

**Writer in Progress and the Representation of the World
in *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance***

Shinichiro Ohuchi

I

Richard Powers starts his debut novel, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance* with an incident in his real-life experience, modifying it just a little. The incident is instrumental in originating his writing career. In the early eighties, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has an exhibition of the German photographer, where Powers first meets the works of August Sander. In an interview, he remembers clearly what happens to him at the moment:

I have a visceral memory of coming in the doorway, banking to the left, turning up, and seeing the first picture there. It was called *Young Westerwald Farmers on Their Way to a Dance, 1914*. I had this palpable sense of recognition, this feeling that I was walking into their gaze, and they'd been waiting seventy years for someone to return the gaze. I went up to the photograph and read the caption and had this instant realization that not only were they not on their way to the dance, but that somehow I had been reading about this moment for the last year and a half. Everything I read seemed to converge onto this act of looking, this birth of the twentieth century. . . . ("Fiction" 111)

The nameless narrator of the first narrative experiences almost the same revelatory moment in a Detroit museum, though in his case, after the encounter with the picture, he has to track down the author's path reversely; he goes on to read stacks of books about the beginning of the twentieth century and attempts to elucidate the meaning of the unusual experience. The sense of wonder Powers had at the museum is fictionally transformed and given to other characters as well, but most distinctly to the protagonist of the third narrative, Peter Mays. Viewing the redheaded woman in a parade by chance, he is haunted inexplicably by her transcendental image, which drives him into a strenuous search of her identity for some months after. Both the narrator and Mays reenact the author's experience, to greater or lesser degrees.

When Powers talks about the unforgettable meeting with the farmers' portrait, his voice takes on an evidently impassioned tone, which is informed, as the reader of *Three Farmers* surely sees, with the same wonder several characters experience in their moments of epiphany. Standing before the picture, Powers seems to have felt as if his past eclectic reading at once has predicted and created that unexpected moment of realization. To express his paradoxical feeling, he makes a sort of phenomenological equation of the "act of looking" with the "birth of the twentieth century." This equation represents clearly what Greg Dawes calls "mutual determination," a major principle functioning throughout the novel. (46) These two elements, his act of looking and his realization of the twentieth century, occur at the same time. They influence each other interdependently without any priority over the other. This phenomenological interdependence is in many ways represented in the novel; for instance, Powers's own experience echoes in the intersection of the farmers and the audience's gaze

through the medium of photography.

As the most substantial element, the metaphor of the stereoscope should be taken up. In the stereoscope, two slightly different images produce for the viewer the three-dimensional vision, and it is obvious that three entwining narratives expect the reader to regard the book itself as something like the stereoscope, by which the reader subjectively reacts to the novel. In this way, the function of the stereoscope applies figuratively to the relation of two narratives, the first and the third. They are both stories of search, set in the eighties and in Boston, with similar progression, while the second narrative tells a different kind of story about the struggle against the absurdities of war. The narrator and Mays undergo the considerable change of mind in the process of their quest; they forsake their standoff individualism and begin to seek ways to involve themselves with other people. Joseph Dewey maintains that these two reciprocal modes of manners are consistent in Powers's fiction and calls each of them respectively, the Dickinsonesque withdrawal and the Emersonian drive to connect. (5) In *Three Farmers*, what combines those two conflicting elements, Dewey argues, is the force of the imagination employed by the characters' active participation into the work of art and their willing involvement with others. Withdrawn, Dickinsonesque figures such as the nameless narrator and Mays, through their exercise of the imagination, finally place themselves into the social network.

In Dewey's terms, it is called "an Emersonian network of ties." (24) Indeed, it is a concept common to all Powers's works, but it is especially one that fits *Three Farmers*, for all the main protagonists experience the revelatory perception and look beyond the limited sphere they have been trapped in so far, by way of the imagination: the narrator resolves to

imagine a fictional version of the three farmers' lives; they, in turn, have a paranormal vision of the future when Sander takes a picture of them with a flare of flashlight; and Mays sends all the inherited coins to people at random to follow the spirit of Ford's motto, "Help the Other Fellow." They all experience the privileged moment to perceive the configuration of the world they belong to, and through the force of the imagination, they get a palpable sense, if in a heartbeat, of a larger context of the world that they could not possibly conceive.

