Polysèmes

Revue d'études intertextuelles et intermédiaires

25 | 2021

Lieux revisités

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/polysemes/8565>

DOI: 10.4000/polysemes.8565

ISSN: 2496-4212

Publisher

SAIT

Electronic reference

Monica Manolescu, ““Arboretum America” in Richard Powers’s *The Overstory*”, *Polysèmes* [Online], 25 | 2021, Online since 30 June 2021, connection on 11 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/polysemes/8565> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/polysemes.8565>

This text was automatically generated on 11 July 2021.

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Monica Manolescu

- 1 Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018) offers a re-centering of human history and literature around trees and forests as highly relevant, even unsurpassable, biotic and semiotic systems. Trees become an alternative measure of all things in an attempt to question anthropocentrism and to represent humans and trees growing together in a joint narrative in which the emphasis is displaced from the former towards the latter. Divided into four parts entitled "Roots", "Trunk", "Crown" and "Seeds", the novel explicitly follows an organic model that functions as an all-encompassing metanarrative (the "overstory" spelled out in the title). While this model suggests connectiveness, circulation, dissemination and growth, it also entails a reframing of temporality and history, and ultimately a reassessment of literature in general and of the novel as a genre in particular.¹ *The Overstory* encodes a reflection on the thematic and formal potential of literature activated by a tree-based approach. This article seeks to elucidate the ways in which Powers's engagement with trees and forests invites a reconsideration of American geography, history and literature in general. The novel builds on Transcendentalism, nature writing and environmentalist philosophies, reworking their most radical strands in its ambition to question the place of the human and to embrace a bold version of tree-inspired ethics and imagination. Margaret Atwood compared Powers to Melville in terms of literary scope and vision (Atwood 2006). *The Overstory* appears to grant non-human creatures (trees) the same central role and encyclopedic treatment that *Moby-Dick* granted whales in 19th-century American literature. However, Powers's novel goes much further in wrenching non-human creatures from subordination to human goals and fantasy, and in promoting trees to the "active voice" that Val Plumwood argued in favor of, reflecting on how agency, point of view and voice can be granted to trees. Early in the novel, the character of Nicholas Hoel and his ancestor who planted the chestnut tree that dominates the first section come to the realization that art, just like trees, "makes you

think different about things" (19, 20). This different thinking animates the perspective on history, geography and the genre of the novel elaborated by *The Overstory*.

Trees and forests: stories, history and geography

- 2 *The Overstory* adopts a connective and relational model of character construction according to which individual characters exist and grow primarily through their relation to trees, although this interdependence is not manifest from the very beginning. After reading the first sections, this principle of correlation becomes predictable. Nicholas Hoel, Mimi Ma, Adam Appich, Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly, Douglas Pavlicek, Neelay Mehta, Patricia Westerford and Olivia Vandergriff all derive substantial meaning from trees and their lives become inextricably bound to them. Certain trees in the novel carry names and loom large as characters in themselves (Mimas, the sequoia tree, for instance). Conversely, certain human characters acquire tree names. All the characters in *The Overstory* converge in their passion for trees, resulting in shared environmental commitment and action of various kinds, from scientific study to forceful intervention.² For all of the characters, trees represent the apex of natural life forms and the consummation of their own lives, giving meaning to all other concerns. In "Trunk", the narrative moves from one character to another, crisscrossing the territory of the United States. While the biographic sections devoted to the various characters in "Roots" borrow from the tradition of literary realism, it would be misleading to read them exclusively through the lens of realism. The novel embraces a hybrid mode that blends life narratives with surges of poetic or aphoristic language that translate the language of trees or that describe ecstatic and life-changing experiences granted to certain characters in their communication with trees (Olivia Vandergriff in particular). Such characters and situations, placed on the borderline between the visible and the invisible, occupy a spiritual, mystical or empathetic space of discourse and action.
- 3 Parallelisms between man and tree are not new in literature. In a famous scene from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, prince Andrei Bolkonsky identifies with an old oak tree whose revival in spring heralds a new beginning for the character, rejuvenated by his love for Natasha Rostov (chap. 1, part III). Prince Bolkonsky considers the tree as a symbolic marker that illustrates his own changing state of mind and resilience. But *The Overstory* transforms the parallelism into biotic kinship. The novel seeks to take trees to another literary level, far from mere anthropomorphic projection and symbolic annexation. In Powers, it seems that Tolstoy's oak tree mutates into a pivotal presence and force, more durable and more massive than single human individuals and humanity as a whole. It can be argued that Powers revisiting Tolstoy's oak tree cannot escape anthropomorphic appropriation given the human source and shaping of language and literature, but Powers attempts to place this archetypal oak tree within a distinct philosophical, imaginative and artistic horizon, which questions the values inherited from previous representations. The very notions of character and story are reinterpreted to include trees and to shift the focus away from humans or towards a fusion of trees and human characters. The human content and determinism of stories is questioned. By taking recurrent pictures of a chestnut tree, Hoel leaves out human stories to focus on an unusual subject as far as stories go: "everything a human being might call the story happens outside his photos' frame" (16). The growth of the tree immortalized in

hundreds of photographs tells a different story, which requires a new set of narrative and reading skills.

