5 Of Cranes and Brains

Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker*

With *The Echo Maker* (2006) these explorations of the novel's investment in giving narrative voice and form to concerns with belonging reach our late-modern present, depicted by Richard Powers in an intricate double perspective: as an encompassing ecosystem in which human troubles shrink in geological scale, and as a tenuous product of a specific narrative economy—that of the human brain. There is a striking congruence to these themes that begs to be read as counteracting the "hyper-liquefying" tendencies of late modernity. Speaking from a world in which daily routines and social relations have become intangible, short-lived and unpredictable to an unprecedented degree, the novel insists on the stoic materiality of that world and pairs it with a narrative activity that is located not in the lofty realm of the psyche but in the materiality of the brain. And if the brain's narrative capacity is firmly grounded in the materialist worldview of cognitive science, the novel renders it, quite naturalistically, as a product of evolutionary contingency.

Powers is known as a "content-intense" and "brainy" writer. He thinks of the novel as "a supreme connection machine—the most complex artifact of networking that we have developed" (Williams 104), and of connectivity as the baseline of late-modern problems with belonging.[1] His fiction seeks to enhance the novel's

1 His novels, says Powers with vast implications for their investment in matters of belonging, "work by saying you cannot understand a person minimally, you cannot understand a person simply as a function of his inability to get along with his wife, you cannot even understand a person through his supposedly causal psychological profile. You can't understand a person completely in any sense, unless that sense takes into consideration all of the contexts that that person inhabits. And a person at the end of the second millennium inhabits more contexts than any specialized discipline can easily name. We are shaped by runaway technology, by the apotheosis of business and markets, by sciences that occasionally seem on the verge of completing themselves or collapsing under its own runaway success. This is the world we live in. If you think of the novel as a supreme connection machine—the most complex artifact of networking that we've ever developed—then you have to ask how a novelist would dare leave out 95% of the picture" (Williams 104). Only recently, Powers has become an avid commentator of his own work. The many interviews published in the "second" phase of his productivity (since *The Time of Our Singing* in 2003)

connecting powers by blending novel-typical plotlines (of family trouble, ailing love, betrayed friendship, torturous disease) with scientific and other nonliterary discourses. *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* engages with photography, *Prisoner's Dilemma* with mathematics, *Gold Bug Variations* with genetics, *Operation Wandering Soul* with medicine, *The Time of Our Singing* with quantum physics, and so on. In each case, Powers exploits "the elasticity of the novel to shift from strict dramatization to become essayistic, embedding the reader in a flood of data that extends beyond the boundary of the merely literary" (Burns xxviii), and that is not ornamental but essential to the act of giving narrative form. In *The Echo Maker*, the discursive matrix exploited with the aim of knitting a pervasive net of connections is neuroscience—specifically its recent efforts to reframe the cognitive operations of the human brain in terms of ontological narrative. In the words of Gerald Weber, the novel's eloquent expert in neuroscientific matters: "Consciousness works by telling a story, one that is whole, continuous and stable. When that story breaks, consciousness rewrites it. Each revised draft claims to be the original. And so, when disease or accident interrupts, we are often the last to know" (185).[2]

The Echo Maker both explicates and exploits the narrative drive of consciousness as "a networked ecology that mirrors the networked ecology of all life" (Harris 232).[3] Its narrative world arises from three intersecting and at times colliding acts of self-narration: those of the siblings Mark and Karin Schluter, and that of the star neurologist Gerald Weber. All three of these narrative acts are trapped in personal needs and self-delusions, struggling with the expectations, fears, hopes, and desires of the protagonists themselves and of those who happen to be in their lives. Drawing on the notion of identity as narratively produced and continuously revised over the course of a life, the novel allegorizes the process in which not one but three protagonists intermittently pursue their individual needs to belong in narrative

make up a powerful body of paratexts. I am engaging with them with mixed feelings. Powers has a gift of speaking about his work with insight that is of great resonance to our critical debates. But the frequency with which he is quoted in scholarly articles amounts to being imposing. In fact, while his commentary seems too relevant to be left out, it is difficult to escape the sense that the author is trying to control his reader and the discourse about his work. For a careful and differentiated take on the issue, see Ickstadt, "Asynchronous."

2 Quotations from *The Echo Maker* are cited parenthetically and refer to the William Heinemann Paperback Edition, London 2006. Weber, the characters through whom most neurological commentary is articulated, is modeled after a range of experts including the neurologist Oliver Sacks, the cognitive philosopher Daniel Dennett, and the Neural Darwinist Gerald Edelman. See Harris 230-32; Tabbi 225.

3 Some of Powers's earlier novels also deal with cognitive matters but without turning the theme into a major form-giving device. See for example *The Gold Bug Variations*, *Operation Wondering Soul*, and *Gallatea 2.2*.

acts that bounce off and seep into each other as "echo making."[4] And if making an echo presupposes a material entity from which sound waves can bounce off, the materiality of the human brain rendered as a "storytelling machine" provides this substance. Arguing against *The Echo Maker*'s frequent association with the genre of "psychological realism," Charles Harris makes the following important point:

> Whereas traditional psychological realism records the effect on the "inner self" of external forces or deep-seated neuroses, neurological realism foregrounds the effects of largely unconscious neurological activities. Whereas psychological realism affirms, indeed, requires, the concept of a solid, continuous "inner" self, Powers, drawing on contemporary neuroscience, challenges that concept at every turn, variously describing the self as "hundreds of separate subsystems" (171), "dozens of lost Scouts waving crappy flashlights in the woods at night" (415), "like coral reefs, […] complex but fragile ecosystems" (186), a "division" (436), a "community" (383), a "committee of millions" (437). Whereas traditional psychological realism continues the longstanding reification of dualisms—inner and outer, mind and body, reason and emotion, self and other—Powers […] dismantles such dualisms on neuroscientifical grounds. And whereas traditional novels of psychological realism view infringements of the boundaries between self and the world as threatening, Powers'sss novel of neuroscientifical realism exposes ego-boundaries as false demarcations, another illusion generated by the brains "spin-doctor subsystem" (444). (243-44)[5]

The thrust of *The Echo Maker*'s new brand of realism lies in its extraliterary foundations. In psycho-realism, psychological assumptions serve as the premises of narrative motives and mental states, and usually these assumptions are grounded in a notion of the psyche that (especially in the Freudian "geological" subdivision of the psyche into ego, super-ego, and id) harbors a personal "truth," buried as it may be by repression. *The Echo Maker*, however, is subtended by "*neuroscience, not psychology*," which means that the mental states of its characters enact the "inner workings of the human brain" (243; my emphasis). This also means that the

4 See for example Ricoeur, "Narrative Identity;" Ezzy; Somers; Kraus; Keupp et al.; Kerby. Pragmatist models of identity formation (like Charles Herbert Mead's conception of the self, me and I) can be seen as forerunners of this concept. Yet, it was not until the concern with language unleashed by post-structuralism turned to narration as a highly significant form of language use that "narrative identity" began to be recognized as a scholarly concept. Today, its impact can be traced across many disciplines, ranging from sociology, psychology, philosophy, semiotics, and historiography to literary studies.

5 Harris situates this argument within the larger context of the evolution of the psychological novel: "*The Echo Maker* is character-driven and adapts the Jamesian central intelligence for its point of view. […] Just as James, in inventing psychological realism, elevates to another level of the psychological novel, which had been around at least since Richardson, so does Powers, drawing on recent neurological research, nudge psychological realism into a different category. The result, I would argue, is the first fully realized novel of neurological realism" (243).

neuro-realism charted here does not rest on an ontological notion of a non-narrative "real" (be it situated in raw perceptions or unconscious desires) but in a neurologically authorized notion of ontological narrative that makes all forms of the "real" available to our consciousness by means of some form of emplotment. The inner workings of the human brain are fictional reenactments rather than reflections, for the novel's neuro-realism—despite its artfully crafted claims to transparency, achieved through what one may call, with Roland Barthes, its neurological "reality effects" ("L'Effet de Réel")—creates artificial textures and surfaces just as any other form of fictionalizing. It does not mirror its object of depiction but strategically stages and transforms it for specific purposes.

