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ARTICLE

Novelty, Pattern, and Force in Richard Powers's *Orfeo*

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Richard Powers's *Orfeo* pits novelty against familiar pattern, and explores the destructive effects of forcing something new to fit known patterns in art, science, and politics. The protagonist's dedication to writing truly new music wrecks his marriage and damages his personal life. His tinkering with novelty in bacterial genes will apparently get him killed by the police. Powers has argued in *The Gold Bug Variations* that the point of science is wonder, not control. Powers embodies this tension between novelty and known pattern by imposing the Orpheus myth on a composer for whom traditional patterns are anathema. Further, by embedding a radical political protest within a well-known myth, Powers demonstrates in his own writing the presentation of the new within recognizable older patterns, the tactic that protagonist Peter Els could have tried with his music if he had hoped to develop an audience. On the political level, Powers equates oppressive police power with forcing unusual people to fit a narrow range of behavior and belief patterns.

Eleven-year-old Peter Els hears the last movement of Mozart's Jupiter symphony for the first time:

The shuffled half scale gathers mass; it sucks up other melodies into its gravity. Tunes and countertunes split off and replicate, chasing each other in a cosmic game of tag. At two minutes, a trapdoor opens underneath the boy. The first floor of the house dissolves above a gaping hole. Boy, stereo, speaker boxes, the love seat he sits on: all hang in place, floating on the gusher of sonority pouring into the room.

Five viral strands propagate, infecting the air with runaway joy. At three and a half minutes, a hand scoops Peter up and lifts him high above the blocked vantage of his days. He rises in the shifting column of light and looks back down on the room where he listens. Wordless peace fills him at the sight of his own crumpled, listening body. And pity for anyone who mistakes this blinkered life for the real deal.¹

Early in this novel, Richard Powers introduces us to the ecstasy available to some people who open themselves to art. The passage actually continues to cover several more minutes of Peter's mystic experience, but at the end, we learn something else about such ecstasy: you cannot regain it by replaying the music. For Peter, this effect comes only from the originality and newness of the experience. *Orfeo* explores the joy of discovery that can be found in both art and nature. We see gradations of pleasure felt both at understanding and creating. However, such pleasures are circumscribed and opposed by patterns of human meaning-construction and human behavior. Cognitively, we "understand" something by fitting it into a known pattern, and we frequently respond to situations by trying to exert control or force. This opposition of force and ecstasy lies at the heart of this novel.

In the past, most of Powers's novels argue that we should study art or nature so deeply that we can revel in wonder at discovering things that are new to us.²

¹ Richard Powers, *Orfeo*, 17–18.

² J. D. Thomas argues that Powers celebrates science by superimposing religious transcendence upon science.

This can be in scientific research (*The Gold Bug Variations*), in virtual reality artwork (*Plowing the Dark*), in music (*The Time of our Singing*), or in the sheer wonder of life (*Generosity*). He treats that profound joy as the emotion about which we should reorganize our lives and culture, rather than pursuing the transient and meaningless pleasures of consumerism.

The alternative to ecstasy that Powers usually offers is service: we among the fortunate few should devote ourselves to bettering conditions for the majority who lead damaged and tragically limited lives.³ His social vision is extremely bleak and angry. As *Operation Wandering Soul* puts it, “the species is clinically psychotic. Pathetic, deranged, intrinsically, irreversibly mercury-poisoned by nature, by birth. . . Mental thalidomide cases, every last mother’s son, as far back as accounts take things” (165). The suffering may come from natural problems (disease), but more often Powers explores racism, war, economic oppression, pollution, and eagerness to exploit scientific study for profit. Even art, as created in Virtual Reality in *Plowing the Dark* will be exploited by the Military. In *Orfeo*, concern with oppressed people does flare up over the slaughter of the Branch Davidians at Waco in 1993 (and their historical forerunners at the 1534 Siege of Münster), but they are not prominent throughout. Overall in this one novel, Powers shifts his moral focus away from the dreadful sufferings endured by most of the world’s population. As the title *Orfeo* suggests, music ostensibly takes center stage.

