

## **Richard Powers and the Post-Postmodern Novel of Ideas**

### **Part 2: The Middle Novels**

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#### **Introduction**

The major problem with being a novelist in mid-career, especially if one's early work has been quite singular, is that the novelist cannot sustain that sense of singularity over the breadth of an extended body of work. If the novelist begins to write novels that are dramatic departures from the early work, some critics and readers will complain that the novelist has lost his or her way—that the promise of the early work is not being realized and may never be realized. On the other hand, if the novelist persists in creating works that attempt to extend the structures, situations, narrative techniques, motifs, and themes of the earlier works, some critics and readers will begin to yearn for something appreciably different, the very deviation that the previously mentioned critics and readers will bemoan. They will complain that the novelist is approaching a dead end, the exhaustion of invention.

Powers has persisted in creating lengthy and structurally, linguistically, and thematically complex novels. In these novels, he brings together diverse settings and characters, and he connects the issues in such diverse disciplines as science, medicine, digital technologies, politics, economics, corporate culture, literature, the fine arts, and popular culture. In fact, he has explored many specialized areas within those disciplines, and he has done so with a generalist's compulsive fascination with specializations and an equally compulsive interest in understanding and synthesizing their effects on the human experience. The opposite of a dilettante, he is a serial obsessive. His novels are loaded with information, not just to provide background or to fill out the story, but because he is genuinely interested in exploring the nuances and implications of the information for his characters, his readers, and himself. He is also fascinated by language and with experimenting how narrative can be accented and even supplemented by all sorts of wordplay, from the banal and even ridiculous to the arcane and extremely sophisticated. Not surprisingly, some critics and readers have found Powers' signature approach is becoming somewhat predictable and even tiresome. They have complained that the novels are so dense that many, if not most, of the

characters never come fully to life, that narrative voice and tone become less distinctive under the weight of the wordplay, and that the density of the novels is seldom carried through their resolutions. Very predictably, critics and readers are increasingly dividing into two distinct camps: those who believe that Powers' potential is being increasingly undermined by his novelistic compulsions and outsized ambitions and those who believe that, with each novel, Powers is adding to a body of work that stands as an increasingly remarkable achievement and that increases his stature among contemporary novelists.

These two assessments can be illustrated in excerpts from two reviews of Powers' seventh novel, *Plowing the Dark*. The first is from Michiko Kakutani's review for the *New York Times*: "That Tai's story has far more emotional resonance than Adie's, however, has less to do with the traumatic nature of his adventures than with Mr. Powers's [*sic*] restraint in embroidering his story with the sort of lugubrious philosophizing that weighs down the other portions of this novel. Both stories illuminate the author's thesis about the powers of the human imagination, but Adie's tale, which makes up the bulk of this novel, remains a clumsy, paint-by-numbers illustration, an illustration that, oddly enough, lacks the requisite imagination to become a persuasive fiction."

The second excerpt is from Steven Moore's review for the *Washington Post Book World*: "And of course the oldest and wildest VR simulation is the one we are all hard-wired with: the ability to dream and imagine, the origin of all art, religion and technology. All this and more is at the heart of *Plowing the Dark*, Powers's [*sic*] seventh and perhaps greatest novel. In each of his novels, Powers tackles a specialized field of study--economics in his last one, genetics and cognitive neurology in earlier ones--and uses it as a vehicle for his career-long meditation on the nature of artistic creation. They can be described as intellectual thrillers because, despite their brainy subjects, there is a palpable sense of drama in each of them. . . . A few pages from the end of the novel, Powers pulls off one of the most astonishing feats I've ever seen in literature. Adie's narrative and Martin's apparently unrelated one half a world away dovetail in such a daring, unpredictable and emotionally powerful way that tears came to my eyes. Unbelievable. I've only scratched the surface of Powers's [*sic*] deeply profound exploration of the interface between art and technology in our age. I haven't marked up and underlined a book this much since college: Nearly every page has stunning ideas that will force you to reevaluate everything you thought you knew about these subjects, and implications you never imagined. I'm tempted to end my review by simply

emptying out my thesaurus with every synonym for ‘masterpiece,’ but you could do that just as easily. Just boot up your PC; there's bound to be a digital thesaurus somewhere in cyberspace.”

This article will make it clear that I share Moore’s view more than Kakutani’s.

### ***Galatea 2.2 (1995)***

This novel is a convenient starting point for discussing Powers’ work in mid-career because it features a focal character named Richard Powers, whose background is remarkably similar to the author’s and who has reached a point in his literary career at which he is struggling with writer’s block. So, on the surface, it may appear that Powers, whose first four novels were structurally intricate, linguistically dense, polymathically erudite, and thematically complex, has been reduced to exploiting the sudden exhaustion of his own resources as a novelist. In a review for *The Times* of London, Gordon Chivers remarks on this point: “Unpromisingly, the hero of the piece is called Richard Powers, a newly successful novelist in early middle age.”

Reinforcing this impression, the novel’s other major plot line involves an overtly metafictional subject: the effort to create a digital entity that can outperform a graduate student of literature on a Master’s-level, comprehensive, essay examination on the literary canon. This plot line gives the novel its title. In later versions of the Greek myth, Galatea is the name given to the statue of a beautiful woman that the sculptor Pygmalion creates, begins to desire, and finally persuades Aphrodite to transform into an actual woman.

In a review of the novel for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Carlin Romano addresses the juxtaposition of the two plot lines in a series of animated rhetorical questions: “Have we been in this novel before? Is Powers being digital, or is he just being an autobiographical, post-postmodern Philip Roth updated to the CD-ROM era? Is he trying to write ‘The Great American Artificial Intelligence Novel,’ scouting the cognitive limbo where abilities in syntax, inference and reasoning grade into the human, or is he just hoping to bare his injured romantic soul in a echno-friendly cyber-environment? A lot of both.” Similarly, in his review for *Washington Post Book World*, Steven Moore observes: “Despite the autobiographical content, *Galatea 2.2* is not an example of what has been called ‘navel-gazing’ fiction, where an author's preoccupation with his own creative processes takes on undue (usually boring) proportions. Instead, Powers tackles the big questions: How does the mind work? How do we know what we know? What is the relationship between literature and ‘real’ life? What is the impulse behind literary creation? How do metaphors work?”

And what is the proper attitude toward literature? Powers leaps right into the current maelstrom that is literature in the '90s, with literary theory, multi-culturism [*sic*] and 14 varieties of cultural politics pulling it every which way.”

Powers, the character and narrator, is to some extent a postmodern version of Pygmalion. He returns to his alma mater, simply referred to as the “U” in the novel but bearing many similarities to campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He has taken a visiting appointment as the humanist in residence at the university’s Center for the Study of Advanced Sciences. He joins an ongoing effort to create a digital entity that can read literature knowledgeably, insightfully, and sensitively, but the project has many false starts. Each of these failed efforts is identified by a letter of the alphabet assigned in sequence. When the small team finally achieves some success in harnessing the university’s neural net to create a digital reader, they have reached the letter H in the alphabet.

