

## Seeing Animals on Egdon Heath: The Democratic Impulse of Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*

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In a well-known journal entry from 1888, Thomas Hardy emphasized the claims that animals have on humankind. After seeing worn-down horses in the street, he wrote:

What was it on the faces of those horses? — Resignation. Their eyes looked at me, haunted me. The absoluteness of their resignation was terrible. When afterwards I heard their tramp as I lay in bed, the ghosts of their eyes came in to me, saying, 'Where is your justice, O man and ruler?'.<sup>1</sup>

The horse's eyes held Hardy's attention so intensely that he described them in terms of haunting and invasion: he could not escape their gaze. This emphasis on perception highlights a point of view, one that questions human authority, as the eyes themselves are imagined as speaking. Jacques Derrida confessed to feeling shame and the epistemological limits of the human when he saw his cat look at him naked; similarly, Hardy's confrontation with an animal gaze throws humans off their pedestal as God-appointed stewards or rulers of the earth.<sup>2</sup> Hardy's emphasis on *seeing* animals thus implies not a passive encounter resulting from human power, but an engagement with the Other that seeks understanding, empathy, and recognition. Even further, with his use of the word 'justice', Hardy's critique is explicitly political: imagining animal points of view challenges assumptions of human superiority and questions the efficacy of nearly a century of new anti-cruelty laws that brought mostly domestic animals into a political community with humans.

The claims that animals made on Hardy's attention, and the often challenging and unsettling responses they demand, were replicated in his fiction, in which he examines the possibilities and limits of an inclusive democratic representation extending beyond the human. While Victorian democracy emphasizes shifting class boundaries and wider political

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<sup>1</sup> *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Michael Millgate (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 220.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. by Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

representation as a movement towards social and political equality, this more inclusive representation can also be taken seriously as literary representation, which views the novel as democratic, and considers it a fruitful space for imagining a multi-species political community.<sup>3</sup> Alex Woloch famously argues that the incorporation of minor characters into the nineteenth-century realist novel represents the ‘democratic impulse’ of the nineteenth century, and I suggest that we can also read this impulse in relation to representations of animals.<sup>4</sup> Woloch argues that the ‘asymmetric structure of characterization — in which many are represented but attention flows toward a delimited center [...] registers the competing pull of inequality and democracy within the nineteenth-century bourgeois imagination’, and that ‘the *claims* of minor characters on the reader’s attention [...] are generated by the democratic impulse that forms a horizon of nineteenth-century politics’ (p. 31, emphasis in original). While Woloch never suggests that animals can be minor characters, novelists such as Hardy expand their literary representation to include a multiplicity of animals, and, at times, their perspective. Although Hardy’s animals often elude conceptions of human characterization, this wider representation suggests that animals also make claims on the reader’s attention and form ‘a horizon of nineteenth-century politics’.<sup>5</sup> Woloch’s characterization of the nineteenth-century novel’s ‘democratic impulse’ helps us understand how the very act of representing animals within the novel has political implications: *seeing* animals and imagining their point of view can result in treating them differently at both the personal and legislative level.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Williams’s discussion of ‘democratic’ helps clarify my use of the term throughout this article. Williams writes, to ‘have democratic manners or feelings, is to be unconscious of class distinctions, or consciously to disregard or overcome them in everyday behaviour: acting *as if* all people were equal, and deserved equal respect, whether this is really so or not’: see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 97. In terms of animals, these democratic actions are less about class distinctions and more about species distinctions: acting *as if* animals and humans were equal and deserved equal respect. The term ‘multi-species’ comes from Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, *Posthumanities*, 3 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 3, yet its connection to democracy is my own. Haraway’s notion of multi-species challenges an anthropocentric world view and acknowledges the multiplicity of species and the different worlds they inhabit.

<sup>4</sup> Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Kreilkamp briefly considers Woloch’s notion of minor characters in relation to animals in ‘Dying Like a Dog in *Great Expectations*’, in *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 81–94 (p. 82).

<sup>6</sup> Tobias Menely argues that representations of the animal voice in eighteenth-century poetry are specifically political. His claim that ‘rights come to be recognized in an emotive public sphere, defined by exposure to the claims of others’ lends credence to my own that representing animals in the novel has political implications.

Such concerns are not unrelated to recent work in the field of ecocriticism, which interrogates how democracy, a distinctly human institution premised on language and reason, can include non-humans. Yet it would be a mistake to understand this to imply that humans give trees, insects, or animals the vote, as it instead aims to broaden ideas of political action, inclusion, and representation. Timothy Morton, for example, calls ecological thought ‘a practice of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings — animal, vegetable, or mineral. Ultimately, this includes thinking about democracy’, and imagining what a ‘truly democratic encounter between truly equal beings’ would look like.<sup>7</sup> While Morton uses the concept of democracy rather loosely, Jane Bennett gives it more theoretical substance, drawing on John Dewey, Bruno Latour, and Jacques Rancière to imagine how a public can include both human and non-human actants. In her analysis, non-human actions both become and inspire political acts, as she revises understandings of non-human agency: ‘a political act not only disrupts’, she argues,

it disrupts in such a way as to change radically what people can ‘see’: [...] the political gate is opened enough for nonhumans [...] to slip through, for they also have the power to startle and provoke a gestalt shift in perception.<sup>8</sup>

Bennett’s focus on actions and affect shifts political action and power beyond the human. She offers a less anthropocentric version of political participation that asks us to imagine how ‘an animal, plant, mineral, or artifact can sometimes catalyze a public’ (p. 107).

