

Metafiction, Defamiliarization and Cognitive Science:
Andrew Crumey's *Mr Mee*
and Richard Powers' *Galatea 2.2*¹

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Abstract

The present article considers two metafictional novels published at the end of the 20th century against the background of cognitive literary studies. The formal features of the novels are discussed with a view to the way they defamiliarize various concepts: fiction itself, consciousness, memory, science, art, reading, the internet, artificial intelligence, etc. The novels' attempts at fostering a dialogue between fiction and the humanities, on the one hand, and science and technology, on the other, are mirrored by the reader's vacillation between engagement and detachment and the effects of the texts' self-reflexivity on the reader's mind.

Keywords: the Two Cultures, (self)consciousness, metafiction, defamiliarization, metafiction, academic fiction, cognitive literary studies, foregrounding

This article discusses two novels published at the end of the 20th century, on different sides of the Atlantic: Andrew Crumey's *Mr Mee* (2000) and Richard Powers' *Galatea 2.2* (1995). They are both academic novels penned by reformed scientists: Crumey is a Scottish novelist with a PhD in theoretical physics who also teaches creative writing; Powers started out as a physics major at the University of Illinois, but switched to English, and later on worked

as a computer programmer, while writing his novels. At first sight, both texts seem to be interested in brooking the divide between what C.P. Snow referred to as “The Two Cultures,” and, in particular, in making sense of new technology. According to the blurb on *Mr Mee*’s back cover, the novel “ultimately provides a history of the Internet” (a reductive description), while *Galatea 2.2* reads like a (slightly sci-fi or at least anticipatory) history of connectionism and artificial intelligence. Notwithstanding the importance and relevance of their content, it is the novels’ formal features that make the object of the present article. The relentlessly self-conscious/reflexive and defamiliarizing impulses at work in these texts account for the cognitively and affectively stimulating (re)reading experiences that they engender.

The concepts of metafiction and defamiliarization are not new in literary studies and even less so is their practice. (Self)reflexivity/self-consciousness has been demonstrably present in literary fiction at least since *Don Quixote* and has gone through a period of intensified critical concern in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, with critics like Linda Hutcheon, Patricia Waugh, and Mark Currie engaging with this type of fiction, which draws attention to itself and raises questions about its own nature. On the other hand, critical interest in defamiliarization can be traced back to “Aristotle, Horace, and Quintilian, through the British Romantic writers, to the Russian Formalists and the Prague Linguistic Circle” (Miall and Kuiken, “Foregrounding”). Victor Shklovsky’s 1916 formulation of a definition of defamiliarization rings pertinent to this day: “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (16). For Jan Mukařovský (of the Prague Linguistic Circle), “[f]oregrounding is the opposite of automatization, that is, the deautomatization of an act; the more an act is automatized, the less it is consciously executed; the more it is foregrounded, the more completely conscious does it become” (44). Thus, consciousness

and self-consciousness are a crucial component in both defamiliarization/foregrounding and in self-reflexive (or meta-) fiction. Self-conscious fiction can be argued to be no more than an instance or a form of defamiliarization, one that takes the novelistic genre as its object.

Recently, the two concepts have been subjected to the joint scrutiny of cognitive scientists and cognitive literary critics. The thought that Shklovsky's and Mukařovský's claims can be tested empirically is compelling. Cognitive poetician David Miall and psychologist Don Kuiken have conducted reading experiments to examine "the relationships between foregrounding, strikingness, affect and reading time" (Miall and Kuiken, "Foregrounding"). The inclusion of affect within cognition (as opposed to the traditional opposition between the two terms) is by now a generalized occurrence in cognitive literary criticism. The results of Miall and Kuiken's experiments have shown significant correlations between phonetic, grammatical and semantic foregrounding on the one hand and reading times on the other, i.e. foregrounding/defamiliarization slows down reading. It also results in "reader's judgements of strikingness and affect," i.e. foregrounding provokes an intensified readerly attention and affective response: "reading foregrounded text accentuates activity in critical areas specialized for affect" (Miall and Kuiken).

