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Trees and Time: Some Roman Reflections

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ABSTRACT

Roman literature includes many reflections on the overlaps and differences between time as perceived and experienced by humans and by trees. Trees can offer ways for humans to conceptualise expanses of time which go far beyond their own lifespans, even stretching back to the primordial, as well as mapping onto more readily understood annual and generational cycles. Moreover, trees offer particularly fertile material for thinking about the more fluid representations of time within literature, memory, and the imagination. The outlook is anthropocentric, but not unreflectively so, and the intersections between the observed and the abstract world are examined from a range of perspectives.

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The awareness that trees' experience of time is different – partially overlapping, partially tangential to our own – underlies much of the fascination they hold. The longevity of many arboreal species is probably the most striking aspect,[1] but the annual regenerations of deciduous trees, and the surprising speed with which woodlands can spring up (counterpart to the still more shocking speed with which they can be felled) offer further ways of relating to the past, the present, and even eternity. My subject is not what the Romans knew or did not know about the development of post-glacial temperate forests, or methods to calculate the precise lifespans of trees, but the overlaps between the observed and the abstract world, where trees belong simultaneously to the everyday and to the world of imagination, where contemplations of time itself so often reside.

The strong association of trees with the far – even primordial – past sets them up in one kind of relation to time, yet the mapping of human lifespans onto cycles within trees' lives approaches that difference from an alternative angle. For Paul Ricoeur, whatever time might be in any absolute sense, from the point of view of the human experience it can only be felt 'to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative' (Ricoeur 1984, 3). We place things into a linear, 'before and after' organisation, not just using but *requiring* narrative to make sense of time. Through the stories we tell about trees, humans can both map and extend our own narratives of time; sometimes, too, we can imagine how the trees' narratives would differ from our own.[2] While some different species will gain particular mention, my focus here is more often on a generalised sense of 'the tree' than examining particular differences between trees.

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Trees and earliest time

In many ancient accounts of the creation or emergence of the world, trees are often seen as foundational features of the primaeval earth. Greek and Roman traditions do not offer us as clear a connection between cosmology and trees as, say, the Norse world-tree, Yggdrasil (on which, e.g. Marder 2023, 43–58), but the associations are still quite readily found. In the cosmogony sung by Vergil's Silenus, after the emergence of land, sun, and rain, forests are the next things to rise up (Vergil, *Eclogue* 6.37–40):[3]

> iamque nouum terrae stupeant lucescere solem,
>
> altius atque cadant summotis nubibus imbres;
>
> incipiant siluae cum primum surgere, cumque
>
> rara per ignaros errent animalia montis.
>
> [He sang how] now the lands are in astonishment at the new sun growing bright, and the rains fall from greater height as the clouds are lifted; when the woodlands begin to grow up for the first time, and scattered animals wander on the unfamiliar mountains.

Vergil may offer a gentle (and more plausible) corrective to the poet-philosopher Empedocles' vision of the earliest world, where trees emerged even *before* the light of day,[4] but there are still complexities in this conception of trees' relationship to time (Empedocles 2018). Silenus sings not of the shoots of trees first emerging, but of *siluae*, expanses of (intuitively, at least) mature trees growing up: the logical chronology of individual saplings growing together to form woodlands over time is here effaced as woodlands in collective form are apparently both growing and already grown. Again, in Ovid's account of creation in the *Metamorphoses*, which alludes (amongst other texts) to *Eclogue* 6, woodlands are also viewed as both part of a process of growth and in some sense already there. They are, moreover, emblematic of the primordial separation of land and sea, equivalent to – and possibly coeval with – vast geological features like mountains (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.43–4) (Ovid 2004):

> iussit et extendi campos, subsidere ualles,
>
> fronde tegi siluas, lapidosos surgere montes.
>
> [The creator] ordered plains to stretch out, valleys to sink down, woods to be clothed with leaves, stony mountains to rise up.

