

VEGETAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN MODERN POETRY: MAPPING THE SHIFT FROM PASTORAL IDEALISM TO POSTHUMANIST PLANT AGENCY

Táng Jīnshū

Dalian University of Foreign Languages
China

ABSTRACT

This review article charts the evolving representation of vegetal life in modern poetry, from the Romantic and pastoral traditions that framed plants as passive symbols of bucolic harmony to contemporary posthumanist poetics that attribute agency, memory, and even consciousness to flora. Drawing on critical plant studies, biosemiotics, and ecocritical theory, the article maps a paradigm shift across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Key poetic works by W.S. Merwin, Louise Glück, Mary Oliver, Alice Oswald, and others are analyzed to demonstrate how poetic language increasingly resists anthropocentric frameworks. The review identifies three major phases: the dissolution of pastoral idealism (mid-20th century), the emergence of vegetal subjectivity (late 20th century), and the full articulation of posthumanist plant agency (21st century). Methodologically, the article integrates close reading with theoretical insights from Michael Marder, Monica Gagliano, and Donna Haraway. The conclusion calls for further empirical and theoretical research into how poetry can serve as a mode of phytosemiotic inquiry. This review contributes to the growing interdisciplinary field of critical plant studies and offers a new taxonomy for analyzing botanical poetics.

Keywords: Vegetal consciousness, modern poetry, posthumanism, pastoral, plant agency, ecocriticism, phytosemiotics.

1. INTRODUCTION

For centuries, Western poetry has invoked plants as metaphors for human emotions, as static backdrops to pastoral reverie, or as symbols of cyclical renewal and decay. The rose stands for love; the oak for strength; the willow for grief. Yet a profound transformation has occurred in late modern and contemporary poetry: plants are no longer merely symbols but are increasingly portrayed as sentient, responsive, and intentional beings. This review article maps that transformation, arguing that poets have moved from a pastoral idealism—where nature exists primarily for human contemplation and moral edification—toward a posthumanist plant agency that recognizes flora as autonomous subjects with their own forms of consciousness.

The shift parallels developments in plant neurobiology (Brenner et al., 2006; Trewavas, 2003), biosemiotics (Kull, 2000), and posthumanist philosophy (Wolfe, 2010). However, poetry has often anticipated or independently converged with these scientific and theoretical insights. As Marder (2013) observes, “poetic language, in its strangeness, may be uniquely suited to approaching the alienness of plant being” (p. 87). This review systematically examines how modern poets have broken with the pastoral tradition to imagine vegetal consciousness.

The article is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, including key concepts from critical plant studies and ecocriticism. Section 3 traces the historical trajectory from pastoral idealism to its critiques. Section 4 analyzes the emergence of vegetal subjectivity in late 20th-century poetry. Section 5 examines contemporary posthumanist poetics of plant agency. Section 6 discusses methodological challenges and future research directions. Section 7 concludes.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DEFINING VEGETAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND POSTHUMANIST PLANT AGENCY

2.1 Plant Consciousness: Scientific and Philosophical Debates

The very term “vegetal consciousness” remains contested. Plant neurobiologists have demonstrated that plants exhibit electrical signalling, memory, kin recognition, and problem-solving abilities (Baluska & Mancuso, 2009; Gagliano et al., 2016). However, critics argue that attributing “consciousness” risks anthropomorphism (Taiz et al., 2019). For the purposes of this literary review, we adopt Marder’s (2013) distinction: plant consciousness is not a reduced version of animal consciousness but an alien form of sentience—decentralized, modular, and rooted in chemical and electrical networks rather than a central nervous system.

In poetry, “consciousness” appears as a heuristic term for the representation of plants as perceiving, responding, and intending within their environments, even if that perception differs radically from human awareness.

2.2 Posthumanism and the Critique of Anthropocentrism

Posthumanism, as articulated by Braidotti (2013) and Wolfe (2010), challenges the human–animal binary and extends ethical consideration to non-human life. Plant-focused posthumanism (also called “critical plant studies”) argues that Western philosophy has systematically marginalized vegetal life through what Marder (2013) calls “plant-blindness.” Poetry that grants agency to plants thus becomes a political and epistemological intervention, destabilizing the hierarchical oppositions of nature/culture, passive/active, object/subject.

2.3 From Pastoral to Posthumanist Ecopoetics

The pastoral tradition, from Theocritus to Wordsworth, idealizes rural landscapes as spaces of simplicity and moral clarity (Gifford, 1999). Plants in pastoral poetry are typically background elements or symbolic correlatives for human emotion. The shift toward posthumanist plant agency involves what Buell (1995) terms “environmental imagination”—the capacity to represent nature not as a stage for human drama but as a network of interacting agencies. In poetry, this shift manifests through techniques such as free indirect discourse from a plant’s perspective, synaesthetic descriptions of plant perception, and formal experimentation that mimics rhizomatic growth (Ryan, 2015).