Although drained of a specific sociohistorical context, both Bennett and Morton call for more inclusive ways of imagining a less anthropocentric political community that refigures non-human–animal–human relations.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Bennett distinctly posits the need to ‘find a more horizontal representation of the relation between human and nonhuman actants’ and claims that ‘the scope of democratization can be broadened to acknowledge more nonhumans in more ways’ (pp. 98, 109). The kind of political

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See Tobias Menely, *The Animal Claim: Sensibility and the Creaturely Voice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 106–07.

<sup>9</sup> While it has become common to use the term ‘non-human’ or ‘non-human animal’ in place of ‘animal’, I keep the term ‘animal’ not only to distinguish between animals and everything else that gets classified as non-human (from plants to trash), but also because although humans too are animals, labelling animals non-human centres the human and defines animals through a negative. While the claims Morton and Bennett make about agency can apply to non-humans other than animals, in this article I am specifically interested in how they apply to animals.

encounters Morton and Bennett imagine encourage ‘mutual recognition’ — an active form of seeing rather than passive observation — built on democratic ideals of coexistence and reciprocity (Morton, p. 80). Representing a more horizontal field of perspectives that includes the recognition of animals, and imagining how animals might recognize humans, as Hardy does, thus pushes political categories beyond the human and invites us to take the claims of animals more seriously.

Given his interest in the claims of animals, the writing of Thomas Hardy is especially productive for examining the democratic impulse of animal representations, as they make claims on the attention of both characters and readers. As such, I suggest that Hardy’s early novel *The Return of the Native* (1878) recognizes the claims animals have on human attention beyond their imbrication in a larger environment and offers a more horizontal representation that includes animals. This democratic impulse, Hardy shows, requires a fundamental shift in human perception. Through emphasizing the importance of perception and perspective, Hardy distinguishes animals within the environment and presents a more nuanced understanding of the interconnections Morton asks for as part of his ecological thought. He further registers the kind of non-human agencies and drives towards horizontality that Bennett posits as essential to conceptualizing non-human political action. Hardy foregrounds moments of attention and recognition between animals and humans, suggesting that animals need not have qualities of a human character — such as individualism, subjectivity, and speech — to gain representation within the novel and make claims on the reader’s attention. Significantly, these concerns often emerge within the novel’s interrogation of class and liberal individualism: the two characters who most fully embody Hardy’s ecological ethic — Diggory Venn and Clym Yeobright — attempt to move beyond a capitalist system premised on their own social mobility and show little commitment to maintaining class hierarchies. Shifting one’s perception towards animals is thus connected to a larger democratic ethos of challenging class distinctions and accepting alterity. Yet importantly, the novel also acknowledges that a democratic relationship between animals and humans is a difficult challenge: for Hardy, an ecological democracy depends upon the human to enact representation and encourage more equality between animals and humans. Thus a more inclusive representation ironically comes as a result of human power.

### **Hardy’s aesthetics of ecological perception**

Both ecocriticism and animal studies share a desire to move beyond anthropocentric epistemologies that justify environmental and animal destruction and exploitation, and the two fields intersect in significant ways,

particularly through their critiques of anthropocentrism.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, paying specific attention to animal perspectives and multiplicity destabilizes hierarchical and anthropocentric modes of engaging with the environment and the non-humans who live within it. In delineating distinctions between these fields, for example, Erica Fudge argues that ‘the ecological argument, in which the species rather than the individual is emphasized, sits at the heart of much literary ecocriticism, in which landscape and nature in general are the focus and animals perceived only as part of that landscape’.<sup>11</sup> Yet animal studies specifically critiques speciesism: ‘if we challenge speciesist ideas’, Fudge suggests,

we also challenge the construction of the human as a species splendid in its isolation from the natural world as a whole, and such a challenge can, surely, only impact positively on human relations with that natural world and the non-human animals that live in it. (p. 95)

Shifting one’s perception to see the multiplicity of animals distinct from the environment not only helps to conceptualize a multi-species inclusive representation, but challenges anthropocentric conceptions of non-human–animal–human relations and the hierarchies they inevitably produce. This democratic impulse encourages the perception of interdependencies and relationships beyond hierarchical and speciesist understandings, inviting us to imagine perspectives and epistemologies beyond the human, and to recognize animal claims on our attention and our actions.

Hardy’s work has long been acknowledged to challenge human relations with the environment and offer less anthropocentric and more inclusive ways of relating with non-human worlds.<sup>12</sup> Richard Kerridge,

<sup>10</sup> For productive connections between late-Victorian animal welfare and environmentalism, see Jed Mayer, ‘Edward Carpenter, Henry Salt, and the Animal Limits of Victorian Environments’, in *Victorian Writers and the Environment: Ecocritical Perspectives*, ed. by Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 220–35.

<sup>11</sup> Lucinda Cole and others, ‘Speciesism, Identity Politics, and Ecocriticism: A Conversation with Humanists and Posthumanists’, *Eighteenth Century*, 52 (2011), 87–106 (p. 93).

