

“A-synchronous messaging”: The Fictional World of Richard Powers

Of a new generation of highly gifted contemporary American writers – such as David Foster Wallace, William T. Vollmann, Jonathan Franzen or Jeffrey Eugenides: all born in the late 1950s and early 1960s – Richard Powers surely is the most brilliantly versatile and intellectually demanding. In fact, his novels have been an awe-inspiring experience for most of his readers; if only for the reason that the author’s erudition forces them to face the limits of their own knowledge – be it in genetics, artificial intelligence, the growth of corporate capitalism, the structure of baroque music, quantum physics, paleontology or the structure of the brain. Positioning himself at the crossroads of literature and the sciences has put him in an ancestral line with authors like Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, Joseph McElroy or Don DeLillo (an ancestry he gladly acknowledges), but has also brought him the reputation of being a ‘brainy’ writer with implications of intellectual aloofness and emotional coldness. Powers’s books have nevertheless appealed especially to audiences in Europe (where ‘novels of ideas’ have traditionally had a larger resonance) and to young scholars for whom his attempts to combine imagination with scientific expertise have been a creative challenge, a whetstone for their intelligence as well as their ambition.¹

He is also an author noted for his willingness to “tackle big subjects,” and accordingly his novels have been called “content-intensive.” Some critics were even quick to link his work to nineteenth-century traditions of novel writing. “However idiosyncratic his technique,” Daniel Mendelsohn declared in a review of *The Time of Our Singing*, “the novelists whom Powers really resembles are the nineteenth-century behemoths, like Balzac or Zola or Tolstoy.” This is true and yet beside the point. It is true inasmuch as all of Powers’s novels are eminently topical: They deal with relevant aspects of our social and historical experience (atomic fall-out, the fate of children in postcolonial times, cancer and the cancerous growth of corporate capital, the false promise of the virtual and digital, racism and cultural diversity, the fragile constitution of the brain). And yet, what Mendelsohn calls his “idiosyncratic technique” indicates that Powers narrates these seemingly ‘realistic’ or ‘naturalistic’ matters in a manner beyond traditional concepts of mimesis. In all his fictions ‘content’ is

¹ I am thinking specifically of two relatively recent dissertations on Powers’s fiction, both brilliant in distinctly different ways: Emilie Janton’s “Systèmes, modèles et représentation dans les romans de Richard Powers” and Jan Kucharzewski’s *Propositions about Life: Reengaging Literature and Science*.

intimately connected with ‘form,’ and in many cases ‘story’ grows out of structure – e.g., out of the structure of Bach’s fugues or the double helix of the genetic code in *The Gold Bug Variations*. Without being overtly self-referential, even his most ‘content-intensive’ novels imply a metafictional reflection on how stories are told, how they unfold, how they are, in fact, central to our lives and self-awareness – since “the brain,” as he once observed, “is the ultimate story-telling machine and consciousness the ultimate story” (qtd. in Michod). And yet, in all likelihood, he would not call himself an experimental writer.

Although they do not playfully engage in the postmodern deconstruction of the mimetic mode or project a poststructuralist sense of confinement to the “prisonhouse of language,” Powers’s fictions nevertheless undermine the very basis of mimetic representation since they conceive of the mind as being part of the reality it experiences: as shaped by it and as shaping it in the process of its own unfolding. Even if language cannot truly represent the things it names, it can provide the codes and metaphors, the structures of cognition. Self-reference and world-reference therefore strangely echo and interact with one other: “Remember,” as Powers explained once, “that the actively narrating conscious brain is not arbitrary; it is itself the evolutionary product of several billion years of bumping up against the world ...” (qtd. in Neilson).

This overlapping of self-reference and world-reference has made it difficult to place Powers and his work in the context of contemporary writing (something which continues to worry his critics). In a provocative yet thoughtful interview, Jean-Yves Pellegrin tried, several years ago, to connect Powers’s closely-knit novels (their “system-like unity”) to the aesthetics of early twentieth-century modernist literature rather than to the open-ended fragmentariness of postmodern fiction. To which Powers replied that he had often wondered

if my connection does not even predate modernism in some way, if these books don’t somehow resemble works of nineteenth-century encyclopaedic social survey, like a survey in a Dickens novel on, let’s say, the social effect of the factory system or the law courts. What are the large-scale social institutions going to do to the characters? (qtd. in Pellegrin)

Although Powers points to Dickens primarily to justify the inclusion of discursive elements in his own novels, he also places himself in a tradition of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction (from Balzac and Dickens via Melville to Joyce and Musil) that incorporates the factual and documentary in its strategies of representation – in his case, against a moving, yet always present historical background of twentieth-century horrors: both world wars and the holocaust to Vietnam, the two Gulf wars, Middle-East terrorism, 9/11 and its patriotic aftermath. Considering the scope of his

work and its attempt to understand human existence in its social, environmental, genetic and historical interconnectedness, one might perhaps evoke the spirit of Balzac's monumental if unfinished project of *La Comédie Humaine* and its obsession with placing the individual within contexts that not only include the rich particularity of the social and economic, of individual and collective *mores* in general, but also the scientific and, as its largest frame, the cosmic. What seems evident, in any case, is that Powers grounds his writing in established traditions as well as in traditional functions of the novel: to enlighten, to instruct, to entertain² – but under the radically new conditions of contemporary reality and scientific knowledge: “And that’s how my books work,” he argues in one of his many interviews:

They work by saying you cannot understand a person minimally, you cannot understand a person simply as a function of his inability to get along with his wife, you cannot even understand a person through his supposedly causal psychological profile. You can't understand a person completely in any sense, unless that sense takes into consideration all of the contexts that that person inhabits. And a person at the end of the second millennium inhabits more contexts than any specialized discipline can easily name. We are shaped by runaway technology, by the apotheosis of business and markets, by sciences that occasionally seem on the verge of completing themselves or collapsing under its own runaway success. This is the world we live in. If you think of the novel as a supreme connection machine – the most complex artifact of networking that we've ever developed – then you have to ask how a novelist would dare leave out 95% of the picture. (qtd. in J. Williams, “The Last Generalist”)

