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# Of Language and Music: A Neo-Baroque, Environmental Approach to the Human, Infrahuman and Superhuman in Richard Powers' *Orfeo*

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**Abstract:** In 2014, Richard Powers published *Orfeo*. Literally, a road novel, *Orfeo* tells the story of retired, avant-garde composer Peter Els as he flees Homeland Security for bioterrorism. However, Els's intentions in biohacking *Serratia marcescens* are merely artistic, and concerned only with encoding his last musical composition in the DNA of this bacteria. Troubled as he is with the purpose and reach of art, Els does not anticipate the consequences of his artistic experimentation until Homeland Security is after him. In *Orfeo*, the power of music to move human and natural elements and the illicit disruption of the divine order-of-being represented in the Orphic *katabasis* find their parallel within the historical context of post-9/11 America, the environmental concerns regarding scientific experimentation at the turn of the century and the transhumanist branch of posthumanist discourse respectively, but also as they relate to each other. Orpheus' *katabasis* is also reflected in the textual construction of the novel as a road novel, an epic journey the original purpose of which stands behind an ultimate gain of self-discovery that in the novel, engages the main character as much as the narrative itself. Finally, the thematic and formal aspects of the novel organize around a Neo-Baroque aesthetics that insists on the arrangement of apparently disconnected historical, musical and literary phenomena, as it widens into the transhistorical dimension of Orphic myths and religious practices.

## Introduction

*Orfeo* tells the life story of retired composer Peter Els along the second half of the twentieth century until his death at some indeterminate moment in post-9/11 America. His is the story of an artist as a young, middle-aged and old man who

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explores the mutual influence of the life experience and artistic aspirations of a particular individual character while also serving to portray the particular historical context in which his life develops. Yet through these particularities, Powers brings universal thematic concerns about life and art drawing from a long musical and literary tradition rooted in ancient mythical origins. The connection between the particular and the universal in this novel is constructed according to an aesthetic taste that has been described as typically Neo-Baroque; an aspect so far neglected in previous analysis of Powers' work.

In 1992, Omar Calabresse listed, explained and exemplified a series of features representing a taste of the times that he identified with Neo-Baroque aesthetics as an alternative to the historical restrictions that constrain the use of the term 'postmodern' (13). These features include complexity, stylistic and thematic variation, fragmentation, dynamism, polycentrism, random, labyrinthine, fractal structural arrangement, theatricality and monstrosity; and develop through techniques such as citation, perspectivism, transgression of conceptual limits, indefiniteness, aesthetic virtuosity and risk. The presence of such Baroque features has been hinted, though not explored, by McCracken in an interview with Richard Powers shortly after the publication of *Orfeo* (see McCracken 2014). In this essay, I have tried to illustrate how Powers' choice of a specific literary performance articulates these aesthetic features in intersectional relation with current pressing cultural, social and political concerns that have been recently developed by the critical discourses of ecocriticism, posthumanism and trauma theory.

The story beings *in medias res* at the end of Els' life as a retired composer, which he leads in the seclusion of his home, alienated from his relatives and society as he has just completed the musical masterpiece of his life. What should have been the climax of a plot development that spins around the obsessive artistic pursuit of its main character, is however displaced by the seemingly irrelevant event of his dog's death. The unexpected, subtle movement of these butterfly wings in the supposedly controlled environment of Els' home musical laboratory triggers the irruption of the external elements that set the plot in motion.

When the police comes to his home in response to the 911 call he made about his dog Fidelio, they find what they interpret to be an illegal home laboratory for genetic experimentation, which in the context of post-9/11 America, sets all the alarms on against a possible act of bioterrorism. Although Els' home genetic laboratory is certainly illegal, the purposes behind his experimentation are merely artistic and totally unrelated to international terrorism. What he has just accomplished is bridging the representational gap between the natural and the artistic, between the means and the object of representation, the physical and the informational aspects of art, by encoding his musical composition in the DNA of

harmless bacteria *Serratia marcescens*. When his musical accomplishment is misunderstood for an act of bioterrorism, Els runs away from his home in a road journey along which the recollected story of his life discloses the reasons and conditions behind the moment and circumstances that are presented at the onset of the novel.

As the circumstances of his life gain the linear structure symbolized by the road motif, they also raise in Els the realization of its ultimate purpose or organizing structure, and the initially random direction of his escape from Homeland Security stabilizes around the target of meeting his daughter Sara, whom he became estranged from after his divorce as a result of his artistic obsessions. Escaping Homeland Security makes Els aware of the compositional arrangement of his life, a piece he half discovers and half composes by selecting and organizing the moments that become relevant as he recollects them. Flashbacks in the narrative flow of his life and flash-forward comments from his narrative future projection, as well as the contrivedly random associations of Els' roaming memories, allow Powers to build improbable intra- and intertextual, metahistorical analogies in a polycentric arrangement of narrative nodules that cause the wondrous effect of having "found" rather than arranged, a natural coincidence among them.<sup>1</sup>

The narrative voice in the novel is constructed as the indistinct, superposed enunciation of three perspectives converging in the same individual. Most of the narrative is rendered by a seemingly omniscient, third-person narrator that is however restricted to the perspective and narrative style of its main character, somewhere between indirect-free style and controlled, detached, autobiographical reflection (Powers 2013). This narrative is repeatedly interrupted by the first-person reflections of Peter Els himself, in what appear to be aside comments to the main narrative of Els' somewhat ghostly voice from a time or perspective beyond it; and which are separated from the main text by two continuous lines. By the end of the novel, the third-person narrative voice turns briefly to the second person singular, conveying a sort of reflexive effect of the main character gaining distance from himself in the intimacy of a direct self-address, but also projecting this address towards the external reader. The combination of these perspectives pushing the limits between narrative levels confers the novel with a sense of undecidable vagueness between the objective and the subjective, as well as the textual and the extratextual that remains stable thanks to its dynamism.<sup>2</sup> A

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1 For a discussion of Neo-Baroque contemporarization of different historical periods through textual contiguity and its relation with the verifiability of reality, see Calabresse (1992: 54–55).