Powers begins to assume the leadership role on the project, feeding first major literary works and then significant critical interpretations of those works into the memory of the digital reader. Then, as the digital reader attempts to synthesize the material, it begins to ask questions about the concepts, the historical figures and events, the cultural artifacts, and the social and political realities that are referred to in the literature and that have shaped the critical interpretations of the literature. Powers obliges by attempting to feed as much of that information as possible into the digital reader’s memory. Eventually, the exchanges between the two of them begin to resemble human conversation, and when the digital reader suddenly refers to itself as Helen, rather than as H, Powers accepts and even encourages “her” increasing sense of personal identity. At this point, the novel very much echoes George Bernard Shaw’s adaptation of the Greek myth in his play *Pygmalion*, with Powers assuming the role of Henry Higgins and Helen providing a digital corollary to Eliza Doolittle. Indeed, in 1966, Joseph Weizenbaum, one of the first computer scientists to focus on the development of artificial intelligence, introduced the first program that was capable of natural language processing and named it ELIZA.

But the whole point of Shaw’s play, and even of its sanitized and more whimsical—and extraordinarily popular--adaptation into the musical *My Fair Lady*, is that Eliza Doolittle is not the blank slate that Henry Higgins presumes her to be. Even as he succeeds in teaching her the speech, the manners, and the demeanor that will allow her to pass for someone of a much higher social

class, she remains her own person: that is, although she has a great deal of room for personal development, she also has the innate potential to realize much of that development. She has a fully established personality, formed by her life experience, which Higgins is very slow to appreciate. What she learns from Higgins enhances her self-confidence, but it does not alter who she fundamentally is.

In a turn on Higgins' presumptions about Eliza, Powers is very slow to appreciate how frustrated Helen is becoming because of her growing awareness of her lack of any life experience and her lack of actual physical being. At first, when she asks him to provide information on human brutality, from individual acts of violence and criminality to warfare and political oppression, she simply expresses consternation that human beings should be capable of such heinousness. But then she seems gradually to realize that her increased understanding of literature and literary analysis does not really provide her with an increased understanding of the human experiences that the literature explores because she is incapable of having any of those experiences, and, worse, her creators cannot provide her with a physical form that allows her to have any sort of sensory experience of the world. At one point, when she asks Powers what she looks like, he sends her a photo of his former lover, identified simply as C.

So, Powers' novel is not so much simply a contemporary reimagining of the Pygmalion myth as it is an inversion of that myth. In the myth, Pygmalion's passion is the impetus for the transformation of Galatea from a beautiful work of art into a beautiful woman. In Powers' novel, his passion for literature and his parallel obsession with science and technology led him to create Helen, but even the unprecedented, accelerating achievements of human imagination and ingenuity are still not enough to bridge the gulf between what is machine and what is human. Although commentators frequently discuss artificial intelligence as if the main measure is intellectual—the scope and the complexity of the matters that can be processed, or analyzed and resolved—Powers emphasizes that such intelligence will always be artificial if it is detached from experience and, more specifically, if it has no basis in sensory experience or location in personal memory.

If this were the only turn that Powers is giving to the Pygmalion myth, the novel would be provocative and even multi-dimensional. But Powers gives the treatment of the myth several additional and significant turns. In creating a character named for himself, Powers is not simply giving the novel an explicit autobiographical aspect. To this point in his career, Powers had very

deliberately maintained a very minimal public profile, and as his literary reputation had grown, he seemed all the more determined to keep the details of his background and his personal life private. So, he had to be very aware that his creation of a character named Richard Powers would in itself attract the attention of the most avid readers of his novels and the critics who had been fascinated by the structural, linguistic, and thematic complexity of his novels—in short, those who have been naturally curious about the man capable of producing such elaborately constructed and richly imagined fictions.

Paradoxically, however, the more that Powers reveals about himself in this novel, the more that these readers and critics must come to the recognition that his personal life provides a very striking contrast with, rather than a compelling backdrop to, his novels. He does reveal that his relationship with his father was strained, that his relationship with his mentor was cut short by the mentor's dying from cancer, that his relationships with women have been for the most part relatively brief and somewhat tenuous, and that his one enduring relationship with a woman, with C., was, in effect, undermined by his increasing success as a novelist and his deepening obsession with the fictions that he was creating. None of it is in any way shocking or even in any way extraordinary. In fact, the biggest surprise is actually the ordinariness of Powers' background and personal experience, as well as the relative paucity of compelling fictional material readily available in that background and experience.

In his review for the *Washington Post*, Steven Moore takes a somewhat different angle on this aspect of the novel and comes to a complementary conclusion: "One of the greatest advantages of Powers's [*sic*] using his own career as subject matter is that we learn of the precariousness, the almost accidental nature of artistic creation: the novels Richard Powers has blessed us with so far were the result not of careful career planning but of accidental glimpses, unexpected relationships, unplanned relocations, unlooked for financing . . . , and so on. Remove one event here or there and we would have had different novels, or none at all. We take novels for granted because hundreds of them appear each year, but the few that matter, that will last, are almost miracles. Powers doesn't play the noble artist suffering for his art here: he's amusingly self-deprecating about his achievements and his reputation. But these precious things are not to be taken for granted."

In a way, the paradox of an author with very ordinary life producing extraordinary novels makes sense, even if it disappoints our reflexive interest in dramatic revelation. For creating such

fictions would seem necessarily to demand more effort and time than a person with a very active and therefore demanding personal life could possibly manage. Powers' lover, C., is correct in her awareness that Powers' attention to his novels is coming between them. At some level, relationships are defined by the degree to which both people share the same stories—the degree to which one person's story can become absorbed into the other person's story and the degree to which they continue to create a shared story. Although more than a few popular novels have been co-authored, writing “serious” novels has been an almost exclusively solitary enterprise. Given the personal—the emotional and psychological and even physical—investment required to produce works as complex as Powers' novels are, it seems all too possible, if not likely, that a novelist's relationship with his or her most avid readers might begin to displace his or her personal relationships. It is very telling that Powers' two tentative efforts to initiate relationships at the U. are both rejected because they are so obviously contrived: that is, Powers is quite obviously trying to invent somewhat pre-defined relationships with the graduate student competing with Helen, identified as A, and with a colleague named Diana, rather than allowing the relationships to develop in any sort of natural way. Both women recognize that, in a half-hearted sort of way, he is projecting things onto them, as if they were characters he was creating, rather than responding to them at any sort of genuinely personal level. In a very ironic sense, Powers' fictional attempt to create an author, a fictional version of himself, is no more successful than that fictional author's effort to create a digital reader. After Helen becomes so disillusioned by her irresolvable disengagement from the “real world,” she shuts herself down, Powers restarts her. But after she unsuccessfully competes with the graduate student, Helen again shuts herself down, and there are no further efforts to restart her. Likewise, in the end, Powers, the character, is of interest primarily because of the novels that he writes—or, more precisely, because he is the main character in this novel that the author Richard Powers has written. The events chronicled in the novel seem to reinvigorate his—in this case, both the character's and the author's—passion as a writer of fictions, but this artistic reinvigoration seems to be tied to his recognition that his personal life cannot compete with his novels as a matter of interest, even for him.

