



Call for Papers

Ideas of Order: Narrative Patterns in the Novels of Richard Powers

University of Erlangen-Nuremberg
11/26 – 11/27 2010

According to Richard Powers, whose ten novels to date have generated a lively critical discourse, literature needs to engage with all the available modes of knowledge and representation to examine how identity is constituted in culturally situated relations. Powers insists that “you cannot understand a person minimally, you cannot understand a person simply as a function of his inability to get along with his wife, you cannot even understand a person through his supposedly causal psychological profile.” Powers’s novels engage with this understanding of the individual as a complex system that exceeds the mere sum of its parts by implementing narrative patterns which establish parallels and symmetries between radically different levels of experience. However, the patterns and systems created in his novels are less predefined templates that would reduce the inherent complexity of the world in order to enable its representation. They are much rather self-consciously symmetric narratives that function as self-referential artifices through which the world can be refracted and ultimately reaffirmed. Consequently, Powers’s novels are described as hovering between the poles of mimetic realism and metafictional postmodernism, creating narratives in which the conventions of realism are both deployed and undermined, in which characters are simultaneously presented as motivated agents *and* as textual constructs.

Taking its cue from Wallace Stevens’s poem “The Idea of Order at Key West,” in which the lyrical voice witnesses a “blessed rage for order” that is nevertheless presented as provisional and ephemeral, the conference aims at establishing a critical approach to Powers’s oeuvre which acknowledges and investigates the implications of the distinct poetics of his novels. For this purpose we invite papers on a variety of topics, including Powers’s

implementation of narrative systems, patterns, and symmetries; the connection between narrative and identity in his novels; the discursive specificity, argumentative strengths and intellectual relevance Powers's novels attribute to literary writing; the dimensions of reality, realism and metafiction around which his texts revolve; questions of consciousness and character, agency and determinism as they emerge from Powers's fiction, as well as the discourses of ethics and aesthetics, science and literature, humanism and post-humanism.

Proposals should not exceed a length of **500 words** and can be submitted until **03/31/2010** to the organizers of the conference:

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(As of February 2010)

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