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## Capturing Capgras: *The Echo Maker* by Richard Powers

Richard Powers's novel, *The Echo Maker* (2006), tells the story of Mark Schluter, a young man of 27 who is nearly killed in an accident with his truck. He recovers but seems to be suffering from Capgras, a condition in which the patient believes that some of his loved ones have been replaced by doubles. Mark thinks his sister Karin has been replaced by someone who looks exactly like Karin, but he is certain she is only a robot or a stand-in. He calls her Kopy Karin and Karbon Karin. The evolution of the syndrome is far from positive. The condition seems to spread. Mark begins to believe it is not just Karin who has been replaced. His dog, his house, his old town and some of his best friends all seem to be replaced by stand ins.

Two doctors are trying to help Mark. The neurologist, Dr. Hayes, seeks the causes for Capgras in the physiological aspects of the brain. For him, treatment consists of pills. The popular "cognitive neurologist" (93), Dr. Weber, on the other hand, tries to understand the syndrome by linking it to existential problems such as "what is the self?" and "who is the other?" He starts from the idea that "you couldn't grasp any individual brain without addressing private history, circumstance, personality—the whole person, beyond the sum of mechanical modules and localized deficits" (227). Both doctors fail to get a grip on the syndrome and to help Mark. We might say they fail to capture the condition called Capgras. In what follows, we would like to see if the novel succeeds where these two fail. To organize our thoughts on the matter, we will first look at narration and focalization as they serve in *The Echo Maker* to grasp Mark's condition. At the end of our paper, we will test our findings on the representations of Mark's brain immediately after the accident. His limited brain capacity at this stage brings out the bare necessities of consciousness representation, which will give us crucial evidence for an analysis of the way in which brain trauma is narrativized in *The Echo Maker*.

### 1. Telling The Story of Capgras

In the view of Dr. Weber, one can only come to grips with a brain disorder by turning it into a story. His books have become nationwide bestsellers thanks to his

talent for turning the strangest cases of brain disorders into the most interesting and arresting stories. When he is asked for a speech “at an international conference on “The Origins of Human Consciousness” (229), “he was simply supposed to play himself, tell some good stories, and shake lots of hands” (230). As a scientist, he is a “tale-teller” (231) driven by “the narrative impulse” (232). Put positively, he has “been telling the story of people whose stories don’t get told” (225). Put negatively, Weber reduces his patients to stories and forgets about their all too real misery. Thus, there was Neil, who couldn’t see the left side of things anymore. Weber liked the man, but as soon as Neil had been turned into an interesting story, Weber forgot all about him: “He had no idea what became of the man. Some other neglect wiped him out, reduced him to story” (125).

### *Narrative mirrors*

Weber’s storytelling involves a form of blindness and voyeurism at the same time. He pries into the private affairs of his patients. More than once, people ask “if Weber had any qualms about violating his subject’s privacy” (186). A critical reviewer states that Weber’s “stories border on privacy violation and sideshow exploitation” (221). At the same time, Weber suffers from blindness because he does not want to get involved: “He dealt in generalities with no particulars, facts with no understanding, cases with no individual feeling” (222). He refuses to feel what his patients feel, in short he refuses empathy. His stories reflect the life of his patients in an exciting but safe way. In narratological terms, we might say his stories have a high degree of tellability, but in common sense terms they have a low degree of involvement. He offers a narrative mirror in which it is pretty safe for his readers to glance, because in the end no one is really there: not the disordered patient, not the orderly neurologist: “He’d left ‘Neil’ behind in the prose looking glass, lost somewhere, off in an imperceptible direction, an unreachable place deep inside the narrative mirror. . .” (126).

The narrative mirror is the central image to understand Weber’s ways of capturing Capgras. Mirroring is miming, and that is what Weber is doing when he tells his patients’ stories. He does so in two ways. First, he mimes their “exterior” lives, that is he reflects their background and their history into his narrative case study. Second, he mimes their “interior” lives, because his stories reduplicate the workings of the brain: “Consciousness works by telling a story, one that is whole, continuous and stable. When that story breaks, consciousness rewrites it. Each revised draft claims to be the original” (185). This is exactly what has happened to Mark: his accident broke up his story, he tried to rewrite it and considers the rewritten version as the original one. The “original” original therefore is lost.