- 4 In *The Overstory*, the bond between humans and trees is asserted first of all through an epigraph taken from Emerson's "Nature" that posits an "occult relation between man and vegetable" and also in the opening pages where Thoreau features briefly as a character who "feels" the chestnut tree to be a "blood relation" (5). This model of parenthood suggests that man and tree belong to a common realm and the boundaries between them are blurred. A scientific explanation is provided for the "occult relation". As Patricia Westerford (the central dendrologist of the novel) argues in her book *The Secret Forest*, "You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. A billion and a half years ago, the two of you parted ways. But even now, after an immense journey in separate directions, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes" (268). As Buell explains in an analysis of Thoreau's "Nature", this scientific explanation is already implicit in Emerson's "occult relation between man and vegetable", which translated Darwin's evolutionary hypothesis. Emerson sought to stress it even further in the second edition of "Nature" (1849) by removing the initial epigraph from Plotinus that granted nature no capacity for knowledge and replacing it with an epigraph in which the worm aspired to become man (Buell 1995, 188-189). In *The Overstory*, this family relation between men and trees is put forth in its literal valence by activist discourse, where deforestation and logging are compared to family massacres and cannibalism: "Let's grind up your grandfather for dinner, while he still has some meat on him" (288).³ The equivalence between human and tree becomes more abstract and particularly poignant in the case of Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly who, unable to have children, come to believe (or to realize) that a chestnut tree they planted is their daughter (444, 459-460). In Powers's *Galatea 2.2* (1995), the protagonist's refusal to have children and his declaration that his books are his children are decried as "idiocy" by another character (245), functioning as additional arguments in Joseph Dewey's analysis of the protagonist's isolation, misanthropy and refusal to engage (Dewey 94). In *The Overstory*, a different set of environmental values sheds new light on child-bearing and replaces books with trees.
- 5 Above the level of individual characters, *The Overstory* reframes the American nation and its history, and more largely human history, around trees. Thus, the chestnut in the section devoted to Nicholas Hoel is planted in the 19th century by a Norwegian immigrant who marries an Irish immigrant to found a farm and family in Iowa. Whole periods in American history (the Civil War, the homesteading movement, the roaring twenties, the Great Depression, the Pacific War etc.) are condensed in a few pages as members of the Hoel family live through these events, with trees providing the counterpoint of a distinct temporality: "Three-quarters of a century dances by in a five-second flip" (17). The "flip" resurfaces to become the unit of tree time as it correlates to human temporality in an imbalanced way (19). Two metaphors in particular suggest the quick pace, ephemerality and configuration of human time in relation to tree time: the zoopraxiscope and the concentric rings. The visual effect of these moving images is similar to the one provided by the zoopraxiscope, an optical device mentioned early on (11). Trees also materialize time and world history in their concentric rings, as Nicholas Hoel realizes after spending a night lying down on the stump of Mimas: "his head on a wadded jacket near the ring laid down the year Charlemagne died. Somewhere underneath his coccyx, Columbus" (358).

- 6 In the Hoel section, American geography is organized concentrically around the Hoel chestnut tree. Six chestnuts travel from Brooklyn to "the treeless prairie" of Iowa (6), where only one survives and grows majestically, becoming a revered visual and spatial landmark, outliving the Hoels. The chestnut blight that arrives from Asia and affects American chestnuts at the beginning of the 20th century sends ripples across the country, but leaves the Hoel chestnut standing due to its isolated position, propelling it to the status of celebrated survivor and monument. Although the focus in this first section is on American geography and history with the Hoel chestnut at their center, international affairs, foreign policy and external influences are woven into the fabric of national narratives. This interweaving of the national and the global becomes particularly salient in the Mimi Ma section, where the character's father, Ma Sih Hsuin (renamed Winston Ma in the USA), travels from China to the Carnegie Institute of Technology, carrying in his suitcase generations of family profit materialized in Buddhist scrolls inscribed with enlightened figures and three jade rings carved with mulberry trees. These heirlooms and their transferal from China to the US stand at the intersection of several religious traditions: "A Moslem from the land of Confucius, going to the Christian stronghold of Pittsburgh with a handful of priceless Buddhist paintings" (28). The mulberry tree connects China and America, both as a symbol of illumination and an actual tree growing in the Ma family garden in Wheaton, Illinois. The narrator repeatedly insists on the fact that trees are older than religions and religious principles, the mulberry tree for instance, "a single tree with two sexes, older than the separation of yin and yang" (30). The temporality of trees is confronted not only to the time span of individual lives, but also to the history of religions, surpassing them both.
- 7 Douglas Pavlicek's section also operates an enlargement of the geographical frame and projects a spatial itinerary literally marked by the significant trees in the character's life. Douglas moves from Palo Alto to Asia (where, on a mission in Cambodia, he is saved by a banyan tree as he is parachuted from a plane) and then back to the United States, where he becomes involved in environmental action. The spatial trajectories of the characters appear retrospectively to be drawn from one tree landmark to another, or dictated in advance by some secret communication with trees. The latter is true of Olivia Vandergriff, who embarks on a journey mapped out progressively by her intuitive understanding of what seems to be a message sent out to her specifically by trees (3). Olivia's road trip conjured by these signals turns out to be following the itinerary of Johnny Appleseed.⁴ The road trip takes her by the Hoel chestnut tree, where Nicholas Hoel joins her for the rest of the way to California, in defense of sequoias.
- 8 These trips from one tree to another culminate in the journey entirely mapped out in a tree during the tree-sit in Mimas, the sequoia tree. This tree-sit was inspired by the experience of the environmental activist Julia Butterfly Hill who spent 738 days in a California redwood tree between 1997 and 1999. Mimas appears as a cosmos in itself, a tree that amounts to an entire world and calls forth religious comparisons:

Mimas: wider across than his great-great-grandfather's old farm-house. Here, as sundown blankets them, the feel is primeval, darshan, a face-to-face 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. The 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. (260)

