

The Tree from OZ

How can we contrive to be at once astonished
at the world and yet at home in it?

-G. K. Chesterton

“Anthropomorphize” is a praying mantis kind of word—all angles and joints and articulated parts: to change something into a person, just as that voracious insectivore gets its name because it looks like us begging god for mercy. “Personification” is a slicker word, more subtly assembled, the seams sanded smooth: to make something into a person. But “changing” is different from “making.” Ideas and objects are personified when they become human, but animals are anthropomorphized, transformed into persons retaining something of their animal nature. At the turn of the twentieth century, American writers fought over whether treating animals as people was a legitimate way to write about nature. Even the president, Theodore Roosevelt, himself a nature writer, was drawn into the argument. In the end Roosevelt and those arguing that translating animal behavior into humanly motivated behavior was fiction not “nature writing” won. The losers became “the nature fakers.”

So I felt sheepish (therianthropy?) as I stood before the sixth of the sugar maple trees planted around our house and could think only of people. It is the tallest of the sugar maples, rising into the air about 74 feet. I measured it one day using a trick I learned in Boy Scouts. As I stood in the field that spreads out from the top of the embankment across the dirt road from that tree, Madalene stood next to the tree. I took her measure with a stick and then stacked those measures one atop the other until the last Madalene hovered at the top. The tree turned out to be about fourteen Madalenes tall, and since she is five foot three, the rest was multiplication. Tree

diameters are measured at four and a half feet from the ground; that is called Diameter at Breast Height (DBH), mapping human anatomy onto the tree. This tree is about 36 inches DBH.

But it is down around breast height that I begin to have my people problems. The bark on the lower part of the tree draws me in and I lack the Zen-like discipline to see only bark: the tree seems to writhe with motion and patterns emerge from the folds, crevices, and blemishes in the bark. The local patterns in the bark suggest faces, any number of them, like the hidden pictures I remember from *Highlights for Children* magazine: How many faces can you find in this tree? In the magazine, that question had a definite answer since the faces were the product of intelligent design. But the sixth sugar maple is about its own business so the faces in its bark are **insinuated**: focus on a knot here and crease there, and he or she appears but never quite pops out separating itself from the tree the way a *Highlights* hidden picture would. Two particular knots just under the crown of branches, though not level with each other, work quite well in becoming the eyes of a face that serves for the whole tree. In addition, in winter, this tree alone among the sugar maples around the house retains its light brown leaves in the bottom quarter of the tree so that the branches ringing the trunk are festooned with leafy hair. A couple of the branches are lower than the others, and though one is dead, from the correct angle, they can be seen as arms.

An especially clear apparition of that figure in the tree, one day as I came down the front steps of our old farmhouse, called up a vivid remembrance of the trees in the film version of *The Wizard of Oz*. On her way to the city of Oz and accompanied at this point by only the Scarecrow, Dorothy is walking on the yellow-brick road, which has left the rolling cultivated fields of the background flats, and has entered a grove of gnarly trees. The trees are full of apples, but when she picks one, the tree grabs it back, slaps her hand, and says in a gravelly, growly voice, “What do you think you’re doing?” The trunk of the tree, which a moment before looked like a plain old

scenery tree trunk, has developed eyes and a mouth and branches moving like arms. She tells him she’s hungry and he says, “How would you like to have somebody come along and pick something off of you?”

Dorothy turns to the Scarecrow and says, “Oh, dear. I keep forgetting I’m not in Kansas.” In Kansas, Almira Gultch (the Kansas equivalent of the Wicked Witch of the West) can arrest Toto with the full approval of the law; in non-Kansas, however, the rules are so different, that the trees themselves have rights to their fruit. They must be tricked out of it by the “brainless” scarecrow, who makes fun of the apples so that the trees will throw apples at Dorothy and him in anger.

The Scarecrow’s trick takes advantage of the trees’ immobility, counting on their reacting to that immobility in a burst of angry frustration. But a sense that the big sugar maple is straining against its bindings is not in the bark’s faces but in other patterns, patterns that make it seem like the tree itself is full of constrained motion; the tree seems to writhe. Sections of bark have detached along one side, standing out a few inches and sometimes curling up. These curled bark flaps churned from the surface combine with the suggestion of muscle striation in the bark, so that the tree seems to flow upward with motions that weave back and forth over each other. At some points the bark eddies around the bases of branches or the empty sockets of branches that have died and been swept away by decay.