I am tempted to call this not only an aesthetic but also an educational program. It is connected with a sense of urgency that has its origin in the discrepancy between the present state of scientific knowledge and the general state of social and ecological unawareness on which the global reign of corporate capitalism thrives – threatening, among other things, the status of the novel and the vital role that Powers ascribes to it. His books are, as Sven Birkerts notes, political and driven by “a passionate social concern” (59). The novel, as “the most complex artifact of networking that we've ever developed,” in fact provides, so Powers argued with reference to his sixth novel, *Gain*, “a forum for the reawakening of conscience. Social conscience and moral conscience. And I think if I felt that it weren't a political forum, that I would be much less interested in writing. I'm not finally a believer that private aesthetic experience has much redemptive value” (qtd. in Tortorello).

² Commenting on the novel's relation to the entertainment industry, Powers argues that “to the extent that novels have tried to compete in that industry, the two halves of the old imperative ‘to instruct and delight’ have begun to seem inimically programmed, whereas they ought to be more or less identical” (qtd. in Neilson).

However, it is not for *this* reason that Jean-Yves Pellegrin presses Powers on the potential didacticism of his novels – rather, he sees in Powers’s mastery of form a veiled attempt at controlling the reading process. Which Powers, of course, denies. And with good reason. Although he places himself in a continuity of modern and pre-modern traditions of the novel and evokes existing conventions of plot and character, he uses them for the purpose of undermining them. As Charles Harris writes: Powers “reappropriates and recontextualizes the conventions of representational [or for that matter: psychological] realism” (“The Story” 242). In his case, “realism” is, in fact, a highly innovative and self-conscious constructivism in so far as all categories traditionally connected with the term – all forms of the real: the sensually perceived, a shared everyday, all aspects of character and the dynamics of family – are, as Bruno Latour has it, “facsimiles,” always part of a fluid process of construction, narrativization, reinvention (274). In this sense, Powers’s work forces us to reconsider the meaning of “realism” in terms of a quasi-mimetic, map-like correlation between a textual and an analogous, yet different, extra-textual reality – a “simulacrum of mimesis,” thus Harris, that allows, on the one hand, a self-referential emphasis of language and design, and, on the other, an interaction between world and text via the participation of the reader (cp. Harris, “Technoromanticism”). As Powers writes at the end of *Plowing the Dark* when the “cave” of virtual reality construction is turned metaphorically into the space of narrative fiction: “Inside this room, the world re-forms itself. Outside, there is no saying. Against the real, *perhaps* must plead no contest. But from the demonstration room, no one walks out the way he came” (410). Our concept of ‘innovation’ will have to be redefined as well – beyond the radical flair of avant-garde experimentalism in any case since, as Powers demonstrates, it is possible to be traditional *and* innovative at the same time.

And yet, there is a tension which Pellegrin caught astutely without nailing it down. Powers, whose books resonate with John Dewey’s pragmatist aesthetics, wants his fictions to be socially useful; he wants them to transform the awareness of the reader, and for that he has to rely on the reader’s ability to read right: “The only thing that is going to save us is better reading. Reading that knows when narrative is leading us away from the brink and when narrative is leading us headlong toward it. The future of the world depends upon our skill as readers” (qtd. in Hermanson). Perhaps this explains the astonishing number of interviews that have accompanied the publications of his novels for some time. In fact, it is difficult to avoid the impression that Powers has been trying to control the discourse about his work – quite successfully if you consider how often critics (this one included) refer to his interviews. Being perhaps the best reader of his books, he guides our reading even against his better judgment. For, as he

says, again in an interview, he gives them only with “trepidation” since they might intrude upon the dialogue – a dialogue he treasures – between text and reader (qtd. in Blume). It is not, as Pellegrin suspected, that his *novels* are didactic. He avoids direct “messaging” by his structural openness of form; but then he frames it didactically with massive explanatory comment.

It is this tension – within his fictions but also within his concept of the novel’s function – which I address in the oxymoronic metaphor of my title: “a-synchronous messaging” which is of course taken, once again, from Powers himself. I shall explore, in my following analyses, those structures of open closure or of closed openness, i.e., of indirect, broken up or fragmented messaging, that characterize all of his novels and make for a distinct Powers signature. I shall discuss continuities and shifts in the history of his novelistic self-inventions, then briefly compare one of his earlier with one of his recent fictions (the apocalyptic *Operation Wandering Soul* with his more light-hearted social satire, *Generosity*³) and finally focus on the endings of some of his novels, since as he also says in that illuminating interview with Pellegrin:

[T]he amazing thing about story is that endings are the source of meaning. When we read the last page of a book, it retroactively changes all the pages that came before. So rather than putting an end to meaning, endings generate meaning, retroactively lending significance to all the stories that we try to tell.

Or, again, in a conversation with Bradford Morrow: “I write the book to discover the ending that, unknown to me, has set me on the path of the story in the first place.”

The phrase “a-synchronous messaging” is originally used by Powers with reference to the peculiar temporal structure of several of his novels – first in *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, but then again in *The Gold Bug Variations*, *Gain*, *Plowing the Dark* and *The Time of Our Singing*.⁴ It also applies to disruptions in the development of what seem to be conventional plot lines. “A-synchronous messaging,” or what Powers

³ “[A] novel about whether the human race can have a happy ending,” as Power described *Generosity* (then still in progress) in his interview with Alec Michod.

