

Organic Reformations in Richard Powers's *The Overstory*

Garrett Stewart

*Richard Powers takes the literary concept of “organic form” to new exploratory lengths – and satellite heights – in his latest ecofiction. In particular, the novelist who has proselytized voice-recognition software for the dictation of novelistic prose offers with that advice an unexpected leverage on the structuring “understory” (the botanical term) for his Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *The Overstory* (2018). In both textual phonetics and mapped thematic links, marked patterns of recurrence are to prose, here as elsewhere, what rhyme and meter are to poetry. In a novel that seeks to attune us to the secret “semaphores” of forest life, such elicited traces of nonhuman signaling articulate a vital terrestrial network evoked through a scale of decoded pattern that, in developing its own stylistic ecosystem, answers to the environing field of narrative action, and forest activism, across eight different biographical plotlines in the novel’s convergent cast of characters.*

The woods were unfathomably complex, but they didn’t know it.

— Jonathan Franzen, *Purity* (2015)

Her maples are *signaling*. Life is talking to itself, and she has listened in. ... If she dies tomorrow she’ll still have added this one small thing to what life has come to know about itself.

— Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (2018)

With the novel as much as any genre, literary intensity is often a function of verbal density, generated under the shaping force of style or form. And density is partly a matter of harmonic intervals, whether narrow or many pages wide. To keep order, remain true to form, poetry may often decide to rhyme; to keep house, long prose must at least repeat, with a harmonizing difference each time around. Beyond and including end rhyme and meter, close recurrence is the spine and flexion of lyric verse; motif the normal engine of narrative. Lyric recurs to its own phonetic beat and measure; the novel returns at less regular intervals to its themes, and sometimes to the wording that

works them up in the first place, which may thus chime in service to this texturing of recognition. Any novelist who titles a book *The Echo Maker* (2006) would in part be naming his own procedures at one level or another. And none more obviously than American novelist Richard Powers, whose sense of phrasal patterning – not just within sentences, but among them, chapters apart – amounts to the very poetry of his fiction. With sound play in mercurial ripple across his sentences, a broader-gauge framework of schematic echo is regularly the most notable mark of his intricately linked storylines. Attending to such a scalar balance between narrow syllabic bandwidths and widely looped wording – each advanced with new exigency in *The Overstory* (2018), the most multipronged and disparately character-driven of his books yet – is only to recognize something abidingly novelistic about this tandem work of language. As a philosophical ironist who is also a luminous writer, Powers pursues unexpected connections that, beyond strict formulation, he makes us *hear* in precisely the novel form and play of his words.

Whereas Pirandello once thrust onto the surrealist stage six unfinished dramatic characters in search of an author, a century later, in *The Overstory*, Powers sends out a third again as many fictional characters in search of a plot. If that sounds like a reviewer's barb, it is not. Because they find it, the plot they are looking for, and themselves in the process, with some bitter consequences. This happens when they converge, mostly by happenstance, and in one case only via Midwest TV coverage, on antilogging activism amid the West Coast redwoods that escalates to the point of violence. Not just personified ideas, the characters jostle and suffer, hurt and purge, with a novelistic impact that remains inextricable, as always, from the linkages, tight and broad, of Powers's language, but this in a context, as never so insistently before, that exceeds these characters by definition. The conceptual threading and intermesh, it must be said, are certainly easier to track than the lives actually entwined. Each interknit subplot extends backwards into the childhoods of the divergent characters, then forward into their contingent overlap. If all this seems too much to hold in mind at once, it is. Such is the multistory in build-up, even as this dispersedly communal focus becomes instead global in the end; reading is the effort to educe just that ultimate overstory.

Part of the idea, no doubt, is that all walks of life may lay themselves open to unexpected onsets of ecological passion. The heavily loaded roster of plot agents seems engineered in this sense primarily to grid, and gird, the intersections and echoes, not of personal psychology, but of language itself in the poetics – botanically inflected this time out – of Powers's typical scientific vocabulary. Funneled together by plot, the tracked actors share their portrayed vitality with quasi-personified tree forms that take up, in a sense, their own choral speaking parts, animated, communicative, medial, bearing witness to the world from the heights and depths of an arboreal sensitivity on a par – though not a level playing field – with human motive. As distinguished from the attitude toward insentient nature

in the first epigraph from Jonathan Franzen, in Powers's novel, trees not only liaise with each other and their adjacent vegetation, but they are in themselves messages. All antennae out, the novel stages the realized urge to listen up. Moreover, its pages go so far as to figure that urge in the elicited terms – and wrought attentions – of a hypertuned vocabulary, forest lingo and otherwise, puns, echoes, and harmonic overtones included. It is a language that taps directly – often by metaphoric filaments strung across long stretches of text – into the author's familiar linguistic predilections, but with new urgency and leverage. At this pitch of fictional stylistics, to talk trees requires a borrowed and replenished discourse all its own, in the face of which the dated aesthetic shibboleth of “organic form” takes on a fresh tensile application, however contorted or arcane at times, as part of an unabashedly reformative ethic.

