Xylosophy and Treeory : The Greening of the Text in Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018)

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1. The title of Richard Powers's "great American plant novel"[1] branches into two directions from the outset: the overstory is the superior layer of foliage in a forest, constituting a canopy, whereas metaphorically it points to some overarching story of stories. The table of contents is a sort of *calligramme*, whose different parts are called "Roots" (fanning out into nine headings bearing the names of the main characters), "Trunk", "Crown", and "Seeds". This double allegiance to theme and form, warping plot architecture to fit the text's subject matter, endows the novel with a self-reflexive dimension, and even a theoretical impulse. This seems to contradict Lawrence Buell's 2005 statement that the ecocritical turn in literary studies, while bringing about a major thematic shift, had failed to renew theoretical approaches.

2. Powers declared that his original intention had been to make his trees full-fledged characters, but that he had to fall back on the human-interest motif for readability's sake.[2] Yet the novel does not content itself with describing the meeting of humans with trees that changed their lives and to which they feel connected, their struggle to defend forests, their failure and subsequent dispersion in a context of environmental catastrophe. The novel distils a sort of "dendrosophy" or "xylosophy" (from the Greek roots meaning "tree" and "wood" respectively), a wisdom suggested by trees and their mode of existence. It probes the relations between man and nature, questioning some of the discriminating boundaries constitutive of humanism. Interfacing the paper beings that are both humans and trees in the text, it interrogates the nature of characters and, hence, the ontological status of persons.

3. In a second movement, we will examine how the text also investigates our language and worldviews: the narrator systematically gleans the vegetal metaphors that help us make sense of experience, from common speech to such competing philosophical frameworks as arborescence and the rhizome. Describing trees, the text describes itself and its own branching, echoing network, opening beyond Western modes of thought onto Buddhist philosophy or Native American animistic

1 T.S. Miller, "Fantasy and Urgency: Climate Change and Rewilding the Imagination in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*", 3:28.
2 R. Powers, "Open Book", 7:10.

views.

4. Since an *ars poetica* is literary theory in action, this largely self-reflexive narrative spells out a textual "treeory", inviting readers to a thought experiment aimed at broadening our vision of the world, overcoming our anthropocentric bias, and urging us to find a new symbiosis with nature. From the novel's insertion within the honored tradition of American conservationist literature stems part of its power and appeal, yet it may also constitute a limitation, to be examined in the light of recent developments in ecocriticism.

Woodblock Characters

5. *The Overstory* (*TO*) was born of a sort of revelation on the part of the author, at the sight of some gigantic ancient redwood trees in California, just off Stanford University.[3] One of the obvious purposes of the novel is to expand our consciousness so as to include the natural world, and more particularly trees, into our sphere of interest and involvement. But there are psychological as well as aesthetic hurdles that hamper the overcoming of anthropocentrism. One of the protagonists, Adam Appich, a psychology student, is soon confronted to one of the reasons why thought conformism resists even scientific proof: "We're all operating in a dense fog of mutual reinforcement. Our thoughts are shaped primarily by legacy hardware that evolved to assume that everyone else *must be right*. But even when the fog is pointed out, *we're no better at navigating through it*" (291). These social and cognitive blinders are all the more powerful to prevent thinking out of the human box. This poses a particular challenge to the fiction writer, since "human interest" is what provokes most readers' identification and concern, around the notions of plot and character.

> [Books] share a core so obvious it passes for given. Every one imagines that fear and anger, violence and desire, rage laced with the surprise capacity to forgive – *character* – is all that matters […] To be human is to confuse a satisfying story with a meaningful one, and to mistake life for something huge with two legs. No: life is mobilized on a vastly larger scale, and the world is failing precisely because no novel can make the contest for the *world* seem as compelling as the struggles between a few lost people. (477-478)

Still, avid fiction consumer Ray Brinkman feels that, although literature does not make any difference, it can "change your mind" (478). The first response to this dare is to probe and question the notion of character, reaching beyond the human world while resisting the trap of simplistic

3 *Ibid*., 4:40.

anthropomorphic projections.

6. The very meaning of the word "character" is multifaceted: it is not only a fictional persona, but also an individual's personality, a defining trait or essential nature of some object or notion and, even more pointedly, a graphic symbol used in writing or printing. The literary characterization of trees will self-reflexively, and ironically, take the form of type on paper made from (hopefully recycled) tree pulp. All nine human protagonists are twinned with an emblematic tree, represented by a botanical plate juxtaposed to their names on the title page of each of the "Roots" section. The multiplicity of human characters detracts from individualistic habits of reading focusing on one main figure, a perspectivist structure preventing one tree from hiding a whole forest. The entanglement of human and vegetal types introduces a double defining move: characterization of the former is enhanced by their association with trees, while the latter benefit from the depth of interest we invest in fictional *people*. Moreover, the metaphorical superimposition of book leaves and tree leaves – a reminder of Walt Whitman – together with the etymological remark that "the word *beech* becomes the word *book*, in language after language" (146) establishes a homothetic relation between literature and the natural world.

