

Richard Powers and the Post-Postmodern Novel of Ideas: Part 1: The First Four Novels

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Abstract

In producing a very substantial body of highly regarded work, Richard Powers has established himself as one of the major American novelists of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Powers has taken the novel into new territory, and his work very clearly represents an acute awareness of and a conscious synthesis of the traditions in the American novel, and the novel more broadly. This essay treats Powers' first four novels which stand as a substantial and noteworthy body of work. They demonstrate the things that make his novels distinctively his: the daunting range of interests and preoccupations; the gradual enlargement of his sensibilities, or his sense of the world, and of his place as a novelist within that world; and the continuing refinement of his skills as a novelist and his increasing sense, I think, of a cumulative legacy—of how each new novel complements his earlier efforts and yet extends it in terms of the selection and treatment of subjects, structure, characters, themes, and style.

Keywords: Richard Powers, Postmodernism, Novel of Ideas, Dos Passos.

Introduction

Since 1985, eleven of Richard Powers' novels have been published. His output has been very regular, with each new novel following the previous one at an interval of two to three years, with the exception of his most recent novel, *Orfeo*, which appeared five years after the novel that preceded it, *Generosity*. All of the novels have been critically well-received, with even the more pointed complaints about some aspects almost always being framed in the acknowledgement that Powers is a serious novelist whose work deserves serious consideration even when it may fall short of what he may have intended or a particular reader may have hoped for. The novels have started to receive major awards and perhaps, more significantly, to be more routinely listed as

finalists for such awards. In short, in producing a very substantial body of highly regarded work, Powers has established himself as one of the major American novelists of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. And, although he is still relatively young, it does not seem premature to begin trying to gauge his place in the history of American letters.

In the title of this essay, I have already characterized Powers as a post-postmodernist novelist. That term does not, of course, designate any broadly acknowledged formal category, but it is, I think, a convenient way to suggest both that Powers has taken the novel into new territory and that his work very clearly represents an acute awareness of and a conscious synthesis of the traditions in the American novel, and the novel more broadly. So, it is my intention in this introduction to highlight some of the elements of Powers' novels that seem distinctive and then to suggest some of the novelists to whom his novels seem to bear some resemblance, if not to owe some level of debt.

More than most novelists of this and any other period, Powers is interested in exploring the complexities, the ramifications, and the unresolved issues related to very specialized fields of research. These fields have ranged from linguistics, art history, and cultural studies to historical documentation, political analysis, and corporate histories; from genetic research and advanced medical specialties to industrial chemistry, pharmaceuticals, and quantum physics; from the effects of disease and injury to emotional attachments and familial bonds, states of mind and responses to crises, and social expectations and personal and group identity; from industrial and communication technologies to computer coding, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality; from philosophical and theological suppositions to other conceptions of human identity and from the mysteries of subatomic reality to those of the far reaches of the universe. As Daniel C. Dennett points out in "Astride the Two Culture: A Letter to Richard Powers, Updated," a contribution to *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*, Powers is a non-specialist whose fictions are so thoughtfully conceived, thoroughly researched, and carefully executed that they can truly be said to animate and even to inform the work of specialists by providing a perspective that specialization often precludes. Indeed, in each novel, several of these specialized disciplines are treated in threads of

the narrative that permit Powers to explore and to highlight the parallels and contrasts between them—to emphasize that they are all ultimately part of the same “story,” the store of human experience that fiction attempts to render in a manner that is beyond the reach of reportage or exposition.

Beyond the thematic and the structural complexities of the novels, Powers adjusts the diction, syntax, and tone of his narratives to their subjects. But, beyond the variations, there is a consistent attention to the novel as language, a challenge to the reader to engage with the narrative fully and to accept that much of what is going on linguistically will not necessarily be fully grasped or understood in a particular reading. The novels are rich with figures of speech, word play, and allusions—as well as digressions into explanations of all sorts of items of possible interest, from the mundane to the arcane.

The preceding two paragraphs might suggest to someone who has not read any of Powers’ novels that they are so dense as to be almost unreadable. But, although some critics have complained that the characters and action seem sometimes to become buried under the other layers of the narrative, most commentators have found a nicely maintained balance between the basic elements of the stories and the other elements. Indeed, if the characters and plot lines were developed with less substance and nuance, they would not support the “ideas” that Powers is attempting not just to delineate and to illustrate through their stories but also to bring to some fresh synthesis or insight through their stories. In short, we are engaged by the “ideas” because we care about the characters and we are curious about how the situations that they confront will be resolved.

In the extensive integration of specialized knowledge into the narrative structures and the thematic considerations of his novels, Powers recalls, of course, Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* and, more recently Thomas Pynchon’s novels. Although Powers has also acknowledged the influence of the novels of William Gaddis, I would argue that his work differs significantly from that of other meta-fictionists because it is not as self-referential as the work of John Barth increasingly became and because it is less self-indulgent than the work of Joseph McElroy and Ronald Sukenick. (I don’t mean this observation as a denigration of the work of McElroy and Sukenick: their self-indulgence is one of the major things that has sustained me in reading their

very lengthy novels.) In some ways that I might have difficulty articulating in any precise way, among all of the meta-fictionists, Powers' novels stylistically remind me most of John Hawkes's novels.

