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Botanical Awareness and Adolescent Maturation in Siri Pettersen's *Odin's Child*



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ABSTRACT

This article supports the thesis that (eco)fantasy novels written for young adult people are nowadays crucial to give the next generation an ecological expertise to face environmental challenges. It is therefore important to consider what perceptions of nature are actually conveyed through the reading of these literary works, thus involving a pure dissemination of knowledge about flora. The novel *Odin's Child* (*Odinsbarn*, 2013) by Siri Pettersen is considered here, giving voice to arboreal and botanical perspectives and basing the analysis on phytocriticism and the recent developments in ecocriticism. *Odin's Child* supports the belief that a deep knowledge about botanical elements can be shared through the practice of embodiment and through an active interaction with the plant world, especially at a young age; for this reason, the importance of liminality and the role of contemporary literature in the human maturation process are underlined here.

Plants play multiple sustainable roles in our life and for the survival of the planet: they are sources of medical treatments, and absorbers of carbon dioxide and other air pollutants (Jones and MacLeod 2022). Yet, it is only recently that scholars from the humanities have started analysing the role of plants in fiction, inaugurating the so-called 'plant-turn'. The aim of this study is to highlight the importance of plants and botanical knowledge in young people's understanding of and engagement with the natural world via young adult literature. This article's approach will underscore the pedagogical value of ecofantasy as a suitable genre in creating empathy and a positive attunement towards flora in young readers. The central part of this paper, informed by the work of John C. Ryan (2018) and his phytocritical method, provides an analysis of the botanical elements of the eonovel *Odin's Child*, with an emphasis on its affective potential. A final reflection will involve new materialistic visions – such as the concepts of hybridisation (Curry 2013) and transcorporeality (Alaimo 2010) – in considering the liminal space of human/non-human and the girl/woman maturation process through which the novel develops.

KEYWORDS

arboreal and botanical knowledge, ecocriticism, ecofantasy, embodiment, human maturation process



COCRITICISM AND CRITICAL PLANT STUDIES

In the last decade, ecocriticism has redirected the analysis of plants, attentive to the representation of the plant world – forests, trees, bushes, flowers, herbs, wild shrubs, garden plants – in cultural works, including literary works. Ecocriticism has examined the figurative powers of the flora present in literature

through symbols, metaphors, tropes, linguistic means, and narrative devices. In his introduction to *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies* (2013), Randy Laist argues that it is ‘impossible to overstate the significance of plants to human life, and yet this simple fact is easily overlooked, taken for granted, or, perhaps, actively repressed in the semantic texture of urban, technological consciousness’ (2013: 10). For Laist, the common rhetoric tends to conceptualise botanical life as a category of things that are alive like us, but that live in a completely different way, located outside our capacity for empathy, omnipresent but unknown, seductive but unresponsive (2013: 14). For ecocritics, imagination signifies the author’s ability to mediate the plant world in an evocative or persuasive way, a quality that emerges between text and referent during the mediation process (Ryan 2018: 10).

As Lydia Kokkola claims, the use of critical plant studies within literary analyses ‘draws attention to works which concretise human dependence on plants’ (2017: 274). In his volume *Plants in Contemporary Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Botanical Imagination* (2018), John Charles Ryan aims to reverse the trend denoted as plant blindness: ‘an inclination to overlook flora, to undervalue its global biocultural significance, or to render it appropriable matter in service to human desire’ (2018: 6). From this point of view, the plant world in the text is analysed with the aim of identifying its potentially negative yield through human aesthetic inclinations (plants as pretty objects and picturesque scenarios), appropriation (such as consumables or throwaway materials) and figuration (as symbols, tropes and linguistic devices rather than presences, corporeality and sensory exchanges). By receiving various sensory impressions from plants, our mind enters a perceptive sphere unifying plants, nature, imagination and knowledge. The sphere of imagination, beyond its normative limits, also highlights their transience; in this context, the imaginative faculty acts as an intermediate zone on the threshold of rational thought, objective knowledge, and the specific corporeality of plants (2018: 8–9). Ryan names this mode botanical criticism, or phytocriticism, which attributes greater vital capacity to plants. By recognising plants as cognitive entities capable of behaving, deciding, feeling, learning and remembering, phytocriticism evaluates the extent to which plant dynamism figures in cultural productions, including environmental texts in which botanical life is an active presence (2018: 11). Catalysing a transformation of language, a phytocritic recognises

the totality of the botanical sphere, such as the environment, ecology, landscape and, of course, plants.