7. The visual pairing of titles/characters with plants might remind us of medieval illuminations, or a deck of cards. Nicholas Hoel is twinned with the chestnut tree his ancestor brought over from New York to Iowa, a sentinel tree now, a rare survivor of the massive blight caused by the fungus *cryphonectria parasitica*, which devastated North America in the early 20th century. Over three generations, the family took one picture a month of the chestnut tree, resulting in a flip-book showing its growth in time-lapse. After the death of his family one Christmas, due to a faulty chimney, Nick became a wood artist hunkered down in the family farm. Mimi Ma, the daughter of a Chinese immigrant, is associated with the mulberry, a specimen of which was imported and planted in the garden by her father. Adam Appish, the psychology student, is connected to the maple in a broader series of correspondences, as a tree was planted by the family at the birth of each child. Roy Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly, a married couple, are oak and linden, a figure of contrast and complementarity: "the linden, it turns out, is a radical tree, as different from oak as a woman is from a man" (90). After a stroke, Ray suffers from locked-in syndrome, a physically vegetative state that brings him to find solace at the spectacle of trees out of his window.

8. Douglas Pavlicek is a veteran from the war in Laos, whose life was saved by a giant fig tree – similar to the Bodhi tree under whose foliage Buddha had his illumination – as he fell from his

downed plane. But his totem tree is the Douglas-fir: after realizing the extent of the damage done by deforestation in the Western states, he participates in replanting campaigns only to realize that these only favor monoculture and further logging of that fir down the years. Neelay Mehta is a computer wizard, the son of an Indian immigrant. After falling from an oak tree and becoming a cripple, he invents video games based on tree structures and forest ecosystems. His vegetal peer is the fig tree, a small seed which can grow into a huge structure, like his computer programs. Patricia Westerford or "Plant Patty" is a scientist ridiculed then lionized for discovering the social and communicative capabilities of trees; the choice of birch as her emblem may be motivated by the best-selling books she writes to popularize her ideas. Finally, Olivia Vandergriff (*gingko biloba*) is a student who, after a near-death experience, is convinced she can receive messages from trees, and federates several of the protagonists into a small band of anti-logging activists.

9. The longest part of the novel, "Trunk", is composed of a mosaic of short sections focalized through the various protagonists and aptly separated by the image of a trunk section with its concentric growth rings. This main body of the text brings together five out of the nine main characters – Nicholas and Olivia, Mimi and Douglas, Adam – who join an environmental group in the California forest to save some of the big redwoods threatened by logging companies. This episode is "inspired by the activities of Earth First and other organizations to protect old growth forests from logging during the so-called Redwood Summer, the larger Timber Wars of the early 90s".[4] Their action focuses more specifically on a giant called Mimas, which Nick and Olivia will tree-sit for several weeks as human shields before being evacuated for the final cut. Their failure radicalizes the group and after an ill-fated attempt at ecosabotage, during which Olivia dies, they go their separate ways to evade pursuit by the FBI. This dissemination and the winding down of the different plot lines compose the centrifugal parts of "Crown" and "Seeds".

10. The importance of trees is conveyed to the reader through the human characters, in a sort of triangulation. Their entanglements take various forms. Childhood or later memories establish affective associations, some positive like Mimi Ma's childhood spent under the "breakfast tree" in the garden (37), some traumatic like the suicide of Mimi's father under the same tree (52) or the death of the Hoel family on the farm because of a leaking stove that stymied Nick's plan to live in the city, or Adam's panic when seeing the roots of his baby brother's tree swaddled in cloth for transportation and planting, and believing that if the roots can't breathe the child will die (62).

4 T.S. Miller, "Fantasy and Urgency: Climate Change and Rewilding the Imagination in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*", 7:57.

Sometimes the connection is motivated by metaphor or intertextual references: Ray is faithful and trustworthy, has a "heart of oak" (85) and once played Macduff in the Scottish play, which involves camouflaging an army behind tree limbs to attack Macbeth's castle (85). Here trees almost become characters in their own right, literalizing their characterization by association according to a mechanism of projection and identification. The most radical illustration of this process is Adam's bout of sympathetic magic in identifying his siblings to their emblematic trees and his panic at the sight of the swaddled roots of his baby brother's sapling during transportation. His belief that if the tree's roots can't breathe the child will die (62) recalls the boy Vardaman's "totemic" identification of his dead mother with the fish in William's Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.[5] A more playful version of such totemism involves the pseudonyms taken by the protagonists as they join the activist group: Mulberry, Maple, Watchman (Douglas), Maidenhair (*i.e.* gingko).

11. Trees acquire standing by becoming doppelgangers of human characters, or at least through some form of twinning or entwinement. They are therefore envisaged in their individuality, either as a singular or a generic being. This parallelism may be supported in part by the correspondence between the shape of a tree above ground and that of a human figure, with its trunk, limbs and crown: anthropomorphic projection or structural similarity? Some of the vegetal portraits seem to bolster the first hypothesis. The Iowa sentinel tree, the photographer's "exact coeval" (12), appears through the time-lapse flipbook as endowed with intent: "The Hoel chestnut keeps lifting the high-water mark of its leaves. *It's after something,* the farmer thinks, his lone venture into philosophy. *It has a plan*" (14-15). This teleological vision of growth appears as a personification. A sublimated form of the same trope seems at work in the epiphany that seizes Nick in front of Mimas, the giant redwood the environmental activists are trying to protect:

> Here, as sundown blankets them, the feel is primeval, darshan, a face-to-face intro to divinity. The tree runs straight up like a chimney butte and neglects to stop. From underneath, it could be Yggdrasil, the World Tree, with its roots in the underworld and crown in the world above. Twenty-five feet aboveground, a secondary trunk springs out of the expanse of flank, a branch bigger than the Hoel Chestnut. Two more trunks flare out higher up the main shaft. The whole ensemble looks like some exercise in cladistics, the Evolutionary Tree of Life – one great idea splintering into whole new family branches, high up in the run of long time. (325)