<sup>12</sup> For older analyses of Hardy’s representation of the environment, see John Alcorn, *The Nature Novel from Hardy to Lawrence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Michael Irwin, *Reading Hardy’s Landscapes* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000); Bruce Johnson, ‘“The Perfection of Species” and Hardy’s Tess’, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 259–77; George Levine, ‘Hardy and Darwin: An Enchanting Hardy?’, in *A Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Keith Wilson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 36–53; and John Paterson, ‘Lawrence’s Vital Source’, in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. by Knoepfelmacher and Tennyson, pp. 455–69. Such critics often foreground Hardy’s admiration for Darwin, as in Gillian Beer’s now famous discussion of Hardy in *Darwin’s Plots: Evo-*

for example, characterizes Hardy's work as a 'nature writing not always in search of stability, not simply hostile to change and incursion', which 'offers the endless generation of meaning as the vivid life of a place, produced by its human, animal, and plant life'.<sup>13</sup> To delineate an arboreal realism, Elizabeth Carolyn Miller and William Cohen have recently focused on Hardy's lyrical merging of tree and human in *The Woodlanders*. While for Miller this is 'dendrography: an attempt to imagine a fictional viewpoint beyond the human', Cohen emphasizes how the novel's 'tactile imagination [...] demands a reorientation of ideas about what constitutes nature and how we understand the human'.<sup>14</sup> Nestled alongside ecocritical readings of Hardy, and sometimes falling within them, are analyses of how his oeuvre cultivates sympathy for animals, a goal made clear in his characterization of his novels as 'one plea against "man's inhumanity to man" — and to woman — and to the lower animals'.<sup>15</sup> Anna West's recent *Thomas Hardy and Animals* demonstrates the wide-ranging extent to which Hardy was committed to animal welfare, even though this commitment was at times contradictory and not always straightforward. West highlights how Hardy cultivated an animal ethics that destabilizes the animal-human divide, privileges animal alterity, and seeks alternative understandings of language, reason, and moral agency.<sup>16</sup>

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*lutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Richard Kerridge, 'Ecological Hardy', in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), pp. 126–42 (p. 138).

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, 'Dendrography and Ecological Realism', *Victorian Studies*, 58 (2016), 696–718 (p. 711); William A. Cohen, 'Arborealities: The Tactile Ecology of Hardy's *Woodlanders*', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 19 (2014) <<http://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.690>> (p. 2).

<sup>15</sup> *Thomas Hardy: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. by James Gibson (New York: Macmillan, 1999), p. 70.

<sup>16</sup> West's final chapter examines contradictions within Hardy's commitment to animal welfare, such as the casual mention of drowning kittens, thus proposing the need for readings that nuance his animal ethics: see Anna West, *Thomas Hardy and Animals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). For other readings of Hardy's animal welfare, see Jean Brooks, 'The Place of the Animal Kingdom in Thomas Hardy's Works', *Aligarh Critical Miscellany*, 4 (1991), 157–73; Michael Campbell, 'Thomas Hardy's Attitude toward Animals', *Victorians Institute Journal*, 2 (1973), 61–71; Elisha Cohn, *Still Life: Suspended Development in the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Ivan Kreilkamp, 'Pitying the Sheep in *Far From the Madding Crowd*', *NOVEL*, 42 (2009), 474–81; Ronald D. Morrison, 'Humanity towards Man, Woman, and the Lower Animals: Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and the Victorian Humane Movement', *Nineteenth-Century Studies*, 12 (1998), 64–83; and Christine Roth, 'The Zoocentric Ecology of Hardy's Poetic Consciousness', in *Victorian Writers and the Environment*, ed. by Mazzeno and Morrison, pp. 79–96.

Thomas Hardy showed a lifelong interest in animal perspectives. In the biography of her husband, for example, Florence Hardy tells readers that one of his earliest memories was of an attempt to see from the point of view of sheep. She writes:

He recalled how, crossing the eweleaze when a child, he went on hands and knees and pretended to eat grass in order to see what the sheep would do. Presently he looked up and found them gathered around in a close ring, gazing at him with astonished faces. (*Life and Work*, ed. by Millgate, p. 479)

This moment shows Hardy trying, quite literally, to see from a sheep's perspective. A young Hardy going on hands and knees suggests a desire to move to their level and understand the sheep's point of view. As an adult, this interest in the animal perspective influenced Hardy's conceptions of art and literature. Sitting in the gallery of the English Art Club, for example, he wrote: 'If I were a painter, I would paint a picture of a room as viewed by a mouse from a chink under the skirting' (*Life and Work*, p. 246). And while working on revisions for *Far from the Madding Crowd*, he explores the descriptive complexity of animal perspectives: describing a scene in Celbridge Place, London, he writes:

Middle-aged gentleman talking to handsome buxom lady across the stone parapet of the house opposite, which is just as high as their breasts — she inside, he on pavement. It rains a little, a very mild moisture, which a duck would call nothing, a dog a pleasure, a cat possibly a good deal.<sup>17</sup>

Hardy expands his representation in what seems a human-centred moment; animal perspectives enhance description and expand our world view by offering a more inclusive viewpoint constituted by difference.

