Connotations
Vol. 13.1-2 (2003/2004)

The Parody of "Parody as Cultural Memory in Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2*": A Response to Anca Rosu*

LARS ECKSTEIN and CHRISTOPH REINFANDT

Parody as Cultural Memory

Richard Powers's 1995 novel *Galatea 2.2* is, among other things, a latter-day version of the Pygmalion myth. As such, Anca Rosu chooses Powers's novel as a case study of 'sympathetic parody': rather than ridiculing Ovid or George Bernard Shaw, Rosu argues, "by *gently* parodying the Pygmalion myth, [*Galatea 2.2*] builds up a critique of the state of literary studies in the late twentieth century and their long-standing quarrel with the sciences" (Rosu 139, our emphasis). In what follows, however, Rosu's article hardly addresses the novel's relationship with the Pygmalion myth, but focuses entirely on its commentary on "the impasse of literary scholarship as part of a larger crisis of knowledge in the age of information" (Rosu 139).

Rosu argues that, at the heart of *Galatea 2.2*, Powers explores the divide between a scientific approach to literature (which treats literature as a "knowable object") on the one hand, and an approach typical of the humanities (which treats literature as knowledge in itself, or as "a way to know" [Rosu 145]) on the other. The novel's autodiegetic narrator—who is called Richard Powers, and resembles his creator in uncanny detail—is torn between both approaches. 'Powers-as-Hero,' as we wish to call him to separate the fictional character from the author, is the "token humanist" in the newly founded Centre for the Study of Advanced Sciences at a major Mid-Western University. He engages in the teaching of literature as a

*Reference: Anca Rosu, "Parody as Cultural Memory in Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2*," *Connotations* 12.2-3 (2002/2003): 139-54.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <http://www.connotations.de/debrosu01223.htm>.

knowable object by joining the cognitive neurologist Philip Lentz in feeding information routines to an artificial neural network. Lentz bets that his artificial device will end up 'knowing' enough literature to beat a student in the humanities department in a final exam. Rosu perceptively stresses that such a 'scientific' approach to literature is counterbalanced by the love of literature as an 'experience' with an emotional quality to it. Two models feature prominently here: Powers-as-Hero's father, who is able to recite his favourite popular songs and ballads from memory, and his first professor of English, who effortlessly quotes from a canon of 'great' poets in class. From this, Rosu weaves a larger argument about the role of writing in the age of information strongly reminiscent of Walter Ong and the French historian Pierre Nora's major observations (cf. Ong and Nora).[1] She associates the divide faced by Powers-as-Hero and the Literary Studies departments at large with a historical shift in the quality of cultural memory. In an age of virtually unlimited storage capacity, memory ceases to be a matter of oral performance and everyday experience, but is increasingly relegated to what Pierre Nora would call the "uninhabited" memory of data banks and libraries. Accordingly, literary scholarship faces the "paradox of the archive," as Richard Powers states in an argument supporting Rosu's approach: "Once you have a permanent medium of representation and recording, the notion of individual life gets lost in the notion of a constantly accreting history" (Powers in Tortorello, n.p.).

In Rosu's argument, it is precisely here that the importance of 'sympathetic parody' comes into play: while on the story level Powers satirises the 'crisis' of literary studies, his pervasive use of quotation on the level of discourse counter-balances the story's pessimistic thrust. The novel's narrator, as a "writer and scholar of literature, for whom speaking naturally includes the words of other writers" (Rosu 149), continually alludes to poets from Shakespeare and the Rossettis to Yeats and Eliot. Through this general application of 'sympathetic parody' beyond the specific re-writing of the Pygmalion myth, and the mingling of literary allusions with techno-talk, Rosu claims, the

novel re-negotiates the precarious dissociation of scientific and literary communication characteristic of modern culture. Moreover, by employing the realm of the intertextual as a mnemonic space,[2] Powers implicitly "connects us to that impossible-to-reach totality of knowledge-as-literature." In effect, Rosu elevates parody—at least in *Galatea 2.2*—to the ranks and "distinct honour of being the great preserver" (Rosu 152).

