Pynchon's Bequest

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Stephen J. Burn and Peter Dempsey, eds. *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*. Champaign: Dalkey Archive P, 2008. Paper, xxxix + 336. $29.95.

Although Thomas Pynchon has famously avoided the spotlight, he and his work—especially *Gravity's Rainbow*—nevertheless cast a large shadow over contemporary American fiction. In a Bloomian anxiety of influence, a subsequent generation of fiction writers—I'm thinking of writers like the late David Foster Wallace, William T. Vollmann, Rick Moody, Bradford Morrow, Mary Caponegro, Michael Chabon, A. M. Homes, Colson Whitehead, and the subject of the collection of essays under review, Richard Powers—has been inspired to write by Pynchon's great novels but has also sought to find a way out from under their shadow. This anxiety is made more acute by the concomitant sense that the postmodernism exemplified by Pynchon and his fellow experimental writers of the sixties and seventies (Barth, Coover, Sorrentino, Gaddis, Barthelme, Reed, and so on) has reached something of a dead end. That is, postmodernism's consciousness of language, its iconoclasm, and its questioning of all master narratives, which in the 1960s played an important role in exposing and debunking many long-held social conceits and hypocrisies, by the late 1980s and 1990s had devolved into an all-purpose irony, the rolling of the eye and the nudging in the ribs that mocks any assertion that eschews irony's game and aspires to sincerity. As Wallace explained in a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, "Irony's useful for debunking illusions, but most of the illusion-debunking in the U.S. has now been done and redone. . . . All we seem to want to do is keep ridiculing the stuff. Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. . . . Irony's gone from liberating to enslaving" (147).

Wallace articulated most explicitly and consistently the challenge facing the generation of fiction writers that came of age at the twentieth century's close: to make use of the bequest of the postmodernist generation—the awareness of language as language, narrative as narrative, representation as representation, the refusal to let the reader suspend her disbelief—but to use it in ways that will connect fiction more directly to the world we all more or less share. If postmodernism can be characterized as a double representation—fiction representing fiction representing the world—then the fin-de-siècle generation seeks, not so much a complete break with their

forebears, but a way to preserve though deemphasize the first representation while reemphasizing the second representation.

As a result, this generation's relations with the postmodernists can be testy. Wallace had enormous admiration for *Gravity's Rainbow*, but he also tired of reviewers' comparisons of *Infinite Jest* to Pynchon's novel. He once said to me, exasperatedly, "Why do they always compare me to Pynchon? Why don't they compare me to DeLillo?" In his novella "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (which would be a novel by anyone else's standards) from the collection *Girl with Curious Hair*, he uses some creative writing students' engagement with Barth's classic story "Lost in the Funhouse" to critique the exhaustion and commercialization of postmodern fiction and the need to find new aesthetic directions so as to make fiction connect to the world and touch its readers. In "Octet" and "Adult World," from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, he directly addressed the exhaustion of postmodernism. Another example is Matthew Remski's brilliant and insufficiently known novel *Silver*, which begins with foreign correspondent Tyrone Pynchon's peregrinations in pre-World War II Europe and works its way to contemporary America, where Jesus Christ, who is immortal but who did not, it turns out, ascend into heaven, becomes the first Ronald McDonald, and where the murdered Playmate Dorothy Stratten becomes a symbol of the dehumanization resulting from the twentieth century's ideology of control. Both authors attempt to metaphorically kill the literary father and claim a new aesthetic.

Richard Powers is among the most intelligent, ambitious, and eclectic of the fin-de-siècle generation. Beginning in 1985, he has published ten novels, each interweaving a discipline or topic (genetics, medicine, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, race, memory), a narrative that acts on and is acted upon by the topic, and a set of formal strategies that develop the themes. Although there are no weak entries among his novels, my favorites are *Prisoner's Dilemma* (1988), about the effects on a family of the trauma suffered by their father during World War II; *The Gold Bug Variations* (1991), probably his most complex work, about the search to decode DNA, genetic communication, and interpersonal communication; *Galatea 2.2* (1995), about a novelist named Richard Powers who assists a scientist in creating a neural net that can pass the Master's comps in English; *Plowing the Dark* (2000), which features parallel stories about code writers and artists trying to create a virtual reality program and a teacher held hostage by a fundamentalist group in Beirut; and *The Echo Maker* (2006, National Book Award), about a brain-damaged accident victim who cannot recognize his sister as his sister.

Stephen J. Burn in his introduction to *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*, which he has edited with Peter Dempsey, notes the important influence Pynchon's writing had on the young Powers: "Pynchon's novels, with their blend of literature and science, and their dark portraits of the hidden networks of institutional power, exerted a lasting influence on Powers's work

and, in fact, Powers has re-read portions of *Gravity's Rainbow* every year since he discovered it as a sixteen-year-old" (xxi). Burn further tells us that one explanation Powers has offered for his decision in college to drop his Physics major and enter the Rhetoric program was his rereading of *Gravity's Rainbow*'s Advent Evensong section. Powers has apparently maintained his interest in Pynchon: in 1990 he reviewed *Vineland* for the *Yale Review*; and in 2005 he wrote "Pynchon Appreciation" for *Bookforum*. Such influence as there may be is evidenced in Powers's work not so much in character, narrative, surreal violations of the realist aesthetic, or the shotgun marriage of high-brow and low-brow as it is in the narratives' casual mastery of esoteric disciplines, especially the sciences, and the application of those disciplines to explore ontological and epistemological questions.