Indeed, this novel itself illustrates that the author's work exhibits his sensibility at its most animated level of expression. In his review for the *London Times*, Gordon Chivers comments on the novel's linguistic virtuosity: “This device [of having a main character named for the author]

could have been more irksome were it not for the wealth of the language used to justify it; this touches on just about everything from the Bible to buzzwords, Chaucer to Chandler, Shakespeare to slang. There is techno-babble and torch song, cyberspeak and sonnet. There are allusions and references and hints at still more. There is even Double Dutch. For all this, Powers's [*sic*] main concern is the inadequacy of words, their shortcomings, which are skillfully used to strengthen the threads of the story. The unrelaxed tenor of the writing does similar work: low on humour, high on cleverness just like being there, no doubt." In a review of the novel for the *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani writes: "Although this *mise en scene* may sound like a contrived *Twilight Zone* setup, it provides Mr. Powers with the perfect opportunity to show off his virtuosic skills as a writer: his encyclopedic knowledge of science, literature, history and hermeneutics; his penchant for allusions, puns and word play; his love of musical counterpoint and variation."

Indeed, Kakutani asserts that, despite all of Powers' suggestions that he has been experiencing a severe case of writer's block, this novel represents a stylistic advancement over his previous novels: "In Mr. Powers's [*sic*] earlier novels (*Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, *Prisoner's Dilemma*, *The Gold Bug Variations*, and *Operation Wandering Soul*), these talents resulted in dense, allusive narratives in which the razzle-dazzle, free-associative pyrotechnics frequently tried the reader's patience, even as they enchanted and amazed. Like the early computer versions of *Helen*, these novels tended to suffer from a surfeit of connections and input: one had the sense with these volumes that Mr. Powers was trying to pack everything he knew and everything that crossed his mind into a single story, whether all these elements belonged there or not. To be sure, *Galatea*, too, is crammed full with philosophical asides, bad puns ('Rhesus pieces' in reference to slices of simian forebrains) and riffs on everything from artificial intelligence to literary criticism. But the novel's strong, straightforward story line is both an armature for Mr. Powers's fecund talents and a magnet that pulls all his themes together and lends them a focus and direction. As a result, the novel has an urgency that is new to the author's work, an urgency that makes the emotions of this story as compelling as its more cerebral components." In his review for *Washington Post Book World*, Steven Moore concurs, calling the novel "an elegant attempt to use cutting-edge research on cognition to explore the nature of memory and literary creation."

The novel includes several details that serve to emphasize that no matter how unremarkable Powers' personal life may seem to be, his visceral engagement with the physical world and his

willingness to explore the mysteries in the human ability to process that engagement emotionally and intellectually is absolutely essential to his capacities as a novelist. His closest associate in the effort to create Helen is Philip Lentz, whose wife has been reduced to a near-vegetative state by a cerebral hemorrhage. Likewise, his colleague Diana has two sons, one of whom is mentally very gifted while the other is severely autistic. The insertion into the narrative of two characters whose responses to the world are limited by their physical conditions reminds the reader, as it does Powers, the character, of the fragility of human cognition and the ambiguities in attempting to define what is human and what is not. Although Helen seems to have a human sensibility—is able to respond emotionally to the recognition that she is incapable of responding to the world as most human beings respond to it almost from the moment of their births, she is clearly not human and never can be human. On the other hand, Lentz’s wife and Diana’s son are very clearly human beings, even if they do not have Helen’s capacity to process the meaning of being and to confront its mysteries. In his review for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Carlin Romano comments pointedly on the significance of these paradoxes within the novel’s central themes: “*Galatea 2.2* finally works as a disturbing novel of ideas because the real Powers cares enough about his twin obsessions--the frustrated emotions of the artist consumed with imaginative creation, and the conundrum of rethinking intelligence in the age of parallel processing--to continually texture the narrative with dangerous bystanders to his themes, such as Lentz's institutionalized wife and a Down syndrome child. While Powers thrusts much of his autobiography to us on the surface, a deeper personal struggle--scientist-philosopher versus novelist--unfolds in subtler ways. Freedom of the will versus determinism, soul versus structure, hardware versus software, teaching versus learning, flesh versus plastic, mechanism versus mysticism, representation versus reality, the innate versus the environmentally acquired--these are not the oppositions most fiction teachers have in mind when they tell their fledgling writers that an exciting novel requires conflict. But Richard Powers, like Bill Gates, is his own CPU, creating his own benchmarks for fiction.”

### ***Gain* (1998)**

In *Gain*, Powers continues to explore the nature and significance of story that he focuses on very pointedly in *Galatea 2.2*--though one can, of course, make the case that it is a recurring preoccupation in most, if not all, of his novels. In *Galatea 2.2*, the focus is on literary stories and specifically fictions. In *Gain*, it is on history. Indeed, for this novel, Powers received the James

Fenimore Cooper Prize for Outstanding Historical Fiction from the Society of American Historians. Because that award has seldom been given to the sort of complexly conceived, postmodernist novels that Powers writes, its having been awarded to him does suggest that in some ways, *Gain* is one of his most straightforward and accessible works.

The novel chronicles the rise of Clare International, a chemical conglomerate headquartered in Lacewood, Illinois, a modest-sized city. The narrative is a synthesis of sorts of conventional corporate histories, commonly commissioned by the corporations themselves, and the more contemporary histories that are themselves a synthesis of the techniques of the New Journalists and the reformist impulse that drove the muckrakers during the Progressive Era. On the one hand, the narrative includes all sorts of documentary records and artifacts that would be included in a commissioned or authorized history of a corporation. On the other hand, the narrative also includes personal profiles of the members of the Clare family and of various corporate officers that very clearly go beyond the formal documentary record and that rely on a judicious combination of historical reconstruction and careful invention.

In a review of the novel for the *New York Times Book Review*, Bruce Bauwer finds Powers' rendering of the history of Clare International to be the most compelling element of the novel: "the book holds one's interest . . . , mainly because Powers, in the corporate-history passages, makes a compelling tale out of the evolution of American business practices over nearly two centuries. The story of Clare, like that of many a real-life American company, proves to be one of survival and expansion made possible by its management's ability to adapt to--or even anticipate--such changes as the invention of the corporation, the introduction of packaging and promotion and the advent of multinationals and vertical integration. Powers's [*sic*] account of how Clare's management acquires a concept of the corporate image and then consciously strives to establish the corporation as 'a person' not only 'in the eyes of the law' but 'in the minds of its customers' is perceptive and valuable. Has any novelist been more successful at bringing the history of American business to life?"