Hardy's aesthetics thus destabilize the centrality of a human perspective, even as they highlight the human's lingering presence and the possibility of reinscribing unequal power relationships through human attempts to speak for the animal.<sup>18</sup> He famously explains that

Art is a disproportioning — (i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion) — of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would

<sup>17</sup> *The Personal Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Richard Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> In Anna Feuerstein, "'I Promise to Protect Dumb Creatures': Pastoral Power and the Limits of Victorian Nonhuman Animal Protection", *Society & Animals*, 23 (2015), 148–65, I analyse how animal welfare discourse perpetuates animal–human hierarchies through imagining animal subjectivity.

more probably be overlooked. Hence 'realism' is not Art. (*Life and Work*, p. 239)

Hardy's distortion rebalances proportions and represents reality differently, without reifying alternative hierarchies. His comment that 'I sit under a tree, and feel alone: I think of certain insects around me as magnified by the microscope: creatures like elephants, flying dragons, etc. And I feel I am by no means alone', shows two kinds of representation: the first centring the human, and the alternative emphasizing multiplicity (*Life and Work*, p. 110). As Hardy's fantasy about painting a room from a mouse's point of view suggests, animal perspectives can de-privilege the human and shift how they see the world. The many animals in Hardy's work and his interest in their perspective suggests his vision is ecological; he searches for perspectives that may be overlooked and takes pains to represent them. Indeed, as Elizabeth Miller emphasizes in relation to *Under the Greenwood Tree*, 'Hardy's realism produces a sense of the real [...] through the life of trees and the natural world' (p. 708). It also does so through emphasizing animal lives and perspectives. This interest in representing multiple species and perspectives, I suggest, exemplifies the democratic impulse behind his incorporation of animals into the novel.

Hardy's emphasis on vision and multiplicity thus recognizes animal perspectives and offers less anthropocentric modes of seeing, relating, and knowing. The fact that, as Gillian Beer suggests, Hardy 'places himself in his texts as observer, traveller, a conditional presence capable of seeing things from multiple distances and diverse perspectives almost in the same moment' (p. 230), highlights that his ecological thought is made up not only of interconnections between animals and humans, but of the varying perspectives that constitute them. Hardy highlights the wide array of animal perspectives constituting a multi-species world and asks humans to recognize animals and understand that animals can see humans too. As Sheila Berger notes, 'Hardy is teaching several things: to see, that seeing is subjective, and that one view is not the only view.'<sup>19</sup> I argue that *The Return of the Native* interrogates the failures of perception and the lack of mutual recognition between equals and suggests the need to have more empathy for alternative perspectives. This kind of ethical engagement across class and species difference involves acknowledging multiplicity, seeing the animal life around us, and imagining animal perspectives. Through teaching readers to embrace this less anthropocentric and more democratic viewpoint, Hardy suggests that ecological thought demands an expanded representational sphere constituted by multi-species perspectives. At the same time, his ecological thought also emphasizes the inability to get fully beyond a human presence.

<sup>19</sup> Sheila Berger, *Thomas Hardy and Visual Structures: Framing, Disruption, Process* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), p. 26.



### ‘Those who are found where there is said to be nobody’

*The Return of the Native* is famous for its intricate portrait of Egdon Heath, an environment that critics have long argued functions as a character.<sup>20</sup> Yet Hardy also characterizes the heath as an inclusive democratic space. He writes that ‘The most thorough-going ascetic could feel that he had a natural right to wander on Egdon [...]. Colours and beauties so far subdued were, at least, the birthright of all.’<sup>21</sup> While on one level Hardy makes the claim that nature’s beauty is for all to enjoy, the very language of ‘natural right’ and ‘birthright’ suggests a replacement of hierarchy with inclusivity, emphasized by his claim that after storms, ‘Egdon was aroused to reciprocity’ (p. 11). The heath’s inclusivity is further represented by the pains Hardy takes to gather animal perspectives and differentiate them from the larger environment. On one level, then, the heath’s intricate portrayal de-emphasizes the human, reflected, for example, in Clym’s association with the heath — he ‘had been so inwoven with the heath in his boyhood that hardly anybody could look upon it without thinking of him’ — and his feelings of ‘bare equality with, and no superiority to, a single living thing under the sun’ (pp. 168, 206). This merging of heath and human makes the novel ripe for ecocritical analyses that illuminate how to ‘conceptualize human life as bundled with the ecosystems to which it belongs’ (Elizabeth Miller, p. 709). Yet failing to conceptualize animal life within such ecosystems can lead to exclusion: animal perspectives especially foreground the extent to which human actions influence multiple life forms within the environment. For, as Morton argues, ‘thinking big [ecologically] means realizing that there is always more than our point of view’ (pp. 57–58). If all have a natural right to be on the heath, Hardy’s novel suggests a similar natural right for representation.

One strategy Hardy uses to show a more horizontal recognition of perspectives is to represent animal perspectives beyond an economic rationale and human self-interest. His engagement with bird perspectives, for example, enters into political debates about wild bird legislation that

<sup>20</sup> Ian Gregor explains that ‘it is a routine gesture by now to refer to [the heath] as “the chief character in the novel”’, while William Cohen argues that the heath has a level of agency that ‘intrude[s] on and become[s] inseparable from the bodies of its inhabitants’. J. Hillis Miller, however, suggests that the ‘heath is neither a character in itself nor merely a dark background against which the action takes place. The heath is rather the embodiment of certain ways in which human beings may exist.’ See Ian Gregor, *The Great Web: The Form of Hardy’s Major Fiction* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974), p. 82; William A. Cohen, ‘Faciality and Sensation in Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*’, *PMLA*, 121 (2006), 437–52 (p. 446); J. Hillis Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, ed. by Tony Slade (New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 11. The quotation forming the section heading is from p. 74.

