

Introduction

This paper offers a reading of Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker*, to the extent that the novel constitutes an answer to the profound and difficult question: what is the self? While postmodernist fiction has provided plenty of innovative meta-fictional and/or anti-narrative responses to this same question, Powers' text interests me for the way he employs a conventional realist approach to the same problem. I am curious to explore how the author manages to juggle the demands of conventional narrative progression required by the realist novel, including the construction of characters as relatively consistent, logical and 'rounded' individuals, with some radically destabilising approaches to the nature of consciousness and the self. In my reading of the text I seek to apply some useful frameworks from the cognitive approach to literature.

Characters and Minds

The very terms we use to speak about characters in fiction suggest something of the critical framework we take with us into the reading of a text. In classical narratology and in semiotics, discussions around the construction of character in fiction are generally premised upon the fact that because characters are mediated by language, they can never be treated as real people. For classical narratologists, characters become narrative agents or actants submitting to acts, little more than simple patterns of recurrence in the text. More recently, poststructuralist approaches to literature have favoured the term "subject" to discuss identity in fiction, emphasising the constructed nature of identity, the fact that we are subject *to* as much as we are the subjects *of* culture, and that our sense of self is constantly formed and re-formed by the way we position ourselves (or are positioned by) race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and so forth. The term character, which I have already used – perhaps automatically – in this paper, is not without its own problems. Character is a term that can be taken to be synonymous with "individual personality" as defined in psychology – "a complex of enduring traits, attitudes and dispositions" (Margolin 283) – hence assuming, one could argue, a relatively essentialist understanding of identity. The fact that character remains a kind of "default" term is significant, and I will return to this point later. During the last two decades, the Possible Worlds approach to literature, as developed by Marie-Laure Ryan and Ruth Ronen, has favoured the term "storyworld participant." The noun "participant" is interesting in that it seems to restore the idea that characters generally stem from and seek to render – to whatever degree of realism – our active, embodied experience as people at large in the world.

Significantly, “storyworld participant” is the term generally favoured by the cognitive approach to literature.¹ The cognitive approach questions, rather controversially for those of us raised on a diet of semiotics, the long unfashionable practice of linking fictional characters and real people. Cognitivists argue that while it is clear that characters in fiction are mediated via semiotic means, it can be useful to set aside the truth-functional or semantic focus on the gap between fictional and actual domains, and focus instead on “mental constructs and the internal representation of content or information. In this area,” says cognitivist, Uri Margolin, “our cognitive processing of fictional narrative may not be all that different in its fundamentals from our processing of a fact-based one” (281). Similarly, Lisa Zunshine argues that the reason we feel compelled to read and/or write fiction is that doing so exercises our Theory of Mind; in other words, it helps us to read the minds of others, explaining their behaviour and helping us to navigate and construct our social environment.

Alan Palmer argues that “narrative fiction is, in essence, the presentation of fictional mental functioning” (5) and that narrative theory has been too long pre-occupied with the ‘privacy’ of consciousness. He argues for a post-classical narratology where “an emphasis on the social nature of thought might form an informative and suggestive perspective on fictional minds” (11). Palmer views the mind in the terms developed by psycholinguist James Wertsch, as something that “extends beyond the skin” (qtd. in Palmer 11). “It is revealing,” says Palmer, “that the language of actants and functions is totally alien to the language of fictional minds and consciousness. When characters are not seen as beings, issues of consciousness do not arise” (31).