On another level, "an Emersonian network of ties" developed by the imagination is also a metaphor of the complex contexts of the world that Powers lays out, through his unique style of constructing fiction; the unification of essayistic, discursive writing and traditional, mimetic narrative. For example, in *Three Farmers*, Powers places the adventures of young farmers, by the side of a dense disquisition on the cultural studies of the early twentieth century. And, in *Prisoner's Dilemma*, the story of a sick father and his family is interlaced with a close consideration on the significance of the individual in history. As Stephen J. Burn writes, this aspect of Powers's fiction, "the richness of data," is sometimes regarded as "a sign of authorial self-indulgence, the result of a brainy author who didn't know when to stop." (xxviii) But, those charges, Burn contends, are totally mistaken, because whether it is too detailed scientific knowledge or too abstract argument for the general idea of the novel, "information in Powers's work never floats free as mere ornamentation, but always serves a pragmatic end." (xxix)

Considering this stylistic approach, in an essay "Making the Rounds," Powers himself refers to the unification of mimetic narration and essayistic writing; in other words, realist and meta-fictional narrative:

[The] novel I'm after functions as a kind of bastard hybrid [of mimetic and postmodernist fiction], like consciousness itself, generating new terrain by passing "realism" and "metafiction" through relational processes, inviting identification at one gauge while complicating it at others, refracting the private through the public, story through form, forcing the reading self into constant reciprocal renegotiations by always insisting that no level of human existence means anything without all the others. (308)

His construction of the novel "as a kind of bastard hybrid" is intended to make the reader notice how seemingly unrelated things are interdependent. This sense of our world as an organic system is always at the heart of his work, and Powers is known for his unparalleled gift to fuse vast knowledge of diverse disciplines, from virtual reality to molecular biology, into mimetic narrative we could empathize with. The unification of heterogeneous modes of prose functions in all of his novels, but it does in the most self-reflexive fashion in *Three Farmers*.¹ In it, those two disparate modes are not only interlaced in his stylistic use of much layered and informed sentences, as in his other novels, but they are also reflected thematically in the major interest of the novel, the possibility of communication through the medium of art. Burn considers *Three Farmers*

¹ Self-reflexivity is a recurring motif; for instance, the novel begins with a close study of the impact of Rivera's mural when it was produced. As Greg Dawes points out, it is "a mural about mural making (Rivera himself appears in the mural)." (43) It is possible that the narrator's shock at the mural comes from its self-reflexive quality, as well as its alienation effect that shows the poor working condition at the auto factory.

as “in essence, a critique of art that relies on ‘decorative’ content.” (xxix) By “‘decorative’ content,” he supposedly points to the assumption of the novel that complicated contexts exist in just about everything; even a small piece of someone’s memorabilia is not only tinted by the owner’s life, but also connected to a larger context that seldom represents itself at the level of the individual. It is the most fundamental idea that the novel tries to describe through its rumination on Sander’s portrait, and in a far broader sense, the “birth of the twentieth century.”