In addition to this, Ryan evaluates the ethical orientation of these texts and the degree to which the narratives suggest the moral consideration of plants (2018: 14–15). His phytocritical method points to a vegetal dialectic recognising states of difference and commonality between plants and non-plants. This allows critics to think of plants in terms of their complex phenomenological experiences as individuals and communities, with their own subjectivity within an ecosystem. Through literature, the dialectic of the strangeness and familiarity of plants attracts the reader, who becomes involved in the lives of plants and will have to confront both their radical otherness and their profound identity (2018: 17). Ryan's work is divided into thematic chapters dedicated to different topics such as soul, body, empathy, humour, memory, time, death, hope (and love). Ryan emphasises poetry in developing a phytocritical approach, but his subdivision based on the sensory perception of the plant world also represents a good starting point for the exploration of flora and our empathic perception in contemporary (eco)fantasy novels. It is indeed of particular interest to analyse the role of plants and their perspectives emerging in recent literary productions for children and young adults. Considering the important role that plants play in our lives, this article underlines the potential of floral and arboreal depictions in supporting the liminal maturation process – as the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage between childhood and the passage to a new and more adult way of structuring their identity, time, or community (Van Genneep 2019) – in the imaginative dimension of the young reader.

ODIN'S CHILD AND MEANINGFUL HOPE

Odin's Child (2021), as translated into English from the original Norwegian title *Odinsbarn* (2013), is a contemporary young adult novel by Siri Pettersen. In this (eco)fantasy story, the protagonist Hirka, a fifteen-year-old girl, has no ambitions, lives in a small, isolated house on top of a hill, and conducts a poor existence away from everyone. She is an expert healer, and often uses her skills and knowledge of healing herbs, learned from her father, to create natural medicines, to cure

people or to sell herbs in the market. This activity puts her in close contact with the surrounding environment to collect herbs and wild plants. All she wants is to be free and live like everyone else, but this doesn't seem possible because she is an 'Odin's Child', the only human being to live in the kingdom of Ym. The typical magical and fantastic element gives the main characters the opportunity to develop some inner psychological processes typical of adolescent maturation, such as disorientation, fear and anxiety towards the switch to adulthood.

In ecofantasy novels, as in works of fantasy, we find a secondary world that is a separate realm where society revolves around magic or where magical creatures are present. It can be a unique world by itself or one that is connected to a primary (non-)magical world through a portal. Typically, in this secondary magical world, young protagonists act freely, as they are no longer at the mercy of the daily limits imposed by adults and, in this way, they take control of their own lives (Teigland 2014: 104).¹ Fantasy novels, therefore, give their protagonists the opportunity to bring order to inner chaos, usually generated by conflicting feelings about the world and the society in which they live. The inner crisis reflects the need for a personal change and for a departure from the everyday environment, a dimension in which the protagonist is at a disadvantage and, often, finds him- or herself with no way out of an apparently hopeless situation. The secondary world – the fantasy universe that finally offers the adolescent the possibility to take an active part and to remedy his or her ineptitude – is of crucial importance for change: in this new setting, the young protagonist finally finds friendship and love, and pursues freedom and self-determination (Teigland 2014: 105).