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Clare International begins as a modest family business in New England. Its founder has the ingenuity to develop a process by which animal fat—the waste from meat processing—can be transformed into soap. As the company develops its customer base and its product line, some of the founder's descendants are driven by the same

impulse to discover and to innovate, but some of their efforts are more quixotic than scientific. One of the Clares discovers a root in the South Pacific whose fragrance beguiles him. He turns it into Nature's Balm, basically a patent medicine, an over-hyped cure-all. So, from very early in its history, the company's success is based on a combination of, on the one hand, intuitive science, resourceful imagination, and persistent effort and, on the other hand, fantastical (or delusional) invention and shrewd (or deceptive) marketing. Within several generations, the founding family becomes subsumed within the corporate bureaucracy. There is a burgeoning specialization of units and individual positions within the ever-expanding operations of an organization that is both part of and apart from the city and the nation in which it is headquartered, as well as the populations--the corporate and individual customer bases--whose needs it purportedly serves. Moreover, like most large corporations, its emphasis gradually shifts from developing products that its customers need because the products serve a practical purpose to developing products that repay the corporate investment in research and development, that can be marketed effectively, and that drive up the corporation's stock price and investor dividends--regardless of whether or not the products actually meet a need, whether or not they live up to the claims used in advertising them, or whether or not they actually pose a hidden risk to some of those who are convinced to use them.

Juxtaposed with the history of Clare International is the life story of Laura Bodey, a successful real-estate agent who has been a lifelong resident of Lacewood, where the chemical conglomerate is headquartered, and who is suddenly diagnosed with late-stage cancer. Although Laura is a very vividly developed character, she is one of the most thoroughly ordinary characters in modern American literature. A divorced mother of several children, she maintains a very orderly household, has an amicable relationship with her ex-husband, maintains a discreet sexual relationship with a married man, is well liked by her neighbors and co-workers, and has been recognized for her professional accomplishments. When she is diagnosed with the cancer, she is at a point in mid-life at which she has achieved a satisfying balance between her personal and professional lives and has a sense of control over the direction that her life is taking. In short, her life is remarkable only because of the thoroughness with which it has become an illustration of the well-ordered, modestly affluent, and contented life that a middle-class American life is ideally supposed to entail.

Despite the overall tone of domestic tranquility, there are indications that the personal control that Laura Bodey exerts over her daily life is an illusion, or at the very least transitory. Near the beginning of the novel, she attends the funeral of a neighbor's adolescent daughter, who has died from the ovarian cancer with which Laura herself will eventually be diagnosed. The novel also begins around Memorial Day, a ritual commemoration of lives abruptly and violently cut short in order to permit and to preserve the sort of lives that Laura, her neighbors, and most middle-class Americans enjoy. Beyond these obvious reminders that no one is guaranteed the peaceful death in one sleep and in old age that everyone hopes for, there are some more subtle indications that contentment involves willfully disregarding, to some degree, the daily disappointments and frustrations that, in the absence of more serious, can very easily be blown out of proportion and create at least an undertone of frustration, if not outright distress. Her son's soccer team, named the Glass Gladiators, is losing one match after another, and the parents such as Laura seem very reluctant to do anything that might make them more competitive, or even to acknowledge that their level of play abysmal. Likewise, when her son asks Laura for help on an English essay in which he is supposed to analyze Walt Whitman's poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Laura is stumped, unable to suggest an approach to understanding the poem, and so she accedes to her son's decision to give up and accept an F for the unfinished assignment.

Laura's inability to understand what is, after all, a relatively straightforward poem may be simply a reflection of a limited capacity to appreciate literature—perhaps due to some predisposition in her personal sensibilities or perhaps due to something in her educational experience. But it may also be a reflection of her unwillingness to think very deeply about anything that might cause her to reflect in any serious way on her own experiences and attitudes. I suspect that it is not so much that Laura is incapable of personal reflection but, instead, that she dismisses it as largely a waste of time because she is reflexively protective of her contented life. Ironically, the Whitman poem is largely an expression of the poet's dynamic reflection on the meaning of an activity that many residents of New York and Brooklyn engaged in as an almost automatic part of their daily routines, without much, if any, reflection on it whatsoever. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when New York and Brooklyn were still separate cities and when there were no bridges or subway tunnels connecting them, the traffic between them was carried by ferries that crossed the East River almost continuously from sunrise to sunset. On most days, most of those

taking the ferries would have been locked in their own thoughts, waiting out the time in transit and thinking either about something that occurred before they boarded the ferry or that they anticipated might occur after they disembarked. Whitman, however, sees in the ferry crossing a microcosm of the great human energy in two large and continually growing cities. Even though the cities' skylines were much lower then than they are now, or would have been only a few decades later, Whitman saw in the horizons crowded with buildings the growing industrial and commercial might of the cities and the nation--the accumulating material evidence of human ingenuity and technological progress and the promise of ever-expanding prosperity. Whitman embraced a form of American exceptionalism, but he saw the American experience as a markedly progressive chapter in the continuing chronicle of human experience. So, the movement of people in transit suggests the dynamic energy that has driven human history—an energy that, in Whitman's view, is as relentless as the flow of rivers and the rise and fall of the tides.

In the later stages of her illness, Laura has several moments in which she looks at her surroundings with a new awareness. In one instance, after she chooses to walk home after splitting up with her lover, she looks at the homes in her neighborhood in the quietness of the night and realizes that she has not really looked closely at them despite having driven by them countless times. Likewise, after she has become confined to a hospital bed that has been brought into her home, she looks out into her yard and becomes absorbed in watching the movements of a squirrel. For years, Laura has maintained a garden, and so she has spent countless hours in her yard. And yet, she has never really taken in the activity, the evidence of other life, around her. It is natural that someone who has been given a terminal diagnosis should invest more meaning in the days and the experiences remaining to her. But, somewhat paradoxically, this sudden, more intimate awareness of her immediate surroundings also suggests the shallowness of her previous contentment. Her contentment with keeping busy may be seen as something very comparable to the squirrel's busyness, which is an affirmation of the mundane rhythms of life and is not in itself a bad thing; nonetheless, it is in the end a very limited thing.

Laura's garden is a focal point for many of the novel's themes. Laura literally gets her hands dirty in planting and tending her flowers and vegetables. She has remained connected to some of the food that she is eating much more directly than many, if not most people, are. So, it is all the more ironic that she does not have a more deeply visceral sense of, never mind an intellectual awareness