In terms of the novels' linguistic virtuosity and density, Powers' novels owe an obvious debt to James Joyce's *Ulysses*—though I think that there are also echoes of the apparent straightforwardness but actual obliqueness of the stories in *Dubliners*. And again, there is a debt to Gaddis, especially *J.R.* Several reviewers have very perceptively suggested that in their meticulous renderings of contemporary American life and mores, Powers' novels seem very comparable to those of John Updike. Indeed, I think that at their best, Powers' novels show the influence of most of the major American novelists of the postwar period. Like Bellow, he has a deep and abiding interest in the tensions within mature sensibilities—in the emotional tumult or psychological strain just beneath the surface of the practiced public persona. With Roth, he shares a preoccupation with sexual relationships and the psychological impediments to intimacy, as well as with the tension between the very concrete impact of historical events and the elusiveness of historical accuracy. Like Morrison, he is interested in the intersections of tumultuous public events and personal torment over terrible choices and missed chances. With Oates, he shares an interest in the subversive impulse, the very fluid boundaries between what is real and what is imagined—between the inconceivable and the incontestable. And like Mailer, Powers seems to relish being selectively idiosyncratic—so that it is not always profitable to wonder why a particular character should have an odd trait or be described in a peculiar way.

Among his contemporaries, Powers seems to me to be most connected to writers such as William Vollmann, Neal Stephenson, and John Calvin Batchelor. Among somewhat older novelists, Don DeLillo seems to be very similarly attempting to find a balance between narrative and thematic complexity and accessibility—specifically, in anchoring his narratives to significant events within American popular culture. Tom LeClair observes that Powers has recognized and has sought to mitigate “the dinosaurian demands on diminishing literacy that the maximalists imposed.”

Lastly, in terms of this introduction, I think that Powers owes a great debt to John Dos Passos, whose novels from *Manhattan Transfer* through the *U.S.A. Trilogy* to such late works as

Midcentury are deftly structured but seem almost intuitively controlled. Like Dos Passos, Powers integrates very diverse materials into the novels and ultimately makes the materials seem not just inherently or inexplicably related but inextricably connected. Like Dos Passos, Powers has treated characters as something other than simply the producers or the products of their circumstances, something other than actors who are swept up in historical currents; instead, they are finally inseparable from the events of their lives. This distinction may account for the sense among some reviewers and readers that the characters do not emerge as clearly as they might from the narratives. Despite all of the evidence of his authorial control, one gets the sense that like their characters and his readers, Dos Passos and Powers are being swept forward through the narrative on the sometimes satisfying, sometimes frustrating, and often confounding momentum of creation.

Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance

Powers' first novel, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, takes its title from a photograph by August Sander. On the most superficial level, the novel "recreates" the stories of the three young men, both before and after the moment captured in the photograph. Under normal historical circumstances, such a narrative would connect their family backgrounds and formative experiences with the adult choices that would shape not only their lives but those of their wives and offspring and, perhaps by extension, their later descendants. But, because the photograph is dated immediately before the outbreak of the First World War, the lives of these characters are truncated or radically transformed by the unprecedented, industrialized violence of that conflict. As George Kearns notes, the dance to which the three young men were walking is not just "a village *fete*, but the First World War as Dance of Death." Whatever mundane promise their lives may have held, the Great War wrecks it, much as it wrecks the assumptions on which the supposed political, economic, cultural, and moral ascendancy of Modern Europe were based.

Although the three young men are living in the Rhineland, they actually represent a much more fluid representation of European identity than the national rationales for going to war would suggest. One of them is actually Belgian, and, in trying to escape Germany ahead the outbreak of hostilities, he crosses the Belgian border and manages to get shot and killed by his own jittery

countrymen shortly before the war begins. A second is Dutch and escapes Germany by assuming the identity of a Dutch journalist who is fearful of covering the war. Ironically, although in this imposture and from the French side of the front lines, he becomes obsessed with chronicling the horrors of the war, first in words and then in photographs, in an unsparing manner that ensures that almost none of his reports or photographs will be publicly disseminated by the news organizations. Although he survives the war and ends up back in the Rhineland, he becomes a more ambiguous figure and ultimately disappears somewhat mysteriously during the Nazi consolidation of power ahead of the Second World War. The third farmer is the only one of the three who actually enters military service, but although he enlists in the German army, he never actually sees combat. Instead, he is assigned to a unit engaged in the pacification of the Belgian territory overrun by the German army. After a brutal reprisal against Belgian civilians, he has a psychological breakdown, wanders away from his unit, and is then shot as a deserter.

Like many conventional historical novels, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* is framed by a narrator chronologically removed from the events and providing broader historical perspective through an investigation of those events. Powers' narrator is identified simply as P. He is a stockbroker traveling by train from Chicago to Boston for a job interview. During an extended layover in Detroit, he happens to visit the Detroit Museum of Art, where he first sees Sander's photograph and becomes obsessed with it. Although he knows very little about Europe in the first several decades of the 20th century, the narrator immerses himself in researching the period with the intensity of a doctoral student but without any special focus. He conducts this research after work hours and, ironically, invests himself in it to a degree that he has never been able to bring to his job. Although he is able to find relatively few details about the lives of the three figures in the photograph, he learns all sorts of things that illuminate aspects of their circumstances, and he ultimately begins to reconstruct their lives imaginatively—fictionally. The sections of the novel in which this research is presented are often more exposition than narrative, but they are as essential to the narrative as any of the action. They inform the narrative in the same way that the materials on whales, whaling, and the oceans inform *Moby Dick*.

