"Earth Speaking Aloud": The Agency of Trees in *The Overstory* by Richard Powers

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1. In his essay *Nature*, the American essayist and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson declared: "In the woods we return to reason and faith" (1990 [1836], 18). Like Henry David Thoreau's well-known expression of his desire to go to the woods in order to live "deliberately", Emerson's affirmation of the comforting values of the forest has become a proverbial expression of an American attachment to the wilderness, nature and the values that they represent.[1] In more recent times, the simplicity of Emerson's confidence in the capacity of the woods to restore "reason" and "faith" has proven problematic. Both notions have become more difficult to define. And the woods themselves have come to play a more complex role as a reservoir of biodiversity, but also as an economic resource and a source of protection from global warming. In recent years, discussions of the environment and climate change have produced a different discourse, or rather a variety of discourses, revolving around the forest and its role in warding off global warming. This practical preoccupation has been accompanied by an increasing interest in trees seen from both a scientific and a cultural perspective.

2. Richard Powers's novel *The Overstory* (2018), which examines the place of forests in a world threatened by climate change, demonstrates the fictional potential of forests as sites of cultural and social investment, but also as war zones in the fight against an "extractive" vision of forests as a resource to be exploited.[2] As a novelist, Richard Powers is fascinated by the ways in which science is implicated in people's lives. He brings to his novels a complex understanding of the fields he evokes. The *Overstory* mobilizes the most recent knowledge about trees, their behavior and interaction, through the voice of the scientist Patricia Westerford. However, its complex interweaving of the stories of several characters connected in very different ways to trees suggests more than a curiosity about science. Powers raises fundamental questions about the nature of

1 In *Walden*, Thoreau said, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (1966 [1845], 61).

2 The idea of forestry as an extractive enterprise has been developed in postcolonial criticism in relation to what Michael Niblett calls "commodity frontiers", a concept covering the different forms of exploitation involved, "the diverse forms of unpaid or underpaid work performed by human and nonhuman natures alike" (50). One of Powers's characters uses the word extraction explicitly (380).

narrative and its capacity to represent complex realities. One of these questions concerns the idea of agency and its possible extension to trees.

3. Given the novelist's grasp of recent developments in the understanding of trees, it can be assumed that he has perceived the importance of bringing the activity of nature into a more harmonious balance with human agency.[3] If one considers that action is the very core of narrative, one might hypothesize that Powers enhances the capacity of his story to give trees equal weight with humans in the ecological equation by conferring "agency" upon them. We could adopt this as a working hypothesis and attempt to tease out its implications in order to measure the author's capacity to give trees a voice. If we wish to explore this option, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of what is meant by agency in discussions of the environment and how the theoretical tools we propose make the notion applicable to nonhuman objects, regardless of whether they belong to nature or the material world.[4]

4. In the debate that has developed around climate change and the Anthropocene,[5] the very "nature of Nature" plays a pivotal role.[6] The difficulty in imagining the agency of nonhuman nature is to a great extent the result of a view that considers nature as a separate domain, accessible only through a scientific approach capable of establishing "indisputable" facts (Latour 2004, 68). According to Baptiste Morizot, "climate change and the era that it has ushered in reshuffle the cards concerning our conception of 'nature' and the relations that we can and must maintain with nonhuman nature" (2023, 95, my translation).[7] Morizot bases his call for a redefinition of these

3 The search for a different relation to nonhuman nature underlies much environmental theory at the present time. The philosopher Baptiste Morizot has called for the invention of "relationships with nonhuman nature that are not imprisoned in the relations that modernists saw as 'natural', based on the quantitative management of inanimate matter or the civilizing struggle against 'wild nature'—but that are altersocial and alterpolitical" (2023, 271, my translation).

4 The notion of "agency" as I use it (following authors like Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett) implies the ability to affect other entities in a complex reality based on inter-relations. The treatment of nature, in the words of the anthropologist Tim Ingold, as something that "already exists 'out there', like an unmapped continent […] simply waiting for humans to discover it" (2021, 5) denies the potential reciprocity of agency, even in the world of nature. Latour considers that an excessive confidence in the capacity of science to understand and explain everything reduces living nature to the status of an object and calls into question the pertinence of a distinction between living and non-living objects. Ingold, Bennett and Latour insist on the need to focus on the relations between things as a way of perceiving their potential for agency rather than being obsessed with their "nature" as humans, living beings, plants or material objects. While Baptiste Morizot contests Bruno Latour's equating of living and non-living objects (2020, 110-112), we will see in the discussion that follows that trees, in the extractive perspective that treats them as an economic resource, hover on the borderline between the living and the purely material. The agency envisioned in Powers's novel does not rely solely on their belonging to living nature.

5 The term is subject to controversy both in its formulation and its dating. First used by the American hydrobiologist Eugene Stoermer in the 1980s, it was popularized by the Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen. The two published a paper in 2000 in which they designated humanity as a "major geological force" (Guyot-Téphany 2020, 60-61).