2 For a detailed description of this aesthetic device, see Calabresse (1992: 41).

similar effect is conveyed through the pervasive analogies the novel builds between art and lived experience. The continuous references that Els makes to musical compositions and the biographies of their composers seem to run parallel to, or serve as inspiration/illustration of his life and works. The novel itself begins with what reads like stage directions in italics to a main narrative that is nothing other than Els' composition of his life as if it was an opera.<sup>3</sup>

While the title of the novel suggests the figure of Orpheus as its interpretive key, the text is presented as a sort of palimpsest from which the character of Orpheus himself has been erased, leaving but the traces of the main motifs in the Orphic tradition. The particularities through which these motifs take shape in the novel gain a uchronic dimension through the analogies that Powers builds with diverse Orphic myths. These include Orpheus' exceptional skills as singer and musician, which allegedly moved both human and non-human, living and non-living elements into an ideal pastoral utopia that is later related to magic and the development of an early science based on sympathy. Orpheus' influence is also present in the myth of his *katabasis*, where music is presented as a human artifact that fails in challenging the divine order policing the borders between life and death; but that can also be interpreted as an individual quest for knowledge. The last Orphic trace in the novel involves the myth of Orpheus' dismemberment by the Thracian women and his transcendence of death through the prophetic and literary skills of his talking head at Lesbos.

The universal character of the Orphic myths serves Powers to unfold pressing issues that concern western society in its contemporary historical particularities, which could be summed up as the clash between the natural and the technological in its existential, ethical, social, political and aesthetic dimensions. So, although Els' musical experimentation is primarily targeted at making sense of (his) life and art (existential and aesthetic dimensions), his biological experimentation with the DNA of *Serratia marcescens* gains political, social and historical dimension in the context of post-9/11 America and the threat of international Islamist terrorism, while the ecological and ethical dimensions press against/for genetic experimentation in ambiguous relation with the humanist paradigm.

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed description of Neo-Baroque citation and spectacularity as an effect of textual liminality, see Calabresse (1992: 56 and 173–179 respectively). For an in-depth study of Neo-Baroque theatricality, see Egginton (2014).

## Music, Word, Performance

Although the ancient myths involving the character of Orpheus portray him in general, as a cultural hero (he was considered one of the seven wise men of antiquity, inventor of the alphabet, a philosopher, a magician and a prophet) and relate him to religious and more or less scientific activities such as medicine, botanic, or astrology; the most salient feature of the Muse's son is his musical skill. He was regarded as the inventor of music and the author of innovations in musical instruments and the hexameter, but also as an exceptional singer (see Bernabé 2003; Bernabé 2008). In fact, the development of this multifaceted picture of Orpheus in antiquity is directly related to the way music was understood in ancient Greece as a combination of music, word and dance, which involved combining the rational, referential order of language and the marvelous order that music imprints on the physical world by means of sympathy (Bernabé 2008b: 29). In Powers's *Orfeo*, this combination of differential reference (word), isomorphic identification (music) and performative embodiment (dance) underlies Peter Els' use of biological engineering as the ideal medium for musical composition, since the DNA of *Serratia marcescens* allows him to integrate musical score, physical instrument and performance in one, while also incorporating its external model as its internal compositional effect. The choice grants total control over all the aspects and phases of musical composition, but replicates the random natural processes that make Orpheus' music *move* natural elements around him.

While Powers claims that it haunts and inhabits the margins of all his stories (Fuller and Powers 2003: 109), music is a central motif in *Gold Bug Variations*, *The Time of Our Singing*, and *Orfeo* (Powers 2013). The correspondence between the narrative, musical and performative dimensions in *Orfeo* can be sensed in its structural, rhetorical and thematic aspects in multiple ways that suggest their interconnected reflection and refraction through a perspectivist approach that is unified and temporarily stabilized under a shifting fractal organization. In his discussion of *The Gold Bug Variations*, a novel where genetic engineering and music are also related as analogous themes, Labinger interprets the novel's consonance between narrative structure and theme in terms that resonate with Neo-Baroque aesthetics. Labinger lists a series of features in Powers' language that, according to him, target conveying a sense of the infinite in the particular by embedding the core message in every level, namely; the use of puns, allusions, structural metaphors, and biographical, textual, intertextual and extratextual (historical) parallelisms involving theme, voice, plot structure, and character construction (1995: 92). Labinger's list of structural and thematic features can also fit a description of *Orfeo*.

Specific comparisons between Els' personal life and the biographies of relevant composers whose works and lives inspire him, stand in mutually reflective and refractive interrelation, so that it is impossible to tell whether they influenced the way he constructed his life or whether they served as a retrospective, interpretive key that Els uses to make sense of his lived experience.<sup>4</sup> A short, but significant list would include Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of time*, which Els relates to his birth; Mozart's *Jupiter*, signaling adolescence; Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*, which he plays at his dog's funeral; Partch's *Barstow*, to signify the lonesome, wandering direction of his road escape; Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony*, bridging the differences between Stalin's repressive policies and NSA policies after 9/11; and Lieberman's *Neruda Songs*, presenting love as the motif unifying all life and music at the end of the novel.