Bundling the separate plotlines, the fourfold structure of the novel reflects, at a glance, its emphasis on a metaphoric bond between plant life and human maturation. Written gradually into a bigger picture than the plaited strands of their human backstories in the first eponymous eight chapters – picaresques in search of an epic – the divergent characters sprout there under the section title “Roots” until their shared masterplot figuratively *thickens*, as if ring by ring, in “Trunk,” only then to spread out – by ever-widening circles, and by resulting upward thrust – into its overarching “Crown,” from which to propagate again in “Seeds.” Matching nature's cyclicality, the tacit circularity is unmistakable, as if a familiar four-volume structure from the English fictional canon (think Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*) has been turned involute and self-renewing, unrolled like a continuous looped scroll rather than an eventually closed book: from seeds to the roots of full fruition and back again in dissemination. Such titular divisions of narrative labor give away no plot, but instead give way immediately to archetype. They are tropes, but tropes all but literalized in narrative, as with the novel's first of countless plays on words: “Roots” for the separate *routes* that will carry many of the tracked characters west, along various personal paths and paved roadways, to the redwood forest, or merely forward in place to associated revelations at a geographic distance, as in the case of Ray, the property lawyer, wrestling at one point with a brief punningly called “Should Trees Have Standing?”¹ The ecological torque of this novel turns repeatedly on such subterranean turns of phrase and their tacit off-rhymes. And if we are still left asking, in generic terms, what kind of novel this could really constitute, the answer is precisely a *prose* fiction, whose understrain of assonance plumes with its own curious music.

In zeroing in on the western stands of redwoods, each vector of story may be thought to minimize the personal in deference to the conceptual – the Powers trademark – here in particular the emphasis on the ecopolitical. En route, language allegorizes, as prose, the same reformations it instigates, bioethical and

stylistic alike. Hence my title. Powers is not just a hard read, but a hard reader. Through the continually readjusted lens of his verbal attention, we learn how to decipher the world anew through the test of reading itself. And in-jokes, like “standing,” only bolster the inferential sympathy between vegetal nature and verbal invention. A passing dead metaphor, “thicket of words” (249), has already achieved full metatextual troping when the botanist Professor Westerford, known as Tree-Patty, puts the finishing touches on her botanical masterwork: “She types up the draft. She prunes a few words and pollards a few phrases” (223). As Powers well knows, such is the topiary work of prose: cut to the measure, in his every effort this time out, of botany’s organic system.

Balancing prose against plot in this way, the thinness of character psychology is framed to invoke more than it forfeits. The emphasis is to make characters learn for themselves to devalue the clench of personality in favor of collective being and purpose, and so to merge, if not entirely submerge, troubled personal stories in the vicissitudes of longer-span natural histories. These are histories that the characters must not just brush up against, but learn to decipher, in the world around them, to which end the vocation of prose fiction offers its own direct homologies. Even if one were to assume an ethic of reciprocal impersonality, in this particular naturalist saga, as converting defect to virtue in regard to what some critics see as the author’s slack “people skills,” still the insistent theme of *The Overstory* plugs directly into Powers’s eccentric strengths as well, including perhaps their signal feature: the fertile thesaurus of his lexical imagination, exercised to the full in the technical encyclopedia of botanic lore. True, a serious novelist, let alone a gifted one, engaged in any such unapologetic act of consciousness-raising about global deforestation and the sacred life of trees, has only his writing, moral fervor and political stamina aside, to build on, whether in celebration or polemic. More to the point in *The Overstory*, when the purpose is manifestly to elicit not just the venerable organic system of forest renewal but, more intimately, the very *medium* of tree life, the writing has only its own medium (the tactical channeling of its language) to draw on, and out, for exemplary cross-reference: its rhetorical medium as such, lexical, syntactic, figural; always verbal before representational, transmissive before mimetic.

More than evocative, the novelistic medium must here become programmatic in its cognate disclosure of arboreality’s own elusive communicative system. In this respect, the forest colloquy joins forces with Powers’s inveterate dictionary prose, driven by a confluence of specialist lexicons rather than any cultivated stylistic fluency. Beyond mere “windy” effusions in the rush of leaves, the summons to any true organic music – requiring close lexical transposition into human prose – is bound up in the conjured internal soundscape of the trees’ own pulsing biorhythms. One result is that, for the novel as a whole, quite apart from the recorded botanist audiobook featured at more than one point within it, reading is

listening. It is too early to prove this, but none too soon to pose it as this essay's leading hunch and heuristic. Legal *standing* in court, implied vertical *stance* in their native habitat: etymology bears covert witness in many such phrasings, including Ray the lawyer's own last name, Brinkman, an irony borne in on us when the suspended animation of his paralysis, after a stroke, holds at the border of death for pages on end. The novelist who, in *Orfeo* (2014), speaking of music, and by analogy with prose's own notation, approximates a phonetic anagram in locating the "islands of silence" between fluctuant sounds – and does so with that haunting silent *s* floated amid the sibilance of the phrase itself – arranges in *The Overstory*, we'll find, for phonetic language to ferry across just such a flow of words between insular (yet sometimes not quite insulated) silences.² This happens most tellingly, as we are to hear (without seeing), in the cross-currents of a climactic homophonic wordplay: a verbal reveal only to be apprehended under pressure from the long build-up behind it. Suffice it to say for now that *The Overstory* has no way to transliterate sylvan tongues, the forest's cellulose signaling, but through its own linguistic grid: not a loosely woven trellis of suggestion but a tight lexigraphic and etymological schema whose most striking nodes are alive with auditory stress (in every sense of that noun), as focused at one point on the punning clues of an actual crossword puzzle playing on a sound pun for the syllable "leaf." In advance of the settings required for full exemplification, we may characterize the gathering rhetorical effect of such volatile phrasing as serving to familiarize the otherwise uncanny notion of arboreal messaging with a sense, somewhat less foreign to normal reading, that alphabetic language may often slip out from under strict authorial coherence into a seemingly independent agency of its own, kindred in this way to the sometimes audited (preter)natural signage of the forest.