Anca Rosu's argument is admirably lucid and conclusive. Still, we think that a sense of discomfort prevails as her essay chooses to remain curiously focussed on the conflict between 'science' and 'humanism,' but altogether ignores a third major thrust of the novel which may be called its 'romantic' dimension. Ironically, Rosu's concluding remarks on parody as "the great preserver," by evoking Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," remind us of such 'romantic' topoi in *Galatea 2.2*. What are we to make of Powers-as-Hero's lamentations about his loss of inspiration as a creative writer, of his loneliness and inability to socially connect, of his search for a stable self? These 'romantic' aspects are particularly unsettling since *Galatea 2.2* comes in the guise of a confessional autobiography in which not only the name, but also the narrated vita of Powers-as-Hero unmistakeably correspond to the historical person Richard Powers, whom we shall refer to as Powers-as-Author in the following. Here, an altogether different level of parody comes into play, a parody perhaps much less 'sympathetic' in nature. This level of parody results from a curious intertextual oscillation between the factual and the fictional in *Galatea 2.2*.[3]

The Simulation of Autobiography as Parody

Much in *Galatea 2.2* suggests that there is little point in carefully distinguishing author and narrator. The novel's autobiographical thrust is very hard to miss, and some research into the life of Powers-as-Author does much to confirm this. The brief synopsis of his vita in Joseph Dewey's monograph (cf. Dewey 6-10) reveals a meticulous

correspondence between Powers-as-Author and Powers-as-Hero. The fictional setting of "U." is a barely disguised version of Urbana, where both hero and author studied, and to which they both eventually return as writers-in-residence; both hero and author move to Boston after completing their M.A. to take up work as freelance data processors. There is a detailed correspondence between the accounts of how both hero and author were inspired to write their first novel by encountering a photograph in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Both move to and are enchanted by Holland, and the creative geneses of Powers-as-Author's other books feature prominently in the novel. Correspondences like these go even further to include major characters in Powers-as-Hero's recollections: thus, the influential English teacher convincing Powers-as-Hero to stick to literature rather than physics, "the incomparable Taylor" (64), is a thinly veiled version of his real-life counterpart Robert Schneider ("Taylor" is simply the English translation of the German word "Schneider"), and the problematic relationship with his father corresponds with the fact that the author's father indeed "died of cancer during [Powers's] first year [in graduate school]" (Powers in Williams, n.p.).

Where, then, does the fictional element come in? After all, *Galatea 2.2* features an explicit addition to its title informing us that we are dealing with "*A Novel*" rather than anything else. Certainly, the major plotline concerning the sensational progress of the artificial neural network "Helen" is to be rated as 'fiction,' not least since the final stages of Helen's development suggest that she indeed gains consciousness, thus presenting us with an obvious element of *science*-fiction. However, the paradoxical opening phrase "It was like so, but wasn't" (3) not only refers to Powers-as-Hero's detached but increasingly obsessive involvement at the Centre for the Study of Advanced Sciences. It is also palpable with regard to the (romantic) self-fashioning of Powers-as-Hero who, at the end of the day, remains curiously suspended between fact and fiction. There certainly is an element of rather 'unsympathetic' (self-)parody in the portrayal of the writer-persona Richard Powers devoid of inspiration and purpose,

and the resulting effect is an uncomforting indeterminacy between authenticity and ironic distancing.

Powers-as-Hero's situation as a writer-in-residence and "token humanist" (Rosu 144) at the Centre for the Study of Advanced Sciences is one of elected disengagement. Waiting to be kissed again by the muse, and recovering from the painful alienation and separation from his long-time partner C. in Holland, he leads a life of self-indulgence. This is most obvious in the failures of his attempts to emotionally connect with others. His encounters with the scientist ironically called Diana Hartrick are a case in point: 'Rick' is both the hero's and the author's nickname, yet 'tricks' of the heart are closer to what is at stake here, as Rick's stabs at romance with the single mother always end in withdrawal. Powers-as-Hero is at his most pathetic in his blind crush on the graduate student A., who eventually beats Helen in the final exam. Without knowing much about her, Powers-as-Hero falls in love with a self-generated image of A., to whom he eventually confesses his love ("'A., I love you. I want to try to make a life with you. To give you mine […].'" [314]). A., of course, is disgusted: "'I don't have to listen to this,' she said, to no one. 'I trusted you. I had fun with you. People read you. I thought you know something. Total self-indulgence'" (316). A.'s verdict is sustained with regard to other characters, as Powers-as-Hero is generally the last to find out about the fates of his friends and colleagues—for instance the fact that Philip Lentz' wife had a major stroke causing mental amnesia, or that Ram Guptha, who judges the final showdown between A. and Helen, suffers from the effects of chemotherapy.