Further complicating the narrative framework is the introduction of a second contemporary character, a writer/copy editor for a computer periodical named Peter Mays. Mays undertakes the

reverse of the narrator's trip from Chicago to Boston, traveling from Boston back to his family's home in Chicago. While rummaging through the attic there, he comes across materials that identify his grandfather as the figure in Sander's photograph who survived the war. During the war, his grandfather covered Henry Ford's peace mission to Europe, and Mays finds a document that seems to grant his grandfather a tiny percentage of Ford's business, which Mays quickly calculates should now be worth a quarter of a million dollars. When he travels to Detroit to try to claim this inheritance, he predictably discovers that the claim is dubious and worth, literally, a few pennies. But parallel to his pursuit of his inheritance is his pursuit of an actress who specializes in playing female figures from the early 20th century, most notably Sarah Barnhart. Although he is unsuccessful in meeting the actress, during his pursuit of her, he meets a waitress, with whom he falls in love. Serendipitously, she unexpectedly receives a small fortune from a former customer who decided to remember her in his will because she resembled his deceased wife. In any case, the only actual detail linking the narrator and Peter Mays is the narrator's acquaintance with a cleaning woman who is a cousin several times removed of Peter Mays, though there is no evidence that the narrator ever actually becomes aware of that linkage. So although the narrator, who is, again, identified only as P., seems to be a version of Powers himself, the sections of the novel concerning Peter Mays remind the reader that there is an author beyond and distinct from his narrator.

All of the connections between the narrator and Peter Mays are expositional, involving their research into a period about which they know very little—even though it is not much more than a half-century removed from their current lives and had an incalculable impact in shaping the world in which they live. Couching one of the few largely negative reviews that the novel received, Marco Portales acknowledges that Powers' "recreation of the characters' thoughts captures postmodern, fragmented consciousness well," but he finds the historical passages overly long and unengaging, building to a rhetorical question: "We are not told why the narrator should be tracing 'a path back to the world of the First World War.' At one point, he confesses that he cannot remember the 'urgency of the picture' and has 'lost sight of the ends' of his research and his attempts to extrapolate subsequent events from the photograph. When the narrator arrives at this juncture in Chapter 7 of a 27-chapter novel, readers can only ask 'Whither?' and, worse, 'Why?'" In contrast, Gregory L. Morris builds to this very different judgment: "This is a

remarkably accomplished first novel. As a technical, structural experiment, the book generally succeeds, despite the occasional staginess of some of the narrative. More exciting and more satisfying, though, is the intellectual stamina of the book. Both story and idea engage the reader, lure him in to the web of time and mystery and connection that is the real fabric of this very fine book.”

Sander’s photograph was part of a series that he called *People of the 20th Century*, which he regarded as life’s work and his great achievement. Sander was very aware of the avant-garde movements of the period, but his photographs in this series typically are topical, occasional—capturing moments that would be categorized under “human interest” by magazine editors. Thus, the lines or tensions between information, entertainment and art, between documentary and imaginative art, and between historical artifact and historical representation are all inherent in Sander’s project. By extension in Powers’ novel, the lines or tensions between history and fiction, between realism and experimental fiction, and between Modernist and Postmodernist experiments with form are likewise explored. Although it is clearly a work of meta-fiction, Powers’ first novel clearly embraces many of the conventions of the novel, in a self-aware way, rather than highlighting their artificiality in the manner of most of the meta-fictionists. In essence, since the meta-fictionists have thoroughly demolished the notion that realism is reality, Powers sees no disadvantages—and manifold advantages—in employing narrative conventions that are familiar to readers and that make a very complex narrative more accessible.

There is some parallel between Powers’ attempt to reconstruct the “story” of Sander’s *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* and curators and historians efforts to reconstruct Sander’s series. Some sixty of the photographs in the series were collected in the book *Face of Our Time*, published in 1929, but the Nazis proscribed the book seven years later, ordering that all copies and the photographic plates held by the publisher be destroyed. Sander relocated from Cologne to the obscurity of a rural village, and although his Cologne studio was destroyed in the Allied bombing of the city, he had managed to move about three quarters of the negatives to temporary safety in the countryside. But then, about a year after the end of the war, those negatives were largely destroyed in a catastrophic fire. Sander would live almost another two decades, but he never resumed his work as a photographer.

So, Powers' has not merely or arbitrarily selected or appropriated one photograph from the thousands that Sander took with the intention of incorporating them into his ambitious series. Rather, Powers is focusing on a single photograph that a complex combination of historical circumstances has arbitrarily made available to him. In the end, the photograph and the novel do truly and very complexly complement each other. And although one cannot say that the photograph is about the novel (because that would be a historical impossibility), it is almost equally implausible to say that the novel is simply about the photograph. For the novel is so fully and complexly about the photograph that no one who has read the novel can now look at the photograph apart from the novel—without seeing the photograph through the multiple lenses of the novel. In most historical novels, complex historical circumstances are rendered in microcosm in order to simplify the complexities and to make the core experiences more understandable. Some of that occurs, of course, in each of the separate elements of Powers' narrative. But, taken together, the elements of that narrative expand, rather than narrowly define, our sense of the possibilities in the photograph. Ironically, despite their seemingly unrestrained scope, neither Sander's series of photographs nor Powers' ambitious novel may ultimately have been of sufficient scope to fulfill their creators' ambitions. But, at the very least, both stand as illustrations of what achievements are possible when awareness and imagination are informed by conceptual vision and invention. As Patrick Parrinder concludes, "*Three Farmers* pays genuine tribute to August Sander's Teutonically thorough and slightly dotty photographic project in a manner as far removed from Sander's horizons as it possibly could be."