While the geological features are all given verbs relating to spatial change – extending, rising up or down[5] – the woods' change is more ambiguous. The covering with leaves could indicate a similar expansiveness, as swathes of forest spread out to cover the new earth, but is also reminiscent of a temporal change, the arrival of leaves to cover deciduous woodland in the spring. Neither Vergil nor Ovid describe deep time in the geological sense, but within the far past of the imagination time behaves not dissimilarly, the passage of centuries occupying a moment as shoots become a forest.

When imagining vast expanses of lived time, then, it is often trees which offer the model for concepts otherwise hard for human minds to encompass. Even contemplating the first beginnings of the human race can lead back to trees. When the aged king

Evander welcomes Aeneas to the area which will later become Rome, he points to the groves which surround them: *haec nemora indigenae Fauni Nymphaeque tenebant/gensque uirum truncis et duro robore nata* ('Fauns and indigenous Nymphs used to occupy these groves, and a race of men born from trunks and hard oak-wood', Vergil, *Aeneid* 8.314–15). There are other myths which see humanity as emerging from stone, or a combination of tree and stone, but in Vergil's emphatically and heavily wooded proto-Roman landscape (Armstrong 2019, 87–92), the origins of primitive people are most naturally connected with the woodlands. These trees readily present themselves as templates for imagining not only the general concept of far distant time, but also the ancientness of the human race itself.

When considering contemporary forests, rather than the generalised woodlands of primordial time or half-mythologised versions of far antiquity, the temptation is still felt to assume that their ancientness must equal 'genuine' ancientness (Pliny, *Natural History* 16.6) (Pliny 1968):

> in eadem septrionali plaga Hercyniae siluae roborum uastitas intacta aeuis et congenita mundo prope immortali sorte miracula cedit
>
> In the same northern region, the vast expanse of the Hercynian oak forest, untouched by age and coeval with the world, surpasses marvels by its almost immortal lot.

There is something about an evidently ancient forest which argues not just that it has been there for a long time, but that it has been there for *all* time. And while this necessarily elides the myriad cycles of growth and decay of individual trees, that notion of the forest as quietly spanning the immeasurable gap between the now and primordial time gains imaginative traction.[6] For the Vergilian and Ovidian creation stories, thus, the marvel in some ways is to imagine that there could have been a time when woods were not in order for woods to begin:[7] this, perhaps, explains that oscillation between the sense of trees both first emerging and always there (Vergili Maronis 1969). This may also resonate in our own times: campaigns to harness trees in combatting the climate crisis tend to bifurcate between the planting of saplings in their millions, and the preservation of ancient forests. Trees that are merely middle-aged seem to impose themselves less on our consciousness.

While in the sixth *Eclogue*, Vergil explicitly links trees with the first beginnings of the world, elsewhere within the collection he plays more implicitly with that sense of trees as always already ancient, no matter how recently they have arrived. At the very start, the shepherd-poet Tityrus is found under a beech tree (*Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi*: 'You, Tityrus, reclining under the cover of a spreading beech . . . ', *Ecl*. 1.1). The tree is mature enough to be shade-producing, an established part of the landscape, and yet it is actually a new arrival to the pastoral genre. It is neither the pine nor the oak mentioned in Theocritus' first *Idyll* (and not, in fact, mentioned at all by Theocritus), and has not even been widely seen in Latin poetry before Vergil's time: in the literary-historical sense, therefore, the beech in the opening line of the *Eclogues* springs up fully grown, a little like the primordial woods of the world's beginning. In the second *Eclogue* beeches appear again, now in plurality, forming a shady wood through which the love-sick Corydon wanders (*Ecl*. 2.3–4), and by the time we get to the third *Eclogue* these poetically youthful trees are ready to be viewed as, in fact, ancient: *hic ad ueteres fagos*, 'here by the old

beeches' (*Ecl*. 3.12). As other ancient trees may be perceived as coeval with the world itself, so Vergil's now ancient beeches are implicitly coeval with his literary world. To underline this, in the ninth *Eclogue*, as many other signals of poetic closure gather, we find the trees in natural decline – not, as more commonly seen, storm-battered or actively felled by humans, but apparently just old and starting to decay: *ueteres, iam fracta cacumina, fagos* ('the old beeches, their tops now broken', *Ecl*. 9.9). Within the compass of his book of pastoral verse, Vergil is able to achieve the botanically impossible, establishing rapidly mature and, finally, dying trees without the evident passage of centuries. The imaginative pull of the 'always already ancient' tree is strong, and for a writer fascinated by the intersections between natural and literary time more generally, the beeches offer a subtly fertile symbol of the complex webs of tradition and innovation, realism and fantasy, the timeless and the time-bound, with which the *Eclogues* as a collection engage.