Recently, many Nordic econovels have used natural motifs as central to the maturation process of their young protagonists: as well as Siri Pettersen's bestselling fantasy trilogy *The Raven Rings* (2013–2015) – of which *Odin's Child* is the first chapter – novels *Hulder* (2013) and *Forbannet* ('Damnable', 2015) by Tonje Torne have gained more and more popularity. In particular, the novel *Odin's Child* is part of that ecofantasy literature dealing with ethical and philosophical themes (Goga 2018b: 77). By ecofantasy, I specifically refer to a subsection of the fantasy genre that emphasises our co-dependence on the natural world without

1 All translations from critical essays originally written in Norwegian and Italian are mine.

relying on dichotomies or divisions between human society and the environment. Indeed, these narratives are marked by harmony between human civilisation and plant nature. The ethical question underlying the plot in *Odin's Child* is the relationship existing between different life forms and between the protagonist Hirka and the natural elements; there is a subtle balance in Hirka's life and much depends on the presence of plants and animals and the comfort they give her. Specifically, this book challenges the notion of the primacy of the human being, or what in a broader perspective can be defined as an anthropocentric attitude towards nature (Goga 2018b: 77), and at the same time provides optimistic and empathetic counter-visions of sustainable futures. In *Odin's Child*, Hirka is the only human being in a world with no other humans: the protagonist's attitude towards different forms of life and the fact that the interaction with them increases her self-determination and her wisdom in facing difficulties lead her to establish what Goga calls 'an ecocentric attitude within literature' (*ibid.*).

In her official website, Pettersen writes that her books are inspired by Nordic culture, climate and mythology, but that they are not limited to this: the worlds she describes are unique, complex and complete, with their own rules and settings. Furthermore, Pettersen assumes that in an unreal world, of which no one has heard before, readers have a privileged position, given that, from the very beginning of the reading, they have no prejudices. It is precisely in the hands of young readers that Pettersen puts her trust for a different future:

They haven't given up yet. Young people haven't been moulded yet and haven't succumbed to the patterns of adults. Young people refuse to accept 'that's just how it is' as a reason. They are alert, sharp, they notice when things aren't working, and they burn with desire to fix it. They have utopian mindsets and believe in all the best fairy tales.²

The writer entrusts them and the (eco)fantasy narrative with the most important mission in this historical moment:

Many people think fantasy is about getting away, about pure escapism. And of course, that's part of it, but the genre also has a far more important role. Fantasy is often criticised for being unrealistic since it is about saving the world. But for the very first time, saving the world is a realistic problem. Sadly. I think people

2 <https://www.siripettersen.com/about-siri>

swallow fantasy because it teaches them to tackle big problems. It gives them motivation and inspiration to attack the big issues we are facing.³

From this point of view, Pettersen's words match exactly the definition and scopes of young adult fiction in a broader sense, that of playing an important pedagogical role in adolescent maturation. In particular, the more recent ecofiction incorporating human–plant relations suggests that the thinking underlying critical plant studies is becoming more accessible to young readers (Kokkola 2017: 277). Furthermore, by foregrounding the activeness and liveliness of the vegetal world, ecofantasy authors 'provide a new way of promoting changes in human behaviour in relation to the lived world' (276), to eventually lead to more desirable pro-environmental behaviours. Ecofantasy allows writers to portray a relationship in which botanical awareness and human identity merge, creating a hybrid. This aspect will be strongly underlined and supported during this analysis. In fact, while the roles of imagination and freedom in fantasy have been traditionally taken into account by literary critics, little has been done on hybridisation. Yet hybridity is an important factor in the liminal phase of adolescent maturation. Hybridity gives Hirka a space to grow and the novel itself might give young female readers the space to muse on their own identities and growth.

BOTANICAL ELEMENTS AND 'PLANTINESS' IN *ODIN'S CHILD*

In 1990, Drew Leder argued that readers of literary fiction have the potential to develop skills and learn explicit rules that can be transferred through the example of characters to pervade individuals' own corporeality. Head et al. (2014) refer to the term 'plantiness', or the unique and multiple ways in which plants do things, as opposite to the plant blindness denoted first by James Wandersee and Elizabeth Schussler (1999; 2001) and then by Ryan. Making the agency of plants explicit through literary fiction 'could therefore guide readers through pro-environmental behaviour, greater empathy and curiosity about plants and ecological stewardship' (Jones and MacLeod 2022). Of particular interest in *Odin's Child* is the narrator's attitude in constantly highlighting the need for a

3 <https://www.siripettersen.com/faq>

floral and arboreal awareness by giving the main characters a special and detailed botanical knowledge.