Each apparently random selection of episodes from his lived experience is presented as the choreographed performance of a musical piece inspiring or explaining the decisions and motivations of his life, which is thus inextricably linked to music. It is through the *movements* of lived experience that the dissipative structure of randomly connected pieces become stable or significant, preventing the dissolution of meaning in their arrangement along the novel. When first confronted with the eccentric choreography that his friend Richard Bonner designed to accompany his music, Els feels estranged from his own composition while Bonner instructed musicians: "*You gonna sit there with a broom up your sphincter, afraid to tap your feet? You've all forgotten where music comes from. Why do you think they're called movements?*" (2014: 153). But although he hated the overall results, which he judged as a "total lie" (159) against his grander, stranger ideal of music, Els proposed the singer immediately after the show because "*I saw something in you tonight. Something I didn't know was there.*" "*That [something]*" she explains, "*was performance*" (2014: 163). The isomorphic arrangement of themes, voices, plot nodules, and characters, as well as of puns, allusions, and biographical, textual, intertextual and extratextual (historical) parallelisms, confers the novel with a labyrinthine, polycentric structure that however suggests (and challenges the reader to find or construct) a complex, coherent – though elusive – whole, the suspended stability of which lies in narrative movement. Each of the nodules reinscribes and is reinscribed in the others introducing variations in their isomorphism that both push the plot forward and turn it around itself.

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<sup>4</sup> Calabresse describes this type of structure as *emboîtement*, or the potential figurative metamorphosis of each narrative nodule into another, "making the actual metamorphosis of one [nodule] actually take place within another" (1992: 106). All the nodules are thus "different manifestations of the same underlying structure" (1992: 105).

The most obvious superimposition of models including and included in the models they reflect and refract is the literalized metaphor of musical inscription in the curling DNA of *Serratia marcescens*. The physical limits of the genetically modified bacteria enclose and break the limits between the natural and the artificial, and reflect Els' lived experience as a retired composer as he pushes the borders of art and life in the seclusion of his laboratory. The model expands to the whole of Els' life interpreted as the expression and composition of his music and as the reinterpreted performance of a selection of relevant, previous musical compositions and the lived experiences of their composers; but also to a resignification of the USA as a living organism whose internal structure is explained through the history of its musical interests and expressions, and finally to the existentialist and ontological question about human life in its natural, political and spiritual dimensions in the context of 9/11. Each different compositional nodule includes and reflects others, causing refractions in every analogy that result from their narrative contiguity and continuity and that imitate as well as serve as a constructed model to represent the natural composition of life; the novel as *Serratia marcescens*, the novel as Els, the novel as musical and narrative composition that reflects and refracts all narrative and musical compositions, the novel as the USA, and all of them as the novel.

## Nature, Science, Wonder

The ancient Greek understanding of music in its musical, vocal and performative dimensions serves to explain the effects that Orpheus' exceptional music causes on natural elements. When Orpheus plays his lyre, the whole of the natural world responds to his music; animals, plants and inert beings are emotionally and physically moved towards and around him in a non-competing order that reflects the harmony of his music. However, most narrative and pictorial representations of this myth establish an ambiguous relation between art as a human technology and the non-human, natural Other. Typically, Orpheus is represented playing the lyre at the center of a natural landscape and surrounded by all kinds of animals that are moved by his music into a harmonious coexistence with him and each other. The picture is literally anthropocentric, with Orpheus in its center and the animals around him. However, this natural society is organized by a narrative that does not reflect an actual natural order in which animals predate each other, feed on plants and distribute or change the inert, physical space around them; but on a strongly humanist one. It depicts a natural order that is harmonious only by human intervention, since the wilderness of the living beings that should naturally be competing with each other for survival (i.e. carnivores, herbivores



and plants) is ideally reinscribed through the temporary suspension of its natural dissonance during Orpheus' performance. Thus, while it suggests a perfect harmony between the human (represented here in terms of musical artifice) and the natural order (represented against its own wild and violent nature), it does so by means of a hierarchical structure that is overtly anthropocentric.<sup>5</sup>

This issue is fundamental in the current ecological and transhumanist debates, within the frame of a long pastoral tradition.<sup>6</sup> Despite the many different approaches that these discourses have developed in relation with the redefinition and reconfiguration of the humanist paradigm, what seems to pervade all of them is a challenge of conceptual limits between former ontological and physical differences targeting their ultimate dissipation. This continuity has been formulated in terms of a common *quiditas* that is empirically proved by the common discursive inscription of identity through shared codes (such as DNA in the field of biology or computer data in the field of information technology),<sup>7</sup> functions (such as aesthetic or prosthetic surgery)<sup>8</sup> or matter (such as vibration and agency).<sup>9</sup> Apparently disparate concepts and practices such as genetic experimentation, mind transfer, or singularity on the one hand and ecological, geological or geopolitical consciousness, being one with nature, and even a common spirituality of an All-being, share this sense of continuity among the different *haecceitas* of the particular.

Natural and technological elements that formerly fell within the category of the infra-human by lacking either the soul, reason, ethics, feeling, genetic evolution or technology that used to define humanity within the humanist paradigm; are incorporated to a new post-human subjectivity that finds in their incorporation, a dissipation and/or a transcendence of a merely human subjectivity and identity. Thus, although most ecocritical and post-humanist discourses develop different versions of the pastoral ideal, their intended harmony between the natural and the artificial includes models ranging from contingent sustainability

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5 The natural space depicted in this myth adjusts to the model of the garden that Leo Marx described as a temporal and spatial clearing in the wilderness where the threats that technology and nature imply for each other are suspended in a harmonious physical, psychological and social tension that is ideal for human existence. See Marx (1964).