To this end, as a reading lesson, no novel's title could be more instructively metanarrative. The very coinage, in its tacit synonym for masterplot, is typical of Powers's associational diction in that it springs, unspoken, from the botanical argot of "understory" (think underbrush) for the blanketing of a forest's floor. This is a curious term that comes underfoot over half a dozen times in a novel whose opposite coinage, never in fact let loose into the narrative discourse, has its penultimate appearance, just before the title page itself, when copyright information assures us that the novel so-named, and if only pro forma, is "printed" with tacit ecological commitment "on 100% recyclable paper." Whatever the "overstory" may be, it goes unnoted as such throughout, a pure extrapolation as we read. By recognizing this in overview, we are closing in – by what might be called reverse zoom – on what makes Powers's trope of the closed terrestrial biocircuit and its looming overstory so different from the preceding generation of his postmodernist forebears in American fiction. The overarching is not in this case overweaning. The unmastered mysteries of a System in which human energies have found themselves embedded – that anxious horizoning frame that constitutes the stock-

in-trade of the paranoia novel (Thomas Pynchon to Don DeLillo and beyond) – is a trope turned inside out by Powers so as to limn (ultimately limb) the intricate workings of a vulnerable botanic superstructure and its tongueless signage.

In all facets of their vitality, trees (as italicized) “*pour out messages in media of their own invention*” (355). It is this overheard interplay of arboreal signals and receptors that is both manifested in, and modeled by, the audited *echology* of Powers’s prose. Across its eight parallel storylines – its “Roots” or (again, in one pronunciation) self-echoed “Routes,” together with the whole array of verbal recursions that brace and interlace them – the interpretive work of what we might call *echocriticism* is a first line of response. Only by tracing the spores and seedlings, the tubers and sudden shoots, of vocabular outcroppings, all in the linked lingo of organic interdependency, does one sense the pattern before – and beneath – its tangled ground cover and towering foliate canopy. I speak in further metaphor, of course, responding in kind to the novel’s loam and efflorescence of tropes, its figurative title included, hovering, above it all, somewhere between global abstraction and tethered emblem in its crowning bloom: a never-named or specified tale to be told only on the pulse of readerly recognition. One thinks, by contrast, of Powers’s academic satire in *Galatea 2.2*, about the learning curve of artificial intelligence, with the hero’s half-hearted effort to teach a phonorobotic computer enough language to render it an independently functioning literary critic. Robots must be programmed with our own language; trees predate us with theirs. The organic story they tell, never over, is not easy to translate.

In contrast to the novel’s supposedly entitled overview, the received (if not widely used) term “understory” takes its lexical exit with this, its eighth, appearance: “A distant branch snaps, and the crack shoots through the understory” (492) from which new “shoots,” in the other, botanical sense, will soon protrude. The subsequent prose of causal explanation is immediately elided into a reverbering declarative, playing with two odd plural singulars: “There are mink nearby, in these same woods, and lynx” (492). And links – the kind figured in this case by echoic troping in its own right: a music of interfusion between a deliberated singular plural (“mink”) and a falsely audited *s* in the equally double-duty “lynx.” Such are the frequent chiming byways of *echology* in Powers’s novel, instanced late in the day by an allegory of echo’s dying fall itself. On the verge of cabin fever in the mountain wilds of Montana, outlawed by his previous violence against the lumber industry, the character nicknamed Doug-fir is in despair about a logged-out wilderness: “This place is *dead*” (386). The italics are not just for emphasis. Doug’s is the bleated word *as word*, a spectral phonetic palindrome, about to be parsed and parlayed at once, spit back and spun round, by indifferent nature: “The *ed* bangs around the Garnet Range two or three times before giving up” (386). Even just twice, and the knell would be fully renewed in its own dying away: *dead ed ed*. Conservation of energy, diminishing returns, the larger system writ small in writ-

ing per se: a sly syllabic economy thereby at work even in this re-sounding dentalized stutter from the realm of inanimate – yet still accusatory – nature. So the prose often goes in this novel, leaving us, leaving reading, to sense detected patterns less than explicit, and regarding the organic intricacies and recursive systems of the plant realm rather than the sounding-boards of cliff faces.

In repeatedly moving from any miniscule textual detail, down in the weeds of syllabification and syntax, to the broad sweep of the overstory, however, Powers is often doing more than extrapolating from the technical idiom of his botanical topic. In all this we are kept in mind, as readers, of our own work in decrypting a set of language acts tacitly shared, in vitalist translation, across echelons of sentience between humans and the forest primeval. Verbal echoes come to sound like the reverberation of deeper bonds. Beyond all paranoia in such *uber*plotting, entanglement turns restorative. Yet how could any calculated stylistic ecosystem – or echosystem – plausibly carry conviction as a cross-species articulation of shared vital signs? The question is not rhetorical, but neither is there a ready answer. Except from – and through – the lexical texture of exemplification.

So the nagging query remains. In the face of society's most pressing global concerns, what in the world – this world of animal and vegetal rather than digital life – would such a nonelectronic ethics of *connectivity* between plant and human biology, tree being and human being, have to gain from (however ingenious) a web – or say scrub – of ground-level wordplay, even in anomalous technical forms of oblique verbal herbage? From one perspective, at least, the gain, the yield, would amount to no more, but decidedly no less, than the promotion of a certain reading posture, often just slightly askew to expectation, and, as such, an exploratory mode of epistemic notice. Reading would open in this way to a deciphered semiotics of nonhuman systems, raising the stakes of attention in the will to linger, look harder, discern otherwise. *Deep reading*, then, versus anything conceived as surface reading, would stand revealed not as its own unfeeling and predatory mode of extraction, the self-interested dredging of interpretive symptoms, but as a flexible way forward, leaving clearly in place, and further contextualized by examination, the interdependencies that style's own pressure excavates, explicates, and sometimes mimics.