12. This vision of divinity is not purely anthropomorphic, as it encapsulates the Norse mythological image of the Cosmic Tree and the branching hierarchy of Darwininan taxonomy –

5 W. Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*, 45.

cladistics is a system of biological classification based on shared characteristics that allows to define ancestry lines of evolution. Yet the further comparison of such growth to the mechanisms of thought could once again be seen as a human projection. When Patricia Westerford comes face to face with a tree shaped like "the Virgin, looking on the dying world in horror" – "In knots and whorls, muscles arise from the smooth bole. It's a person, a woman, her torso twisted, her arms lifting from her sides in finger branches. The face, round with alarm, stares so wildly that Patricia looks away" – she attributes the vision to "pareidolia […] the adaptation that makes people see people in all things" (491). This cognitive bias complements mutual reinforcement in obscuring an authentic apprehension of trees: one hampers mere consideration of the non-human world, the other warps its alterity into an anthropomorphic illusion; yet, even if it may be at the source of erroneous poetic figures of speech, religious errors, and Disney-like sentimentality it might foster a welcome preoccupation with the environment.

13. The novel's rhetorical strategy involves a balancing act between the characterization of trees in close connection with their human counterparts, and an anthropomorphic temptation that would collapse the non-human world onto purely human categories of thought and sensibility. The technique of internal focalization is one of the means for the text to allow critical distance. The recourse to focalization allows to question Olivia's reliability when she believes that trees communicate with her – conversely, this distance may also permit the suspension of the reader's disbelief. Whereas she is finally abandoned by her visions and voices, Neelay Mehta finds continuous inspiration for his videogames among the strange trees in Stanford University's courtyard. "All these signaling, sentient beings knock him back in his seat." (138); "redwoods work a plan that will take a thousand years to realize – the plan that now uses him, although he thinks it's his" (140). In these moments when inner focalization is put on hold and an omniscient narrative voice takes over, an animistic stance is affirmed. Timothy Miller relates this communication between humans and nonhumans with the genre-blurring that is common in Powers' œuvre, especially the influence of Fantasy and Speculative Fiction, which are the only literary genres that have consistently and seriously explored this avenue of thought.[6] This is corroborated by Sci-Fi buff Neelay's imagination of the trees as "alien invaders" (*TO* 139) or "unearthly life, waiting to waylay him in this courtyard while he was searching for them on distant planets" (138). This last phrase nevertheless brings us back to a consideration of alterity on this earth, maybe under the auspices of already-existing, non-Western ways of coexistence with other-than-human life, as specified by Plant

6 T.S. Miller, "Fantasy and Urgency: Climate Change and Rewilding the Imagination in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*", 8:42.

Patty's musings about the Achuar, a Native Amazonian people.

> Just upriver, the Achuar – people of the palm tree – sing to their gardens and forests, but secretly, in their heads, so only the souls of the plants can hear. Trees are their kin, with hopes, fears, and social codes, and their goal as people has always been to charm and inveigle green things, to win them in symbolic marriage. These are the wedding songs Patricia's seed bank needs. Such a culture might save the Earth. (492)

14. Animism is the belief that the world is full of spiritual beings capable of favoring or harming human interests. More particularly it endows animals and plants, among others, with souls, *i.e*. consciousness, willpower and agency, and even with a social life similar and parallel to that of human beings. Such an outlook questions the dichotomy between "nature" and "culture" that is so fundamental in Western culture. Still, should it be construed as just another form of anthropomorphism or some radical epistemic alterity? Anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro leans toward the second option, as he ventures the hypothesis of an animist "multinaturalism", a perspectivist worldview according to which all beings have similar souls and social structures but construct widely different views of the natural world – a jaguar will picture his jungle lair as a home in a village, and the blood he is drinking as beer – as opposed to our "naturalist" outlook based on the premise of one "nature" serving as common material background for multiple cultures. "In short, European practice consists in "making souls" (and differentiating cultures) on the basis of a given corporeal-material ground – nature – while indigenous praxis consists in "making bodies" (and differentiating species) on the basis of a socio-spiritual continuum, itself also given […] but in myth, as we shall see".[7] Such a radical animistic vision is not fully developed, but tree characterization in *The Overstory* does suggest consciousness and intentionality.

Arborescence, Rhizome, Simulation

15. Trees do not only stand as separate entities comparable to human individuals: like Viveiros de Castro's animistic beings, but with different modalities, they are also endowed with a social life and social impulses. The resulting network pattern has a boomerang effect on the conception of human individuals and characterization, ushering in a tension between the philosophical models of arborescence and the rhizome, which are also two figures of textual structure.

7 E. Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 2014.

16. The theme of the social life of trees is mainly developed through excerpts from Patricia Westerford's best-selling book *The Secret Forest*, whose title is reminiscent of Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2015) and whose other source of inspiration may be the work of Suzanne Simard, Professor of Forest Ecology and author of the recent book *Finding the Mother Tree* (2021). According to this view, trees are not mere individuals but social, collective creatures, so that the relevant unit is not the tree alone but the whole forest. United they stand. They are interconnected through an extensive network of roots and symbiotic mycelium (mycorrhyzae), which Simard has called the "wood-wide web". This network allows trees to exchange nutriments and electric signals. Trees are also said to communicate, for example to warn each other of the presence of predators and parasites, so as to crank up their defenses, or to synchronize the maturity of fruit (*e.g.* nuts) in order to glut the appetite of animals and ensure maximum survival of their fruit and seeds. These messages can be conveyed either underground, through the mycorrhizal network, or aboveground, by means of pheromones wafting in the air. Altruistic behavior has also been detected, as when a dying Douglas-fir sends all its nutriments back to the soil to share them with its fellows. "Mats of mycorrhizal cabling link trees into gigantic, smart communities spread across hundred of acres. Together they form vast trading networks of good, services, and information. […] There are no individuals in a forest, no separable events. […] Maybe it's useful to think of forests as enormous spreading, branching super-trees" (*TO* 272-273).