⁴ “A lot of my books have been structured around this idea of an a-synchronous messaging, that there are two or more stories going on in different moments in time that are somehow trying to signal each other, trying to open a conversation between time periods that ought to be sealed off one from the other as far as any ongoing message. But in the moment of being reconstituted in the reader’s brain those messages between past, present, and future are, I hope, detonating all the time” (Powers, qtd. in Hendricks).

and Charles Harris call the “stereo view,” marks the point where different discourses, different temporal or conceptual frames jarringly meet, overlap or interpenetrate so that the reader is forced out of his/her settled expectation of plot development. As Margaret Atwood phrased it in her review of *The Echo Maker*: “Powers jams wildly disparate elements together in a kind of atomic-bomb manner – what he wants is fission, then fusion, and a big bang at the end.”

Atwood’s explosive metaphor usefully reminds us that the function of Powers’s structures and constructions is to a great extent appellative, pragmatic: They are meant to affect the reader, to change his/her awareness, by “detonating”, as Powers himself writes, in “the reader’s brain” (qtd. in Hendricks). At the same time there is an organic subtext underlying the dominant constructivist rhetoric. It refers not only to structural coherence and the intricate, often symmetric, order of his narrative (like Borges, Pynchon, DeLillo and Coover, Powers is fascinated by symmetries of doubling and numeric arrangements) but also to an intimate connection between content and the linguistic shape it takes: as if each story generated its own appropriate form – a form as much invented as it is discovered in the process of writing. Thus, each book becomes “an experiment in finding the style that best supports and exemplifies that particular story’s themes.” Accordingly, he calls *The Gold Bug Variations*, for instance, a novel “about linguistic mutation and wordplay, and I tried to imitate my vision of the genetic code as a punning, runaway fecundity in the book’s prose” (qtd. in Neilson). In a similar way, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985) – Powers’s first novel and, formally as well as thematically, the ‘germ’ of much of his later work – is a triangular exploration of an initial act of intense seeing (of “observation” as “involvement”). Seeing equals interpretation, which is acted out, on different levels and in different voices, as story, as narration. It translates the act of seeing into an act of participation and thus also, at least by implication, into a call for action.

The novel is composed of three intertwining plot lines arranged in an a-b-c-musical sequence that is repeated nine times to form the 27 chapters of the book – the last of them, “Arrival at the Dance,” brings “the trajectories of the three narratives” together “in an ‘intersection of planes”” (Cristofovici 47). In the first plot line A, the nameless I-narrator (whose only vice is, as he says, “symmetry”) sees, in a photo exhibition of the Detroit Institute of Arts, August Sander’s photo of 1914, “Three Westwald Farmers on Their Way to a Dance.” (As Powers himself did in the early 1980s – a conversion experience that transformed the scientist into a novelist.⁵) The I-narrator is haunted by the three young men apparently

⁵ “One Saturday, I went to see a show of a German photographer whom I thought I had never heard of before. It was the first American retrospective of his work. I remember very vividly walking into the exhibition room and bearing to my left and

looking directly at *him*, the observer, who knows the future that is still unknown to *them* who are caught in the present moment that for *him* is a known past of catastrophe and war. His search into the history of the photograph as well as into that of its creator constitutes the book's narrated present.

Plot line B, told by a third-person narrator in the present tense, tells the interwoven life (and death) stories of the three farmers – named Hubert, Peter and Adolphe – during World War I and after, thus establishing a second time level in the historic past. While the third plot line, C, is yet another contemporary tale of the mid-1980s, this time telling in the third person the story of what seems to be the I-narrator's alter-ego, Peter Mays who, although starting *his* search for identity at another end, also encounters Sander's photograph of the three farmers and is likewise drawn to it. These mutually reflective and interacting elements, told via three distinctly different narrative voices, are part of a complex strategy designed to make the past speak to the present: a double or, more precisely, a triple perspective based, surely first, on the photographer's act but, second (and perhaps more importantly), on the narrator's and his alter-ego's reinvention of that frozen moment of arrested past from different positions in the present. The narrator calls this a "stereo" or "parallax view" that gives three-dimensional depth to the photograph's flat surface:

One context did not replace the other but existed concurrently, like the two views needed to create the illusion of depth in a stereoscope. [...] With two slightly dif-

seeing this photograph on the wall that instantly seemed recognizable to me. Three young men in Sunday suits, looking out over their shoulders as if they had been waiting there for seventy years for me to return their gaze. I leaned forward to read the caption, and the picture was named, 'Young Westerwald Farmers on Their Way to a Dance, 1914.' The words went right up my spine. I knew instantly not only that they were on their way to a different dance than they thought they were, but that I was on the way to a dance that I hadn't anticipated until then. All of my previous year's random reading just consolidated and converged on this one moment, this image, which seemed to me to be the birth photograph of the twentieth century" (qtd. in J. Williams, "The Last Generalist"; see also Hendricks). Significantly, the narrator does not – like his author, Richard Powers – discover Sander's picture in the Fine Arts Museum in Boston but in the Detroit Institute of Arts where he first encounters Diego Rivera's gigantic mural dedicated to machinery and mass production before he "wheeled smack" into Sander's portrait of the three farmers – also a work of social realism with a story that feeds into the story of the century. Sander had meant his photograph to be part of a life-time project he called "Man of the Twentieth Century" in which he wanted to visually record a broad variety of German social types, "a massive, comprehensive catalog of people written in the universal language – photography" (*Three Farmers* 39) Because of the destructions of World War II and twelve years of Nazi censorship Sander was never able to finish it. However, some of the photographs he had collected for his *magnum opus* later became part of the most famous photo exhibition of the 1950s, Edward Steichen's "The Family of Man."

ferent views of the photo [...] side by side, I needed only the stereopticon itself to bring the image into fleshy three-dimensionality. Walking home through the drifts in the dark, I began to imagine what shape that machine might take. I saw the thin film of the image spreading out in two directions, back through the past, through catastrophe, to that idyllic day that had brought the taker and subjects together, and forward, far forward in time until the product of that day crossed the path of one who, like me, took on the obligation of seeing. (334)

The ambivalent reference to an “I” that is not only “one like *me*” but also one “*like me*,” clearly is intentional (emphasis added). The (hi)story of the person(s) caught in the “arresting moment” of photography is brought to life not only by a future “reader” but by a process of interpretation that connects past and present in an act of self-recognition that is the narrator’s as well as the reader’s.