Prisoner's Dilemma

If *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* can be fairly described as an attempt to recover some historical understanding of cultural artifacts now largely isolated from their contexts and of familial connections that remain, at best, very tenuously recoverable, then Powers' second novel, *Prisoners' Dilemma*, might be described as a historian's attempt to escape history through alternating immersions in facts and fantasies that define his familial relationships. The main character is Eddie Hobson, a history teacher in his early fifties who has moved from one teaching position to another without markedly advancing his career. The degree to which his peripatetic career has been a manifestation of his own dissatisfactions or of his employers' dissatisfactions is

never made entirely clear. Indeed, it is ultimately not even clear whether his restiveness is due more to physical or to psychological causes.

Prisoners' Dilemma presents a somewhat conventional family saga juxtaposed with several pointedly postmodernist elements. The Hobsons are a very average family living in a series of middle-class communities in Middle America. Although it becomes clear that the Hobsons' five children have issues that they are struggling to resolve and that most of their issues have some connection to their father's unresolved and persistent issues, their problems do not hint at any great psychological abnormalities but, instead, serve to reinforce their normality. Maureen Howard suggests: "We might think of Salinger's Glass family, slightly less damaged, transferred to the heartland. Each child, while distinctly a Hobson [*sic*], has made it out of the system." Although the Hobbes family's communications are somewhat constrained by an awareness of topics that have long been avoided or that might be addressed only in very circumspect or formulaic ways, this is a family that very much enjoys talking—that communicates in meaningful ways, even about those things that they are very hesitant to talk about directly. Indeed, the focal events in the novel involve a family crisis—the need for Eddie Hobson to seek treatment for an ambiguous illness from which he has been suffering for some indeterminate period of time but which has now started to become seriously debilitating.

This illness is not the sort of topic that Eddie Hobson has routinely discussed with his family. His main way of communicating with his children has been to quiz them on all sorts of facts, historical and otherwise. Although this practice is not entirely out of line with what we might expect a teacher to do, Eddie Hobson takes it to something of an extreme. Furthermore, although it is very true that an understanding of anything must be based on facts, it is also true that simply knowing the facts does not necessarily define or even lead to understanding. If it did, then doctoral degrees would be awarded to the big winners in each season of the long-running television program *Jeopardy* or to the winners of the scholastic bowl leagues in which many elite schools field teams. We get a glimpse of Eddie Hobson the teacher in these discussions. Somewhat incongruously, Eddie Hobson takes on many of the characteristics of the teacher that everyone loves to hate while insisting that his purpose is to encourage his students to think for themselves instead of allowing others to do their thinking for them. Whatever challenges his methods have

produced in the schools in which he has taught, no such challenges have been permitted in his home. Richard Locke suggests that “his brain teasers express his own isolation, his sense that history is a double bind, his search for a way to connect individual and group experience, to make one act of trust ameliorate a world of self-destructive mutual suspicion.”

In contrast, to his conspicuous penchant for testing the breadth and depth of his children’s knowledge of facts, Eddie Hobson has long indulged in a very personalized fantasy that he has called *Hobstown* or *World’s World*. Inspired by his visit to the 1939 World’s Fair, whose theme was *The World of Tomorrow*, and, in particular to the General Motors’ exhibit called *Futurama*, Eddie Hobbes’s fantasy blends his autobiography with a sort of repurposing of the propaganda films produced by Walt Disney. In the chronicles of *Hobstown*, Disney and Mickey Mouse are the heroes. Eddie records the episodes or chapters of this fantasy narrative on tapes that he stores in his office, and they are not discovered by his children until after his disappearance and presumed death. Notably, Eddie Hobson names the main character of his fantasy narratives Bud Middleton; very clearly, Powers is using Eddie’s conceit to highlight the commonplace questions of when a narrator speaks and does not speak for an author, even when the narrator and author do have the same initials (as in *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*) or the same name.

In the chronicles of *Hobstown*, Eddie Hobson is obsessed with the forced internment of Japanese-Americans during the Second World War. A clearly immoral response to mass anger, paranoia, and a sudden awareness of shocking, national vulnerability, Eddie’s interest in the internment is understandable but also masks his more sublimated and profound experience of the nation’s and the world’s entry into the atomic age. Eddie was reassigned to Alamogordo, New Mexico, shortly before the Trinity Test of the prototype for the bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan. Eddie’s coincidental presence at this landmark event gave him a very visceral sense of the terrors of the Nuclear Age. But, whereas those terrors led many others to construct bomb or fallout shelters, Eddie Hobson constructed *Hobstown*. It became his readily available retreat from a world that has too often seemed too willing to risk its own annihilation, but, in the end, it could not protect him from the atomic blast. For it becomes increasingly clear that his mysterious illness is a result of his exposure to the radiation produced by that blast. Ironically, because Eddie Hobson was an aircraft mechanic who had stateside postings throughout the war, the Trinity Test site is as

close as he ever got to a war zone, to the personal risk of combat. In the end, he spares his family the trauma of having to witness his final decline and death by fleeing the hospital and, presumably, returning to the vicinity of Alamogordo as if he finally might there get the answers to the test for which he seems to have been preparing all of his life. Ironically, since the White Sands missile range has by this time been transformed into a tourist attraction, it is ambiguous whether Eddie Hobbes is confronting the horrors of history as he confronts the horror of his own demise, or if he is actually circling back unknowingly to something more comparable to the fantasy of Hobstown. Likewise, in disappearing as he does, Eddie Hobson paradoxically does not spare his family the trauma of his passing because his disappearance lacks the finality of a death and burial.