For classical American realism, these ends have been compellingly described as exploiting the depragmatized realm of narrative art to stage a conversation between text and reader; the ultimate function of its investment in intersubjective dialogue is to negotiate—and thus restore beyond the limits of the text—a community's values and beliefs as it faces a reality ruptured by the corrosive forces of modernization (Ickstadt, "Concepts of Society;" Fluck, *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit*; "Fiction and Fictionality"). In recent "returns" of realism, conversations between characters and between the text and the reader may have become epistemologically hollow or obsessed with semantic surfaces, but in Powers's novels, the commitment to this conversation—perceived as the social obligation of the novelist—persists. "Powers, whose books resonate with Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics, wants his fictions to be socially useful, he wants them to transform the awareness of the reader, and for that he has to rely on the reader's ability to read right," writes Heinz Ickstadt, quoting the author himself with the following weighty remark: "The only thing that is going to save us is better reading. Reading that knows when narrative is leading us away from the brink and when narrative is leading us headlong toward it. The future of the world depends upon our skill as readers" ("Asynchronous" 5). Powers's work as a novelist, a commentator of his own work and a teacher of creative writing and literature is committed to developing this skill with "a sense of urgency that has its origin in the discrepancy between the present state of scientific knowledge and the general state of social and ecological unawareness on which the global reign of corporate capitalism thrives" (Ickstadt, "Asynchronous" 3)—and that might threaten what Powers himself has called the novel's function as sanctuary from which "we reenter, more fully equipped, the world of reality" (quoted in Ickstadt, "Surviving").

Giving voice and form to contemporary concerns with belonging is closely, if not problematically, bound up with didactic "messaging" in *The Echo Maker*. The stakes of the conversation to be fostered among characters, and between text and reader, could hardly be higher: The novel exploits the recent approximation of cognitive science and narrative art not only to reframe the educational program of classical, psychological realism in neurological terms but also, and perhaps even more importantly, to propose a model of reality that is based on its participants'

capacity to tell and listen. New insights in the cognitive operations of the human brain, described by Powers elsewhere as "the distributed, modular, massively preconscious, multiply recursive, *narrative-dependent model of the bundled 'I'*" (Burn 175; my emphasis), provide the extraliterary foundations for this narrative experiment. Expanding both the form and the scope of the novel in close dialogue with neurological discourse (and in ways structurally similar to and yet very different from the Freudian notion of "narrative therapy" that was part and parcel of the artistic enterprise of *Call It Sleep*), *The Echo Maker* posits and actively propagates a scientifically authorized notion of ontological narrative as the only viable means by which belonging can be pursued.

Making one's way across the plotted grounds unfolding from the intersecting narratives of the novel's multiple narrating agents is to familiarize oneselves with the neurological assumptions engrained into this world. And if Powers's novels can justly be described as pursuing "narrative therapy"—not only in the sense of "therapy through narrative, but also as therapy for narrative; […] an exploration of the possibilities of narrative, a recuperation of this currently much-maligned way of ordering the world" (Hurt 24)—*The Echo Maker* epitomizes this project while also exposing its limits.

Connecting Midwest and Medial Cortex[6]

The Echo Maker takes us to the Midwest, a literary region that ever since *The Great Gastby* has been resonating with self-deluded longings for a world still in order. More concretely, it takes us to Kearney, Nebraska, a town on the outskirts of the Great American Desert. The place is home: to Mark and Karin Schluter, the siblings at the center of the novel, and to countless numbers of cranes that come to the shallow banks of the nearby Platte River for a few months every year to mate and breed. And as unremarkable a place as Kearney may be, the cranes' migratory routine enchants it once a year with a ritual of archaic beauty. Choosing the exceptional over the ordinary state of this place, the novel begins with the spectacle of the returning cranes, "the oldest flying thing on earth, one stutter-step away from pterodactyls" (3).

> Cranes keep landing as night falls. Ribbons of them roll down, slack against the sky. They float in from all compass points, in kettles of a dozen, dropping with the dusk. Scores of *Grus Canadensis* settle on the thawing river. They gather on the island flats, grazing, beating their wings, trumpeting: the advance wave of a mass evacuation. More birds land by the minute, the air red with calls. (3)

6 The heading is inspired by a question asked to Powers by Michod in his interview for *The Believer*: "Can you talk about the role 'place'—be it the Midwest or the medial cortex—plays in your work, particularly in this book?" (n. pag.)

The homecoming scene is described with the awe of an enthralled spectator marveling at the secret script choreographing the eerily synchronized arrival of thousands and thousands of birds "tall as children, crowding together wing by wing on this stretch of river, one that they've learned to find by memory" (3). Year after year, the birds find this place through their mysterious capacities to remember and to recognize the route that takes them here at a secretly scheduled time. The time of the birds is mystic and ancient to the degree that it seems timeless. They "converge on the river at winter's end as they have for eons" (3). "This year's flight has always been" (4). But then, it is suddenly interrupted. "A squeal of brakes, the crunch of metal on asphalt, one broken scream and then another arouse the flock. The truck arcs through the air, corkscrewing into the field" (4). An accident must have happened, but after a short interlude of unrest, the cranes settle back into their well-worn routine as if nothing happened.

In another world, the disruptive force of the event rapidly spreads as Karin, torn from her sleep by a phone call and driving back to Kearney, finds out that her brother will survive the car crash but live on under the shadow of a rare brain injury known as the Capgras syndrome, which causes severe states of estrangement by interfering with what has just been introduced as the birds' mysterious mastery: making the right connections between recognition and memory. And so we arrive in Kearney twice within just a few hours, yet in vastly different life-worlds. Both worlds belong to the same ecosystem but are separated by their different temporalities. One adheres to the age-old rhythm of migratory routines and the glacial pace of evolutionary changes with maps dating back to the Jurassic age; the other is sleepless, clock-timed, organized by networks of transport and communication, and sustained by modern medicine.[7] What connects the two in a violent flash is Mark's car shooting off the highway. Yet while the accident has dramatic repercussions in the human life-world, it is quickly bypassed in the world of the cranes. Formal differences dramatize this spatial antagonism. The time-space of the cranes is narrated in a meditative tone pregnant with an appreciation that seems to stem from the humble depths of knowledge. The present tense employed here underscores the archaic timelessness of the birds' migration routine, creating an aura of unmediated presence that sets the world of the cranes apart from the human world, which is narrated retrospectively in the past tense. Similar passages are placed at the beginning of each of the novel's five parts. Yet even though their rare occurrence and consecutive opening function disrupts the flow of the narrative, connections between the two time-spaces—through the missing parent crane that may have been killed by Mark's crashing car, through shared themes such

7 Powers's concern with ecological matters is the main topic of the interview that Scott Hermanson conducted with him and Tom LeClair. Ecocritical scholarship on Powers's work is nonetheless strikingly rare. An exception is Heise, whose essay predates *The Echo Maker* and discusses Powers's *Gain* and De Lillo's *White Noise* in dialogue with contemporary risk theory.

as orientation, place-making, or child-rearing—are unmistakable. But, while the "crane passages" are clearly construed to articulate an ecological conscience that exceeds human needs to belong, they are not focalized through the cranes. Instead of trying to familiarize us with these mysterious creatures by offering an imagined version of their perceptive world, they render the cranes as radically other. We are told about them in zero-focalized voice whose well-informed speculations draw from scientific sources, superstition, and myth with the effect of enhancing the mysteriousness of its object. "Something in their eyes must match symbols. But how it's done, no person knows and no bird can say" (277).

Within the narrative design of the novel, the crane passages are sanctuaries into which narration recurrently retreats from the dominant clock-timed, alarmed mode of storytelling. In fact, these insular passages, positioned in effective scarcity and uncovering utterly unfamiliar grounds, construe the time-space of the cranes as the ultimate "spatial other" to the sprawling time-space inhabited by the human characters of the novel. And if the by far larger share of the narrative presents us with (and confines us to) alternating worlds of individual, self-centered concerns, repeatedly reminding us that this time-space is indeed quintessentially molded from these concerns, the crane sections present us with the magical world of "feathered dinosaurs […] , a last great reminder of *life before the self*" (277; my emphasis)—to project a distant future of *life after the self*.