Powers pays particular attention to novelty and to our drive to impose known pattern on anything new. Novelty represents the source of that wonder and joy.⁴ Pattern is what we impose on all novelty to explain it to ourselves. Give us a new animal or plant and we assign it a genus and species. In doing so, we destroy some of that thrilling newness, and therefore lose some potential pleasure. True, we enjoy discovering how the new item fits a known pattern, and neurocognitively, we survive because of our brain’s ability to identify pattern, so pattern is necessary, not an evil in

³ For the tension between these two imperatives, seeking wonder and offering help, see Kathryn Hume.

⁴ Joseph Dewey (4) argues that such cerebral quest for knowledge and novelty can lead to indifference, insulation, or narcissism, and that Love is necessary.

itself; Powers does not create a false binary opposition. However, relying too heavily on pattern can deaden our responses to things observed, particularly in art.⁵

Beyond novelty and pattern lies power or force or control, the dangerous cluster of closely related terms in this novel's politics. We see power or force exercised when something new and unusual is forced to fit an inappropriate pattern, as when Peter Els is forced to fit the popular idea of a bioterrorist. In *The Gold Bug Variations*, scientist Stuart Ressler essentially discovers DNA but backs off and gives up science. He argues against the genetic engineering that he foresees, saying, "It's not science. Science is not about control. It is about cultivating a perpetual condition of wonder in the face of something that forever grows one step richer and subtler than our latest theory about it. It is about reverence, not mastery" (411). "The point of science was to lose ourselves in the world's desire" (413). In *Orfeo*, Powers shows us this interplay of force and wonder in art, and gives us a new version of his angry politics, but he encases it in an Orphic pattern. When we recognize this compositional tactic of meshing the unpalatable with the well-known and cherished, we will see more clearly the failings of his protagonist, Peter Els, who tries to force his audiences to accept new music, something that seems to them unpatterned and therefore indigestible. We will also see the failings of surveillance society when dealing with an unusual but harmless citizen who does not fit known patterns.

Els is a composer of avant-garde music. Indeed, he has succeeded in focusing so intently that he has achieved transcendent moments of wonder and ecstasy in three forms: in his family life, in music, and in science. Since his marriage ends in divorce, let me deal with that brief interlude. Els's source of wonder is his baby daughter. He and she compose on her toy piano and xylophone, and he marvels when she uses the colors on her xylophone keys and spaces between alphabet blocks to create a system of notation, a readable pattern (186). Wonder enfolds him that she does this only a few dozen months away from herself being a single cell. Without prompting, she invents the very idea of notation. He lost that relationship with his daughter and the wonder it generated when his wife divorced him. She was tired of supporting him,

⁵ Viktor Shklovsky asserts that art's function is to make us recover that sense of newness.

and irritated by his refusal to compromise his musical ideals and take a job teaching traditional compositional values and patterns in some local university.⁶

Music is Els's earliest and primary source of ecstasy. Thanks to his experience with Mozart, he makes novelty unconstrained by expectations the key to his philosophy as a composer. What he wanted to produce in his audiences was awe, surprise, suspense, refreshment, sense of the infinite, fear, change, and beauty (346). Most listeners can no longer derive that from the often-heard classics, so Els thinks to produce it through the unanticipatable sounds that do not obey old rules of form, genre, and pattern. He studies research done on the physiological responses to sound—how some intervals literally make us sad, others, happy; “a six-chord sequence could chill a soul or make it see God” (332).⁷ He also ponders the political repression of music in the case of Shostakovich and Stalin, and “that endless need to legislate sounds” through history (282).⁸ Els wants to tap into those musical powers and use them to bring pleasure, but his avoidance of recognizable pattern in his composing reduces his ability to pass these joys on to others.

Els is similarly thrilled by his scientific studies, particularly when they remind him of music. “To Els, music and chemistry were each other's long-lost twins: mixtures and modulations, spectral harmonies and harmonic spectroscopy. The structures of long polymers reminded him of intricate Webern variations” (57). He enjoys learning that people are making music from fractals, the digits of pi, the solar wind, voting records (330). “Brain waves, skin conductivity, and heartbeats: anything could

⁶ In general, Powers upholds the human bond and love over intellectual constructs, notably in *The Gold Bug Variations* and *Galatea 2.2*. D. Quentin Miller and N. Katherine Hayles both comment on Powers's preference for certain human qualities over posthuman values.