Some critics observe on this point in their readings. Noting that various “metaphors for connections that bind strangers” (24) are deployed as thematic motifs, Dewey argues the individual’s role in the times of developed capitalism: “In a century in which the individual has been reduced to irrelevance . . . Powers rejects such diminishment. Everything—every event, every person—is tied in unintentional, undirected, unsuspected choreography . . .” (25) Meanwhile, Burn says that a series of essayistic sections on the history of ideas is not the mere ornamentation, but it serves to “[remind] the reader that life does not simply take place at the level of the individual in the present moment, but rather unfolds amid an accumulation of vaster social, economic, scientific, historic, and artistic trends.” (xxix) Their arguments seem to correspond well to what Powers illustrate, when he states about how any change in a network has an influence on all the other networks related to the network in question: “A new discovery in, say, a stem cell laboratory has enormous repercussions for every domain of human affairs: biological, economic, legal, psychological, social, spiritual . . .” (“Interview” 171) What he tries to describe here is expressed elsewhere, in a nutshell, with the help of Powers’s favorite quote, a passage by John Muir: “‘When we try to pick out

anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.”
 (“Making” 309)

The “nodes in the network”, “the hitch” in the universe or whatever he may call it, must be the central interest of his fiction. Powers says: “Fiction has the potential to be the most complex set of experimental networks ever built, one that can model feedback passed among all other gauges of speculation and inhabitation, fact and concern, idea and feeling.” (“Making” 309) This is his enterprise as a novelist, and this declaration can be a valid argument against those charges that his fiction is overloaded with information. But one may have a slight suspicion that there is a sense of abuse of the authorial privilege in his idealistic parlance. The charges that his novels are too knowledge-oriented might miss the point, but the suspicion is not without any ground. One might deduce from Powers’s thought above quoted on the art of his fiction that it has a little inclination toward an anachronistic assumption of the omniscient author who exerts his dominance over every corner of the novel. If it is the author who builds and controls “the most complex set of experimental networks,” that connoted assumption would cancel out the significant imperative of *Three Farmers* for the reader to participate subjectively in the process of realizing the text.

Indeed, it is not true of *Three Farmers*. For one thing, in it, Powers gives a series of thinking about the act of recognition from various angles: recognition itself is the important motif, and its variants, such as reading, looking, and knowledge, play an indispensable role. And for another, as the author himself admits, his personal experience forms a model for the narrator’s strange revelation occasioned by the self-same photograph. At the moment of the encounter with it, Powers has an “instant realization” “that somehow [he has] reading about this moment for the last year and a

half.” (“Fiction” 111) In the novel, the narrator calls this peculiar kind of realization “unsponsored recognition,” (207) by which one can recognize something they have no conscious memory of. He observes that this “unsponsored recognition” has a self-reflexive quality and it makes one become aware of his own self-awareness. The consciousness of being in the act of looking grants him an ability to look at the object from a totally different angle that would never exist if one does not reflect on his own act:

By slightly changing our angle of observation, a copse of seemingly random trees reveals itself as an orchard. . . . Such a surprise visit of the orchard effect is always pleasurable –filled with the delight of recognition, a sense of community of all explorers who also touch base at this common spot. (208)

It is hard to read this passage apart from the author’s vivid recollection of the event at the Boston museum. “[The] delight of recognition” suffuses the author’s account, and “a sense of community of all explorers” is supposed to be what Powers experienced when he felt that everything he had read until then seemed to “converge on this act of looking, this birth of the twentieth century.” Sander’s *Young Westerdale Farmers* is just one portrait among many after all, but for Powers that day, it becomes the magical “common spot” where every piece of knowledge assembles; the photograph does represent the twentieth century by acquiring a specific angle of observation just for him.

Yet, Powers must have been aware that the artifact before his eyes looks significant strictly because he makes it so, that he determines its state

as well as it determines his. This idea of “mutual determination” (Dawes 46) is taken up as a basic concept throughout the novel. In a conspicuous way, it reflects itself in the curious narrative structure: the three stories, which are incompatible at the level of fact, yet interdependent at that of ‘fabulation’. The facts of each story are not accordant with those of the rest, but they have many motifs in common, which weave the complicated network of cross-reference. This peculiar relationship can be, in the context of our argument, interpreted as one example of the novelist’s resolution of the double bind situation between the authorial control and its relinquishment. Through various elements, the narratives loosely connect to and define each other. Because of their theoretical equality, one cannot establish an order of precedence among them. On this point, Dewey writes, “Powers refuses to validate entirely any one story . . . There is no irrefutable evidence of which characters are invented and which characters are doing the inventing.” (21) Thus, the fundamental discrepancy of the three narratives denies the concept of the ultimate origin, and emphasizes the novel’s claim of the reader’s responsibility in the full realization of the text.