6 Rosi Braidotti has related the relevance of these issues to current academic interests in the crisis of humanism and a corresponding rise in the formation of otherized subjectivities that formerly fell outside the paradigm of the human: the unconscious, the female, the colored, the animal and the machine. See Braidotti (2002/2005). A decade before her, Calabrese related the formlessness of suspended liminality to Neo-Baroque taste (1992: 50, 97).

7 For a transhumanist approach, see Kurtzweil (2005).

8 For a discussion on the emerging field of bioart, see Yetisen and Yun (2015: 724–734).

9 For a material ecocritical approach, see Iovino and Oppermann (2012) and Bennett (2010).

to a transcendence of the human that may gravitate towards the infrahuman or the superhuman with either utopian or dystopian orientations.<sup>10</sup>

In 2003, Powers claimed that all his novels were about connection, symbiotic and interdependent mutualism, collective identity, complicity and interdependence, and the impossibility of separation, opposition or binary categories (Fuller and Powers 2003: 110). He could still make the same claim a decade later about *Orfeo* (Powers 2013: n. pag.), where Powers' recurrent narrative interests give an expression to the anxieties that the collapse of the humanist paradigm causes in contemporary Western culture. At the beginning of the novel, Peter Els extends the scope of human dignity to his dog Fidelio<sup>11</sup> by calling 911 instead of Animal Care and Control when she starts hemorrhaging, and by procuring her a proper burial instead of disposing of its corpse as biological waste. More obviously, his (choral?) uchronic voice from beyond the main third-person narrative also contemplates the idea that there is no genetic difference between human beings and the infrahuman bacteria it incorporates "[y]ou carry around ten times more bacterial cells than you do human ones. Without their genes, you're dead" (2014: 92). However, while Els' behavior regarding his dog and his opinions about bacteria question the borders between human and infrahuman life – his dog's name also overtly suggesting that she is replacing the function of Els' life companion after his divorce (Powers 2014: 11–12) – he justifies biohacking *Serratia marcescens* on the assumption of its biological infrahumanity, which is established by comparing its DNA with the technology of musical scales and instruments. At the center of the picture is Els as a Nietzschean superhuman figure amorally "playing" God or justifying his intervention in natural selection through the superiority of his rational qualities as man, while his genetic identification with *Serratia marcescens* implies that a similar justification for genetic experi-

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**10** The machinal understanding of human beings underlying eugenics may promise universal health or genetic discrimination; and global computer networks may promise a superconscious subjectivity or the repression of individual freewill. Ecological policies protecting the natural environment may promise the sustainability of the pastoral order or impose the natural selection of the weakest, while the transcendental spirituality that connects human beings to the natural environment implies imposing a universal moral order that represses the diversity of cultural and religious identities.

**11** Beethoven's opera (1805) sings the triumph of Leonore's marital love for her husband, whom she rescues from death in prison by disguising herself as a prison guard (Fidelio). Powers' intertextual reference to Beethoven echoes Orpheus' *katabasis* with revisionist variations that do not only reverse gender roles between Orpheus and Euridice, but human-infrahuman categories and functions, since Els' Fidelio is Cancerberus (hell's guard), loving wife (Leonore) and Orpheus (hero). Also, although Els reflects that "[i]t's not as though a human had died," he still plays Mahler's *Songs on the Death of Children* at her funeral (2014: 29).

mentation could be used to reduce human beings to an infrahuman condition on an aesthetic basis.

Similarly, Els' use of information and communication technologies also bring his merely human capacities to the sphere of the transhuman-superhuman bordering the divine. Although this technological superhumanity is based on a hierarchical division between the human and the infrahuman, it is also through the use of these very same technologies that such categorical division is challenged. The smartphone Els borrows from his late-life romance Klaudia Kohlmann includes a musical playlist that would take him a lifetime to listen, a mapping app that helps him escape the FBI (2014: 147), internet information about him that projects upon his face the public image he cannot have access to from his inside (175), and the keys to spread a silent description of his musical experiment all over the web through twitter; "every message, a melody" (2014: 358–359). Yet the same device that makes him transcend his merely human possibilities is addictive for Kohlmann, makes Els traceable to the authorities and drowns the internet users all over the USA in data (2014: 175), reducing them to the infrahuman condition of living programmable devices and hunted animals in a surveillance state.

Despite the common claim that posthumanist and ecocritical revisions of the humanist paradigm stand against anthropocentric views, the Cartesian phenomenological catch is still difficult to shake off for any human critical discourse, no matter how perspectivist its claims may be. The catch, which is so obviously present in the anthropocentric position of Orpheus surrounded by the natural elements that are moved by his music, is however successfully removed in the Orphic myth. According to this myth, Orpheus' art moves nature because it speaks to nature in its own terms, dissolving Wittgenstein's famous paradox of the lion. Molina Moreno relates the proximity between the musical and the recitative in the ancient understanding of music to magical chants (2008: 36), which Bernabé explains through the *sympathic* properties that music shares with the corporeal state (2008: 29). A continuity is thus established between linguistic technology and corporeal nature through musical mediation, which partakes of both. Music is not only one with word, it is also one with nature.