The ways in which botanical encounters are represented in the text underline the importance of plants and people's relationships with them. Hirka and her father Thorrald are healers who help people with ailments and diseases. The hut in which they live teems with illegal herbs and teas that sometimes need to be hidden in case of a rare visit by the authorities. Over time, Thorrald lost the use of his legs and this doesn't allow him to travel far; in the present of the narration, Hirka is in contact with the vegetal world as she collects the herbs necessary to produce their medicines. She has been practising and deepening these botanical ideas since the age of seven. One of the situations in which Hirka shows her knowledge as a healer is when she arrives in Ravnhov and, while she is looking for a place to get a hot meal, a fight breaks out in the inn where she is staying. A man, Villir, finds himself with a knife planted in his foot and Hirka helps him stop the bleeding. But the knowledge of medicinal herbs also guarantees Hirka a place to live when she is forced to flee her home after her father's death. Hirka helps Lindri, the owner of the tea house, and in return she gets a bed to sleep on.

The herbs, plants and spices known to us that are mentioned, albeit less frequently than the supernatural ones, are heather, mint and exotic spices, and tea. The heather mentioned twice in the novel has a death valence reflecting Ryan's elaboration of the idea (2018: 190–213). The same goes for dogwood, a fantastic powerful poison. These two plants are bound in a context of desperation: Thorrald commits suicide by taking dogwood, to facilitate Hirka's escape, given that the paralysis of his legs would prevent them from moving quickly. Dogwood has a metallic and nauseating smell that heralds something ominous to Hirka, even before she discovers what has happened. The heather, on the other hand, is the first landscape element that Hirka notices and, almost involuntarily, chooses it to express her desperation: 'Hirka dropped to her knees in the middle of the heather' (Pettersen 2021: 171). With regard to magical herbs and plants, Gianna Chiesa Isnardi points out that their growth from the subsoil expresses the activity of the vegetative forces of the earth (1991: 540). The image of grass is therefore one of the first manifestations of the existence of the world. Chiesa Isnardi states:

In the grass itself the energies of the earth are collected and made available; for this reason, herbs and plants generally have therapeutic and medicinal

properties. The concept of ‘medical science’ understood as magical possession of the secret power of each plant shines through where we speak of the runes of the branches, the knowledge of which allows wounds to be healed. The allusion to the runes contains a reference to divine wisdom which teaches us to recognize the healing powers of herbs and makes healing a superior gift. Herbs therefore contain the vivifying, fruitful and healing power of the god (*ibid.*).

In *Odin’s Child*, teas, infusions and spices are linked to Hirka’s memory, hope and soul. In fact, the hut in which Hirka spends her childhood is described as follows: ‘Everywhere you looked, there was tea. Herbs hanging from the ceiling to dry, and then the smell of mint and exotic spices. Almost too exotic if the voices were true’ (58). Olfaction brings back memories of home in Hirka’s mind when she is in Mannfalla, in the tearoom. Furthermore, she empathises with the landscape of Bromfjell when negotiating with the Council members: ‘You understand ... I feel good here. Peace is restored. It is a good place to live. Here the tea grows on the mountains’ (608). Hirka is respected by all for her healing abilities, even if the other villagers keep her and Thorrald at bay. Having this connection to the plant world, Hirka and Thorrald can still survive, albeit with a poor lifestyle, on the edge of the community. This kind of balance occurs because they have the knowledge and skills to use nature’s resources in a different way.

Although this is a fantasy world, in Ym there are only trees known to us: firs, pines, birches, maples and oaks. Trees are a constant and strongly empathetic presence, insofar as they interact, sympathise, admonish and know events: they are, thus, personified, and omniscient. They know more than people and are guardians and silent observers. There is a strong connection between Hirka’s own story and the forest. At the beginning of the novel, Hirka is attempting to rescue Vetle, a child astride a felled fir tree over a precipice; to approach him, she has to advance a few steps and, from the first lines, the author describes the state of decomposition of the tree through a personification: ‘below her, the trunk moaned’ (9). Hirka tries to communicate mentally with the tree, in the hope that it would listen to her: ‘She began to formulate kind thoughts towards it, as if to prevent it from shaking her off, making her fall into that gaping wound that was the rocky abyss below’. Later the same day, Hirka climbs to the top of another tree, a birch, which she does anytime she wants to escape from someone, including the reproaches of her father who, to get her down, one day goes as far