⁷ Whether sadness or happiness are universal responses to major and minor is debatable. See Philip Ball. Other experiments show that western listeners, at least, prefer frequency combinations that do not set up beats, a preference that may grow out of our auditory system, though may also be to some extent conditioned (See Josh H. McDermott et al.). Since classical music has used consonant combinations over and over, Els's search for novelty undoubtedly led him to those that had been avoided for physiological as well as cultural reasons. His fascination with newness perhaps overrode any preference he might originally have felt for consonance.

⁸ Extended work with music can even alter brain structure, but any extended specialization tends to do that; the learning of all London streets by taxi drivers changes their brains, as does achieving fluency in several languages.

generate surprise melodies. String quartets were performing the sequences of amino acids in horse hemoglobin" (330–331). "Genomics was right now learning how to read scores of indescribable beauty. Els just wanted to hear, before the light in his tent went out" (143). Like Singularity's prophet Ray Kurzweil, who sees computational power in every atom of a piece of granite, Els senses that all Nature is something we should learn to listen to rather than just exploit. A dog splashing in a duck pond produces ripples that "contained enough data to encode an entire opera" (331). He heard "soundtracks extracted from DNA" on the radio (333), and he realized that DNA was the "one durable medium" (333). By coding some sequence—anything—into a bacterium, he will produce a scientific and musical novelty that enchants him, and it will arguably intrigue some future student of that bacterium.

New York Times reviewer Jim Holt eloquently argues that Els's altering DNA for artistic reasons is obscene. The practice, however, has become commonplace, and I detect no revulsion in Powers's description.⁹ DNA carries enough junk that the music evidently can ride along harmlessly. Els is, after all, creating a new form of art, and many aspects of art involve imposing force of sorts, whether mining and grinding compounds for colored paints, melting ore and casting metal, or shaping landscape in Land Art, as Robert Smithson did in his "Spiral Jetty" or Michael Heizer is doing in his "City." Powers seems to distinguish between using such force for commercial exploitation and enrichment of the creator or industry as opposed to creating art for future viewers to wonder it. Els is not trying to enrich himself, and were he to stumble across something exploitable, he might, like Stuart Ressler, quit science, or switch to something with less applicable potential. At what point force becomes unethical is arguable, but Powers does not seem to be disturbed by Els's tinkering.

⁹ *The Economist* published on such amateur biohacking in 2009; see <http://www.economist.com/node/14299634>. For an almost identical experiment to that of Els, see Katherine Xue's account of a Danish Christmas poem being inserted into *E. coli*. MIT scientists have recently turned *E. coli* bacteria into "tape recorders" to store usable, erasable information (<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/11/141113142006.htm>). Steve Tomasula analyzes the phenomenon of a man grafting his own DNA into a petunia. What Els does may make some readers uneasy, but amateurs and professionals are doing it regularly.

Pattern is what Els struggles against in his music, and we might wonder why. He is not personally a law-breaker. His upbringing was conventional, and his one tiny act of teen rebellion (refusing to come when called) seemed to contribute to his father's dying of a heart attack, so one might expect him to shrink back into safe obedience. All of Els's musical impetus, however, goes toward rebelling against the old and creating something new. His most successful work is an opera about the Siege of Münster, in which a religious splinter group desperately seeks transcendence through new forms of worship and governance, and is massacred by the surrounding rulers in the name of political and religious orthodoxy. To him, discovery of the new brings variations on ecstasy, transcendence, and wonder, whether in science or art or religion. What bothers him is the human determination to make everything fit into familiar patterns.