An archetypal tree promoted to the status of *axis mundi*, Mimas is a condensation of superlatives, but without fossilizing effects. Nick perceives it as a living creature and a living monument that deserves protection and radical action: "the largest, strongest, widest, oldest, surest, sanest living thing he has ever seen" (262). Olivia Vandergriff confers a religious aura to Mimas. She acts like a "prophetess" (326), translator of its secret language and worshiper of its greatness. The tree's ample spatial deployment makes it fit for long-term living despite the height, the wind and the challenges it poses to humans used to comfort. In Mimas, tree-sitters have built a seven-by-nine-foot platform called the Grand Ballroom (262), another platform that serves as pantry, kitchen and den, and have supplied even a library. Mimas serves as an improvised dwelling place shaped and furnished by daring tree-sitters, but its potential for wonder and defamiliarization stands out primarily through the new world metaphor it invites. In Mimas, Nick and Olivia are "high-wire surveyors of newfound land" (264). The tree is explored and charted, revealing "a small lake" or "a six-foot hemlock, growing in a mat of soil this deep!" (267). The two characters "head off in different directions. No point in trying to spot each other" (266). This vegetal "new world" is exposed to the colonialist dangers that all "new" worlds (in fact "new" only to the colonial settlers) have faced, in the sense that Mimas is treated as a resource and will end up being cut down by lumber companies. The tree-sit shows Mimas standing at the intersection of several conflicting literal and symbolic meanings, both a resource to be consumed and an archetypal center of the universe, both a source of revenue and an awe-inspiring creature. Two opposed forces clash around Mimas: capitalism and environmental activism confront their world views and methods. However, the loggers appear as conflicted human beings, putting forth arguments about the need to feed their children and their reliance on the jobs provided by the wood economy (288). They become touching when they show up worried for the tree-sitters after a spell of windy weather (296). The sequoia reveals its distinct values for distinct groups of people: economic and biotic, consumerist and visionary. Powers has already explored the nefarious impact of capitalist industries on individual lives and whole communities in *Gain* (1998), which traces the evolution of a soap company from the use of natural resources in the 19th century to entirely synthetic products with no connection to organic nature at the end of the 20th century.⁵ In *The Overstory*, the lumber industry during the Pacific Northwest timber wars comes center stage and its negative influence affects people and trees alike.

American landscapes and nature discourses

- 9 Powers's American forests coalesce into landscapes marked by representations and discourses inherited from the spatial imagination of the 19th century, environmental literature and scientific publications, woven together. In his interviews, Powers refers to the fact that he read "over 120 books" about trees while researching *The Overstory* (interview with Alex Preston in *The Guardian*) and lists some of them, many of which deal with American trees and forest heritage.⁶ This bibliography on trees and forests is blended with a large array of references to many disciplines and authors, which is typical of Powers's encyclopedic writing. In what follows, I will

examine some of the ways in which the novel revisits, prolongs and sometimes displaces the American landscape tradition, the most radical ideas in Transcendentalism (Thoreau in particular) and the assumptions of a classical example of nature writing (Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*).

- 10 Nick Hoel's section ends with a visit to an "American landscapes" exhibition at the Joslyn Museum during which his family dies at home due to a stove malfunction. At the exhibition, Nick is particularly impressed with "the Sheelers" (22). Charles Sheeler's famous *American Landscape* (1930) is an ode to industrial modernism and an embrace of precision, but also a response to the American landscape tradition of the 19th century. Thomas Cole, Thomas Moran, Frederic Edwin Church and Albert Bierstadt, using different approaches and painting landscapes in different parts of the Americas, had forged grand narratives of American nature that sought to highlight its sublimity and, in some cases, to monumentalize it more or less nostalgically, just as the first national parks were created and the rest of the non-sanctuarized West was undergoing severe industrial and commercial exploitation.⁷ Sheeler's landscapes are exclusively industrial, with culture having "colonized all the space in the American imagination that nature once claimed" (Hughes 386). Nick's acknowledgement of Sheeler pre-dates his political commitment to trees triggered by his encounter with Olivia Vandergriff.
- 11 We can trace certain elements in *The Overstory* back to Thomas Cole's paintings, in a rewriting of the opposition between the permanence of nature and the impermanence of human endeavors put forth in Cole's series *The Course of Empire* (1833-1836). In these five paintings, one landmark remains unchanged despite its evolving surroundings: the mountain always visible in the background. *The Savage State*, *The Arcadian State*, *The Consummation of Empire*, *Destruction* and *Desolation* are all structured around the unchanging mountain. Just as the generic community and dwelling grow into an empire and then decline into war and nothingness, the mountain flaunts its tranquil indestructibility. In Powers's novel, the tree stands for an enduring generic landmark in comparison to human history, with three significant differences. First of all, in *The Overstory* trees are not indestructible, on the contrary. The novel insists on the fact that they are longer lasting than humans, sometimes impressively so, Mimas being a case in point. Contrary to mountains, which are more difficult to destroy or remove by humans (but far from impossible!)⁸, trees are an easy prey to various commercial and industrial forces, which treat them exclusively as resources. The destruction of whole forests and the decline of tree diversity is a leitmotif of the book, with visible effects on the landscape. But until its destruction, Mimas has the same symbolic status as Cole's mountain. This is also true of the Hoel chestnut tree. Secondly, one of the main arguments of *The Overstory* suggests that trees do not occupy a distinct regime from humans. The nature-culture opposition is deconstructed to suggest the kinship between trees and humans, as already pointed out. Thirdly, the suggestion of rebirth in Cole's final painting of the cycle, *Desolation*, where a bird has made its nest atop a column amid a ruinous landscape, becomes ambivalent in *The Overstory*, which spells out impending ecological disaster with possibly no regeneration.
- 12 Powers's celebration of the primeval forests of the United States recalls passages from Thomas Cole's "Essay on American Scenery" (1836) which discuss "Forests" in the section on "Elements of the American Scenery". Cole promotes the distinctive features of American forests: their "unrivalled" diversity and their "primitive" character, which distinguishes them from European forests. Mimas is described as "a tree older than

America" (325) and "half as old as Christianity" (327). Powers does not idealize nature as transcendent and untouchable, but rather argues in favor of a stronger articulation between humans and trees, in favor of an elucidation of our commonality.