In both its title and the choice of the name Hobbes, Powers highlights choices that are either paradoxical or not real choices at all. The “Prisoners’ Dilemma” refers to a situation in which two prisoners accused of wrongdoing are separately interrogated and offered the choice of saving themselves by betraying each other. If they both agree to betray each other, they are both doomed. In fact, if either agrees to betray the other, they are very likely both doomed because the betrayal by the one prisoner will almost certainly provoke a reprisal by the second prisoner. So, their only hope of salvation lies in their having the faith and the foresight to trust each other—to protect each other as a means of saving themselves. In effect, the dilemma challenges two human beings who have presumably demonstrated some willingness to flout societal or political norms to find the capacity for a faith in each other that would presumably be difficult for those of more exemplary character to achieve. And that paradox may be the paradox within the paradox of self-serving altruism. The paradoxical choice described in the “Prisoners’ Dilemma” is echoed more straightforwardly in the phrase “Hobson’s Choice,” which refers to the practice of a livery owner in England who permitted his customers to take any horse that they wanted as long as it was the horse in the stall closest to the door.

All of this is echoed in the choices that Eddie Hobson permits himself—between the terrors of the Nuclear Age and the transparent, superficially reassuring escapism of entertainers such as Walt Disney. The escapism is the easy choice, except that it provides no actual escape. So, Eddie Hobson’s dilemma echoes America’s dilemma in the decades following the Second World War. Not only did the American prosperity in those decades come on the heels of both the Great

Depression and the World War, but it was the direct result of the country's having become the "Arsenal of Democracy" during the war and having escaped the massive destruction that every other major industrialized nation suffered during the war. In a very real sense, we prospered because we were geographically removed from the calamity that made it difficult for any other nation to prosper. Yet, the development and proliferation of nuclear weapons—the Cold War—undermined the confidence in American prosperity because it undermined our sense of invulnerability. More than ever, Americans committed themselves to achieving the American Dream, but they knew that all of the manifestations of their material prosperity did not make it any less of a dream, a fantasy.

All of these thematic threads come together in a single, rather trivial detail—but it is the sort of trivial detail that so fascinated Eddie Hobbes. When we enter the Hobbes's story, they are living in DeKalb, Illinois, which is the place where barbed wire was invented. More than the U.S. cavalry, barbed wire made the taming of the Wild West possible. It allowed homesteaders to section off the wilderness into personal property. In a very real sense, it made the American Dream possible by both defining and protecting personal property. But, as the free-range ranchers argued, often at the end of a gun, prosperity came at the cost of the personal, unrestrained freedom of which the American Dream is ostensibly the embodiment. Once barbed wire was invented and perfected, it was an either-or choice whether to use it or not. So the underlying paradox may be that either-or choices are often simplistic renderings of complex realities but, just as often, they may be the only choices that we have.

3. The Gold Bug Variations

Powers' third novel remains both his most admired work and his most criticized work. Those who admire the novel find the characters compelling, the narrative stunningly elaborate in its symmetries, and the prose richly and unflaggingly inventive. Those who have criticized the novel have found the characters less interesting than almost all of the other elements of the novel, the narrative structure so complex as to be bewildering, and the prose so self-indulgently dense as to be overwhelming rather than rewarding. Given their substantial length and consistent complexity, it is probably an exaggeration to say that any of Powers' novels can be read and appreciated in a single, even very extended session. But a work such as *Prisoners' Dilemma* is

certainly much more accessible and easy to read than some of Powers' other novels. At the other end of the spectrum, *The Gold Bug Variations* is certainly one of Powers' most challenging novels, a work that probably needs to be read slowly and over some extended period of time to be understood and appreciated to any meaningful degree.

Although Roy Porter ultimately finds the novel fatiguing and unsatisfying, I think that his description of it is largely on the mark—that is, he finds fault with the very things that I and others have found most remarkable about the novel: “Powers’ prose exemplifies the phenomenon it depicts, shares the psychopathology that is at the heart of his tale. Like other sorts of bingeing [*sic*], overdosing on jargon, or data for data’s sake, is temporarily exhilarating, but ultimately exhausting. In the end, atomized individuals disappear behind the walls of information that they erect to conceal themselves. Scientific discovery becomes a kind of re-covering, and the enterprise of science, and with it, the schema of this novel, turn self-defeating. The more we find out, the less we understand.”

The prose of *The Gold Bug Variations* is an elaborate exercise in rhetorical and figurative devices that less accent the narrative than absorb it. Although there are too many metaphors and allusions to count, the predominant device is the pun. Not only the narrator but also the other characters are compulsive punners. As a result, the narrative often contains complexly devised levels of punning so that a reader who is intensely responsive to language descends into the narrative rather than simply being propelled forward through it. In this sense, Powers’ novel is similar to Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and it achieves at least some of the anticipated but still largely unrealized possibilities of the hypertext novel.

The formal term for the pun is *paronomasia*, a word derived from the Greek *paronomazein*, meaning to alter slightly, to call with a slight change of name. On every level, Powers’ novel explores and is itself an exercise in slight variations on basic patterns that sometimes in themselves and sometimes in totality provide sophisticated insights into basic truths. Most commentators on the novel have noted Powers’ own detailed and knowledgeable attention to Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, which, in the seminal recording by Glenn Gould, not only holds an enduring fascination for one of the focal characters, but which also provides a musical corollary to

the scholarly research that all of the characters undertake and a template for the structure of the novel itself.