A Radically Impaired Mind

One reason that Theory of Mind has become so interesting to cognitive psychologists in recent decades is that they have come across minds in which the capacity to “see bodies as animated by minds” is radically impaired, as is the case, it has been argued, with people suffering from autism (Brook and Ross 81). Such cases go straight to the heart of questions about the relationship between narrative and identity. It is significant, then, that Richard Powers’ *The Echo Maker* constitutes a kind of illness narrative. The inciting incident that opens the novel is a road accident in which a key character, Mark Schluter, suffers severe closed-head trauma. The narrative complications that arise in the text all stem from the radical damage done to Mark’s brain as result of this single incident. In this sense, he is deliberately set up as a character whose Theory of Mind is damaged. Uri Margolin, in discussing cognitive approaches to literature, makes the point that a focus on “non-standard cognitive functioning” is, and has long been, a common trope in fiction. The deviant, failed or marginal mind, he argues, “provides the

¹ Uri Margolin tends to use the term “storyworld participant” in his writing on the cognitive approach to literature, but also argues for the term “cognizer” given that, as he sees it, “a storyworld participant, when conceived of as a thinking agent” is essentially “a processor of information” (283).

reader with novelty and an intellectual challenge to make sense of the unfamiliar and exceptional, and in addition, makes him or her aware *ex negativo*, of the presumed standard case” (287).

When we first meet Mark at the beginning of Powers’s text, he is only semi-conscious. He has scant understanding of what has happened to him and cannot yet speak. Clearly, through the trauma of his accident, Mark has experienced a profound disruption to his sense of continuity. His new, damaged state is so different from his pre-trauma state that he now experiences himself, and those around him, as profoundly other. His doctors diagnose Capgras syndrome, a rare brain condition characterised by a kind of “amnesia of affection” whereby the sufferer remembers almost everything about his former life, bar the important emotional connections (Whitehead 22). Mark believes the regular hospital visitor who says she is his sister, for example, is an actor, a fake. So begins one of the novel’s key pre-occupations: actors, semblances, frauds.

Early in the text, as Mark relearns language, he begins by copying the phrases of others, childlike. “Echolalia,” Dr Hayes tells Mark’s sister, Karin (36). Here, in a section of prose focalised by Karin, we witness Mark’s first tests of rediscovered speech:

Mark’s speech traced the same tight loops his walking did. One afternoon it was “chick, chick, chick, chick,” for almost an hour. It sounded like symphony to her. Rousing him for a walk, Karin said, “Come on, Mark, let’s tie your shoes.” This launched a barrage of “tie shoes, tissues, die your noose.” He kept it up until she, too, felt brain damaged. But exhilarated: in the hypnotic repetition, she thought she heard “too tight shoes.” A few loops later, he produced, “Shoofly, don’t tie me.” The words had to mean something. Even if they weren’t quite thoughts he flung them with the force of meaning. (37)

This focus on echoes is a central metaphor in the text. It is an example of how Powers’ represents the mind as inherently intersubjective, emphasising what Alan Palmer sees as the social nature of thought. Mark’s damaged mind “extends beyond the skin” (Werstch qtd. in Palmer 11) . He recreates himself, albeit in a profoundly altered way, in relation to those around him, and in doing so, begins to affect others. His sister, in particular, suffers as a result. “The more he says he doesn’t know me, the less I know how to be,” she tells the neurologist (120). The continual process that is the construction of self is inherently flawed, the novel seems to argue, not just in Mark’s case, but in anyone’s case.

Powers posits, via a lecture given by the character Gerald Weber, who I will come to discuss in more detail shortly, that the “job of consciousness is to make sure that all of the distributed modules of the brain seem integrated. That we always seem familiar to ourselves” (363). But continuity, hence the self, is always at risk, and never more so than when the usual way of seeing, of narrativising, is defamiliarised, as in the case of Mark Schluter.

The Quest for Knowledge

At the extreme end of the cognitivist approach to literature, is the shadow of Western scientific discourse at its most blatantly self-important. Mark Turner, in

Reading Minds: The Study of English in the Age of Cognitive Science, published in 1991, predicted, like some kind of unreconstructed empiricist that “The coming age will be known and remembered, I believe, as an age in which the human mind was discovered. I can think of no equal intellectual achievement” (qtd. in Hogan 2). Those who use a cognitive approach to literature have been accused of understanding the minds of both storyworld participants and real people as little more than computers, existing solely to process information.² Margolin, and others, argue against such an approach, positing that information processing is only part of the picture, and that the visceral and emotional aspects of lived experience, as well as the influence played by a subject’s immersion in culture are all important considerations.