And there is another aspect of *Three Farmers* associated with the ontological dominance of the author: the nameless narrator whose family name begins with P. His narration is rich with wide knowledge and sharp in philosophical thinking, which reminds us of the author Powers. And also more bewildering to the reader, his narrative is told in the first person, while the others are in the third. Considering the novel’s narrative strategy, James Hurt claims: “One is at first tempted to regard the first-person A [first] narrative as base-line ‘reality.’” He concludes then, however, the relation between the narratives is too complex to allow such a simple

reading that is, after all, attributed to “our inclination to grant a special authority to a first-person, apparently authorial voice.” (26) But this use of the first person narrative may be intentional on the author’s part, because it is difficult to ignore its tone superior to the other two stories. Moreover, the peculiar state of the first narrative has something to do with its protagonist as a writer in progress. His story can be read as a tale of Powers becoming the writer. Thus, in *Three Farmers*, the narrative process is accorded a self-reflexive treatment. For the consideration of this element, there is an important chapter, where the narrator P. undergoes a radical shift of concern in his search about Sander’s photo. That shift is of great significance for the thematic synthesis of the narrator’s nature and the overall structure of the novel.

II

The epigraph in the opening of chapter 16 is by Alfred North Whitehead: “There is no [independent] mode of existence. Every entity is only to be understood in terms of the way it is interwoven with rest of the universe.” (202 Bracketed word by Powers) The relation of this particular passage with the plot of this chapter is clear. The nameless narrator, who has encountered Sander’s photograph in Detroit months before and has ever been obsessed by the magical spell, is forced to realize how his everyday life and a distant past represented by the photograph are correlated. Highly verbose in his thinking but very standoffish in his social contacts, the narrator has never taken his personal temperament into account in his search about the farmers. In the attraction of the three farmers’ gaze, he finds there has been his own compulsion by meeting Mrs. Schreck. At the level of the narrator’s story, this chapter is considered to be the point of

conversion from his belief in the material evidence to his awareness of need to involve himself in the act of observation if he wishes to know something more than just the prosaic facts about the photo.

Considering Whitehead's passage in the context of the relation of this chapter with the other narratives, we notice a corresponding plot in Mays's story. A strange chance factor is common to both stories of searching. Mays, bewitched by the inexplicable aura of the red-haired woman, chances upon the figure of his great-grandfather by the medium of her, while the narrator happens to meet Mrs. Schreck, an old immigrant lady who possesses a print of the farmers' photograph. In this way, sheer fortuity works in their way of searching into the past. To begin with, even the events that originate their quests are somewhat accidental; the narrator's encounter with Sander's work is a by-product of his lukewarm sightseeing conducted for killing time, and Mays's view of red hair is prompted by his colleague's whimsical incitation. Then, both of them have to spend some months gathering the substantial materials about their objects. The narrator has scoured the biographical tidbits of Henry Ford, August Sander, Sarah Bernhardt and analyzed the ethos of the era, and Mays at first has been prompted by Delaney to examine a parade manifest and next goes to as many concerts as he could attend, even visiting "a brood of football halftimes, a brace of USO galas, a pride of nightclubs" (106) These attempts do not solve the problems they are obsessed with. As the result of several coincidental events, they end by acquiring the help of the third party: Bullock for Mays, and Mrs. Schreck for the narrator. Just before receiving their aid, however, they both recoil from the others' intervention, somehow fearing their searching activity might lose its comfortable aspect as daily routine by getting the answer to their initial questions.