The title is, of course, also a play on the title of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Gold Bug." In the story, a man who has lost his family's fortune retreats from New Orleans to the coast of South Carolina. There he comes across a mysterious gold bug and a piece of parchment on which he discovers secret writing that contains a cryptographic code. When he deciphers the code, it provides directions to where Captain Kidd had buried a fortune in gold coins and jewelry, and the man's fortune is more than restored. Much has been written about the ambiguity of the gold bug itself. It is clearly not an actual insect, though Poe seems to have based his description of it on a distinctive beetle native to the region in which the story is set. In fact, despite all of the detail about the nature of "invisible ink" and the techniques employed by cryptographers, and despite the emphasis on the reasoning that permits the protagonist to locate the buried treasure, it is never really explained what the gold bug is, how it happened to be where the protagonist finds it, and how the piece of parchment managed to survive well over a century on an island in a region with a hot, humid, and stormy climate.

In a very similar way, Powers provides so much in this novel that one might miss the things, some of which are central to the stories that the novel presents, that he does not fully explain. The novel explores two relationships separated by about three decades. In the mid-1950s, Stuart Resler is a biologist involved in unraveling the mysteries of DNA. While pursuing research that brings him to national attention, he falls for Jeanette Koss, a fellow researcher who, though happily married, nonetheless enters into an extramarital affair with Resler. It is she who gives Resler the Glenn Gould recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. When she ends the affair, Resler decides to abandon his career as a scientist and disappears into anonymity. Resler's ascetic personality has enabled him to bring an extraordinary level of concentration to the task of cracking the genetic code, but it has also seemingly left him emotionally vulnerable to some unusual degree. It turns out that Jeanette Kos is unable to have children. But the fact that Resler should be so invested in cracking the genetic code while being captivated by a woman who cannot bear children seems more a provocative irony than the key to understanding his subsequent life.

Some three decades later, Resler is working the overnight shift at a computer data center. One of his co-workers is Franklin Todd, a doctoral candidate in art history whose work on his dissertation has stalled. Todd's curiosity about Resler's past history leads him to the library, where he meets a research librarian named Jan O'Deigh. Although she is in a very safe and generally satisfying relationship, O'Deigh becomes involved with Todd, and their relationship intensifies as they uncover the peculiar facts of Resler's earlier life. But the details of the two relationships occurring some three decades apart are more variations on a pattern than in any sense neatly parallel. O'Deigh, like Jeanette Kos, is unable to bear children, but in O'Deigh's case, she has deliberately decided to be sterilized because she has long been haunted by the myriad possibilities for genetic abnormalities. She and Todd eventually split up because of his compulsive infidelities, and when Resler dies, she decides to begin graduate study in genetics. A postcard from Todd about Resler's death very circuitously—and in a manner that recalls her and Todd's researches into Resler's past—leads to a reconciliation between her and Todd. Resler's death, from cancer, has its own somewhat circuitous turns in circumstance. Not only does Resler finally return to Illinois, ostensibly to receive some last-ditch treatments but fairly clearly to die, but in its early stages, his illness is narratively overshadowed by an interlude that is part Robert Ludlum and part Preston Sturges. As a gesture of kindness toward a co-worker who has covered for him and Todd, Resler manipulates the computer system to award the man a bonus. But, in doing so, he inadvertently eliminates the man's health insurance. The man then becomes so stressed out by not only the loss of his health coverage but also by his potentially being implicated in the fraud that he suffers a stroke. To correct this series of unforeseen ramifications of what was intended as a simple gesture of gratitude, Resler then develops a computer code for a virus that can wipe out the data on the company's computers, and he blackmails the company into restoring the co-worker's health benefits.

In the end, all of the codes in this novel, like the cryptogram in Poe's story, are complex variations on simple patterns. That complexity is further underscored by the number of codes that are not just brought together within the novel but on some levels synthesized within the narrative: musical scores, cryptographic codes, genetic codes, social mores, behavioral codes, romantic cues, legal codes, moral codes, and personal codes. In addition, the novel more indirectly treats issues of

neural encoding, cognitive encoding, and memory encoding. But, most fundamentally, the novel is itself a demonstration that all communication is code. One of the contributions to *intersections: Essays on Richard Powers* is Patti White's "The Rhetoric of the Genetic Postcard: Writing and Reading in *The Gold Bug Variation*." With great attention to the intricacies in the communications, and the miscommunications, White analyzes the communications that very circuitously bring Jan O'Deigh and Franklin Todd back together. I would like to suggest that the entire novel can be approached in this way. We know that language is selective—that it suggests, rather than captures, our experience. We recognize that the multiple levels of concreteness and abstraction that language provides can just as easily make a communication ambiguous rather than exact. We accept that different perspectives on the same experience will almost certainly yield different versions of that experience. Nonetheless, we cling to the notion that clear and straightforward communication is not just possible but a sort of baseline against which miscommunication can be measured. Moreover, we continue to regard the written word as being somehow more substantive, more solid, than the spoken word—ignoring that writing is a further layer of symbology, a further filter through which the experience being communicated must pass. Because of all of the advantages of written communication—especially its allowing us to transcend some of the limits of space and time in our communications—we tend to accept it as—to confuse it with—our actual reality. In this sense, the novel can be understood as a forerunner to virtual reality. At its best, it is something more than a recreation but something less than a recreation of our reality. As is the case with all of the other codes explored in this novel, it can allow us to isolate some of the basic elements that underlie the complex patterns of our experience, but at its best, it simultaneously makes us very pointedly aware of the complexity of those patterns. And that is, in essence, the case for why *The Gold Bug Variations* is a very important novel.