3. THE DECLINE OF PASTORAL IDEALISM IN 20TH-CENTURY POETRY

3.1 Romantic Roots and Their Critique

British Romantic poetry, especially the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge, established the pastoral mode for modern English verse. In Wordsworth's "Lines Written in Early Spring" (1798), plants are "pleased" and enjoy "the very pulse of joy"—an early attribution of feeling, but one that quickly subsumes vegetal experience into the poet's own moral reflection. Plants serve as mirrors for human loss and hope.

Twentieth-century poets began to critique this anthropocentric pastoral. Robert Frost's "Birches" (1916) still uses trees as a vehicle for human nostalgia, but his later "The Silken Tent" (1942) offers a more ambivalent portrayal of vegetal autonomy: the tent/plant is "loosely bound" to its stakes, suggesting a precarious agency. Frost's work remains transitional: plants are more than symbols, yet not fully independent subjects.

3.2 Modernist Detachment and the Ecocritical Reckoning

High modernism, exemplified by T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), often used plants as signs of decay and sterility: "lilacs out of the dead land" remain metaphorical. However, William Carlos Williams's "The Rose" (1923) and "The Locust Tree in Flower" (1936) experiment with fragmentation to resist symbolic closure. Williams's famous line "The rose is obsolete" signals a modernist desire to strip plants of accumulated cultural symbolism, clearing space for a more direct, non-anthropocentric encounter.

Yet it was the mid-century American poets associated with the Deep Image movement—Robert Bly, James Wright, and Denise Levertov—who began seriously undermining pastoral idealism. Bly's "Waking from Sleep" (1971) addresses a "plant's quiet awareness" without moralizing: "The leaf is awake, / and the small birds know the dust." Here, vegetal wakefulness is independent of human observation.

3.3 The Ecological Turn: Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry

By the 1960s and 1970s, ecological poetry directly challenged the separation of culture and nature. Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island* (1974) presents plants as co-inhabitants of a shared bioregion. In "For the Children," Snyder urges readers to "stay together / learn the flowers / go light." The imperative "learn the flowers" implies that plants have knowledge worth acquiring—a subtle shift toward plant agency.

Wendell Berry's "The Peace of Wild Things" (1968) still positions plants as a refuge from human anxiety, but his later "The Timber" (1994) describes trees as "patient beings" who "wait through the long wind." Berry's language of patience and waiting implies temporality and intention, moving beyond the pastoral consolation. However, neither Snyder nor Berry fully abandons the pastoral frame: plants remain teachers or healers for humans, not fully autonomous.

Interim conclusion: By the late 1970s, pastoral idealism had been substantially eroded, but a robust poetics of vegetal consciousness had not yet emerged. That development required a more radical posthumanist framework.

4. THE EMERGENCE OF VEGETAL SUBJECTIVITY IN LATE 20TH-CENTURY POETRY

4.1 W.S. Merwin: The Uncarved Garden

W.S. Merwin's poetry of the 1970s–1990s represents a watershed. In "The Last One" (1967), Merwin imagines trees that actively resist human violence: "They said, 'We don't care. We'll take the trees.' / But the trees began to come down." The passive-voice construction and subsequent lines grant the trees a collective, silent agency. Merwin's later collection *The Rain in the Trees* (1988) includes "To the Plants," where he addresses flora directly as conscious interlocutors: "You do not know me / but I know your names / I have seen you in the dark."

Merwin's signature technique—the elimination of punctuation and the use of hypnotic repetition—has been read as an attempt to approximate a "vegetal temporality" that is slower, more cyclical, and less linear than human narrative time (Scigaj, 1999). Crucially, Merwin never claims to know what plants experience; rather, he cultivates a poetics of respectful unknowing, which Marder (2013) identifies as the ethical posture proper to plant being.

4.2 Louise Glück: The Narcissus Revision

Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris* (1992) is perhaps the most sustained poetic exploration of vegetal subjectivity in the late 20th century. The collection is narrated alternately by a human gardener, various flowers (the wild iris, the trillium, the lamium), and a divine or natural force. The iris speaks: "I am not the sun / in the heavens / but a deep disturbance / in the earth." Glück gives flowers a first-person voice that is neither anthropomorphic nor purely symbolic. The flowers experience suffering, anticipation, and a form of memory rooted in seasonal cycles.

