

“Only the Conversation Matters”

Jean-Yves Pellegrin

An interview with Richard Powers

Note de la rédaction

This interview took place at the Sorbonne on the 20th of February 2006. Many thanks to Richard Powers for his exceptional kindness and patience.

Full text

From *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* (1985) to *The Echo Maker* (2006), American novelist Richard Powers explores the effects of modern science and technology on human lives. He teaches in the Creative Writing M.F.A. program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1998, has been awarded a MacArthur Fellow (1989) and is the recipient of a Lannan Literary Award (1999).

Jean-Yves Pellegrin is Associate Professor of American literature at the University of Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV). He has translated two novels by Richard Powers.

J-Y. PELLEGRIN: *Many critics describe you as a novelist who writes “content-intensive” books, but your novels might just as well be described as form-intensive. Your narratives obey strong structural constraints. The Gold Bug Variations is patterned on the overall configuration of Bach’s Goldbergs. Many of your novels contain embedded story frames. Structural symmetry is central to the composition of Three Farmers on their Way to a Dance... So, to what extent do you consider these tight structures as a means of triggering ideas and inspiration? Do you see structure as a “story-making machine,” as Georges Perec had it?*

R. POWERS. I think that most people’s gut reaction is that structure somehow limits what you are able to do with narrative; it forecloses on possibilities. I think just the opposite: for certain kinds of compositional temperament, constraint is liberating. Finding the right form for certain content frees up infinite possibility that is absent when you can head in any direction. The artists that I most admire have discovered that inverse relationship between constraint and freedom: the more you constrain the outline of possibility, the richer the possibilities for filling in that outline. The trick lies in finding the specific constraint that is the most appropriate for the content. The constraint cannot be arbitrary, or it won’t release you thematically to create. You mention for instance *The Gold Bug Variations*. My challenge in laying the groundwork for that book was to find a way to free up a story about variations, about how everything - all of life’s limitless complexity - can come from almost nothing. The model for this unlimited variation, of course, is the genetic code, where all creatures on earth achieve this incredible diversity of form and function, all based on the same alphabet of four nucleotides. So I had to find a way of stripping down the basic material of the story to the smallest starting particulars in order to release the possibility of creating variation in every available literary mode. All of my novels have sought, in their formal constraint, the same kind of structural mirror that would release the themes for their stories. Each of the nine

books finds its generating principle in a structure that is quite different from any of the other books. Each one has involved starting from scratch. Each book has had to teach me how to write it. The act of composing a book has been the act of reinventing myself as a writer every time.

J.-Y. P.: *So ideas come first, and you look for the most appropriate form to express them?*

R. P.: I have never made a huge distinction between ideas and emotional urgencies. The new book that is going to be published this year in the United States^[1] deals with the subject of neuroscience. It was wonderful to research contemporary neuroscience, and to read these researchers who are demonstrating the necessary interdependence of the brain activity that we would typically call high-level cognition – reason and logic – with the brain processes of emotional or visceral response. The one cannot exist without the other. Any starting idea also contains a visceral urgency, a need to solve some aspect of existence, some aspect of the world we have created. But I think you are right. If we make a broad distinction between top-down composition and bottom-up composition – top-down commencing with the terrain, theme, the abstract urgency, and the formal shape that drives this story; and bottom-up commencing with persons, faces, voices, and local events– I’m much more of a top-down writer by temperament. My process of writing consists of refining my imagination from the top down until I have enough sense of the story’s internal urgency to begin to compose from the bottom up. The first process releases the second. That means I have never succeeded in writing a book on a first draft. The first draft is rather the experiment I run to see where the tunnel from the top down and the tunnel from the bottom up are going to meet. Revision is where I figure out how to connect the two.