> What does a bird remember? Nothing that anything else might say. Its body is a map of where it has been, in this life and before. […] Something in its brain learns this river, a world sixty million years older than speech, older even than this flat water. This world will carry when the river is gone. When the surface of the earth is parched and spoiled, when life is pressed down to near-nothing, this world will start its slow return. Extinction is short; migration is long. […] Nothing will miss us. Hawks' offsprings will circle above the overgrown fields. Skimmers and plovers and sandpipers will nest in the thousand girded islands of Manhattan. Cranes or something like them will trace rivers again. When all else goes, birds will find water. (443)

In envisioning—celebrating—the *long durée* of geological time, the crane passages assume a heterotopian function within the imaginary geography of the novel. Not utopian but just as real as all other places in the novel, they are located outside of them, where they act as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault, "Other Spaces" 24). In fact, both the space inhabited by the cranes and the narrative interludes from which this space evolves relate to all other sites and narrative modes of the novel by means of what (again with Foucault) we may call "compensation": of creating "a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (27). Departing from the temporal norm further enhances the crane-space's compensatory function. Its

heterochronic temporality is indeed hyperpotent: It combines an "indefinitely accumulating time" (akin to the heterochronic temporality of the museum and the library) that produces a sense of eternity through the everlasting ritual of migration with its polar opposite, the "absolutely temporal" of the crane routine (in the fleeting, transitory sense that Foucault associates with the festival and the fairground) (26).

The heterotopian implications of the crane passages epitomize the novel's ecological concerns. And whereas articulating these concerns oscillates between enthusiastic celebrations of nature's mystic operations and Cassandra-like warnings of environmental destruction, the self-centered and clock-timed sections of the story unfolding from the novel's human-space explore the messy realities of late-modern life. Among them are the deceptive plans of a group of global investors and local realtors to build a crane-themed vacation resort that endangers the breeding grounds of the birds (ironically, the vacation village resembles the crane-space in drawing together the heterochronic extremes of extra- and fleeting temporality); personal struggles with the dictates of self-realization and professionalization, often in conjoined form, and thoroughly intertwined with the widespread use of mood-enhancing drugs that complicate the search for an "authentic" self; the mixed blessings of the time-space compression through digital technology and global travel; the media-enhanced post-9/11 fear of terrorism, the propagandistic protection of "homeland security" through missions such as Operation Iraqi Freedom, and their lure for young men with a lack of purpose like Mark Schluter and his friends. The heterotopian crane sections infuse these troubled realities with an ecological imagination—the notion of a shared ecosystem both sturdy and fragile that grounds matters of belonging in a thoroughly materialistic worldview. In fact, evolutionary biology provides a matrix of total connectivity that at once embeds concerns with belonging in a larger environmental scheme and relativizes them by insisting that life will go on after humankind has become extinct.

Rendering the novel's spatial imagination as systematically evolutionary and environmentalist as it is done here is significant for the narrative pursuit of belonging as a whole, for it widens the imaginative scope on the macro level in a similar way that the neurological perspective expands it on the micro level. In fact, the two levels are imagined as interacting ecosystems that conjointly create the novel's world, and they are most powerfully interlinked in the novel's conception of place. "Place has been important to me before in other stories but never quite like it was for this one," Powers notes, going on to expound:

> The book is about memory and recognition, but those mental skills are themselves deeply linked to the brain's spatial abilities. The hippocampus—that portion of the brain that orchestrates the formation of new memories—seems to have developed in large part as a way of mastering place. Animals with the greatest navigational requirements also have the most developed memory. […] Some neuroscientists have even proposed that the hippocampus may have originated as a processor of relations

> in space, a "spatial cognition machine," as it's been called. In some strange way, our capacity to form and retrieve memories—and with it, our ability to shape stories and construct a sense of self—may be a happy by-product of our sense of orientation. Even our social vocabulary reflects that connection, when we talk about who's in and who's out, who's up and who's down, who's at the center and who's marginalized. For that matter, our vocabulary for the elements of storytelling itself is also highly spatial: exposition, situation, plot, reverse, arrival … (Michod n. pag.; ellipsis in the original)

Neurological assumptions thus serve as the foil to fuse memory, narrative, space, and place. They do so not only in the usual sense that storytelling unfolds a space (the imaginary geography of the novel) and unfolds in space (the space of the page, the space between book and reader, the mental space of the reader), but also in the sense of engaging narrative as a life-sustaining and distinctly spatial practice of orientation and emplacement. In exploiting the tacitly searching and categorically improvising narrative activity of the human brain as its main form-giving drive, place and self enter the world of the novel exclusively through some brain's more or less oriented storytelling operations. And because narrative acts affect the world in which they are conducted (either directly or through the "echoes" they make in other narrative acts), the need to belong depicted here engenders a complex and dynamic network of intersecting "narrative ecologies."

What does this mean for the novel's plotting operation? Throughout this study I have stressed how crucial emplotment is to matters of belonging. It is essential to conducting the search for meaning-as-form that is both the pragmatic and the artistic thrust of the narrative productivity engendered by the need to belong. It keeps the story on track or leads it astray, slows it down and speeds it up, connects characters and places, and in all of this it can be scarce or overpowering, subtle or imposing. But in whatever concrete way it molds the narrative operation, plot is what lays out the grounds to be traversed by a story unfolding in space and time. And hence it has substantial stakes in where the narrative "journey" takes us. In *The Echo Maker*, it takes us onto the intricately plotted and continually shifting grounds emerging from a plurality of narrative voices with notably different "spatial abilities" to remember and recognize. All three are caught up in specific narrative acts of orientation to be further spelled out later on. What can already be said at this point is that the story—brought to us by the indirect voices of three "narrating brains"—envisions a rite of passage that is made up of a compound simultaneity of rituals, conducted by storytellers who are also listeners. The intersecting acts of telling, receiving, and revising their stories accumulate in an erring and self-deluded, yet irreducibly dialogic practice of *conjoint* storytelling. And true to the evolutionary biologist's assumptions undergirding the neurological fusion of place, memory, and storytelling, a contingent course of *collision* is the trajectory along which the conjoint operations of emplacement and emplotment unfold.

Gaining momentum through the disruptive force of an accident—an event that is in itself an intriguing limit case of storytelling—collision is indeed the novel's

primary connecting device. Making its first meteoritic occurrence in the opening passage, the accident that happens on the second page of the novel is surrounded by semantic gaps. The mystery about its cause sparks a hermeneutic desire of detection that generates the novel's most powerful plotline. In fact, in terms of narrative energy, it seems that only when the mystery around the accident's cause is resolved that the colliding, narrative-propelling forces emanating from this event weaken enough for the story to come to an end. Underscoring the novel's concern with emplacement, this transformation has a distinctly spatial dimension. As the reader is about to see, the network of social relations imagined here becomes decidedly more suitable for matters of dwelling toward the end. But just as crucial as the accident is in terms of engendering a narrative drive toward reaching a more comfortable state of dwelling, it stirs a chain of events that are both unpredictable and unstoppable. It is indeed through the haphazard contingency of colliding matter that concerns with belonging are made tangible in this novel.

The novel's "narrative ecology" revolves around Mark's accident: It connects crane-space and human-space; it distances Mark from his two closest friends; it brings his sister back to Kearney, causing further collisions between her life and the lives of two of her ex-boyfriends; it brings Gerald Weber there as well when one of these boyfriends finds out (in the endless connectivity of the world wide web) about Weber's expertise in Mark's rare brain condition, and encourages Karin to get in touch with him; it makes Barbara Gillespie, a burned-out journalist from New York, cause the accident in a moment of existential despair, take on a position as a nurse in the hospital where Mark is being treated, become entangled in Mark's and Karin's lives, and romantically involved with Weber. What takes shape in this web of lives randomly colliding with one another is an ecological version of Doreen Massey's notion of place as "formed out of a particular"—contingent, accidental—"set of social relations which interact at a particular location." Its singularity as an individual place is formed from a site-specific collision of forces—the needs and desire of individual characters, the reverberating trauma of 9/11, the global flow of finance capitalism, the mysterious migration routine of the cranes—"which occur at that location (nowhere else does this precise mixture occur)" and "will in turn produce new social effects" (168). In a world that is ecologically and materially grounded in the storytelling activity of the human brain, these effects are by default also narrative. By exploiting the accident as an event that not only makes *lives* collide but also the *stories* in which these lives are lived, *The Echo Maker* fuses concerns with place and narrative. It is the disruptive force of the accident that initiates and interconnects the three narratives that make up most of the story, and the resulting need for readjustment creates collisions with other "storied lives" with the effect of redirecting and molding through these stories the place evolving from their interaction, and the ways of dwelling that are possible at this place.