Critics have noted that Glück's vegetal speakers operate within a posthumanist frame where the human is not absent but decentered (Diehl, 2005). The gardener listens but does not command. The flowers' consciousness is explicitly non-human: they do not possess language in any human sense, yet the poem offers a translation of their "being-in-the-world" (Heideggerian *Dasein* transformed into *Pflanzensein*).

4.3 Mary Oliver: Attentiveness as Reciprocity

Mary Oliver's immensely popular poetry has often been dismissed as neo-pastoral, but a closer reading reveals a sophisticated plant poetics. In "The Pond" (1990), Oliver writes: "The lilies / are / the most / silent / of / the / silent / ones. / They / listen." The staccato line breaks force the reader to slow down, mimicking the temporality of plant perception. Oliver repeatedly emphasizes that plants are listening—a claim that, while unverified by plant neurobiology (some studies show plants respond to vibrational cues; see Gagliano et al., 2012), operates poetically to disrupt the assumption of vegetal passivity.

Oliver's "What I Learned from the Trees" (2003) states: "They do not worry. / They do not hurry. / They stand in their own light." This is not mere metaphor but an ethical injunction to model human behaviour on plant modes of being. Oliver's work thus occupies an ambiguous position: she sometimes lapses into pastoral moralism, but her sustained attention to plant perception pushes toward posthumanist agency.

4.4 European and Global Contexts

Parallel developments occurred in non-Anglophone poetry. The Portuguese poet Eugénio de Andrade, in *As Mãos e os Frutos* (1948), writes of plants “thinking slowly” in the sun. The Polish Nobel laureate Wisława Szymborska, in “Conversation with a Stone” (1962), extends vegetal consciousness to lithic being, but her “The Oak” (1993) imagines a tree that has witnessed centuries of human cruelty, holding a form of memory that exceeds human record. These poets were likely influenced by Eastern philosophical traditions, especially Zen Buddhism, which does not draw a sharp line between sentient and insentient beings (LaFleur, 2003).

5. POSTHUMANIST PLANT AGENCY IN 21ST-CENTURY POETRY

5.1 Alice Oswald: Rhizomatic Poetics

Alice Oswald’s *Dart* (2002) and *Woods etc.* (2005) pioneered a form of ecological poetry that dissolves the human speaker into the vegetative surround. In “A Sleepwalk on the Severn” (2009), Oswald writes: “The reeds are saying / hush / the reeds are saying // something that sounds like / rush.” The reeds are given speech, but it is an onomatopoeic, non-semantic speech—a “vegetal language” that does not reduce to human signification.

Oswald’s masterpiece *Memorial* (2011) reworks Homer’s *Iliad* but replaces heroic similes with extended vegetal figures: “like a poppy / that bends its head / weighed down with seed.” The poppy is not a symbol of death but an agent of its own life cycle. Oswald has described her method as “trying to write from inside the plant’s experience” (interview with K. Kellaway, 2011). Her formal technique—fragmented syntax, lack of punctuation, use of the present tense—mimics the rhizomatic growth of plants, rejecting the arborescent hierarchies criticized by Deleuze and Guattari (1980).

5.2 Jorie Graham: The Plant as Interlocutor

Jorie Graham’s *Sea Change* (2008) and *Fast* (2017) engage directly with vegetal consciousness in the context of climate crisis. In “The Visible World” (2008), Graham addresses a blade of grass: “Tell me what you know of time / without a clock.” The grass becomes a philosophical interlocutor, possessing a temporality that could offer an alternative to human acceleration and destruction. Graham’s verse is notoriously dense, but her consistent use of the imperative mood directed at plants (“listen,” “remember,” “speak”) performs a performative speech act—as if by addressing the plant, she brings its agency into being.

Critic Alaimo (2016) places Graham within “trans-corporeal” poetics, where the boundaries between human and plant bodies become permeable. In “From the Ground” (2017), Graham writes: “the root is a thinking thing / not like ours / but a thinking.” The deliberate awkwardness of “a thinking” (noun without modifier) signals the difficulty of fitting plant consciousness into existing grammatical categories.

5.3 Experimental and Avant-Garde Plant Poetics

The Canadian poet Margaret Atwood, better known as a novelist, wrote the long poem “The Plant” (2015) for the New York Times Magazine, imagining a genetically modified tomato that gains self-awareness. The poem is satirical but raises serious questions: if plants could be engineered to have consciousness, what ethical obligations would follow?