Crumey's academic novel *Mr Mee* wears its reflexivity in its title – a reflexivity modified by orthographic defamiliarization, hence the second "e." The title is a give-away for the novel's two most salient formal strategies, which have been mentioned above. The novel illustrates the process that transforms invention into convention and the difference between information and knowledge. Therefore, it begs for an interpretation through the framework of the cognitive turn in the humanities.

Mr Mee is a hybrid novel, as it comprises an epistolary novel, a historical novel, and a memoir, delivered to the reader in clearly delimited, alternating chapters. The epistolary novel is allegedly penned by Mr. Mee, a Scottish octogenarian who lives in relative seclusion and spends most of his time reading Scottish philosophy,

David Hume and Thomas Carlyle in particular. The historical novel harks back to the time widely regarded as being the century of the birth (or rather of the “rise”) of the novel, i.e. the eighteenth century. The historical novel-within-the-novel is set in France. It revolves around Ferrand and Minard, two copyists who flee from Paris to Montmorency, where they get acquainted with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The memoir records the last months in the life of a contemporary Scottish academic, Dr. A.B. Petrie, Professor of French literature, and gives an account of his infatuation with his student Louisa. The connections between the three books-within-the-novel are ever so tenuous at first, consisting in mere intertextual hints, but the end of the novel neatly integrates all three, making a totalizing interpretation possible.

At first sight, *Mr Mee* can only be called an academic novel due to the presence of Dr. Petrie and his students. However, if the academic novel were to be seen as revolving not around an institution or a setting, but around the life of the mind as what Hannah Arendt calls the “*vita activa*,” as opposed to the life of the mind’s traditional association with the “*vita contemplativa*” (6), this novel in its entirety becomes academic. The very plot is set in motion by Mr. Mee’s intellectual voraciousness, by his quest for an elusive work entitled *Encyclopédie de Jean-Bernard Rosier* (Crumey 6), which links Mr. Mee’s story to that of Ferrand and Minard, the copyists and intellectual beneficiaries of that very encyclopedia. The fact that Ferrand and Minard are copyists is significant: they are pastichized versions of Bouvard and Pécuchet, the protagonists of the eponymous novel by Gustave Flaubert (a fact slightly hinted at by Crumey at the very end of the novel). According to Dr. Petrie’s memoir, however, Ferrand and Minard are his own fictionalized versions of “*les Commères*” or ““the Gossips”” (Crumey 142) mentioned by Rousseau in his own *Confessions*. By having Ferrand and Minard learn from the encyclopedia articles they copy, Crumey fashions them into unconventional (and thereby defamiliarized) academics of the self-taught variety. Academia is defamiliarized through Mr. Mee as well:

he is a remnant of the old order of university learning, i.e. the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake.

The octogenarian becomes the focalizer whose perspective is used to hold taken-for-granted phenomena of the contemporary world up to a defamiliarizing light. As Mr. Mee sets out to buy a computer, he has difficulty communicating his wish to the shop assistant:

“Is it word processing you want to do?” [the shop assistant asks him]

I gather this is a term used now to denote what was known in our day as ‘writing.’ . . . I would use the machine primarily for reading, an archaic habit the correct name of which I didn’t know, unfortunately, in the jargon of ‘new technology.’ . . . Indeed I must remind myself in future that you no longer ‘read’ my letters, but ‘browse’ them, like sheep. (19)

In a similar vein, he insists on explaining and/or else on searching for the etymological roots of all the terms he encounters: World Wide Web, site, link, source code, net surfing, click, live video, refresh, and so on. At Waterstone’s, he is bewildered by the proliferation of books in the new sciences section, and he misinterprets the “Personal Growth” section for “something to do with child rearing” (156). It is not only the transformation of language by new technology that is highlighted, but also language itself, its very emergence, as Mr. Mee applies the sorites paradox to both animal species and to language: “when did a reptile become the first bird, when did grunts and squawks become the first language, when were words like ours first coined, and how were they ever understood?” (5).