17. The description of this decentered brain-like or computer-like network based on symbiosis and sharing questions the very notion of individuality. Whether it is a mere metaphorical, and therefore anthropomorphic, interpretation of biological processes may be open to discussion, but Patricia's contemplation of such rhizomatic structures does have a feedback influence on characterization. In Utah she observes "one of the oldest, largest living things on earth", a forest of aspen that is the offshoot of a single root system:

> the baby trees all around her have sprouted from a rhizome mass too old to date even to the nearest hundred millennia. Underground, the eighty-year-old trunks are a hundred thousand, if they're a day. She wouldn't be surprised if this great, joined, single clonal creature that looks like a forest has been around for the better part of a million years. (165)

18. The Pando aspen clonal colony, in Utah, is supposed to be the heaviest and oldest living organism, with an age of 80,000 years. Even though the networking collaboration of multiple trees and the serial cloning of the same genetic material are two different figures of the rhizome, they both challenge our categories of thought. This textual sequence precedes a kaleidoscopic collage of

paragraphs featuring all the other protagonists at different times and places, setting up a rhizomatic network of connections between them. "These people are nothing to Plant-Patty. And yet their lives have long been connected, deep underground. Their kinship will work like an unfolding book. The past always comes clearer, in the future" (166). Since some of the characters will be meeting in the next "trunk" of the novel, this rhizomatic description may allude to their mutual relations and destiny, proposing a model of human relationships based not on individualism but on interconnectedness, within mankind and with the more-than-human world. But some of the protagonists will never meet, so these sentences may also apply to the text as network, where the characters are mere signs on the page, constructed in an infinite series of echoes and oppositions within a larger structure. One may be reminded of the etymological derivation of the word "text" from textile, a network of vegetal fibers. The novel's form and characterization technique are ultimately patterned on their object, tree life, and constitute a self-reflexive model for the utopian social and ecological relations it puts forward, and a blueprint for the broadening of consciousness that alone could make it happen.

19. This inroad into rhizomatic territory may put the reader on the scent of the philosophical opposition between the topologies of the tree and the rhizome, as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. For these authors, the tree structure and its branching logic follows the law of unicity, dichotomy, and hierarchy, whereas the decentered network of the rhizome encodes multiplicity and becoming. This also corresponds to specific forms of textuality, which find echoes in *The Overstory*.

> A first type of book is the root-book. The tree is already the image of the world, or the root the image of the world-tree. This is the classical book, as noble, signifying, and subjective organic interiority (the strata of the book). The book imitates the world, as art imitates nature: by procedures specific to it that accomplish what nature cannot or can no longer do. The law of the book is the law of reflection, the One that becomes two.[8]

> In contrast to centered (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and preestablished paths, the rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states. What is at question in the rhizome is a relation to sexuality – but also to the animal, the vegetal, the world, politics, the book, things natural and artificial – that is totally different from the arborescent relation: all manner of "becomings".[9]

8 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 5.
9 *Ibid.*, 21.

20. Although the French theorists' connotative variations on the figure of the rhizome far exceed its botanical definition, they connect textual form with the environment and thought processes in manners that recall *The Overstory*. Deleuze and Guattari comment on the experimental form of their essay: instead of chapters characterized by "culmination and termination points", *A Thousand Plateaus* is "a book composed instead of plateaus that communicate with one another across microfissures, as in a brain", a plateau being "any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome".[10] Do the rhizomatic correspondences established between the protagonists after Patricia's aspen vision invite us to consider the chapters and sections of the novel as such plateaus and multiplicities, or should they merely be replaced within the general tree-shaped pattern of the table of contents?

21. Numerous passages suggest that *The Overstory* does not foreground a rhizomatic structure at the expense of the branching pattern, which it rather seems to uphold or rehabilitate. The semantic field of trees is at the origin of many expressions that describe fundamental human realities, as if fixed metaphors and etymology bore the trace of some primordial commonality. Roots and seeds are especially evocative. For a sleepy Ray Brinkman, "The words turn into twirling things, like winged seeds spinning in the air" (*TO* 262), and inspiration for Neelay Mehta is described in terms of "germination" (238), as is the growth of his games and company (Sempervirens, or evergreen, the sequoia or redwood tree). Seeds are also associated to images of endurance, dissemination, and renewal: the five ecoactivists must disband, but hopefully after having "[p]lanted a seed, the kind that needs fire to open" (432). Roots are even more seminal, since they self-reflexively describe the archeology of European languages: "It occurs to Adam where the word *radical* came from: *Radix*. *Wrad*. *Root*. The plant's, the planet's, brain" (410). The root of *radical* is *root*, a tautology that suggests an arborescent model for the evolution of languages, predicated upon an older wisdom that was also a closer communion with the non-human world. "The older the word, the more likely it is to be both useful and true. […] the word *tree* and the word *truth* come from the same root", can we read on the penultimate page of the novel (624). Whether this punning demonstration is to be taken as philosophy or mere sophistry, it is not without its persuasive effect – yet it may also represent a myopic specificity of Western culture: "It is odd how the tree has dominated Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy, but also gnosiology, theology, ontology, all of philosophy…: the root-foundation, *Grund, racine, fondement.* The West has a special relation to the forest, and deforestation".[11]

10 *Ibid.,* 22.
11 *Ibid.*, 18.