Being No One

In moving on to a closer analysis of the narrative fabric produced through these colliding forces, another interlocking place- and plot-making feature of the accident must be addressed: its providing the occasion for exploring the emotional dimension of the human brain's spatial and social intelligence—more precisely, the interaction of cognition with feeling in the imagined constitution of this most basic capacity of human survival.[8] Mark's recovery soon reveals that he suffers from a rare brain injury that eclipses his emotional intelligence and causes him to believe that those most familiar to him—his sister, his dog, his home—have been replaced "with lifelike robots, doubles or aliens. He properly identifies everyone else. The loved one's face elicits memory, but no feeling" (106).

> What did it feel like to be Mark Schluter? To live in this town, work in a slaughterhouse, then have the world fracture from one moment to the next. The raw chaos, the absolute bewilderment of the Capgras state twisted Webere's gut. To see the person closest to you in this world, and feel nothing. But that was the astonishment: nothing *inside* Mark felt changed. Improvising consciousness saw to that. *Mark* still felt familiar; only the world had gone strange. He needed his delusions, in order to close that gap. The self's whole end was self-continuation. (301; emphasis in the original)

The Capgras syndrome thus provides the imaginative matrix to defamiliarize what is most familiar to Mark through a narrative delusion produced by his injured brain as it struggles to provide his consciousness with a life-sustaining sense of continuity. The most daunting effect of Mark's condition is the strain that it puts on his social relations and the troubled sense of place evolving from them. There will be more to say about this later. For now, it is important to note that the impact of Mark's injured brain on the novel's conjoint operations of emplotment and emplacement is not confined to his particular troubles. Rather, Mark's condition allows Powers to illustrate how profoundly "the feeling of what happens" affects

8 Through its fictional mediation of the Capgras syndrome, the novel enhances academic discourses about space and narrative by connecting them to recent neurological attempts of reframing the relation of intellect and feeling. Coming to terms with this relation already played a major part in Hume's model of the human mind, which has been instrumental to conceiving the imagination as an indispensable motor of human belonging. For a longer discussion of the matter, see the Introduction and the "Historical Trajectories" section of Chapter 2. To my knowledge, *The Echo Maker* was the first novel to concern itself with Capgras. The fact that it was soon to be followed by two further American novels dealing with this condition, Nicole Krauss' *Man Walks Into a Room* and Rivka Galchen's *Atmospheric Disturbances*, underscores its capacity to articulate and fictionally mediate a collective, contemporary state of trouble.

the life-sustaining conjunction of orientation and narration for all human beings.[9] Exceeding an individual pathology, the Capgras syndrome is used to allegorize a collective state of alienation in which "the outline of life […] still looks familiar," yet "the place no longer feels recognizable" (Michod n. pag.).[10]

In the materialist world and narrative ecology of the novel, Capgras spreads through the collision of lives and storylines. Again it is Weber, the character most frequently employed to articulate neurological ideas, who voices this option when observing, in the midst of his romantic involvement with Barbara, a distorted emotional resonance in himself. "He would write it up—first case ever of contagious Capgras—if he could still write" (430). There is a subtle irony to Weber's attempt to distance this troubling thought while still in the act of conceiving it. And although no one but the reader can hear it, its meaning spills over and "infects" the rest of the narrative. Similar to the trope of sleepwalking in *Edgar Huntly*) Capgras is not exploited as a stabilizing metaphor but as a metonymic trajectory, "the figure of contiguity and combination, the figure of syntagmatic relations" (Brooks, "Masterplot" 281) that destabilizes all certainty of "feeling right" about one's sense of self and place through the sheer circumstance of it being part and parcel of the novel's narrative world. As a looming threat of disjoining emotional and intellectual intelligence, its spread causes a "contagious" identity crisis. What kind of place evolves from the collateral encounters between such individuals? If the novel imagines place to a substantial degree as a shifting network of social relations, a sense of self that is troubled through the spread of Capgras must affect the place evolving from the particular set of social relations imagined here. Ricoeur's notion of self-identity is helpful for gasping this trouble. For Ricoeur, identity is a treacherous concept because it is used with two fundamentally different meanings: selfhood and sameness. Identity as *selfhood* responds to the question "who am I?" and is (like concepts such as "being-in-the-world," "care," or "being-with") characterized by the capacity "to question itself as to its own way of being and thus to relate itself to being *qua* being." Identity as *sameness*, on the other hand, answers to the question "what am I?" It belongs to the world of things that are "ready" or "present-to-hand" ("Narrative Identity" 190-92). Harking back to these different bearings, irritations within self-identity may best be described as a rift

9 Powers cites António Damásio with this phrase in the *Believer* interview with Michod. For an elaborate discussion of this topic, see Harris 231-38.

10 In the interview passage from which these quotes are taken, Powers ties this collective state of alienation to a distinctly national trauma: "Estrangement seems to have become the baseline condition for life in terrorized America. After November 2000, after September 2001, after the Patriot Act and the detainee bill, after Gitmo and Abu Ghraib, our stories—public and private—keep scrambling to keep America whole, continuous, and coherent, to *place* it" (Michod n. pag.). Sielke reads *The Echo Maker* as a post-9/11 novel, a qualification that is certainly apt, but limiting as a general label for a novel whose narrative scope so clearly exceeds this collective trauma.

between "being" and "having" that turns the social and psychic demand for identity into a troublesome affair.[11] And yet the two intersect in one matter that is vital for both: in the words of *The Echo Maker*'s eloquent neurologist, the "self's longing for self-continuation." For *selfhood* this means keeping one's promises and being accountable for former actions, for *sameness* it means maintaining a recognizable appearance. Hence, Ricoeur arrives at his influential notion of "narrative identity"—identity as the endlessly malleable product of self-narrativization—as a way of suturing this very gap.[12]

So yes, one's sense of self is constantly troubled by *having* the same properties versus *being* in the same relation to the world, but the resulting tension can be eased if selfhood is relieved from the burden of sameness. (In the late-modern world depicted here, this burden has increased through an growing specialization and compartmentalization of social life; responses to the question "who am I?" have multiplied, but flexible, pluralized, and contradictory as they may be, they still need to create what Powers has aptly called a "bundled I.") For Ricouer, the project of the modern novel is deeply engaged with the task of reducing the burden of sameness, with Robert Musil's "man without qualities" as an extreme case (a better translation would indeed be the "man without *properties*"); Max Frisch's Stiller or Nabokov's Humbert Humbert are other examples.[13] For Ricoeur, this literary phenomenon is significant because the loss or rejection of sameness-identity does *not* put an end to the problem of selfhood:

> A non-subject is not nothing, with respect to the category of the subject. Indeed, we would not be interested in this drama of dissolution and would not be thrown into perplexity by it, if the non-subject were not still a figure of the subject, even in a negative mode. Suppose someone asks the question: Who am I? Nothing, or almost nothing is the reply. But it is still a reply to the question who, simply reduced to the starkness of the question itself. (196)

The heading of *The Echo Maker*'s first part—"I AM NO ONE"—seems to respond directly to Ricoeur's call for a rejection of sameness-identity. The line soon

11 Grounding subjectivity in a gap between "being" and "having" also features prominently in Lacan's "mirror stage." Despite their very different approaches to identity formation (visual and imaginary vs. narrative), both models are grappling with the same basic problem. In the mirror stage, identity is forever split along the lines of "being" (in front of the mirror), which in Ricoeur's reasoning can only confirm itself "*qua* being," and "'having' one's image in the mirror," which in Ricoeur's reasoning belongs to the order of the "present-to-hand," of things to be had in the sense of possessing (and, by extension, being possessed by) them.

12 For Ricoeur's most concise discussion of this concept, see "Life."

13 Musil is indeed one of the authors whom Powers credits as an influence on his own writing. See Williams 14.

reappears in the mysterious note that Karin finds next to Mark's bed in the trauma unit of the hospital.