At the bases of the crown of branches, the bark changes, becoming cracked and crazed, like an aerial photograph of an ice-jammed river in the spring thaw, only dark gray like the skin around the eye of an elephant. The crazed bark seems to be crushed together around the bases of the branches and branch scars, but in the open spaces between branches, the trapezoidal bark

shards seem like an avalanche cascading down the tree, frozen in motion, just as it collides with the bark at the base roaring up the tree.

Rising out of this violence like islands in a river is a pair of boles that look like the buttocks of someone whose thighs and torso are caught inside the tree, the right side a little further out than the left. The struggler’s skin looks reptilian. The frozen motion of the bark and the trapped figure move beyond the simple frustration of the Oz trees protecting their fruit. We are given no back-story for the trees in *The Wizard of Oz* and are invited to assume they are indeed trees not people caught within the trees, and they understand their being rooted to earth as part of their nature, the way we understand that we eat through our mouths rather than through the soles of our feet.

But there is a story about man who is turned into a tree by a wicked witch. Like the Wizard of Oz, the Faerie Queene in Edmund Spenser’s epic 16th century poem presides over a place quite different from Kansas. The Red Cross Knight, on a quest just as Dorothy is, reaches up and breaks a branch off a tree, but the tree begins to bleed and moan and eventually tells his piteous story. The tree-man, Fradubio, was tricked by the witch Duessa into abandoning his true beloved, Fraelissa, and transferring his affections to Duessa. Duessa cast a spell over Fraelissa so that all of a sudden she appeared ugly, and Duessa convinced Fradubio that the illusion was in fact Fraelissa’s real nature and that her beauty was an illusion. In horror he abandoned Fraelissa and left with Duessa. Of course, it was Duessa whose youth and beauty were an illusion, and after a while, Fradubio caught a glimpse of her in her true form, and when she read this in his looks, she made her move. Fradubio explains to the Red Cross Knight that while he was sleeping, she

With wicked herbes and ointments did besmeare
My bodie all, through charmes and magicke might,
That all my senses were bereavéd quight:
Then brought she me into this desert waste,
And by my wretched lovers side me pight,
Where now enclosed in wooden wals full faste,
Banisht from living wights, our wearie dayes we waste.

(Book 1, Canto 2, 372-78)

What the reader knows that the Red Cross Knight does not know is that the lady accompanying him is that same Duessa, disguised as Fidessa. Spenser intends us to use the names to see deeper significance in the characters. “Duessa” means “duplicity” and “Fidessa” means “faith”; “Fradubio” contains the word “doubt” and “Fraelissa” means “frailty.” This is story about illusion and deception, about the consequences of misreading the world and failing to see what is real. In this case the consequence is immobility, to be imprisoned in a tree in a wasteland, in Kansas not Oz. It is the trapped Fradubio that I see in the boles, cut off from his love and his adventures.

But there were more characters trapped in the tree. One day after a string of rainy days, I was on the way out to the mailbox, and was brought up short by a dead branch sticking into the ground in the open space between the house and the sugar maples. The branch was fairly straight, about four and a half feet long and two and a quarter inches thick. Stuck in the ground at a 20 degree angle, it looked like a spear or javelin. When I grabbed it, the wood was so rotted

that it broke in half. When, looking up, I studied the fretwork of branches above me, the most likely candidate for the source of the spear was the Oz tree.

The edition of the *Fairie Queene* I read was peppered with explanatory footnotes, one suggesting that the tree story may have been inspired by an incident from Virgil’s *Aeneid* that actually involved spears. Aeneas and his followers are looking for home—he’s not in Troy anymore—and they land on the island of Thrace, where they are thinking of settling. Aeneas attempts to break off a “spear-like” limb from a myrtle tree that looks like a coppice, a tree with many small trunks beginning close to the ground. Such small trunks would be cut for poles and others would grow up to take their places. But the coppiced tree that Aeneas comes upon takes its shape not from forestry but from treachery. When Aeneas breaks off one of the limbs, he discovers that blood drips out the end; he breaks off another and the tree seems to cry out. Once again, the tree begins to speak, and Aeneas finds out that the small trunks growing in a cluster from the ground are rooted in the body of Polydorus, a Trojan prince who was sent from home during the Trojan War with a large treasure to the king of Thrace to be raised away from the threat of the Greek siege. But the Thracian king ended up killing Polydorus for the treasure. He was killed with many spears and as Dryden translates it, ““Here loads of lances, in my blood embrued, / Again shoot upward, by my blood renew'd.”” Rooted in his body, the spears have become living branches.