Els admits late in life that listeners cannot learn to love just anything. He finds that most people are best satisfied with known patterns. Els's brother and boyhood friends once tied him down and forced him to listen to popular music, but where they think that no finer music exists, Els can only hear "harmonic jail" in the boringly simple bass chords (20). Similar resistance would arise for a fan of *Finnegans Wake* being forced to read a Harlequin Romance; the formulas leading to predictable resolution do not interest someone with sophisticated tastes. Many challenging novels exist, however, between those extremes, and Els seems blind to the potential that an equivalent musical middle ground would offer for educating his audience to relish his preferred kind of music. Evidently, most of us respond to music much the way we do to scientific phenomena; we want to fit both into patterns we have already learned. We may not need to label something a concerto or a septet, but we want to know that this kind of tonal combination will lead to that sort of resolution. Lacking an audience that can listen the way Els himself does, he opts for the novelty of inscribing music into DNA.¹⁰

¹⁰ How a future researcher would know to turn a sequence of DNA that did not fit known patterns into tones is unclear to me, but music would surely be more easily recognized if it were a tune like Yankee Doodle than "birdsong, a threnody, the raw noise of this arboretum, music spun from the brain" (333), all of which Els considers for possible transcoding.

Powers introduces another factor into this apparent war between novelty and pattern and the effects of force. Whereas Els wants ecstasy, that experience has its opposite in anguish. Els is highly susceptible to anguish. Many Powers protagonists are cripplingly sensitive to the suffering of others. Els does not show this trait to the same extent as "Rick Powers" of *Galatea 2.2* or Richard Kraft of *Operation Wandering Soul*, but his sensitivity flares up just as his operatic collaboration with Richard Bonner approaches opening night. The U.S. Government attacks the Branch Davidian compound at Waco and shoots and burns alive a religious group rebelling against orthodox patterns in order to seek transcendence. Els does his best to close the opera down, revolted at what he considers the ghoulish interest that will bring opera-goers to see it specifically because Waco has happened. He does not want to feed their appetite for a horror that feels comfortable because it befalls folks who are *not* like Metropolitan Opera goers. While he cannot prevent its initial brief run, he refuses to let other opera houses put on productions, a refusal that completely baffles and infuriates his collaborator Bonner, for whom this is also the most effective creation of his life. Bonner is "pure energy" (197), and that energy fuels Els when the two manage to work together. Bonner is also madcap and vicious, and their previous collaboration ended with the drunken Bonner saying that Els's music is only "*steamy, creamy, lovely shit*" (217). Els gives up composing after their opera disagreement, and his eventual turn to biogenetics lets him compose in a new register. If science and music are somehow twins in his mind, he shifts from one to the other after anguish has made him give up on music.

Force emerges as a key issue toward the end of the novel. Els's grotesquely inept people-skills are misinterpreted by the police. They force on him the label bioterrorist, and he finds himself being hunted by the irresponsible press and gun-happy troopers. The press never retracts stories when they are found to be incorrect, so public hysteria rises. He has few options. He could arrange a quiet surrender and spend the rest of his life and all his money trying to clear his name, and then die peniless and forgotten. His daughter wants him to go this route. After all, Els is guilty of nothing except taking a trip and seeing family and friends when he was warned to stay available in his hometown. What he has done with the bacterium is not illegal.

More sinisterly, if he decided to enter the clutches of the law, he would probably be judged guilty and imprisoned, no matter how harmless his activities. The legal system does not resist hysteria very well. Alternatively, he can take Bonner's enthusiastic advice and produce "*Killer Theater*" (338). Bonner always wants the most dramatic and anarchic actions. Bonner glories in the idea of "Music to panic a whole country" (345). "*You have to do this. The largest audience for an experimental piece in history*" (347). After releasing tweets to gather a following, Els follows Bonner's advice.

Because of his status as composer and the novel's title, we automatically link this end to the Orphic pattern of *sparagmos* or dismemberment by a mob. Had Orpheus lived to a ripe old age in connubial bliss (or single, or married for a second time), his legend would not be all that well known. Its dramatic, violent, bloody ending somehow makes his life more valuable, and his oracular role makes it mysterious as well. After all, both Odysseus and Aeneas deal with the underworld, but those episodes are comparatively obscure. The *sparagmos* intensifies the value of Orpheus and his skills—by robbing us of them. What makes this ending to Els's life meaningful is that it becomes a protest against the government's misuse of power, a protest, however, that necessitates Els's own death.