took place between 1869 and 1880. During this time, Parliament passed four Acts to protect wild birds, which many feared were becoming extinct due to shooting and trapping. These Acts enforced a close period during breeding season, making it illegal to kill, wound, or trap wild birds during certain months. Many supporters of bird protection constructed avian subjects in terms of use-value and emphasized the (mostly economic) benefits humans derive from birds. Concerned Victorians who wrote to *The Times*, for example, stressed that ‘birds are the great charm of the country, and to lose them would be to lose the most pleasant companions that nature gives us’.<sup>22</sup> Others suggested that birds act as natural pesticides: ‘Of the soft-billed birds no defence is needful — they live on insects; occasionally they may rob the garden, but their song repays the loss.’<sup>23</sup> This relationship between birds and utility also emerged in parliamentary debates. Christopher Sykes, the writer of the 1869 Sea Birds Preservation Bill, introduced it by emphasizing that there ‘were no mere sentimental or humanitarian grounds’ to the bill, ‘though these were strong enough’. Rather, he explained that the bill was in the interest of ‘the farmers, the merchant seamen, and the deep-sea fishers’. Birds ‘afforded warning of the proximity of a rocky shore’ and helped deep-sea fishers know where to cast their nets.<sup>24</sup> This rationale for bird protection foregrounds human interests — entertainment, the economy, and protection of property — even as it recognizes the benefits of thinking ecologically.

Hardy’s engagement with bird perspectives emerges through Venn, the novel’s most disinterested character, who, like the novel’s birds, is associated with extinction. For Venn ‘was one of a class rapidly becoming extinct in Wessex, filling at present in the rural world the place which, during the last century, the dodo occupied in the world of animals’ (p. 13). Through Venn, the novel’s democratic impulse connects to a critique of self-interestedness and individualism. As a reddleman, Venn is practically shunned from the community: ‘His occupation tended to isolate him, and isolated he was mostly seen to be’ (p. 80). Children think reddlemen are ghosts (p. 77), and Venn is mostly ignored by cattle-drovers and peddlers, even though he ‘was more decently born and brought up’ and has ‘more valuable’ stock than both of them (p. 79). In general, the community’s views are informed by class ideologies, as it judges Venn by his occupation rather than by his character. Even Eustacia Vye cannot understand him, as she views his love for Thomasin Yeobright as ‘entirely free from that quality of selfishness which is frequently the chief constituent of the passion [...]’. The reddleman’s disinterestedness was so well deserving of respect that it overshot respect by being barely comprehended; and she almost thought

<sup>22</sup> H. H. S, letter to the editor, ‘British Birds’, *The Times*, 21 September 1869, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Lucas, letter to the editor, ‘Small Birds’, *The Times*, 23 August 1861, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 194, col. 405 (26 February 1869).

it absurd' (p. 151). Venn's pre-industrial profession, lack of desire for social climbing, and disinterested love for Thomasin make him an outsider to the human community. Instead, he is associated with the animal and non-human life of the heath, moving beyond a 'bounded' individualism in which humans do not see themselves as part of a complex multi-species ecosystem.<sup>25</sup> Such bounded individualism in the Victorian period often resulted from the inability to imagine animals outside of economic terms, seeing them as objects to use rather than as subjects with whom humans are interconnected in multiple ways. Through Venn's ability to recognize animals beyond economic interests, Hardy brings animal epistemologies onto a less hierarchical representational plane and emphasizes animal perspectives in order to question human supremacy.

As a way to foreground animal perspectives and ecological relationships, Hardy takes pains to differentiate between land and animal. He filters the environment through Venn and represents birds beyond their economic use-value. Importantly, avian subjectivity lessens human superiority instead of reaffirming it. Describing Venn's walk through the heath, Hardy writes:

Though these shaggy hills were apparently so solitary, several keen round eyes were always ready on such a wintry morning as this to converge upon a passer-by. Feathered species sojourned here in hiding which would have created wonder if found elsewhere [...]. A traveller who should walk and observe any of these visitants as Venn observed them now could feel himself to be in direct communication with regions unknown to man. Here in front of him was a wild mallard [...]. The creature brought with him an amplitude of Northern Knowledge. Glacial catastrophes, snow-storm episodes, glittering auroral effects, Polaris in the zenith, Franklin underfoot, — the category of his commonplaces was wonderful. But the bird, like many other philosophers, seemed as he looked at the riddler to think that a present moment of comfortable reality was worth a decade of memories. (p. 88)

Through Venn's recognition of avian lives, experiences, and knowledge, Hardy incorporates animal alterity into the mode of vision composing his democratic impulse. His separation of the landscape and the animals found therein emphasizes the multiplicity of viewpoints that, without Venn's own 'keen' perception (p. 14) — another marker of his connection to animals — may remain undetectable.<sup>26</sup> Seeing the hills as solitary negates the recognition of animal viewpoints, yet Venn's perspective foregrounds them. Further, Venn's lack of access to the birds' knowledge registers animal

<sup>25</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Venn's perception is 'keen as that of a bird of prey' (p. 14).

alterity, expressed through their ‘communication with regions unknown to man’. Migration becomes a marker of alterity that questions human knowledge and ability; imagining what birds carry from beyond human provinces removes one from a human viewpoint and into an avian one that questions human superiority. The passage’s movement through different levels — from shaggy hills, to keen eyes, and to what such eyes may have seen — offers scales of knowing beyond the human. Hardy’s capturing of unknowability, I suggest, places animals and humans within a less hierarchical and more ecological relationship. Unlike discourses such as animal welfare that imagine animal perspectives only to reinsert hierarchy or read animal actions in terms of how they benefit the human economy, Hardy represents animal perspectives to decentre the primacy of human epistemologies. By filtering these perspectives through a disinterested figure such as Venn, Hardy acknowledges the role of the human in animal representation; yet at the same time he demonstrates that if represented with a desire for equal respect and mutual recognition, human power can be lessened rather than reified.