The scientific approach to minds, and hence to subjectivity, comes under considerable scrutiny in *The Echo Maker*, particularly via the character of Gerald Weber, a New-York-based celebrity neurologist who has a lot in common with the real-life Oliver Sacks. When Weber arrives in the novel’s small town Nebraska setting, at Karin’s invitation, it seems that Mark is destined to become a mere artefact to be studied, interrogated, narrativised in the next of Weber’s highly successful non-fiction books on brain disorders. Weber is passionately interested in Mark’s rare condition and its implications for his new book on memory. “The boy-man might throw no end of light on consciousness,” according to Weber (303). “How did a Capgras patient see character,” he wonders during his first visit with Mark. “Could logic, stripped of feeling, see past the performance of personality? Could anyone?” (119). But significantly, Weber, the voice of authority, turns out to be completely fallible. He is unable to cure Mark in any conventional sense.

Weber’s latest book on the brain, titled “The Country of Surprises” (that landscape Turner and others are yearning to “discover”) has failed miserably with the critics. As a result, his own sense of self takes a battering. There are accusations of shallowness, of his use of subjects for his own personal gain, of invasion of privacy, of outdated methodology, “of being, in other words, a fraud” (Atwood 59). But if Weber can no longer be “Famous Gerald” and his outdated approach prevents him, also, from carrying on as a serious academic researcher in the university laboratory, who can he be? Who else is he? It is worth emphasising that the case histories of brain damaged patients Weber cites throughout the text tend towards cases where the mind has tricked itself, misidentifying or failing to recognise certain truths. Often there is a kind of blindness or agnosia – “blindness of objects, blindness to places, blindness to age or expression or gaze” (148) – and sometimes long passages on phantom limbs or phantom physical sensations – “even the intact body was itself a phantom,” Weber tells us, “rigged up by neurons as a ready scaffold. The body was the only home we had, and even it was

² In the novel, Weber comments on the cultural and historical situatedness of this approach: “Throughout history, the brain had been compared to the highest prevailing level of technology: steam engine, telephone switchboard, computer. Now, as Weber approached his own professional zenith, the brain became the Internet, a distributed network, more than two hundred modules in loose, mutually modifying chatter with other modules” (190).

more a postcard than a place” (260). Weber, for all he understands intellectually about the fact that there is no self without self delusion, cannot prevent his overwhelming visceral and emotional response to falling in love with the mysterious nurse, Barbara. He loves her because he recognises in her his own fall from grace.

In terms of narrative progression, we can read the case histories of patients suffering from rare brain disorders narrated by Weber, as a kind of embedded narrative in the text. They provide an almost didactic, essayistic aspect to the novel, mapping what neuroscience “knows” about the brain, and raising questions about those aspects we cannot yet explain. Weber, like Turner, sees himself as living in an age when the final mystery of the mind will be fully revealed. But Powers, in his interview in the *European Journal of American Studies*, acknowledges the failure of that particular kind of scientific project. The traditional approach to science, says Powers, worked on the basis that “as we got better and better at making our map, our empirical descriptions would finally arrive at a picture of reality that was isomorphic with reality itself. [But] [T]hat dream died”(3).