Ovid plays with tree-time in a broadly similar manner in the *Metamorphoses*. After a catastrophic conflagration, Jupiter is obliged effectively to re-start creation: *flumina restituit, dat terrae gramina, frondes/arboribus, laesasque iubet reuirescere siluas* ('he restores rivers, gives grass to the earth, leaves to the trees, and orders the wounded woods to green again', *Met*. 2.407–8). The sense at this stage is of a repetition in the cycle of creation already repeated in the first book of the epic after the great flood – there, again, trees are a prominent visual feature as the waters retreat and divisions between sea and land are re-established (*Met*. 1.346–7). In the second book, just as cycles of creation are replayed, so cycles of the god's lustfulness resume: the Arcadian nymph Callisto catches Jupiter's eye, as previously Io had done. Yet Ovid has a chronological surprise in store: only a few lines after Jupiter has presided over this apparently youthful re-greening of the woods, the scene turns to an ancient grove: *nemus quod nulla ceciderat aetas* ('a woodland which no age had felled', *Met*. 2.418).[8] In a startling time-slip, we have moved from the vibrant green of shoots re-emerging from the scorched earth to a landscape of timelessly ancient and shade – giving woods. Meanwhile, Callisto, victim of Jupiter's sexual advances within that suddenly ancient grove, finds her resulting pregnancy revealed only gradually as the moon moves through the necessary nine cycles (*Met*. 2.453–6). The contrast between human and arboreal time – so often, rather, underlining the brevity of human lives compared with those of trees – is made to warp as the quasi-definitional notion of woodlands as ancient reasserts its imaginary necessity. The trope of a numinous ancient wood left uncut through the ages is a particularly popular one in Latin poetry; Ovid now uses it to wrong-foot a reader anticipating normal kinds of chronological progression, while additionally – and like Vergil – commenting on the capacity of literary time to offer accelerated, or otherwise distorted, versions of the life of trees.

Time after time: trees and regeneration

Jupiter may kick-start the regeneration of mythical forests in the *Metamorphoses*, but the capacity of many real trees to survive various forms of damage to re-grow underlines both their bodies' difference from human bodies and their different relationship to time. While the analogy between human reproduction and a plant's transformation from seed to adult is ready enough, re-sprouting after fire or growth from cuttings seems a qualitatively distinct process. It implies the possibility of in some sense being unbound by teleology, of having one's time again. In the *Georgics*, Vergil offers a list of methods of propagating trees which draws out this marvellous

re-sprouting, underlining the contrast with the human case (Vergil, *Georgics* 2.23–4, 30–31):

> hic plantas tenero abscindens de corpore matrum
>
> deposuit sulcis . . .
>
> quin et caudicibus sectis (mirabile dictu)
>
> truditur e sicco radix oleagina ligno
>
> This man tears suckers from the tender body of their mothers and plants them out in furrows . . . Indeed, an olive root will even emerge from the dry wood of chopped-up tree trunks – wondrous to speak of.

Both the young suckers torn from their mother's body and the new olive trees elicited from the desiccated trunks of the old not only survive but thrive. The contrast is not just the stark one between the resilience of the arboreal versus the human body, but also a more subtle one between the sense of early infancy and old age being times of peril for humans, yet potential times of (re)generation and vigour for trees – something only miraculous (*mirabile dictu*) from our perspective. The trees' narrative, perhaps, would simply tell of pause followed by resumption: 'the seemingly mechanical rhythm of vegetal growth contains discontinuity right in the middle of continuity and time in the midst of spatial augmentation' (Marder 2013, 110).