In fact, the novel includes the reader in its very structure. One could even say that by making the reader an active agent of its own entanglement in history, the novel allegorically enacts the merging of its representational with its pragmatic functions: “Only through the direct complicity of another, an interpreter and collaborator, can we extend the code of survival hidden in the past. *The form that delights the eye prescribes action; the eye’s delight is its own best telling*” (336, emphasis added). The “dance” of its title thus also refers to the narrative ‘dance’ of the novel itself: between stories situated on different time levels and told in different voices and from different perspectives – “the past looking full-faced into the present and recognizing it,” and the present creating itself in the recognition of the past. “Remembering forward,” Powers called this in an interview (qtd. in Hendricks); and the attempt at “trying to open a conversation between time periods” (qtd. in Berger), discourses or areas of experience normally sealed off from each other remains a characteristic of his subsequent novels.

This weaving together of two or three narrative voices, perspectives or positions in order to create a “stereo view” of history Powers uses again, in different ways but to similar pragmatic purpose, in *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991), *Gain* (1998), *Plowing the Dark* (2000) and *The Time of Our Singing* (2003) – with most sophistication in the first and last of these four novels. In *Gain* and *Plowing the Dark* the braiding of contrapuntal narratives into a sequence of alternating chapters is relatively straightforward – correlating, in the case of *Gain*, the expanding public world of corporate capitalism and the shrinking world of private life incorporated and destroyed by the former’s cancerous growth. In a similar and yet quite different way, Powers juxtaposes and interlinks two totally disconnected and secluded realms of experience in his next novel, *Plowing the Dark*. On the one hand, there is the self-enclosed world of a technological avant-garde working to create a substitute reality of complete simulation, and on the other the closed-off room where the kidnapped victim of an Arab

terrorist group tries to keep mentally alive by reconstructing, word for word, the books he has read and by visualizing, minutely and painstakingly, the world he can no longer see. The book opens with a section evoking an island space of confinement (out of time and out of world) that may refer to either of the two realms. In the subsequent narrative these are diametrically set against each other until, in the last chapters, they converge – by a miraculous leap of the imagination – to form one visionary space. Taimur Martin, an Iranian-American language teacher in Beirut and the protagonist of the terrorist plot line, uses memory and the mind's image-making faculty as a means of survival in a situation of prolonged solitude and deprivation. While Adie Klarpot, once an artist of promise, is lured into joining a virtual reality project in Seattle (the "Cave Project" according to its grounding in a Platonic concept of the world). It is run by a team of artists and scientists dedicated to realize the ultimate dream of representation: a "self-contained virtual environment," the complete imitation of life by its most perfect substitution. Yeats's aesthetic utopia in "Sailing to Byzantium" is the subtext of this dream whose realization in the digital age is the immortal immanence of a virtual existence beyond time and body, "humanity's final victory over the tyranny of matter" (267).⁶

The complicity between fantasies of an aesthetic counterworld and the lure of the visual/virtual becomes apparent when Adie, inspired by Yeats's poem, constructs a life-size virtual model of the Hagia Sophia, "the Byzantine temple in Istanbul she associates with Yeats's 'artifice of eternity'" (Harris, "Technoromanticism" 256). When she comes to realize that "the Air Force had taken all her pretty pictures and put them to use" in the precision bombings of the first Gulf War and that "[h]er work here was just a rough draft for technology's wider plan," she enters virtually the temple of her art as a soaring angel of destruction, "*in* the simulation but not *of* it" (*Plowing the Dark* 397-98). Falling "like a startled fledgling, back into the world's snare," she sees a man "staring up at her fall, his face an awed bitmap no artist could have animated" (399). Although nameless, it is – so we may assume – Taimur, freed from his blindfold, tumbling back into a world that has become for him a sacred temple and a visionary space: He sees an angel falling, "its bewilderment outstripping your own." Is she the

⁶ Cp. Richard Powers's short essay "Being and Seeming," where he writes: "The more advanced the media, the higher the level of mediation. The hypersymbolic nature of the digital – the fact that its descriptions have that odd ability to rise up and walk – leaves it particularly vulnerable to this mistake. More than ever, we are in danger of reifying our artifacts, of mistaking them for a priori entities [...]. The problem with the digital promise lies not in its frivolity or its shallowness. (Remember that only upon its deathbed has the novel no longer needed to defend itself from being only a novel.) The problem with the digital promise lies in its potential depth, in the degree and the force of an emulation that might make us content to take the map for the place, the sign for the thing signified."

“truth that only solitude reveals” (414)? Or is it the need for such truth that provokes her falling? Since the novel projects a world in which the imagination is put to such radically opposed uses, the question arises “whether the imagination is powerful enough to save ourselves from its power” (Powers, qtd. in J. Williams, “The Last Generalist”). The novel cannot, of course, answer that question but it clearly opts for the saving power of memory and reading where the world is creatively imagined, reflected and reconstructed at a remove from it. *Plowing the Dark* is a passionate plea for the novel as a (counter-)virtual space in which reality is not replaced but “re-constituted into something more survivable.”⁷

The Gold Bug Variations links the discourse of genetics to that of musicology and the structure of DNA to that of Bach’s “Goldberg Variations,” the “best metaphor for the living gene,” a “symmetry-laced catalog of unity” that nevertheless reveals “how nothing was the same as anything else.” Apart from the obvious fact that Powers models the structure of his novel on that of the “Goldberg Variations” – there are in both cases an Aria (Prologue), thirty Variations (Chapters) and another Aria (Epilogue) – he also follows the arrangement of Bach’s variations in groups of three, each consisting of different musical forms. According to Barry Lewis, these forms correspond to the novel’s three narrative lines connecting three temporal levels and two intersecting and interweaving narratives in “an ascending spiral dance” around each other (84).