It is fitting, then, that the confident, worldly, successful Gerald Weber, for all he knows about the mind’s need to maintain the illusion of self, follows a narrative trajectory that leads him towards self-annihilation, wholly because of his own grief for the fallen “Famous Gerald.” He grieves also, perhaps, for the failed project of modern scientific knowledge. In the end, there is no map for “The Country of Surprises” and Weber is revealed as a fool for thinking he could manufacture one. On the very last page of the novel, we follow Weber as he flies back to New York to try and resurrect his marriage. He looks up from the book he is reading as the plane lands and feels himself fracture: “No whole left to protect” (451). What he needs, quite desperately it seems, is to be able to pick up the illusion of selfhood again; he hopes for Sylvie, his wife, and pictures her standing at the baggage claim. “He needs her to be there... holding his name on a little card, printed neatly so he can read it. Man, the card must say. No, Weber” (451). This final image in the final line of the novel calls attention to just how flimsy – but also how necessary – those aspects of the brain that maintain it in a steady state and ensure continuity between past, present and future. “When we read the last page of a book,” Powers tells his interviewer, Jean-Yves Pellegrin, “it retroactively changes all the pages that came before” (9). This ending, while satisfying the formal constraints of the chosen genre, retroactively lends significance to the way Powers’ exceeds those constraints. The name card Weber longs for is the sign that retrieves the story of selfhood, and that separates – at least temporarily – life from death.

Innovation within Formal Constraints

As I have said earlier, of key interest here is the way Powers handles character development and narrative progression through the guise of conventional realism in this novel, at the same time as he foregrounds selfhood as profoundly unstable.

How does he manage to compel the reader forward, to complicate and progress the dramatic narrative, at the same time as enabling each of the key characters – Mark, Karin, Weber – to unravel, to expose themselves as fabrications? One of the keys to understanding how Powers succeeds with this project comes through a consideration of the convention of genre. This text is a quest novel, constituted as a thriller, and we can easily chart all the key elements we would expect to see in such a text. Powers plants the question of who caused, or at least witnessed, Mark’s accident, very early in the narrative. He uses the device of a cryptic handwritten note left at Mark’s hospital bedside before Karin arrives at the hospital. Written in a spidery scrawl, the note reads:

I am No One

but Tonight on North Line Road

GOD led me to you

so You could Live

and bring back someone else. (10)

The novel is then divided into five sections, each bearing the title of a line from the cryptic note. A number of questions arise. Is the note a set of instructions? Why has Mark’s life been saved? Who is he supposed to “bring back”? Who were the drivers of the other two vehicles that left tyre marks at the scene? And what mysterious white object – bird, human, ghost – caused him to swerve? The first section of the novel – “I am No One” – is largely concerned with Karin returning home to sit by the bedside of her comatose brother and with Mark gradually regaining consciousness. Each section of the book adds further complications, detours and red-herrings to the questions raised by the note. In the third section – “GOD led me to you” – Mark has been sent home from hospital and is convinced that finding the person who wrote the note will provide some clue as to why his post-accident world has been so drastically altered. He tries all number of routes, including visiting all the charismatic churches in town and appearing on a crimestoppers program on TV, to try and track down the note-writer. But in the latter part of the novel, it is the neurologist, Weber, who trumps Mark and Karin as the detective. As mentioned earlier, he is positioned in the beginning of the text as a professional sleuth, if not in the crime game, then at least in the game of exploring the riddle of consciousness. It is fitting then, that it is Weber who ultimately solves the mystery of the note writer and the circumstances of the accident, even as he fails to “cure” or even understand – in any conventional sense – Mark’s brain disorders.

Much critical attention has been paid to the issue of structure in Powers earlier texts, and to the way his novels can appear to be programmatic. But “something in

every narrative,” Powers argues, “always strives to evade or exceed the formal constraints of its frame” (qtd. in Pellegrin 6). Significantly, he equates the narrative of the novel with narratives of the self: “We are always falling away from the story we once thought about ourselves. Every experience shatters the map that we have made. And yet, somehow, the fossil of that earlier story stays with us” (Powers qtd. in Pellegrin 1). For the novelist who seeks to create a new work from an old tradition, the “map” of conventional, realist dramatic structure leads us to incite conflict, to complicate it and resolve it (or not) along particular and familiar lines, and yet, we want for the same old map to transform a reader’s understanding of themselves, and of the world, in new ways. “I want you to read the story I’m about to tell as a perfectly mimetic, realist fiction,” says Powers, “but I also want you to read it simultaneously as an insufficient analogy, as something that is not quite what it seems to be” (qtd. in Pellegrin 8). He elaborates:

The crisis of representation is not unique to fiction. It is the crisis of being alive. We know intellectually that the map is not the place, that any utterance we make about the world is a bastard, partial, insufficient, faulty and failed representation. Something in us knows that we live in this inescapable gap, this unavoidable *différance*. And yet, at the same time, the simple knowledge of that futility drives us to revise our stories. And in fact, fiction has sometimes proven to be devastatingly effective in transforming the world *out there*, the world that representation can never quite get to. The map changes the place whether or not it suffices to represent it. (Powers qtd. in Pellegrin 8)

David Herman and Becky Childs, in their essay on narrative as cognitive artefact, discuss the way in which story operates dually, both as an abstract cognitive structure and as the material trace of that structure left in writing, speech or some other representational medium such as the novel. They quote Brad Shore, who posits that the term narrative refers on the one hand “to the activity of adjusting and creating reality through talking about it,” that is, the way people use stories to make sense of their worlds, and on the other hand, to the “instituted result of this structuring process,” that is, the production of actual cultural artefacts with certain formal conventions such as the novel (qtd. in Herman and Childs 179). If we take the Theory of Mind approach to literature, we can read novels such as *The Echo Maker* as operating on both levels simultaneously. The characters Powers employs as focalisers can be said to operate on the abstract level, constructing (or deconstructing) narratives of the self in and through our reading of them; meanwhile the text into which they are cast, and to whose conventions they are subject, operates on the other, more material level, providing shape and direction, and complicating and resolving those characters which are the developing focus of the audience’s interest in the narrative (Phelan 15). In this way, *The Echo Maker*, can be read as both a cognitive workout or, as Lisa Zunshine would put it, a tool for exercising our ability to read the minds of others, *and* as a predictable, risk-free sort of a game, precisely because the conventional realist structure which Powers imposes on the text, allays any risks inherent in our hypothesising on something so dangerous as the dissolution of the self. Hence the

formal constraints of the conventional realist novel, and of the conventional realist construction of character can actually work to facilitate the discontinuous subject even while staving off, or protecting us, from the certainty of death or dissolution. In Powers' novel, the effect is to enable us to fall simultaneously into *and* away from the story of self.

Conclusion

The Echo Maker takes its title from the migratory crane, long famous for its sonorous calls, and now surviving in the environmentally-devastated Nebraska landscape against the odds. The birds descend on the town of Kearney *en masse* once a year, their numbers expanding exponentially each season as alternative sources of fresh water dry up. Just as the question of the self is central to the novel, so is the structural metaphorical mystery of these migratory cranes. How do they learn how to travel this miraculous route, covering thousands of miles every year? How do they know what they know? Their route is "a tradition, a ritual that changes only slightly, passed down through generations," writes Powers, in one of several chapter openings devoted to the birds. "Even small ripples – left down that valley, on past that outcrop – are preserved. Something in their eyes must match symbols. But how it's done, no person knows, and no bird can say" (277). Powers seems to suggest that the birds survive via a deeply intersubjective impulse, even if they do not know it themselves. Perhaps it is this state of not-knowing that is the point. Throughout the novel, Powers takes pains to emphasise the fragility of the cranes. Their survival, in twenty-first century earth, is greatly at risk.

This emphasis on fragility and risk is key to any reading of *The Echo Maker*. At the end of the book, Powers works to resolve the "certain instabilities" we have come to know as storyworld participants in the novel in a manner that satisfies the reader's desire for a hopeful and conventional ending to the thriller genre at the same time as it underlines the very unstable nature of each of the central subjects. In the fifth and final book, titled "and bring back someone else," Mark's nurse Barbara is revealed as the cause of the road accident. She had attempted suicide by stepping into the path of Mark's truck. He swerved to avoid her and, crucially, wrote the cryptic hand-written note himself, in the hours before he descended into coma. In the wake of this realisation, Mark is able to finally recognise his sister. "It's you," he says to her. "You're here" (444). But the recovery is not a plastering over of all faults, insufficiencies, illusions. "Whatever you call this," says Mark, in his final scene with Karin at his bedside, as he gestures out the window of his hospital room at the Great American Desert. "Just as good as the real thing" (447). Powers' emphasis on simulations and phantoms has not gone away.