22. As already remarked, Nicholas Hoel's encounter with the divine tree Mimas emphasizes arborescence as a model for both Evolution and thought processes (*TO* 325). A similar picture of language, thought and text is presented in the Brinkmans' "branching book", a manual to identify the species of a given tree through binary alternatives like "*If you live east of the Rocky Mountains, go entry 1. If you live west of the Rocky Mountains, go to entry 116*" (524). This classificatory nomenclature based on a system of differences echoes Saussurian linguistics and, even more accurately, Noam Chomsky's structuralist grammatical trees, criticized by Deleuze and Guattari.[12] Dorothy compares this "splitting and choosing" both to the law cases she used to transcribe as a legal secretary and to "evolution's decision tree", establishing once more a homothetic connection between the vegetal and the human realms (*TO* 525). This process and the manual that inscribes it are also "like the tree itself, with one central questioning stem splitting into dozens of probing ones, and each of those forking into hundreds, then thousands of green and independent answers" (526). The handbook is a portrait of the novel as a young tree, with the flowering of its myriad stylistic and aesthetic choices.

23. Neelay's computer-savvy brain is the locus for another Mehta-discursive exploration of the relations between tree and thought processes. "His seven-year-old brain fires and rewires, building arborized axons, *dendrites*, these tiny spreading trees" (116). Artificial intelligence is conceived along similar lines.

> There's a thing in programming called *branching*. And that's what Neelay Mehta does. He will reincarnate himself, live again as people of all races, genders, colors, and creeds. […] He'll spend his life in the service of an immense conspiracy, launched from the Valley of the Heart's Delight, to take over the human brain and change it more than anything since writing. (119)

24. Algorithms are an extension of Dorothy's "decision tree". Neelay will build computer games like *The Sylvan Chronicles* that will "put its players smack in the middle of a living, breathing, seething animistic world filled with millions of different species, a world desperately in need of the player's help" (139). All this through a fractal multiplication of the arborescence pattern. This computer simulation is another avatar of the text we are reading, especially if we factor in the recent apparition of digital readers. The branching branches even further, in that it allows people (readers or players) to explore the paths untaken and live alternate lives. The cripple Neelay will walk in his brave new virtual world, whereas Dorothy "sees in the chestnut's branching the several speculative paths of a lived life, all the people she might have been, the ones she could or will yet be, its worlds

12 *Ibid.*, 5.

spreading out just alongside this one" (554). This possibility to hop in imagination from one branch to the next in a parallel universe transforms the arborescent model into a rhizomatic one. In an allegory of reading and writing, this describes the many trajectories of the mind's eye, following plot lines while simultaneously drawing correspondences between distant episodes, even inventing alternative storylines.

Dendritic Eschatologies

25. Dorothy's speculative bifurcations, encompassing both actual and virtual potentialities, are blown up to the larger structure of the text, offering several possible endings and hence precluding any real closure, as is fit for a final part entitled "Seeds". One such branching takes place at the level of the plot, superimposing two incompatible alternatives in postmodern, experimental fashion. At a conference attended by world and business leaders, Patricia seems to despair of the possibility to reconcile sound environmental policies with our anthropocentric bias – "If we knew what green wanted, we wouldn't have to choose between the Earth's interest and ours. They'd be the same!" (568) – so to answer the question "*What is the single best thing a person can do for tomorrow's world*?" she drinks a poisonous decoction of *Tachigali versicolor* or "suicide tree" (570). Yet, like Schrödinger's cat, she also survives.

> The speaker raises her glass, and the world splits. Down one branch, she lifts the glass to her lips, toasts the room – to *Tachigali versicolor* – and drinks. Down another branch, this one, she shouts, "Here's to unsuicide," and flings the cup of swirling green over the gasping audience. She bumps the podium, backs away, and stumbles into the wings, leaving the room to stare at an empty stage. (583)

26. This passage conflates quantum and narrative superposition with the structural metaphor of the tree. Even though the insertion of the deictic "this one" seems to imply that one path only is being taken and that Plant-Patty is not actually committing suicide, no definite certainty is achieved. The textual structure mimics the political and ethical dilemma posed by our relations with trees, in the very shape of the object under discussion. We think in tree form.