- 13 The 19th-century awareness of a changing landscape in the American West is echoed in *The Overstory* by the similar realization of a rapidly evolving landscape due to deforestation, technological progress and the passage of time. The landscape around the Hoel farm in western Iowa is transformed by the vagaries of the Depression (when the farm loses two hundred acres), the widespread use of agricultural machinery and the effects of monocropping. Douglas Pavlicek's first encounter with cut down forests camouflaged from the highway by a thin curtain of remaining trees suggests medical connotations of illness and surgical intervention, "the shaved flank of a sick beast being readied for surgery" (79). The cutting down of Mimas leaves behind a "denuded ridge" (327) suggesting nakedness, vulnerability and loss. However, we are repeatedly confronted with the future promise of the forest reclaiming ground (even urban ground) in its unstoppable growth: "Jungle will get Bangkok before too long. L.A., one day" (79). These pronouncements carry ominous overtones for humans: the jungle could only get Bangkok and L.A. at the expense of human primacy. But the forest would still live on, with or without the latter. Patricia Westerford's final talk features slides showing the forests of Brazil, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Pacific Northwest "melting away" (451). These proleptic moments of landscape metamorphosis are accompanied by a hallucinatory episode in which Adam Appich has a nocturnal vision of pre-colonial Manhattan from his apartment window. Confined at home with an electronic bracelet, he sees Mannahatta momentarily replace 21st-century Manhattan, with trees and animals populating the landscape: "Wilderness rushes down lower Broadway, the island as it was a thousand years back or a thousand years on" (463). The instability of time (past or future?) suggests a combined resurgence and prophecy, a return and a projection. This Manhattan of the past and future is a forested island, "a forest as dense, terrifying, and inescapable as childhood. Arboretum America" (463).⁹ This vision serves as an ethical turning point (or simply reflects a decision already taken unconsciously) for the character, who chooses to go to prison rather than cut a deal, putting the welfare of other people and species before that of his family.
- 14 Nick ultimately embraces a Land Art approach, on which the novel ends. In an unidentified forest up north, he sets out to build his "largest and longest-lasting sculpture [...], until time and living creatures come to transform it" (485). This sculpture consists in the word "STILL", a huge word that is "greening" and can be photographed from outer space (501-502), made of fallen trunks and branches. An ambivalent word, "still" suggests both stillness and a continued present temporality, an adjective and an adverb, with the apparently immobile "stillness" of dead wood clearly undermined by the dynamic growth of vegetation. A sculpture made of and for trees, Nick's "STILL" revisits the procedures of conceptualism and Land Art, using language and entropy in a remote location to convey the condensed message of life itself, "the word life has been saying from the beginning" (502). Art becomes the translation of organic discourse into human language, materialized in the vegetal medium. Reminiscent of the coiling monuments of Earthworks like Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and dependent on the use of tools and machinery, "STILL" trades Smithson's crystals for green moss and sprouts, displaying an organic version of monumentality: Treeworks instead of Earthworks.

- 15 Powers is reworking not only 19th- and 20th-century American landscapes and site-specific art, but also 19th-century Transcendentalist discourses. As already mentioned, the first of the novel's three epigraphs is taken from Emerson's "Nature" (from chapter 1 in the essay, entitled "Nature"):

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right. (n. p.)

The "occult relationship" between man and tree¹⁰ (whose transposition in *The Overstory* has already been discussed above) suggests a mysterious connection that dispels the possibility of human solitude and invites mutual recognition. Powers takes hold of this specific strand of Emerson's reflection and turns it into a foundation for his novel. But the spiritual framework of "Nature" is fundamentally at odds with *The Overstory*, notably Emerson's belief in the creation of nature for man's spiritual benefit and in the status of nature as "present expositor of the divine mind" (Emerson 350). On the other hand, it can be claimed that a large number of Emersonian ideas, imperatives and figures migrate to *The Overstory* in various adapted forms, for instance the injunction to "look at the world with new eyes", the emphasis on poetic language, the figure of the poet as interpreter of nature or the image of the world lying "broken and in heaps" due to the fact that "man is disunited with himself" (Emerson 354).

Thoreau and Whitman also feature in the first ten pages of the novel. It can be argued that Powers builds on Thoreau's most revolutionary ideas about the environment, more specifically on what Dassow Walls calls "Thoreau's most remarkable innovation" in "Resistance to Civil Government". In an analysis of the most far-reaching implications of the latter, she explains that:

"Resistance" means not just self-defense, defense of one's fellow citizens, or even of one's own nation, but defense of all those lives entangled with our own: slaves, upon whose labor even "free" Massachusetts depended economically; Mexicans, the declared enemies of the State; and Indians, the declared enemies of civilization itself. But Thoreau was not finished even here. Life at Walden Pond helped him understand how deeply humans are related to nonhumans as well, whether animals used for labor or food, trees used for lumber, wild fishes destroyed by dams, or whole ecosystems, forests and river meadows. In the same weeks he was finishing "Resistance to Civil Government", Thoreau put the final touches on *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. "Who hears the fishes when they cry?" he asked in its opening pages. "It will not be forgotten by some memory that we were contemporaries". Their lives, thrown into the hydraulic machinery of the Billerica Dam, "armed only with innocence and a just cause", were lost, but "I for one am with thee, and who knows what may avail a crow-bar against that Billerica dam?" Extending one's ethical community to the nonhuman world was, in 1849, novel, shocking, ridiculous. But Thoreau would give the rest of his life to this revolutionary insight. What he worked out in writing "Resistance to Civil Government" became not only the foundation of his political philosophy but also the gateway to his environmental ethics. (Walls, ebook)

- 16 A recent reading of Thoreau by Alda Balthrop-Lewis extends his vision of "society" to include more-than-human beings such as animals and plants.¹¹ Walden is thus interpreted as a multispecies ethical community, a variegated society in its own right (Balthrop-Lewis 40-88). The reference to the crying of fish quoted above suggests sentience and pain attributed to the members of this extended community. Lawrence

Buell had already pointed out Thoreau's sensitivity to violence against nature using quotes from the latter's journals that express regret at having pelted chestnut trees with rocks to make the chestnuts fall and outrage when a neighbor fell his huckleberry trees (Buell 1995, 209). From this perspective, it is no wonder that *The Overstory* singles out Thoreau as an important reference. Still, Powers's novel seems to aim at a displacement of the center of gravity of this larger community towards trees rather than at an inclusion of non-human beings in a community dominated by humans. This shift in emphasis captures the different environmental and literary ethos of *The Overstory* as compared to *Walden*.