4. Operation Wandering Soul

Like the protagonists of Powers' first three novels, the protagonist of *Operation Wandering Soul* is a loner, an ascetic—a psychological recluse even if he has not withdrawn from it entirely. But, unlike Hobbes, Kraft has no family to provide a buffer between his interior and exterior worlds that softens their collisions. Kraft is a physician, but unlike many doctors and medical professionals who maintain some emotional distance from the horrors that they confront by

focusing on them scientifically—by concentrating on symptoms, diagnoses, treatment options, and expected outcomes—Kraft cannot prevent himself from measuring the limits of the science against the immensity of the horrors.

In its structure and scope, *Operation Wandering Soul* does broadly resemble *Prisoners' Dilemma* in that most of the action occurs in the present and in a relatively concentrated space. As with Eddie Hobbes' experiences during the Second World War, there is, however, a background story here. Kraft is the son of a Foreign Service operative. Like the offspring of many parents in the diplomatic corps and the military, Kraft benefits from the broad view of the world that his father's various postings provide, but he suffers from the lack of lasting connections with extended family and friends that his father's peripatetic career have made impossible. Perhaps as compensation for those absent relationships, Kraft seems to have had more than the usual share of youthful idealism. When his father is posted to Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, Kraft commits himself to building a school in a poor village. His efforts at securing donations for the school attract significant media attention, which insures that the government media will exploit the story for propaganda. But as the donated items accumulate and the school becomes a real showpiece, Kraft realizes that for the children whom it has ostensibly been created to serve, the school is simply and unalterably foreign. Many of the children who have not been maimed by bullets and bomb fragments are afflicted with untreated injuries from more mundane causes, uncorrected congenital conditions, chronic diseases, or parasitic infections.

The title refers to a psychological operation undertaken by the American military intelligence services during the Vietnam War. The operation was based on the assumption that the majority of the Viet Cong who were from rural areas still deeply believed that it was essential to the soul of a deceased person that he or she be buried in an identifiable place so that his or her relatives and descendants could visit the grave and insure that the memory of the deceased would be preserved. The soul of a deceased person denied such a burial would be condemned to wander aimlessly and to suffer agonizing anguish for eternity. So, the psy-ops agents prepared recordings that could be amplified through loudspeakers attached to helicopters, warning the Viet Cong in their own language of the dire fate that awaited them. In these recordings, they went beyond warning that those who died in carpet bombings or napalm attacks would be condemned to such

eternal suffering. The voices in the recordings identified themselves as the souls of the already deceased who had been condemned to eternal wandering. Yet, despite all of the careful reasoning, focused effort, and considerable resources that were committed to this strategy, there is no evidence that it succeeded in undermining the morale of any Viet Cong troops. It seems likely that at least some of the Viet Cong wondered why their dead would have chosen to speak to them through loudspeakers mounted on American helicopters.

Not only is John Kraft himself metaphorically a wandering soul, but he is anguished by the recognition that we are all wandering souls, regardless of what happens to be done with our remains after we are deceased. For some, this recognition may come sooner than for others, but, in Kraft's view, the idea of the soul unendingly wandering in anguish is as much a metaphor for the human condition as the myth of Sisyphus was for Albert Camus. But, whereas the existentialists found some nobility in the persistence of humanity in the face of the total meaninglessness of existence, Kraft, whose name in German means "power," does not find salvation in even such a meagerly redeeming insight; instead, he is gradually overwhelmed by his sense of powerlessness.

Kraft takes a position at a public hospital in a poor section of a city that seems to be a thinly fictionalized rendering of Los Angeles. He works in a children's ward, where he confronts children afflicted with diseases and deformities that are an amplified version of what he saw in the children of that Asian village. The ward is a heart-rending carnival of grotesqueries that includes even a child suffering from progeria, the genetic condition that accelerates aging. The children manifest all manner of genetic abnormalities and environmental aberrations. In terms of the former, this novel seems to provide an extremely dark and extended confirmation of the fears that have led Jan O'Deigh in *The Gold Bug Variations* to have herself sterilized. In terms of the latter, the children are literally and figurative scarred by everything from endemic impoverishment and all manner of accidents, neglect, and abuse, to chronic environmental degradation, such as exposure to lead, smog, and polluted water, and individual environmental calamities such as chemical spills and toxic conflagrations.

In most fictional treatments of this sort of subject matter, there is an implicit, if not explicit, contrast with a more affluent, more secure part of the world—a place where everyone may die, but most do so quietly in their sleep or suddenly from a momentarily disconcerting cardiac arrest, a

place where most children live to fulfilling adulthood and those few who do die very prematurely expire only after their parents and other family members have been able to exhaust every possible means to prevent their passing, which comes upon the unfortunate children like a comforting sleep. In short, their passing is heart-rending but in an ultimately reassuring way.