Importantly, this post September Eleven novel cannot be read without some acknowledgement of the broader cultural narrative of nationhood in contemporary America. When Weber and Barbara witness the news that Operation Iraqi Freedom has begun, coming to them via television in a diner close to the end of

the novel, Weber feels only a mild sense of *deja-vu*. Barbara, on the other hand, a former news journalist, seems caught in the heart of Baudrillard's America: "Mark's right you know," she says, "The whole place is a substitute. I mean: Is this country any place you recognise?" (432-433).

Cognitive approaches to literature are useful in reading a novel such as *The Echo Maker* precisely because of the emphasis cognitive science places on mental activities such as perception and recognition. The fact that this novel, in particular, sets up to investigate the need consciousness has for narrative makes for a double-layer of relevance. As a novelist, I find the cognitivist approach to fictional minds in literature intriguing precisely because of the way it sets aside some of the complex, semantic problems of representation, focussing instead on how techniques such as focalisation can work to provide a sense of psychological reality. Fiction does have the potential to teach us something about human cognition as a whole, in part because it seems capable of describing specific instances of the mind in action that are yet to be – or may never be – fully explicated in scientific discourse. The cognitive approach to literature has much to offer in terms of helping us to understand authoring, reading and reception. The danger, of course, is that in likening the mental functioning of characters and narrators to real people, we may forget that we are operating within the world of a text constructed by semiotic means. My argument here, however, has been that precisely because the realist novelist is obliged to pay attention to the demands of conventional narrative progression, and to give shape and direction to those "certain instabilities" otherwise known as storyworld participants, we are unlikely to forget for long the constraints of genre, and hence of textuality, even in those cases where the author seeks to explicitly defamiliarise the narrative of the self. Ironically, the term "character," for all we know about the constructed and illusory nature of identity, remains useful for precisely the same reasons that Weber longs to see his wife holding up his name card at the airport: relative consistency is crucial to conventional narrative progression in the novel. The fossil, as Powers has put it, stays, inevitably, with us.

References

Atwood, Margaret. Rev. of *The Echo Maker* by Richard Powers. *The New York Review of Books*. 21 Dec. 2006. 58-60..

Brook, Andrew and Don Ross. *Daniel Dennett*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.

Forster, E.M. "The Story and the Plot." *The Narrative Reader*. Ed. Martin McQuillan. London: Routledge, 2000. 44-46.

Herman, David and Becky Childs. "Narrative Cognition in Beowulf." *Style*. 37.2(2002): 177-203.

Hogan, Patrick Colm. *Cognitive Science, Literature and the Arts: A Guide for Humanists*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Margolin, Uri. "Cognitive Science, the Thinking Mind, and Literary Narrative." *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*. Ed. David Herman. Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2003. 271-294.

Palmer, Alan. *Fictional Minds*. Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 2005.

Pellegrin, Jean-Yves. "Only the Conversation Matters." *European Journal of American Studies*. 27 April 2007. 7 June 2007. <<http://ejas.revues.org/document1145.html>>

Phelan, James. *Reading People, Reading Plots*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989.

Prince, Gerald. *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative*. Berlin: Mouton, 1982

Powers, Richard. *The Echo Maker*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.

Ronen, Ruth. *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991.

Whitehead, Colin. "Migratory Spirits." Rev. of *The Echo Maker* by Richard Powers. *New York Times Book Review*. 22 Oct. 2006. 22-23.

Zunshine, Lisa. *Why We Read Fiction*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2006.