21. An Archive of the Future: Wood in Thomas Pitfield's *The Poetry of Trees*

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> *Wood finished in glistening black lacquer is the very best; but even unfinished wood, as it darkens and the grain grows more subtle with the years, acquires an inexplicable power to calm and soothe. (Tanizaki 12)*

In the opening pages of his celebrated essay on Japanese aesthetics, *In Praise of Shadows* (1933), the Japanese novelist Junichirō Tanizaki pauses to consider the qualities of toilet fixtures made from wood. Whereas materials such as porcelain and nickel earn his opprobrium for their garish glitter, wood is praised for its patina; as it ages, its texture thickens, allowing holder and beholder to discover beauty in its darkness. Although Tanizaki's reflections on this dusky kind of beauty stem from a consideration of Japanese culture, they also indicate how wood, as a material, is marked by time. Once a tree has been felled, wood will rot and disintegrate; skilled woodworkers can halt and reverse this process, however, thus, like necromancers, giving the tree a second life. To the artisans working with wood, the precise moment in the process of decomposition is vital: craftsmen engaged in carving wooden utensils, such as spoons, will generally prefer wood that is still fresh and slightly "wet," while those engaged in making chairs will ensure that their wood is sufficiently dry. Artisans' decisions about when to carve and how to chisel are, of course, also influenced by the type of wood (say, ash versus walnut), not to mention the way in which the tree was chopped down and the wood was stored; as the famous Japanese-American woodworker George Nakashima writes in praise of the burly oak, for instance, "this species should be cut when the last of its life juices are ebbing, when its only future is decay. . . . Sawing this 'treasure' calls for the precision of a diamond cutter" (91). With proper treatment and proper use, in short, wooden objects may extend the tree's existence beyond its original lifespan. This new life, moreover, is not immutable. As many a musician knows, wood contracts and expands according to the moods of the

season; it breathes. In every work of wood, then, the spirit of the tree may be said to linger; hovering in the twilight, no longer alive yet not quite dead, wood is a material with ghostly, undead qualities.

Perhaps as a result of the material's association with temporality, artists have long recognized wood's power to induce a state of contemplation. One might consider the almost painterly use of wood in the wall paneling of Federico da Montefeltro's *studioli* in the ducal palaces of Urbino and Gubbio. Through the wood-inlay technique known as intarsia, the paneling creates optical illusions that heighten these rooms' function as a place for meditation and study. In the hands of a major craftsman and designer like George Nakashima, to give a more contemporary example, wooden objects like coffee tables attain the status of a sculpture. Indeed, the way in which Nakashima's work aims to get in touch with a tree's soul is not unlike the way in which premodern artists crafted wooden effigies of gods and magical creatures. As these examples suggest, wood can be transformed into myriad forms and shapes, which is probably why Aristotle's mind, "when he sat down to think about materials—his was arguably the first systematic attempt to do so, at least in European philosophy— . . . drifted naturally to the forest" and he adopted the Greek word for wood (ὕλη) for his thinking about materiality (Adamson 2–3). The artist on which we will focus, Thomas Pitfield, has not—or, at least, not yet—attained the canonical status of these different thinkers and makers; as such, one of his works in and on wood, *The Poetry of Trees* (1942), has some untapped potential for an exploration into the kind of reflections that wooden works of art may produce. Taking our cue from Ann-Sophie Lehmann's reminder that materials in art "are embedded in a web of language on a cultural level, and it is through textual references in inventories, recipes, anecdotes, pamphlets, and poems that their meaning-making becomes most obvious to us" (18), we will be paying attention to the interplay between wood's material affordances and its historico-cultural context. Pitfield's fascination with wood's ghostly qualities, we aim to show, was partly a response to the horrors of industrial warfare.

The first and arguably most striking way in which Pitfield's "book" uses wood is its cover (fig. 1). In the original version, created in 1942, the work is bound in thin panels of English brown oak (15"x11") that have been sanded, beveled, and varnished, with the title engraved on the front. From the moment that one holds this work, then, one is touching the remains of its subject matter, one of the eponymous trees. On the inside of the work (which has no page numbers), the reader first encounters a beautiful endpaper made from a woodcut of two interlocking waves, one with trees in bloom and one with their withered counterparts. This interleaving of life and death strikingly captures the eerie feelings that wood may inspire. The following pages contain ten prose sketches and ten images printed on a thick yellow paper—paper which, of course, was made from wood shavings that were boiled, washed, bleached, and mixed with water before being pressed into sheets. Each of the ten two-page "chapters" revolves around a tree native to Britain: the common