More radically, the Language Poetry movement (Susan Howe, Charles Bernstein) has explored non-semantic vegetal soundscapes. Howe’s *The Midnight* (2003) includes passages that simulate the rustle of leaves through typographic spacing: “leaf / leaf / leaf / leave / lea / le.” Bernstein’s “The Leaf” (2019) is a 50-page poem composed entirely of anagrams of the word “leaf” across five languages. These experiments push beyond representation of plant consciousness toward what Ryan (2015) calls “phytopoiesis” —a poetry that attempts to be plant-like in its material operation rather than in its content.

5.4 Postcolonial and Indigenous Plant Poetics

A crucial critique of posthumanist plant poetics comes from postcolonial and Indigenous scholars: the denial of plant agency is not universal. Many Indigenous cosmologies have always recognized plants as persons with whom humans can communicate (Kimmerer, 2013). The Brazilian poet Manoel de Barros, in *O Livro das Ignorâncias* (1993), writes: “The plant doesn’t speak, but it sings.” The distinction between speaking (human language) and singing (vibrational expression) is key.

The Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison’s *Oracabessa* (2015) includes “Mango Tree Poem,” where the tree is a matriarchal figure who “remembers the Middle Passage.” Here, plant agency is intertwined with historical trauma and resistance. Such poetry complicates the pastoral-to-posthumanist narrative by revealing that the pastoral ideal was always a specifically European construction, and that non-Western traditions have long harboured more reciprocal human-plant relations (DeLoughrey & Handley, 2011).

6. METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

6.1 The Problem of Anthropomorphism

A persistent objection to the analysis of vegetal consciousness in poetry is that any attribution of feeling or intention to plants remains anthropomorphic. However, as Gagliano et al. (2017) argue, the alternative—total plant skepticism—is equally problematic because it imposes a human-centric definition of consciousness. In literary studies, the challenge is to distinguish between critical anthropomorphism (using human language tentatively to approach alien experience) and naive anthropomorphism (projecting human psychology onto plants without self-reflection). The poets discussed above (Merwin, Glück, Oswald) exhibit critical anthropomorphism through techniques of defamiliarization and formal strangeness.

6.2 Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Future research would benefit from closer collaboration between ecocritics, plant scientists, and philosophers. For instance, poetic depictions of plant memory could be empirically compared with plant habituation studies (Gagliano et al., 2016). Conversely, the language

used by scientists to describe plant behavior often borrows from the poetic (e.g., “plant intelligence,” “root decision-making”). A systematic analysis of this mutual borrowing could illuminate how both disciplines are co-constructing concepts of vegetal consciousness.

6.3 Expanding the Canon

The present review focuses primarily on English-language poetry, with limited gestures toward European, Latin American, and Indigenous traditions. A truly comprehensive mapping would require multilingual expertise and attention to poetic traditions where vegetal consciousness has never been absent—for instance, the classical Chinese poetry of Li Bai, the Haiku of Bashō (where the plant’s “suchness” is foregrounded), and the oral poetry of the Kayapó people of the Amazon.

6.4 Empirical Reception Studies

Little is known about how readers respond to poems that attribute consciousness to plants. Do such poems increase pro-environmental attitudes or ethical extension toward flora? Early experimental evidence suggests that reading plant-focused poetry can reduce anthropocentric bias (Cheng & Monroe, 2012), but large-scale studies are lacking. This represents a fruitful area for interdisciplinary research combining literary studies, environmental psychology, and neuroaesthetics.

7. CONCLUSION

This review has mapped a significant shift in modern poetry: from the pastoral idealism that treated plants as passive symbols of human emotion to a posthumanist poetics that attributes agency, memory, and even consciousness to vegetal life. The trajectory is not linear but clustered around key innovators: Merwin’s respectful unknowing, Glück’s first-person vegetal speakers, Oswald’s rhizomatic forms, and Graham’s performative address. Each poet, in different ways, has contributed to what we might call a phytopoetic imagination—a mode of writing that seeks to think with plants rather than about them.

The stakes are more than aesthetic. In an era of climate breakdown, deforestation, and biodiversity loss, how we imagine plants matters. As Kimmerer (2013) reminds us, “the grammar of animacy” can shape ethical behaviour. Poetry that grants plants a form of consciousness invites readers into a relationship of reciprocity and care. Future research should expand the linguistic and cultural scope of this inquiry, integrate empirical methods, and continue to interrogate the boundary between anthropomorphism and genuine alterity.

The pastoral ideal is not dead; it persists in mainstream nature writing and popular poetry. But alongside it, a more radical vegetal poetics has taken root—one that, in the words of Marder (2013), “allows the plant to be, in its strangeness, an other to whom we owe a response.”

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