Poor Polydorus. The Battle of Troy was the great adventure, almost the pivotal one in Western Culture. Achilles rejected a long, peaceful life to face certain death there in order to be part of it. Polydorus lost his chance, was kept from it so he would be safe, and ends up dying anyway, buried in obscurity. In the end, Polydorus serves as only a bit player in someone else’s

adventure. He is merely a warning to Aeneas, who abandons his plan to make Thrace the home for himself and his fellow refugees from Troy and continues the search.

Instinctively, I responded to the stick in the ground as if it were a spear thrown deliberately by the tree, like the trees in *The Wizard of Oz* throwing their fruit. And in a way it was. Just as during the fall, trees form an abscission layer between the branch and the leaf because they intend to get rid of those leaves for winter, trees protect themselves from dead branches by forming a protective layer between the living and dead wood, and eventually the dead wood is cut off and falls. So the tree wanted that branch to drop off. But the spear is also a kind of warning: that the tree keeps its own counsel and will take action based on its needs not mine. No matter what I imagine about it, it is itself. Look at the spear at your feet, it says, and keep your distance.

But despite that warning, there are other stories of transformation that the sugar maple tree evokes, and one in particular I have always found haunting. The nymph Daphne becomes embroiled in one of the gods' disputes when Cupid, to revenge himself on Apollo, shoots Apollo through the heart with a sharp, gold-tipped arrow, and Daphne through the heart with a blunt lead-tipped arrow. Apollo becomes madly in love with Daphne, and Daphne, uninterested in love, just wants to stay in the forest and hunt game. Her indifference enflames Apollo all the more. Eventually he begins to chase her and she flees, but she is not fast enough and the god gains on her. She cries out to her father the river god to either bury her or change the form that has caused her to be pursued. Bulfinch, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, described what happens next,

Scarcely had she spoken, when a stiffness seized all her limbs; her bosom began to be enclosed in a tender bark; her hair became leaves; her arms became

branches; her foot stuck fast in the ground, as a root; her face, became a tree-top, retaining nothing of its former self but its beauty.

I remember when first hearing this story as a young person, feeling that this transformation was particularly unfair. It was also before I came to understand how the story reflects the unfairness of the way sexual predators can restrict the lives of women. But something else is going on too: Daphne is refusing an adventure. Apollo is a god—the sun god, the god of poetry and music—but she refuses the connection with the divine and prefers the safety of virginity and her usual activities. She is not running toward something; she is running away. The critical first step in any heroic story is the call to adventure, the requirement that the hero take a chance, try something new and perhaps dangerous. By refusing to act she is condemned to take a form more consistent with such inaction, the tree rooted in its place. She does not ask to become a tree, but what she does ask for is to continue to be part of the forest, to stay as she is. And for Daphne, as for Fradubio, and Polydorus, the tree is a symbol of restricted movement, a loss of the dynamic principle. Even the Oz apple trees, left behind by the side of the Yellow Brick Road, exemplify the impotence of trees, their inability to move as they throw their fruit into the air.

As I stand outside the door of my home on the half-dead grass pressed down under my feet into the cold, pre-spring mud, I see the struggle in the trunk of the sugar maple tree and the stories it evokes, and I wonder if there is some basis in the life of this tree for this response. Is the tree itself struggling against bondage to this place. Of course the shape of the tree is the product of its struggle for the sun: it cannot move, but it can shape shift, adding branches and shedding them as needed. But the tree will always be in its home. And there is, of course, no

place like home: this damp, cold, gray landscape that is the photographic negative of the sunny, colorful Land of OZ.