In his intricate analysis of the novel, Jay Labinger has shown that Powers takes the structure of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* – built on threes and fours – as a generative code for creating multiple meanings, the message of the book being “the overriding importance of the *infinite* arising from the *simple*.” (“What could be simpler?” as one of the protagonists argues. “We all derive from the same four notes” 25) The code is “embedded in every level: in the metaphor-, allusion-, and pun-rich language; in the individual coding motifs; in the narrative; and in the structure of the entire text” (Labinger 92).

From a slightly different perspective, the generative code becomes a metaphor also of ecological and narrative interconnectedness: “Each thing is what it is only through everything else” (180). The symmetric set of

⁷ In one of several interviews on *Plowing the Dark*, Powers describes Adie and Taimur’s encounter as a “metaphor for reading; that’s what reading does. In the end, the book becomes an apology for the virtuality of fiction, fiction not as a replacement for the real world, but as a hybrid place where the real world is suspended and reconstituted into something more survivable” (qtd. in Harris, “Technoromanticism” 273). In an interview he gave to *The Paris Review*, Powers states that he got the idea for the book when he heard Terry Waite sum up his five-year captivity in Beirut in the “shocking” statement that “Contemporary humanity has lost the ability to engage in productive solitude” (qtd. in Berger).

characters and the choreography of their changing interrelation merge the love for life with the desire for cognition. Not, as one of them comes to realize, in order to advance, in the name of scientific efficiency, “the sadistic myth of progress,” but “to revive and cultivate a perpetual state of wonder” (611) – wonder at life’s as well as the mind’s infinite possibilities and mutabilities; a wonder, however, that is always also on the verge of possible disaster.

“That all things possible must exist” is a variation of Bach’s dictum “Es muss alles möglich zu machen seyn.” This is the quasi-musical ‘base’ of Powers’s work, its thematic center, its harmonic vision built on “catastrophic awareness.” Whereas, in the field of science, not everything that *might* be *should* be, in the field of culture, Bach’s dictum becomes a plea for the reality of the particular; since, in Powers’s fictional world, the free unfolding of the imagination (the life’s mind) is concurrent with the evolutionary unfolding of life itself. Within this cultural field, fiction is the privileged space of “symbolic transaction” in which the possibly real is ethically tested through and against experience. Herein lies fiction’s political and cultural significance – its function for the mind’s survival.⁸ And it is here that the culturally possible can be said to realize itself, against a coercive concept of cultural unity and as part of a push for cultural mutation and diversity. However, the universal survives in the very process of its unceasing transformation. Powers’s fiction, as much as Bach’s contrapuntal music, hovers “around the fixed center of diatonic time.” They are both “tightly bound, symmetry-laced catalog[s] of unity” in which structure may be repeated but in which “nothing was the same as anything else.” They thus form “an imperceptibly vast chaconne, an evolutionary passacaglia built on repetition and recycling” (578) whose basic unity is realized in the very plenitude of its possible variations but whose polyphonic harmonies neither deny nor hide the reality of the abyss.

Musical structure and intersecting time levels that make present, past and future converse with each other are used again differently in *The Time of Our Singing* which probes into the history of twentieth-century racism

⁸ “My apology for fiction has always taken the form of saying: When we live in real time, under the onslaught of the challenges of unmediated existence, we cannot solve all the problems that are thrown at us, the problems of the physical challenge of the world, the nature and needs of others, our own internal aggressions and animosities and ambivalences. Therefore, we remove ourselves into the space of symbolic transaction. And we do that with an eye toward solving in abstract those crises, getting a handle on them in the domain where time has been suspended. And then we reenter, more fully equipped, the world of reality” (qtd. in Harris 274-75n). In his interview with Jim Neilson, Powers argues in similar fashion for fiction’s powerless power: “The problem with the world we have made is that it can’t be survived without the fictional moratorium that fiction provides, but it can’t be opposed adequately from within that fictional moratorium.”

and its alliance with universalist notions of culture. Although the novel’s narrative by and large follows a linear sequence from Marian Anderson’s concert at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 to the Rodney King trial in Los Angeles and its violent aftermath in 1992, it frequently turns back on itself in temporal and musical loops of “unchanging change” (629). Combining a complex musical structure of counterpoint with Einsteinian notions of relative time, the novel revolves around three temporal still-points: returning twice to 1961, Jonah Strom’s debut as professional singer; three times to 1955 when his mother Delia dies from hate crime or accident; and four times to 1939, when Delia Daley, a black nurse who wants to become a singer, and David Strom, a German-Jewish mathematician and physicist who barely escaped the Holocaust, meet at the Anderson concert, decide to ignore racial barriers and marry to build a quasi-utopian family space beyond race. Via these temporal loops, the narrative not only contracts time by telescoping several generations into one recurrent name or situation, it also spirals back to the foundational moment of transracial union when Delia and David meet for the first time. Due to the novel’s peculiar temporal structure, however, this moment is rendered not only as remembered past but also as remembered future, as a past that is already (or yet again) ‘in’ the future – a moment in time out of time which keeps possibilities open. This structure of suspended temporality is emphasized again and again since it makes for the book’s topic as much as for the manner of its telling: “She hears effect before cause, response before call: her own daughter singing to her, the one tune that will do for her funeral” (524); or: “Time backward and time forward: Both are always. The universe does not make a difference between the two. Only we do” (355). Not only is past re-enacted as present, future is already present in a past repeating what is yet to come. I have shown elsewhere that from this “still-point” the universalist dream (“the old imperial dream of coherence” 177) – so thoroughly discredited by its imperialist or racist underpinnings – can yet be redefined: not *beyond* or *above* the reality of race but *through* the concrete particularity of its experience: “Not beyond color, *into* it. Not or; and. And new ands all the time” (621).⁹