Such carefully created ironies poke fun at the 'romantic' alienation and narcissist pathos of the self-searching writer: there is a constant current of what Bakhtin refers to as "double-voiced discourse" (Bakhtin 324) which destabilises the alliance of author and hero. *Galatea 2.2*, therefore, is both autobiographical and it is not; it is but a 'simulation' of self-fashioning in writing which constantly parodies itself as it goes along. It is on these grounds that we would like to question the notion of 'sympathetic' parody in *Galatea* 2.2 as presented

by Anca Rosu. Powers-as-Hero's pervasive use of literary allusions to canonical writers may have less to do with an act of "preservation," but presents us with a highly ironic parody of the literary universe as an escapist refuge.

The Parody of "Parody as Cultural Memory"

Anca Rosu rightfully notes that "[i]t is as if Powers could not express himself beyond literary allusion" (Rosu 150). The rationale of the constant recourse to the words of other writers and poets, however, may be an altogether different one from that which Rosu sketches. Joseph Dewey, for instance, is less charmed by the "[b]ook-fat and word-fat" Powers-as-Hero. He writes:

> His chitchat at the Centre for the Study of Advanced Sciences is polished and impersonal, self-consciously epigrammatical and allusive […]. Language has given Richard a satisfying, self-sustaining autonomy, a lifestyle of elected disengagement that has engendered only a steadying equilibrium frankly uncomplicated by intrusive others. (Dewey 97-98)

At the same time, the universe of canonical writers (including his own first novel) which Powers-as-Hero so adamantly feeds into Helen's artificial synapses provides him with a comforting wealth of secondary experiences to hide behind. 'Sympathetic' parody, therefore, for Powers-as-Hero first of all functions as a wordy protective shell with which to cover up an emotional hollowness, an inability to relate to others by means of genuine affection. The world of literature as portrayed in *Galatea 2.2* is precisely not capable of offering a totality of knowledge, but is presented as a fairly autonomous realm, opposed to, rather than interlinked with, the realm of experience. The literary world, despite Powers-as-Hero's insistence on context and the influence of his father and Taylor, remains a world beyond the "inexplicable visible" which, as Powers-as-Hero realises in a final confrontation with Diana Hartrick, he "had failed to tell Helen, and she me" (318).

This is not to imply that 'sympathetic' parody necessarily has an escapist quality to it: in fact, the novel suggests that a very different view of literature and its relationship with contextual realities is feasible. Thus, Powers-as-Hero is truly fascinated by A.'s politicised approach to literature that comprises radical questionings of gender, ethnicity and class issues; however, he hardly takes up any of her ideas, preferring to stick to a rather traditional canon in Helen's education,[4] and, by extension, in the 'sympathetic' parody marking his own conversational style. Accordingly, the employment of parody in *Galatea 2.2*—in the sense of a global intertexual thrust—altogether appears less 'sympathetic' than 'pathetic' in nature. The cultural memory of literature evoked in Powers-as-Hero's encompassing allusions retains a thoroughly narcissistic quality: it mirrors the self-indulgence and monological vanity of Powers-as-Hero, and it allows him to carefully avoid implacable affections and intimate encounters with other human beings. What is at stake in *Galatea 2.2*, then, is an ('unsympathetic') *parody* of "parody as cultural memory": the message conveyed is that there is little value in parody as cultural memory as long as the intertextual realm of literature remains aloof of negotiations with the "ineffable web" and "unmappable" (318) subtleties of real-life experience.

On these grounds, one may doubt that *Galatea 2.2* is just a "gentle" parody of the Pygmalion myth, as Anca Rosu suggests. The novel can also be read as a satirical critique of the 'romantic' notion of the reclusive artist. It dramatises the rather unsympathetic qualities of the likes of "Gepetto, Victor Frankenstein, Prospero, Pygmalion, each of whom Powers introduces into the narrative line," as Joseph Dewey observes:

> Benevolent dictators, massively competent animators, master megalomaniacs—in short, artists—they are all estranged from the vulnerabilities of the everyday. Closet misanthropes aghast over the inadequacies of experience, unavailable to the simplest pull of the heart, they exert an unnatural exercise of control, a ghastly parody of love that finds its expressions in the cozy manipulations and sterile control of the narrative/laboratory. (Dewey 102)