Nothing in this commentary is meant to, nor could, detract from the palpable agenda of Powers's book as a genuine ecocritical text: a landmark one (to speak in its own kind of topographical dead metaphor), and this, as might be expected, from the most important contemporary novelist operating at the cross-mapped intersections of science and human desire. No question what the story *means*, politically, ecologically, for all its mysteries of organic linkage between linguistics and the loquacious “chemical semaphores” (499) of tree life, that perfectly judged phrase for the forest's nonlinguistic communiques: sublingual semiotics channeled by a minimal internal rhyme. Any interpretive emphasis on the literary, the

letteral, in assessing the linguistic scientism of the book's prose, evinced by the whole phonetic and etymological sedimentation of its lexical complexity, is only meant in turn to highlight, while always in the closest league with meaning, the revisionary stylistic organicism of his *echological means*. This is the system whose lateral resoundings serve to delineate the fugue-like structure of Powers's never more than tacit, nor less than immanent, overstory, unrolled in harmonic process across his orchestrated octet of storylines.

Which first come together around the next-to-last of them, concerning the introvert tree-loving girl – and eventual botanical guru of print and audio culture – Patty Westerford, introduced in the penultimate chapter of the “Roots” sequence in a way that anchors and codifies most of the disparate backstories so far. She thus takes her late but centering place – located as a kind of ideological clearing-house – in the through-lines of motival developments so far, her presence twining them together around her governing passion for the otherworld of trees. Daughter of an “ag extension agent” who took her with him, from a young age, as he traveled the Midwest landscape, “Tree-Patty” eventually finds herself, along with the majority of Powers's cast, drifting inquisitively – Westerfording, as it were – toward the Redwood coast. Trees have always, in the figurative sense, spoken to her, even before she could write back with her science. As a young child, she was distressingly slow in learning to articulate words in her inherited human tongue: a malfunction eventually diagnosed as resulting from a deformed inner ear. In this virtual muteness, she consoled herself with a “secret language” in her devotion to an arboreal dollhouse world of “woody citizens” made by her of “pine-cone bodies” and “acorn shell” helmets, demurely housed together in the “burls of trees.” All this compensatory play – braced by its “miniscule architecture of imagination” – generates the seedbed of a lifelong mission, with her “acorn animism” (114) eventually nurtured into a botany doctorate, scholarly renown, and even a popular print (and audiobook) audience. Literature and science cohabit, as in the novel we are reading, especially when its spokeswoman sets out to read the trees in an apperception cued to the nuances of prose form.

Beyond her tree-foraged dollhouse community, the young Patty also seeks out the messaging of “booklike bark” (119): the very phrase a layering of consonants, on prose's own part, that sends unmentioned roots into the deep etymology of *book* in the *beech* (or *birch*) on which runes were once carved. When eventually finding her words, she realizes they are not ready for social circulation. They are as ingrown as her forest sensibility. It is “her father alone” who, as prose captures it in the oscillation of internal echo, “understands her woodlands world, as he always understands her every thickened word” (113). Years later, her degree credentials eventually in hand, she nevertheless returns as soon as possible to a committed fieldwork, “the green negation of all careers” (129). It is

there that she loves to hear the wind *through* – in both senses – the trees: not just sounding its way *between* branches but *via* those appendages, a breeze strumming those limbs to help the latter breathe forth their Aeolian messages.

In another micro-ecology, the mention of leaves that “turn” in the wind are what “turn” that wind (“on”) to its associated whisperings: “The oracle leaves turn the wind audible” (130). Why not an adjective (“oracular”) rather than a noun used as modifier? Too predictable? Too portentous? In any case, whenever the nonverbal linguistics of trees is evoked, the prose of the narrative is likely to thicken or buckle its own English contours, as with the implicit surplus (or junctural elision) of “oracleaves.” And the next sentence follows suit in the self-adjustment of its own internal echo: “They *filter* the day light and *fill it* with expectation” (130). Such is the association of a forest’s macroprocess with the minims of prose’s own reflective echosystem, as made explicit when Patty comes upon trees, in her research, “etched with knowledge encoded in native arborglyphs” (113). Beach, birch, book: medium. And whenever the motif of language occurs in this way, whether as trope or epistemological datum, it tends to entail some degree of lexical kink – or, better, knottiness – in Powers’s own prose. Tree-Patty’s story sets the mold, and does so in the familiar drag on grammatical momentum induced by minor surprises or aberrations in diction. Speech impedance is not a malady in such writing, but a tactic. Reading Powers is the act of slowing over idea through the medium of words. Later in the biographic track of this seventh (recapitulative) chapter, when Patty contemplates a forest “sprouted from a rhizome mass too old to date even to the nearest hundred millennia,” its primal source is immediately restated – in a tongue-twisting syllabic node – as “this great, joined, single clonal creature that looks like a forest” (131). The very shadow of oxymoron (single/clonal) sets in as a kind of fractalized lexical node, pars pro toto for the entire overgrowth of botanical entanglements.