elm, beech, Scots pine, Lombardy poplar, horse chestnut, silver birch, wych elm, willow, oak, and yew. The accompanying images of the trees are linocuts, a method of relief printing that uses a sheet of linoleum (which is itself made of linseed oil, derived from flax) as a relief surface. Pitfield's choice for linoleum (especially in contrast to steel engraving) is significant. Originally developed in the 1860s as a deck covering for battleships, linoleum soon began to replace wood as a material for hand-pulled prints. As such, linocuts are made with the same tools—chisels, gouges, carving knives, and burins—and techniques as the woodcut (Amann 9). Like the woodcut, moreover, the linocut does not lend itself to mass reproduction: to print the linocut, ink or paint is applied manually with a dabber or a roller.

The use of wood in the creation of *The Poetry of Trees* has its roots in the author's youthful years in Bolton, which he ironically describes as "a forest of [chimney-stacks], spreading a black foliage, branching into one immense canopy of smoke" (Pitfield, *A Cotton-Town Boyhood* 9). Yearning to escape the cotton mills and weaving sheds, Pitfield imagined trees wherever he could; at one point, he planted a lime sapling where the privy used to be. Pitfield's love of the forest and his interest in craftmanship—inherited from his father, a joiner—were heightened by the onset of World War II: his dislike of industrial production segued into a loathing of industrial warfare. As a committed pacifist, Pitfield translated his opposition to the war into linocuts with an overtly pacifist message. In *The Poetry of Trees*, this pacifist dimension is somewhat veiled but becomes apparent when we consider the work's particular concern with the oak. The oak occupies a special place in the book's catalog of trees. In most of his descriptions, Pitfield is keen to explore the ways in which trees' personalities express moods that humans cannot put into words. "On a still, moonless night," for instance, "the very air creeps eerily about [the yew], whispering things too ghostly for the language of living men" (*The Poetry of Trees*). Only in his sketch of the oak, his subjective portrayal moves into a more detached, historical register. Since the oak "has been claimed as a national hero," Pitfield argues, the English have "accommodated its characteristics into [their] own versions of [themselves]." Instead of being swayed by the oak's aura, he continues, "we must try to disentangle [the oak] from the old history-book associations that cling to it, populous as gnats by summer streams." Pitfield's injunction to strip the oak of its ideological cortex can be understood more clearly when we take stock of its historical and cultural significance.

The oak has a long-standing role in English culture. Rather than planting oaks in large forests, as in France, the English prioritized their appearance, which resulted in the planting of oak trees in smaller clusters (Thirgood 7) and thus associating them with the picturesque (Burton 17). At the same time, these aesthetic qualities seeped into a particular ideology. With its large crown and typically thick branches, the oak became a symbol of the nation's strength (Cosgrove 48; Fulford 164). This symbolism acquired a material dimension during the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) when oak

provided one of the primary resources for constructing battleships (Cosgrove 51). More so than its Baltic and French cousins, the English oak was known for its solidity and played a vital role in parts of the ship where the combined force of water and wind usually resulted in weaker spots (Thirgood 9). As a result, many naval ballads put the oak in service of a patriotic message (Fulford 164). Given these ideological mystifications, it bears reminding that ships constructed with English oak were also "crucial to the brutal operations of the slave trade" (Adamson 4). Pitfield's choice for oak in his cover, then, may be understood as a provocative gesture: he reclaims this material from its military and imperialist connotations. His uncanny linocut of the oak extends his critique: suffused with darkness and shadows, it goes against the grain of the picturesque quality that the oak is supposed to have.