Both in its exterior and interior variety, mimesis is not a pure reflection. It is a refraction, a form of rewriting. Thus, in his representation of the exterior details of his patients, Weber regularly changes things, to turn private histories into good stories. He says this protects his patients' privacy, and at the same time it highlights the most important features of the neurological problem—that is: the rewriting is also beneficial for the interior mimesis: “I always disguise the names, and often the biographical details, when they're important. Sometimes one case history actually combines two or more stories, to bring out a condition's most salient features” (186). Which leads a member of his audience to ask Weber: “You mean they're fiction?” (186).

Weber's narrative mirror involves fabulation and fictionalization because it puts together story elements that in reality are shattered: “*Personal confabulation*, the neurologist Feinberg called it. A story to link the shifting self back to senseless facts . . . : a single, solid fiction always beat the truth of our scattering” (164). Even when Weber starts to doubt the decency of his approach, he still relies on this fictional narration to make sense of the brain and its many disorders. When he sees his students, he gets an idea of a new form of science that would not just make use of narration to order chaos, but that would itself become a fictional narrative: “A feeling came over Weber, a desire to supplement genuine neuroscience with half-baked literature, fiction that at least acknowledged its own blindness. He would make them read Freud, the prince of storytellers” (365). He thinks his next book might become “a neurological novel” (366).

The question is to what extent Weber's fiction really acknowledges its own blindness. It is blind not just because the story-teller refuses involvement and erases the all too real tragedy of his main character (his patient), it also turns a blind eye to a great deal of hard science. Weber sometimes realizes he has been exaggerating the fictional and narrative dimension of neurology while at the same time underestimating the medical, clinical, physiological dimension. When his new book gets critical reviews for being no more than a collection of stories and anecdotes, he starts to feel guilty and wants to get into “solid research” (189), “get back to pure science” (223), admitting what he finds so hard to admit, namely: that “‘Everything's physical.' Chemical, electrical. Synapses” (354).

Weber is torn between clinical, non-narrative, pure science, on the one hand, and hermeneutic, narrative popularization on the other. Pure science, embodied in the novel by Dr. Hayes, works with figures, diagrams, scans, and all sorts of non-narrative tools. Still, these hard scientific facts are to be found in what is called scientific *literature*. Thus, when Weber researches “Mark's story” (311), he discovers

that scientific articles are few and far between: “He’d looked at the literature, enough to conclude that no real literature existed” (311). When Mark starts believing that he is dead, Dr. Hayes says: “There’s nothing like this in the literature.” To which Karin reacts: “‘Literature,’ she repeated, everything fictional” (398). So maybe, science is not free of fiction and storytelling after all. But then of course that is a take on the discipline by a laywoman who is desperate for results.

In his most optimistic moments, Weber believes his narrative tools produce an integrated whole and thus make sense of fragmented lives and scattered evidence. The multitude of figures, diagrams, and scans used by pure scientists seem unable to come up with a similar result: “Story was the storm at the cortex’s core. And there was no better way to get at that fictional truth than through the haunted neurological parables of Broca or Luria—stories of how even shattered brains might narrate disaster back into livable sense” (414). But his optimism is short-lived: “Then the story changed. Somewhere, real clinical tools rendered case histories merely colorful. . . . And all his literary cures turned to circus acts and Gothic freak shows” (414). Weber’s stories fail to get to the heart of the matter, and the basic reason that seems to be given for this in the novel is that they are heartless stories, lacking personal involvement and empathy.

Weber’s refusal to empathize undermines his mirroring or miming act. His narrative mirror has a neurological basis, which, ironically, he cannot mirror. He is unable to follow the neurological process of mirroring that lies at the heart of all empathy: “Science had at last laid bare the neurological basis of empathy: brain maps, mapping other mapping brains. . . . Imaging and EEG soon revealed that humans, too, were crawling with mirror neurons. Images of moving muscles made symbolic muscles moves, and muscles in symbol moved muscle tissue” (355). Miming the other is “the work of mirror neurons, empathy circuits” (383).

Put in a non-scientific way, these circuits might lead to contagious brain disorders. People might start to imitate symptoms and syndromes. This in fact is the story of *The Echo Maker*: the case of Mark restructures and rebuilds the whole world around him. His Capgras infects his whole world and turns his sister, his friends, his aide and his doctor into some sort of fellow-sufferers. *The Echo Maker* is not just about Capgras, it is about “mimetic Capgras” (420). Weber calls it the “first case ever of contagious Capgras” (430). Mark’s story affects and infects his reality. It is a case of “stories [come] true” (414).