So it is that the “every thickened word” of Patty’s incipient speech seems to have authorized in advance the novel’s own most intimate summons of vegetal density: not just via a passing mimesis, in some broached phrasal performativity (of integrated glottal cloning), but in a more deeply probed metalinguistics linked to tree “signals,” again, an arboreal semiosis. And precisely as figured, so we are soon to note, both in – and as – the pulped wood of a book: the one we have been reading for many seemingly disparate chapters, and to whose spine the corded rhizome is now tacitly analogized as a “kinship” fostered “deep underground” (132). Out of nowhere but narrative’s own backlog, five brief paragraphs are suddenly devoted to previous characters we have met, locating them now on compass points, spatial and temporal, in regard to Tree-Patty’s present professional life of sophisticated botanical expertise. Convergence is for the first time explicit in the over(t)story – asserted almost by the sentence-level equivalent (albeit in the negative) of that *parallel montage* equilibrating the separate spans of the novel’s un-

even microplots as they have shifted until now from one character's moral trajectory to another. Yet: "These people are nothing to Plant-Patty." Not to say mean nothing; they would be meaningful to her if she knew of them, given their various conservationist passions. Instead, they simply "aren't": they do not exist for her at the plane of narrative manifestation, and never will. "And yet," as figured here, "their lives have long been connected, deep underground." Regarding the assembled characters in such "underground" filiation (a political pun as well): "Their kinship will work like an unfolding book" (132), for which a photographic folio in the first chapter is the establishing paradigm as arborist chronicle.

Few novels, intent on giving us a long-term overview of planetary dependencies and endurance, could begin more promisingly. In the multigenerational chronicle of the first chapter, named for the present-day inheritor of the family legacy, "Nicholas Hoel," history is serially sketched in, almost at the elliptical pace of its own embedded technical emblem in a pre-Victorian optical toy. Generations back, the head of the immigrant Iowa household – and farmstead – was inspired by the zoopraxiscope in launching a family hobbyhorse. With its spinning images in a glass drum offering the flicker effect of protocinematic motion, a related idea dawned. Since then, decade after decade, the men of the Hoel tribe have sustained the documentary "ritual" of photographing – from a fixed tripod in front of their house – one shot per month of a still-growing chestnut tree planted by the original settler. When the progenitor of this technological tradition has first assembled a year's worth of black-and-white images in a stack, he "ruffles through them with his thumb" (11) in the manner of that other precinematic optical toy, the flip-book: in this case, the predecessor as well of time-lapse effects, each split second overleaping, by eliding, a month's growth. As if true to the family name, intermittence becomes holistic. And does so as an explicit model for the narrative's own ellipses. "Three-quarters of a century dances by in a five-second flip" (17), writes the narrator by metonymy in his own elision of any unfolded sequence – until, with the cinematic prototype now historically in place and specified, "one more flip through the magic movie, and faster than it takes for the black-and-white broccoli to turn again into a sky-probing giant, the nine-year-old cuffed by his grandfather turns into a teen" (19).

And so it is, by association, in his own arboreal picturings and scripts alike, that Nick Hoel becomes, by novel's end, the representative of the forests themselves, always haunted by "the time-lapse pictures of the chestnut his gypsy-Norwegian great-great-great-grandfather planted, one hundred and twenty years before" (20). It is in this way that the flip-book has miniaturized the time lapses of the plot so far, though not so much the irregular, shifting tempos of its anything but staccato prose – not at least, until almost five hundred pages later, when Nick is assigned the closing passage of the novel to bookend his place in the first. By now,

he has had the inspiration, less as draughtsman than as installation site artist, to use whole fallen trees to translate their own abiding message into English, trees given quite literally the novel's last word, as word, in their own anglicized witness, dragged into place to spell out "STILL" (502), a cross-hatch of vegetal legibility ultimately available only from satellite vantage. Whatever they are here made to be suggesting, it is clearly an overstory resisting the temporal rather than the spatial sense of "over." *Still* present after all these years, but with the extra twist of an ambivalent adverb (*fixedly in place* as well as *even yet*) and the adjectival double of the former (*immobile*). What we are stationed to "close read" in that lone word STILL, even from an aerial distance – and in the subdivided split seconds, as we will see, of its passage's incremental momentum – is, with its surprise organic resurgence, prose's nearest echo of nature's text. Nick's "articulated" trees compose no book, only a message, but one already taken up in time-lapse registration even as the tree artist has just completed their scriptive pictogram. Immobile, yes, but not unchanging at that, nor removed from cycles of decay and new growth.

Partly determining the power of this closing episode is its immediate convergence with what had seemed for a long time two other quite disparate lines of plot. We might by now have intuited some deep connection between Nick's tree painting, including his foliate graffiti scripts, and the precodex and tree-themed calligraphic scroll willed by her suicided immigrant father to Mimi Ma, second of the introduced characters in the eightfold cast, and whose last scene, her mind awash in arboreal messaging, abuts most closely upon Nick's own final act of woodstock "graphology." Farther afield until then – though suddenly operating in immediate counterpoint to, almost superimposition upon, Nick's final tree-built wordwork as well – is the previously marginalized story of the computer genius Neelay Mehta. Miserably injured in a childhood fall from a tree, he goes on from his wheelchair to orchestrate a Silicon Valley computer-game empire under the corporate name *Sempervirens* ("always flourishing," "evergreen"), dubbed for the designer's Redwood City studio. After his brand's floppy-disk launch with *The Sylvan Prophecies* (191), Neelay's genius takes the company product through one hi-def iteration after another, down to cutting-edge 3-D, in its signature *Mastery* series, where exponential expertise can lead its players to revel in control over whole virtual continents of their own devising, fantasies of terraforming and wealth extraction uncramped by reality. But Neelay eventually suffers an epiphany, realizing the hollowness of this model, and deciding instead to equip his gamers with the data-searching finesse needed to become "learners" rather than mere players, "mastering" the life of our actual planet (not some escapist world of their own optical concoction), and not from participatory virtualized points of view but from actual satcam overviews. The empty eschatology of total mastery over a fictive universe becomes instead the eponymous overstory of documentary narrative, open-eyed and investigative. *Sempervirens* has become globally enviroing, with

the epistemic urge replacing the ludic as monetized adrenaline rush. And with the “branchings” of the Internet in new sync with the actualities of organic life. One does not have to dwell for long over this conversion experience to find it figuring the intellectual voracity, rather than sheer esoteric gamesmanship, of Powers’s own polymath style.