Pitfield's critique of industrial warfare also intersects with what may be considered the archetype of the book's form, the xylotheque. The xylotheque is a particular kind of arboreal herbarium: rather than describing the plants that it documents, it consists of books that were "made out of a particular type of wood, the spine covered with the corresponding bark and decorated with associated moss and lichens. Once opened, the book would reveal samples of dried leaves, flowers, seedlings, roots, and branches, with a special compartment in the spine holding a written description of the species' biology and use" (Lovejoy). This way of documenting trees originated in the seventeenth century, became popular as a cabinet of curiosities in the Enlightenment, morphed into an important taxonomic method of nineteenth-century biology, and was disregarded for a major part of the twentieth century. Intriguingly, there are some nineteenth-century Japanese collections that consist of wood blocks decorated with painted illustrations of twigs, leaves, flowers, fruits, and seeds (Lack). Pitfield's work is a creative echo of the xylotheque: its oak cover corresponds to the outside of a xylothetic volume, while its prose and pictures resemble the contents of such a collection. Although we cannot assess Pitfield's intentions, it is tempting to argue that he was one of the first to reassess these collections. In recent years, indeed, xylotheques have been rediscovered: responding to the ongoing mass extinction of species and deforestation, artists are creatively engaging with the form, and scientists are rediscovering their use as a means of conservation (Figueroa et al.; Vásquez-Correa). Looking at Pitfield's work as a xylotheque implies that it has an archival function. The archive that Pitfield creates is very different from the totalizing vision of nineteenth-century biologists: it is a personal and emotional archive, not a scientific collection. The sentiments that Pitfield's descriptions and images express are akin to Tanizaki's vision of a premodern world in which natural materials allow one to reflect on the passing of time.

Pitfield is not alone in choosing wood to reflect on the transience of our existence. His art dovetails with other works in wood. George Nakashima's "Altars for Peace," huge walnut tables with free edges that preserve the tree's natural outline, use the ancient device of the butterfly key not only as a practical joint but also as a

metaphor: they "remind us of the brevity of human lives and of the fragility of the environments in which we—humans, animals, and trees—exist" (Duarte-Gray 121). In his famous *7000 Eichen: Stadtverwaldung statt Stadtverwaltung* (*7000 Oaks: City Forestation Instead of City Administration*), begun in 1982, Joseph Beuys invites reflection on the change of nature through time: by planting oaks that grow next to basalt stones that remain unchanged, Beuys argued for "an ecopolitical and spiritual transformation of society through art, in its relationship to living beings in general" (Arnaud 261). In a similar vein, Katie Patterson's *Future Library* project, "in which a forest of trees will become an anthology of books to be printed in 100 years . . . unfolds concurrently over long, slow time—a century—and the present moment—the diurnal, daily cycles of the trees, the seasons, and the author's yearly contributions and handover events" (Harris et al. 39; cf. Bronstein). Like these more modern artists, we feel, Pitfield was considering the deep time of nature as opposed to the mechanical time of human history. In Pitfield's case, the seeds for his articulation of an arboreal kind of temporality might be traced to the threat of the atomic bomb. As Paul K. Saint-Amour has recently argued, the foundations for fear of total annihilation were laid during the interwar period, as the practice of air-raid alerts turned "cities and towns into spaces of rending anticipation . . . amounting to a proleptic mass traumatization" (7–8). Even though Pitfield does not explicitly refer to the experience of a collective pre-traumatic stress syndrome, it is not too far-fetched to see his love of the countryside as a response to such a condition. From this perspective, the backward-looking temporality of *The Poetry of Trees* might be interpreted as a form of topiary therapy.

In a paradoxical way, which matches wood's ghostly qualities, *The Poetry of Trees* reached a larger audience only after the demise of its creator. At a recent exhibition at the Atkinson in Southport (2022–2023), which owes its title to Pitfield's work, *The Poetry of Trees* enters into a dialogue with such works as Ibrahim El-Salahi's "Meditation Tree" (2018), an aluminium sculpture, and Heywood and Condie's "Nil By Root" (2022), a laminated pine tree that was choked with sand and washed out to sea in the 1970s. This sense of belated acknowledgment seems to be the fate of artworks in wood. Beuys's project is continuing after his death, as in Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey's *Beuys' Acorns*. Patterson's library will be completed only in 2114. Nakashima's peace project, too, did not reach its conclusion during his lifetime. Only in 2001 did Nakashima's Russian Altar reach its destination; it now sits in the Tsereteli Gallery at the Russian Academy of Arts. At a time in history when the threat of nuclear war seems stronger than ever, except for the Cuban Missile Crisis, one wonders whether it would be possible to have Nakashima's American and Russian Altars moved to the offices of the presidents of the US and Russia. That way, these leaders might be prompted to redirect their attention to the climate catastrophe that surrounds us before we humans, too, become the ghosts of our future. While the exhibition at the Atkinson may not have been intended to make its visitors reflect on our own geopo-

litical and ecological moment, we hope that our examination of the role of wood in Pitfield's *The Poetry of Trees* shows that attention to the material history and the material affordances of wood is vital to grasp the significance of this work of art fully: through his use of wood Pitfield prompts us to think about a different future, one in which a consideration of the natural world ensures that we do not willingly consign ourselves to the archive of our planet's history.

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