The birds Hardy incorporates further demonstrate an engagement with the threat of human-caused animal extinction, and the context of wild bird legislation makes this incorporation explicitly political. Indeed, the narrator specifically mentions endangered birds:

A bustard haunted the spot, and not many years before this five-and-twenty might have been seen in Egdon at one time. Marsh-harriers looked up from the valley by Wildeve’s. A cream-coloured courser had used to visit this hill, a bird so rare that not more than a dozen have ever been seen in England; but a barbarian rested neither night nor day till he had shot the African truant, and after that event cream-coloured coursers thought fit to enter Egdon no more. (p. 88)

The choice to represent rare birds, alongside the characterization of the shooters as ‘barbarians’, emphasizes the negative effects of human action on animal life when animals are seen through an economic lens.<sup>27</sup> By moving within the environment to show the perspectives of distinct lives extinguished or damaged by self-interested human behaviour, Hardy posits not just ways of action, but modes of seeing and understanding as political. Indeed, his claim that ‘cream-coloured coursers thought fit to enter Egdon no more’ aligns with arguments used in the parliamentary debates about wild bird legislation, as when MP Andrew Johnson explained in 1872 that ‘the increase of feathered visitors [...] must inevitably arise under the

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<sup>27</sup> Two of the birds mentioned here and above, the cream-coloured courser and the bustard, were rare birds. See C. J. P. Beatty, ‘Two Rare Birds in Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*’, *Notes and Queries*, 8 (1961), 98–99.

Bill, when [birds] found that persecution no longer awaited them'.<sup>28</sup> Like Johnson, Hardy imagines avian subjects who flee from the human due to a subjective awareness of the danger posed by humankind.

Venn's ecological thought stands in contrast to that of Damon Wildevé, the novel's most socially mobile character, who becomes agitated and violent in response to animal perspectives. The famous gambling scene between the two — lit by the light of glow-worms — emphasizes the agency animals have to influence and disrupt human life. As they gamble, a group of 'forty or fifty' heath-croppers (small semi-wild ponies who roam the heath) approach them, 'their heads being all towards the players, at whom they gazed intently' (p. 228). Wildevé at first sends them away with a 'Hoosh!'; yet they appear again, 'looking on with erect heads just as before, their timid eyes fixed upon the scene, as if they were wondering what mankind and candlelight could have to do in these haunts at this untoward hour' (pp. 228, 230). The heath-croppers' stare disrupts Wildevé's composure: "What a plague those creatures are — staring so!" he said, and flung a stone, which scattered them' (p. 230). Indeed, Wildevé's castigation of the animal gaze is similar to his own anger at Venn's surveillance of his relationship with Eustacia, again aligning Venn with the novel's ethical ecological thought: 'Damn him!', he says about Venn, 'He has been watching me again' (p. 265). Wildevé's unease at the heath-croppers' stare as he commits a morally questionable act — gambling with Thomasin's money — testifies to the disruptive power of animal perspectives and agency. By including animal points of view, Hardy signals the possibility of the mutual recognition Morton asks for as part of a democratic ecological thought.

While Venn is aligned with animal perspectives, Wildevé rejects them, and Eustacia, whose family 'did not feel that necessity for preserving a friendly face towards every man, bird, and beast' makes it a point not to see them, as when she ignores the group of heath-croppers (pp. 89, 58).<sup>29</sup> Not only does Venn represent a more ecological and democratic mode of being in the world, but the novel's inclusion of animal perspectives, and what Darwin might call 'small agencies', offers 'a more horizontal representation of the relation between human and nonhuman actants' (Bennett, pp. 94, 98). By levelling the field of representation and highlighting a variety of perspectives, Hardy attempts a more democratic mode of representation that aims towards inclusivity, horizontality, and equal respect. The combination of the glow-worms who eventually make the gambling possible, the moth who originally extinguishes the light, and the curious

<sup>28</sup> Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 211, col. 1647 (12 June 1872).

<sup>29</sup> Eustacia's hatred of the heath and nature in general, as well as her lack of 'love for my fellow-creatures' (p. 185), signals her distance from the novel's ecological ethic. It is also significant that Eustacia and Wildevé's signal for meeting — causing a moth to fly into a lamp — is a violent use of animal agency (pp. 263–64).

heath-croppers who keep returning all emphasize the ability of animal lives to disrupt human action and make claims on human attention. Hardy emphasizes the ethical implications of this acknowledgement through illustrating the building of the furze-faggots as a more-than-human event: it ‘attracted the attention of every bird within eyeshot, every reptile not yet asleep, and set the surrounding rabbits curiously watching from hillocks at a safe distance’ (p. 107). These animal perspectives serve as a reminder that human control over the environment, with its possible dangers, can affect them too. Acknowledging animal agents and spectators destabilizes the centrality of human perspectives and human self-interest. Humans are seen and heard by animals; such a realization should claim our attention and influence our actions.