In spite of his wide reading and lively mind, however, Mr. Mee turns out to be as innocent of the world as Cervantes’ Don Quixote or Vladimir Nabokov’s Timofey Pnin. In his search for Rosier’s encyclopedia, he stumbles upon a pornographic video, which he utterly misinterprets: “Her pose upon the bed was rather unladylike, resembling that of childbirth, I believe. . . . Of chief interest to me, naturally, was the book which the young lady was

reading” (26). He is therefore puzzled by the indignant reaction of his housekeeper Mrs. B, who storms out of the house at the sight of the naked woman on the screen. Mr. Mee naïvely deduces that she “would no doubt have preferred the anonymous woman to have crossed her legs” (26). His constant failure to recognize the feelings of the people he interacts with, however, soon prompts the reader to suspect there is more to his affliction than an insufficient knowledge of the world. His self-centeredness and the tenacity with which he pursues his interest in “eighteenth-century arcana” (307), irrespective of others people’s feelings, suggest he might suffer from a cognitive impairment, such as Asperger’s Syndrome or high-functioning autism. The readers are thereby made aware of their taken-for-granted “tendency to interpret observed behavior in terms of underlying mental states. . .[which] seems to be so effortless and automatic (in a sense that we are not even conscious of engaging in any particular act of ‘interpretation’)” (Zunshine 7), an ability termed “*mind-reading*” (4) or “Theory of Mind” (6). This cognitive ability is crucial in navigating one’s social environment as well as narrative fiction. Hence, people with autism spectrum disorder lack interest in fiction or experience difficulty in understanding it. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Mee rarely if ever reads fiction. Our own, taken-for-granted, ability to attribute certain states of mind to others based on their behavior is thereby defamiliarized, foregrounded, made conscious.

As Ferrand and Minard copy Rosier’s encyclopedia, the reader is offered glimpses into the contents of that work, which presumably “constitutes an alternative philosophy of the universe” (Crumey 84). The articles which are ‘reproduced’ in the novel’s pages for the reader’s benefit are explanations of (mostly twentieth-century) scientific theories and concepts, such as quantum theory and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, the latter of which becomes “Rosier’s Uncertainty Principle” (180). Rosier’s “theory of Mechanical Intelligence” (181) traces the beginnings of artificial intelligence and of the computer: Minard, a poor logician who is bent on finding out who killed the Parisian seamstress he had fallen in love with, is fashioned into the inventor of the “computing

engine" (271), which consists (in the eighteenth century) of a web of threads to which bits of paper with statements are attached, leading to various conclusions. This contraption anticipates Charles Babbage's analytical engine and its punched cards by about seven decades.

Another example in point is the entry on Nicolas Clair's theory of "mechanical poetry" (92), which turns out to be a spoof article penned by Louisa's boyfriend to poke fun at Dr. Petrie. This alludes to the Sokal affair. Based on short texts, Clair builds devices, according to the notion that "every speech which may be made by the voice of man is equal to a device which can be fashioned by his hands" (93). The description of the equivalences he finds brings to the reader's mind with more acuteness than any critical text the arbitrariness of language and Clair emerges as a proto-structuralist. Similarly, the centrifugal forces and centripetal effects (97) at work in literary texts as postulated by Clair are a nod to Mikhail Bakhtin. The translation of the world back into text constitutes a wink at semiotics. Nonetheless, all of this ends in Clair's madness.