The Orphic Framework

The tension between novelty and pattern also plays out in Powers's decision to use the very well-known Orpheus story as template for his plot, and thus he imposes such a pattern on someone who hates such pattern. The myth is easier to discuss than Els's music, since readers cannot hear that. Orpheus's story consists of five basic mythemes, and my starting with that statement shows the usefulness of pattern. Without such a framework, I could wander back and forth between the novel and myth, calling attention to possible parallels, but with the pattern, identifying those likenesses is much easier. Pattern lets one build an argument or make a case. These five mythemes or plot situations have appealed to later writers: Orpheus's musical power that extends beyond humans to animals and all nature; his descent into Hades for Eurydice and his return; his invention of homosexuality; his dismemberment

or *sparagmos* at the hands of the maenads; and his head becoming an oracle until silenced by Apollo. Different mythemes have been popular in various ages.

Orpheus's ability to enchant animals and more generally his power over nature as well as humans has been traced in literature since the Renaissance by Elizabeth Sewall in *The Orphic Voice: Poetry and Natural History*. Powers nods to this motif when he explores animal consciousness of music through Els's dog Fidelio.

If Els held a D, the dog went to E-flat or E. If Els moved to Fidelio's pitch, the dog slid a semi-tone up or down. If a human chorus held a chord, the dog sang a note that wasn't in it. Whatever pitches the pack served up, Fidelio found one that hadn't yet been taken.

In the creature's howling, Els heard the roots of music—the holy society of small discord. (8)

Els wants to understand what Fidelio is doing and why. He knows of other musical dogs, including Wagner's spaniel, which would howl at passages it didn't like in *Tannhäuser* until Wagner changed them. Els proves that Fidelio hears octave intervals as we do. He admires her focus on the instant: "Not for her, the insatiable need for novelty. She never tired of warhorses, but neither did she recognize anything Els played her, however often she heard it. A permanent, moving dance, in an eternal Standing Now" (9). If humans could temporarily achieve that focus on the instant, they might reach the sublime, and they might enjoy Els's music. Most listeners do not just focus on the moment; they remember what leads up to a passage, and they anticipate (or wish to anticipate) a satisfying resolution, or they get distracted and think of something else entirely.¹¹ Once Els had believed he could create music that would educate listeners to focus on the moment, but by the time Fidelio dies, Els no longer expects to achieve this through normal channels. He decides instead to use the patterns of

¹¹ Patrick Colm Hogan, pp. 11–12 discusses most listeners' tendency to become angry and bored while listening to highly experimental music; we cannot code what we are hearing and make sense of it, so the very novelty becomes sameness and hence boring. He makes the point that the compositional "grammar" understood by the composer is far more complex than the listeners' "grammar," and so they cannot parse what they hear.

bacterial DNA to encode some music and let it “play” out into the future. It will pass down through bacterial generations. His music will thus have an effect on Nature as did that of Orpheus, albeit at the bacterial level.

The second mytheme is the love story of Orpheus and Eurydice, her death, his descent into Hades to win her back, his near success but ultimate failure in restoring Eurydice to life. Historically, this is the most productive mytheme. Humans enjoy assurances that something exists after death and most of us like a love story. Even though readers do not believe in the Greek mythological universe or gods, they relish claims that we continue in spirit if not body. The descent into a place of danger and threat serves many symbolic purposes. Romantics, Modernists, and contemporary writers use Hades as metaphor for madness, the unconscious, the suffering of the artist, the dark night of the soul, political dictatorship, the hardships of poverty, and any other sort of oppression or anguish.¹² Recent writers have built a minor industry on the Orpheus story. Russell Hoban's *The Medusa Frequency* offers an instance of the artist's suffering; J. J. Phillips's *Mojo Hand* shows descent into serious poverty; and Janette Turner Hospital's *Orpheus Lost* takes on American intelligence work and political torture in Iraq as her form of the underworld, literally tunnels under Baghdad. Furthermore, zombie-besotted popular culture has spawned horror stories of what happens when the Eurydice figure *is* brought back from the dead.¹³

Given the fame of the descent into Hades, we naturally see that in the novel.¹⁴ Els's panicky flight through the surveillance society is indeed a trip into hell, and Powers agrees with that reading, but then society is always hellish in his novels.¹⁵ Els does seek out the only three people important to his former life during his flight:

¹² See Walter A. Strauss for these dark descents in Novalis, Mallarmé, and Rilke.