⁹ For a more extensive discussion, see Ickstadt, “Surviving the Particular?” Powers’s most recent novel, *Orfeo* (2014), continues the interweaving of musicologist and genetic discourse in a post-9/11 context of collective paranoia. It is a book full of wonder, obsession, pain and mystery that I am tempted to call Powers’s *Doctor Faustus*. It traces, in the history of its protagonist (a composer and amateur biologist), the avant-garde’s obsessive effort to escape the “black and white prison bars” of conventional forms of music and of living (as much as the personal price paid for such an effort). Powers dramatizes fifty or more years of avant-garde musical experiment and draws the reader sensually into experiencing a music he or she has surely never heard (like the protagonist’s opera on “The Siege of Muenster”). The protagonist’s linking the structures of music to invisible, yet ever-present micro-

Counterpoint, parallax view and the stereoscopic design create patterns of continuity in Powers's work: They allow for permutation and rearrangement without repetition, enabling him to reinvent himself with each novel, yet within a recognizable frame of theme and structure. I would even argue that the world of Powers's fiction – from *Three Farmers* to *Generosity* and *Orfeo* – is intensely interconnected, as if, with each work, we see the world we live in (and the writer's engagement with it) from a different perspective and from a different conceptual frame and position. Yet some of his novels break with the strategies of counterpoint and parallax view and aim to provoke the participation of the reader in different ways. *Operation Wandering Soul* (1993), Powers's fourth novel, is not only his darkest but also appears to be his least structurally ordered – there are no symmetries, no number games, no braiding of contrapuntal plot lines. Instead he places story next to story and story within story in a sequence of twenty-two unnumbered and untitled chapters, plus one titled "Peter Pan."

The novel begins with a scene on an LA Freeway and the frantic lane-switching of Richard Kraft, who works as a surgeon at a Charity hospital, called Carver. Carving up children in order to save their lives and failing mostly in the effort of doing so drives him increasingly to despair and, finally, to the brink of physical and mental collapse. Lane-switching is an apt metaphor for Powers's strategy in this book which begins as a conventional narrative but soon switches narrative lanes by telling the stories of displaced, crippled, undernourished children, mostly of the immigrant poor. There is the story of the Thai immigrant child, Joy, whom one of her disfigured playmates calls "Joyless" and whom Richard tries to, but eventually cannot, save. Or there are Richard Kraft's memories of his childhood in Thailand which he might tell, but probably doesn't, to the children on the ward. Or the stories from an anthology read to these children by the hospital's psychotherapist, Linda Espera; among them the story of Peter Pan who takes all lost boys to Neverland, and that of the Pied Piper who leads the children of Hamelin into the gaping mouth of the Koppelberg. There are also stories from Joy's history books: the evacuation of children from London during the Second World War (one of several hidden allusions to Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*); or the legendary children's crusade in the early thirteenth century that aimed for salvation and ended in death and dispersion; or the bloody sack of Rome in 1527 and, a few years later, the short millennial reign of the Anabaptists in Muenster that ended in disaster. All of these stories are loosely interconnected by analogy – marked by a push toward catastrophic ending. But while Richard's main narrative

physical structures (an activity suspicious in the eyes of NSA agents) also seems to imply an attempt at revealing a hidden (or forgotten) unity engrained in the structured particularity of life, yet totally disrupted and denied in the restraining forms and contexts of our living.

gradually becomes one story among many others, the legend of the Pied Piper, read and eventually performed by the children, becomes the allegorical frame for the whole book: Betrayed by their parents and driven by their desire to escape, the hopeful children of all ages and all countries follow (as they have always followed) the seductive music of some Pied Piper to an unknown, yet predictable fate.

The book’s children are the product of an age of mass migration, of refugee camps and LA slums (“a holocaust of children” 122). They come from the unsavory underbelly of the city’s dominant culture of consumerism (one of the book’s several Pied Pipers), a destitute third world within the first, colonized by it, exploited by it. A mirror of Los Angeles and a second City of Angels is Bangkok with its masses of unimaginably poor people, where Ricky Kraft, child of a CIA agent during the Vietnam War, spent his guilt-ridden youth¹⁰ and from where he was transplanted – like thousands of other Wandering Souls – to the U.S., a “lost boy” himself, an alien in his own country. The “Operation Wandering Souls,” one of his father’s schemes for subverting enemy morale, merges with other military operations in Vietnam to infiltrate Kraft’s consciousness and make the incursions of his own bloody operations appear to him like acts of “professional sadism” (268). The hopeless task of dealing with an endless “traffic of juvenile misery” (22), the mental and emotional adjustment to the brutality of place (Carver *is* LA, *is* the U.S., *is* the megacity of our globalized future as “the species is clinically psychotic” 165) reaches a final apocalyptic crescendo when Kraft has to operate on the badly wounded bodies of children shot by a madman in a neighborhood school.

While there are other voices (such as the voice of the luscious Linda Espera,¹¹ Richard’s lover, increasingly turned away from him by his growing inability to love), it is Richard’s self-hating and hysterical voice, half-unconscious from exhaustion and lack of sleep that invades Linda’s as much as that of the third-person narrator – a voice oscillating between free indirect discourse and a frantically associative stream of consciousness. The bloody drama of the final operation is linguistically enacted as a mad polyphony of sounds heard and imagined, a surreal mix of cynically joking colleagues, of an a-capella *Knabenchor* of wide-eyed children, of Mozart arias, of *Kindertotenlieder* and trivial tunes: “He works head down, endlessly steeped in bodily punishment, an automaton in darkness. He does not

¹⁰ His effort to “atone” for his life above the poverty level in a city where most live in abject poverty makes him engage in a utopian project that fails and leads to the tragic death of a young girl. The trauma of her dying is repeated in Joy’s death – another failure in his effort to become an agent (a “Christopher”) of salvation.