It's no wonder, then, that Pynchon enthusiasts have been drawn to Powers's work as well. Indeed, *Intersections* includes essays by several critics—David Cowart, Charles B. Harris, Joseph Tabbi, Sven Birkerts, and Joseph Dewey—who have made important contributions to Pynchon studies. It is something of a surprise, however, given Powers's output—ten novels so smart, complex, and rich that they practically beg for critical explication—that more scholarly work on his fiction has not already been generated. The useful annotated bibliography at the end of *Intersections* shows us that to date only one book-length study has been published, Dewey's *Understanding Richard Powers*, along with a special issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, guest edited Jim Neilson in 1998, and a couple of dozen other book chapters and articles. It is this context that makes Burn and Dempsey's collection so important. The essays here offer a variety of approaches to Powers's work (*Generosity* [2009], Powers's tenth novel appeared after *Intersections* was assembled), create an opportunity for critical exchange about his work, and blaze trails that other scholars can follow and then extend.

The editors have organized the collection into Burn's introduction, providing background information on Powers's life, career, and aesthetic, and three sections, the first covering his novels chronologically from his first, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985) to *Operation Wandering Soul* (1993); the second beginning with *Galatea 2.2*, which, they argue, marks a turning point in his fiction, and ending with *The Echo Maker*; and the third consisting of essays that consider the novels in broader contexts and including a short but valuable essay by Powers. My own idiosyncratic way of thinking about the organization here is to divide the essays into three categories: essays that explicate some disciplinary knowledge to support a reading of the text; essays that explore formal strategies to show how they contribute to the ways the text makes meaning; and essays that consider Powers's work in the context of the sea change I suggest above, the transition from postmodernism to whatever comes after.

I include four essays in the first category. Anca Cristofovici looks at

Powers's first novel, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, and its inspiration, a well-known photo by August Sander of three German farmers taken on the eve of World War I. She uses Sander's biography and aesthetic as well as other photographic theory to show how the novel blurs the boundary between aesthetic and documentary truth and how it uses the photo as a means of traveling back and forth in time. Like others in this collection, she does not see Powers's engagement with his sources as being a one-way flow of information. Rather, just as knowledge of Sander gives us an entrée into the novel, so does the novel gives us new ways of looking at Sander's work. Burn, looking at *The Gold Bug Variations*, uses Paul MacLean's concept of the Triune Brain as a way of understanding Stuart Ressler's decision to drop out of the race to decode DNA, the novel's treatment of evolution as an ongoing competition among the three parts of the brain, and the role of art as a means of stepping outside this evolutionary competition. Jon Adams examines in *Galatea 2.2* the themes that develop out of phenomenal similarity and functional simulation, or, as he puts it, "the differences between things that look the same and things that work the same" (138). The novel's narrative, the creation of a neural net that can pass the Master's comps, becomes a vehicle for exploring what makes one human. Charles B. Harris uses research in Capgras Syndrome (the brain perceiving a loved one as an imposter) and, more generally, in brain functions to connect *The Echo Maker's* presentation of the brain as a networked ecology to our instinct to narrate ourselves into safe places. The moral impulse suggested by the novel is to break out of our self-protecting narrative and create a new story that can include someone else.

My second category includes essays that focus on formal issues and so gesture toward the question of the extent to which Powers's novels participate in the postmodern tradition of self-referentiality. Sven Birkerts argues that the titular logic problem in *Prisoner's Dilemma* provides both the formal structure for the novel and a mini-narrative out of which the novel's themes develop. He sees Powers's technique of wedding a series of realistic episodes with an alternate, more fantastic narrative as a way of addressing the crisis of the exhaustion of postmodernism: "how to create the terms of mattering in a culture that has divested itself of faith in all anchoring premises" (59). David Cowart, in looking at *Operation Wandering Soul*, a novel set at a hospital for seriously ill children, examines how the novel itself simultaneously participates in and refutes a tradition of literature in which narratives of some children's suffering become entertainment for other children. The novel's debate over the value of storytelling in the dwindling lives of these sick children—does it cure or kill?—leads to a synthesis in which *Operation Wandering Soul* becomes a narrative of children's suffering that acknowledges and implicates the agents of that suffering. Trey Strecker argues that the paired narratives in *Plowing the Dark* present art as a space from which an observer can achieve a critical and reinvigorating distance from the overwhelming real world. Each narrative

