

How I Became a Tree. Sumana Roy. Aleph Book Company, India, 2017, 236 Pages, Hardcover, Rs. 599; Yale University Press, 2021, 248 Pages, Hardcover, \$25.00

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In *Philosophy of Nature* (1842), G. W. F. Hegel has argued that plants are but a step to be dialectically sublated/ superseded by animals in the fulfillment of Spirit in nature. According to Hegel, plants are unable to preserve within themselves ‘the unity of selfhood’ (§350, 102) and ‘inwardly’ contain an independent individuality that ‘returns into itself’ (§349, 101), and, thus, they do not evince the subjectivity and inwardness that animals exhibit *in nuce* (102). The plant is a subordinate organism, destined to tender itself to its organic superior and be consumed by it. The plant’s tendency towards being-for-self gives rise to the plant and the bud/the flower, which are two independent individuals, and are not of an ‘ideal’ nature. Animal being consists, as Hegel avers, of these two posited in unity. The animal organism is, therefore, this duplication of subjectivity, in which difference no longer exists as it does in the plant, but in which ‘only the unity of this duplication attains existence’ (Hegel §350, 102). Goethe, in his *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790), sets out to show, however, in all these different parts of the plant — roots, stem, branches, leaves, blossoms, fruit — there is a simple basic life that is self-contained and enduring, and that all its forms are nothing more than exterior transformations of the identity of one and the same ‘primary essence’ (66, 70, 122). In Aristotle’s ‘ladder of nature’, the so-called *scala naturae*, or in the hierarchical universe as posited by the Greek Neoplatonists, that remained highly influential throughout the medieval and early modern periods, the inanimate beings as well as the plants, though having rudimentary neural nets and the capacity for primary perceptions, occupied the lowest level of the scale. The notion that plants are imperfect and ontologically lacking the characteristics that render animals superior, including movement, intentionality, or the ability to communicate, was to remain a philosophical tenet long after the Renaissance (Gagliano et al. ix). It is important to note that in *The Power of Movement in Plants* (1880), Charles Darwin, together with his son Francis, has used a neurological metaphor to acknowledge the sensitivity of plant roots when he proposes that ‘the tip of roots acts like the brain of some animals’, even though plants possess neither actual brains nor nerves (570-75). Hegel, however, less kindly sees the breathing of the plant as its sealed reticence (*verschlossenen Ansichhaltens*) and considers their incapability of self-movement as the ‘fragility’/‘feebleness’ of vegetal vitality; but at one point in his *Phenomenology of the Subjective Spirit* (1807), he significantly suggests, or to put it more accurately, asserts that plants are the living enablers of the ‘mingling’/ ‘blending’ (*Vermischung*) of natural forms and ‘forms of thought’. The word, *Vermischung* (with the prefix *Ver*) might imply the ‘confusion’ within, the sudden reversals and mishmashes with the notion of the self-production of the vegetal beings without resorting to the sexual difference (Marder 2013). The question is: does the pervasive feebleness/fragility of the vegetal life-world(s) (*Umwelten*) anyway align and attune itself with the (un)becoming of the feminine, the woman-as-plant, when an uninterrupted stream of liquids enters by the roots, rising along the stem and branches out in all directions to the leaves of the sexed body? “A woman is like a tree. Her heart, her mind, her hands, her feet, all these are also like parts of trees or tree themselves” (Roy 45). The act of writing is, in a certain way, writing with the body. It calls forth and consists of an eternal return to the original ‘wounds’. It is risking one’s active body in the text. Sumana Roy’s *How I Became a Tree* (2017), a mélange of memoir, music, spiritual philosophies, phyto-literature, and botanical studies, is a risky body-writing that opens the self toward the other to measure out the author’s (own) capacity to respond to the call of the other, as she, as if, or in a keen sense, literally and textually, breastfeeds the non-human non-animal plants/trees, an intimate and unsettling *samjoga* (contact) that blurs the borders between the bodies. “I was tired of speed”, she writes, “I wanted to live to tree time” (4). The book begins with the overwhelming question: “how does one live to tree time in this