It is precisely the last “chapter” of this evolved corporate story, realized from satellite vantage, that converges (via overview) with the final phase of Nick’s scribal endeavor. Instead of reducing cellulose to the tabula rasa of inscription, the unexpected symbolic reversal, on which the novel closes in and down, is to have Nick write *with* (not upon) the dead trees themselves. And on their behalf as well. So that, in an unspoken wordplay, their inert logs are arrayed to log in their own message for upload to Sempervirens’s orbiting camera hook-ups, of which we are not even sure Nick, the word artist in wood, is aware. When Nick as a boy first embarks on his pencil drawings of trees, based on his fascination with the photographic flip-book, he doubts he can do them justice. Yet such is the structural pivot, the cryptic metanarrative chiasmus, involved in his eventual writing of nature’s ongoing will and testament, its message immemorial, that the character once daunted by a vitality of tree forms beyond “his powers as an artist to reveal” (19; emphasis added) now exits the novel in figuring, by proxy, the *artistry of a Powers* in just such a materially paraphrased revelation.

This emblazoned word of razed nature, STILL, is the novel’s true coup de grace, and its tacit metatextual gambit bears more speculation than satellite photos directly bestow. What if the tired metaphor of “organic form” – in the internal feedback system of a literary text – could in its own right, as scriptive form, do more than blandly shadow a living ecosystem, but offer instead a cogent parable of a global terratext? What if the fallen trunks of trees, as well as their cross sections, could be read, in the way Nick’s labor attempts, as fashioning their own message? Could have their messages made transmissible from the right angle and distance of vision? Terra firma would become in that case no longer just a tabula rasa for predatory human imprints but a silent arboreal outcry from the forest floor.

That is what Nick’s version of terrestrial installation art, his implanted earthwork sculpture, accomplishes. As transcribed on the page, rather than reproduced, the word STILL appears in vertically elongated sans serif caps, stripped bare, even though we know that Nick’s usual ecological inscriptions have been graced with tendril filigrees like the florid margins of an illuminated “medieval manuscript” (231). This time, the medium is bark and leaves, pith and parasites, rather than pigment, the felled trees fringed, if at all, by their own withering leafy flourishes. “The learners” – again Neelay’s gamer addicts and fantasists turned planetary fetishists of biodiversity – “will puzzle over the message that springs up

there, so near to the methane-belching tundra” in what we have heard alluded to as the “boreal north” (355), as frigid, by etymological coincidence, as it is arboreal. On the novel’s last page: “Satellites high up above this work already take pictures from orbit” (502) and that adverb “already” soon becomes a threefold spatiotemporal refrain, extending well beyond the momentary “blink of a human eye.” At the data-mined pace of a global algorithmic archive, “the learners will grow connections,” with that dead metaphoric cliché for “develop” given a freshly rooted context in aerial photography. Then, too, the “giant word” spelled out in the sights of satellite telemetry by Nick’s bulking calligraphic monosyllable – as if in evoked counterpoint to the imprisonment, by now, of the other tree-terrorists, Adam and Doug – is a “shape” that at first “arrests” the learners. And in an up-ended trope “reads them their rights,” where we might expect “reads them the riot act” (501 – 502). In any case, it would seem that the tree-fashioned curt adjective/adverb for fixity and endurance alike (dead STILL/STILL changing) – almost a synonym for *sempervirens* – is therefore a word that reads its mortal readers in the throes of their own curiosity.

Yet again the lexical understory contours the literalized optic overview. For here is a vegetal “still life” of earth art that names at once its own severed condition of possibility, as text, and the transcendence of that finality, stillness and staying power respectively. Inaugurating its own time-lapse momentum, the prose now moves us through closely magnified adverbial snapshots of the dead wood’s escalating new fruition. This is to say that the aerial satellite frame of downed trees turns cinematic as we look, at least if we watch – and listen – closely. The parallel impetus is clocked by three repetitions of “Already” that exceed any fixed view. “Already, this word is greening”: the word STILL, by metonymy with the wood that fashions it. Change is still manifest in the mode of figurative inscription, as made explicit in syntax’s close convergence of “wood” and “word”: “Soon new trunks will form the word in their growing wood, following the cursive of these decaying mounds,” and “cursive,” yes, despite their block cap treatment on the page. The second adverbial impetus: “*Already* the mosses surge over”: an odd freestanding intransitive, rather than surging over *something* in particular, as if the pure *urge* of vitality itself is at one with “the beetles and lichen and fungi turning the logs to soil” (502). Imposed composition lapses to compost, replete with its own eloquence.

Soon too, in syntactic pacing, we come upon the fulcral time-lapse of the third adverbial downbeat accompanying that loan wooden monosyllable in its narrative rendering. Even within time present, the eventual is once more flashed past: “*Already*, seedlings root in the nurse logs’ crevices, nourished by the rot.” Again, that clumping of adjectival and possessive form that so often marks a thematic, not just a syntactic, flashpoint in Powers. The unsaid “nursery” of the world guides us through the densely ridged awkwardness of “nurse logs’ crevices” to the

immediate payoff in an internal phonetic rhythm of cause and outcome across the chiasmic bracket “root / nurse / nourished / rot.” In this syllabic span, the phonetic closed circuit mimes the energy of recirculation in the vegetal ecology under report.