For humans, re-growth and rejuvenation can only occur intergenerationally, yet one of the most common English metaphors for this extension of life through reproduction is arboreal: the family tree. Romans also talked of family lines in terms of stocks, branches and scions, exploring the notion of the family – or more broadly of whole races – as a composite entity which could enjoy a relationship with time more like that of age-old oaks. Emily Gowers (2011) offers illuminating discussion of this metaphor pursued in grim terms in the *Aeneid* as the family tree of Priam is systematically eradicated, yet the potential just discussed even of cut trees to put forth new growth could be transferred back to the human realm when thinking across generations. Horace's Hannibal reflects with frustration on the capacity of the Romans to survive in spite of individual death and generational slaughter (Horace, *Odes* 4.4.57–60) (Horati Flacci 1901):

> duris ut ilex tonsa bipennibus
>
> nigrae feraci frondis in Algido,
>
> per damna, per caedis, ab ipso
>
> ducit opes animumque ferro.
>
> Like a holm-oak on Algidus fertile in dark leaves shorn by harsh two-headed axes, through the losses, through the slaughter, the tree draws resources and spirit from the steel itself.

The Roman race is tough and evergreen: cut it down and it will only grow back stronger.

Life times: trees and human timescales

The persistent impulse to see trees through an anthropomorphic lens leads to a number of depictions of tree-time as very much parallel to human-time. The vines of Vergil's

Georgics are tracked from infanthood, through adolescence to maturity: the young vines are *laetum . . . uitis genus* ('the happy offspring of the vine', *Geor*. 2.262) and need to be carefully planted into similar soil to that in which their parent tree grew, *mutatam ignorant subito ne semina matrem* ('lest the seedlings should suddenly not recognise their changed mother', *Geor*. 2.268. The earth here acts as foster-mother). As they grow up the farmer needs to adjust his treatment of them in accordance with their age (*Geor*. 2.362–3, 367–8):

> ac dum prima nouis adolescit frondibus aetas,
>
> parcendum teneris . . .
>
> inde ubi iam ualidis amplexae stirpibus ulmos
>
> exierint, tum stringe comas, tum bracchia tonde
>
> While their first age grows to adolescence with new leaves, the tender things should be spared . . . but when they have embraced and overtopped the elms [on which they are trained] with their strong stocks, then cut back their foliage/hair, then prune their limbs.

Such an anthropomorphised view of vegetative growth on an intimately familiar timescale is also echoed in the prose writer Columella's various injunctions to treat vines like children in need of discipline and education, e.g. *ut membra infantium a primo statim die consitionis formanda* [*sunt*] ('from the first day of its planting it immediately needs shaping, like the limbs of young children', *Res Rusticae* 4.3.5) (Columella 1941). The effacing of the stark difference between the methods of shaping – training and, eventually, pruning for vines, exercise for children – further facilitates the conceit.

Arboriculture is playing the long game, though: unlike the annual cycles of cereal farming and (much of) the vegetable garden, the planting and maintaining of tree plantations and orchards has to work within a timeframe most often stretching beyond the individual human lifespan. In the *Eclogues*, the pastoral figure Daphnis is urged, *insere, Daphni, piros*: *carpent tua poma nepotes* ('graft the pears, Daphnis: your grandchildren will pick your fruits', Vergil, *Ecl*. 9.50); as a fleeting voice of faith in pastoral continuity and the long lives of trees, the grafting of pears in one human generation will still – and perhaps better – bear fruit in the third. This injunction is complicated by its clear echo of a bitter reflection from the dispossessed Meliboeus of the first *Eclogue*, who orders himself with sarcasm, *insere nunc, Meliboe, piros* ('graft your pears now, Meliboeus', *Ecl*. 1.73): he no longer has a foot in the landscape to enable him to engage in this long-term activity and, in any case, it will be for a demobbed soldier not either himself or his grandchildren to reap those fruits. Yet, of course, the trees themselves will survive, living through changes that may happen on a human timescale: a resurgence of civil war, the confiscation of land from one family to be given to another. Thus, the vulnerability of human lives to be thrown off course over time – or, indeed, the comforting notion of a human intergenerational stability where grandchildren pluck the fruit from trees first grafted by their grandparents – is set against the placid backdrop of the persisting trees themselves.[9]