deadlined world?” (6) The tree-time implies the cessation of intentional actions, a willful commitment to inactivity — “a life without worries for the future or regret for the past. There’s sunlight: gulp, swallow, eat, there’s night: rest” (6). Living on the edge of exhaustion, we are constantly reminded by our bodies and minds that the pace of life is spinning out of control. In the emerging theatre of industry, the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. In Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, the subject comes full circle when he re-discovers his ‘original’ repose. Slow is beautiful. The aesthetics of slowness — the *techné* of how to remain slow inside has its unavoidable linkage with the art of thinking. Genuine philosophising cannot be rushed. The vegetal hetero-temporality ‘indifferently’ invites the time of any other to stand in for the time of the plants themselves. The temporality of capital, nevertheless, violates and consumes the intrinsic scheme of botanical time under the exigencies of commodification and ever-accelerated profiteering, imposing the ‘routine’ of the same on crops and vegetables grown under the auspices of the capitalist agro-scientific complex (Marder 184). Any human appreciation/acknowledgement of the temporal dimension of vegetal being then falls into the conduit of a broader environmental ethics. “My need to become a tree, then, was a need to return to slow time” (62). When reading is carefully practiced, the reader, however unverifiable, attempts to inhabit the desire inscribed in the text; but the desire, or in a more extensive performative scape, the ‘quest’ (for anchorage) remains unfulfilled. Pain issues up as a terrible gift, a rare lucidity and a violation of measure. With her disenchantment with the ‘ambition industry’ and the ‘violence of professional success’ her hopelessly romantic ‘need’ to live like a tree, with other trees in a forest has guided her toward an imagined communitarianism and a deep sense of response-ability “where self-containment and a related self-contentment [has been] the abiding ethic” (155). “Trees are faceless” (51), Roy writes, but they are an undeniable reality that overflows images, and the most exposed, most vulnerable and most expressive aspect of other’s presence. The act of writing is precisely, therefore, an unceasing (un)becoming is an encounter with the ethical. The author is not simply drawn to emulate the ‘comfortable calm’ and the spacious and relaxed rhythm of the trees; rather, she tiptoes, with an intense and acute sense of precariousness and biological kinship/altruism (*sahrdaya*), into the vegetative life-world in its anarchic bareness, stripped off all its recognisable features, yet remaining a source of ‘meaning’, similarly bare and non-anthropocentric, but “ontologically vibrant” (Marder 22) and bustling with ‘poietic’ activity hidden from unaided human perception.

The vegetal world speaks a language without words, which both exhaust meaning and paralyse it. Plants talk without articulating and naming. They do not use language as a tool, or a technique, in order to express themselves. They say through shaping their own matter as they grow self-feeding energy-carrying light. It has a syntax or structure of its own — an ‘intrinsic’ language (of silence) that includes bioacoustics, electric signaling, pressure cues, phytohormones, and signal molecules to interact/negotiate ecologically with the biotic and abiotic environments (Gagliano et al. 2019). Spotlighting the vegetal singularities of the plant and plant-community, at once the most singular and most general being, Roy refers to Jagadish Chandra Bose’s “Gachher Katha” (“The Story of Plants”), which begins by criticising our “over-privileging” of human speech over what might have considered “tree speech” (133). Something is happening inside, as I attempt to understand along a Hegelian line, a specific system of ‘tones’ inside the unspoken (*abyākta*) that suddenly slips out but remains an unfulfilled outing, no ‘determined’ putting before or *vörstellung*. A pain inside that palpitates and envelops the vegetal being: Roy writes, “The secret I wanted to know was how young plants felt when their parent died?” (130) The persona-as-plant looks for freedom within a more esoteric and difficult zone of opacity and radical non-communicability. Plant blindness always takes zoocentric attitudes as ‘default’ human condition, normal and inevitable. *How I became a Tree* compels us to confront this fundamental precarity with a soft dose of philosophical placebo that imagines, questions and wonders what it would be like to have sex with a tree, looks into why people marry trees, and explores the loneliness, pain, unselfishness, death and rebirth of trees. Attachment to plants bespeaks a symbolic bond uniting the vegetal language to human sexuality and the unconscious, where death blooms

and lurks as the ever-present shadow and source of meaning for earthly existence, nearly letting a finite-life express itself in the language of finitude. “To an outsider”, Roy writes, “it might have seemed like she was speaking of an affair that her daughter was involved in, Radha’s mother complaining about her daughter’s restless pining for Krishna” (38). It is impossible to differentiate sentience in a world that is blind and throbbing with contingency. The plant nourishes the mind, as Irigaray poetically puts in her *Elemental Passions* (1992), which contemplates the blooming of its flower.