¹¹ Powers uses ‘telling’ names in all of his novels. In this case “Linda” not only refers to the physical beauty of Kraft’s lover but also to her beautiful, yet also possibly delusional hopefulness.

look up again at the observation glass or at the faces of the mauled meat packings under his hands” (339). Until he feels compelled, after the horror is over, to tell his story of the mutilated children to Linda whose faith in the healing power of storytelling he had rejected earlier: “‘Linda,’ he says. How does it go again? Clap your hands. ‘Linda. Listen’” (343).

This could be the end of the book but isn't. For only now do we learn that the novel we have been reading is the story told by Richard Kraft to his younger brother, the storyteller, who we know is Richard Powers.¹² The last chapter, told in the first person, is thus that of the storytelling younger brother who tells Linda of his intention to write, “‘under a different binding [...] [s]omeone else's narrowly rescued life story. Yours.’ Linda wants a happy ending. ‘Make someone donate their organs, at least.’ ‘Someone donates organs, all of them. You’” (351). While the first “you” may refer to Linda, the second addresses not her but the reader in what might be the novel's final word. Yet it ends with the archetypal scene of a child that, instead of sleeping, has finished the book her parents had given to her: “I finished it. That book you gave me? Your old favorite? I *just* finished it” (352).

Throughout the novel, children are begging to be read to. For Linda, telling or reading stories is the only therapy that works: “Read-alouds, the oldest recorded remedy, older than the earliest folk salves” (76). “Dropped down in the middle of a plot,” between uncertain beginnings and unknown endings, all stricken “children of Planet Earth” need stories “to live *as if* life might yet lead all the way to unexpected deliverance.” They need “the promise of fiction, the *pleasure*, our one moral obligation” (79). They need a different kind of Pied Piper, a “giant Christopher in their midst,” a “storyteller” (344). As in *Three Farmers*, or again in *Plowing the Dark*, the story of *Operation Wandering Soul* is thus revisioned from the end when the reader is appealed to and a narrative that seemed a tale of catastrophe and closure is opened up to the possibility of an alternative telling, or at least toward the reader's awareness of such a possibility. It is only when seen from the end, that the function of fiction and the power of storytelling to create, revoke and *re-create* meaning become visible through Powers's “a-synchronic messaging.”

In other words, *Operation Wandering Soul* is yet another “apology for fiction in a postfictional age” – a phrase Powers used later in connection with *Plowing the Dark* but that also applies to *The Echo Maker* and *Generosity*. It is interesting that Linda's reflections on the therapeutic

¹² Although we also know that Richard Kraft is, translated into English, Richard Power(s). The older brother, the doctor whose life is dedicated to saving the life of children, is thus the alter-ego of his younger brother, the writer Richard Powers (who may also feel compelled to “save” through the power of his writing and fears he might – like his alter-ego – fail in the attempt).

power of stories, of their “regimen of blessed, bourgeois, fictive closure,” appears to echo Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending* – a book that Powers evokes explicitly in connection with *The Echo Maker*: “We create a migratory path, and we project it outward into the world as our source of explanation and our source of orientation” (qtd. in Owens).¹³ Thrown into the middle of things, the mind needs fictions of coherence against the chaos that surrounds it. But these are useful only when they are recognized *as* fictions, built on a notion of “as if.”

From Kermode’s ruminations on the function of stories it is a surprisingly short step to the concept of the brain as “ultimate storytelling machine” (Michod), that “evolutionary product of several billions of years of bumping against the world” (Powers, qtd. in Neilson). The fictions of coherence it projects issue from the need to create a sense of stable self as well as of a stable world. It tries to maintain this stability at all cost – as becomes apparent in Mark Schluter’s case whose damaged brain reshapes itself and its disrupted story of self by a new tale of self-coherence. In other words, as much as the brain needs fictions, it also needs to deny their fictionality so that it can maintain its internal sense of order and stability. The function of storytelling in *The Echo Maker* (2006), although different from that in *Operation Wandering Soul*, is thus nevertheless related to it. In the later book, its healing power consists in replacing compulsive and self-deluding fictions of coherence with more flexible ones in which the mind in all its fiction-making fragility is seen as part of a larger natural order that connects all living creatures. It is an order of coherence powerfully represented in the mysterious cranes – in their danced greeting of the morning sun, in their ancestral memory of route and in our relation with them via our own ancestral “reptile brain.”¹⁴

In *The Echo Maker* there is, as always, the structural strain between a plot line tending toward closure and another pushing toward openness. But in this case, the closed fictions of self (those of Mark, the patient, as well as

¹³ In *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1967), Kermode had argued that – since we are always in the middle of our journey – we need fictions of coherence and meaningful endings. Powers elaborates on Kermode’s thesis in his interview with Jill Owens: “So we shape our sense of the envelope of our life and the envelope of our days to somehow correspond with each other. We create a migratory path, and we project it outward into the world as our source of explanation and our source of orientation. The amazing thing about the story of the self is that it’s perfectly capable of continuously revising that beginning and that middle and that end, the reason why the middle looks like it does, and the prediction of what the next step is going to be, or what the previous step meant. It’s capable of continuously revising that, and still creating an edifice that seems continuous and coherent.”

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion see Sielke; Bieger.

those of Weber, his therapist) are doubled in the plot conventions of a genre that demands closure by definition: the detective story. Powers's neurological transcription of it forces his narrator to provide a hasty and somewhat pedestrian explanation of the intriguing mystery of Mark's accident as well as of the enigmatic note from which the title of each of the book's five parts is taken. It is entirely possible that, with the final rushed unraveling of the novel's captivating riddles (who did what and why?), Powers wants to parody the end-directed machinery of plot.¹⁵ But it is also possible that he is trying to escape from that coercive machinery when he gives the narrator of his next book, *Generosity* (2009), a new, a more generous kind of storytelling freedom.