- 17 If we examine later landmarks in nature writing, for instance Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), we can identify a series of convergent, but also divergent concerns. In chapter 6, on "Presence", Dillard reflects specifically on trees, starting from a sycamore on the banks of Tinker Creek. She acknowledges the physical proximity of humans and trees, the beauty and resilience of the latter, their long-lasting endurance, coming close to immortality, as is the case with sequoias: "Some trees, like giant sequoias, are, practically speaking, immortal, vulnerable only to another ice age. [...] We are out on a jaunt, picknicking, fattening like puppies for our deaths. Shall I carve a name on this trunk? What if I fell in a forest: Would a tree hear?" (93). Such passages on the different scales of human and tree temporality, and the nature of tree-human relationship are echoed by *The Overstory*. Also, Dillard discusses her awareness of the many creatures that surround her, asserting the existence of a multispecies community:

But under me, directly under the weight of my body on the grass, are other creatures, just as real, for whom also this moment, this tree, is 'it'. Take just the top inch of soil, the world squirming right under my palms. In the top inch of forest soil, biologists found 'an average of 1,356 living creatures present in each square foot, including 856 mites, 265 spring tails, 22 millipedes, 19 adult beetles and various numbers of 12 other forms... Had an estimate also been made of the microscopic population, it might have ranged up to two billion bacteria and many millions of fungi, protozoa and algae – in a mere teaspoonful of soil'. (Dillard 95)

- 18 Dillard's explicit purpose is to become aware of these teeming creatures and thus, in the tradition of Hasidism that she explicitly mentions in this respect, assist God in redeeming creation: "Keeping the subsoil world under trees in mind, in intelligence, is the *least* I can do" (96). This awareness of the species coexisting with humans is central to *The Overstory*. But Powers's goal is not to highlight illumination or redemption as steps in a spiritual narrative of human awakening, but rather to question human primacy and agency through an assertion of the centrality of trees and through a literary practice that gives them pride of place (although human awakening may be achieved in the process). If for Dillard keeping the subsoil in mind in order to assist God in redeeming creation is "the least she can do", it can be argued that for Powers "the least he can do" amounts to showing how trees assist humans in redeeming creation. God is a hypothesis that *The Overstory* does not need, to quote Laplace, although it should be noted that spirituality is very much present in the novel and inextricably bound with trees. The novel highlights the role of trees in supporting whole ecosystems, constituting an essential source of life and a locus of spirituality. From Thoreau's *Walden* to Powers's sequoia forests in California passing through Dillard's Tinker Creek, the variables of environmental thought and the concerns of literature

change to aim, in Powers, at imagining what "nature in the active voice" may sound like (Val Plumwood).

The "grain of trees" and the literary canon

- 19 The novel's focus on trees is not simply a plot device that allows Powers to bring together eight human characters around a similar concern or to revisit the geography and history of "arboretum America" from this particular vantage point. The engagement with trees has far-reaching consequences on their treatment as characters, on the tapping of the experimental vein of literature as far as the translation of the language of trees is concerned and on the reassessment of the literary canon based on the commitment to the non-human realm. *The Overstory* attempts to bring trees closer to a position of active voice, which Plumwood describes as representing "nature as powerful, agentic and creative, making space in our culture for an animating sensibility and vocabulary" (2009). For Plumwood, this regime of the active voice which requires a deconstruction of anthropocentrism converges with certain directions in literature and the arts. She adds that it is a project for which no fixed guidelines exist and which needs continual reinvention. *The Overstory* experiments precisely along these lines.
- 20 The principle of trees as characters is among the most obvious aspects of the novel. As characters, they are discussed in terms of their genetic kinship with humans and their radically different scale of temporality. The Hoel chestnut or Mimas are minutely portrayed at all levels: scientific, sensory, historical, symbolic, through their special significance for human characters whom they fascinate and inspire, but also beyond them. As characters, trees offer experiences and inspire representations. Thoreau appears as an important precursor in this respect through his insistence on Walden Pond which becomes, according to Buell, "a major presence superior to any human being in the text". This emphasis constitutes "an extraordinary event in the premodern American literary canon, matched only by Melville's white whale, whose interest to a much greater extent than Walden Pond hinges on its status as a figment of the quester's imagination" (Buell 1995, 209). In non-fiction, the genre of tree biography already exists, exemplified by David Suzuki and Wayne Grady's *Tree. A Life Story* (2004), which presents itself as "the biography of one tree" as it follows the development of a Douglas fir from "birth" to "death" (these are the titles of the first and last chapters of *Tree*).
- 21 Powers goes beyond the tree-as-character dimension in order to explore the possibilities of granting perspective and voice to trees, but without resorting to tree narrators. We do find a certain number of memorable non-human narrators in world literature. Tolstoy's short story "Kholstomer" (1886) features several chapters narrated from the perspective of a horse. More recently, Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red* (1998) uses various unexpected narrators: a horse, a dog, a corpse, a tree (the latter in the chapter entitled "I am a tree"). These examples are part of a very long list of non-human narrators in fiction, which have recently gained visibility in narratological studies, for instance animal narrators, but also a whole range of object-narrators (Bernaerts et al. 2014; Herman 2018; Jacobs 2020). Powers's novel deploys a different strategy which consists in using instances of direct speech devoid of quotation marks whose origin, we are explicitly told from the very first page, lies in trees:

A woman sits on the ground, leaning against a pine. Its bark presses hard against her back, as hard as life. Its needles scent the air and a force hums in the heart of the wood. Her ear tunes down to the lowest frequencies. The tree is saying things, in words before words.