When Mays finally comes close to the identity of the clarinetist, he has “suddenly lost all interest,” because “his mind had habituated to the too-frequent setbacks and diversions . . . until now he felt more comfortable in the sheer plod of pursuit than in the possibility of arising victorious” So, he “still coveted the chase and wanted to resume it. But he had no need for any lead Bullock might give him. . . .” (150) Against Mays’s will, Bullock tells him about “I Dwell in Possibility,” “a one-woman show” by Kimberly Greene who has acted as the red-haired Sarah in the parade. Thus, his personal fantasy about the woman is replaced by the actual presence of Ms. Greene, a local celebrity. So Mays realizes, through others’ interferences, how he is positioned in the configuration of the world. He becomes aware that he has been navigated by what cannot be discerned as anything but a chain of coincidences from his previous standpoint, and he senses “that an even more elusive string of interpretations [leads] well beyond that day at the window, beyond the concerns of Delaney, Brink, Bullock, and Ms. Greene, back through a tangle of years, even involving and outdistancing the Bernhardt herself. (159) Thus, Mays places his own existence in the historical context, which is the consequences of collective workings beyond his immediate grasp.

Then, a few chapters ahead, the reader will find that the narrator traces a similar course to that of Mays’s. In chapter 16, getting acquainted with Mrs. Schreck who tells him a lot about the photo at the office Christmas party he reluctantly attends, the narrator determines to meet her again on his way home, but somehow or other, his resolve weakens. It seems unreasonable of him not to take advantage of a chance to get firsthand information about the First World War era from its survivor because he has read and searched so widely to elucidate the obscure allure

of the farmer's look. But he justifies the loss of his resolution, saying, "her privileged knowledge that could fill the gaps in my research, her personal experience that could at least cause my reading to coalesce . . . frightened me . . .," (203) because:

Mrs. Schreck's personal involvement with the picture led me to believe that I had been vain in thinking of it as 'my photo' and 'my farmers.' I was an egoist who dabbled amateurishly in the politics of another time . . . strictly because it was more entertaining than the workaday. Finally, I was afraid to arrive at the final object of all my effort and, by succeeding, end what had been my only diversion." (204)

Clearly, there is a parallelism between Mays's and the narrator's reluctance to change their habituated approaches and to adjust their personal anticipation to the hard realities of the world that might belittle their passionate endeavor and even devalue their experiences of epiphany.

In chapter 16, after the narrator recoils from meeting the old immigrant lady again, he goes back to the reading of some biographical volumes on Bernhardt, Kaiser, Planck and Ford. There, he suddenly sees, "in the story of [the] Yankee industrialist, evidence of an explicit subplot involving the three young men." (204) The narrator infers with confidence that Ford "must have met my, or more properly, Mrs. Schreck's farmers." While Ford's Peace Ship is a historical fact as described in chapter 10 "Flivvership", needless to say, his meeting with the farmers is fictional, for there's no evidence that Ford makes friends with a young Dutch journalist knowledgeable about autos, and to begin with, there is no telling who

Sander's farmers are. At this point, the narrator demonstrates one central theme of *Three Farmers* that the merger of fact and creation is inevitable in our understanding of the world.

III

The narrator's proof-less realization is also significant from another point of view; his fancy about Ford's encounter with the farmers is, in the end, to create the intersection of the three heterogeneous narratives. In the farmers' story, Ford meets Peter Kinder in Norway. Peter, one of the farmers, comes all along as a reporter to a news conference for the arrival of *Oscar II*. This encounter brings about great, if invalid, expectations in the form of Ford cents for the hero of the third narrative, Mays. Incited by the hoax of Ford's false coins, he tries to carry out the spirit of Ford's Peace Ship, only if in a symbolical way. He attempts to send all the inherited coins to people at random, with a letter that includes a passage of Ford's speech of the Peace Ship, in a slightly altered version: "A few of us would like to get together and try to keep the boys out of the trenches this Christmas." (351) Ford's project is already anachronistic at that time in its belief that a few individuals could change the course of history, and even more so is Mays's action, reminding people in the eighties of "the boys" who have fought in the Great War. What Mays has in mind in undertaking this operation could be made sense if one traces back the motif of the false pennies that combines the three narratives. In Ford cents, a phrase "Help the Other Fellow" is inscribed for Lincoln cent's original, "In God We Trust." When the episode of the making of those cents is mentioned in chapter 10, "Flivvership," his modification of the motto is interpreted only as a sign of his self-reliant pragmatism and bold optimism for peace. But