Coming back to the question of what happens in the reader's mind when basic human experiences (such as sex – Mr. Mee is having it without at first realizing what it is) and key concepts (such as the internet) are defamiliarized, certain stages in the reading process can be identified. First, the pace of reading slows down, and there is a certain readerly resistance to the novelty of expression, an affective response which, in the case of Mr. Mee's adventures, consists in incredulity – one doubts that one's own construction of meaning can be correct. As Mr. Mee's first-person narrative is as slow-paced as his life, and his language is both elegant and precise, verging at times on the pedantic and the precious, the reading process is first slowed down by the wish to do justice to the style. Additionally, Mr. Mee's letters are over-explanatory, but he invariably delivers the wrong (often literal) explanation, which brings the right one to the fore, the one that is always conspicuously absent. At this point, wonder gives way to the wish of reading the passage again – just to make sure that the

ambiguousness has been correctly resolved – and to appropriate this sense of novelty, the sense of thinking very differently about a taken-for-granted, mundane phenomenon. Even as the reader instinctively strives to preserve that excitement, the sense of novelty wears off, and the alien and unfamiliar of a few minutes earlier will be assimilated, as it already becomes familiar. In the process, Mr. Mee asserts himself as an endearing character in the reader's mind.

Miall and Kuiken conceive of literariness as a tripartite process, “involving foregrounded textual or narrative features, readers' defamiliarizing responses to them, and the consequent modification of personal meanings” (“What Is?” 121). This process is self-consciously and explicitly taken up by Dr. Petrie in his memoir, which is very much concerned with memory: “Truth exists only in the first bite, all else is repetition” (Crumey 131) or elsewhere “the first impression is the truth, and all that follows is merely the excuse of memory” (133). The painstaking process of choosing new curtains is summed up as: “they had moved from the problematic realm of Recognition into the comfortable domain of Memory” (134).

Dr. Petrie extrapolates this process to history and to the self by claiming, in recognizably Proustian terms, that “recognition is a faculty we are forever denied with regard to our own selves; unless perhaps one can become, at least temporarily a person called ‘I’ who is not necessarily oneself” (135). History is viewed as best left to those who have not lived during that particular era – because those who have see “it all too closely, too continuously, and hence [see] nothing” (135) – much as he himself did not experience the swinging 60s as swinging at all. Unsurprisingly, history looms large in *Mr Mee*, as it was published at the turn of the millennium. For literature, the same approach is advocated, i.e. that the critique of a fictional work is best left to those who do not know the author. Thus, the words-on-the-page argument of New Criticism is reconstructed. In short, what Dr. Petrie advocates is defamiliarization *tout court*, whether it is defamiliarizing literature, history or the self: “The human willingness to resort to the comfort

of cliché can act at such a deep level that it can leave us, at times, in a state which is entirely derived and inauthentic" (285). His own life he considers to have been unexamined before Louisa's appearance. It is the memoir that enables him to see himself from the outside, or, in other words, defamiliarizes him to himself.

Last but not least, the novel itself defamiliarizes fiction. The chapters dealing with Mr. Mee and with Ferrand and Minard, which are formally traditional in that they hark back to the eighteenth-century epistolary English novel and to Flaubert's free indirect style respectively, are counterbalanced by Dr. Petrie's reflexive and self-conscious memoir, which exposes the story of Ferrand and Minard to be not only fictional, but also of his own making. However, the novel's last chapter, which also takes the form of a letter, relativizes Petrie's claim regarding the fictionality of Ferrand and Minard within the novel by having a descendant of the latter not only install Proust's Théâtrophone and suggest to him the title of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, but also move to Scotland, where he fathers a son who grows up in an orphanage; needless to say, this son turns out to be Mr. Mee. The reader's alternative move from immersion in the narrative (reading for the plot) to the consciousness that one is reading a narrative, that one is constructing a possible world, a fictional world with the help of an author, results in a cyclic defamiliarizing process. According to cognitivist Marie-Laure Ryan, "it is the memory of the immersive power of the text that engages [the reader's] critical faculties during the self-reflexive moments," when they participate more actively in the realization of the text. Crumey's not merely thematically ambitious but also stylistically audacious novel forces the reader to subject crucial notions to renewed scrutiny while also providing them with a highly enjoyable reading experience.