¹³ Kim Paffenroth and Daniel H. Gower have explored zombie themes in Orpheus novels.

¹⁴ In her NPR review, Helen McAlpin talks of “Els's descent into Hades” as meaning the world of surveillance gone mad. Scott Korb's review in *Slate* emphasizes that “the fleeing Els, like Orpheus, cannot help but look back.”

¹⁵ See the *Raintaxi* Interview with Allan Vorda, where Powers says, “Since my story is concerned with one man's attempt to locate and reproduce the transcendent power of music, and since it also concerns a flight through the underworld of the contemporary culture of fear while attempting to resurrect a lost past, the legend was made to order. Nothing can compare to music in its power to raise the dead.”

his wife, his daughter, and his one friend, Richard Bonner. In various ways, he asks forgiveness and gets it. They help him in his flight, but do not join him, and he does not expect them to.

Ovid was probably indulging in a passing joke when he said that Orpheus instituted homosexuality because he could find no woman equal to Eurydice. This mytheme seems confined to Ovid, and has not been much developed until the twentieth century, but Powers does make a suggestive gesture in its direction.¹⁶ Richard Bonner once says to Els, "*Maestro, We work pretty well together, don't you think? It seems to me that half of life's problems would be solved if one of us had a vagina*" (154). We know nothing direct about Bonner's sexual preferences, and Els does not follow up if this is an invitation. When Bonner tries to browbeat Els into doing the opera, Els lashes out in resistance, "*So what is it? You're a repressed queer? Is that your great secret?*" (260)—to which Bonner responds "*Oh, fuck off. Queer, straight: Who makes these things up? Is anybody anything?*" Els brings up the remark about the vagina in their final meeting and when he quotes it, Bonner "recoils" (349) and calls it a very curious statement. Whatever Bonner may or may not have wished earlier, and whatever Els may or may not have understood (though the line obviously stuck in his memory), the two of them working together produce a kind of intensity that resembles that of sexual attraction. Els's one moderately successful public piece, the opera, comes out of this fraught collaboration. Given Bonner's manic amorality and Els's depressive ethical hypersensitivity, their incompatibility is predictable.

Powers shifts the *sparagmos* within Orpheus's life so that it merges with the traditional exit from Hades. With Bonner's excited encouragement, Els stages a dramatic and grandiose finale: the novel ends as he runs out of a house toward a band of hysterical cops. He invites their blasting him to shreds by rushing toward them waving a flower vase shaped like a lab beaker. They have labeled him a bioterrorist, so he pretends to be what they fear. Orpheus's maenads were intoxicated and swept up in a Dionysian frenzy; these police have been whipped into trigger-happy panic by the grossly irresponsible news media, and are doubtless frustrated that Els has eluded

¹⁶ For the use of that motif in modernist works by Rimbaud, Hart Crane and others, see Merrill Cole.

them so cleverly. Els never achieved much fame with his music, but he will achieve temporary celebrity with this death. Powers himself refuses to interpret the ending: "I would like to think that this is a complex, rich, somewhat mysterious ending. But I feel pretty certain that I would only diminish it by spelling out my own interpretation of it. I have no doubt that people will hear that piece in lots of different ways. That, too, is the beauty of art: you can't control what people will think of or do with it" (*Raintaxi* interview). Since the novel stops just as Els rushes out, we do not witness his death, but what Powers says about surveillance society leaves no doubt in my mind that Els will indeed be torn apart by bullets.