### The democratic impulse of Hardy’s ecological perception

Hardy’s expansion of the representational scope of the realist novel to include animal perspectives and epistemologies is tied to his critique of self-interested and class-based perspectives. Through connecting class, the need for alternative perspectives, and animals, he emphasizes an ethical and political imperative to accept non-hegemonic viewpoints and see the world beyond strict hierarchies.<sup>30</sup> Characters such as Eustacia, Clym, and Mrs Yeobright all have their own forms of blindness, resulting from idealism, a totalistic mode of perception, or physical limitation. While Eustacia has ‘no middle distance in her perspective’ (p. 70), Clym’s ophthalmia and Mrs Yeobright’s dismissal of alternative viewpoints are articulated through almost microscopic descriptions of animals. The Yeobrights are represented in close proximity to animal life during formative moments in their relationship to class and individualism: while Mrs Yeobright’s eventual empathetic perspective comes only on the day of her death, Clym’s interconnections with animal life come after he descends the social scale to become a furze-cutter. Through these movements beyond social hierarchy and bounded individualism, Hardy offers possibilities for a more democratic ecology, in which lessening class and species hierarchies allows one to recognize and accept alternative viewpoints.

Mrs Yeobright’s initial inability to accept Clym’s marriage with Eustacia results from a class-based perspective founded on self-interestedness. Pointing out that Eustacia is a ‘band-master’s daughter’, and asking

<sup>30</sup> For other critics who discuss Hardy in terms of vision and perception, see J. B. Bullen, *The Expressive Eye: Fiction and Perception in the Work of Thomas Hardy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); David Sweeney Coombs, ‘Reading in the Dark: Sensory Perception and Agency in *The Return of the Native*’, *ELH*, 78 (2011), 943–66; and Julie Grossman, ‘Thomas Hardy and the Role of Observer’, *ELH*, 56 (1989), 619–38.

‘What has her life been?’, Mrs Yeobright can only see the marriage as ruining Clym’s ‘prospects’ and shortening her own days (pp. 200, 201, 202). Her perspective is so totalizing in its understanding of the world that she cannot consider other viewpoints and ways of being in the world. Indeed, Hardy even describes her view as one that erases difference. ‘What was the world to Mrs Yeobright?’, he writes: ‘A multitude whose tendencies could be perceived, though not in its essences. Communities were seen by her as from a distance [...] and processioning in definite directions, but whose features are indistinguishable by the very comprehensiveness of the view’ (p. 188). Although her vision is ‘comprehensive’, she is so obsessed with Clym ‘doing well’ that she cannot see beyond class distinctions (p. 175). She sees the world in terms of hierarchy, rather than more laterally.

Significantly, Hardy represents Mrs Yeobright’s limited perception — and its ultimate switch towards acceptance — alongside detailed descriptions of animals. I suggest this switch in perception signals a lessening of hierarchical viewpoints. Shortly after Hardy’s description of her limited point of view, for example, he describes a pool outside Eustacia’s dwelling. This narrative movement contrasts her vision with a perspective emphasizing small animals and insects:

The pool outside the bank by Eustacia’s dwelling, which seemed as dead and desolate as ever to an observer who moved and made noises in his observation, would gradually disclose a state of great animation when silently watched awhile. A timid animal world had come to life for the season. Little tadpoles and efts began to bubble up through the water, and to race along beneath it; toads made noises like very young ducks, and advanced to the margin in twos and threes; overhead, bumblebees flew hither and thither in the thickening light, their drone coming and going like the sound of a gong. (p. 189)

This recognition of minute animal life counters Mrs Yeobright’s comprehensive yet limited vision, as Hardy represents more lateral ways of seeing that recognize alterity. Through his detailed and lyrical description, readers take on this alternative way of seeing. And indeed, once Mrs Yeobright becomes less blinded by her class-based perspective, she has ‘a chance then of using [her] eyes’ (p. 267), as Venn suggested she would. On her way to Clym’s house Mrs Yeobright sees animal multiplicity:

Occasionally she came to a spot where independent worlds of ephemerons were passing their time in mad carousal, some in the air, some on the hot ground and vegetation, some in the tepid and stringy water of a nearly-dried pool. All the shallower ponds had decreased to a vaporous mud, amid which the maggoty shapes of innumerable obscene creatures could be indistinctly seen, heaving and wallowing with enjoyment.

Being a woman not disinclined to philosophise, she sometimes sat down under her umbrella to rest and to watch their happiness, for a certain hopefulness as to the result of her visit gave ease to her mind, and between her important thoughts, left it free to dwell on any infinitesimal matter which caught her eyes. (p. 270)

Mrs Yeobright's acknowledgement of small animals suggests an acceptance of alternative perspectives, and a breaking down of the bounded individualism she showed in her refusal to accept Clym and Eustacia's marriage. Ready to befriend Eustacia, Mrs Yeobright now sees 'lower' life forms, and gains a more horizontal and less hierarchical way of comprehending the world.

Clym's poor vision is also connected to class, albeit in a more positive manner, as it results from his desire to open a school and help raise the lower class. His ideas of social mobility stand in stark contrast to Eustacia's, as the two have almost completely opposite world views: whereas Eustacia sees Clym as the means to a more extravagant life in Paris, Clym desires to reject his own upward social mobility for the good of the community. Although Clym's social decline raises his spirits — the 'monotony of his occupation [furze-cutting] soothed him, and was in itself a pleasure' (p. 247) — Eustacia views it as 'degrading to her, as an educated lady-wife', for it was 'bitterly plain to [her] that he did not care much about social failure' (p. 248). Ultimately, Eustacia reinforces hierarchies, and Clym hopes to break them down. Yet once he becomes estranged from Eustacia and her class-based perception, and recognizes 'that there is nothing particularly great in [life's] greatest walks, and therefore nothing particularly small in mine of furze-cutting' (p. 250), he shows a democratic impulse premised on a wider scope of vision and more inclusive representation. Significantly, Hardy describes Clym's politics as a desire 'to raise the class at the expense of individuals rather than individuals at the expense of the class' and emphasizes that he 'was ready at once to be the first unit sacrificed' (p. 171). This view rejects liberal discourses aiming for individual social mobility rather than structural change. Clym thinks in terms of the community and not of himself as an individual.