As if in liturgical solemnity, Nick has said “Amen” at the completion of his bulking – his lumbering? – cellulose script: for “verily,” since he “remembers that he read once, back in Iowa . . . that the word *tree* and the word *truth* came from the same” – wait for it – “root” (501). It is up to us to look it up: “sturdy, firm.” Etymology carries its usual weight in Powers’s prose. But the pun itself on “root,” hardly incidental, is in fact definitive. Everywhere in the depicted world of this fictional work, words turn woodwards, and vice versa. The diegetic system is one in which – no stray analogy this – there are “trees older than moveable type” (254). And, at any age, potentially as articulate in their own defense, and even as fungible in their mobility. So we have just seen in closure, under telekinetic overview in a time-lapse aerial video that is nevertheless all prose’s own, and where the trace of typeset can itself be more moveable than meets the eye. I repeat: “Already the word is greening.” But repeat not exactly, more like simultaneously: “Already the word is screening.”

I began by suggesting that the novel’s summons to the *medium* – rather than just the organic manifold – of tree life needed the conduit of a taut prose medium in its own fibrous right: alert to its own grain, resonance, subterranean filaments; not just phrases audible in the crosswinds of enunciation but words with their underground feelers out, probing, improbable, uncanny. Operating here is a conservation of linguistic energy that remains dependent on the circulatory system of a lexicon and syntax fully enmeshed – every bit as much as the sylvan undergrowth of its championed ambience – in webs of connection and interlace. Along the inner linings of its effect, prose is an entwined capillary action not so much allegorizing the pulse of tree life from the top down, but schooling cognitive recognition from the lexical ground up, seeding its own underlay with strange depths of phonic porosity in the turf of wording.

Where inference may lie fallow until unearthed by second thoughts. Few authors dependent on the force of linguistic facility telegraph their effects so delicately, or at least with such dead-pan neutrality. Powers can be wry, satiric, enigmatic, but in his language, the intricacies of his diction, he is the least showy of wordsmiths, the least blunt of punsters. “Boreal” and “arboreal” play against each other, as noted, many pages apart, without further ado. And when typography is specially enlisted to flag an effect, it is a device cited rather than imposed: as when a website time-lapse video called, in cutesy branding fashion, “ArBoReal” (483) is downloaded by Mimi Ma under her new alias Judith (in the continuing evasion of police capture). Without any such chance of typographic intervention in the play

of flagging caps, the novel leaves it for us to note that the tree-lover, Doug, who went to prison (for arson and accidental manslaughter) instead of Mimi, to spare her after the accidental death of their fellow activist Olivia, alleviates the claustrophobia in his viewless cell by listening – innocently amazed that people with “speech impediments” are now recruited for such recording chores – to none other than Tree-Patty’s audiobook through the solacing “buds” in his ears (479). This is the same author who bestows on his hero in *Orfeo* the surname Els, and abuts it more than once with “else,” as if to suggest the split psyche of a man repeatedly other to his own motives in his self-inflicted solitude

This is also, after all, the same Richard Powers who once authored a kind of self-help guide for “writers,” encouraging them to leave keypads behind for the triggering of voice-recognition digital code. His brief *New York Times Book Review* essay on “How to Speak a Book,” despite its title, offers no advice to audiobook reciters. It details instead his devotion to writing through voice-dictation on a tablet PC, involving the feedback system of decipherment itself.³ He is quick to historicize. Over the evolution of human literacy, “most reading was done out loud. Augustine remarks with surprise that Bishop Ambrose could read without moving his tongue.” Such subvocalization was long in gestation for human deciphering capacity: “Our passage into silent text came late and slow, and poets have resisted it all the way.” Powers explains further: “Speech and writing share some major neural circuitry, much of it auditory. All readers, even the fast ones, subvocalize.” In none of this is Powers directly issuing instructions, in the role of literary critic, for that silent reading which would elicit the “phonemes” he mentions as so crucial to the shape of phrase. So Powers’s claim is finally a suitably modest, if infinitely suggestive, one: “Mostly,” when dictating, “I’m just a little closer to what my cadences might mean, when replayed in the subvocal voices of some other auditioner.” Not auditor, note, but a literate agent trying out for the role of attentive reader.

Two discrete instances of such audition near the end of *The Overstory* are found to arc within or between single words in sparking verbal microplots that immediately scale up into alignment with the whole curve of the overplot. First, there is a punning flashpoint in the story of Ray Brinkman, the Minneapolis lawyer (horrified at one point by broadcast images of police brutality against the West Coast tree activists), now a movingly bedridden stroke victim who can barely grunt out his desire to play “Crss . . . wds” (371) with his wife, as in their former marital routine. He is convulsed in frustration by not being able to articulate his solution to their attempted puzzle except in scrawling out the alphabetic tendrils of a barely legible – but relieving – cross-syllabic “Releaf” (its scribble represented graphically rather than typographically on the page) in response to the original newspaper prompt: “starts with an R. *Bud’s comforting comeback*” (374). Once again, the pun can be laid at other than our author’s door. Yet Ray’s twisted, snagged script