> No one could tell her when it had appeared. Some messenger had slipped it into the room unseen, even while Karin was shut out. The writing was spiderly, ethereal: an immigrant scrawl from a century ago.
>
> 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)

In its cryptic, "ethereal" act of messaging, the note projects a journey of self-erasure and spiritual recovery—a journey in which a subject with no claim to sameness-identity whatsoever gives up its life for a "You" that then brings back an enigmatic "someone else," possibly the transformed "I" or "You" of this note, possibly a third party "reborn" in their fateful encounter. A substantial part of the story is concerned with deciphering this enigmatic piece of writing and its connection to the accident. In fact, solving its mystery disperses the *horror vacui* of the missing cause haunting those who are accidently thrust together by it. The note's significance is amplified by using each of its lines as a heading for one of the novel's five parts, thus repeatedly (and somewhat pedantically) suggesting that it contains a secret "masterplot" for the unfolding narrative. But it is the note's first line with its rhetorical erasure of selfhood that is by far the most memorable. It looms over the story like a predicament. Anyone could have said it, and most of the characters do at some point in one way or another: Karin by calling herself "a stand-in […] one of those chameleon people with nothing at the core" (327), Barbara by conceding that "she's finished, she's nothing now" (446), and Weber by realizing that he is "in reclamation," "nothing […] left of him but these new eyes" (449). These multiple disclaimers of selfhood turn the capacity to question one's being into a recursive yet minimal assurance of one's existence (if I can ask a question does this not mean I am there?), but under the impact of this procedure selfhood becomes porous (what is the practical value of an empty account?).

Ironically, the only character who does not disclaim his selfhood is Mark. His shell-shocked insistence on being "the same" makes him immune to feeling that he might be nothing. In fact, Mark's insistence inverts the evacuation of selfhood and makes it spread. His stubborn refusal to recognize his sister turns *her* into being "not the same," a disclaimer that, once she begins to internalize it, turns her into "nothing." In the end we find out that he, who so obsessively tried to find the writer of the note, wrote it himself when caught between life and death but not yet unconscious—wrote it to address the woman standing next to his bed in the trauma unit of the hospital, and whom he had seen standing, apparition-like, in

the middle of North Line Road just a few hours earlier. Seeing her for the second time shatters his former self, turning him into "no one"— and in this crucial sense the note literally *has no writer*. The medical records of Mark's brain activity bear a clear mark of this incident, yet it is not until the end of the novel that an actual event can be attached to it. Once this mark comes to index Barbara's guilt-laden presence at Mark's hospital bed, the traumatic fracturing of his former self, sealed off and denied through the Capgras state, takes on new meaning: Mark's brain damage is triggered not by the accident itself but by the shock of finding the person who caused it through her suicidal walk in the middle of the dark country road by his bedside upon walking up from his coma; and the accident is directly connected to 9/11. Barbara covered the terror attacks as a reporter, unsympathetically sticking her camera into people's faces in her desire for authentic coverage, thriving on the success of her work until she became so exhausted that her boss sent her off to Kearney for a human-interest story on the cranes. But instead of seizing her chance to recover, she tracks down another story of disaster: The breeding grounds of the cranes are threatened by deceitful plans to build a vacation resort whose wasteful use of water is bound to destroy the ancient ecosystem. Upon finding out about this complot, Barbara suffers a nervous breakdown, interrupts her nightly drive, and steps into the road.

The accident hence "erupts" from a troubled geography in which 9/11 terror and ecologic destruction collide with hazardous force; that these connections are recovered as the polyvocal narrative moves towards its end intertwines the needs for psychic and spatial recovery engrained into the world of the novel. Moreover, solving the mystery of the note relocates the source of contagion: Not Mark but Barbara is the damaged "cell" in the social organism from which the destructive force of emotional uprootedness spreads through the entire ecosystem. Her secret involvement in the mystery plot exempts her from being one of the focalizers. But leaving her voiceless creates a curious sense of indeterminacy, for she is at once central to the story and disconnected from the self-narratives gaining traction around her. How does she fit into the social network in which she operates with conspicuous ease? Where does she come from? Does she not seem overqualified for her job as a nurse? Why is she so committed to Mark's wellbeing even after he leaves the hospital? Barbara's voicelessness fuels both the "plot of action" driving the narrative forward (usually by creating some form of disturbance) and the "hermeneutic plot" that allows us to reconstruct what has happened.[14] Yet if Capgras is rendered "contagious" in this novel, the desire for *self-continuation*—conceived here as the narrative program that the evolution has engrained into the human brain to secure the surivial of the species—becomes instrumental in spreading the pathological state. In fact, it spreads through the collision of storylines fabricated for this very purpose.

14 The terms are drawn from Barthes, *SZ*.

Colliding Narratives, Conjoint Map-Making

Outside of the crane sections—read here as narrative manifestations of the desire for a spatialized, selfless Other—the story is told through the alternating narrative activities of Mark's, Karin's, and Weber's brains. As I have noted before, all of these activities are trapped within the confines of personal concerns and self-delusions. But regardless of these biases and limitations, each of these narratives depicts an inner state that is deeply entangled with the outer world and its inhabitants as it relentlessly seeks to process and integrate the narratives of the others. The form that results from interweaving these three voices—all of them indirect, and together adding up to the polyvocal texture that makes up most of the narrative—is the concern of this section. How does this kind of storytelling lend itself to giving voice and form to the need to belong depicted here? Does its disseminated yet conjoint act of voice- and form-giving project a viable mode of dwelling in narrative? What kinds of agency does it probe? What kinds of recovery does it pursue? In grappling with these questions it is important to note that the conception of the brain as a "storytelling machine" aligns the novel with the "narrative turn" in the social and natural sciences.[15] In fact, it is fair to say that Powers, true to his interest in merging science and fiction, lends his narrative art to exploring the convergence of social and narrative agency posited by proponents of ontological narrative. The novel's polyvocal narrative fictionalizes everyday acts of self-narration in a neuro-realist mode, and in doing so, it turns these everyday acts into the stuff of fictional world-making.

In this compound form, narrative agency is assumed and probed in every voice. Each voice is rendered in a specific way, with the effect of maximizing its impact on a world that exists only in and through the narrative acts that engage with it. Within the world of the novel, these acts and the agencies staged and performed by them, are not removed from the messiness of everyday life but closely entangled with it. Mark's rejection of his sister may be the best example for this. After awaking from his coma, his brain injury causes his consciousness to fabricate a story in which Karin plays the role of an identical-looking stranger who has replaced his real sister. As his life continues, the story prompts explanations for this odd situation that gradually grows into a full-blown conspiracy plot in which secret government agents are after him, having replaced not only his sister but also the entire neighborhood including his house while Karin's boyfriend trains cranes and other animals to spy on human beings.[16] A recursive double movement drives Mark's narrative: Implausible experiences need to be emplotted, but emplotment is continuously exposed to new experience, with exposure to other storylines (for instance, to Karin's repeated rejection of the fraud character he has construed

15 I discuss the topic in Chapter 1.

16 Keen elucidates this obviously paranoid kind of self-narration from a psychological perspective.

for her) being an inevitable part of the procedure. And while Karin's persistent rejections of the role ascribed to her must be integrated into Mark's story, her self-narrative has to cope with being exposed to Mark's tale of fraud and rejection—from being supposedly better looking than his "real" sister to wondering if she is indeed an impostor playing a part designed to please others rather than living a self-directed, authentic life. The self-doubt that being exposed to Mark's story stirs in her makes her turn to her ex-boyfriends, hoping that romantic entanglements will stabilize her (and finding out that the lover who makes her feel most like herself does so by virtue of taking mood-enhancing drugs). As readers of these interlacing self-narratives, we are inclined to observe and compare their respective world-making capacities and limitations, and to marvel at their artful revisions as lives and storylines keep colliding. In doing so, we may note that the separate accounts do not give seamless shape to the world in which they interact; that they indeed contradict and rival each other with the effect of continually undermining and transforming the selves for which they speak, and the lives they harbor and sustain. Yet while individual voices allow for an explication of different narrative modes and agencies, the polyvocality of the narrative makes its own claim in these matters. This latter feature of the novel—its art of connectivity and "narrative therapy" (Hurt 23)—is key to its vision of dwelling in the world; hence the need to trace its design.

The sections that are focalized through Mark initially map the recovery of his brain. That the first one of them is only half a page long replicates the fragility of its storytelling activity as Mark emerges from his coma. Perhaps the most striking feature about the highly fragmentary, impressionistic account of the accident given in this passage is the absence of self-asserting pronouns. While clearly speaking from Mark's subjective experience, its grammar bears no trace of selfhood.