as cutting down the tree. On that occasion Hirka, sitting at the top of the trunk, feels safe and feels that she has time to reflect, comparing herself to a leaf: 'She could wait. Up there she was nothing but a leaf in the wind' (37). Powerless in the face of what is happening, and facing the risk of falling from the tree, she uses the misfortune of the tree to speak of her own misfortune: 'The trunk of the tree vibrated against her body, and she nearly fell. She held on tightly and looked down in disbelief. Her father raised his hatchet, ready to strike another blow. Was he completely insane? ... After only four blows she felt the trunk give way ... It was just an inauspicious day for trees!' (37–38). This action highlights Hirka's morality and respect for trees, as if there were a higher law that prescribed that a consequence follows every action: 'He had even cut down a birch! One never knocks down a tree without something changing...' (39). After the argument with her father, Hirka feels even smaller among the grandeur of the forest: 'She became smaller and smaller, among the old maples' (101).

Pine needles are another important element characterising Hirka's liminal passage to a more adult stage, as if she had suddenly left her childhood and the whims of a young girl behind to be more mature in her choices and reflections. Hirka awakens in *Blindból*, near a warrior camp north of the kingdom. When Hirka opens her eyes, even though she doesn't know where she is, she feels different, changed, and wiser. In fact, in that very place, she will soon make the decision to leave Ym forever. When she wakes up, the sensations she feels following this inner maturation are almost unreal: 'Hirka floated above the ground. In a dream in which she was dead. Or just born. Green conifers and white kissels were sailing around her' (589). As Nina Goga points out, children's and young adults' literature is full of examples in which the protagonists of these stories are surrounded by plants and trees or, at least, spend time among them, and this often leads to a maturation, growth or development of the protagonist, or what can be defined as the process of human maturation (2018a: 354). Goga states,

To reason with the visual and verbal representations of plants, trees, gardens and forests, it is to become aware of and problematize the forest as a training arena. But it is also a question of testing the representations of plants and plant hierarchies as a metaphor for emotional registers and social structures (2018a: 356).

In this specific case, this is not just a comparison; Hirka establishes communication with trees, and recognises, in some of their signals, warnings, as if trees know better. Trees accompany Hirka's physical and inner journey as she becomes increasingly aware and farsighted in her travels. One day, in an attempt to get over her father's suicide, she goes against the rules by donating a piece of her father's body to the crows; it was believed that only a deceased person of noble blood could be donated to ravens because, in this way, the individual would be made immortal. This was not possible for Thorrald, but Hirka is inflexible: 'She went out into the cold night. Trees rustled her admonishingly, but Hirka had made up her mind. She knew what she had to do' (Pettersen 2021: 174). Soon after, however, she is seized by a sense of immorality regarding her actions and it seems to her that this also affects the surrounding landscape, which avoids her: 'Now the wind blows harder. The trees shook their leaves as she passed and leaned to one side to avoid her. She was a defiler of corpses! Hirka smiled bitterly. What else could they expect from her? She was just a human...' (176).

A peculiarity of *Odin's Child* is that human visual perception is sensitive to (bio)diversity, so much so that even relationships and communication between people change according to encounters with the arboreal landscape. In the chapter where Hirka and another woman, Ramoja, travel to Mannfalla in a cart, the conversations between the two change according to their movement through the landscape. First, the forest is the right place for confidence and secrets: 'On the cart, the conversations were influenced by the landscape. While they were crossing the fir forest, Ramoja took courage and spoke of secrets, of which nobody was supposed to know' (303); then, as they descend from Hrafnfjelli mountain, the fir forest thins out, making room for a few scattered birch trees and at that point '[t]he conversations became more cautious, and began to speak more cryptically' (*ibid.*); finally, descending from the mountains to the first inhabited places, Hirka becomes increasingly restless, accompanied by the worsening weather, with violent gusts of wind that foreshadow the disaster that will soon occur during the ceremony of the Rite, in which Hirka will show everyone that she is a human, unleashing general panic and then being sentenced to death. The emotional states proposed by Ryan are therefore present in the novel; plants are omnipresent, as they influence the decisions of the soul, heal the body, empathize with the moods of the characters,