It says: Sun and water are questions endlessly worth answering.

It says: A good answer must be reinvented many times, from scratch.

It says: Every piece of earth needs a new way to grip it. There are more ways to branch than any cedar pencil will ever find. A thing can travel everywhere, just by holding still.

The woman does exactly that. Signals rain down around her like seeds.

Talk runs far afield tonight. The bends in the alders speak of long-ago disasters. Spikes of pale chinquapin flowers shake down their pollen; soon they will turn into spiny fruits. Poplars repeat the wind's gossip. Persimmons and walnuts set out their bribes and rowans their blood-red clusters. Ancient oaks wave prophecies of future weather. The several hundred kinds of hawthorn laugh at the single name they're forced to share. Laurels insist that even death is nothing to lose sleep over. (3)

- 22 The "lowest frequencies" of arboreal diction are reminiscent of the final, supremely enigmatic, line of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* addressing the reader: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (469). Powers places the "lowest frequencies" at the very beginning of his novel, introducing a literary procedure that simulates the "tuning down" operation (requiring a posture of stillness and an attitude of active listening) and the messages thus intercepted. Metaphors of nature interfere with metaphors of language, resulting in an overlap of seeds and signals, wind and prophecy, shapes and signs. The "things" the tree is saying are aphorisms, apodictic pronouncements that refer to trees and humans alike. The language of trees is pre-verbal, requiring translation into human idioms that are inadequate to discriminate linguistically among the many nuances of botanical categorization.
- 23 Among the listeners and translators of tree messages, Olivia Vandergriff stands out as particularly invested and gifted. After her electroshock, she seems to have developed a particular sensitivity to vegetal language and to obey the injunctions of trees that only she can hear. Thus, her trip to the sequoia forest in California is dictated by rustling leaves, although her destination is not clear until she reaches it: "They want her to stand and leave the auditorium. She will do whatever they ask" (160). Mimas is her interlocutor and a figure of quasi divine authority: "Mimas says he won't let us fall" (267). Olivia is compared to a radio transmitter, but the technological simile has religious overtones: she is "obeying the presences. Like a radio station from another city, their signal wavers between clear and static. She makes herself an instrument of their will" (160). Olivia's ecstatic mode and secret connection to trees is reminiscent of Julia Hill's similar experiences as recounted in *The Legacy of Luna*: "The energy hit me in a wave. Gripped by the spirit of the forest, I dropped to my knees and began to sob. I sank my fingers into the layer of duff, which smelled so sweet and so rich and so full of layers of life, then lay my face down and breathed it in" (Hill, ebook). Spiritual vocabulary permeates Olivia Vandergriff's discourse: trees are beings of light, presences, oracles, "the most wondrous things alive" (171). This angelic vocabulary and the promotion of trees to the status of superior, sentient creatures can be traced back to a variety of influences. They have Swedenborgian overtones, which are activated by the references to Johnny Appleseed. More generally, an animist spirit appears to inhabit nature from the point of view of the main human characters. This leads to a surprising complementarity of scientific and animist discourses about trees in *The Overstory*, to a combination of very precise technical vocabulary and spiritualist considerations.¹² Patricia Westerford explores tree communication from a scientific

perspective in terms of biochemical signals which lead her to conclude that trees are members of a community (126-127). Despite her rigorous scientific approach, her findings are derided by fellow scientists who prevent her from pursuing an academic career. She also experiences ecstatic communication with trees: "Signals flood her muscles, finer than any words. *Not this. Come with. Fear nothing*" (128). Patricia's scientific findings and her intense communication with nature confirm each other, in a synthesis of traditionally independent (if not opposing) discourses.

- 24 In *The Overstory*, tree communication is aural and haptic. It is based on listening on the lowest frequencies, but also on touching the texture of leaves, barks and trunks. Whole stories can be inferred through careful exploration. Powers develops the idea of a grain of trees that seems to apply Barthes's grain of the voice to the textures of the vegetal world:

The grain under his fingers [...] wonders like ridges and ravines on a topo map. [...] He can map them, project their histories into the wood's plane. And still, he's illiterate. [...] If he could read, if he could translate... If he were only a slightly different creature, then he might learn all about how the sun shone and the rain fell and which way the wind blew against his trunk for how hard and long. He might decode the vast projects that the soil organized, the murderous freezes, the suffering and struggle, shortfalls and surpluses, the attacks repelled, the years of luxury, the storms outlived, the sum of all the threats and chances that came from every direction, in every season this tree ever lived. His finger moves across the prison desk, trying to learn this alien script, transcribing it like a monk in a scriptorium. He traces the grain and thinks of all the things this antique, illegible almanac could say, all the things that the remembering wood might tell him. (155-156)

- 25 This passage on the reading and writing of the stories of trees revisits the tropes of the book of nature and medieval scriptoria, but also transforms and extends them in other directions: reading trees is a haptic event that requires a change of habits and the adoption of a new kind of Braille for impaired readers. The script under scrutiny is a mnemonic stratification of the combined action of weather and time, a condensation of events happening in the natural world. Just like the monk in the scriptorium involved in the arduous task of copying manuscripts, the tree reader/writer is animated by religious feeling, by a sense of discipline and the mission of spreading the (arboreal) Word. "Illegible" and "alien", the tree script requires the invention of a new language, of new skills of translation that bridge the gap between natural and human languages. Tree writing or "phytographia", defined by Vieira as plant inscription in literature, combines the early modern concept of *signatura rerum*, Walter Benjamin's idea of the language of things and Jacques Derrida's arche-writing in *Of Grammatology*. Tree writing can only be an experimental endeavor. The whole of *The Overstory* is an example of a phytographic novel, from its larger organic tree model to the minute details of individual words and sound formations, where Garrett Stewart identifies "verbal microplots" of tree language that he interprets as "epiphonies" (phonic ephiphanies) especially in Ray Brinkman's impaired speech (Stewart 174-175).
- 26 At the level of literary history, *The Overstory* argues in favor of reconsidering the literary canon on the basis of the visibility it offers to non-human creatures. Various characters voice concern over the blindness and narrowness of certain classical authors and texts. For instance, Ray Brinkman "almost choked to death from claustrophobia" when reading Jane Austen (210). Reading Shakespeare and other authors during her tree-sit in Mimas, Olivia complains about characters "imprisoned in a shoe box", unable