27. Three other plot lines are brought to a conclusion, or lack thereof, in ways that have philosophical or theoretical relevance. After a night of meditation in a park, Mimi Ma has a "tree illumination" (in the words of Miller) along Buddhist lines. Her fear of suffering vanishes and is replaced by receptivity to messages and voices coming from the trees surrounding her: "Chemical

semaphores home in over the air. Currents rise from the soil-gripping roots, relayed over great distances through fungal synapses linked up in a network the size of the planet" (621-622). The revelation of this enlightenment connecting her to the universe has an apocalyptic dimension: "The fires will come, despite all efforts, the blight and windthrow and floods. Then the Earth will become another thing, and people will learn it all over again. […] Once the *real world* ends" (622). Buddhist selflessness and compassion towards all sentient beings – which traditionally do not include the vegetal realm – is seen as a possible way out of Western anthropocentrism. Even though the consequences of logging and climate change may not be avoided, both trees and humans may survive or be reborn, in keeping with the universal metaphor of the resurrection of the seed, and more particularly a syncretic mix of Asian and Christian spiritualities. But this eschatology is primarily of the mind, if we remember Patricia's reflections before her (un)suicide. "The problem begins with that word *world*. It means two opposite things. The real one we cannot see. The invented one we can't escape" (583). The reality of material pursuits depicted in the traditional realist novel is the illusion, whereas the true reality is the more-than-human world.[13] What is needed is a complete reform of the human gaze, almost an anamorphosis that would allow us to consider life from the point of view of trees, with their much longer lifespans.

28. With the advent of the Internet, Neelay Mehta's virtual game world progressively takes on aspects of a Baudrillardian simulation, through the desertion of the real world for the imaginary one: "a million more lonely boys emigrate to the new improved Neverland" (345). Jean Baudrillard's insight was that computer simulations and the new media, among others, would radically change the nature of the sign and its relation with reality, fostering an implosion of meaning in which the image would become the reality. "It is no longer a matter of imitation, or redoubling, or even parody. It is a substitution of the signs of the real to the real itself".[14] In *The Overstory* computer simulations do not necessarily exile us from reality and an awareness of environmental disaster. Even if his project of creating "a game with the goal of growing the world, instead of yourself" (517) was vetoed by his company's executive board, Neelay's next project of an AI capable of collecting and processing data and measurement about trees and the environment, through satellite and computer networks, ties in with the more positive uses of simulations, in ecological science, to modelize, raise consciousness about, and possibly act on reality.[15] It is

13 T.S. Miller, "Fantasy and Urgency: Climate Change and Rewilding the Imagination in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*", 28:00-31.
14 J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 2.
15 G. Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 190.

through the efficacy of the rhizome, multiplying the power of branching algorithms, that this network will be able to find solutions to ecological threats. "They gossip to one another, these new species, exchanging discoveries, as living code has exchanged itself from the beginning. […] They'll speculate on what it takes to live and put these speculations to the test. Then they'll say what life wants from people, and how it might use them" (614). Yet there is an ambiguity about these "new learners": will the AI try to save humankind, "to find out how big life is, how connected, and what it would take for people to unsuicide" (600), to "translate between any human language and the language of green things" (600), or will it represent the next stage in evolution, possibly superseding and replacing human or even organic life? If everything is code, from the genetics of biological life to language and computer software, as he intuits in front of a giant redwood tree, "the most perfect piece of self-writing code that his eyes could hope to see" (129), one sort of code can outgrow others, which makes Neelay's last entry disquietingly ambiguous. "Life is speculation and these new speculations strain to come alive. […] But life is going someplace. It wants to know itself; it wants the power of choice. It wants solutions to problems that nothing alive yet knows how to solve, and it's willing to use even death to find them" (617).

29. This possible future smacks of the questionable outlook on evolution that historian Yuval Noah Harari calls "Dataism". "Dataism declares that the universe consists of data flows, and the value of any phenomenon or entity is determined by its contribution to data processing". Since the life sciences have come to see organisms as biochemical algorithms, "Dataism thereby collapses the barrier between animals and machines [and, may we add, between plants and machines], and expects electronic algorithms to eventually decipher and outperform biochemical algorithms".[16] Equating life with the flow of information, the prophets of Dataism assert such Dadaist (to us) beliefs as "information wants to be free" and "humans are just tools for creating the Internet-of-All-Things", a massive data-churning network that could spread to the whole planet and beyond, to outer space (444). Such an outcome, straight out of science-fiction, may give the human species a taste of its own medicine, making it undergo what it has done to other animals – and plants (406), according to a double vegetal pattern, the conjunction of (electronic) arborescence and rhizome.

30. The final prong of the novel's forked ending is situated in the Far North where Nicholas Hoel still makes tree art, but on a much larger scale than on his lost farm. With the help of a few Native Americans won over to his project, he carries large trunks of dead trees to form an organic monument evocative of Land Art.

16 Y.N. Harari, *Homo Deus,* 428.

> The shapes turn into letters complete with tendril flourishes, and the letters spell out a gigantic word legible from space:
>
> STILL
>
> The learners will puzzle over the message that springs up there, so near to the methane-belching tundra. But in the blink of a human eye, the learners will grow connections. Already, this word is greening. Already the mosses surge over, the beetles and lichen and fungi are turning the log to soil. […] Two centuries more, and these five living letters, too, will fade back into the swirling patterns, the changing rain and air and light. And yet – but *still* – they'll spell out, for a while, the word life has been saying, since the beginning. (*TO* 624-625)

31. This is a highly metafictional passage, in which these legible trees, complete with the typographical ornamentations of "tendril flourishes", become block letters for a message to be decoded not only by Neelay's satellite "learners", but also, hopefully, by the present-day readers of the novel. The characters of the word STILL stand tall like the trunks they are made of, growing a forest of meaning characterized by branching polysemy. The word pictures a still life of sorts, distilling the tension between the immobility of the adjective and the enduring quality of the adverb – also an objection, or a call to resistance. The last sentences also hint at the connection between trees and humans, in their common will to survive: "Something moves at the base of the motionless trunks. Nothing. Now everything. *This*, a voice whispers, from very nearby. *This. What we have been given. What we must earn*. This *will never end*" (625). The origin of the voice is ambiguous: it may be that of the Natives accompanying Nick, the latter's inner voice or, more probably, the voice of the trees. But the pronoun "we" might as well be mankind as the arboreal world. And the deictic "this" may represent natural beauty, life, which encompasses both trees and men, as well as the text itself, whose closure is denied even as it concludes on the word "end". The novel is thus implicitly compared to one of the "seeds" that constitute the last part, referring to the green-friendly characters, their message, and the medium of this message, literature.