6 This is the expression used by Baptiste Morizot in his latest work *L'Inexploré* (2023, 20).

7 I have translated the word "vivants" used by Morizot as "nonhuman nature". This term is used by David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (2017, 16).

relations on his rejection of a view of nature that sees it as "a universe of matter governed by laws, subject either to rational exploitation or to sanctuarisation in order to be 'protected' […]" (22, my translation). This view of nature, which places it in the province of the exact sciences, leaves it, in a vision inherited from Cartesian epistemology, beyond the reach of human action. It draws a borderline between the nature of science and that of poets and society in general (and undercuts, in the process, Emerson's linking of reason and faith). Bruno Latour, whose work has deeply influenced Morizot's approach, formulates this dualistic vision by using a capitalized version of the word science and defining its objective as the production of what he calls "an incontestable nature" (2004, 10).[8] Both Morizot and Latour are concerned with the necessity of developing models for action capable of meeting the challenge of climate change. And both consider that no model for effective action can be developed without a reconsideration of the dualistic model that opposes scientific and social views of nature. Attributing agency to nonhuman nature is one way of reducing the gap between strictly scientific approaches and those which rely on other, alternative views.

5. In the structure elaborated by Latour to define a form of collective life bringing science and society together, the notion of agency covers "*a profound doubt about the nature of action*" (2004, 73). To say that Latour simply assigns to nonhuman living things and even to simple objects the status of actor would be an oversimplification. The painstaking redefinition of all the notions he puts in the balance, including what constitutes action, is crucial to his demonstration. He rejects, in particular, any assumptions made at the outset concerning the nature of actors in discussions of the relation between nature and society (74). He proposes on the contrary, the notion of what he calls "trials", involving humans and nonhumans, as a basis for observing what can constitute agency:

> Let us suppose that someone comes to find you with an association of humans and nonhumans, an association whose exact composition is not yet known to anyone, but about which a series of trials makes it possible to say that its members *act,* that is, quite simply, that *they modify other actors through a series of trials that can be listed thanks to some experimental protocol*. This is the minimal, secular, nonpolemical definition of an actor. (Latour 2004,75, original emphasis)

Lawrence Buell, in his study of the ways in which literary criticism can become environmental, sees Bruno Latour as an unlikely candidate to "become the all-purpose theorist of literary studies' environmental turn" because of his "scant interest in literature and the arts" (Buell 21). He does however recognize that the interest in Latour's work has stimulated "a more reflexive approach to science on the part of those who look to it to energize literary studies" (Buell 21). This is due in

8 This is Latour's way of avoiding a confusion between a discourse on science which makes it capable of producing an objective view of an "incontestable nature" and "the life of the sciences" as they actually function (2004, 9-10).

particular to the way in which Latour has provoked "a more sophisticated rethinking of the nature and place of 'nature' itself" (Buell 21).

6. Suggesting that *The Overstory* accords hypothetical agency to trees is a way of approaching the idea of nonhuman agency without drawing conclusions, at the outset, as to its nature and functioning. Latour's model offers a theoretical space in which the views of an "indisputable nature" generated by an excessive confidence in the idea that the facts "speak for themselves" is called into question (Latour 2004, 68). This could be seen as consistent with a view of Richard Powers's fiction as revealing "the promises and pitfalls of rampant technoscientific development" (Houser 2014, 108). Latour posits an extension of agency to objects and nonhumans as a way of imagining "the hard labor necessary for the progressive and public composition of the future unity", or what he calls "the collective" (2004, 59). Similarly, Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter* talks about "developing a vocabulary and syntax for […] the active powers issuing from nonsubjects" (ix). Like Bruno Latour, she is concerned with the possibility of public action: "How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?" (Bennett viii). Seen in a fictional context, a questioning of the strictly human nature of agency opens avenues for exploring the way in which a novel brings together characters, settings, objects, events, language, and style. It allows one to treat the different elements entering into the fictional composition, in Bennett's terminology, as "a swarm of vitalities at play" (32).[9] Considering trees as agents constitutes a way of accentuating the challenge involved in "abandon[ing] the safe haven of subjectivity and go[ing] beyond the division between observer and observed world" (Wiese 2014, chapter 4).

7. In attempting to develop a "vocabulary and syntax" for nonhuman agency, Jane Bennett draws on numerous theories, starting from Spinoza's notion of *conatus*, "the trending tendency to persist", shared by both human and nonhuman bodies (2). From Spinoza she takes the idea of the "heterogeneous assemblage" a term developed by Deleuze and Guattari, to designate "an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency of the assemblage" (24). She retains the term "agency" (as opposed to other terms such as "self-organize" or "participate") because "the rubric of material agency is likely to be a stronger counter to human exceptionalism, to, that is, the human tendency to understate the degree to which people, animals, artifacts, technologies, and elemental forces share powers and operate in dissonant conjunction with each other" (34). The notion of heterogeneity, as

9 "This understanding of agency does not deny the existence of that thrust called intentionality, but it does see it as less definitive of outcomes. It loosens the connections between efficacy and the moral subject, bringing efficacy closer to the idea of the power to make a difference that call for response" (Bennett 32).

developed by Deleuze and Guattari, provides a tool for thinking outside cultural models based on notions such as filiation and resemblance.[10] The term "rhizome" is used in their writings to characterize the connections that constitute assemblages, a term chosen for its capacity to counter images related to the "tree" and "root" which they see as inspiring "a sad image of thought that is forever imitating the multiple on the basis of a centered or segmented higher unity" (16).[11] There is a certain irony in evoking Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome in connection with Richard Powers's novel of trees, which relies on an explicit evocation of trees and of their symbolic relation to human culture. Their exclamation "We're tired of trees. [...] All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics" (15) seems to be incompatible with Powers's project of using trees as the basis of an exploration of the multiple connections between humans and nonhuman nature.[12] However, like Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, the notions of the "assemblage" and the "rhizome" can function as horizons for imagining non-human agency without determining the form through which this agency will emerge. One can, on the contrary, consider that Powers proceeds by mobilizing many of the images and cultural motifs associated with trees in order to push those very models and images to their limits, thus leaving them free to create new connections and reveal unsuspected forms of agency. We will begin by examining the role of metaphor, the most obvious exercise of human agency through the imagination, before examining the ways in which metaphor, language, conversation and dramatic irony become sites for the emergence of another vision of agency.