bears immediate comparison with a distant motif in the novel, and with the coming climax: namely, Nick's habitual way of "writing nature." The hard-edged sans serif caps that always represent, on the page, the content rather than form of Nick's arboreal word art, even long before the climactic STILL, force us to imagine for ourselves – in contrast, again, to the illuminated decoration with which they are compared – the leafy untrimmed look of his lettering, whose "borders teem," in an important analogy, "with fronds and flowers from the margins of a medieval manuscript" (231). In Ray's case, however, the impaired, pained venting in letters of the homophonic pun on "Releaf" has recruited modern digital reproduction to simulate the spastic scribal flourish of the damaged hand's involuntary squiggles and volutes: a paralytic scrawl more leafy than readily legible. The filigrees and flourishes we associate with Nick's ecological calligrams, his scraggly fronds of script, have thus been deflected, with hypertrophic visibility, onto the more cryptic, crippled scrawl of that never explicitly parsed (and indeed cross-worded) pun awaiting Ray's recognition, dug deep from the undersoil of the novel: a novel where the only *relief* for arboreal devastation is precisely its *re-leafing*, a process "already" inchoate in those recuperative iterative lap-dissolves we have noted on the novel's last page.

The second and far more covert node of epiphany, or echological *epiphony*, is associated with a last venture of tree art that precedes the closing STILL life. Long after his arboreal heroics in the company of ecological fellow travelers, with Nick also now on the run from the law, we find him reduced, by way of gainful employment, to "scanning bar codes" on boxed books – the doubly pulped fate (unsaid) of the arboreal – at the "enormous Fulfillment Center" of an (equally unsaid) Amazon of deforestation. The "product" there is "not so much books" as – so the sentence lisps out lazily in its own *crss-wrd* hiss – "convenience. *Ease* is the disease and Nick is its vector" (397). Worlds apart from the "booklike bark" and "arbor-glyphs" of botanical inscription and its devoted legibilities early in the plot, phonetic diagnosis names at this point an opposite syndrome, as national ailment, even before the noun of malady, the restless "disease," fully arrives in syntactic delivery. But that is an incidental slippage – a minor ironic sabotage by lexical contagion – compared to what we discover on the next page. In secret provocations apart from his day job, Nick's polemic vandalism is still bent on defacing public as well as private property with outsize tree paintings, whose "furrows of bark" – when *read*, as it were, up close – are said in this most recent case, with their dark irregular striations, to resemble a "two-foot wide UPC bar code" (380). With a pun neither explicit nor funny, opening only between and across lexical ridges, it is the inward turned, blurred "furrow" of this phrasing that claims attention: the double decryption of this *bark code* as undersong culmination to a novel-long *bark ode*.

Crucially, too, Nick's messaging, "legible from space" as a stratospheric upload on the learners' monitors, is matched on the ground by a visceral download

in the closing pages. Immediately preceding the aerial recognition of STILL, Mimi Ma, alias Judith, having refused to sell off her own inherited, tree-dedicated calligraphic scroll, a priceless relic of her father's Chinese heritage, is flooded by tree speech, where "messages *hum from out of* the bark she leans against" (499), depth itself measured (almost in metrical spondee) by an excess prepositional uprush (with the arguably tautological "from" echoing more than directing the "hum"). Immediately reverberated from this already onomatopoeic hum ("origin probably imitative," say the dictionaries), the transcendental buzz surfaces, escalates, across the vector of another prepositional doublet, and then four more such thrusts along the infrastructure of a third encompassing sentence: "Chemical semaphores home *in over* the air. Currents rise *from* the soil-gripping roots, relayed *over* great distances *though* fungal synapses linked *up to* a network the size of the planet" (499). That "network" is no dead metaphor where the learners, our wired surrogates, are concerned.

An "echological" reading of Powers's novel will, of course, not only pick up the rebound of phrases across the text, articulating its own subsystem in answer to that of the private forest's. It will attune itself as well to re-soundings that reach beyond – back into the literary "network" – for a new interplay with its previous "actors," near and far. Tree-Patty is at first mocked among academic botanists for the very claim that later makes for her scholarly and popular renown: exactly the confidence that trees communicate, sign themselves, as above, in "semaphores" rather than just spores and seeds. Short of an intuitive uprush of audition like Mimi's in the park, the work of discerning the trees' secret code is, in effect, that of a fine-tuned disciplinary stethoscope, as if eavesdropping on the leaves themselves. Their impulses are transferred to our ears by a phonically keyed (indeed, as we know from Powers's advice to writers, voice-activated) prose set in train, at times, even by more or less abstruse crossword effects. And, as part of the literary system, by implicit intertexts. Famously in *Middlemarch*, George Eliot analogizes an impossibly totalized human sympathy to the aberration of "hearing the grass grow," whose preternatural overload would mean that "we should die of that roar which lives on the other side of silence," a sonic fate quite minimally approached, as it happens, on the keyboard of her own chiasmically launched assonance (*die/side/si*). Powers's gambit stops short of this contemplated fatality. Rather than risking obliteration by audition, he implies that an ear tuned to the inner hives and havens, the groves and coverts, of a woodland vernacular – with its parallels in involute or even recondite lexical play – might instead revitalize our senses. With it we might hear what lies on the *inside* of silence, whether in paged words or in the mute *barchives* that prose, in this novel, so vividly transliterates.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Garrett Stewart, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2010, is the James O. Freedman Professor of Letters at the University of Iowa. He is the author of *Cines-thesia: Museum Cinema and the Curated Image* (2020), *Cinemachines: An Essay on Media and Method* (2020), and *The One, Other, and Only Dickens* (2018).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), 247; subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this edition.
- ² Richard Powers, *Orfeo* (New York: Picador, 2014), 381.
- ³ Richard Powers, "How to Speak a Book," *The New York Times Book Review*, January 7, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/07/books/review/Powers2.t.html>.