of, the rich potential for meaning in what she is doing, but she, instead, tends her garden much as she keeps her house, dividing the work into series of tasks that need to be accomplished in a pre-established order and in a prescribed manner to insure that they are done right. Ironically, Clare International is responsible for producing many of the products that enable Laura to keep her home clean and her garden free of pests. Powers emphasizes, of course, that Clare International's production methods and even its products may be responsible for not only Laura's cancer but also the relatively high rates of cancer among the residents of Lacewood. Nonetheless, he is careful to indicate, too, that the corporation continues to make products that actually improve people's lives—even if in some cases, its marketing department has simply convinced people that the products are things that they cannot now do without. In short, Powers is not denying the value of progress. He is, instead, demonstrating that progress needs to be measured more carefully against its costs and against the compromises made ostensibly in the cause of continuing progress, which is inevitably tied to, but not really the same thing as, increasing profits. Indeed, Laura has enjoyed a modestly affluent lifestyle because of her success as a real-estate agent, and the value of the property in this city is very obviously tied directly to Clare International's being headquartered in it. It is difficult to measure the benefits that the corporation has brought to Lacewood and surrounding region against the costs of its presence there, but what is very clear is that the city cannot continue to enjoy those benefits without some of the costs—that the city without the corporation would be a very different place, a much less prosperous place. In Laura's ex-husband Don, Powers gives voice to the anger at corporate irresponsibility and the pursuit of profits at a very closely calculated cost, if not at all costs. Don wants Laura to join in a class-action lawsuit against Clare International, and he simply cannot understand why she delays for so long before agreeing to do so. Despite their divorce, he has remained on good terms with Laura, and he still has some strong feelings for her. He is clearly stunned by the prospect of her dying at such a relatively young age from such a relentlessly debilitating disease. He wants some justice on her behalf, but he wants more than a legal verdict. Whether he fully realizes it or not, he wants some sort of reassurance that what is happening to Laura is an anomaly, something so out of the natural order of things that someone or something must be to blame for it. In short, he is venting the very feelings that Laura is quite determined to suppress. They are at odds on this issue, as they have previously been at odds over other issues, not because they have conflicting expectations but because they have conflicting responses to failed

expectations. Although Powers establishes the connection between Clare International's plant and the cancers that afflict Laura and others in Lacewood, he is very clearly exploring issues well beyond whether corporations should or can be held accountable for all of the health hazards that they create or to which their practices or products contribute.

In his review for *Washington Post Book World*, Thomas M. Disch offers an extended commentary about the ways in which Powers is working against expectations: "Readers expecting, as I did, that the twain will meet somewhere close to the denouement--and that Laura's cancer will be shown to have its sources in the ecological ravages wrought by the pharmaceutical Leviathan -- are in for a surprise. Or, rather, for none at all. . . . This is not the world according to John Grisham or even E.L. Doctorow, where justice can triumph against the odds and Goliath corporations are zapped by an underdog David. Powers refuses to load his dice to favor innocence and virtue. Laura's suffering as she soldiers through her prescribed regimen of chemotherapy is evoked in unsparing detail, but it is not blamed on Big Medicine. All the misery in the book is just part of daily life and death, and the moments of transcendence, while often spectacularly beautiful, are just that--moments. This is an attitude more often found in poetry than in novels, where plots are designed so as to give us some sense of dramatic closure, resolution, justice. What Powers offers, instead, is pragma, which is the Greek root of "pragmatic" and, as used in English, a collective noun meaning 'things'--especially things of commercial value. Pragma was the theme of the first great novel in English literature, Robinson Crusoe, and it has been a standby of such novelists as Arthur Hailey and James Michener, who show us how the world works and how its units mesh together. But it has seldom been the territory staked out by such as Richard Powers, who is as serious a contender for highbrow laurels as any novelist on the present scene."

Likewise, in a jointly authored review for the *New York Post*, Ben and Daniel Wattenberg categorize the novel as a representative example of the "new social novel" that Tom Wolfe called for in his much-discussed essay for *Harper's* magazine. Within that context, they observe: "When American fiction hasn't evaded the subject of corporate America entirely, it has often pilloried it in novelistic poster art. Refreshingly, Powers does not exploit Laura's illness to put Clare Soap and Chemical on trial for murder. Enlightened in its labor relations, committed to quality products, a generous corporate neighbor in Lacewood, Clare is no stock corporate ogre. While Laura's illness poignantly crystallizes the possible human costs of technological progress, Powers also gives

capitalism its due: jobs, prosperity, and life-enhancing and sometimes life-saving products that only the modern corporation-- with its vast resources and economies of scale--can develop and bring to market. Laura's struggle with cancer gains depth and weight from the historical saga that forms its background, and the corporate chronicle derives emotional resonance and moral complexity from Laura's battle with a disease that might have environmental causes. In answering the challenge to report, Powers has captured the intimate, inextricable interrelationship of an individual and her surrounding society with subtlety and fair-mindedness that would be the envy of any journalist.”

Just as Clare International has developed from a small company manufacturing soap to a conglomerate producing a large number and variety of products for both corporate and individual customers, as well as for both domestic and international distribution, so, too, the cultural expectations of Americans and the citizens of other nations with advanced economies have changed dramatically across the era of industrialization and into the current post-industrial period. These cultural expectations are now so entrenched that it is difficult to separate those to which the chemical industry has simply responded from those which the industry itself has fostered. But, very clearly, some mixture of customer demand and corporate promotion has been driving an ever-increasing demand for medicines that lengthen life and enhance quality of life and products that mitigate the actual physical effects of aging or at least reduce some of the most obvious physical manifestations of aging. Although Powers does not suggest that there is anything inherently wrong with any of these efforts to extend or to enhance one's life, he does seem to suggest that the effects of our genetic inheritance and our exposure to potential environmental hazards, especially in their extremely complex combination, are very much beyond our control. Adopting a lifestyle that is based on the assumption that one is guaranteeing oneself a long life is not much more reasonable than living recklessly under the assumption that one is going to die young and never have to confront the debilitating consequences of one's poor choices. The spread of Laura Bodey's cancer and the intensification of her cancer treatments are described in excruciating detail (in a review for *Washington Post Book World*, Thomas M. Disch asserts, “. As a photo-realist documentation of a normative contemporary death, *Gain* has no rivals this side of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*) but the depth of detail is not meant primarily to intensify the feelings that Clare International and the chemical industry are culpable and should be held accountable. Instead, Powers wishes to establish incontrovertibly that we are suffering under a sort of mass delusion that we can delay and

perhaps ultimately evade death. The truism that nothing is certain but death and taxes can be very aptly applied to this novel's core themes. And the fundamental irony is that the industry that may be responsible for premature deaths from cancer is the very industry upon which we are basing our sense of entitlement to ever-increasing longevity, if not immortality, if we ourselves simply have the wherewithal and the willingness to commit ourselves to making the right choices.

This novel paradoxically both reinforces the importance of history as a record of human events and undermines our confidence in the ultimate function of history within an ahistorical universe. History is, after all, as much a product of human invention as any product of the chemical industry is. In writing a creditable history of a fictitious conglomerate, Powers is reminding us that history is typically as much a distillation of politically, socio-economically, and culturally significant events as fiction is typically a distillation of some narrower, more personalized experience. In the case of history, a creditable interpretation of events cannot be based on incorrect facts, but a history limited to the reporting of basic facts will not yield many insights. More than anything else, history is selective. Although history books may sometimes seem very crowded with less important or even footnote figures, what is included and excluded is somewhat arbitrary, a matter of some combination of historical tradition or convention and of authorial choice. In all cases, much more is excluded than is included. A corporation may have its history recorded in a book comparable to the sections of Powers' novel on Clare International, but very little if any of that history is going to make it into broader histories of even a relevant and relatively narrow historical period. Likewise, we speak of individuals such as Laura Bodey having personal histories, but very few ordinary people ever have their histories actually written. Recent inventions such as cameras, videorecorders, and social media sites have allowed ordinary individuals to document their lives in ways that were simply unavailable to pre-industrial societies, but for the most part, the artifacts of our personal lives are probably going to be disposed of much as the contents of our most of homes are disposed of after we die. Certainly, if we survive online, the Internet companies will find ways of extending the commodification of our personal data to some equivalent commodification of our personal digital artifacts. Similarly, for all of the importance that we have continued to put on owning and documenting property, very few properties remain in the same family over multiple generations. On even a very modest historical timeline, the differences between leasing or renting and owning diminish significantly. Laura Bodey is, in effect, supporting

herself by selling one of our most commonplace illusions of permanence and personal security. A reporter for the newspaper in the small city in which I live once visited one of our oldest and largest cemeteries. Although the city is small, with a population of between 35,000 and 40,000, it is the largest city in about a ten-county area, and so its population would seemingly be more stable than that of a much larger urban area. But after the reporter wrote down the first 100 surnames on the headstones in the cemetery, he checked them against the local phonebook. (This column was published just ahead of the proliferation of cell phones and the relatively sudden irrelevance of the white pages.) He discovered that about two thirds of the surnames on the headstones did not appear in the phone book. So much for being remembered.