But in the world depicted in *Operation Wandering Soul*, there is no reassurance. The descriptions of the city seem to emphasize that the security that affluence provides is a delusion—that almost nothing in the natural or the human-created world actually observes the lines or fragile boundaries that distinguish levels of wealth and privilege. The city might be described as a post-apocalyptic landscape—the kind of nightmarish vision that Eddie Hobbes and Walt Disney tried to keep at bay with sanitized fantasies—except that this reality is pre-apocalyptic, the “normal” conditions under which most human beings live. More specifically, Steven Moore suggests that certainly in Kraft’s view and very likely in Powers’, too, “for children it is always apocalypse now.” Sven Birkerts classifies the novel as millenarian fiction: “As Powers writes in a peculiar chapter made up of words and definitions: ‘The most common hallmark of millenarian thought is the conviction that civilization is just now entering its moment of truth, an unprecedented moment of danger and opportunity, of universal calamity and convergence . . .’ And it is a millenarian tension, a sense of urgency verging on terror, that drives this remarkable imagining forward.” Since most of the narrative seems to reflect John Kraft’s point of view, one can argue that this unrelentingly grim view of the world and the human condition is largely a reflection of his deteriorating psychological state. That said, there is not much in the descriptions of the city that seems distorted beyond recognition.

Like Eddie Hobbes and Walt Disney, Kraft does begin to relate “children’s stories” to the patients in his ward. These include the usual “fairy tales” and, when he seems to have exhausted his store of those stories, sanitized versions of historical events centrally involving children. In his telling, the tale of the Pied Piper becomes linked to the Children’s Crusade. Kraft is particularly drawn to a very small and frail Thai girl who is suffering from terminal cancer. Like a dark but very compelling and deeply sympathetic caricature of the dedicated Asian student, she is driven to absorb as much knowledge as she can before the disease kills her. But she and the other children, who have in many other ways become much older than their years, are still children and so enjoy

Kraft's stories that they are inspired to improvise a stage version of the Pied Piper that they are invited to perform outside the hospital, as the appetite for inspiring human interest stories becomes very demonstrably as grotesque as their disease-afflicted bodies.

Kraft comes to two very devastating realizations. First, he recognizes that medical intervention is often a dedication to the extension of life without regard for the suffering involved. For all of our great advancements in medicine, we have not actually moved all that much beyond the sorts of treatments that we now view as primitive, if not barbaric. For all that we know about particular diseases—and Powers seems determined to impress this point upon us by sharing everything that he knows about them—there is a great deal that we cannot explain, including, in many instance, such basic things such as why one person gets a disease and another does not or why one person recovers while another does not. Second, Kraft recognizes that the tales that he has been telling to the children to their great delight all ultimately suggest the horrible ways in which children have been victimized, individually and *en masse*, both in our fictional tales and in our histories. From the Children's Crusade to the Holocaust and the carpet-bombing of cities, we have not spared children from the worst inclinations and imaginings of the human psyche.

Unlike Powers' previous protagonists, Kraft finds a willing lover in Linda Espera, a therapist who works with the children in the ward. Although she seems to have an unflagging generosity of spirit and an almost indestructible faith in value of doing good, she is so much Kraft's polar opposite that she ultimately cannot reach him and cannot save him. Some commentators on the novel have found her characterization and the treatment of her relationship with Kraft to be either unconvincing or unsatisfying. But it is difficult to make something conventionally engaging from a relationship that is not so much tortured as torpid. I think that the same point needs to be made in response to the criticisms that the unrelentingly bleak rendering of Kraft's world could have been accomplished at a more abbreviated length—as if the fault lies with a novel that extends beyond our usual capacity for finding tormented souls engaging, if not entertaining, rather than with the expectations and the habits that we have developed as readers.

Kraft's breaking point occurs when a massacre at a nearby school overwhelms the hospital's emergency room. Perhaps, in 1993, some readers could be excused for regarding this climax as overly melodramatic, as a calamity necessitated primarily by the scale and the scope of

the misery preceding it. But, in the context of how normalized school massacres have become, and in the aftermath of the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary in particular, the novel's climax seems more prescient than contrived. Indeed, one can argue that the failure to do anything concrete in the aftermath of Sandy Hook to try to prevent another massacre of innocents stands as a grim testament to our actual capacity to accept such losses. Since Powers himself treats the Children's Crusade, I will be somewhat self-indulgent in highlighting another dark irony. Modern historians have largely debunked the traditional narratives about the Children's Crusade, suggesting that they are probably very fluid syntheses of real and invented events, including the atrocities. Any notion that we have progressed well beyond the Medieval sensibility might, however, be challenged by citing the unsettling phenomenon of the Sandy Hook Deniers. These gun advocates have taken the contemporary penchant for indulging in conspiracy theories to a level that is as myopically absurd as it is unsettling. They contend that the Sandy Hook Massacre never occurred--that it was, instead, staged by extremists determined to undermine the constitutional right to bear arms. Perhaps the Deniers are more vocal than they are numerous, but that they exist at all is basically what pushes John Kraft beyond his ability to cope.

Conclusion and Prologue

By themselves, Powers' first four novels stand as a substantial and noteworthy body of work. They demonstrate the things that make his novels distinctively his: the daunting range of interests and preoccupations; the gradual enlargement of his sensibilities, or his sense of the world, and of his place as a novelist within that world; and the continuing refinement of his skills as a novelist and his increasing sense, I think, of a cumulative legacy—of how each new novel complements his earlier efforts and yet extends it in terms of the selection and treatment of subjects, structure, characters, themes, and style. The next four novels—*Galatea 2.2*, *Gain*, *Plowing the Dark*, and *The Time of Our Singing*—now chronologically constitute the middle of his output, but it is very possible that they may eventually be grouped with the first four novels as his early work. They will be the focus of the second in this series of three articles.

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