In discussions of the *Patimokkha* (the basic code of monastic discipline), the *Vinaya Pitaka* 4.32 makes clear that monks and nuns are not to cut down trees (*rukka*) in the course of repairing their lodgings, because in so doing, they will cause injury to one-facultied living beings — *ekindriyaṃ samanā sakyaputtiya jivaṃ*. In the *Majjhima Nikāya* (3.34), the virtuous monks are cautioned against trampling down crops and grasses as they walk during their alms tour in late monsoons; the non-violent monk celebrates his practiced restraint from seed and vegetable growth (Findly 252-54). In the Pāli canon, the one-facultied plants appear to be endowed with the sense of ‘touch’ (*kāya*). The Jain *Uttarāddhyaṇa* (10.13-20) avows that it is rare to be born into a five-facultied body. In growth and intention (*cetana*) of flourishing, plants, however, reflect the process of extension by stretching out their roots, trunks, and branches and are thus responsive to spans of earth, water, and air (*Dīgha Nikāya* 87, 111). Conversely, in the *Mokshadharmā Parva* of the *Mahābhārata* (12.177.10-18), the high-souled Bhṛgu explains to his disciple-friend Bharadvāja the role played by the five primeval elements in the functioning of the plant-system and elaborates how they are compounded of visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile perceptions; though dense, they have spaces (*ākāśa*) within them and an inherent ability to recover from illness. The *a priori* idea of human sentience is delicately disturbed as the *ashoka* blooms when touched by the foot of a well-attired girl and the *vakula* when watered with wine, when Emma McCabe wants to marry a tree she loves and has sex with ‘him’, who fulfils her emotional and sexual needs (109), and when Rabindranath insists on studying every single tree of the *aśrama* as an individual, the way medical doctors and psychiatrists might study men (98). Sharanya Manivannan wants ‘a boyfriend like a banyan tree’ (107) with secret blossoms and shaded places, Nitoo Das writes about the memory of getting married to a plantain plant at the age of eleven (107), or Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s Tejimola undergoes metamorphosis to inhabit a liminal space from where she can re-tell her stories of loss and dejection — “I’ve been a creeper,/ A flowering plant and a lotus,/ Why should I want to be a wife?/ Nobody asked me what I wanted,/ So I left, misunderstood” 50-53). The faint, faltering but agentive (female) voices purportedly disrupt the socially-constructed narrative of viewing plant life. Sumana Roy’s *How I Became a Tree* protrudes and pulsates as an intense and interruptive foray into the fragility and the force of the vegetal, the condition of planthood in its radical contingency. The tree inscribes its name on the human body. It is a phytographic inscription that takes place, at the most elemental level, through the food we eat, the space we inhabit, and the oxygen we breathe. The tree ceases to be a mere ‘It’ and instead participates in the ‘I-Thou’ relation as the non-verbal and non-conscious communication reaches the other, making and marking the interaction (singularly) ethical. “So why was I so keen on becoming a tree? And was my malady exclusive to me alone?” (10) She imagines a kinship between her undisciplined hair with the wayward branches of trees and literally *feels* the violence of seasonal pruning and cutting that is inflicted on plants and trees (10). Her being is with the vegetal, which surrounds her. An intolerable proximity, when *treeness* is interiorised: “That I was not the first person to think of a woman as a tree was a relief. D. H. Lawrence helped me to look at my body as a tree — his poem, ‘Figs’, liberated my breasts and vagina from their femaleness” (17). She whispers: “among all other desires to become a tree, the most urgent is the need to escape noise” (23). When constraints of logic and reason loosen, aloneness engulfs the self, with a phytographic vision of being bathed by a forest, ‘shinrin-yoku’ (160). Plants are open, non-self-centered subjects. It is precisely to the distinct ‘worldhood’ of plants that we should approach exposing ourselves in order to become more adequately ethical in and to the world in its incredible diversity. When desires are rearranged, the self’s boundaries weakened, we

soul-share the (convivial) vegetal democracy and pray with the penitent woodcutter in the *Śatapath Brāhmaṇa*: “O earth, May I not injure the roots of thy plants!”

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