"Likeness *is the sole problem of men*" (443). Metaphor in *The Overstory*

8. Richard Powers has described his vision of the novel as "a kind of bastard hybrid, like consciousness itself, generating new terrain by passing 'realism' and 'metafiction' through

10 "The history of ideas should never be continuous; it should be wary of resemblances, but also of descents or filiations; it should be content to mark the thresholds through which an idea passes, the journeys it takes that change its nature or object" (Deleuze and Guattari 235). In the chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus* entitled "1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible…" in which they state that "becoming is always of a different order than filiation", they extend the notion of "becoming" to the functioning of trees: "There is a block of becoming between young roots and certain microorganisms, the alliance between which is effected by the materials synthesized in the leaves (rhizosphere)" (238).

11 "[...] unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states" (Deleuze and Guattari 21).

12 Monica Manolescu points out this irony in a footnote to her article "'Arboretum America' in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*". She considers that "Powers's trees are very often rhizomatic" and that the "oversimplified opposition tree/rhizome does not function in *The Overstory*" (15-16). Michel Feith, for his part, considers that the novel "presents the branching and rhizomatic models as equally productive, which has the effect of rehabilitating the arborescent pattern, against Deleuze and Guattari" (116).

relational processes, inviting identification at one gauge while complicating it at others" (2008, 308). This is an apt description of *The Overstory*, the very title of which encapsulates this hybridity by dovetailing the technical term overstory, referring to "the highest layer of vegetation in a forest, the canopy"[13] with the suggestion of an all-encompassing story. Far from eschewing organic images in Deleuzian fashion, Powers mobilizes them deliberately, beginning with the structure of the novel: roots, trunk, crown, seeds.[14] This organic model of the narrative serves as a reminder of the difficulty of overcoming people's tendency to organize the perception of nature in terms of their own objectives. The "Roots" section narrates the life of each of the main characters in a way that suggests the origin of the character's behaviour and worldview: Nicolas Hoel, descendant of a Norwegian immigrant, Mimi Ma, daughter of a Chinese immigrant, and Neelay Methta, with his Gujarati father, are all affected by the immigrant's drive to succeed. Adam Appich, the future psychologist, and Patricia Westerford, the novel's dendrologist, present inverted images of the relation to the father, the violence of Adam's experience reversed in Patricia's loving relation to a man who teaches her that "plants are willful and crafty and after something, just like people" (143). Olivia Vandergriff, whose life at college is defined by "sex, drugs and all-night parties" (183) seems to be estranged from her parents who are "so much less than they should have been" (187). Only Douglas Pavlicek and the couple Dorothy and Ray are defined more by their experience as adults than by reference to their origins. In the "Trunk" section the lives of the characters become intertwined by their involvement, with varying degrees of proximity and distance, in the fight to prevent the felling of redwoods in the Pacific Northwest, a struggle that leads indirectly to the death of Olivia. The Crown and Seeds sections follow the lives of the characters after the explosion on a tree-cutting site in Idaho, the latter also referring implicitly to Patricia Westerford's project for the creation of a seed bank in Colorado to preserve threatened trees for future generations. If this brief summary suggests the affinity of Powers's novel with organic views of fiction that see it following the growth and development of characters, it does not capture the complexity of the metaphorical, intertextual and metafictional connections that both reinforce and subvert this pattern. Each character has a specific relation to trees: these connections range from Ray and Dorothy's total indifference to trees ("two people for whom trees mean almost nothing" [80]) to Patricia Westerford's expertise as a scientist and her development of the theory of trees as "social creatures" (153). The family of Nicolas Hoel has been photographing a chestnut tree on their farm for

13 "overstory". Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary. 2010. 2010 K Dictionaries Ltd. Copyright 2005, 1997, 1991 by Random House, Inc. 7 Nov. 2023 https://www.thefreedictionary.com/overstory

14 Garrett Stewart considers that "the dated shibboleth of 'organic form' takes on" in Powers's novel, "a fresh tensile application" (2021, 162).

generations; the Appich family plants a tree for the birth of each child, both actions suggesting an emotional and symbolic investment in trees that will be developed in the course of the novel. Neelay Mehta is crippled by falling out of a tree, Douglas Pavlicek is saved by a fig tree when he is obliged to bail out of his plane during the Cambodian campaign that was part of the war in southeast Asia:

> His scream pierces the air, and his body tumbles into the branches of the banyan, that one-tree forest that has grown up over the course of three hundred years just in time to break his fall. (102)