The idea of music as the unmediated expression of nature's apparent randomness on the basis of a shared code unavailable to merely representative means such as word, also underlies the musical interests of the post-war, American avant-garde that serves as geographical and temporal setting of the novel. Understanding the occasional temporality of any sonorous landscape as a musical composition, or trying to reproduce such effect through the random dissonance of instruments designed *ad hoc* for each unique musical piece, are techniques pervading the musical compositions of the American avant-garde (see Nichols 1998).

When Els perceives the environment around him, he is attentive to its underlying musical order, the random harmony of which he strives to imitate in his compositions: “The sky-wide trill filled the air with sonic pollen [...] It filled the air at every distance, too sweet for locust or cicadas. Bats didn’t shriek in broad daylight, and birds didn’t sing in chorus. Something invisible and abundant was playing with harmony, and Els turned student again” (2014: 148). On the one hand, there is a sense of awe at the mysterious order hidden from plain ear, while the implication that such order exists involves the pleasure enclosed in the challenge to unravel its mystery.<sup>12</sup> Then, at Els’ laboratory,

*For two hours, DNA melts and anneals, snatches up free-floating nucleotides, and doubles each time through the loop. Twenty-five doublings turn a few hundred strands into more copies than there are people on Earth. Outside budding trees submit to the whims of a light wind [...] This plate goes under a microscope, at 400x. The man puts his eye up to the lens and sees the real world. (2, emphasis in the original)<sup>13</sup>*

The general effect produced by such pieces targets a sense of **the-a**we in the audience by obscuring the categorical distinction between a naturalized idea of music and a theatricalized conception of nature. Composing musical pieces that would reproduce the undecidability of natural randomness causes a double intellectual pleasure in the audience; an initial awe at the incomprehensible, and the desire to unravel its mystery.<sup>14</sup> However, what is extraordinary in Orphic music is not the sympathetic principle that connects it to nature, nor the knowledge of nature’s apparently random, mysterious order; but the human possibility to alter such order, to move nature around man. When Els composes his music in the DNA of the *Serratia marcescens*, he relies on the random complexity and abundance of the natural order to play a part **on his** composition, so that his cumbersome technological arrangements produce his composition as a natural reproduction, or in nature’s own infrahuman language. Still, there is no denying that like Orpheus, Els is at the center of his laboratory, moving the natural forces of genetics to his tune, somewhere between the anthropocentric human and the creative divine.

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<sup>12</sup> This aesthetic device has been described by Calabresse as Neo-Baroque in taste when **describ**ing precisely this period in western art (1992: 122).

<sup>13</sup> In science fiction, Calabresse identifies a Neo-Baroque concern with the transgression of merely human perceptual limits through technological supermediation (1992: 55) that is central in transhumanism, and that paradoxically redefines reality as hyperreality.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of this double intellectual pleasure in Neo-Baroque art, see Calabresse (1992: 156–157).

## Ethics, Eschatology, Art

The ideal harmony between the natural and the human is also central in Orphic soteriology, which was based on a doctrine that forbids shedding blood and the ingestion of animated beings (Jiménez San Cristóbal: 734) that still resonates in current vegetarianism and its ethical identification of all animated life. However, underlying both religious and ecological approaches runs a humanist evolutionary logic targeting spiritual and ethical perfection through the physical one. A similar transcendental approach is held by current transhumanist discourse, which advocates for perfecting the human, biological body by technological means aiming the transgression of their categorical limits. Although the intellectual and aesthetic beauty of Els' Orphic composition in the DNA of *Serratia marcescens* pursues harmony with natural randomness, its challenge of conceptual borders between the human and the natural also pursues a similar, though dangerous, eschatological transgression with ethical implications deriving from its anthropocentrism.<sup>15</sup>

What Els intends as natural, musical and rational beauty is based on the temporary disruption of the accepted categorical order it challenges. Since wonder is the intended effect of this aesthetic object, its ruling aesthetic principle must rest on *not* being socially accepted. In the particular case of bioart, the social rejection that grants its aesthetic effect has an ethical character.<sup>16</sup> The wondrous effect caused by this particular aesthetic taste based on transgression is similar to the effect caused by the monstrous;<sup>17</sup> a sense of awe at the incomprehensible because the destabilization of limits it causes is beyond recognition. The unstable, incomprehensible, and therefore mystic form of Orphic music can thus be considered as beautiful and/or monstrous depending on the ethical level of tolerance allowed by its audience.<sup>18</sup> An ethical criterion that judges a transgres-

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**15** When found in the subgingival biofilm of teeth, *Serratia marcescens* stains them with a red color that suggests the cruelty of animal ingestion by the evocation of blood. By choosing this particular bacteria as the object of Els' bioart, Powers seems to attribute a negative ethical value to its corresponding intellectual and aesthetic positive.

**16** I have used Calabresse's table indicating the correspondence between the morphological, ethical, and emotional dimensions of a work of art (1992: 93).

**17** Calabresse defines the monstrous in relation with the supernatural or fantastic, but also with the marvelous (rarity or casualness in content and mysterious in form), and etymologically, as the spectacular as a challenge to the objective (the world beyond us) and subjective (our spirit or intelligence). For a full discussion, see Calabresse (1992: 91–92).

**18** Calabresse describes this limit as the "interval of confidence" in statistics (1992: 170), and relates it to a varying ethical imperative regulating aesthetic taste (1992: 66, 92–94).


sive aesthetic object as bad or beyond ethical limits, would therefore render a wondrous effect corresponding with the terrible.