Tree-Text and Treeory

32. Richard Powers's *The Overstory* is undoubtedly an environmentally committed work of literature. It is rooted in one of the major traditions of nature writing in the United States, the conservationist tradition, as illustrated by the context of the central plot. It also bridges, like many ecocritical works, the gap between science and the Humanities, seeding the novelistic plot with

scientific data and hypotheses. The several green "conversion narratives" of the human protagonists are no doubt meant to raise awareness and possibly lead to environmental action. Some of the mainsprings of this appeal are the twinning and grafting of human protagonists and trees, who also become characters; and the evocation of "earth emotions" like "solastalgia"; which Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht defines as "the existential and lived experience of negative environmental change, manifest as an attack on one's sense of place".[17] Such powerful feelings are evoked through Douglas' discovery of the devastation behind the thin curtain of "Potemkin forests", Mimi Ma's sense of loss and anger at the cutting of the trees in front of her office, and most of all the fall of Mimas.

33. But the urgency of the situation demands more than a few accommodations in our way of life and our way of telling stories. In a variation on Aldo Leopold's famous adage "Thinking like a mountain",[18] Powers would have us "think like a tree", which implies a radical change of perspective from an anthropocentric to a dendrocentric and, more broadly, to a biocentric viewpoint. The last leaves of the book, with their forked endings, suggest that this new worldview can find inspiration in already-existing ones, like Buddhism or, more fundamentally, Native American animism. As his voluntary Native assistant jokingly answers Nicholas when he discovers that it is not too hard to hear what the trees are saying: "We've been trying to tell you that since 1492" (*TO* 613). Hence perhaps the importance given to myth in the novel, as an alternative to the type of realistic novel that deals only with humans in their social environment. Traditional myths are alluded to, in the many mentions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Patricia's favorite book, in the comparison between Mimas and the cosmic tree of Norse mythology, Yggdrasil, but also in the contemporary environmental mythology of Gaia, crafted by James Lovelock, which sees the Earth as "a self-regulating system, analogous to a living organism".[19] In a book about giving "legal standing" to trees or valleys for their defense, Ray Brinkman reads that short of such mythic vision human self-interest will defeat all efforts at ecological action: "*What is needed is a myth. […] I do not think it too remote that we may come to regard the Earth, as some have suggested, as one organism, of which mankind is a functional part – the mind, perhaps*" (*TO* 315). *The Overstory* might function as such a myth, with its mix of realistic fiction with touches of Fantasy and Science-Fiction endowing trees with consciousness and communicative abilities.[20]

17 G. Albrecht, *Earth Emotions*, 38.
18 A. Leopold, *Sand County Almanac,* 129.
19 G. Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 199.
20 T.S. Miller, "Fantasy and Urgency: Climate Change and Rewilding the Imagination in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*", 24:30.

34. Enforcing such new awareness entails changing the way our brains are wired, so that the message is also conveyed by the medium. The numerous allusions to computer technology point the way to an emerging medium that might soon replace the book, yet the parallels between arboreal and digital information networks tend to bridge the qualitative hiatus. After all, the "Wood-Wide-Web" was discovered only in the era of the World-Wide-Web: new technologies shape our understanding of the natural world. To think like a tree implies writing like a tree, as suggested by the monumental greening word on the forest floor that ends the novel.

35. The novel is a complete biome of words and interlinked characters. More than this metaphorical parallel, its "treeing" form gives it a discreetly experimental quality, endowing it with a central self-reflexive dimension as an *ars poetica*. This is effected in part by fashioning the structure of the novel on the different parts of a tree, coordinating the various plotlines into interdependent threads obeying both a branching and a rhizomatic structure, and therefore relativizing the anthropocentric focus on human desire and agency. At this juncture the book becomes theoretical, positing visions of textuality that correspond best to its object and purpose. The insistence on the many derivations, in both our ordinary and scientific language, from vegetal structures may pose the hypothesis of the originally metaphoric nature of human language, and of some ancient connection between humanity and the more-than-human world that would need to be restored, or even of a homothetic relation between all realms of life. The theory of the text emerging from the novel presents the branching and rhizomatic models as equally productive, which has the result of rehabilitating the arborescent pattern, against Deleuze and Guattari. Even though the latter ultimately affirmed the complementary nature of both vegetal-inspired patterns of organization – "the root-tree and canal-rhizome are not two opposed models […] We employ a dualism of models only in order to arrive at a process that challenges all models"[21] – their revolutionary intent made them privilege the rhizomatic pattern that they associated with multiplicity and an anti-hierarchical stance.