sometimes sarcastically, other times by infusing feelings of hope and love in the atmosphere or, on the contrary, by witnessing and foretelling nefarious events and death (Ryan 2018: 17). Native landscapes are bearers of memory, even when one visits places with characteristics similar to one's place of origin or belonging. In *Odin's Child*, we have what Ryan defines 'a state of plant-human souls in dynamic exchange with the material landscape' (2018: 29).

Ryan states that plants can mediate human experience of the world and that they possess the ability to perceive the bodily presence of other living beings. His assertion is supported by the idea of going beyond the mere utilitarian function towards the plant world to establish 'a bio-empathic feeling with plants that entails openness to being affected by plant gestures in response' (2018: 93). In the last chapter of his work, Ryan analyses the feeling of hope in phyto-literature, underscoring the fact that this is often transmitted from a given environmental context. He asserts that this can constitute a resource in the current era, given that ecocriticism is able to embrace 'the idea of the plant as a bearer of hope for a more equitable future on earth for itself and us' (2018: 236). The feelings of hope and empathy transmitted by trees are also the last ones experienced by Hirka. This eventually seems to hold out some hope for a new world. When, at the end of the novel, she has to find the courage to leave the world of Ym to return to what is assumed to be the world of human beings by jumping into a portal made of a circle of stones, she looks hesitantly at the depiction of two pale people without tails near the stone where she must jump and feels as if immobilised by fear. 'But behind them was a tree. This calmed her down' (Pettersen 2021: 621).

'PLANTSCAPES' AS LIMINAL PLACES

Hirka's progressive construction of identity can also be analysed from an ecofeminist perspective, based on the liminal spaces between human/non-human and girl/woman. An eco-hybrid union between the protagonist and vegetal nature constitutes the main reason why Hirka is also described, by others, as monstrous. *Odin's Child* is thus, once again, an example of how Nordic fantasy reflects ecological issues. Hirka therefore embodies both the prototype of the adolescent transitioning to adulthood and the prototype of the heroine who finds her strength

in a profound union with plant nature. The vegetal world as a place of challenge for the growth of young women is not a new concept, but has brought with it a wave of depictions in which plant nature occupies a prominent place alongside the main characters. Hirka's closeness to plant nature characterises the whole narration but an ecofeminist reading shows how Hirka's symbiosis with plant nature solidifies notions of women's deeper understanding of non-human life.

Greta Gaard defines 'ecofeminism' as combining feminism with environmental politics: 'Ecofeminism is a perspective that sees social and environmental problems as fundamentally interconnected. Beginning with a recognition that the position and treatment of women, animals, and nature are not separable, ecofeminists make connections among not just sexism, speciesism, and the oppression of nature but also other forms of social injustice' (2009: 323). Gaard bases her reflection on an eco-pedagogical reading that examines oppressive structures by examining environmental issues, as well as gender, ethnicity, class, disability and age. More generally, ecofeminism applies feminist theories to the interpretation of human interactions with plant nature and underlines the need to overcome and replace patriarchal visions of the world. Some ecofeminist approaches claim that certain androcentric ideologies have contributed to the current environmental crisis. The use of gendered (feminine) metaphors and metonymies associated with the environment – such as 'Mother Nature' – links environmental degradation to patriarchal rule and the oppression of women. Ecocriticism analyses the coexistence of environmental and narrative discourses, providing the opportunity to consider how texts position readers through specific narrative strategies, such as focus and point of view (Massey and Bradford 2011: 113). An ecocritical approach can be strengthened and enriched by the incorporation of ecofeminist perspectives that examine the extent to which these texts may or may not be permeated by patriarchal ideologies (Vakoch 2011; Vakoch and Mickey 2020).