Outside the rigidity of social hierarchies grounded in liberal capitalism, Clym is represented within a multi-species community that moves beyond perspectives focused solely on human actors. Although his job as a furze-cutter shows control of the environment, the novel represents him beyond an individualized, human position of superiority: he 'was a brown spot in the midst of an expanse of olive-green gorse, and nothing more' (p. 247). Indeed, Clym is described as insect-like:

The silent being who thus occupied himself seemed to be of no more account in life than an insect. He appeared as a mere parasite of the heath, fretting its surface in his daily labour as



a moth frets a garment, entirely engrossed with its products, having no knowledge of anything in the world but fern, furze, heath, lichens, and moss. (p. 271)

Clym becomes like Venn, associated with an ecological perspective beyond social hierarchies:

His daily life was of a curious microscopic sort, his whole world being limited to a circuit of a few feet from his person. His familiars were creeping and winged things, and they seemed to enrol him in their band. Bees hummed around his ears with an intimate air [...]. The strange amber-coloured butterflies which Egdon produced [...] quivered in the breath of his lips, alighted upon his bowed back, and sported with the glittering point of his hook [...]. Tribes of emerald-green grasshoppers leaped over his feet [...]. Huge flies [...] buzzed about him without knowing that he was a man. In and out of the fern-brakes snakes glided [...]. Litters of young rabbits came out from their forms to sun themselves upon hillocks, the hot beams blazing through the delicate tissue of each thin-fleshed ear. (p. 247)

This lyrical multiplicity represents the abundance of life forms within the environment. Even though Clym remains strongly present in this passage, the fact that he and the surrounding creatures become ‘familiar’ lessens the animal–human hierarchy. Beer’s suggestion that in this scene Hardy makes room for the human in Darwin’s entangled bank (p. 238) demonstrates the extent to which it should be read as ecological, and even democratic. Moving away from a perspective that was, perhaps, too focused on the *human* community, Clym represents a mode of being in the world comprised of many species. While the multiplicity is not filtered through Clym’s point of view, Hardy’s detailed representation of animals and insects makes claims upon the reader’s attention. In the same way that Clym finds pleasure in his lower-class job of furze-cutting, readers gain pleasure from the gorgeousness of the scene. The horizontality Clym earlier found ‘oppressive’ is now no longer so (p. 206). A broadened perspective allows for more inclusive representation, which embraces coexistence, difference, and horizontality, even if only in fiction. The filtering of this scene through an omniscient and nameless narrator suggests that this democratic ethos comes most fully from beyond an individualized perspective; one that, as both Clym and Mrs Yeobright suggest, can sometimes only ever be ‘a forced limitation’ (p. 247). Hardy, however, introduces readers to a more inclusive mode of representing multi-species perspectives, highlighting the abundance of lives within an environment. Yet through all of this the human remains present, for these relationships are filtered through, and represented by, the human.

Morton calls irony ‘the beginning of ecological democracy’ (p. 125), and the many interconnections and relationships within Hardy’s novel are often quite ironic. Mrs Yeobright was ultimately correct that Eustacia was not a good match for Clym; Clym’s desire to open a night school results in his inability to even educate himself, let alone others; Venn sees animals beyond an economic rationale even though his profession is premised on animal exploitation; and it is Wildeve, whom Eustacia thought not good enough for her, who could have brought her to Paris and given her a life of wealth. Perhaps the greatest irony of all is that readers only arrive at this more horizontal, democratic way of engaging with animals and the environment through the human. *The Return of the Native*’s democratic impulse offers a mode of perception in which animals make claims on human attention and humans recognize those claims, and in which humans represent such animal perspectives with the goal of rejecting supremacy. The novel’s representations of coexistence show the limitations of remaining tied to hierarchy, yet they also demonstrate the difficulty, if not impossibility, of moving too far beyond the human.

Thus, such an ecological democracy is surely limited, much in the way human democracy was ‘both stratified and universal’ in the Victorian era (Woloch, p. 31). Similarly, a more equalized representation in Hardy’s novel is made through choices that are ultimately political; choosing who is seen and who is heard, for example, risks constructing alternative hierarchies and excluding voices. This impulse towards horizontality and a recognition of animal claims within our environments helps conceptualize non-human–animal–human relationships in more democratic terms. Hardy does this through representing species difference and multiplicity, and foregrounding the possibility of a mutual recognition between animals and humans. When in conversation with ecocritical readings of the Victorian novel, especially in their intersections with animal studies, *The Return of the Native* suggests that we open up human-centred political categories beyond the human, and think more about the political implications of representing animals. So, while Woloch’s notion of democracy relies on the human — he follows C. B. Macpherson’s definition of nineteenth-century liberal democracy as ‘the combination of an ethical principle of equality with a competitive market model of man and society’ (Woloch, p. 346) — Hardy presents an alternative way to imagine a representation aiming towards equality, and to move beyond humans, markets, and society. Expanding these categories invites us to understand the political implications of representing animals and the non-human, and emphasizes the difficulty of thinking ecologically.