Homer's famous comparison of the generations of men to the generations of leaves shares something of this double notion of tree-time as being both like and unlike human-time. In the midst of battle, the Lycian hero Glaucus has a moment to declare (Homer, *Iliad* 6.146–8):

οἵη περ φύλλων γενεή, τοίη δὲ καὶ ἀνδρῶν.

φύλλα τὰ μέν τ᾽ ἄνεμος χαμάδις χέει, ἄλλα δέ θ᾽ ὕλη

τηλεθόωσα φύει, ἔαρος δ᾽ ἐπιγίγνεται ὥρη·

ὣς ἀνδρῶν γενεὴ ἣ μὲν φύει ἣ δ᾽ ἀπολήγει

> Like the generations of leaves are the generations of men. The wind pours the leaves to the ground, but the wood puts forth shoots, burgeoning when the season of spring comes; so with the generations of men, one puts forth shoots, another dies away.

The mapping of human mortality onto the temporary 'death' of only parts of trees simultaneously closes and widens the gap between the human and the arboreal. It also points up the tension between the undated circularity of 'natural' time, where the solar year is perceived as unchanging repetition, and the at least potentially datable linear time once the span of individual lives is brought to the fore.[10] There is something both unsettling and comforting in this analogy – humans (particularly relative to trees) do not live long as individuals, yet the successive emergence of generations is as constant as the return of leaves in the spring. In a way, Glaucus anticipates the kind of observation made more generally by Marder (2013, 112):

> Faithfully following and to some extent embodying the annual cycles with their incessant alternations of decay and regeneration, the tree permits us to appreciate repetition not as … 'tedium' … , but as the mute affirmation and reaffirmation of existence in all its finite materiality.

Direct variants and partial echoes of the 'lives like leaves' idea recur in Classical literature and beyond, including in Vergil's underworld, where the souls gathering to cross the river Styx are *quam multa in siluis autumni frigore primo/lapsa cadunt folia* ('as many as the leaves which slip and fall in the woods at the first frost of autumn', *Aen*. 6.309–10). Vergil replaces the burgeoning spring of Homer's new growing leaves with the autumn of mortality and makes no reference to re-growth of leaves or new birth of people, perhaps sharpening again our consciousness of the finality of human death in comparison with the temporary nature of the arboreal 'death' of leaves (Homeri 1920). Meanwhile, Horace moves the connection still further from the direct analogy of the cycles of leaf growth to the lifespans of humans as he urges his friend Valgius Rufus not to wallow too long in grief over the death of a loved one: [*non semper* . . .] *Aquilonibus/querqueta Gargani laborant/et foliis uiduantur orni* ('[not forever] . . . do the oak-woods of Gargano struggle before the north winds, and the manna-ash become bereaved of their leaves', *Odes* 2.9.6–8). The reasonable limits set to a period of human mourning here parallel the temporary setbacks of trees, yet the metaphor of the manna-ash widowed of their leaves brings us back all the same to the leaves-like-lives analogy.

In contrast with the use of trees to illustrate the brevity of human life, at *Metamorphoses* 8.711–20, Ovid's Philemon and Baucis, a remarkably pious and remarkably devoted old couple, are allowed to finish their allotted span in human form before being transformed into oak and lime trees (in notable contrast with the majority of other tree metamorphoses, which tend to affect younger people). Each becomes a tree of a different species, but the two are so closely conjoined they seem to share a single crown. As to which is which, it might be assumed that the lime is Baucis, whose name evokes softness

and femininity, and the oak a more 'manly' tree, suited to her husband Philemon,[11] but, again, the fact that the poet opts not to specify serves to emphasise their unity. The persistence of the conjoined trees long past human lifetimes which had already stretched to the farther end of normal human life expectancy embodies a paradox: the couple continue to live, yet can no longer be human; these quasi-eternal trees only exist because they were once human.