For most of us, our recognition of our participation in the broader historical flow of humanity, described by Whitman in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” is tantamount to recognizing our historical insignificance and anonymity. But the historical perspective that we have invented to give meaning to the course of human events is a relatively recent invention. It excludes not only almost all of the Earth’s actual history but almost all of our own species’ history. Indeed, the idea that history is some sort of permanent record is equally short-sighted. Even if we somehow manage to avoid destroying ourselves, whether directly through some sort of nuclear Armageddon or somewhat less directly by degrading the planet until it becomes unlivable for us, no individual species has survived across even half of the history of life on our planet. So, what Powers and perhaps Whitman are getting at is that there is some meaning to be gotten from our recognition that we are part of the broader ebb and flow of the universe, which remains well beyond our human comprehension. Since such a recognition is probably not very reassuring to most people, some sort of more comprehensible compromise is needed. That position seems to be essentially what the existentialists have posited: that is, the universe is meaningless, but what ennobles us as a species is that we persist in our efforts to make some sort of sense of it—to find meaning in its absurdity, to impose order on its chaos, and to find value in life itself and in a life well lived. That none of these aims are actually achievable is precisely the point. In the end, then, Powers seems to reaffirm the value of Laura Bodey’s life, even if he is not presenting it as any sort of model for how everyone, or even anyone, ought to live.

At the end of a review for the *Australian* of Powers’ next novel, *Plowing the Dark*, Geordie Williamson provides the following comment and then a related quotation from Powers himself:

“His astonishment, informed by a deep moral intelligence, is one that demands of itself, like science's method, a fierce objectivity. It has earned him a small, but devoted readership. And it has goaded him into a genuine urgency of task, utterly unlike that of any living novelist. In explanation, I should return to a statement made by Powers several years ago, one that could stand as his most eloquent apology yet, for ‘songbooks of homesickness’: ‘Art is a way of saying what it means to be alive, and the most salient feature of existence is the unthinkable odds against it. For every way there is of being here, there are an infinity of ways of not being here. Historical accident snuffs out whole universes with every clock tick. Statistics declare us ridiculous. Thermodynamics prohibits us. Life, by any reasonable measure, is impossible, and my life--this, here, now--infinitely more so. Art is a way of saying, in the face of all that impossibility, just how worth celebrating it is to be able to say anything at all.”

### ***Plowing the Dark* (2000)**

In this, his seventh novel, Powers reworks elements of his approaches in the previous two novels. In *Galatea 2.2*, he gives multiple literary turns to the Pygmalion myth and its various adaptations, focusing on an author without much of a personal life who becomes obsessed with creating a digital reader and then fostering a futile sense of self in a sensibility--a digital memory--incapable of any physical being and the physical experiences that are necessary to create actual memories. In *Plowing the Dark*, Powers presents us with two characters whose personal lives are similarly unsatisfying and who, in provocatively obverse and subversive ways, restore their senses of self through artistic creations that are divorced from the usual public exhibition and elicitation of a public response that seeks to locate the works both in the cultural moment and within cultural traditions. Like the character Richard Powers in *Galatea 2.2*, the two central characters in *Plowing the Dark* recuperate their capacity for and their commitment to artistic creation through works that truncate the typical transactional nature of art—through works that paradoxically assert themselves as art by denying one of the fundamental aspects of art, the impact on other sensibilities of what the artist has fashioned out of the creative maelstrom of his or her own sensibility. Like *Gain*, *Plowing the Dark* explores the ways in which public entities and events intersect private lives—the ways in which even very accurate histories and, in this novel, news reporting distill experience very selectively and incompletely.

*Plowing the Dark*'s two central characters are Adie Klarpol and Taimur Martin. Adie Klarpol is a painter whose early work has received very positive notice. But she has become dissatisfied with her personal life, disenchanted by the competitive nature of the art scene in New York, and disheartened by her flagging impulse to create. Indeed, she has become so disillusioned by the commercialization of art that she abdicates to it, finding employment as a commercial artist. In short, she desperately needs at least a temporary change in scene, and serendipitously, she receives an offer from an old friend from college, named Stevie Spiegel, to join TeraSys, a digital technology company in Seattle. Spiegel is part of a team that is developing a small virtual-reality room—or a large closet in which all of the plain surfaces have been painted white—that they are calling The Cavern. It is 1989, the year in which the phrase “virtual reality” officially entered the lexicon; so this project is cutting-edge stuff. In addition to Spiegel, the team includes an Irish economist who is convinced that they can create microcosms that will provide forecasts of international political events, economic trends, and even weather patterns, an Armenian mathematician who wants to devise ways of visualizing abstract mathematical concepts, theorems, and equations, and a wunderkind computer programmer who believes that anything that can be imagined can be reduced to code if only one has the imagination to understand the possibilities in coding. Despite their ambitions, when Adie joins the team, she finds that the virtual-reality demonstrations that they have developed to that point are quite pedestrian, employing somewhat primitive imagery to mundane ends. Spiegel invites Adie to join the team because he believes that what is missing in the group is a dynamic artistic imagination. He himself is a former engineering student, who then became an aspiring poet, and is now a programmer and project manager. Although Adie has found more success as a painter than Spiegel ever did as a poet, their career trajectories appear to have been broadly parallel. It is worth noting that the German word “spiegel” means “mirror,” for mirrored circumstances, experiences, characteristics, and images are the dominant motif in the novel.