J.-Y. P.: *This intimate connection between content and structure makes a sense of profound system-like unity emerge from your novels. Is it correct to say that this places your work much closer to the aesthetics of early twentieth-century modernism than to the poetics of fragmentation and open-endedness that prevailed in the arts and literature at a later period?*

R. P.: That is an interesting point. I have often wondered if my connection does not even predate modernism in some way, if these books don’t somehow resemble works of nineteenth-century encyclopaedic social survey, like a survey in a Dickens novel on, let’s say, the social effect of the factory system or the law courts. What are the large-scale social institutions going to do to the characters? Every element of plot in such a book is somehow dominated by the desire to reveal this relationship; the plot multiplies and proliferates, but the book is strongly thematically dominated by its central concern. I think that is a risky compositional project these days, in the early twenty-first century, because we have become quite comfortable with the idea of the organic text, the open-ended text, the text that does not resolve its internal contradictions and that finds its aesthetics in a fragmentational roughness that is perceived to be analogical to the mode of existence we have created in the information age. But I would like to have things both ways. I want to tell a story that turns back on itself and creates this perpetual thematic enrichment and structural coherence, when the reader steps back and asks what has generated the narrative and how to make sense of all the disparate elements in the story; at the same time, at the level of scene and character, I also want narratives that generate some sense of suspense, surprise, and open-ended possibility. Do my books create a wholly thematically-resolved universe? I don’t think so. Even though they are dominated by a set of themes, by turning those themes over and over again, they produce their own sense of runaway transformation. With luck, the reader will reach a

moment when he feels that, no matter what underlying themes govern life, resonant particulars are always going to escape, transcend, or transform that order. It is one thing to say that every species on earth is generated by sequences of the same four nucleotides; but when you look at the spectrum of twelve million species, you can't see the family resemblance anymore; variations somehow escape their thematic control. Here's what I would consider an ideal response to my books: the reader begins in a sense of chaotic open-endedness – this story could go anywhere. He then gradually accumulates an awareness of the unifying material – the system-like quality that you mentioned, the constraining and all-shaping theme. Progressing through variation, the reader then feels the story pass yet one more threshold point where the variations escape the theme, and narrative once again recovers a place where anything can happen.

J.-Y. P.: *The encyclopaedic purpose, the social survey that you mention, is part of the function you assign to your fiction, which is to give the reader what you call “the big picture, the aerial view of how things work.” Up to a certain point, this is what other writers with encyclopaedic leanings, like Don DeLillo or Thomas Pynchon, also do. But while these novelists suggest that the larger picture can only be approached asymptotically, if at all, and that it will finally dissipate into noise or blankness as soon as we reach for it, you seem to insist on making the big picture precipitate before the eyes of the reader. Do you think that literature has the power to salvage the “aerial view” from the exponentially increasing complexity of the information age?*

R. P.: I don't believe that art can solve existence, but I do believe that art can render us more capable of mapping our way through experience. It can make us suppler, more open to surprise possibility, more aware of our myopia, and more attuned to processes that are larger than ourselves. Think of the revolutions that happened in a number of physical sciences in our lifetime. In the past, the scientific project dreamed of perfect understanding through reductionism: as we got better and better at making our map, our empirical descriptions would finally arrive at a picture of reality that was isomorphic with reality itself. That dream died. It died in a number of different and very interesting ways. But this Laplacian notion – that you could write down the differential equations of all moving particles in a space and predict the exact configuration of that space sometime in the future – died. That is no longer the goal of even the most vigorous of empirical reductionists. Instead, the vision of mainstream science now involves a richer understanding of the way complex systems work, of the way turbulence works, and of the way chaos propagates out of order while still enfolding strange kinds of hidden order inside what seem to be totally chaotic systems. So we have recast our notion of the relationship between formal order and disorder. This shifts our model for knowledge away from simple formulaic prediction towards rich simulation. We can best understand ecosystems by understanding some of the mathematics behind self-organization, emerging order and turbulence, and incorporating that math into models that, instead of trying to master reality in some kind of formally reductive way, instead recreate the systems that they describe by simulating them. Scientific knowledge has become more dynamic because the mapping is dynamic. As a writer, I have taken away from that revolution a belief in the bi-directional influence of local upon global and global upon local. The novelists that you mention, the artists to whom I owe the largest aesthetic debt, had this sense that as the local approached the big picture, the big picture would recede away from them, would disperse into unknowability. New scientific paradigms confirm that the local cannot map the global in a reduced and complete and consistent way, but nevertheless can understand something about the way local phenomena develop into large-scale event, and the

way large-scale phenomena feed back downwards into the local. To put this in literary terms, we, as individuals can - even as we bump up in our ignorant ways against ourselves, our friends, family, loved ones and enemies, and against the conditions of our local systems - momentarily glimpse what it is that brought about the conditions for our local existence, and perhaps reach a better understanding of the relationship between our small existence and these larger historical conditions, and set in motion new historical processes.