Similarly, Powers' *Galatea 2.2* is one of the most informative novels written on science and on cognitive science in particular. It is also an autobiographical novel that traces Richard Powers' literary career, as it provides accounts of how his four previous novels came to be written. *Galatea 2.2* is the fifth novel of both Richard Powers its author and Richard Powers its protagonist.

In recounting its own creation, the novel self-consciously folds in upon itself: “I was already writing . . . the story of how we described the entire world to a piece of electrical current” (315). As the excerpt intimates, the novel’s plot revolves around the development of an A.I. machine, a neural network developed and trained to interpret literary texts. Its eight implementations mark its progress towards (self-)consciousness, a theretofore exclusively human ability. In the process, major concepts pertaining to being human are subjected to inquiry and defamiliarized: consciousness, memory, cognition, knowledge and love, to name but a few. Thus, consciousness is defined as “the memory of memory” (177), but also “a deception” (88). Striking similes, one of Powers’ stylistic idiosyncrasies, are also abundantly employed:

awareness no more permitted its own description than life allowed you a seat at your own funeral. Awareness trapped itself inside itself. The function of consciousness must be in part to dummy up and shape a coherence from all the competing, conflicting subsystems that processed experience. By nature, it lied. Any rendition we might make of consciousness would arise from *it*, and was thus about as reliable as the accused serving as sole witness for the prosecution. (217)

The epistemological conundrum and unreliability of grasping consciousness is brought home via alliteration and assonance (*itself inside itself; competing, conflicting*),² similes (no more . . . than life; as reliable as . . .), typographically rendered emphasis (*it*) and the alternating rhythm of the paragraph’s euphonious prose (the cadences of complex sentences broken off by dicta like “By nature, it lied”). This excerpt is taken from the last third of the novel, where the reader is immersed in the intertwined stories of the eighth neural network implementation, whom Richard baptizes Helen, on the one hand, and the love stories between Richard and C. and, later, Richard and A. on the other.

Earlier on in the novel, the reader had been forewarned of the dangers of reading only for the plot, as the protagonist self-reflexively outlined his own succumbing to its pleasures. Thus,

when wondering why the memorable and quote-worthy lines in a literary work “clumped up with unlikely frequency toward the start of any new book” (96), he identifies two possible reasons and finally settles on the reader’s responsibility rather than the writer’s:

Perhaps writers everywhere crowded their immortal bits up toward the front of their books, like passengers clamoring to get off a bus. More likely, reading, for me, meant the cashing out of verbal eternity in favor of story’s forward motion. Trapping me in the plot, each passing line left me less able to reach for my notebook and fix the sentence in time. (96)

Dappled with eminently quotable sentences (perhaps to a fault), the novel feels at times like it is too clever for its own good, conjoining stylistic foregrounding with an over-explanatory drive.

In *Galatea 2.2*, the Two Cultures divide is persistently and patently illustrated by the constant clash between the protagonist, who is a writer-in-residence at the university representatively named “U.” and who thus plays “the humanist fly on the wall” (36) on the one hand and Philip Lentz, an engineer who designs and implements neural networks, on the other. The Center for the Study of Advanced Sciences is the hub of U.’s campus, a state-of-the-art building containing 1,200 works of art. By contrast, the English building’s stairs, which are “patched in three shades of gray linoleum” (75), reveal the marginality of the humanities. The Two Cultures divide is articulated in no uncertain terms: “Talk in [the Center’s] public spaces sounded like a UN picnic: excited, wild, and mutually unintelligible. I loved how you could never be sure what a person did, even after they explained it to you” (6). Through its relentless attempts at overcoming this mutual unintelligibility, *Galatea 2.2* overtly posits itself as a means of bridging that divide. The protagonist’s numerous conversations and debates with the connectionists and neuroscientists working at the Center explicitly challenge the assumptions of both camps.