36. Another dendromorphic image of the text suggests a transformed vision of time corresponding to the larger and structurally different perspective of trees. It implies renouncing Western linear time in favor of a more circular, incremental temporality. One of the eco-activists says: "They can't see that time is one spreading ring wrapped around another, outward and outward until the thinnest skin of *Now* depends for its being on the enormous mass of everything that has already died" (*TO* 446). Many non-Western cultures have a cyclic view of time, resembling these growth rings, and also feel

21 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 20.

connected to the past through myth, rituals and ancestral spirits. Yet, more than a reference to any existing mythology, this vision of time is an offshoot of the book's topic, supported by a self-reflexive allegory of reading. As we reach the outer membrane of this hefty volume, we articulate linear progression with incremental learning, and thus mimic the broader wisdom conveyed by the text. The novel presents multiple pictures of textuality, all suggestive and tree-connected but devoid of any attempt at unification. The pleasures of language and imagination are allowed to branch out; the only common point between these different views is growth.

37. In spite of its richness and variety, *The Overstory* is characterized by great poetic and imaginative unity around the theme and form of the tree. Replacing the novel within the more general field of environmental criticism, some of its features and tenets might be apprehended in a different light and be made the objects of further discussion.

38. The novel's dominant outlook is conservationist, grossly corresponding to the ideological impetus of the first wave of environmental criticism in the United States.[22] Even though the failure of the conservation activism of the 1990s is ascertained, its evocation remains the summit of the novel, like the portrait of Mimas as a transcendental world tree towers over the text. Patricia's opposition to plantation forests, which are often monocultural and geared to maximize profit, stems from a view of ecosystemic harmony within old growth forests: "if you want next century's soil, if you want pure water, if you want variety and health, if you want stabilizers and services we can't even measure, then be patient and let the forest give slowly" (*TO* 355). Natural equilibrium is at the basis of many conservationist programs, and linked with an implicit vision of the wilderness as a place of purity and authenticity in direct proportion to human absence.[23] The very notion of harmony between men and nature and within ecosystems has been questioned by "postequilibrium ecology", which argues that nature left alone is in a constant state of change and unbalance.[24] Furthermore, the dichotomy between "nature" and "civilization" seems to be a particularly Western form of thought, according to Anna Tsing, whose worldwide enquiry has shown that in Japan, for example, preservation efforts are also applied to ecosystems disturbed by human intervention where the pine tree and prized matsutake mushroom flourish.[25] There are city trees in *The Overstory*, there are computers and video games that might save plant and animal species; the novel therefore does not set up a clear-cut opposition between unsullied nature and corrupt technology. It advocates a

22 L. Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, 21-22.
23 G. Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 77.
24 *Ibid.,*65.
25 A.L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 179.

symbiotic relation between the human and vegetal realms, but seemingly within the sphere of the pastoral.

39. The animistic theme, a common thread in environmental literature, has had its critics. As Garrard pointedly remarks, the idealized vision of animism found in literature, especially when referring to Native American spirituality, does not always correspond to the realities of tribal cultures, or to contemporary environmental needs. The slaughter of buffalos, driven over cliffs in greater numbers than could be butchered and consumed, draws attention to these discrepancies.[26] Animism in *The Overstory* reaches beyond the link with Native cultures, into the realm of science. Scientific objectivity, in the form of ecology and computer science, adds to rather than detracts from this vision, since it establishes that trees are indeed able to communicate in nature, and that through the plant-like processes of branching and networking machines may become conscious and alive. Animism is potentially extended to computers, rather than subtracted from trees, thus avoiding the pitfalls of anthropocentrism. Yet one of the possible scenarios for the future is disquietingly not a closer connection between men and the non-human word, but an extinction of the organic option.

40. Animals are almost absent in *The Overstory*, which might be attributable to the need for poetic focus. But some defenders of animals have claimed that the recent advocacy of trees, especially in its animistic version epitomized by the success of Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees*, has harmed the cause of animals. By wrongly attributing to vegetal species individuality and consciousness – and possibly the ability to suffer – in a move defined as anthropomorphic, this type of discourse allows us to "get rid of the weight, guilt, and responsibility regarding the violence of our relations with animals".[27] Most biocentric outlooks consider species and their wellbeing as a whole, ignoring the fate, pain and death of individual animals.[28] Burgat concludes, somewhat excessively: "The radical alterity of vegetal life, its rootedness – its existence as literal *Dasein* – its luxuriance, the whimsicality of its motifs, its impassibility and silence, constitute a counterpoint to the life of mortal, flesh-and-blood beings. This life that dies only to be reborn is the opposite of a tragedy".[29] One may wonder at such obliviousness to the tragic loss of forest space and species in our world. The relation between defenders of trees and animals does not need to be antagonistic, but the question of animal life remains unaddressed in the novel.

41. *The Overstory* is an encyclopedic work, a tree-cyclopedia so to speak, owing its title to the

26 G. Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 143.
27 L. Burgat, *Qu'est-ce qu'une plante ?*, 174, my translation.
28 *Ibid.,* cf. 161.
29 *Ibid.,* 186-187.

notion that the overarching story is that of life, of which trees have been a part for longer than humans and might survive our extinction. As Nick thinks: "*The most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help*. Not them; us. Help from all quarters" (*TO* 613). The novel is a wonderful thought experiment, using all the resources of its experimental dendritic form to allow a shift in perspective, first existential then ethical and possibly political. This reader for one lived "his life as a tree" for a few days while reading, and is still meditating on the green world as a result. Powers's latest novel, *Bewilderment*, pursues issues left unresolved in the previous text, most notably the relation between humans and animals in the face of an announced mass extinction. "I wrote a book that asked a very hard question, which is, why are we so lost and how can we possibly get back? […] I thought, now you've asked the question, why not write a story about what that change would look like?" (Alter). It seems that the tree has seeded.

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