J.-Y. P.: *The idea that you must be content with a glimpse of the big picture is also what your novels point to when describing the failure of all encyclopaedic endeavours: in Three Farmers, Sander's photographic encyclopaedia is doomed to incompleteness. In Plowing the Dark, the "Weather Room" proves unable to make long-term previsions, and in Gold Bug, the genetic code never allows you to say what evolution's next move will look like. All these encyclopaedic attempts are limited by the very fact that they have a fixed structure, that they have frames and edges, aren't they?*

R. P.: That's right. The failure of the encyclopaedic system to make a map equivalent to the place it maps resembles the failure of the model of control and mastery. This notion that somehow we can take dominion over these huge complex systems is doomed to failure. But a newfound understanding of the limits to control can ultimately lead to a humbling kind of connective discovery. Even as we strain for a kind of physical mastery, a knowledge that will give us control over time and space, the process itself leads us to how much more complicated, and how much more sensitive to turbulence and to local changes, those accretions really are. But that realization feeds back into the sense of local life being much richer and more surprising, and perhaps more consequential than the control model might ever have allowed. The place we are mapping is much richer and stranger than our hubris ever imagined, and that, in turn, creates a newfound need for reverence and ecological thinking on the part of all local protagonists.

J.-Y. P.: *Speaking of control and mastery, your narratives strike me as being very much in that vein though. They look highly controlled; nothing is left to chance. Each part fits neatly in the whole as a small touch in the big picture, or like a living cell relating to all the others in an organism. How much room do such tightly controlled narratives leave to the reader, what amount of leeway does he get as an interpreter? Or to put it differently, how do you steer clear of the pitfalls of didacticism?*

R. P.: I think in a number of ways. I would love my books to seem like Mondrian at thirty meters, and then like Jackson Pollock at thirty centimetres. From far away, they may seem as if they are kinds of crystalline perfections dominated by an architectonic sense, but then you get closer and start to see the peculiarities, the fractal breaking, and the rippling of these structures. The protagonists in the stories, who are searching for a view of the world, find that the telescope is somehow pointed back upon them, and the knowledge that they succeed in acquiring is always situated, always contingent and qualified, and far messier than they ever anticipated. Ideally, these books leave their readers tinged with that nervousness of thinking, "This is an essay, a clean worldview that I am gradually closing in on." But there comes some moment in the story where the decisions, the character interaction, or the milieu shifts into an unexpected place, and the turbulence inside of the order is revealed. I want the narrative development to pull the rug out from underneath the reader's feet. The reader, who has been thinking up until this moment that he was reading one kind of book, now needs to completely reassemble all theories he had about what kind of book he is reading.

J.-Y. P.: *Still, when first reading Three Farmers, I was struck by the presence of what I viewed as instructions to the reader. I'm referring to those chapters in which the virtually lecturing narrator quotes at length from Walter Benjamin's The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, and I thought that these passages were like captions accompanying the whole picture and telling me how I was supposed to look at it.*

R. P.: True. There are discursive elements in this novel, essayistic components. The story does contain factual knowledge; its rhetoric does employ rationality and formal argument. Each of the books employs the "didactic" in very different ways. *Three Farmers* employs it most overtly, cast as a series of almost university-like lectures. That book affords a wonderful case in point, because you read along thinking, I'm in some kind of burlesque, some kind of comic historical novel about these young men bumping up against history, making their way, and it is all very personal and very local. And all of a sudden you are in an essay about World War I, and following the essay, you shift into some kind of late twentieth-century domestic or personal quest novel. And there seems to be no common aesthetic component among these three. But little by little, these inimical narrative frames start to speak to each other. They are nested, or they form a kind of triangulation, inventing one another. And as these disparate frames draw closer, the reader might say, "Ah! This book is something about the way that didactic knowledge is not enough, experiential knowledge is not enough, and the blundering comic, ironic mode of knowing is not enough either; they are all somehow reciprocal processes, dependent on each other." And yet, as the modes weave even tighter and tighter, and you approach the end thinking these narrative frames will reveal their ultimate connective principle, the end of the book recasts that relationship, and you are left again with the need to reassemble your ideas about the narrative that you yourself have been creating and participating in.