As the novelist Barbara Kingsolver observed in her review of the novel:

> Powers doesn't hesitate to give us wide-screen views of the machinery of his plot, so we can't miss the roles his characters have been assigned as fulcrum and levers bent to a larger purpose. ("The Heroes of this Novel")

Kingsolver's remark points to a mobilization of cultural connections to trees that borders on caricature and parody and stands in contrast to the scientific discourse of Patricia Westerford, which emerges gradually over the course of the novel to encompass the most recent research on trees.[15] This apparent polarity is a way for Powers to dramatize the gap between popular and scientific discourse, but also to explore the cultural roots of people's difficulty in attributing agency to nonhuman subjects.[16] By exploring the prevalence of organic metaphors, particularly those relating to trees, Powers reveals how metaphor becomes a lever for exercising agency in ways that restrict it to human use.

9. The comment about "likeness" quoted in the subtitle of this section, attributed by an anonymous narrator to a man lying on his back observing pine trees at the beginning of the section entitled "Crown", might be considered as a commentary on Lakoff and Johnson's definition of metaphor: "*the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another*" (5, original emphasis). Patricia Westerford's father explains people's reliance on metaphor as a tool for understanding when he tells his young daughter that most people are "plant-blind"

15 In an interview Powers explained that he had read about 120 books on trees (Interview with Alex Preston in *The Guardian*). A few of them are mentioned in a PBS interview in which he gives brief summaries of some of the books (Elizabeth Flock, PBS News Hour). Recent literature on trees is abundant and popular, beginning with Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2017). In France Laurent Tillon's *Etre un chêne* (2021) reflects the popularity of books written by specialists (Tillon is an engineer who works for the Office National des Forêts) who have managed to combine scientific expertise with a capacity to narrativize their subject. Francis Hallé, a French botanist who is a specialist on the ecology of tropical forests, has published a number of works that blend highly specific scientific descriptions of trees with a vast knowledge of the cultural dimension of trees and forests, a good example being *Plaidoyer pour l'arbre* (2005).

16 In an interview with the *New York Times*, Powers said, "If you look at contemporary fiction, the stories that these books tell have no agency except humans" (Interview with Alexandra Alter in *The New York Times*).

because "[w]e only see things that look like us" (143). He makes liberal use of figurative language as a way of communicating his passion for trees to Patricia: "He teaches her how to see a tree […] A patch of narrow stalks, each with big drooping leaves. A sheepdog of trees" (145). However, if Patricia's father's use of metaphor is based on an ethics of "humility and looking" (145), the abundance of metaphors in the novel, many of them using trees as either tenor or vehicle, reflects a more complex vision of metaphor as "one of the primary modes of conceptual organization in language" (Underhill 25). Lakoff and Johnson have demonstrated "how metaphorical expressions in everyday language give us insight into the metaphorical concepts that structure our everyday activity" (7), a dimension of language of which speakers are largely unconscious. While there are numerous instances in the novel of creative metaphors that bring trees to life, as when Jorgen Hoel "look[s] out the dormer window onto a school of leaves, swimming and shining in the sky" (11), conventional uses of the tree as a vehicle underline the role played by organic metaphors in shaping our views of social, economic and technological organization. This becomes obvious in the chapters devoted to Neelay Mehta, who begins programming when his father brings home a computer: "His seven-year-old brain fires and rewires, building arborized axons, dendrites, those tiny spreading trees" (116); "There's a thing in programming called *branching*" (119); "Teams and managers populate an organizational tree he can't keep track of" (285). The "beings of light" which Olivia sees are "family branches lopped off that she must recover and revive" (202). The book Dorothy finds to identify trees is based on "decision trees" (552). The opening passage of the novel already announces the pivotal role played by the intertwining of these two dimensions: "There are more ways to branch than any cedar pencil will ever find" (3). The novel thus generates a dense "understory" in which creative and conventional metaphors become entangled. However, as Underhill's remark suggests, the structural capacity of metaphoric expression extends beyond the need to understand. Along with other figures of rhetoric, it can be viewed as a form of agency, a hypothetical experience extending its invisible roots to constitute the underpinnings of our worldviews. This view of metaphor as potential agency is the mainspring of Paul Ricœur's analysis of the active nature of metaphor and its fundamental link to utterance, discourse and narrative.[17] Powers's reliance on the capacity of metaphor to confer hypothetical agency is particularly clear in

17 Ricœur's definition of metaphor as *vive*, as an integral part of discourse with a potential referential capacity, is based on a refusal to see it as a process affecting only the word. In the first chapter of *La métaphore vive* he takes his cue from Aristotle's reference in *The Rhetoric* to metaphor as words painting "when they signify things in action" (quoted in Ricoeur, 50, my translation). He considers that Aristotle's definition of *mimesis phuseôs* "links this referential function [of poetic discourse] to "the revelation of the Real as Act". To "present men as 'acting' and all things 'as being in action', could be defined as the *ontological* function of metaphorical discourse. Through it, all dormant potential of existence appears *as though* in full bloom, every latent capacity for action *as* effective" (61, my translation).

the opening chapter of *The Overstory*, in which the immigrant Jorgen Hoel's drive to make a life for himself in "western Iowa" sets the stage for a story in which the agency of nature, far from asserting itself independently, is closely related to that of the human beings:

> In four years, the Hoels have three children and the hint of a chestnut grove. The sprigs come up spindly, their brown stems lined with lenticels. The lush, scalloped, saw-toothed, spiny leaves dwarf the twigs they bud from. (7)

The syllepsis of the first sentence, linking "have" to both the children and the trees, creates a connection between the children and the trees, making it easy to see both as "coming up". An earlier reference to the chestnuts personifies them in a way that clearly transforms their energy into a metaphor for the drive of the men themselves:

> The burred husks prickle, but their *No* is more of a tease than any real barrier. The nuts *want* to slip free of their spiny protection. Each one volunteers to be eaten, so others might be spread far afield. (6, original emphasis)

Given the epic sweep of the chapter, it is impossible to distinguish between the agency of God, that of men and that of nature: "His maize and beans and squash – all growing things alone disclose the wordless mind of God" (9).[18] This opening chapter constitutes the terrain for a view of trees which confers on them an agency which is essentially metaphorical.

10. Powers makes abundant use of metaphor, as well as myth and metamorphosis, the narrative extensions of metaphorical thinking, to give the reader a sense of the experience of the forest and to bring a complex reality within the reach of his characters' imagination.[19] However, even if, as Lakoff and Johnson assert, metaphor can be seen "as a mechanism creating new meaning and new realities in our lives" (196), it also has an ideological potential which is the underside of its capacity to create systematic networks of meaning: "whether in national politics or everyday interaction, people in power get to impose their metaphors" (Lakoff and Johnson, 157). Although Patricia's father uses metaphor, comparison and personification in order to give his daughter a sense of the power of trees – "the beech told the farmer where to plow" (143) – this use of metaphor is to some extent a mirror image of Jorgen Hoel's pioneering spirit. Although he understands that "the living

18 Jorgen, who sees words "as a ruse" never reads the lines by Whitman that offer an alternative view of nature. There are numerous echoes of Whitman in the novel.

19 Micronarratives, like the description of Patricia's discovery of the "uncut forests" of the Northwest, (168-170) are particularly effective examples of this approach. In this passage, the extended metaphor of the forest as "cathedral" is doubled by an Alice in Wonderland description that leaves Patricia caught between the infinitely large and the infinitely small; while "her own body seems freakishly small", the mosses she sees become "thumbnail forests" (169). Her perception of the "ever-dying life packed into each single cubic foot" is contrasted with the "primal fear" usually inspired by such forests.

sheath of cells" underneath the bark of trees is "doing things no man has figured out" (144), in real life the man, who works as an "ag extension agent", is "caught between fine folks whose family farms are failing to subdue the Earth and companies that want to sell them the arsenal to bring about total dominion" (143).

11. A reliance on metaphor and analogy to bring the functioning of trees within reach of human understanding runs the risk of reproducing the split between the "liberty of subjects" and the "necessity of things" deplored by Latour, leaving the "social" and the "natural" on opposite sides (2004, 81). Only people can become agents, and they exercise their agency through a metaphorical appropriation of nature. Latour uses actor-network theory as a way of bringing objects and social forces into assemblages that do not rely on a split between the social and the scientific, "a very practical enterprise of world-building which consists in establishing the connection between entities, in other words of tracing a network" (2006, 148). As a novelist, Powers performs a similar work of assemblage by establishing connections between the figurative use of language and the events that constitute the diegesis. He creates networks in which trees acquire agency through a questioning of the borderline between the metaphorical and the literal. Emblematic of this process is the story of Ray playing Macduff in an amateur production of *Macbeth:* "For three nights running, Macduff and his men, knitted out as trees, help the forest migrate from Birnam Wood all the way to Dunsinane. Trees actually journey across the stage" (83). This play on the idea of migrating trees foreshadows the scientific explanation given by Patricia for the shift in the location of aspens:

> Long ago, the climate changed, and an aspen's seeds could no longer thrive here. But they propagate by root; they spread. [...] The motionless trees are *migrating*–immortal stands of aspen retreating before the latest two-mile-thick glaciers, then following them back north again. (167, original emphasis)

Like the witches' prophecy to Macbeth, which comes true when Macduff's army disguises itself with branches, the echoing of migration in Patricia's scientific terminology points to the tension between literal and figurative uses of language and the way in which dramatic irony can modify the perception of this relation. In the sections devoted to Ray and Dorothy, his profession as a "junior intellectual property lawyer" and her obsession with having a child are treated ironically through the couple's growing involvement with trees. Ray discovers Christopher Stone's influential work on the legal status of trees ("His entire career until this moment – protecting the property of those with a right to grow – begins to seem like one long war crime, like something he'll be imprisoned for,

come the revolution", 313).[20] Dorothy, angered by Ray's suggestion that they adopt a child ("Wouldn't be ours", 208) suggests they get "some vegetable we can stick out in the yard and forget about" (209). Ray's loss of agency through a stroke gives the neglected trees an opportunity to assert themselves when the identification of trees becomes the couple's main activity; the *Easy Tree ID*'s instructions – "*If you live east of the Rocky Mountains, go to entry 1*" (524) – transforms the figurative "go" of the instructions into Dorothy's countless journeys to identify the trees in their yard: "She makes her way across the yard to the tree" (526). As Dorothy reads to him about the history of the cutting of trees in America, Ray is able to imagine the "revolution" he feared as "The Pine Tree Riot" (527). Ray and Dorothy later facilitate the agency of nature by refusing to mow their lawn:

> The man who never once failed to feed a parking meter has launched her on a made-to-order revolution – the Brinkman Woodlands Restoration Project. Wildness advances on all sides of the house. The grass is foot-high, clumped, weedy, seeding, and thick with native volunteers. […] A few more years and their stand of woods will half reprise whatever came before the invading subdivision. (584)

The story of Ray and Dorothy is emblematic of Powers's strategy for fleshing out science in ways that transform Patricia Westerford's knowledge of trees into a network of actions and events. Ray's loss of agency in the professional sense of the term leads him to question the idea of "owning". In the same way, the complex issue of the genetic makeup of trees undercuts Dorothy's insistence on having her "own" child.

Beyond Human Agency: Action and Interaction in *The Overstory*

12. Powers persistently explores the ways in which language, in its growth and change through use, generates an ironic discourse of its own that undercuts the agency of speakers. Garrett Stewart has convincingly demonstrated how Powers uses the text's "own linguistic grid" as a way to "transliterate [...] the forest's cellulose signaling" (164). He emphasizes the idea that "alphabetic language may often slip out from under strict authorial coherence into a seemingly independent agency of its own […]" (164). His examination of auditory echoes ("the chiming byways of echology", 165) focuses on the idea of "raising the stakes of attention" in order to encourage "*deep reading*" (166, emphasis in original). However, "the flexible way forward" (166) that Stewart sees

20 The reference is to Christopher Stone's *Should Trees Have Standing? – Law Morality and the Environment* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010) a book which was critical in establishing a legal basis for the defense of nature and nonhuman entities.

in Powers's "echology" is only one of the ways in which the author mobilizes language in order to reposition agency at all levels of the novel. In its articulation of speech and event, the novel creates a context in which language is shaped by its use; the endless friction generated by utterance, by the use of words in context, modifies the perception of agency beyond the level of language itself. Along with intertextuality and the theme of metamorphosis, wordplay and contextual ambiguity subvert the presumed agency exercised through speaking, allowing other visions of action to emerge.[21]

13. The theme of metamorphosis, which runs throughout the novel, provides a particularly fertile ground for the exploration of language and its relation to literal and figurative transformation. Patricia's father gives her "a bowdlerized translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*" on her fourteenth birthday: "She loves best the stories where people change into trees" (147). The language used by both the narrator and the characters, involving the use of common verbs like "change" and "make", creates echoes of this explicit reference, enhancing its thematic impact and raising the question of the agency involved. In their discussion of the metaphorical extensions of prototypical causation, Lakoff and Johnson point out the relation between "making" as direct physical manipulation and metaphors involving change (72-75). The frequent use of the verb "make" in the novel underlines the close connection between the lives of the characters and the metaphorical extensions of the verb. The narrator makes this link explicit in his reference to Adam's tree, the maple:

> How he made himself into a maple – familiar, frank, easy to identify, always ready to bleed sugar [...] He loved that tree, its simplicity. Then people made him into something else. (77)

When he becomes involved with the people protesting the cutting of trees, Adam identifies himself by the name of the tree: "'I'm Maple'" (417). The narrator's use of this name further on – "Adam – Maple – agrees" (422) – constitutes an ironic commentary on such attempts at self-transformation, an irony that foreshadows Adam's subsequent betrayal of the group. The frequent occurrence of verbs such as "make" and "turn into" highlights the close connection between language and human interaction. At the same time, these verbs often generate irony by pointing to the loss of agency through circumstance or manipulation by other people.

14. The numerous references to products made out of wood, many of them integrated into the characters' lives as completely and unconsciously as the verbs that signal transformation, generate

21 In a recent interview with Jean-Yves Pellegrin, Richard Powers, in answer to a question about how his writing "navigate[s] the shifting line between insight and delusion which is perhaps the hallmark of metaphor", answered by evoking the idea that "the way we interpret all experience and not just verbal transactions is always situational, always contextual[...]" (2023, 8).

another discourse about the loss of agency. Ray and Dorothy, looking for a place to put their books "solve the problem with more furniture. A pair of cherry cases […] A large walnut unit in the front room […] Maple in the guest room" (261). Neelay Mehta's office on Page Mill Road[22] is all "redwood and glass" (281). The owner of the Four Arts Gallery whom Mimi consults for an appraisal of her father's scroll "seats her at a conference table made of outlawed mahogany" (457). The ambiguities generated by syntax and the figurative use of words emphasize the status of "mindless wood" (492) as a resource to be exploited. Dorothy's lover, who makes violins, tells her he is "just now beginning to understand how wood works" (465). In the confrontation between the protesters and the men cutting trees, the "timber plan" being contested is a plan *about*, not *by* trees (304). In the confrontation between the loggers and the protesters, the reduction of the two sides to metonymic designations ("Hard hats block the road ahead of them", "the megaphone woman", 305) further complicates the relation between agents and action. The machines, "the metal beasts" doing most of the work, also dehumanize the context by standing in for the people responsible for cutting the trees:

> Down through the clearing, there's a feller buncher, snatching batches of small trunks, delimbing them, and bucking the logs to fixed lengths, doing in a day what a team of human cutters would need a week to get through. There's a self-loading forwarder trailer, stacking the cut longs into itself. (304)