This isomorphism between the beautiful and terrible transgressions explains that Els' musical masterpiece in the DNA of *Serratia marcescens* is interpreted as an act of bioterrorism. Although strictly etymologically speaking, *marcescens* refers to the decay of death; homophonally, it evokes the mixture of violence and rebirth symbolized by Mars (god of war and spring) and chromatically, to the ambivalence between death and life suggested by blood. While he clings to exclusively aesthetic criteria to justify biohacking bacteria for the sake of a transcendental art all along the story, Els' description of the effect of this art at the end of the novel is ambiguous enough to reveal a certain threat behind its beauty:

He tweets of how he let his music go. Of how it's spreading in the air all around, in the grout of your bathroom tiles. A tune you might be breathing in right now, one you'll never be able to hear.

The tweets condemn him.

I left the piece for dead, like the rest of us. Or for an alien race to find, a billion years after we go extinct. (2014: 359)

El's obsession with experimental composition detaches him not only from his potential audience, but also from his family, ultimately leading him to divorce and seclusion from society for the sake of art.  triggering his death at the end of the novel, which he also understands as a musical movement towards the unknown. So, as he seeks the perfect musical order that should give an expression to the natural one, Els breaks the also natural order that connects him to others as a living human being. Similarly, by turning to the purely biological as an instrument to express the internal order of life, he becomes a threat to life by turning into a bioterrorist himself.

Challenging the limits between biological categories also involves an implicit challenge of the limits of life itself; of the limits between the living and the inert, and between the dead and the living.<sup>19</sup> While meddling with these limits is justified by the promise of transcending the human into the transhuman form that is currently ascribed to the somewhat divine, that very promise also involves identifying with the ethically monstrous (Satanic) that challenges the divine order. Molina Moreno connects the ethical and transcendental dimensions of Orpheus' *katabasis* when he describes Orpheus' descent to the underworld as a means to obtain a "superhuman knowledge" about life and death, which would

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<sup>19</sup> Although marginally, Calabresse exemplifies Neo-Baroque concerns for the limits of time with death as the ultimate limit of life (1992: 53).

somehow correspond with his superhuman knowledge of natural language. It is on account of this knowledge that Hades grants him access to the underworld and even the possibility to bring his deceased wife back to life, but the knowledge Orpheus obtains from his *katabasis* is precisely the that his transgression of the limits between the human and the divine makes him creditor of divine punishment (2008: 68). Thus, Orpheus must fail in his attempt to rescue his deceased wife from death precisely because as he pushed them, he learned about the limits separating it from life. There is no transgressing the limits without the limits.

In *Orfeo*, Powers updates the myth of the ancient Orphic *katabasis* to ask the question of the role of art in the age of biotechnological reproduction. The theme of scientific and technological experimentation as an expression of, or a threat against the natural order is also present in Powers' previous and later works, including biology, chemistry, and information engineering (Dawes 1998: 49; Neilson 1998: 18–19; Dewey 2002: 2). Yet in *Orfeo*, this theme connects with the national and international politics of the US at the turn of the twenty-first century and opens the question of the role of art in these particular historical circumstances. Powers himself has provided this interpretive key to the novel when he described it as a *katabasis*: “Els descends to the underworld of twenty-first-century America and he has to end up [making] [...] a kind of collective raid on death” (2013: n.pag.), which he of course, must fail to do.

The novel's contextualization in post-9/11 America opens the novel: “*An overture, then: Lights blaze from an American Craftsman home in a demure neighborhood, late on a spring evening, in the tenth year of the altered world*” (2014: 1); that is, 2011. This initial frame develops with the police merely suspecting his laboratory very early in the narrative, and moves *in crescendo* as the marginal but pervading frame of the whole novel.<sup>20</sup> When Joint Security Task Force inspect his house, they interpret Els' musical creation *literally*, as an act of musical terrorism against social harmony.

*Where'd you learn Arabic? I don't know Arabic*, Els said [...] *Then what's that?* Coldberg pointed to a framed manuscript page hanging on the wall in the dining room: half domes with smaller half domes tucked in line underneath them, like the scalloped arches of a Sinan

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**20** While the main narrative weight of the novel rests on the retrospective account of Els' life, the shadow of bioterrorism operates as a framing, contrapuntal narrative that is however central to the novel. Calabresse describes the particular device of creating a “false distinction between tale-frame and framed tales” as an instance of Neo-Baroque structural instability (1992: 107). The contrapuntal technique is typical of Powers' style, and has been described by Joseph Dewey: “Two (and sometimes three) narrative braids are offered polyphonically, told side by side [...] that do not touch each other [...] Yet they come to complement and deepen each other” (2002: 11).

mosque. Each niche was emblazoned in flowing Arabic. *That's a sixteenth-century Ottoman manuscript showing an old system of musical notation.* (2014: 47)

The collective paranoia the news unleash in the media certainly tells more of the society who actively “listens” to his silent piece beyond its merely artistic purpose, than of Els’ intentions as an artist or of the piece itself. So while Els’ artistic impulse may be that of creating new life through art, the collective trauma<sup>21</sup> justified by and justifying the implementation of NSA repressive policies after 9/11 keeps bringing the shadow of the dead as an interpretive key to his music. The panoramic vision of Els’ prophetic voice from the beyond realizes that the ethical correspondent of aesthetics confers art with political relevance: “I wanted to believe that music was the way out of all politics. But it’s only another way in” (2014: 42). Thus, the potentially disruptive order of bioart is put forward by extrapolating its technological applications to the sphere of international bioterrorism. In fact, if Els’ intended audience identified with his aesthetic premise, they would also have to accept the unpredictable political consequences of justifying biohacking on the basis of aesthetic freedom.<sup>22</sup>