The oracular head mytheme is less obvious, but may be allusively present in Els's decision to encode some of his music in the DNA of the bacterium *Serratia marcescens*.¹⁷ He wants immortality for something he has created, and enjoys thinking of that music "playing" down through the ages in future generations of bacteria. This potential voice of the future is silenced by the cops who unplug the equipment and destroy his experiments. The police who will presumably kill Els are like those who kill his oracular bacteria, but traditionally, Dionysus-crazed bacchantes represent the opposite mentality from that of Apollo. However, while Apollo is normally associated with rational thought and calm behavior, his cracking down on oracles, particularly those associated with female forces, does—in that function—show him as a politically or religiously motivated oppressor. Similarly the police in the surveillance society made legal by the U.S.A. Patriot Act may think their actions coolly rational, but we are invited here to think otherwise. Producing a bacterial receptor for his music is a distant extension of the oracular head, but those bacteria would have carried the potential to utter Els's music down through centuries.

A novelist writing about a composer might well wish to invoke Orpheus. That gives the composer a cultural genealogy and some cultural capital. In doing so, however, Powers reminds us that pattern governs our lives and our literature, and that

¹⁷ In addition to being relatively harmless, it has the distinction of producing a blood-colored growth on bread that may be responsible for various medieval miracles of the Host bleeding. For a picture of this phenomenon, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serratia_marcescens#mediaviewer/File:Bloody_bread_-_Serratia_marcescens_in_action.JPG.

sense of being constrained by rules and patterns is what his Orpheus-figure, Els, most tries to escape. We as readers welcome the allusions to Orpheus. They raise and gratify expectations, and make us feel sophisticated.¹⁸ That very satisfaction at seeing pattern, however, would seem to be what Els despises for most of his life as composer, so why does Powers impose it?

The Role of Force

Consider what we are shown about power or force throughout the novel. Usually, force is bad. Obviously, complex society does not exist without forcing its uses on mineral ores, plants, and animals. We tend to think of art as separate from such imperatives. Disturbingly, however, force dominates Els's own implicit attitude towards audiences and his music. He is a crusader, sure that his offering can bring joy, but he goes about it as if he were forcing medicine on listeners, or as if their resisting was immoral because old harmonies are politically as well as musically retrograde. Els does not recognize the possibility of compromise, of educating them gradually to appreciate new possibilities by embedding those in more recognizable and (to them) enjoyable material. What makes his attitude strange is the fact that he himself was similarly pressured in graduate school and did not enjoy that pressure. Every time he produced something vaguely melodic, he was ridiculed and his work derided. At some level, he must have liked those melodic bits, but he felt forced to recant, forced to feel shame when Bonner calls his scores creamy, lovely shit. Having gone through such treatment, he nonetheless imposes it on others, and because audiences are not advanced students of composition theory, they cannot begin to understand what he is trying to do. We hardly approve when his brother and friends tie the teenaged Peter down and bombard him with their popular music, but that is uncomfortably similar to what he does with audiences, barring the fact that they can walk out. His allegiance to extremes is a kind of force. Because of this refusal to compromise, he never gains a significant audience, cannot get an academic post,

¹⁸ Relying on Pierre Bourdieu, Lawrence Venuti (37) reinforces the distinction that elite taste rests on cultural knowledge and awareness of form, whereas popular taste reflects uncritical identification with characters as if they were real people.

and destroys his marriage when his wife gets tired of supporting him and their child while he contributes only minor earnings from temporary and unskilled jobs. We see the penalties he suffered for insisting on force, and tend to agree that they were deserved.

Whereas Powers usually associates power and force with technology, here his sensitivity to interconnectedness lets him show a kind of force operating even in art. Els never altogether recognizes this implicit problem, thanks to his conviction about the importance of novelty. Because his story is embedded in the Orphic pattern, however, we as readers have the comfort of pattern to sustain us as we contemplate an extremely gloomy assessment of our culture and its future. Powers thus presents politically drastic ideas in forms we can tolerate. In doing so, he demonstrates how Els might have approached his audience, but didn't. In the interview with Jian Sun, Powers himself talks about his own writing in ways that suggest what Peter Els should have considered: "For artists, the great challenge is how to use existing categories, to push the boundaries of those categories, without breaking those boundaries" (335).