In the insistent linking of human and material transformation, the loss of agency affecting wood as the source of objects is extended to human beings. The narrator's use of an ambiguous vocabulary, applicable to both humans and objects, appears to question the capacity of language itself to mirror meaningful action. It would be tempting to consider the search for a precise language, either poetic or scientific, as an antidote and counterpoint to this ambiguity. The numerous passages evoking the names of trees raise the very process of naming to the status of poetry in a gesture that echoes Whitman's lists.[23]

15. However, the conferring of names, whether vernacular or scientific, does not in itself give trees an active role. Their potential agency emerges rather in the "interdependent, reciprocal processes" that Powers evokes as underlying the formation of "real character", but that are also

22 This reference to a real road in Palo Alto, named after a saw mill, suggests a cartography of trees and wood that contributes to the "understory" of the novel. Similarly, references are made to roads named Cedar and Birch.

23 Olivia and Nick's naming of the trees, which the narrator suggests is a childish game, is a pertinent example. "They christen themselves with forest names that night, in the soft drizzle of the redwoods, on a blanket of needles. [...] Why shouldn't they take new names for this new work? Trees go by different labels. There's Texas and Spanish and false buckeye and Monillo, all for the same plant. There's buttonwood, aka plane tree, aka sycamore: like a man with a drawer full of false passports. In one place there's *lime*, in another *linden*, *Tilia* at large, but *basswood* when turned into lumber or honey. Twenty-eight names for longleaf pine alone" (270).

applicable to the nonhuman elements that he brings into play (2023, 7). In the moments in which events or verbal exchanges explore the "meaningful conversations", the "intense interactions" that Powers sees as crucial to Bruno Latour's vision of "composition", the distinction between human and nonhuman agency is called into question in productive ways.[24] In discussing the distinction between writing and speaking, Powers evokes "the precarious nature of just talking" (2023, 11). Yet he uses this "necessarily improvisatory" (11) aspect of speech in his novel as a way of creating a middle ground on which the agency of trees can take shape through human interaction and the search for an appropriate language. When Patricia is called as an expert witness in a hearing involving an injunction to halt logging on federal land, the dialogue between her and the judge obliges them to search for a shared vocabulary as the ground for reaching a decision. The judge is challenged to accept her metaphors: "Beetles are farming the log?" to which she answers, emboldened by his willingness to test the hypothesis, "They farm. Without subsidies. Unless you count the log" (353). When the judge asks whether "trees summon animals and *make* them do things" (354, my emphasis), the power of analogy as manipulation once again becomes apparent in the use of the verb "make". However, Patricia, rather than trying to push her advantage, sticks to the scientific facts, evoking the activity of the trees in "shaping each other, breeding birds, sinking carbon, purifying water, filtering poisons from the ground, stabilizing the microclimate" (354-355). The judge then asks whether "old forests … know things that plantations don't" (356). The verb "know" signals a form of compromise between an anthropomorphic explanation and a recognition of what Patricia's knowledge brings to the conversation. Patricia, in spite of her reluctance to speak in public, wins the argument: "The judge places a stay on the contested cut. He also issues an injunction on all new timber sales of public land in western Oregon until the impact of clear-cuts on endangered species is assessed" (357). In conversations of this type, it is not analogy or metaphor that confers agency on trees, but the process involved in searching for a language to express the interdependence of the human and the nonhuman. In the moment when trees become "matters of interest" subject to discussion rather than "matters of fact", to use Latour's terminology, dialogue opens a theoretical space in which the agency of trees can be envisioned and action on their behalf imagined.

24 Bruno Latour uses the word "composition" to designate the process of bringing together the human and the non-human in associations not based on the "object-subject opposition" (2004, 76): "As soon as we allow them [nonhumans] to enter the collective in the form of new entities with uncertain boundaries, entities that hesitate, quake and induce perplexity, it is not hard to see that we can grant them the designation of actors. And if we take the term 'association' literally, there is no reason, either, not to grant them the designation of social actors" (2004, 76). He points out that it has traditionally been the fear of seeing humans "*reduced* to things" and the corollary fear of seeing "the prejudices of social actors *preclude* access to things" that has made these associations difficult to imagine. (2004, 76, original emphasis).

16. Throughout the novel, agency proves to be inextricably linked to the contexts in which people interact with each other and with their environment. The cumulative effect of these interactions produces a shift in the perception of agency itself, suggesting ways in which it can be seen as the result of people's encounter with trees and not simply a metaphor reflecting human activity. In the story of Patricia Westerford, the exploration of her social interactions transforms her theory about trees as "social creatures" into a vehicle for the exploration of nonhuman agency. The controversy surrounding her article about the collective immune system of trees reflects the situation described by Latour in which "the irruption of scientific controversies on the public stage" reflects the disappearance of "the distinction between what is internal to scientific disciplines and what is external" (2004, 63). In becoming what Latour would call a "spokesperson" for trees and forests, she transforms trees into "matters of concern" rather than "matters of fact" lying beyond the reach of discussion.[25] The reference to the return of her "old childhood speech defect" (160) emphasizes the way in which her social difficulties express the conflicting forces involved in the scientific debate. In this perspective, her relationship with Dennis Ward, the research station manager, "the gentle slow-moving man", becomes a reflection of her growing capacity to speak for the agency of trees: "In his spare motions and abundant silence, he blurs the line between those nearly identical molecules, chlorophyll and hemoglobin" (180).