to get out of themselves (293). She cries for "the blindness, even of fictional beings" (330). Her species is "trapped in blinkered bodies, blind to intelligence all around it—yet chosen by creation to *know*" (282). Doug Pavlicek is reading *Paradise Lost*, *The Portable Nietzsche* and *The Complete Nostradamus* to the horses he is tending, burning page after page as he is reading them (85-86). We can understand the choices of this triad as highly significant, since it involves the fall, the *Übermensch* and prophecy (the prophesied fall of the *Übermensch*). Yesterday's books imagined the figures of today's disasters without always sensing their destructive potential and without preventing disaster from happening.

- 27 Dorothy Cazaly is working her way through *The Hundred Greatest Novels of All Time* that she reads aloud to her husband, Ray Brinkman, after his stroke. Rendered in internal focalization, Ray's thoughts formulate a critique of canonical novels¹³ and of the novel as a genre. Fiction appears to dissatisfy him due to its deployment around human characters: "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" (383). The "failure" of the world is correlated to the narrow human scope of the novel. The key to further experimentation is said to lie in the representation of a larger scale, a larger world, another level of magnitude. Such pronouncements echo Amitav Ghosh's remarks about the fact that most novels leave aside the question of global warming, one of the reasons being the "scalar resistance" of the genre to the vastness of space and time which underlines the phenomenon of global warming (Ghosh 2016, ebook). Ghosh's critique addressed to the history of the novel in general and to the late 20th century and 21st century novel in particular due to its supposed lack of attention to scale and to the topic of global warming has been questioned by some critics from various perspectives (Marshall 2018; Oak Taylor 2018).

¹⁴ Powers elaborates his reflection on the exclusion of a vast non-human temporality (arboreal in this case) from the genre of the novel by entrusting such metafictional musings to the narrator and characters. Some of these thoughts on scale overlap with Ghosh's scalar argument focused on global warming. *The Overstory* is an exercise in scalar expansion within the novel form, carrying also a metafictional reflection on the role of literature as catalyst for action: "The best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that is a good story" (336). *The Overstory* certainly purports to be a good story, or a series of good stories.

- 28 It is worth comparing this reassessment of literature in general and the novel in particular with the treatment of the literary canon in *Galatea 2.2* (1995), a novel where Powers explores artificial intelligence in relation to language and literature. Helen, the super-computer, listens to the protagonist-narrator named Richard Powers read to her the classics (just like Ray Brinkman listens to Dorothy Cazaly). Artificial intelligence is constructed and tested from the perspective of its capacity to assimilate language, literature and critical interpretation. However, Helen's desire to continue the conversation and her own education is stalled by her inability to accept the violence of human history that she senses from certain passages of fiction having to do with the oppression of African Americans and from exposure to brutal daily news. Helen declares: "I never felt at home here. This is an awful place to be dropped down halfway" (349). The experiment is ended due to Helen's ethical and psychological impediment, as paradoxical as it may sound.¹⁵ In *Galatea 2.2*, literature appears as a highly relevant mediator of the world and revealer of its darkness emblemized by racial prejudice. In *The Overstory*, part of the literary canon is no longer satisfactory

from the perspective of multispecies representation. It appears diminished, lacking in scale and, ultimately, missing the point of the present. The canon itself does not go unchallenged in *Galatea 2.2*, where the protagonist's list of great books is debunked by the graduate student known as A., who criticizes its "Euro-retro" character and its lack of diversity (305). *The Overstory* also takes into account the process of canon formation which it places within the framework of a larger reflection on multispecies.

- 29 Obviously, Powers's novel does not speak as trees (so to say), which is one of the great difficulties faced by writers wishing to speak in the name of nature, as Buell points out: "One can speak as an environmentalist, one can 'speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness,' as Thoreau did, but self-evidently no human can speak as the environment, as nature, as a nonhuman animal" (Buell 2005, 7). Instead of embarking upon a problematic fictional endeavor of this kind, Powers invites us, more modestly, to "think differently about things" by placing trees at the heart of American history and geography, by imagining a literary canon of human and non-human coexistence, sensitive to issues of ecology and ethics. By revisiting trees as sites of life and meaning, Powers imagines a novel that gives justice to the ample temporality of trees intertwined with the shorter temporality of humans, in which the tree as model of growth and life is equated with a rhizome, in which literary experimentation brings together the discourses of science and of ecstatic biotic experience. *The Overstory* is a translation of "the grain of trees" into fiction performed by Powers "like a monk" in a contemporary "scriptorium" (156).

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NOTES

1. Powers revisits the tree model and adapts it to the literary form and scale of a whole novel. This is a very refreshing move given the fact that the epistemological model of the tree was the

famous target of Deleuze and Guattari's critique in *Mille plateaux*, who opposed it to the uncentered and open rhizome. While Deleuze and Guattari refrained from thinking of the tree and rhizome as epistemological and reflexive models in conflict, they did end up fossilized as such in many instances of critical interpretation, as Cazalas and Froidefond show in their introduction to *Le Modèle végétal dans l'imaginaire contemporain* (2014). Powers's trees are very often rhizomatic and it can be argued that the oversimplified opposition tree/rhizome does not function in *The Overstory*.