For Powers, self-invention has always also been a form of self-correction. Even if he didn't exactly disown *Operation Wandering Soul*, he not only thought that the protagonist's over-the-top language (his "verbal mania", as he called it) was too close to that of the narrator but he had doubts whether he might not have drawn aesthetic profit from the suffering of others: "When does portrayal and critique pass invisibly over into participation?" (qtd. in Neilson) – a doubt he shares with the protagonists of his later novels, Gerald Weber in *The Echo Maker*, Russell Stone in *Generosity* and Peter Els in *Orfeo* (2014).¹⁶

If the transparency of *Galatea 2.2* (1995) is a response to the problems of *Operation Wandering Soul*, I am tempted to regard the new narrative stance of *Generosity* as Powers's answer to the narrative problems of *The Echo Maker*.¹⁷ In a sense, *Generosity* topicalizes the freedom of fabulation

¹⁵ Or, as Harris seems to argue, to unveil the reader's questionable need for neat endings: "The novel's orderly denouement, like the false coherence forged by the human brain, is a skillful sleight-of-hand, an attempt to pull the rug over the fractured realities we have just seen dramatized" ("The Story" 250).

¹⁶ In his interview with Neilson, Powers calls the style of *Operation Wandering Soul* "often completely over the top, a verbal mania that is supposed to reflect Richard Kraft's increasingly apocalyptic read on inner-city Los Angeles in late-capitalist America [...]. The depictions in the book don't come close to the horrors of the real world, of course. But from inside the conventions of narrative fiction, they run the risk of anaesthetizing the reader with overkill [...] And *Galatea* is my attempt to redress these difficulties." On the relation of these two novels also see Silva. On *Operation Wandering Soul*, also see Pancake; Cowart. The fear of the latent immorality of the aesthetic also haunts the composer Peter Els in *Orfeo* who abhors the success of his opera on the Anabaptist commune in sixteenth-century Münster since it appears to thrive on a similar event at Waco in 1993.

¹⁷ *Galatea 2.2* (1995) had been a reflection on Powers's past life as much as on his past work from a narrative present (situated in the personal crisis of a 'lost' year: the protagonist's age is 35 as was Powers's at the time of its writing). It marks a break between Powers's earlier and his subsequent work. From now on, the dialogic opposition between the public and the private is defined less in subjective/autobiographical and more in historical/political terms. Although Powers

– the book’s title enters into the very manner of its telling. The I-narrator is the inventor of his characters and of the tales that make their lives; he is the narrator/observer of a world that is obviously his – and yet not quite. “A man rides backward in a packed subway car. This must be almost fall, the season of revision. I picture him [...]. I can’t see him well, at first. But that’s my fault, not his” (3). The man is Russell Stone, teacher of a Creative Writing course on the basis of a textbook called *Make Your Writing Come Alive*. Among his students is Thassa, a young woman refugee from Algeria, with memories of civil-war terrors, yet also with an inexplicable inward glow of happiness that radiates outwards. That Miss Generosity, as Thassa is called by her friends, might have a happiness gene makes her an object of manipulative greed as well as of a general desire for genetically implanted permanent bliss – both of which eventually break her spirit. Except that the narrator/fabulator is free to re-tell her story, to change, or at least modify, the ending – an ending that is dark in its relation to “fact” and yet ‘happy’ in its unbroken sense of possibility: “She is still alive, my invented friend, just as I conceived her, still uncrushed by the collective need for happier endings. All writing is rewriting. And for a little while, before this small shared joy, too, disappears back into fact, we sit and watch the Atlas go dark” (293).

This final space where Miss Generosity lives before “she disappears back into fact” – the fact of her ‘real’ story that ends with her suicide – is the preferred space of Powers’s endings: a space of “symbolic transaction” where the tale’s ending is re-written, the tale of life re-told, so that it can also be, hopefully, re-lived. Such endings occur in all of Powers’s novels, no matter what narrative strategies of “a-synchronous messaging” he chooses. Their interventions constitute a realm of reflection that potentially allows the act of reading to become a change of consciousness. From fiction’s demonstration room, as we heard in *Plowing the Dark*, “no one walks out the way he came” (410).

Although Powers’s novels stay within a modified conceptual frame of mimesis, they undermine it by a number of self-referential strategies (patterns of symmetry, word-play, intertextual allusions) and reconfigure it especially via their endings. These are, in a sense, ‘happy endings.’ To be sure, they do not, romance-like, violate a realist taboo or escape to some

conceives of the writer as re-inventing himself with each work, there is an unmistakable Powers signature throughout his post-*Galatea 2.2*. fictions: the blending of different time levels; the contrapuntal or dialogic braiding of oppositional yet complementary plots; the exuberant play with puns and intertextual allusions (beyond literature to a wide range of texts); and, perhaps, more than anything else, his inclusion (if not preference) of “discursive narrative” next to (if not over) what he calls “dramatic revelation” (qtd. in J. Williams, “The Last Generalist”).

utopian Neverland. It is rather that they assert in their metafictional turning to a primary realm of creativity (to the possible *within* the real), the very origin and resource of Powers's storytelling. Even when they openly display their status as pure narrative inventions, their metafictional gestures point back to their mimetic rootedness. Self-reference and world-reference always echo and interact. *The Echo Maker* may dramatize Powers's distrust of any notion of a self-reliant self; yet it also reveals his Emersonian awareness of an infinite network of relations: of mind *and* nature, of mind *in* nature – a unity pervading all particularities that constantly unfolds in an open-ended process of creation in which fiction and the fiction-making brain take part.

Bach's dictum "Es muss alles möglich zu machen seyn," quoted in *The Gold Bug Variations* as well as in *The Time of Our Singing*, is a central motif in all of Powers's fiction, expressing a vision that, as Bradford Morrow argues, is "essentially celebratory. Bachlike" (2000). Like Miss Generosity, perhaps of all of his inventions the figure he loves most, Powers trusts life and its unbounded creativity despite its inevitable "coding errors" and unpredictable mutations. And he insists on the novel's social and therapeutic function at a time when it seems increasingly expendable: on its magic power of inventing an imaginative counter-space in which reality is not *re-placed* but *re-told* and thus "re-constituted into something more survivable" (qtd. in Blume).