This is precisely the way that the human brain creates the narrative of self. Introspectively, we feel that we are whole and solid. We have a sense of a unitary existence and personality. We go through the world, feeling coherent and continuous. And even in the face of extraordinary complications and interruptions, we find ways of justifying and restoring our sense of self. In fact, this entire construction of the unitary self is a fabrication. There are literally two or three hundred different kinds of independent processing modules distributed in the brain, interacting in ways that produce and sustain the emergence of consciousness. If one gets damaged or the network gets interrupted, the person suffering the damage might look very different to anyone on the outside. But he may still feel continuous and identical to himself. The books also function as complex, distributed systems: one voice inside a whole may insist, "Listen to me, I'm the head." Another says, "Listen to me, I'm the heart." Yet another says, "Listen to me, I'm the body, the sex drive," or "Trust to me, I'm the historical repository of memory and wisdom." We are complicated, we are fractured, we are multiple, we are reciprocal feedback processes constantly turning back on themselves, reinventing themselves, reconstructing. So, why shouldn't a book be as complicated as a human being? Why shouldn't it, on occasion, assert different kinds of ways of knowing the world? None of these ways is sufficient unto itself; only the conversation matters. The narrative that completely removes would-be essayistic knowledge is also a kind of sleight of hand. The thing to bear in mind about every book, even these books that curiously have this kind of disembodied lecturing voice, is that fiction always knows the world through situated, focalized, shared, distributed, reciprocal processes. When a novel presents an idea, that idea always arises through a focalizer. What counts is not so much the idea about the world as the

relationship between the thought and the character who thinks it. When someone asserts a fact about the world, they assert a fact about themselves, about how the world looks from their vantage point. So, again, the essayistic elements of the books, these factual litanies, are also always portraits of their focalizers – human beings who are historical products and who have deep emotional investments, people who need the world to look a certain way.

J.-Y. P.: *Don't the essayistic elements of your fiction pose the question of its transitivity? In Galatea 2.2, for instance, your namesake, trying to relate the story of his own family, says "I felt myself taking dictation, plans for a hypothetical Powers World that meant to explain in miniature where history had left me" (162). If you see your books as explanatory miniatures of the world at large, does it mean that they are imitative forms of that world in the same way as nineteenth-century realistic or naturalistic novels meant to mirror and explain the world we are familiar with?*

R. P.: I don't think so. Again, I think the move has been away from this notion of the static map that fixes a miniaturized correlative of the world and towards the notion of rich, networked simulation. Knowledge can no longer pretend to be cleaner than the world, but must also partake of the same kind of confusing, emergent, and unpredictable behaviour as the world. The knowledge contained in a book is provably as messy as the world; if you go back to that book a second time, it's never the same book. The simulation is still running. You, the reader, and I, the writer, are both part of this ongoing simulation, a historical process that is never fixed in time. So Powers World is itself always a kind of messy simulation that continues to dismantle and create itself in more ways than the creator of the simulation can anticipate. *Galatea* tells the story about our desire to create a machine that would be capable of understanding human story. But such a machine would necessarily have to evade the formal constraints programmed into its knowledge base, because if it didn't, it would never be capable of understanding all that is surprising about humans. Up until now, a lot of critical attention has been focused on the programmatic nature of my books, although the books themselves insist that the program is never enough. Something in every narrative always strives to evade or exceed the formal constraints of its frame.