Horace offers a playful counterpoint to the truism of arboreal lifespans being longer than humans' in the form of a tree on his estate which almost kills him when it falls. Horace's survival of the tree's assault is but one example of his charmed life (he has also escaped the battlefield and a tricky sea voyage: *Odes* 3.4.26–8), but it is a marker he is particularly inclined to remember, and to inscribe within his own personal calendar. On the Kalends (the first day) of March, which other Romans know as the Matronalia, a day for married women to celebrate, Horace engages in a private ritual to mark the anniversary of the time when he was *prope funeratus/arboris ictu* ('almost killed off by the tree's blow', *Odes* 3.7.7–8). In a particularly extreme manifestation of the tendency to anthropocentric assessments of trees' significance, he even presents the tree's whole *telos*, or life goal, as leading towards this attempt on its master's life (*Odes* 2.13.1–4):

> Ille et nefasto te posuit die
>
> quicumque primum, et sacrilega manu
>
> produxit, arbos, in nepotum
>
> perniciem opprobriumque pagi
>
> He who first planted you did so on an inauspicious day and raised you with sacrilegious hand, tree, to be a menace to posterity, and to the disgrace of the locality.

This tree which grew up only to fall, narrowly missing dealing a deathblow to the nearby Horace, is a kind of vegetal time-bomb, its infancy and growth to maturity all leading to a point of near-murder. The classification of the day of its planting as *nefas* means 'inauspicious' in a general sense, but more particularly ties it to the Roman calendrical system of classifying different days as either *fas* (on which normal business can be conducted) or *nefas* (when assemblies and courts could not operate). While there is no special opprobrium attached to a day designated *nefas*, Horace clearly means to tar this particular one as a dark day, like the *dies atri* ('black days') on which no religious rituals could be performed, and which were in some cases associated with Roman military defeats. Horace here combines both the metaphorical child-rearing of arboriculture and the more socially structured ideas of calendar and anniversary. His fallen tree itself has two lives which run in partial parallel to the poet's: the first its real, malignant one leading to the *telos* of (not) killing Horace, the second its status as a memory – tree, referred to repeatedly in Horace's poetry as a part-humorous, part-defiant *memento mori*.

Trees beyond time

While Horace's insistence on memorialising his tree is a very personal one, in Rome more widely there were various other memory-trees, surviving in place names and traditions which allowed their presence to outlast even their originally long lifetimes. Varro (*Ling.*

Lat. 5.49) suggests that the Esquiline hill was so named because it was planted with oaks (*aesculi*) by king Tullius (Varro 1977–1979). The fact that this etymology is subject to debate indicates that those ancient oaks were no longer by Varro's time dominant features of the area (or possibly even present at all: he notes the general reduction of size of various sacred groves in Rome as a result of 'greed', i.e. felling to make room for building). Other parts of the city – for example, a saddle on the Capitoline hill known as *inter duos lucos* ('between two groves'), and a part of the Aventine hill known as the Loretum, named after a laurel grove which once grew there – similarly continued to nourish these ghostly trees long after their physical selves had gone.