To underline Hirka's relationship with vegetal nature, the theory developed by the Australian researcher Alice Curry regarding ecological issues in children and young adult literature is of great interest. Curry includes 'the child' as a third category within her ecofeminist analysis, alongside women and nature (2013: 6). She combines an 'ethic of care' with the claim that the exploitation of non-human nature is linked to that of women and children. Hirka is closely linked to natural

elements and consequently has crossed the border between human and non-human: this aspect is precisely one of the basic ideas of ecofeminism. One of Hirka's main characteristics is, therefore, her liminality, which consists not only in being on the threshold of adulthood but also, more metaphorically, in being relegated to the margins of society. On a worldwide scale, in the fantasy genre, the 'heroic journey' has until very recently been strongly characterised by male protagonists retaining conventional patriarchal values. The fact that some Scandinavian fantasy novels of the last decade represent young women as closely related to nature could compensate for this trend.

Pettersen creates a heroine whose story fluctuates between personal development and the affirmation of one's role within a society that does not belong to her; this implies that the social structure, pyramidal and hierarchical, is overturned and that, at the same time, plant nature, as a source of power, emerges. Hirka's eco-feminist characteristics include not only the relationship between humans and non-humans but also the fact that Hirka herself exhibits some traits of 'animality', which are also the reason why the collectivity keeps her at arm's length. The ecofeminist approach proposed by Curry is materialistic and aimed at the dissolution of the nature/culture dichotomy (2013: 160). Curry points out that certain ecological knowledges emerge through liminality and therefore she proposes a hybridism that can be considered a union between 'the deep ecology's notion of identification between humans and the natural world and ecofeminism's call for plurality of voice and ethical actants' (2013: 164). In this regard, the philosopher Val Plumwood asserts that the barrier between deep ecology and social ecology is mainly political, not theoretical, and that a debate that compares them is certainly important but unnecessarily divisive (1992: 225).

Further discussion about the relationship between these two poles could focus more on newer concepts, such as Curry's analysis of ecological hybridity. Vegetal nature and the human subject, as a result, are intertwined in a different way than the conventional dichotomy. According to Curry, such a hybrid fusion between humans and non-humans is important for understanding how young people's identity is formed within an ecological discourse (2013: 7). As a hybrid being himself, the adolescent therefore is a metaphor for the future and for the changes that characterise the maturation process. In an ecofeminist reading, the eco-hybrid form implies a constant dialogue between the

subject and plants, which is also consolidated through the practice of embodiment. A turning point on this concept is Stacey Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* (2010), an interdisciplinary study of the trans-corporeal perception of matter. Alaimo proposes transcorporeality and embodiment as new critical models to adequately theorise the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, non-human creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents and other actors (2010: 2). She defines trans-corporeality in various ways, including 'movement through bodies', 'exchanges and interconnections between various corporeal natures' and 'material interconnections of human corporeality with the non-human world' (2010: 2–3). Her argument is based on the recognition that some material forces are often invisible, or that there is a flow of substances between people, places and economic-political systems which, to be understood, require broader scientific and sociological knowledge (2010: 9). Transcorporeality is positioned as a new hermeneutical horizon that also takes into consideration the ways in which plant nature signifies, acts upon, or otherwise affects human bodies, knowledge, and practices (2010: 7–8).

In Alaimo's description, trans-corporeality realigns the body with the material world from which it was removed by the constructivist theories of the end of the last century; while these theories have provided valuable insights into the categories of race, gender and class, they have downplayed the significance of matter itself. Trans-corporeality, on the contrary, naturalises the body by reinserting it into a world made up of biological creatures and ecosystems (2010: 115). Alaimo therefore proposes an environmental ethic 'that refuses to see the delineated shape of the human as distinct from the background of nature, and instead focuses on interfaces, interchanges, and transformative material/discursive practices' (2010: 142). Hirka's corporeality reconnects with plant nature and makes her prefer a life on the edge. The fact that Hirka's only existence is on the margins of society is related to the idea of the placement of the protagonist in the so called 'blind space' theorised by Curry, in which plant nature and peoples are relegated: 'A "blind space" exists outside of culturally imposed reference frames and denotes a space both out of sight and out of mind: a space to which the cultural majority either wittingly, or unwittingly, turns a blind eye' (Curry 2010: 20).