Despite her skepticism about the possibilities in a synthesis of digital technology and art, Adie rather quickly becomes excited about the potential in virtual reality. Her first major project for the Cavern is three-dimensional rendering of Henri Rousseau's painting *The Dream*. One of Rousseau's “Jungle” paintings, the painting features a naked woman lying on a divan in the midst of a tropical forest that includes lions, birds, a Black flute player, and a snake. The most common

interpretation is that the painting depicts a dream that the woman is having. It very pointedly suggests the density of the tropical forest: plants of various kinds and sizes crowd both the foreground and the background, there are eyes visible in the shadows beyond some of the foliage, and from the waist up, the Black flute player is almost indiscernible. Yet, the painting is certainly not realistic. Lions are not typically found in tropical forest but, instead, on the savannah. Likewise, even though many interpretations of the painting identify the black flute player as a snake charmer, snake charmers are typically associated with South Asia, not with sub-tropical Africa, and, in any case, there are two lions between the flute player and the snake, and the snake seems to be unresponsive, to be slithering away from the flute player. The painting might suggest the tempting of Eve in the Garden of Eden, but it might just as easily suggest an exotic scene out of a strange and remote land created by someone who has never gotten anywhere close to being there. The team at TeraSys manages to develop such a realistic virtual-reality version of the painting that the individuals who close themselves in The Cavern have the sensation of physical contact with the dense vegetation. All in all, Adie's re-imagining of the painting as a three-dimensional virtual space is an impressive success—so much so that no one, including the reader, devotes much time to considering what the point of it ultimately is. After all, the virtual-reality environment does not produce art; it can, instead, only re-create the work of art as a sort of immersive recreation. One can even argue that entering the work of art in this way does not actually enhance one's appreciation of the work of art, for a work of art is an attempt to communicate the essence of an experience, not to replicate the experience *per se*. Therefore, no matter how affecting a work of art may be, responding to it necessarily requires some distance. This requirement is an aesthetic corollary to the truism that one cannot completely or accurately understand a situation in which one is actively involved; one needs, instead, to step back from the situation and to view it, as it were, from the outside.

It seems to be significant that Adie starts with a work by Henri Rousseau, who is not only classified in the sort of catch-all category of Post-Impressionists but is something of an anomaly even within that growth. What connects all of the Post-Impressionists is their desire to restore the sense of form that the Impressionists seemed to sacrifice to their interest in accentuating the interplay between light and color and in emphasizing movement. Under-appreciated throughout most of his lifetime, Rousseau was considered a primitivist when he was not being dismissed

derisively as an amateur. But the Expressionists and other avant-garde artists of the next generation saw him as an artist who was simply somewhat ahead of his time, a symbolist intuitively drawing upon archetypes from Western and non-Western cultural traditions. Ultimately, Rousseau is an artist around whom such fixed opinions have formed that adapting his work to an experimental technology will provoke a great deal of consternation or complaint.

For her second project, Adie chooses to adapt to virtual reality Vincent Van Gogh's painting *Bedroom in Arles*. What is odd about Van Gogh's painting is that it seems close to an Expressionist rendering of the artist's bedroom because the dimensions of the room seem to be distorted. But, in actuality, Van Gogh was fairly accurately painting a room that had odd dimensions—more specifically, that was shaped more like a trapezoid than a rectangle. So one wonders, again, what the purpose of a three-dimensional rendering of the painting ultimately accomplishes. The setting is much more mundane than exotic, much more realistic than symbolic. Moreover, if one enters the room through the illusion of virtual reality, one is not entering the room in which Van Gogh lived but, instead, entering into his artistic rendering of that room. There is some point to analyzing the objects in the painting in terms of how they contribute to the effect of the whole painting, but they have no inherent interest in themselves—certainly not in the same way that some of the actual artifacts might have some individual meaning if one were visiting the room after it had been preserved or restored as a historical site.

Yet, Adie not only becomes very immersed in her work on The Cavern, but she also becomes involved in a passionate relationship with Stevie Spiegel that heightens the intensity of the work that they are doing together. She is, however, given the opportunity to step outside of the facility and to consider her work for TeraSys with some perspective. In several instances, she simply commutes into Seattle and takes in the city much as Whitman took in New York before writing "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." These excursions remind her that however fantastic the virtual reality experience within The Cavern has become, it is not reality but, instead, a sort of phantasmagoric dilution of reality. Unlike Helen in *Galatea 2.2*, she can experience the world physically, in a fully sensory way, and she can distinguish that intensity of such experience from any digital approximations. Paradoxically, her relationship with Stevie Spiegel seems more a part of the approximated experience of virtual reality than a part of the real world outside of the TeraSys facility. All of this is brought home to Adie when she travels to the rural town of Lebanon, Ohio, to

visit a former lover named Ted Zimmerman. A gifted composer who is now in the late stages of multiple sclerosis, Zimmerman is literally bound to his bed to prevent him from injuring himself when his limbs begin to move convulsively. When he was younger, he was a compulsive womanizer, and his chronic infidelities were a major part of the issues between him and Adie. But, like Adie, and perhaps even more so, he is a genuinely gifted artist, and like her, and to a lesser extent Stevie Spiegel, he compromised his artistic ambitions and turned his talent toward lucrative commercial uses. Ironically, the advertising jingles that he composed have made him financially secure enough to be able to afford the around-the-clock care that he is now receiving. More ironically, now that he is almost completely immobilized within his wasted body, he is very determinedly composing serious music—using digital innovations that are very analogous to those that Adie is making use of in her work for TeraSys. In this way, Powers provides a pointed contrast between The Cavern and Ted Zimmerman’s medical confinement. The Cavern is necessarily a very confined and empty space because the effect of the virtual reality projects cannot be achieved in a larger space or in one that is not completely bare, even of color. In contrast, Ted Zimmerman is just about as physically disabled as one can be, and yet his imagination somehow transcends the limits that he confronted even when he was physically robust.

The other major story line in *Plowing the Dark* also involves a character whose confinement to a small space is forcible and harsh, compounded by his being blindfolded for much of the time, and of unsettlingly uncertain duration. He not only does not know when his confinement will end, but he cannot be at all sure that it won’t end with his death. Taimur Martin is an Iranian-American who, unlike Adie Klarpol, very consciously decides that he urgently needs a change of scene, but, like Adie, gets an unexpected opportunity to work at a new job a considerable distance from where he is now living. In Adie’s case, she relocates from New York to Seattle, from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific coast, or from one end of the continental United States to the other. Taimur Martin relocates an even greater distance, from Chicago to Beirut, Lebanon, or from the middle of the continental U.S. to the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, or the western edge of Asia. Taimur is trying to escape a very erotically satisfying but otherwise very troubled, eight-year relationship with a woman named Gwen Devins. Like Stevie Spiegel, Taimur has had aspirations to become a writer, but he has supported himself largely with teaching positions, and when a position to teach English at an American school in Beirut is offered to him, he quickly accepts it and leaves Gwen behind.

When she informs him that she is pregnant, he thinks that it is a ploy to re-establish their relationship, and he glibly and cruelly advises her to identify the father and let him know. Ironically, during a class discussion, he makes an ambiguous reference to the reasons that he is in Lebanon, and his remark is interpreted as his being on some sort of mission for the C.I.A. or some other American intelligence service. When he wanders a short distance off campus, he is kidnapped by a terrorist group and held prisoner for five years in a section of Beirut that might as well be hundreds of miles away from the school at which he was teaching and the U.S. embassy. He endures extended physical isolation, compounded by physical and sensory deprivation.

