



Arboromorphism

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The tree on the lawn was a cypress, old and green and heavy with scaled leaves. As a child I would go into the tree, pushing through its scratchy, bitter-smelling branches to press myself against the trunk so that only my bare feet could be seen, rooting in the dusty brown litterfall. I would peer between the fronds and become the tree; unseen by passersby, I could stand silent, still, and let the world, with all its demands and all its haste, pass me by.

Though I did not know it, I was enacting the deep-rooted literary tradition of what I call arboromorphism, the literal, literary, or psychological process of becoming a tree. Arboromorphism is a prevalent trope in myth and legend; Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for example, is littered with arboreal transformations—Myrrha, Cyarissus, Baucis and Philemon, Daphne, the “metamorphic icon” herself, to name a few.¹ Classical arboromorphism is literal—limbs become branches, bark becomes skin, hair turns into cascades of leaves as “speedy feet / [are] Rooted and held,” and “human senses . . . vanished with . . . human form.”²

In contemporary literature arboromorphism takes a psychological turn.³ In Philip K. Dick's “Piper in the Woods,” a mysterious disease spreads through a garrison of colonists, causing them to believe they are plants; the soldiers reject the capitalist ethos of the garrison, denouncing work and trade as “unnatural” and claiming that “the only worthwhile thing was to sit and contemplate—outside.”⁴ In Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye's arboromorphic transformation is initially inspired by a refusal to participate

1. Ardam, “Releasing Daphne,” 90.

2. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 203, 20, 250.

3. Other instances of contemporary arboromorphism include Smith's *Autumn* and Powers' *Overstory*.

4. Dick, “Piper in the Woods,” 114.

in the cultural violence of meat eating, which builds to a similar refusal to eat, talk, or move.⁵ Though my conception of arboromorphism is rooted (to some extent) in the English language, the phenomenon itself is not exclusively Western, as demonstrated by both *The Vegetarian* and Sumana Roy's *How I Became a Tree*, a critical text that references Sanskrit terminologies, Bengali folk tales, and the work of Indian artists and scientists.

What can we learn from literary arboromorphism? In the age of the Anthropocene, when we have become geological agents, what might it mean to become arboreal, to be “more like a tree . . . endlessly conversing with the sunlight and the soil”?⁶ Roy describes her desire to live in “tree time,” to “escape noise” and “the invisible violence inside humans,” to live slowly, without excess or greed.⁷ Unlike Dick's afflicted soldiers, Roy's arboromorphism is not immobilizing (“who would be foolish enough to call a plant lazy?,” she demands), nor does it result in the decomposition of social ties.⁸ Instead, it expands them, the outsider, the other-than-human becoming neighbor, community, friend.

Drawing from Roy's philosophical concept of becoming a tree, I argue that arboromorphism can be understood as both an ethics and a poetics, a way of thinking and writing connectively, collectively, in a kin-making, assembling, or branching kind of way, that looks beyond the scope and scale of human lives and bodies.⁹ *Arboromorphism*, from *arboreal*, means, at its root, “to grow.”¹⁰ Its companion word, *tree*, shares its roots with *dendrite*, *druid*, *dura mater*, *duress*, *endure*, *troth*, *truth*, and *trust*.¹¹ This canopy of meanings, connected cthonically by their root matter, reveal what it means to become a tree; to become arboreal is to grow not just upward but outward, to connect, to be troth, to trust, to endure.

Rather than being symbols of individuality, trees “look after their own, and they help their sick and weak back up onto their feet. They are even reluctant to abandon their dead.”¹² Trees communicate, collaborate, and form communities, connecting with

5. Kang, *Vegetarian*. It is worth noting that the English translation is contentious, with some critics arguing that it is rife with mistranslations (Kim, “‘Creative’ English Translation of *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang”), and others arguing that it is essentially feminist (Yoon, “Deborah Smith's Infidelity”). Although translation can be seen as an act of collaboration and connectivity consistent with an arboromorphic poetics, this raises important questions about the cultural valences of arboromorphism that deserve consideration beyond the scope of this text.

6. Lovelock, *Gaia*, 12.

7. Roy, *How I Became a Tree*, 23, 27.

8. Roy, *How I Became a Tree*, 62.

9. *Kin-making* is a term from Haraway's *Companion Species Manifesto*. The idea of an “ethics and poetics” draws on the “poethical,” as used by Retallack, who writes that “a poetics thickened by an h” allows us to embrace the “porous borders” between scientific, artistic, and philosophical disciplines (Retallack, *Poethical Wager*, 26–27). An arboromorphic poetics therefore embraces connection and community as ethical and poetical practices.

10. The etymology of *arboreal* can be traced back to the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root **eredh*, meaning to grow high.

11. *Tree* is descended from the PIE root **drew*, meaning to be firm, solid, or steadfast.

12. Wohlleben, *Hidden Life of Trees*, 4.

their neighbors through vast underground networks of mycelial fungus through which they share water, nutrients, and electrical signals.¹³ Trees do not limit themselves to nourishing their own species—they play host to a wealth of organisms, including lichen, insects, and birds. Trees are multispecies assemblages, trees are transcorporeal—each tree body, like each human body, is a “nexus of life and growth within a meshwork of relations . . . not limited by the skin.”¹⁴ Trees are also ghosts, haunting our landscapes; Methuselah, Pando, The Major Oak—veteran trees across the world act as bridges to our past and our oncoming future. “The forms of trees,” therefore, “emerge from relations with others,” be it other lives or other times.¹⁵

In *Metamorphoses*, Baucis and Philemon express a desire that “neither / Outlive the other,” and as they die, are transformed into a “union / Of oak and linden in one.”¹⁶ Human death grants an arboreal life in which the deceased (or transformed) are more closely, more intimately connected. By rejecting anthropocentric priorities of individuality and haste, and embracing arboromorphic qualities of connection and community, our ways of thinking and writing undergo a similar transformation.

In an arboromorphic poetics, we pay close attention to aural, etymological, and thematic roots and branches of relation; we dig for interdisciplinary connections across all species of written matter. Textual relationships are grafted, planted, tended, grown. Time is slow. We prioritize communities, making space for those that need light; we engage in network transfers of resources and ideas; we collaborate. Art is epiphytical to science, science is epiphytical to art; interdisciplinary gardening is key. Form is entangled, nonlinear, rhizomatic; critical writing is creative; creativity is critical. In an arboromorphic poetics, boundaries become hedgerows—spaces of relation, innovation, and growth.

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13. For more on mycelium and arboreal communication, see Sheldrake, *Entangled Life*, and Macfarlane, *Underland*, 87–124.

14. Ingold, *Being Alive*, 63. For “transcorporeality,” see Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*.

15. Mathews, “Ghostly Forms and Forest Histories,” 151.

16. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 203–4.

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