Indeed, the computer network 'Helen' is the only 'being' in *Galatea 2.2* whom Powers-as-Hero grows to be genuinely attached to. It is Powers-as-Hero rather than Lentz (as Rosu suggests) who is the modern day Pygmalion of the novel falling in love with his own creation. Helen, of course, is easy to love, partly because she is always at the hero's disposal in a relationship uncomplicated by the needs and inexplicable moods of human beings, and partly because she is something of a mirror image of Powers-as-Hero himself. Helen, like her creator, is pure language, fed on a representative canon of literature and consequently also revolving around a self-sustaining reliance on the 'sympathetic' parody of what she has "already read."[5] What both lack is social grounding and access to genuine feelings. Ironically, it is Helen who at the end of the tale realises that she is trapped in a world of meaningless parody. She deliberately 'fails' her final exam (on Shakespeare's *Tempest*) by answering: "You are the ones who can hear airs. Who can be frightened or encouraged. You can hold things and break them and fix them. I never felt at home here. This is an awful place to be dropped down halfway" (326).[6] Thus, Helen opens Powers-as-Hero's eyes to the fact that the cultural memory inherent in literature is fruitless when merely employed in aloof parody and self-indulgence. The rest is irony: Helen commits virtual suicide. Richard Powers writes another book.

Eberhard-Karls-Universität
Tübingen

NOTES

[1]For a comprehensive discussion of different manifestations of cultural memory in *Galatea 2.2*, cf. Pence, who draws upon Peter Burke, Paul Connerton, Maurice Halbwachs, Andreas Huyssen, Fredric Jameson, Philip Kuberski, Jean-François Lyotard, and Pierre Nora.

[2]Considering its importance in the conclusion, the notion of 'intertextuality as memory' is given little theoretical backing in Rosu's article. The principle source to turn to here would be Renate Lachmann's seminal study *Memory and Literature* which associates the tradition of the Roman Mnemonics with theorists of

intertextuality such as M. M. Bakthin and Julia Kristeva. Lachmann argues that the memory of a text resides in "the intertextuality of its references [which] arises in the act of writing considered as a traversal of the space between texts" (Lachmann 15).

[3]N. Katherine Hayles notes that the title of the novel already hints at the importance of doublings: "*Galatea* 2.2 is full of doublings, starting with the doubling of Richard Powers as author and as protagonist of this autobiographical novel. Yet the doublings are never simply mirror images. The dot separating the twin twos signifies difference as well as reflection" (Hayles 261).

[4]James Berger notes that Helen "is, in effect, a construct of 'the best that has been thought and said,' a creature—almost a parody—drawn from the shelves of contemporary conservative adherents of Matthew Arnold" (Berger 118).

[5]Helen, one could say, virtually embodies a poststructuralist notion of intertextuality as Roland Barthes defines it. Barthes conceives of intertextuality as a self-sustaining universe of texts without any need of historical or contextual grounding: "The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: […] the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*" (Barthes 160).

[6]Helen's realisation corresponds to what N. Katherine Hayles introduces as the predicament of the 'posthuman' as she understands it: "Whatever posthumans are, they will not be able to banish the loneliness that comes from the difference between writing and life, inscription and embodiment" (Hayles 272). Here, Hayles articulates the 'romantic' dimension of *Galatea 2.2* around which our reading of the novel revolves. On the posthuman in *Galatea 2.2*, see also more recently Campbell.

WORKS CITED

Bakhtin, M.M. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 2000. 259-422.

Barthes, Roland. *Image—Music—Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1977.

Berger, James. "Testing Literature: Helen Keller and Richard Powers' Implementation H[elen]." *Arizona Quarterly* 58.3 (Autumn 2002): 109-37.

Campbell, Miranda. "Probing the Posthuman: Richard Powers' *Galatea 2.2* and the Mind-Body Problem." *Reconstruction* 4.3 (Summer 2004). <http://www.reconstruction.ws/043/Campbell.htm>.

Dewey, Joseph. *Understanding Richard Powers.* Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2002.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1999.

Lachmann, Renate. *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism*. Trans. Roy Sellers and Anthony Wall. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997.

Nora, Pierre. "General Introduction: Between Memory and History." *The Realms of Memory*. Vol. 1: *Conflicts and Divisions*. 1992. New York: Columbia UP, 1996. 1-20.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.* London: Methuen, 1982.

Pence, Jeffrey. "The End of Technology: Memory in Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2*." *Modern Language Quarterly* 63.3 (September 2002): 343-63.

Powers, Richard. *Galatea 2.2.* New York: Picador, 2004 [1995].

Tortorello, Michael. "Richard Powers: Industrial Evolution." Interview. *Rain Taxi* (Summer 1998).
<http://www.raintaxi.com/online/1998summer/powers.shtml>.

Williams, Jeffrey. "The Last Generalist: An Interview with Richard Powers." *Cultural Logic* 2.2 (Spring 1999).
<http://www.eserver.org/clogic/2-2/williams.html>.