Because Orpheus proves he knows and plays the mysteric language that links all natural and human orders into a harmonious whole, Hades grants him the privilege to enter the underworld and attempt to pull the shadow of his wife back to the physical world of the living. This possibility is however subject to one significant condition; that he held the hand of the invisible shadow of his wife *as if* he could actually feel it. The possibility to transcend death is thus conditioned to Orpheus’ faith in that his own musical language can transcend its limits as it could transcend the limits between the human and the natural. So it follows that Orpheus’ failure to bring his wife back to life does not rest on the impossibility of this ultimate transcendence, but on his own impossibility to believe in it, which makes him guilty for his failure. Had his love been stronger than death, he would have remained with her in the underworld in the first instance. But the wish for life being stronger (implicitly acknowledging the unbridgeable difference between life and death) makes him go back to the world of the living, guilty also for his own survival.

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<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the notion of collective trauma, see Gibbs (2014).

<sup>22</sup> Dewey describes Powers’ novels in precisely these terms when he claims that they defy “the terrifying implications of closure by directly inviting the participatory reader to continue the tale [...] via the agency of cooperative creation” (2002: 11). Part of the risk involved in Neo-Baroque transgressive aesthetics lies in its appeal to a “productive consumption” of the work of art by means of which anomalous interpretations may lead to new stable orders with unpredictable ethical consequences (Calabresse 1992: 150–151).



The motif of music as a medium that transcends death and its relation to the survivor's guilt<sup>23</sup> is a recurrent one in the novel. At his dog's funeral, Els expresses his own guilt for surviving his dog through Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*, as the voice singing in italics the blame for the children's death ("*In this raging, in this horror, I would never have let the children out!*") becomes non italicized in the following line: "Guilty survivor, beating up on itself. The music locates the storm inside the singer's mind" (2014: 37). Els explains how Mahler composed the piece in remorse for surviving eight of his siblings, and how this composition somehow involved a threat for his two living children (2014: 34). In evocative fractal recurrence, the piece itself is introduced by Els' recollections of Clara, the girl who introduced the very same piece to him, a love lost together with her childhood. Significantly, Clara is described as some sort of Euridice "coming from a planet even more remote than his;" and remembered as the lost child that "he spent his life trying to revive" (2014: 31, 34). While Mahler's dead siblings stand for all the dead children someone has ever guiltily survived, and his own children are threatened by his composition, their joint shadow extend to the loss of all innocent childhood, including Els' child love and her projection over Els' own child daughter – both of them victims of Els' music. But ultimately, and most significantly, the shadows of all children stand also extratextually, as the victims of 9/11 and the lost innocence of a whole country.

The thousands of lives undone by 9/11 haunt Powers' novel as the invisible and unnamed life mates that no artistic composition can bring back to life. Any new life that might be artistically biohacked into a fresh start (any post-traumatic treatment, any social policy) would necessarily have to incorporate the intricate network of ghostly musical pieces (individual and collective recollections) that would already be inscribed in their modified DNA together with the random differences that a new life code would add to it. And yet, those pieces would be utterly irrecoverable *as they were* when they lived, least you can impossibly believe they actually can, start life afresh from ground zero. At the end of the novel, after having finally arrived at his daughter's house, and surrounded by police forces waiting outside, Els considers that the possibility of his redemption is conditioned by his capacity to believe in it, "as if the *perfected terrors* of the last century changed nothing, and even now, even in this year, home might still be intact, and nearer than you think" (2014: 360, my emphasis).

But when Orpheus looks back to check if he was actually holding the hand of his wife, he already knew the answer because his looking back was the acknowledgement that he was wrong to try to retrieve her in the first instance, that his

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23 For a discussion of the notion of survivor's syndrome see Lewis Herman (1992).

transgression was monstrous. It is the sense of guilt in looking back that makes guilt the cause, rather than the consequence of his failure; a guilt that when transposed to the wider, historical scope of post-9/11 America, makes survivors responsible not only for surviving and impossibly remembering, but also for having somehow contributed to all those deaths by remembering them in the first instance.<sup>24</sup> Els' refusal to believe in his own aesthetic redemption on account of his ethical responsibility has a political reading as a refusal to believe in the NSA redemptive, repressive policies that blame international terrorism and victimize all innocent American history, by not acknowledging its share of guilt in it:

So what to do with that failed revolution, the hundred years of uncompromising experiment? The need for something beyond the ordinary ear: Disown it? [...] shake your head and smile at the airs of youth? No: Strangeness was your voluntary and your ardent art [...] No take-backs-now. No selective memory; no excuses. There's only owning up to everything you ever tried for, here at the end of a very long day. (2014: 361)

The red color of the *Serratia marcescens* Els experiments with, stains his hands in metaphorical comparison with the blood shed by social, economic, environmental, democratic, imperialistic, national and international US experiments that inscribed their artistic variations in the world's DNA for the sake of some transcendental harmony that must necessarily incorporate the monstrous; a risk that it already knew of from the beginning and was still eager to run. "And that is the *curse* of a life spent looking for transcendence: nothing real will ever suffice" (2014: 362, my emphasis), Els concludes, acknowledging that its project was doomed from the beginning.