after the narrator adopts Ford's motto as his principle at the end of chapter 16, (212) the phrase "Help the Other Fellow" begins to take on another metaphorical meaning in the context of the three interdependent narratives. Several motifs, such as Sander's photograph, the Great War, the Peace Ship and Ford coins seem to interplay each other and evoke the central theme of the novel, the subjective commitment with history. At the end of the novel, the reader and Mays are forced to be aware of the mysterious and haunting existence of "the Other Fellow" who is "that most elusive, universal, persistent quantity, always in need of foreign aid," (352) the phrase sounds as an ethical requisition for the helpless fellows who belong to another time, place or say, in the context of *Three Farmers*, even narrative.

Thus the narrator's fancy about an illusionary relationship of Ford and the farmers, if retrospectively considered, has resulted in joining some motifs together and creating a sense of unity; the three stories wind up in stressing the ethical significance of commitment and cooperation. As we have observed above, the change of the narrator's concern in chapter 16, from history as fact accessible through objective inquiry, to history as mixture of fact and fabulation, which he now believes will create a truer view of history. The narrator does not refer to how he comes up with that illusionary conception, as is usual with this self-effacing man. He recoils from seeing Mrs. Schreck at the office, and attempts to resume his own pursuit about the farmers by reading several biographical volumes about the celebrities of the era. Then as he rereads a book on Ford, he realizes spontaneously a need for fabulation, which he has not even relied on. After this spontaneous conception is introduced, the narrator's story section suspends for a while and the philosophical, essayistic section begins; it is then succeeded by the story section again, in which he declares that he

could elucidate the meaning of the epiphany he had from Sander's photo by involving himself with history through creation on his part:

Plainly, I could learn nothing by tracing the photograph back to its material origin alone. I had also to descend into that shifting, ambiguous place of possible meaning, find why I recognized these farmers without ever having seen them . . . To look anywhere beyond my own daily routine was to go too afield. (212)

This passage summarizes the course of the change the narrator undergoes in this chapter. He realizes that until then he has neglected taking a certain variable factor into his inquiry: the narrator himself. The philosophical section, which is placed right in the middle between the ordinary story sections, functions as an indispensable part to explain about this metaphysical idea. In that section, he explicates a proposition about "the paradox of the self-attacking observer" (205); the gist of his statement is that there is no genuine act of observation, because the act of observing inevitably affects observed object. If there could be a valid way of observation, it would be to include the factor of observer as a necessary part of the act. So "that shifting, ambiguous place of possible meaning," which reminds us of this chapter's title "I Dwell in Possibility," indicates the unstable field of forces evoked by observer's participation. This idea is further elaborated again later in the novel when the narrator considers the entangled relationship in photography between "taker, subject, and viewer [that] . . . define one another in their own terms." (335)