> A flock of birds, each one burning. Stars swoop down to bullets. Hot red specks take flesh, nest there, a body part, part body. Lasts forever: no change to measure. Flock of fiery cinders. When grey pain of them thins, then always water. Flattest width so slow it fails to liquid. Nothing in the end but flow. Nextless stream, lowest thing above knowing. A thing itself the cold and so can't feel it. (10)

The next section, already noticeably longer, is equally impressionistic, yet marked with first traits of subjectivity. In fact, these traits emerge precisely at the moment when Mark starts to feel again. "When sense returns, he's drowning" (18). The sensation stems from the depths of his childhood, reminding him of the unpleasant moment when his father taught him to swim. When this reawakening of sensation occurs, he cannot yet differentiate between past and present, but over the course of the novel's first part, and indicated by his increasing capacity of storytelling, his sense of self is more or less fully restored again. Yet even after the immediate effects of the accident are overcome, Mark's self-narration sounds curiously staccato-like. His sentences are short and often incomplete, reduced to a bare minimum

of information. To the extent that he regains his strength, his irritations become more forceful and articulate with the effect of making his already mentioned conspiracy theories more and more elaborate. Rage is the dominant emotion he feels. Crying does not fit into his sense of self, but it does happen once during a visit to the farmhouse where the Schluters used to live when Mark and Karin were children. Mark's conviction that his sister is a fraud becomes porous at this site, and when she asks him what his real sister was like, he breaks down, emplotting what happens as "something must be wrong with Mark Schluter, something from the accident that not even the hospital knows about, because he stands there bawling like a goddamned child" (374).

Throughout these passages, Mark seems to be in conversation with himself, desperately trying to leave semantic marks of orientation in his defamiliarized lifeworld. And as his sister is the most important fixpoint in this world, he invents ever-new nicknames for her, "Kopy Karin," "Karin Two," "Karbon Karin," to name just a few. Mark's name—turned into "Marker" by his naïve girlfriend—puns on his obsession.

> […] he needs to talk to someone, someone who can help to put all the facts together. Bonnie's out. Okay: she's still Bonnie-Baby. Call it love, whatever. But Kopy Karin has gotten her, turned her, as the federales say. Convinced her there is something wrong with him. Even when he lays out all the accumulated evidence—his missing sister, the fake Homestar, nobody admitting to the note, the new Karin hooking up with the old Daniel, the disguised Daniel following him around, training animals to watch him—she says she's not sure. (279)

Mark's biggest problem is that his interlocutors do not share the familiarity that he regains in his rampant quest for self-continuity. Paranoid narratives like his are cataclysmic in the sense that there is no "after," no social value to be gained from the story; "it will not be remembered, the suffering was for naught; the loss is absolute. There is no mourning, no analyzing, no commemorating; there is no redemption" (Keen 179). In fact, the constant rejection of his self-narration reifies Mark's aching sense of not belonging while making the narrative efforts of restoring his place in the world increasingly paranoid and self-destructive—to the point where the (com)plot of his own storytelling convinces him that he is already dead, and that suicide is hence the action he must undertake to set the story straight. As the plotting operations of Mark's shell-shocked brain go back and forth between his sense of self and his surroundings, they have indeed but one aim: to synchronize his inner and his outer world again. Eventually, Weber will find the medication that helps arrest this erring process by reconnecting Mark's cognitive operations to his emotional intelligence, thus "healing" his narrative capacities and the ways in which they emplot his self and emplace him in the world.

But Karin wonders if her brother's troubled sense of belonging could not be older than his accident. She recalls a phase in his life when Mark, still a child, was

convinced that he was adopted, and that his only reliable childhood friend was the imaginary Mr. Thurman.[17] Karin's memory offers a view on Mark's condition that complicates the medical narrative. Maybe the accident disclosed or intensified a sense of alienation in her brother that stems from their troubled family history? Karin's counternarrative is too tenuous to unravel the medical diagnosis—"How much had Mark changed? The question dogged Karin, in that hot summer, a third of a year on […] She no longer trusted her memory" (235)—and yet it subverts its authority. Moreover, the passage brings out a significant difference in Karin's and Mark's modes of self-narration. Mark's passages are invested in the immediate present. They claim authority by engaging with this present, and respectively, the narrative agency that gains shape in these passages is geared toward the present, driven by the rage about his distorted perceptions and rejected narratives crafted to set them straight again. Karin's narrative, in contrast, is withdrawn from the world around her. It tends to resort to the past, driven by a desire to retrieve memories in which it can ground itself, and often it is bound up in memories or emotions to an extent that makes it difficult for Karen to act.[18] Yet while her narrative is rife with empathy, it displays a striking lack of emotional distance. Karen constantly needs to feel herself against something, if this "other" is not given, she tends to dissolve into the environment. Smoking is one way of stabilizing the boundaries of her self, unhappy love is another.

> Some days his rage was so bad that even lying still infuriated him. Then the therapist asked her to leave. Help out by vanishing. She camped out in Farview, in her brother's modular home. She fed his dog, paid his bills, ate off his plates, watched his television, slept in his bed. She smoked only out on the deck, in the frosty March wind, on a damp director's chair inscribed BORN SCHLUTER, so his living room wouldn't stink of cigarettes when he finally came home. She tried to keep it to one cigarette an hour. She forced herself to slow down, taste the smoke, close her eyes, and just listen. At dawn and dusk, as her ears sensitized, she could hear the sandhills' bugle call underneath the neighbors militant exercise videos and the long-haul eighteen-wheelers pounding up and down the interstate. She would hit the filter in seven, and be checking her watch again in fifteen minutes. (44)

Her cigarette addiction gives this passage an out-of-breath tone (other passages have much longer sentences), but it aptly captures the way in which her self-narrative circulates around others, how strongly and emphatically she feels, and how much she needs to express her emotions—always on the brink of dissolving into

17 This act of self-narration echoes the previous chapter as it can be read as Mark crafting his version of Freud's "family romance," which has been discussed with regards to David Schearl, tapping into what Freud specified as a child's early fantasy of exchanging the biological parents with made-up ones in search for an autonomous sense of self.

18 For an in-depth discussion of the relation of self-narrative and memory that surfaces here, see King.

her environment. A moment later, she calls an ex-lover: "Four numbers in she realized that she wasn't dead yet. Anything might still happen" (44). Alas, Karin's sense of self and the world around her are not disjointed; they are too attuned to the outer world. She is emotionally dependent on others, and this dependency impairs her narrative agency. She makes choices about the telling of her story based on what other people most likely want to hear. At one point Karin suggests that their father was sexually abusive when they were small ("Did Cappy […] did he ever touch you?" [374])—a childhood trauma that might explain her difficulties to leave the past behind as well as her inclination toward unhealthy codependencies with the men around her. But the remark is tentative, more hint than proof, and as such not suitable as an anchor for her faltering sense of self. Compared to Mark, who stabilizes over the course of the novel and who is in the end finally treated with a medication that makes the Capgras symptoms disappear, Karin's longing for change is trapped and endlessly revolving around herself. She does, however, manage to shift her codependence from significant others (her brother, her lovers) to the cause of preserving the crane refuge—possibly a more livable form of dependency, and yet a merely superficial mode of change as such.

If Mark's tortured and torturing self-narration is eventually "healed" and Karin's evens out in a functional dysfunctionality (functional in terms of stabilizing her life, dysfunctional in terms of outgrowing emotional dependency), Weber's life narrative is in definite decline. He enters the story at the peak of his fame, a detached outsider, the eloquent expert flying in from New York, curious about the case yet snobbish and unwilling to commit himself truly to the wellbeing of his patient. The parts focalized through him enact this disengagement. They are strikingly rational, full of scientific jargon and sharp observations, and overall marked by a sense of humor that helps him keep emotionally challenging or messy situations at bay. He and his wife share a code that mimics this operation. That they call each other "Man" and "Woman," and refer to God as "tour director" testifies to a biologistic worldview, employed by the couple in ways that evacuates what is named of emotional resonance. But as Weber's reputation falters—he is reproached for exploiting his patients for their stories—this narrative mode and the emotional vacuum produced by it become a problem. His seemingly superior storytelling capacities, which once gained him fame beyond his scientific community, plunge into self-defeating registers of alienation, for instance when observing himself during a nervous breakdown:

> He hated to read talks. Usually, he spoke from an outline, delivering free-wheeling, campfire performances. But when he wandered from the script that night, vertigo hit him. He stood high on a towering cliff, water pounding over it. What was acrophobia anyway if not the half-acknowledged desire to jump. (232)

During the night following this talk, his sense of crisis worsens:

> For a moment, Weber cannot find his shoulder. No sense of whether his hand was underneath or above him, palm up or down, flung out or drawn in. He panicked, and the alarm congealed him, bringing him almost alert enough to identify the mechanism: awareness before the return of the somatosensory cortex from sleep. But only when he forced his paralyzed side to move could he locate all his parts again. (258)

All of this happens when Weber is jetlagged, displaced to "an anonymous hotel, in another country" (258), and upset about the negative reviews of his latest book. But besides expressing his social and spatial sense of vertigo, this passage also illustrates the hollowness of Weber's splendid rationality. And along with it, it showcases the practical limitations of a narrative agency habitually employed to hold the world at bay. Only when he forces himself to move again can he break the haunting spell of dismemberment. This scene can thus be read as a *mise en abyme* of Weber's ailing mode of self-narration, and of the rational disposition from which it springs. For what initially presented itself as the most capable and advanced kind of cognition turns out to produce the most displaced and alienated sense of being in the world. And while Weber finds the right drug to treat Mark's brain condition, he fails to fathom a remedy for himself: He cannot restore his professional reputation, risks his rock-solid marriage when getting romantically involved with the enigmatic nurse who is really an investigative journalist, and when he returns to New York in the novel's final scene, who he is and where he belongs have become utterly unclear.

Distinct as they are, the three voices make for a neatly fitting sample of the basic types of self-narration posited by the narrative psychologists Kenneth and Mary Gergen: stabilizing (Karin), progressive (Mark), and regressive (Weber) ("Narrative and the Self" 23-26). The Gergens have developed these types by drawing from Northrup Frye's basic modes of storytelling, and from Joseph Campbell's idea of a fundamental, psychically grounded "monomyth" with countless local applications and an overarching capacity of emplotting negative events as harbingers of positive outcomes. Their interest is with the psychodynamics afforded by the three types rather than with the plotting operation driving them; in applying their model to the interlacing self-narratives of *The Echo Maker*, the conventionality of the three different modes of storytelling become clearly discernible along with their powerful impact on emplotting individual lives. Mark's self-narration can, indeed, not only be read as progressive but also as comic, captured in the above-quoted passage in his punning acts of name-giving ("Bonnie-Baby," "Kopy Karin," "the federales"), or in the hilarious accounts of his belief that his childhood friend Daniel Riegel trains wild animals to spy on him. In accord with the comic mode, Mark's narrative progresses towards a happy ending: Assisted by the drug that "heals" the Capgras symptoms, Mark crudely affirms his recovered senses of

place and self. As he emerges from his nightmare and finds himself recognizing his long-lost sister, who cannot stop crying, he says to her with his unfaltering sense of humor:

> "Hey. I know how you're feeling. Rough days, for us two. But look!" He twists around to the plate-glass window—a flat, overcast Platte afternoon. "It's not all so bad, huh? Just as good, in fact. In some ways even better."
>
> She fights to retrieve her voice. "What do you mean, Mark? As good as what?"
>
> "I mean, us. You. Me. Here." He points out the window, approvingly: the Great American Desert. The inch-deep river. Their next of kin, those circling birds. "Whatever you call this. Just as good as the real thing." (447)

As the story draws to a close, this hopeful statement is the end of Mark's active share in the narrative—and the only happy ending of three self-narratives. Karin's stabilizing mode of self-narration perpetuates her character's emotional dependency, shifting it merely from her brother and her boyfriends to the cause of saving the environment. Departing from Frye's scheme, the narration performed by Karin's consciousness may best be described as melodramatic. In fact, it thrives on a key feature of melodrama: "its compulsion to 'reconcile the irreconcilable'—that is, its tendency to find solutions to problems that cannot really be solved without challenging the older ideologies of moral certainty to which melodrama wishes to return" (Williams 37).[19] Karin's self-narrative thus confronts us with the "fundamental ambivalence of feelings" that is instrumental in providing the receptive parameters of the melodramatic mode of narration (Decker 14, quoted in Kelleter and Mayer 13; my translation). And if this ambivalence springs from an irresolvable tension between evoking and controlling affect, what would better describe the emotional deadlock of Karin's troubled state of belonging than her compulsive yearning to reconcile the irreconcilable? The siblings' final scene that has just been addressed stages the melodramatic drift in Karin's self-narration. As she visits her brother in the hospital after his suicide attempt and Weber's successful medication, the moment of their reunion is so precious to her that she wishes it might stay, or at least return in a reliable fashion. For once, he complies. "Hang where you know. Where else can you go with all hell breaking loose?" he sarcastically suggests, making "her nostrils quiver and her eyes burn."

19 The notion of the melodramatic employed here draws from Peter Brooks, Thomas Elsaesser, and Linda Williams, especially their proposition to understand it as a narrative mode. For a lucid discussion of this matter, see Kelleter and Mayer, "Revising."

She tries to say *nowhere*, but she can't.

"I mean, how many homes does one person get?" He waves his hand toward the gray window. It's not such a bad place to come back to."

"Best place on earth," she says. "Six weeks, every year." (447)

Indicating the proximity of the novel's ending, narration resorts to the present tense; it does so in the entire, very short fifth part, whose title "And Bring Back Someone Else" bears the promising lure of a successful rite of passage. Next to the obligatory crane section, the final part consists of one section that dialogically closes the narratives of Karin and Mark, and one section that closes Weber's narrative. In the above quote, whose final sentence is the end of Karin's self-narrative, she simultaneously dismisses and embraces the idea of having a home, wants to both stay and leave the place that is most prominently and painfully associated with it. In response, her storytelling resorts to the migratory routine of the cranes, her newly found "stabilizing other," for the right kind of storyline. ("Best place on earth […] Six weeks every year.") The failure of saying *nowhere* preceding this reconciliation is grounded in a narrative act that thrives on the longing to leave the world unchanged in spite of its obvious flaws and corruptions.

Weber's mode of self-narration can be read as regressive and tragic. His lack of emotional involvement with others (including diagnosing himself as the first case of "contagious Capgras") has already been discussed. It is indeed his lack of attachment that serves as the main trajectory of Weber's decline—threatening to cost him his professional reputation, his popularity with patients and audiences, his romance with Barbara, and his marriage. The downward spiral culminates in the novel's final scene, in which Weber, arriving at a New York airport, anticipates his troubled homecoming:

A voice calls to disembark. In the rising crush, he stands and grapples for his carry-on, shedding himself on everything he touches. He stumbles down the jet bridge into another world, swapped out by impostors at every step. He needs her his wife to be out there, on the other side of the baggage claim, though he has lost all right to hope it. There, holding his name on a little card, printed clearly so he can read it. *Man*, the card must say. No: *Weber*. She will be the one holding it, and that's how he must find her. (451)

And while it is uncertain if Weber's life (and) narrative will recover, the unhampered course of decline that we have been witnessing gives these lines a cathartic ring. Weber is made to suffer for his snobby carelessness, and regardless of whether or not he can turn the tides we may feel for him in a way that makes it possible for *us* to learn from his mistakes. Powers seeks to capitalize on this possibility, it seems, by ending the narrative in a moment of surrender. In the closing paragraph, Weber feels that he needs his wife to be cured from the Capgras symptoms that have turned the inhabitants of his world into an army of impostors, and that he

must leave his corrupted name (and self) behind in order to find her. Ending the novel with the unraveling neurologist arriving at an unnamed New York airport (a prototypical *non-place* in Augé's sense, and as such a hostile environment for matters of dwelling) capitalizes on the tragic implications of the decline imposed upon the presumably superior self that Weber embodies. As the splendid storyteller (for many the author's super-ego) surrenders to his longing for his wife, he also gives in to his desire to be received in and through his story.

Allegedly, Powers did not have the Gergens' model in mind when developing the three narrative voices at work in his novel, but MacLean's triune brain: "one part reptilian, one part limbic, one part cerebral, and all parts improvised, interdependent, perpetually revised, and mutually self-deluding" (Burn 178). In striking resonance with the crane sections, Mark's self-narration would then follow the "reptilian" mode (rage and basic survival), Karin's self-narration would be "limbic" (emotion and long-term memory), and Weber's "cerebral" (verbal eloquence and rationality). When combining this model with the Gergens', its evolutionary thrust merges with a progression of life narratives moving, in terms of their narrative sophistication, from "comic" via "melodramatic" to "tragic;" and, in terms of their implied psychodynamics, from "progressive" via "stabilizing" to "regressive." The question that remains, posing itself with amplified weight from this perspective, is what modes of dwelling are gained or lost by enlisting this particular narrative form and the kinds of agency that is afford.