Legend had it that the twin babies Romulus and Remus sheltered beneath a fig tree while being suckled by a she-wolf, and various ancient sources seem to identify it as the *Ficus Ruminalis* ('Ruminal Fig'), still growing within what were – to them – modern times, seven centuries or more after the foundation. Fig trees are not exceptionally long-lived, however, and possibly a periodic replanting went on by which the memory of the tree's significance could be transferred down the generations and each new tree could achieve a kind of successional immortality. Pliny the Elder mentions a (probably different but symbolically connected: Hunt 2016, 100–12) fig held sacred *ob memoriam eius quae nutrix Romuli ac Remi conditores imperii in Lupercali prima protexit* ('because of the memory of the one which as nurse of Romulus and Remus first sheltered the founders of the empire on the Lupercal', *Natural History* 15.77), which is replaced by a new tree if the old one withers. Ovid seems to draw out something of the paradox of the *Ficus Ruminalis*, simultaneously a defunct relic of a long-lost past, and as belonging to the now (*arbor erat: remanent uestigia, quaeque uocatur/Rumina nunc ficus, Romula ficus erat*, 'there was a tree: the traces of it remain, which are now called the Ruminal fig, but was once the Romulan fig', Ovid, *Fasti* 2.411–12) (Ovid 1989). The opening phrase *arbor erat* evokes the familiar literary trope of a tree (or grove) quite likely no longer there – a figure from the past – yet it is immediately followed by *remanent uestigia*, marking the persistence from the very first beginnings of Rome into the present of a tree which both is and is not now the same tree as it was then.

Cicero nods to the Roman (and more generally human) impulse to connect real trees with historical or legendary figures, while promoting, rather, the potential for literary time to surpass even that of the most long-lived species. At the opening of a fictionalised conversation about law, his friend Atticus is seen to speculate whether an old oak he can see is the same ancient specimen as he read about in Cicero's poem on Marius; Cicero's brother Quintus replies:

> manet uero, Attice noster, et semper manebit. sata est enim ingenio; nullius autem agricolae cultu stirps tam diuturna quam poetae uersu seminari potest … sed cum eam tempestas uetustasue consumpserit, tamen erit his in locis quercus, quam Marianam quercum uocent.
>
> Truly it survives, dear Atticus, and will always survive; for it was sown by imagination. There is no stock cultivated by a farmer that can be as everlasting as that sown by a poet's verse … When either time or old age has destroyed this tree, there will still be an oak in this place which they will call Marius' oak (Cicero, *De Legibus* 1.1–2) (Tulli Ciceronis 2006).

There is some irony from our perspective that only a few fragments of this poem on Marius actually survive (the longest in Cicero's self-quotation at *De Divinatione* 1.106), but the general sense that literary tree-time can extend well beyond even the lengthy

lifespans of actual oaks offers an overt articulation of the implicit arguments I identified earlier in this essay.

In Vergil's description of the heavily wooded underworld,[12] there is a rather different example of a tree which stands beyond time, a great elm in the palace of the god of the Underworld, whose existence is eternal, yet also entirely bound to the poem: it is not (so far as we know) part of any other traditions regarding the afterlife (*Aen*. 6.282–4):

> in medio ramos annosaque bracchia pandit
>
> ulmus opaca, ingens, quam sedem Somnia uulgo
>
> uana tenere ferunt, foliisque sub omnibus haerent.
>
> In the centre, a huge, dark elm tree spreads/has spread its branches and ancient limbs, which they commonly say is the seat of empty Dreams that cling beneath every leaf.

Much of Vergil's depiction of the underworld is wreathed in temporal complexity:[13] the overt confluence there of past, present, and future, where Aeneas meets the long- and recently-dead as well as the not-yet-born, combines with a pervasive sense of the dislocation of time. In this underworld, the dimensions of the potential and the imaginary can join and then diverge again from the usually distinct narrative line of real experience. This elm – the only elm in the whole *Aeneid* – offers a powerful symbol of the oscillation between, as it were, indicative and subjunctive relationships to time. It is huge and spreading, with ancient limbs, like many another venerable specimen, and thus entirely and readily imaginable. Yet its leaves have not birds or even bats nestling among them, but dreams: the mind's picture dissolves, fractures into the individual reader's attempt to imagine form for the formless. But even this contrast between the steady image of the ancient tree and the unsteady dreams cannot fully stand. The third person singular form of the verb *pandit* looks identical in both present and perfect tenses ('spreads'/'has spread'). In itself, this is not particularly unusual. In the context of the extreme temporal complexities of the Vergilian underworld, however, where past, present and future cohabit, it may quietly invite the reader to reflect on the elm as belonging to *both* present and past, existing as much now (whenever along the linear stretch of time we read the account) as then (in Aeneas' narrative time). Similarly, the description of the tree's *annosa bracchia* (ancient limbs) most immediately evokes an *old* tree (and, interestingly, Vergil only uses this adjective to describe trees: cf. *Aen*. 4.441 and 10.766), but there is a further sense in which it is more loosely 'full of years', living for all years indifferently. Thus the elm's unusually large reach in the temporal sense is paralleled by its connection with other dimensions, as host to the dreams that visit the unconscious mind, dreams that are empty, rather than prophetic, as many other night visions within the poem turn out to be.