In the process, literary theory and criticism are also subjected to inquiry. The protagonist’s arguments for providing Helen with sensory input and with knowledge of human life are countered by

Lentz's opinion that literary criticism is so divorced from life that Helen has no need to be taught anything extra-literary: "She doesn't need to *know* anything . . . She just has to *learn* criticism. Derrida *knows* things? Your deconstructionists are rife with wisdom? . . . Don't you know that knowledge is passé? And you can kiss meaning bye-bye as well" (190; my emphasis). Nonetheless, Powers (both the author and the protagonist) gave up Physics for English, the sciences for the humanities, lured by the promise of an "aerial view" (210) cleansed of the parochialism of scientific specialization. Occasionally, his tone is distinctly self-congratulatory, especially when he talks about fiction and the making of worlds: "My words had grown careers of their own" (202). However, literary theory and criticism shake his "belief in what writing might do" (254). The conflict at work within the protagonist (who is considering giving up writing fiction at this point) is indicative of a broader conflict within the humanities, where "fear" and "an intellectual energy steeped in aggression" (191) are prevalent. Literary scholars and critics are described in invariably mordant terms as "curators of the written language," "apprentice wordkeepers" and "peach-fuzzed posthumanists, pimplify with neo-Marxist poststructuralism" (191). At one point, Richard confesses that "theory and criticism had shaken [his] belief in what writing could do" (254). The activity of reviewing books also comes under attack for having turned into a monolith, "a single, unified State Department of literary taste. An algorithm of aesthetic appropriateness" (207).

Predictably, "lit crit" emerges as less inquisitive, less open and ultimately less valuable than cognitive science and Helen turns out to have been little more than a ruse, the result of the scientists' wager that she, a machine, would teach the humanist more about human consciousness than he could teach her about literature. As Helen grows "sick of our inability to know ourselves or to see where we were" (314), she shuts herself down permanently, the A.I. equivalent of suicide.³ One page later, the protagonist announces his intention of writing the very book we are reading, which can be seen as a sign of his placing his hope with art in general and

literature in particular. This ties in with an earlier point in the novel, i.e. Powers' conversion from science to literature due to the charismatic Professor Taylor: "Through Taylor, I discovered how a book both mirrored and elicited the mind's unreal ability to turn inward upon itself. He changed my life. He changed what I thought life was" (141). Music and poetry suffuse the novel. It is in describing music that some of the most striking of the novel's tropes are wielded: "The clarinet and orchestra exchanged phrases, elaborating on the ongoing expansion, unfolding, inhaling beyond capacity like the lungs of a patriarch wedging open the air after being told of the death of his last greatgrandchild" (12). While music is mentioned no less than 28 times throughout the novel and is set in contrast with research, whose "ravishing irrelevance" (11) it is said to prove, the novel is dappled with lines of poetry belonging to various poets from a variety of epochs: John Donne (67), William Shakespeare (69), Ben Jonson (234-5), William Blake (192), Christina Rossetti (197), Emily Dickinson (291-2), Walt Whitman (231), and Theodore Roethke (322). Appropriately, Emily Dickinson's "The Brian Is Wider than the Sky" is the motto of the novel. Frequently, the protagonist reads poems to Helen, whom he gets to call "my kid" (92) and "my girl" (202). The Pygmalion myth is altered to stand for fatherly rather than romantic love. However, Helen is not Powers' only Galatea. Even more so than Helen, Powers' books are his children, as the quote from Oriana Fallaci illustrates: "*I miei libri sono I miei figli*" (227).