CONCLUSIONS: AN ECO-PEDAGOGY FOR THE FUTURE

Taking into consideration the ecofeminist concepts of female ethics of care and eco-hybridism, *Odin's Child* is an example of how part of the new Norwegian fantasy draws attention to feminist instances which include the vision of a symbiosis between beings. Both Hirka and plants are protagonists with subjectivities of their own, and they are engaged in a relationship in which they are reciprocally connected to each other. We have seen, therefore, how the novel also offers an ecofeminist reading, whereby the girl, the material landscape and non-humans are connected. In this sense, eco-hybridism is established through Hirka's simultaneous belonging and exclusion to the two worlds: she truly fails to integrate into the first world, but she does not belong to the second either. Yet, it is precisely through her 'plantiness' and eco-hybridity with vegetal nature that Hirka manages to give a voice to natural elements. By creating images that perfectly reflect Hirka's confusion, loneliness and helplessness in the face of a hierarchical society, Pettersen urges her readers to connect with the protagonist and her story. When Hirka, forced to make a change in her life, looks up with a smile at the mountains of Blindból the reader feels the sensation of a new beginning, a beginning full of hope, even if it does not appear to be something easy to make. As Ryan's phytocritical method points out, the emotional registers of plants, which underly explicit messages of regeneration and hope, relates to the landscape as described in *Odin's Child*. Hirka needs a space of her own, a place away from people, to grow and mature, making an emotional and psychological journey towards wisdom and inner peace. The similarities that describe Hirka in symbiosis with other living beings are repeated throughout the narrative: through the focus on trees, animals, flowers, grasses and mountains, the book extends the concept of 'vital principle' through the co-presence of different species. In this way, Hirka's eco-hybridism underlines the importance of corporeality, of physically and emotionally inserting oneself in natural places, and at the same time consolidates the role of the liminal passage through a disorientation which finally leads to full self-awareness.

This also constitutes the essence of the important pedagogical role of young adult ecofiction. As Valentina Adami states, individual emotional crises are necessary at first, because they are strictly 'connected to the adolescent's quest for identity, in an attempt to represent and

test young people's dilemmas against a given background' (2019: 130). And it is in the affective mediation that the pedagogical function of young adult fiction takes place: by showing young readers that they are not alone, and that they have the power to do something in a decaying world. Eventually, young adult fiction educates them into becoming 'better and more active citizens' (Adami 2019: 131), also by shaping and reinforcing their attitude to the natural world.

In *Odin's Child*, Pettersen characterises plant nature as a space for escape and respite from emotional breakdowns caused by pain and fear; at the same time, it is a source of knowledge through implicit messages which, if well interpreted, are a valuable tool for better understanding the concepts of death, regeneration, and life cycle of living beings. When, for example, Hirka is faced with the tragedy of her father's unexpected suicide just when things seem to be going for the best, an immediate escape into the surrounding *wilderness* is instinctively crucial for her. As Greg Garrard claims, 'the protagonist leaves civilization for an encounter with nonhuman nature, then returns having experienced epiphany and renewal' (2004: 49). Furthermore, according to Curry (2013), the adolescent stands on the threshold between an innocent childhood and an adult life and therefore also has a unique opportunity for education. Thus, young readers have the possibility to identify with and draw inspiration from the stories of Hirka, who has a distinctive connection to plant nature, which often shapes her identity. Hirka's changed attitude and her orientation towards natural elements can help make the reader aware, or at least show a direction towards a more sustainable lifestyle. Hirka's maturation consists in moving from being a teenager who knows how one could live more sustainably to putting this awareness into action towards an understanding of the fact that all life forms have the right to (co-)exist. Such an awareness can therefore be described as the basis for the formation of an ecological citizenship (Goga 2018: 88). From this perspective, *Odin's Child* introduces vegetal nature and botanical awareness as something to refer to in daily life, and, at the same time, affectively underscores the deep and current human need to re-establish this kind of contact.

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