In the essayistic section, he does not more than imply to the reader

how he comes to find it necessary to consider the proposition on observation. And after that, he proclaims the need to concentrate on his “own daily routine,” in order to “find why [he] recognized these farmers without even having seen them.” As stated above, his groundless conviction about Ford’s encounter with the farmers matters much for the subsequent development of the three narratives. But somehow he is rather reticent on his own motive that makes him believe the necessity of that creation. Instead, he seems to attempt to give a theoretical basis to his fancy that might look too whimsical without it. As he proceeds on the paradox of observation even further, he points out the self-reflexivity that results from it. The following passage explains his untold motive in a subtle way: “[There] is no understanding a system without interfering with it. This much I knew well. What did not occur to me until the second time through the Ford biographies is that this position is itself tangled. Generalized, it attacks itself: “All observations are a product of their own times. Even this one.” (205-206) In this passage, the proposition “the paradox of the self-attacking observer,” itself is recursively the object of consideration. The narrator does not only say that the genuine act of observation is impossible for it interferes with and change its object by observing it, but he also says that the very claim of that impossibility cannot avoid being an object of the proposition. As he applies this recursion to the problem of a tangled relation between one’s personality and self-consciousness, he asserts: “Temperament is the act of commenting on itself.” He tells us that rereading the Ford biographies has made him become aware of this self-reflexivity, so that we could presume that his motive for creation comes from his recursive recognition of the act of reading itself.

As temperament and the act of commenting on itself cannot be

considered separately, observation and creation are inseparably tangled. What the narrator finds as he rereads the Ford biographies is that his bookish research has not only been influenced by his own temperament, but also by various cultural and historical factors. Even the act of reading a book is the act defined by his personal necessity and his historical standpoint at once. Realizing this restriction, he must have noticed that he has been mistaken all along; he has thought the glamour of the three farmers' gaze has possessed him as a historical artifact for it functions for him as a diversion from his dull everyday life. But one day he notices that the three farmers' gaze is something he is responsible for in a way irreplaceable by anyone else. Throughout the novel, there is no apparent explanation about a causal relationship between that particular photograph and the narrator's impulse. The former and the latter do not originate the other's involvement. As Mays points out about Arkady's double vision of his long-dead wife and a young waitress (350), they exist concurrently and define each other recursively. The narrator comments on this much-repeated motif of recursion through the metaphor of the biographer's impulse and its subject.

This recursion is critical, not because it places a limit on knowing, but because it shows the impossibility of knowing where knowledge leaves off and involvement begins. If there is no independent vantage point, if the sitter's life is not separable from the biographer's interfering observation, then each of the sitter's actions must similarly be tied to biographical impulse. The two are inextricably tangled. Describing and altering are two inseparable parts of the same

process, fusing into a murky totality. (206)

In order to surmount the theoretical cul-de-sac of recursion, the narrator tries to see it not as an indication of the impossibility of knowing, but rather as a starting point of the cooperation by subject and object. There can be no clear borderline between the two interdependent entities such as observation and understanding, self and self-consciousness, biographer and his subject. Realizing this, he turns his attention from the state of “a murky totality” to “the shifting, ambiguous place of possible meaning” coming from the complicity of the two factors. That “place” is created neither by those farmers’ mysterious gaze, nor by the narrator’ inner necessity alone; it is developed by their collaboration like a sort of Jungian collective unconsciousness.

Considering in this way, we can understand the function of “the unsponsored recognition,” which is an apparently paradoxical kind of recognition as we have seen earlier. When the narrator sees Sander’s photo, he is able to recognize it, though he has never seen it before. (16) And, in a similar fashion, when Adolphe Schreck is moved inexplicably by the image of “Jack and the Beanstalk” and manages to ask the owner girl to sell it but in vain, he feels a familiar sadness that he recognizes, but can’t place. (142) As a fact, the narrator has never seen Sander’s *Young Farmers* before and Adolphe feels the sadness that issues from absurd violence of the war. But they recognize the photo and the feeling, and find inexplicable familiarity in them, for they do not know them at the factual level, but they do know them at the level of “the shifting, ambiguous place of possible meaning,” to which the experiences of epiphany is attributed. Those “unsponsored” recognitions are the points of intersection, where the subject and the others

can cooperate. This experience is illustrated through a seemingly strange instance:

I am on a passenger train late at night, speeding through Pennsylvania. The conductor walks through briskly, swinging a ticket punch by its metal chain. "Next stop Linton," he says. "Linton will be our next stop." I suddenly fill with a warm pulse. I recognize the name of the town, though I am equally sure I have never heard it before: "Oh yes, Linton." I settle a little deeper in my seat, wrapped in goodwill for the miserly-looking fellow in the seat across from me, since he too must suffer through another revisit of a place neither of us has ever been. He notices my change in attitude. Catching my eye, he peels back his lips. I am not at all surprised to recognize a gap between his first bicuspid and canine. (208)

The "miserly-looking fellow" who happens to ride on the same train is a metaphor of the others with whom to conspire or cooperate. The "revisit" of Linton that neither of them has ever visited is not possible in any factual sense. So it should be interpreted in a different way. This vignette suggests that "the unsponsored recognition" occurs to the subject as the outcome of his collaboration with the others. The narrator's three farmers, Mays's vision of redhead and Adolphe's "Jack and the Beanstalk," all prompt them to look away from their business at hand and to see their own lives through the standpoint of the lives of others in another time and narrative. Most of their illusionary recognitions like these take place through the mediation of

photography, which is the dominant motif of the novel². Speaking of a collaborative act, the transaction of the narrator's and the farmers' look through the lens of Sander's camera is the grandest collaboration that takes shape over the whole stretch of the book, from the first chapter where the narrator meets Sander's photo, to the final chapter of the second narrative where the farmer sees a brief vision of the future audience. Powers does not fail to put in a fractal part corresponding to that grand design: the narrator's collaboration with Mrs. Schreck at the player piano.

Before leaving her abode, the narrator is invited to try the player piano, at which they "[kick] in unison, each taking a pedal," to make it play a tune. This automated instrument is a suitable analogue to the motif of Sander's camera, for it is a technological medium that induces what the narrator depicts as "an act of limited partnership." (331) And it also denies the attribution of absolute authority to any participant involved in it. The music issuing from the player piano exists as the outcome of the collaborative act by the narrator, Mrs. Schreck and the instrument itself. The narrator becomes convinced through Mrs. Schreck's personal intervention with the photo and his collaboration with her that what he could to carry out his duty for the three farmers is to renew the photograph by adding one more different angle to look at it. Thus, he realizes that the standpoint of an independent viewer he has taken at first matters far less than the state of interdependence of the elements involved in the medium.

No dog is a thoroughbred. The final mystery of photography is that taker, subject, and viewer, each needed for the end

² Even Mays' vision of the red-haired clarinetist in the Vets' parade is through the single, narrow window of the office, which reminds us of the rectangular frame of the photograph.

product, circle one another warily, define one another in their own terms. Mrs. Schreck's farmers, my imagined and implicated viewer, the flesh-and-blood Sander and the actual boys of his photo are each at work reconstructing each other, even going so far as to postulate a biographer such as myself. And I am certainly no thoroughbred. (335)

This interdependent relationship is comparable to that of the three narratives. The narrator's insistence that he is "no thoroughbred" refers to his seeming authority on the other two narratives. At a first glance, the reader is likely to regard the first narrative as the basis of the two others, for it tells a story of the birth of a writer who is inspired by the farmers' look and goes so far as to invent their lives. But the interpolation of the third narrative complicates the problem of his authority, for it is the role of the reader, as the narrator suggests too at the end of his narrative, to connect Mays's and the narrator's stories by means of many motifs that they have in common with. Only from the reader's point of view, the three narratives exist concurrently, defining "one another in their own terms." By interpolating the third narrative side by side with the other two narratives that represents the meta-fictional story of a writer and his creation, *Three Farmers* erases out both the concepts of origin and absolute authority, and makes us view the complexity of our world through these interlocking realities.

Three Farmers is an exemplary debut novel for Powers in the sense that it does not only include many features that would develop later in his following works, but also it traces the story of a writer in evolving process by putting him inside a recursive network of creativity. By transferring the

authority to “the Other Fellow,” Powers attempts to generate the interactions of endless discourse with the reader. This structural idiosyncrasy will keep making the book worth considering in relation with the rest of his fiction.

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