J.-Y. P.: *This reflection in all your novels on the limits inherent in the program or the organizing structure suggests that, even if you're not so openly metafictional as other American writers of your generation, you constantly ponder on the limits of fiction, on what it can do and cannot do as an artefact. In the epigraph to Plowing the Dark, you quote from Auden's "In Memory of William Butler Yeats": "For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its saying." And the lines contrast with the second part of the epigraph, an excerpt from Gertrude Stein's The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, which expresses the artist's – namely Picasso's – belief that art does make something happen, that it can make its wildest fantasies come true. Do you feel closer to Auden or to Picasso?*

R. P.: In the Gertrude Stein excerpt, Picasso and his friends are walking on a street in Paris during the war, and they see their first camouflaged cannon, and they say, "Wait a minute! The Army got their idea from us, from Cubism. We've changed the nature of warfare, inadvertently." I feel in the quote a mixture of surprise, shame, and pride. On the one hand, art, in creating its simulations, removes itself from the world of experience, a world it seemingly can't touch or alter in any significant way. But on the other hand, by removing himself from the world of experience and living inside the simulation of art, the reader opens himself to unforeseeable transformations that can alter the way he re-enters the world of

pragmatics and material facts. The mind reserves the ability to operate upon all outside laws, and yet fiction operates upon the mind. So there is a chain of influence upon matter that propagates completely unpredictably.

I'm intrigued by the question of how metafictional my books are. If you define metafiction as that move within a work of art that calls attention to its artifice and deliberately lifts the experience of the art out of the level of complete imaginative identification into a meta-level awareness of the formal program, I would say my books are more difficult to recognize at face value as being metafictional, because the movement between the frames that encourage visceral identification and the frames that compel meta-awareness are less distinct. You can't always be certain which side of that divide you are on. These books try to trouble the distinction between traditional mimetic fiction and conscious formal manipulation. They try to show that the world can't easily be partitioned into "thinking" and "feeling."

J.-Y. P.: *Is it one of the reasons why poetry is so present in your writing either through direct quotes or indirect references? Do you see poetic writing and lyricism as ways to blur that distinction between thinking and feeling?*

R. P.: I suppose, by many measures, I'm much more temperamentally attuned to poetry than to prose fiction. I wrote poetry privately for many years before writing my first story. My area of concentration in my literary studies was modernist poetry. It's a false binary, of course, but I incline more to lyricism than to narrative. I am much more viscerally attracted, both as a writer and as a reader, to a story that calls attention to itself as a verbal performance than to a story that tries to make its prose transparent.

Every one of my books uses lyric poems as prominent intertexts, quoting everything from the barroom doggerel of Kipling and Robert Service to the Psalms to German lieder to (my most frequent use) modernist poetry in English such as Yeats, Eliot, Stevens, and Roethke. And *Gold Bug* employed the device of having the narrator actually write poems herself. Left to my own devices, I probably would have never gotten into the story-telling business, and would have contended myself entirely with the musical and prosodic power of words. But as Yeats says, the fullest rewards come when we push towards our natural opposites...

Contemporary fiction is dominated by one immense aesthetic prohibition: show, don't tell. Lyricism goes against this law, and in most fictional quarters, poetic writing is highly suspect. But for me, lyricism is not at all opposed to story, but rather, a kind of narrative expectation that appeals to those parts of the brain that are almost pre-cognitive, the feeling regions rather than the reasoning regions. I would like to show how story knowledge and poetic knowledge – narrative feeling and lyrical feeling – are each part of a larger way of apprehending the world that novels can uniquely get to, when nothing is off limits.

J.-Y. P.: *I would like to shift gears slightly and ask you whether you would agree with the notion that, in your novels, fiction vacillates between commitment, especially political commitment, and a kind of retreat from the world, "calling attention to itself as a verbal performance."*

R. P.: I believe that the books do vacillate between outward psychic impulses and inward ones, but in trying to destabilize the boundary between the mimetic and the metafictional, the books also attempt to show the inseparability of those two impulses. Each of us continuously

engages and disengages from life, retreating long enough to reformulate ourselves and then going back once more into the breach, even from one moment to the next. The two impulses are not only inseparable: the desire to fashion, alter, confront and remake the world has, as its generator, the ability to stand above or aside, and look at things as an outsider. So from one moment to the next, individual characters in these books will vacillate between those inward and outward impulses, conscripting art as an ally in both the world-evading and the world-changing processes.