Back in Oz Again

The Echo Maker turns a naturalistic notion of narrative into the ultimate touchstone for matters of belonging: Emplacement, rendered here as a survival instinct engrained in the human brain, is determined by narrative. But narrative is presented as an utterly provisional and inescapably self-delusional enterprise in this novel. Ultimately, the narrative operations staged and performed on multiple levels and in manifold ways are only as good as their receivers—which brings me back to my earlier point about Powers's urge to educate his readers. *The Echo Maker* translates its author's desire for better readers into a self-reflexive, self-observing narrative operation, a virtual training ground to hone the skills of his readers, for which indirect voicedness of the self-narratives is instrumental. Throughout the narrative Powers opted for the third person, which has the paradoxical effect of creating both a sense of intimacy (through the first-hand insight into the characters' inner worlds) and of distance (because the innerness thus revealed is not expressed directly by the person possessing it). And as the three protagonists relentlessly alter their narratives to cohere their interdependent and socially embedded senses of self and place, the compound design of the narrative not only demands of the reader to move along with the constant shifts between different positions

and individual struggles but also demands to continually bridge the structural gaps between intimacy and distance. The text thus creates a reading experience in which one can sympathize, partake, and identify, but never comfortably settle or even gain so much as a lasting sense of familiarity with one of the protagonists.

This constant destabilization undercuts the dire conventionality of the novel's three main characters: Weber, the male rational scientist; Karin, the emotional, caring and self-denying female, and Mark, the raging and rebellious male adolescent. What makes this inbuilt mechanism of "reader revision" all the more persuasive is that it takes shape from within the self-diluting, ever-shifting texture of the narrative. And this is indeed the nucleus of the novel's greatest achievement: to stage and explore the storied nature of human life and the need to belong around which it revolves as a practice of "echo making"—by telling one's story from a particular place that only becomes a place through the distorted versions of that story carried back to the teller. Echo makers, so the implied "message" of the novel goes, are at once sustained and trapped by their storied lives, and because they are trapped their senses of self and of place genuinely depend on mediation. Powers uses the trope of mapmaking to underscore this point: "There is no place *except* the map, and yet we make the map together, by reading ourselves into one another, through conventions and codes, all of them provisional" (178). The map envisioned here is inside as much as it is outside of those who make it. It is improvised and ever-changing, the basic form of all storytelling and the messy blueprint of all social engagement. The cranes are the ideal mapmakers in the novel's world. Instead of distorting the map with self-centered mediation, they embody it—even beyond their own lifespan.

Yet as productive as toying with notions of "echo making" and "mapmaking" are for the project of making tangible the inescapably emplaced and mediated nature of human being, the investment into these tropes gets daunting over the course of the narrative. In other words, the novel suffers from its author's didactic desire. What Heinz Ickstadt has aptly called his "asynchronous messaging" ("Asynchronous") becomes too synchronous in its relentless plea for communal and environmental values, too schematic in its idealization of a selfless, crane-like existence as the mystical, utopian opposite to the various late-modern struggles with selfhood. On the formal level, Powers's didactic urge tips the scales when the different narrative voices are merged toward the end. To the sophisticated reader (who certainly is the implied reader of this book), this move presents itself as a stylistic clue, indicating that the collective mapmaking has entered a new level of collaboration. And while the shift is subtle its effects are grave. Initially, the changing focalizations are used with great persistence and accuracy to produce the shifting, polyvocal narrative that has already been described—a narrative that has been crafted *for* a sophisticated reader, and that provides a dense, aesthetically rich, and challenging reading experience. Which is why this reader is likely to notice that half way through the part four, it becomes increasingly hard to tell whose "brain"

is telling the story, and that focalizations are added that cannot be integrated into the previous pattern, for instance when Karin's ex-boyfriend Daniel calls Mark after the two have not been in touch since they were teenagers. Another passage seems to be focalized through Weber, yet the voice is notably less rational and in control than before, more like Karin's than Weber's. And sure enough, focalization shifts to Karin soon thereafter, yet again the narrative voice has lost some of its distinctive characteristics; it is strikingly less emotional and more coolly observant now. By the end of part four, a less subjective mode of narration is established, which remains in place until the end.

The gradual shift from exploring distinct psychological states and self-narratives to resolving the mysteries around the accident also entails a shift of gears in terms of emplotment. A closure-driven detective work, which favors the "hermeneutic code" over the "proairetic code," interpretation over action, takes over from now on.[20] And yet this artful maneuver aims for more than mere closure. In fact, the new zeal to find out what happened during the night of the accident is bound up with a *specific* quest for closure; the detective work conducted to this end is not that of a single individual but of a polyvocal collective. The merging of the different focalizations in the novel's final stretch hence invites to be read as a moment of synchronicity between different modes of being, feeling, and telling. It gives voice and form to a vision of narrative recovery, the possibility of mutually inhabiting a world in flux or even collision—by virtue of a narrative operation that is materially grounded, sufficiently permeable, and closely connected. The problem with this move, it should now be clear, is that it comes along with a didactical baggage that (even though one is likely to agree with Powers on ethical terms) diminishes much of the pleasure offered by the virtuoso composition of the narrative. Even so, what does it achieve in terms of giving voice and form to contemporary needs to belong?

Toward the end of the novel, "home" comes to provide the common ground for the enterprise of conjoint mapmaking; to return there (for Weber), to stay at home (for Mark), or to decide whether or not to leave this place again (for Karin) is the overarching concern in the novel's final pages. In fact, all three protagonists close their self-narratives (as far as they are still discernible at this point) by addressing this matter: Mark by affirming his recovered sense of self and place in a narrative act that seamlessly alternates between external dialogue and introspection; Karin by framing the relation to her hometown in terms of coming and going just like the cranes, and Weber by realizing that recovering his home will ultimately depend on his wife's forgiveness. Even though "home" has long ceased to be a promise of a security and become a destination or a fantasy instead, concerns with homecoming

20 Again, the terms are drawn from Roland Barthes, *S/Z*. Brooks discusses the conjoint operation of the two codes, one mobilizing the narrative, the other aiming at closure, as the constitutive antagonism of plot-making. See Brooks, *Reading* 16-17. In the context of this study, they have also been addressed with regard to Edgar Huntly's detective work. See Chapter 2, Fn. 24.

provide a shared horizon for all three stories—and for the narrative operation as a whole. For if, in the world of *The Echo Maker*, the productive nexus of belonging and narrative hinges on providing a kind of recovery that is imaginary and self-deluded rather than actual and material, narrative transfer is diegetically geared toward dissolving the individual, self-centered voices with which the novel begins. Notoriously erring and provisional as narration may be, the move from a self-absorbed to a communal mode of storytelling is fathomed and probed as a feasible dwelling ground. This prospect is nestled into and indeed artfully constructed through a polyvocal narrative that exposes the inadequacies and limitations of the self as the autonomous builder of that place called home. A while this place may or may not be called by that name, building it cannot do without a semantics of familiarity and attachment—just as it cannot escape the narrative forms and patterns that this semantics is inclined to assume.

In a way, then, *The Echo Maker* retells the lesson of the ruby red slippers with which this study (or story) began. Just as Dorothy, the main characters in Powers's novel come to find that calling out for one's home is a poetic act of taking measure. Mark's story ends happily because he gets to stay in Oz, which either replaces his Homestar or reinforces the Oz-like qualities already carried in its name. Karin and Weber are doomed if they do not find the way. *The Echo Maker* thus also affirms what is, for Salman Rushdie, the real secret of the ruby red slippers—"that there is no longer any such place as home: except, of course, for the homes we make, or the homes that are made for us: in Oz, which is anywhere and everywhere except the place from which we began" (Rushdie 57, quoted in Kaes 192). And who would know better than a diasporic writer in exile that there is no such place unless we build it, word by word, sentence by sentence, storyline by storyline. The construction material is mostly prefabricated, and much of it may even be bluntly imposed. But the need to belong draws us into the world, where it leaves us with at least some leeway of how to build a suitable dwelling place. And if getting home will not put an end to this need, perhaps we might say that dwelling in narrative is as good as the *next* story from which we build.