Els' question is about the aestheticization of an ethics ruling politics; about the role of aesthetics in the historical context of artistic occurrence. Is art to blame for the natural and political consequences of the aesthetic taste it proposes? Is the musical interconnectedness of all languages and performances accountable for what it sings or silences? And if so, is there any right or good harmony to pursue in art that may serve as leading key for all artistic and life pursuits, a signal for the good turn to take in the changing, random design of the natural labyrinth? A last Orphic myth is concerned precisely with the role of the artist in the spiritual, social and political spheres. After his death and dismemberment at the hands of Thracian women, halfway between the world of the dead and the living, Orpheus' head remains in Delphos separated from his body as a sort of monster; a storage

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<sup>24</sup> A connection can be established here between the Neo-Baroque different sense of history by which all cultural objects (including personal or collective recollections of past events) are regarded as contemporary (Calabresse 1992: 54) and the compulsive repetition of past traumatic experiences in the present as a sign of post-traumatic stress disorder (LaCapra 2001).

system and lifeless device for the delivery of information about the past, meaning of the present and guidance for the future life in the form of music. In Delphos, Orpheus' head sings prophecies and composes musical pieces for posterity.

At the end of *Orfeo*, as Els waits in the alocality of his car outside his daughter's house, the elegiac, body-less voice of Lieberson's *Neruda Songs* plays in the car radio from a future perfect perspective. Like a prophetic voice from the beyond, "the long, luxurious lines forecast your past and remember your future in detail" (2014: 363). Its message provides Els with key to interpret his life and all life, and prophesizes the composition and performance of his death and all death around the common motif of love: "Love, if I die and you don't, / Love, if you die and I don't, / let's not give sadness any more ground" (2014: 360). Love is here presented as a sympathetic force that moves all elements and categories, all times and spaces; a force connecting all the musical dimensions with the natural and the supernatural, all fragments with their totality; a force that cannot defeat death, but can still transcend it through art. Love turns out to be the motif behind Els' most enduring, living, and "only decent composition" (2014: 365), his "cell's lone heir and executor" (2014: 363); his daughter Sarah. She becomes the sole audience and recipient of his life composition, which he conducts and performs for her only as a silent, yet finally meaningful piece of good and beautiful music. Ultimately, this love is an act of faith on an aesthetic lie that transcends while acknowledging, the limits between life and death.

The end of Els' narrative composition is, like its beginning, an overtly theatrical one.<sup>25</sup> Instead of the stage directions that open the novel in italics as an opera, Els chooses to end his composition conducting the performance of his life composition; and the end of life, as its performance. Holding "a bud vase filed with fresh-cut lily of the valley" that he acknowledges would make a "ready-made, if a little theatrical [...] lab glassware in the dark" (2014: 368), he steps out of his daughter's house and into a street filled with armed police forces to play the bioterrorist role that all but him would temporarily believe was true. The terror that this composition (meant to be beautiful) causes in his daughter stands in contrast with Els' impossible faith in the goodness of a death that ambiguously aims at and is motivated by his love for art and for her. Els' dismemberment at the hands of Thracian police lies, like its title and the sound of his music, beyond the limits of the novel, waiting to be completed by an active readership. The novel thus stands overtly theatrical as well as uncannily realistic by suggesting that the reality beyond fiction might be understood as one more of its fictional layers, and

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<sup>25</sup> For an elaboration on theatricality in the context of Neo-Baroque aesthetics, see Calabresse (1992: 56–57), and Egginton (2014).

demanding from readers a similar leap of faith in the impossible magic that transcends its limits.

## Conclusion

Along the development of my analysis, I have suggested a Neo-Baroque aesthetic principle organizing the thematic and structural elements of Powers' novel. I have used Calabresse's definition of Neo-Baroque because despite the time elapsed since its theorization, it still remains the most comprehensive study on the topic, and a most useful tool for the analysis of what still can be claimed to be the sign of our times.

The novel's complexity involves a too-long series of themes and motifs to be listed in an essay, and are arranged in a contrivedly random order that tries to reproduce the way in which those themes and motifs are experienced in life as recollections, unsuspected connections, or spontaneous and unpredictable occurrences. Yet several grand motifs serve to articulate and give a certain coherence to the novel. Those would be music, the limits between life and death, as well as art and life, the technological transgression of the natural order and its ethical implications, and post-9/11 America. All of them are entangled with each other in a way that makes it difficult to discuss them in isolation, and arranged around the ancient myth of Orpheus; the entanglement of music, word and performance in the ancient Greek conception of music, its relation with the sympathetic effect of music on nature; and the ethical implications of transgressing the order-of-being in the process of self-knowledge and self-transcendence.

An ecocritical approach to the novel, engages the reader in contemplating the polycentric order of nature versus the anthropocentric one, while reconfiguring the limits between the natural and the technological on which ecological perspectives are often based. A posthumanist reading of the text connects such concerns with the ontological and conceptual dimensions of humanism as it challenges the order-of-being that defines humanity against its infrahuman and superhuman Others. Finally, all these questions are made relevant for post-9/11 America as a common frame for the lived experience of trauma in its political, social, aesthetic and eschatological dimensions.

While each of these approaches would require and justify an independent and more in-depth study of the novel, their separate analysis would not allow to gain perspective on their complex interconnection within its Neo-Baroque aesthetic frame. *Orfeo* is most aesthetically Neo-Baroque in foreseeing while refusing to render a conclusion that must be actively provided by each reader in unforeseen ways. Its stands as an overtly theatrical embeddedness in a wider, theatra-

lized reality that claims for its pressing actuality as well as its contrived fiction, and that appeals to each reader's responsible contribution to its completion, asking more questions that it gives answers, but leading the tune towards love and belief.

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