Made in 1939 at the height of the Depression, the film version of *The Wizard of OZ* portrays a Kansas that is bleak—black and white, a landscape of dirt roads, broken fences, and a few twisted, leafless trees. The buildings all need paint, and dull, utilitarian cornfields stretch as far as the eye can see. It is a drab and unfriendly place. But Kansas is home and as Dorothy must repeat to activate the shoes, “There’s no place like home.” Kansas is certainly quite unlike Oz, which is much more like California--the rolling hills, colorful fields, exotic flowers and trees full of fruit. Oz is Hollywood

But did Dorothy leave home? In the film, when Dorothy awakens, we come to believe that all that happened was actually inside her head, and that during her Oz adventure when she says, “We’re not in Kansas anymore,” she is wrong because she never even left the house. Oz is peopled by characters out of her Kansas life improbably metamorphosized into a scarecrow, a bionic robot, a lion, and a witch. She meets tiny people and flying monkeys. The Wizard (the transformed snake oil salesman) is the Hollywood producer pedaling illusions and showmanship: the emerald city is emerald because people wear green glasses. “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain,” the fiery head bellows. And all those folks in Kansas who came into town from their dustbowl farms to watch the movie sit in the darkened movie theaters realizing they don’t need to go to anywhere since they already have what Dorothy had to work so hard for: they are home. Neither Dorothy nor the audience ever leaves home.

Perhaps that is not so big a problem. Even if the adventure is entirely inside Dorothy’s head, the maturing of the hero is an important element of the heroic adventure. But how

transformative is the experience in Oz? Not much, it turns out. Dorothy wants to go home from the outset and she gets her wish. What do Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodsman, and the Lion learn? Her three companions did not need to change or grow; they simply needed to realize that they were fine just the way they were. The Wizard is in both senses of the word, a confidence man: it's not about actually learning things; it's about self esteem. Dorothy certainly shows pluck, but of course she is plucky from the beginning. Dorothy wants to go back to being a child; she wants to go back home, to the safety of Auntie Em.

The most important question for measuring how Dorothy has profited by the experience is left unanswered: What will happen to Toto? Dorothy overcomes two wicked witches in her head, but both victories are accidents. Back in Kansas, outside the home created by Auntie Em and Uncle Henry, will she be able to protect Toto? Are we to assume that Miss Gulch died in the tornado? (Another accidental deliverance?) Can Dorothy now overcome evil in the real world? If Dorothy's adventure is entirely in her head then it is like any of our efforts to overcome our own limitations. Even if I triumph over my chronic procrastinating, for example, that triumph is pointless if when I act what I do is trivial and meaningless. I must go on to have real adventures in a landscape outside myself that affect other people. We have a right to expect that something more than the self is at stake in an adventure, that the hero's realization means something beyond itself.

The defeating of the devils inside ourselves—building our confidence, overcoming our fears—is simply getting ready, packing our bags. We cannot stay home and have adventures: we must go someplace that is no place like home because home is safety and an adventure requires the hero to become unsafe, to choose to be unsafe. We must get outside of ourselves. The real adventure happens out on that alien landscape and its essential nature is discovering the larger

forces at work in that landscape, things outside ourselves that we cannot control, and in confronting them becoming larger than ourselves, larger than life.

This big sugar maple tree in the front yard of our house, going through its cyclical life and slow imperceptible linear growth, could easily symbolize the stability and vitality of home. But that would mean ignoring the sense of struggle in the scarred bark and in the lost branches. The sugar maple is rooted in this place, trapped. It has no wizard to tell it “You’re OK,” and its delicate neurotic mechanisms sense that the acid rain, the warming climate, its own aging processes have a message for it about the future, but it cannot flee to some better place.

But the forest can. The forest, however, has always symbolized adventure. Unlike the tree planted in the front yard or in a managed woodlot, the mythical forest shapes itself, plants itself, prunes itself in fire and storm, constantly confronting and adapting to the larger forces of the universe, forces embodied in foundational cultural myth—thunder and lightning, storm and flood, seasons and disease. It is a place of shadow and mystery. And each spring the sugar maples grow wings that ripen during the summer and take off for new places. The sugar maples in the forest can migrate northward to escape the warmth, the acid from the west, and the limited life of any one tree; it can seek a place that is a new home at the end of an adventure involving forces as big as the earth. In their flight, however, the sugar maples will leave their wounded behind and we will live among them and read the stories in their bark.