2. Powers is aware of the difficulty of writing fiction using characters of activists and their discourses, as he makes clear in an interview: "It's tough to write literary fiction, with its love of moral complexity and ambiguity, that makes activists sympathetic. Something in us resists people who are too certain or fight too stridently for a thing. But many ordinary people who wouldn't dare impose their own political will on others have come to realize that you shouldn't throw away an infinitely valuable gift. That's a story worth telling. And once you begin to see trees—really *see* them as creatures with agency and intention and the capacity to communicate—they become characters in their own right. My goal, in *The Overstory*, was to treat trees as persons in their own dramatic narrative" (interview with Bradford Morrow, *Conjunctions* 70 [Spring 2018]).

3. This argument appears in Julia Hill's *The Legacy of Luna* in similar form (chapter 5, "Embodying Love"). We also find empathetic reflections of the kind: "Each time a chain saw cut through those trees, I felt it cut through me as well. It was like watching my family being killed. And just as we lose a part of ourselves with the passing of a family member or friends, so did I lose a part of myself with each fallen tree" (Hill, ebook).

4. Johnny Appleseed is presented in an ambivalent way by the narrator as a "crackpot saint" and tramp who covered four states with apple trees, but also a property owner who died "owning twelve hundred acres of the richest land in the country" (161). The character of Douglas Pavlicek is compared to Johnny Appleseed (88). Doug realizes that he is being manipulated by companies who, for every seedling he plants, are allowed to cut even more trees (186-187).

5. It is worth noting that the pre-Civil War development of the soap company is marked by belief in Emersonian ideas of self-reliance and intimacy with nature. Emerson is regularly quoted by founders' families in *Gain*.

6. "Loved *The Overstory*? Richard Powers recommends other 26 books about trees" (PBS, November 29, 2019): <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/loved-the-overstory-richard-powers-recommends-26-other-books-on-trees> (accessed May 10, 2021).

7. Yellowstone features in Mimi Ma's and in Patricia Westerford's section. John Muir is quoted in "Trunk": "I only went out for a walk" (318). He is also mentioned in connection to Patricia Westerford: "She camps out many nights with Muir" (129).

8. As a character in *The Overstory* puts it: "That's the scary thing about men: get a few together with some simple machines, and they'll move the world" (501).

9. Overlaps between late 20th and 21st-century Manhattan and the Manhattan of the early days of European colonization appear, in very different forms, in Paul Auster's *Moon Palace* (1989) and Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011).

10. The adjective "occult" appears a second time in "Nature" to denote a similar relationship between man and animals: "In a cabinet of natural history, we become sensible of a certain occult recognition and sympathy in regard to the most bizarre forms of beast, fish, and insect" (Emerson 351).

11. Alda Balthrop-Lewis uses the term "more-than-human" at the beginning of her first chapter, indicating that the term was perhaps first coined by David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Throughout this article, I have used the term "non-human."

12. The broadening contemporary scope of animism is examined in Harvey's *Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (2015), which considers animism in contemporary ethnographic, cognitive,

literary, performative and material culture, as well as in activist and indigenous discourse. It is worth noting that David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (1996) also foregrounds animist spirituality and its oral culture as exemplifying a particularly meaningful type of relationship with nature. Powers explores what looks like an animist vein in a contemporary novel through a character with no animist background (a young woman in 21st century USA), whose special relation to trees, sudden and unexplained, is the result of an electrical injury.

13. Of course, the term "canonical" would deserve a separate discussion, which would take too much place to develop here. One can assume that a collection entitled *The Hundred Greatest Novels of All Time* would abide by the most traditional classics without seeking to propose a more inclusive, experimental, bold or iconoclastic version of the novel canon.

14. See also Kate Marshall's article "What are the Novels of the Anthropocene? American Fiction in Geological Time" (2015).

15. In Ian McEwan's recent novel *Machines Like Me* (2019), a series of robots self-terminate when faced with various violent and oppressive situations they consider unbearable, one of which being the destruction of forests.

ABSTRACTS

This article investigates the ways in which the novel *The Overstory* (2018) by contemporary American writer Richard Powers invites a reconsideration of American geography and history, and of literature in general by placing trees at the center of reflection. Powers offers a tree-centered exploration of the United States from the perspective of the country's changing forest landscape, which builds on representations and discourses inherited from the spatial imagination of the 19th century, environmental literature and scientific publications, woven together. The notions of character and story are reinterpreted to shift the focus away from humans, towards trees and their interaction with human characters. The engagement with trees has far-reaching consequences on the treatment of temporality, on the tapping of the experimental vein of literature as far as the translation of the language of trees is concerned and on the reassessment of the literary canon based on the commitment to the non-human realm. *The Overstory* attempts to bring trees closer to a position of active voice (Plumwood) and to imagine a literary canon of human and non-human coexistence, attuned to issues of ecology and ethics.

Cet article s'intéresse à la manière dont le roman de l'écrivain américain contemporain Richard Powers *The Overstory* (2018) invite à revisiter l'histoire et la géographie des États-Unis, et plus généralement la littérature, en plaçant les arbres au centre de sa réflexion. Powers propose une exploration des États-Unis à travers les paysages changeants des forêts, qui s'inspire des représentations et discours hérités de l'imagination spatiale du XIX^e siècle, de la littérature environnementale et des discours scientifiques, qui s'entremêlent. Les notions de personnage et d'intrigue sont réinterprétées pour décentrer l'humain et resserrer le cadre autour des arbres et de leurs rapports aux humains. L'intérêt pour les arbres a des conséquences considérables sur le traitement de la temporalité, sur l'exploration de la veine expérimentale de la littérature pour tenter de traduire le langage des arbres, et sur l'évaluation du canon littéraire du point de vue de la représentation du non-humain. Attentif aux questions d'écologie et d'éthique, *The Overstory* a

l'ambition d'accorder aux arbres une position de « voix active » (Plumwood) et d'imaginer un canon littéraire où les humains et les non-humains coexistent.

INDEX

Mots-clés: écofiction, arbre, géographie américaine, paysage américain, temporalité des arbres, phytographie

oeuvre citée *Overstory* (The)

Keywords: ecofiction, tree, American geography, American landscape, temporality of trees, phytographia

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