J.-Y. P.: *This dual impulse is also what the opening words of Galatea refer to, applying it to fictions themselves rather than to the characters in fictions: "It was like so, but wasn't." This is how traditional Persian tales begin. Doesn't it point to the ambiguous nature and power of fictions? Fictional worlds bear a resemblance to the world, and in this respect they can say something about it, and perhaps change our way of looking at it. But at the same time, they really differ from the world; they don't really mean to say anything about it, and are at best (or at worst) just make-believe.*

R. P.: I wish I had remembered that line earlier, when we were talking about how metafictional the books are, because there you have my narrative posture in a nutshell: I want you to read the story I'm about to tell as a perfectly mimetic, realistic fiction, but I also want you to read it simultaneously as an insufficient analogy, as something that is not quite what it seems to be. Is the representational glass half full or half empty? Is fiction capable of simulating a world in a way that is as rich and as strange as the outside world, yet somehow more comprehensible, or is it just "a shadow of a shadow of a shadow," a failed attempt to articulate some truth that will always remain well beyond any representation's capacity to name it? The crisis of representation is not unique to fiction. It is the crisis of being alive. We know intellectually that the map is not the place, that any utterance we make about the world is a bastard, partial, insufficient, faulty, and failed representation. Something in us knows that we live in this inescapable gap, this unavoidable *différance*. And yet, at the same time, the simple knowledge of that futility drives us to constantly revise our stories. And in fact, fiction has sometimes proven to be devastatingly effective in transforming the world out there, the world that representation can never quite get to. The map changes the place whether or not it suffices to represent it.

J.-Y. P.: *If the map can change the place, it seems at times that you wish it also had the power to become the place itself, as if, like Ebesen in Plowing the Dark, you had dreams of making the golem of art and fiction come to life. But, simultaneously, your novels convey the sense that, at the end of the day, when the story is over, the brick wall onto which the fiction has been projected becomes all brick wall again. Is that what you refer to in Galatea as "the loss fiction fails to repair"?*

R. P.: I want the golem to come to life. Sure. Guilty as charged. But the thing is: there is no "end of the day." There is just the next desire, the next attempted golem. That process of aspiring to make something come alive, to have our limited understanding of the world blaze into full-fleshed life, to have these variations on a theme step up and become some new living thing, is as inexorable as it is doomed. It fails, it breaks down, it falls apart. But the process doesn't stop there. It spills over to the next insufficient representation, the next implementation. What is the famous Beckett line? "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better."

As for the loss fiction fails to repair, I think it is the loss of growing. We are always falling away from the story we once thought about ourselves. Every experience shatters the map that we have made. And yet, somehow, the fossil of that earlier story stays with us. As we become something else, we yearn to grasp what we once were. And even that nostalgic impulse slowly falls away from us and becomes some new revision. We live in the gap between yesterday's story and today's story. All these processes are loose in time, being copied, destroyed, and revived. Stories cannot keep us from death, and yet they are our only protection against the knowledge of death. The curse of consciousness is to know your own end. But the amazing thing about story is that endings are the source of meaning. When we read the last page of a book, it retroactively changes all the pages that came before. So rather than putting an end to meaning, endings generate meaning, retroactively lending significance to all the stories that we try to tell.

J.-Y. P.: *The yearning for what we once were – the nostalgic remembrance of things past – is one of your important themes. Many of your novels have this elegiac tone to them. It is palpable in The Time or our Singing; Prisoner's Dilemma pays tribute to the dead father; The Gold Bug Variations reads like an anamnesis...*

R. P.: Yes, absolutely. Every single book I have written has been tinged with the desire to come to terms with memory, the inescapability of memory, and the sometimes terrifying, sometimes liberating paradox of memory, namely, that retrieving the memory of an event already changes it. The brain that does the remembering is not the brain that did the storing. In a sense, the only thing you can remember is your last retrieval of the event, and each calling up in a new context changes what was stored there. And each loss of memory is a premonition of the ultimate loss of memory, the final dissolution. So I guess we have nothing else but "Once upon a time," and "It was so, but it wasn't so," and "Here, in what happened, is what might happen next."

Footnotes

[1] Richard Powers, *The Echo Maker*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, October 2006.

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