serves as the art-space for the other, and at the novel's climax characters from each narrative surrealistically meet in shared art-space. Paul Maliszewski examines the form of *Gain*, a novel with (again) paired narratives, one the history of a soap and chemical company, the other about a woman dying of cancer, who is convinced the company's output caused her illness. When *Gain* was published in 1998, reviewers generally saw it as straightforward realism. Maliszewski complicates its realism by arguing that the company's narrative gradually removes all humans until the company itself is the character, a strategy that mirrors the presence of corporations in contemporary life: given the rights of individuals by the courts, but also granted limited accountability, they are everywhere in our lives and yet nowhere. Similarly, Joseph Dewey argues that in *The Time of Our Singing*, a 2002 novel about race, focused in the story of a mixed-race marriage, which was also critically categorized as realism, an alternate, third-person narrative that violates the boundaries of time and space undercuts the main, first-person narrative, which is traditional, unimaginative, and leads, predictably, to an epiphanic climax in which Big Themes resonate.

My third category is really an extension of my second. These essays look more broadly at Powers's fiction as it is situated on the cusp between postmodernism and whatever comes next, what Burn in his introduction calls his "synthesizing elements of realism and metafiction" (xxxi). Scott Hermanson argues that in *Prisoner's Dilemma* Eddie Hobson, the patriarch whose mysterious illness so affects his family, suffers metaphorically from the breakdown of modernism's faith in a perfect future based in the possibility of grand, totalizing schemes. Simultaneously, the plot of Walt Disney trying to make a post-World War II epic demonstrates the bankruptcy of the concept of the world as a textual construction. When the novel's narrative levels collapse, we are left with what Hermanson calls an econovel, "an endless revising of reality, but one constantly aware of the inescapable constraints surrounding us—imprisoning us" (72). Bruno Latour posits that Powers's fiction breaks down distinctions between matters of fact, which have traditionally been the domain of science, and matters of concern, which have been the subject of art. Suggesting something of a feedback loop, he argues that, while Powers has drawn on science for his fiction, the fiction provides means for scientists to think and write about their work. Carter Scholz puts Powers's work in relation to traditional science fiction, arguing that the latter is about technology's promise for the future whereas the former gives us not the future but a false present, where technology is omnipresent but stripped of its promise. He says, "everything we need to live or die is now bound to technology and to its narratives" (302). The novels become a place where technology can be narrated in alternate, less damaging narratives than the official ones.

In a book full of laudatory essays, Joseph Tabbi offers the one cranky entry, and its crankiness is based on his perception that Powers has not

succeeded in moving beyond the seeming usedupness of postmodernism. He criticizes Powers's tendency to move from topic to topic (genetics, artificial intelligence, virtual reality, etc.) but then to treat each topic in essentially the same form. He notes Powers's desire to reconcile head and heart in his fiction, but wonders if this ambition is possible in the limited form of the sentimental novel. Finally, he compares Powers to Pynchon, in whose work head and heart are not reconciled but thrown apart. He concludes, "Powers's mastery of information is no less deep or extensive than Pynchon's, but he is much better behaved, much more inclined to keep his imagination within the frame of what science allows and technology licenses. Powers is much more *disciplined* than his literary predecessors, when it comes to processing information from other fields. But it is a discipline that serves these scientific fields and these professional discourses better than it serves the semi-autonomous development of literature" (227). I'm not sure I entirely agree with Tabbi's argument, but I like the potential dialogue that results from his breaking rank.

Intersections gives Powers himself the last word, in an essay in which he places his work in the context of Tom LeClair's concept of the systems novel, which, rather than reducing reality, bracketing it off, represents it as infinitely interwoven with social, scientific, cultural, ideological, and narratological processes. He explains,

> If mimetic fiction, on one hand, inviting an act of unbroken identification that willfully takes the symbol for the symbolized, trades in what John Gardner called the "vivid and continuous" fictional dream, and if postmodernism, on the other hand, calling attention to itself as an artifice through all sorts of anti-narrational devices, employs willful interruption of this unbroken dream, the novel I'm after functions as a kind of bastard hybrid, like consciousness itself, generating new terrain by passing "realism" and "metafiction" through relational processes, inviting identification at one gauge while complicating it at others, refracting the private through the public, story through form, forcing the reading self into constant reciprocal renegotiations by always insisting that no level of human existence means anything without all the others. (308)

This passage serves well as a grand summing up of what the essays in this volume, in their more focused explorations, have tried to demonstrate.

There are a few other essays in this collection that I found less successful, but other readers may find them useful. Another carp: the documentation is quite eccentric. It uses endnotes, preparing us for Chicago style citations, but when you turn to the end of the essay, the notes present the publication information in something approaching MLA bibliographic style. I imagine most readers will not be as irritated by this as I am.

Nevertheless, on the whole this volume is successful in offering thoughtful readings of Powers's fiction, in creating a scholarly dialogue about

his work that will, one hopes, generate future discussions, and in trying to situate Powers as heir to Pynchon's generation and legator to a new one.

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Work Cited

McCaffery, Larry. "An Interview with David Foster Wallace." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 127-50.