This association of trees not only with antiquity but also with multi-dimensionality persists in a variety of literature, whether Dante's *selva oscura*, or Tolkein's Ents. In C. S. Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew*, Polly and Digory find themselves in a thick woodland, where innumerable pools lie surrounded by silent and strongly growing trees. This 'wood between the worlds' works on both spatial and temporal levels, offering a place from which other worlds can be reached, but, in ways broadly similar to Vergil's elm, also eroding normal perceptions of linear time.

The trees grew close together and were so leafy that he could get no glimpse of the sky. All the light was green light that came through the leaves … There were no birds, no insects, no animals, and no wind. You could almost feel the trees growing … [Digory] was not in the least frightened, or excited, or curious. If anyone had asked him, 'Where did you come from?' he would probably have said, 'I've always been here'. That was what it felt like – as if one had always been in that place and never been bored although nothing had ever happened. As he said long afterwards, 'It's not the sort of place where things happen. The trees go on growing, that's all' (Lewis 1998, 39–40).

This sense of eternally extended tree-time as non-time or beyond-time has resonance, too, with the Roman writers' first forests of the world, whose swift appearance and awesome temporal reach seem out of kilter with any humanly measurable, narratable version of time. The simultaneously comforting and sinister atmosphere of the wood between worlds – within seconds confounding Digory's sense of time as well as of himself – well evokes the paradox of familiarity and alienation in ancient conceptions of the forest. Trees are the plants at once both most and least like humans: we may identify physical analogies between us (limbs, trunks), we may plot our lifespans and affections onto developing saplings or see in deciduous arboreal cycles our own flourishing and dying, but trees' silence and stillness, their ability to regenerate from fragments of themselves, and above all their persistence across the ages renders them less like siblings and more like gods – or monsters.

Notes

1. A familiar idea evoked, e.g. in Stafford (2016). Pliny the Elder reserves a section of his *Natural History* for trees of particularly notable longevity: 16.234–40.
2. For an attempt to re-centre various philosophical discussions of time by reference to plants, see Marder (2013, 93–117); and more broadly Marder (2023).
3. All translations are my own.
4. Aëtius 5.26.4 (= Empedocles 31 A 70 D-K): 'Empedocles says that trees sprang up from the earth, the first of the living things, before the sun was spread around, and before day and night were distinguished'.
5. Ovid's mountains rise with the same verb as Vergil's forests: *surgere* (*Met*. 1.43).
6. Even if – for the majority if not all cases – true primordial forest 'exists only in mythic time' (Sax 2023, 174).
7. For both the difficulty and necessity of comprehending the ecologically and meteorologically vast in the era of global warming, see Morton (2013).
8. A passage also considered by Gowers (2023), pursuing (amongst other things) the question of how arboreal and human arcs of time both diverge and coincide in the course of the *Metamorphoses*.
9. A less comfortable reflection of the benefits of arboriculture for the tree itself can be found in the pseudo-Ovidian *Nux*, as discussed from an ecofeminist perspective by O'Hearn (2023).
10. For ancient Roman notions of 'natural time' as susceptible to human taming in a manner similar to the taming of landscapes and living beings, see Feeney (2007, 202–6).
11. Discussion of the gender bias of both narrator and critics in Sharrock (2020 at paragraph 16).
12. For numinous trees in and around Vergil's underworld, see Armstrong (2019, 70–9).
13. Indeed, the whole of the *Aeneid* is fascinated by time and narrative (and time *as* narrative): see Kennedy (2013, 44–71).

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