Not only is Taimur isolated in what amounts to solitary confinement a small, dingy, and windowless room, but, again, for much of his confinement, he is kept blindfolded. So, in effect, he is confined to The Cavern without the benefit of any of the virtual-reality effects. Like Ted Zimmerman, however, he makes the best of a desperate situation by using his unconstrained imagination to create what is essentially art—to fashion stories from his memories. But, unlike Ted Zimmerman, Taimur does not have access to even a pen and paper; indeed, for most of his confinement, he does not have access to any reading materials. So, he is denied the digital technologies with which Adie and Ted Zimmerman are able to transform confined spaces and or transcend confining conditions. So, not only does Taimur have no one with whom he can communicate with any regularity or at any length, but the whole artistic process is confined to his very vulnerable state of mind: his memory is the sole store of material from which he can fashion stories, his imagination is the mechanism by which he generates the stories and then revises them, and his mind is essentially the library in which he stores them—even though there is no real prospect of his being able to share them with anyone. The claustrophobia not just of Taimur’s confinement but of the artistic process by which he largely maintains his sanity is reinforced by Powers’ very unusual choice to have Taimur narrate his sections of the novel in the second-person. In effect, Taimur is also creating—imagining--his audience, his listener or reader. One might think that the fact that the readers of Powers’ novel are reading Taimur’s story would diffuse, if not completely undermine, the sense that he is creating stories in total isolation. But, somehow the second-person narration mitigates the potentially awkward contrivance of the reader’s listening in on the stories being fashioned inside this prisoner’s head. (In a review of the novel for the

*Vancouver Sun*, Lee Henderson suggests that “Martin's story takes on the detached style of an early text-based video game.”)

The first stories that Taimur fashions focus on the incidents that illustrate the highs and lows of his relationship with Gwen. He then begins to recall events and scenes from his childhood and adolescence and to recollect the many stories that his mother told him about their family and their background. Up to this point, he might seem to be simply reminiscing, taking stock of his life now that his future seems to be in jeopardy. But, when he exhausts the store of those stories, he begins to do something very similar to Adie’s reconstitution of Post-Impressionist paintings as virtual-reality experiences: he begins to reconstruct Charles Dicken’s *Great Expectations*, chapter by chapter, to a considerable extent making the narrative his own as he invents what he cannot remember. Eventually, he begs his captors for something to read, and they provide him with a copy of the Koran, permitting him to read it for designated periods of time. After each of these reading sessions, he reconstructs what he has read in much the same way as he did *Great Expectations*. Finally, one of his captors gives him a book called *Great Escapes*, not realizing the irony--beyond the obvious ironies—that Taimur has already escaped repeatedly in ways that have preserved his spirit much more than even repeated attempts at physical escape might have done so.

Taimur is obviously cut off from the news more definitively than Adie is, but her absorption in her work for TeraSys means that she is less aware of the transformative events occurring across the world at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, from the fall of the Iron Curtain and the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War. Adie has shifted from creating three-dimensional virtual realities from well-known paintings to recreating the sensation of being inside an actual architectural space, the interior of the Hagia Sophia. The choice is interesting because this architectural landmark has served as a Byzantine or Eastern Orthodox cathedral and an Islamic mosque, and in the early 1930s, it was transformed into a secular space as a museum. So, the Hagia Sophia has multiple cultural as well as physical points of entry. Moreover, it is an immense and impressive structure, and in a virtual-reality environment, many of its features that would be barely visible or inaccessible to a visitor can be brought within an arm’s reach. In short, Adie makes an very inspired choice. But then she learns that TeraSys may be selling its virtual-reality technology to the military, and quite suddenly political reality and virtual reality intersect in a manner that she finds extremely disturbing. For even Adie is very aware of the media

coverage of the Gulf War as the first digital or video-game war: the cameras mounted on the U.S. bombers showing how the digitally guided weapons lock onto their targets and eliminate them in sudden puffs of dust and smoke. Adie has a very immediate and visceral understanding of how digital technologies might be used to make warfare seem more sanitized while they are actually making it all the more destructive and deadly. To forestall the adaptation of her projects to this sort of use, Adie reworks the programming so that the next person to enter the virtual-reality interior of the Hagia Sophia will have the sensation of its suddenly collapsing upon him. As she planned it, the representative of the military who visits TeraSys is quite shaken by the experience. But by that point Adie is gone. She has erased the programming for her projects as thoroughly as she can, and she has programmed the project with the Hagia Sophia so that the collapse of the great dome initiates the erasure of the programming that makes it possible. Before all of that occurs, however, Adie enters The Cavern and virtually levitates herself too close to the dome. It is a very dizzying sensation, during which she believes that she sees a shadowy figure moving across the space far below her, but when she descends to investigate and then attempts to replicate her movements to recreate the shadowy figure, she is unable to do so. This figure seems to be suggestive of the ambiguous implications of advancements in digital technology, as well as the unpredictable effects of artistic creations on their creators, their audiences, and the cultural traditions from which they have emerged.

Taimur's sudden release from his long captivity is almost anti-climactic, especially for him, for he has no idea what attention, if any, his kidnapping has received. He learns that Gwen has been a tireless advocate for his release and that he has a daughter who is now almost school age. He meets the two of them, his daughter for the first time--in Istanbul, and his daughter offers him a drawing in crayon of their reunion. Although Powers does not put Taimur inside the Hagia Sophia, in the later stages of Taimur's captivity, his imagination has taken a turn away from the literary and toward the visual arts. In one instance, he recalls a visit to a temple, and when he recollects entering the structure, his imagination seems to overwhelm his memory. When he looks toward the ceiling, he is captivated by an angel who suddenly starts to fall toward him, a vision that terrifies him all the more because the angel's alarmed facial expression indicates that she very visibly shares his terror. It is ironic, if not remarkable, that Powers not only includes such imagery not simply in the novel but just before the climactic moments in each narrative. For the novel was published in 2000, and

in 2001, the world watched from multiple angles first as people threw themselves from the upper stories of the World Trade Center and then ran away from the site as the towers themselves collapsed. (Some years before those events, I was visiting a friend in New York. While I was waiting for him outside one of the towers, I turned and looked up its glass wall and had one of the most severe episodes of vertigo that I have ever experienced—and I was looking up, not down.)

In the end, it is not clear whether Taimur's more difficult days are behind him or ahead of him. One would naturally hope that his relationship with Gwen will be stronger than it was previously since she has invested so much extended effort in securing his release. But Taimur has not thought a great deal about her since the early months of his captivity. It may be that he has moved passed the antagonism that he felt toward her, but it may also be that he now feels very little for her. Their daughter may be a major point of connection between them, but the existence of their daughter is a major surprise to him, and given the difficulty that anyone subjected to a lengthy and harsh captivity typically has in readjusting to "normal" life, one wonders whether the relationships thrust upon Taimur on his release will make his adjustments easier or more difficult. It is also an open question whether the solitary exercise of his imagination that has sustained him throughout the course of his ordeal will make it easier or more difficult for him to share that experience, either on a personal level or as some sort of writing offered for publication, for public consumption. It is equally ambiguous whether Adie's experience at Terasys has reinvigorated her impulse to create art or whether the experiments with virtual reality mark an end point in her impulse and commitment to creating art.

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