In *Galatea 2.2*, self-consciousness emerges as a possible link between (meta)fiction and cognitive science. The analysis of metafiction through the lens of cognitive science has as yet been rarely attempted, but interest in this field is intensifying at present. One example that supports this claim is Joshua Landy's "Mental Calisthenics and Self-Reflexive Fiction," which praises metafiction for providing readers with "the opportunity to flex a vital mental muscle" (560), i.e. of consciously deceiving ourselves, a feat enabled by the human ability of compartmentalization or what is called "informational encapsulation" (567) in cognitive science. Powers' novel predates Landy's chapter by two decades; as

recently as 2019, neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux asserted that “we are still in the early days of research on consciousness” (ch. 58, para. 16). Indeed, the novel’s prescience with regard to other matters as well (e.g. the effect of the internet on social bonds) is at times uncanny: “People who used the web turned strange. . . . The web was a neighborhood more efficiently lonely than the one it replaced. Its solitude was bigger and faster” (9).

In his works, Powers is permanently “shifting between engagement and escape,” between “the Emersonian urge to embrace the difficult ad-lib of the world and the Dickinsonesque need to recoil from its evident bruising into the supple sanctuary of the aesthetic enterprise, to withdraw into the secured refuge of a novel, a piece of music, a movie house, a museum, even cyberspace” (Dewey). The same vacillation is illustrated in Crumey’s novel by the reclusive Mr. Mee and the world-wise Catriona, who replaces Mrs. B and shows Mr. Mee how to navigate the contemporary world. While *Mr Mee*’s 18th-century sections and their connections to the fictional present give the novel a past-oriented feel (or at least the sense that history has a certain cyclicity), *Galatea 2.2* is future-oriented in its incorporation of sci-fi elements. Nonetheless, the latter also alludes to the cyclicity of history: “I began to see the web as just the latest term in an ancient polynomial expansion. . . . Everyone who ever lived had lived at a moment of equal astonishment” (8).

The two novels both make for intellectually enthralling and emotionally affecting reads, in different ways. *Mr Mee*’s hybrid structure and style effect defamiliarization in a subtler manner than *Galatea 2.2*, requiring more patience on the part of the reader, especially since the ties between the three plots only surface towards the end of the novel. Powers’ novel on the other hand works with a more ostentatious form of style, slowing down aesthetic perception through striking metaphors and memorable dicta,⁴ reverting to poetry and music in the process. While *Mr Mee* is essentially comic notwithstanding the tragedy of Dr Petrie’s death, *Galatea 2.2* is deeply serious in tone, despite the occasional instances of humor and irony, especially in connection with Dr.

Lentz, who is the novel's most colorful character. The description of his head is an example in point: "The head attached to these glasses peaked in a balding dome. From freakish frontal lobes it tapered away to nothing at the temples only to erupt again in a monstrous beak. Even after I oriented the image, the face shocked me" (12).

The two academic metafictional discussions here substantiate the human drive toward reaching an understanding of the world we live in, whether they do so by going back in time and identifying the seeds of contemporary phenomena in their older 'proto-versions' or by anticipating future developments whose seeds are visible today. They function as catalysts for integrating the various fields of human experience and inquiry. Above all, however, they epitomize "a pleasure difficult to describe and impossible afterward to recover" (39), to use Powers' words: the pleasure of reading.

Notes:

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² Alliterative patterns are not uncommon with Powers. Other types of phonetic and typographic play are present as well, as in this description of Helen: "Three hundred simulated cells had learned to read aloud. No one told it how. No one helped it *plough through tough dough*" (30; my emphasis).

³ This despair with regard to where humanity is headed will be taken up again by Powers in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Overstory* (2019), a novel dealing with environmental destruction and with deforestation.

⁴ Examples of memorable formulations: "In this country, youth was a socially acceptable form of bragging" (37); English is "a discipline choked to death by curatorial gentility" (118); "Reading knowledge is the smell of the bookbinding paste" (148); "Love is the feedback cycle of longing, belonging, loss" (152); the interpretive essay is or should be "an aerial shot from the dispassionate high ground" (228).

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