Since the plot trajectory will presumably result in the police shooting Els, we are primed to see this as an example of such misapplied governmental and media force. Before jumping to that conclusion, however, we need in fairness to ask whether this is suicide as escape for a harmless but ineffectual person, however brilliant. Alternatively, is it an individual's attempt, however feeble, to hit back at the surveillance state and its criminally irresponsible press that forced a mistaken identity upon him? Does Powers offer suicidal acts as a serious political response to the nature of our country?

In one sense, this *is* an escape. Els is over 70 and retired; he has been diagnosed with brain lesions that interfere with his hearing music, and they will probably get worse. He is estranged from the only people who ever meant anything to him. He does not wish to spend the rest of his life in prison. Suicide as escape, however, could be carried out by filling his pockets with stones and leaping off a bridge, or by other private arrangements that involve only himself. By making his death a deliberate provocation, he invites the state to show the true nature of its power, which makes this death more political than personal, and greatly reduces the import of the

escapist element. The reasons he has to wish to escape simply make it easier for him to sacrifice his life.

For all that he stages his demise, he cannot really expect the police to care or to learn anything from his death. Given how little they care for the lives of unarmed black citizens, the death of someone they consider a terrorist nut-case will not change any policies or prick any consciences. Perhaps, though, what we have here is not so much a matter of whom Els is addressing with his choice as of whom Powers is signaling—the reader. As readers, we are being strongly reminded of how power is misused in America, both in terms of police violence and in terms of media irresponsibility. The Orphic overlay enhances reader feelings (not those of the police, who are unaware of Orphic implications), and that overlay intensifies our sense of the wrongness and the loss brought about by the force behind this action.

Are we, as readers, supposed to take this as a demand that we sacrifice our lives to change the attitude toward and exercise of power?¹⁹ “The future does not need a midwife. The future needs an abortionist” (*Prisoner's Dilemma*, 402). “If evolution favored conscience, everything with a backbone would have hanged itself from the ceiling fan eons ago” (*Generosity*, 19).²⁰ Even if everyone shared these views, I doubt if Powers thinks he will get takers for a mass suicidal gesture, but the negativity about our world is another reason for Peter Els not to regret leaving it. To quote Thomas Pynchon's famous warning, “Once the technical means of control have reached a certain size, a certain degree of *being connected* one to another, the chances for freedom are over for good” (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 548). That chimes with Powers's assessment of our situation in this novel. Powers considers America to be in dire straits, but sees no practicable solution.

¹⁹ In the interview with Sven Birkerts, we see how Powers tries to balance the despair at what he sees: “I would say that you can earn your right to feel good about the world by taking a full look at the worst. And you reinvent your capacity for engagement in the face of despair by stepping back and recalling that despair, too, is a coping story that you've told yourself.” Scott Hermanson argues that non-linear science with its sensitivity to input (chaos theory) does make a place for individuals to act meaningfully.

²⁰ For a more complete list of Powers's witty and devastating criticisms, see Hume, pp. 2–3.

In *Els*, Powers portrays one of those rare beings who truly values novelty over pattern, and his biogenetic experiments and those of others deriving music from nature do point toward new principles upon which music might be based. Given the hints at how music can affect and even change the structure of the mind, music based on the mathematics of nature might rewire our brains toward a different mindset. That is a radical idea with great potential. While I consider that concept of new music more promising than biogenetic transmission, *Els* genuinely tries to come up with something new. Unfortunately for him, he is bad at persuading an audience that he is offering them pleasure.

In *The Gold Bug Variations* and *Generosity*, Powers has argued that humans would be better off if educated to derive pleasure from observing, studying, and discovering the world rather than from power, money, technological advances, and consumption. He is sure that such an orientation of social values toward wonder and intellectual enjoyment is possible, but has not found a culture willing to embrace such an outlook. Only occasional individuals manage this reorientation so at odds with contemporary values. *Els* is one of those people, but proves ill-suited to the world we live in. Powers does not supply us with a feel-good resolution any more than *Els* did in music. Like *Els*, he makes us look at the mental and political structures that lead to such a catastrophe, including our own readerly desire for pattern. Unlike *Els*, however, he knows how to present the strange and unpalatable within an Orphic pattern so that we can absorb and contemplate his argument.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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