17. In the stories of the other characters, the very processes activated by their experiences become vectors for expressing the potential agency of trees. This can be seen in the story of Neelay Mehta and the virtual world he constructs through *Mastery*, a narrative which pits man against nature in ways that reflect all of the Midas myths related to human hubris. The most important aspect of his story is not the end result, his realization that endless simulation is "just a stagnant pyramiding scheme. Endless, pointless prosperity" (512), but the actions that the encounter with trees sparks in Mehta. The initial impetus for the creation of the game comes from his discovery of the trees in Stanford's inner court:

> He can't decide which is more incredible: the tree, or the fact that he's never noticed it. Shapes flicker on the edge of his vision. […] Trees like freak experiments beckon from out of eight large planters, each one a miniature starship ark on its way to some other system. [...] He touches their bark and feels, just beneath their skins, the teeming assemblies of cells, like whole planetary civilizations, pulse and hum. (137-138)

25 "In short, with the notion of spokesperson, we are designating not the transparency of the speech in question, but the *entire gamut* running from complete doubt (I may be a spokesperson, but I am speaking in my own name and not in that of those I represent) to total confidence (when I speak, it is really those I represent who speak through my mouth" (Latour 2004, 64, original emphasis).

In a pursuit of digital simulation as a way of "get[ting] to the place he has just seen" (139), Neelay acquires greater and greater financial, digital and organizational control. However, the desire to see the trees again propels Neelay to return to the Stanford quad, a first step in his growing awareness of nature. Getting his crippled body out of bed, into the wheelchair and out to the van is a challenge vividly described in terms that reflect both video games and the action of trees:

> Several dozen more commands in this algorithm of liberty, and he parks the van, exits, and rolls into the Stanford inner quad. He spins 360, surveying, surrounded again by those otherworldly lifeforms the way he was six years earlier. All those creatures from another galaxy, far, far, away: dove tree, jacaranda, desert spoon […]. (245)

The trees are described in a way that blends Neelay's imagination with the natural activity of the trees, making them agents in his transformation:

> The extraterrestrial beings wave their bizarre branches. The collective tapping in the air nags at him. Memory rises inside, like sap. And now it's as if the blowing, bending branches point him outward, behind the quad, out to Escondido, then down Panama Street, past Roble… (244)

In addition to the purely poetic effects (the alliteration, the action verbs), the entire passage gives one form of activity (Neelay's physical struggle) the potential to become a vehicle for other forms of action and activity, suggesting inversely the way in which his growing awareness of the agency of nature affects Neelay's attitudes toward the game he has created. Passages of this type suggest that creating a narrative perception of the agency of trees requires more than the simple use of figurative language. Metaphor must be integrated into the events through which the characters themselves reveal their potential for agency.[26]

18. Richard Powers has recognized that "in order to fully feel the whole range of potential meaning that lies beyond the human, we do have to keep from saddling it with human analogy" (2023, 8). He thus concedes that while he is tempted to "titillate those natural predispositions" which include a penchant for analogy, he tries to balance them with a more complex view. *The Overstory* is an ambitious novel which illustrates the complexity of Powers's vision of "the potential meaning" to which he refers. The idea of nonhuman agency makes it possible to understand the way in which the very intricacy of Powers's fictional construction attempts to open a

26 Powers expresses this idea very clearly in his interview with Jean-Yves Pellegrin. He talks about the way Latour's view of distributed agency challenges people's intuitive belief "that they have integrity, that they are a kind of impermeable actor, a unified and intact thing that is out there in the world, and independent of the millions of prosthetics that actually compose their person. It was Latour's great insight to say that all those things that you have externalized are actually part of what you think is your own agency" (2023, 6-7). In the above passage concerning Neelay, the trees become part of his agency. His own reliance on prosthetics as a cripple makes this connection all the more obvious.

space for nonhuman agency without simply projecting human agency onto nature through metaphor. The agency of trees cannot be grasped directly, although it can be glimpsed in the dense undergrowth of the cultural past, to which many references are made in the novel. But to be seen as an active force, it must be perceived through theories like those of Bruno Latour that provide an inclusive view of agency beyond the purely human frame. By exploring the gap between language and action, Powers reveals the way in which our unconscious use, or rather misuse of words, undermines human agency. At the same time the irony generated by the friction between language and events opens a space in which trees, and nature in general, can be seen as active participants. Interestingly, *The Overstory* offers an answer to the dilemma referred to by the French writer Alexis Jenni in a public meeting organized by Francis Hallé. Jenni pointed out that the novel as a form relies on verbs to carry the action; he found it difficult to write a novel about trees because they don't move.[27] Richard Powers has found, precisely, a way of making verbs express the action of trees without transforming their agency into a mere metaphor for human action.

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27 These remarks were made during a conference entitled "Forêt primaire, un défi pour l'Europe" organized by the Association Francis Hallé at the Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie in Paris on September 30, 2023. Jenni is the author of a book blending scientific knowledge about trees with cultural and literary reflections entitled *Parmi les arbres: essai de vie commune*.

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