### ***The real person behind the story***

This link with reality and with real people is precisely what Weber initially does not want to see or admit. He regards Mark as just one more good story. His first

visit is short, because he quickly finds enough material for an interesting narrative: “He had enough material now, if not for a write-up in the medical literature, at least for a haunting narrative case history” (160). He refuses to admit the reality behind the story. When he is attacked for that, he declines to defend himself: “Any explanation Weber might construct for the attack would be just a story against this story” (222). It seems that there is no reality, just a story. There are only characters, no real people.

But then Weber is forced to acknowledge the people behind the stories. First of all, the attacks force him to recognize that it is not just his narrative mode that is contested, it is his own person. Stories cannot be separated from their authors: “If *he* hadn’t authored the book, *Harper’s* wouldn’t have reviewed it at all. The review gave itself away: it didn’t aim to destroy the book. It aimed at him” (222). Second, Weber knows that stories do not exist on their own. They need a second subject, apart from the author, namely the reader: “The way a reader received his stories said as much about the reader’s story as about the story itself. In fact, his books explored that very fact: there was no story *itself*. No final judgment” (221).

Apart from the author and the reader, there is a third person involved in Weber’s stories, and that is, of course, his patient. As a character, the patient is at the passive, receiving end of the narrative process. Mark is not in control of his own story. “Of course, Mark Schluter doesn’t have the whole story” (336). He feels like a character being carried along by some power that is not his own. He does not feel like he is writing or telling his own story.

The most poignant symbol of this is the puzzling note that is found “on the bedside stand” in Mark’s hospital room (14). It reads: “I am No One/ but Tonight on North Line Road/ GOD led me to you/ so You could Live/ and bring back someone else” (10). Mark reads the note and thinks it was written by his guardian angel, the one who saved him after the accident. In the end it turns out that he himself is the writer of this note, and that the you mentioned in the note is not Mark, but Barbara, who had parked her car on the road, thereby causing Mark’s accident. Barbara becomes Mark’s personal nurse. Mark forgets he is the author of the note, and this reflects his inability to become the teller of his own life story. This fits in nicely with the narrative strategy used in the novel. Mark regularly plays a central role as one of the focalizing characters, but he does not become an intradiegetic narrator, except of course when he, as a character, talks to other characters. He is never in charge of the narration presented to the reader, even if that narration presents his own life story.

Sometimes Mark realizes that he is not in charge of his own story: “I don’t know who I’ve been feeling like, lately, but, man, it would be good to be off this ride” (393). This ride refers to his story, which may seem like his own invention but which basically invents him: “Hate this feeling that I’ve made everything up. That I’m some totally invented asshole” (420). If this is read as a metafictional moment, Mark is indeed “a totally invented asshole.” He is a character invented by the narrator of *The Echo Maker*. The same holds true if one links Mark’s utterance to the story world. In this world, Mark is indeed an invented asshole, as he is invented by Weber who turns him into a case study. The parallel between the metafictional level and the fictional—a parallel that, according to Keen (*Empathy*, 122-24), is not unusual in novels thematizing empathy—suggests a likeness between Weber and the narrator of *The Echo Maker* which we feel has to be central to a narratological interpretation of the novel.

The narrator of *The Echo Maker* is extradiegetic, heterodiegetic, and almost completely invisible. He leaves the floor to his main characters, but significantly they do not become narrators themselves. What holds for Mark, holds for all characters: they do not tell the story of the novel in the I-form, except of course in conversations and the like. Still, they all get their chance to focalize the story that the extra- and heterodiegetic narrator is telling. External focalization is rare and limited mainly to the first sections of the five parts that make up the novel. After the first section of each part, the reader is offered a series of internally focalized sections, separated by blank lines and initially set apart by the use of bold type in the first words of the new chapter. Karin, Mark, and Weber are the centers of this variable focalization. In the final pages of the novel, the succession of the various focalizations becomes more rapid, distinctions become less clear, bold type is used less frequently, and Barbara, Mark’s nurse, enters the field as a center of focalization (427).

While we will deal with focalization later on, it is important for an understanding of the novel’s narration to realize that the narrator rarely if ever gives his own view on the thoughts and feelings of his main characters and focalizers. His storytelling looks like a prototypical example of what Dorrit Cohn calls consonant psychonarration. In this form of consciousness representation, the narrator’s formulations are so close to the character’s thoughts, that the reader feels he or she is inside the character’s head. Focalization seems to be internal. Only in the first sections of each part is there no clear internal focalizer. Hence, the reader will consider these descriptions to be focalized through the narrator. These descriptions all focus on the cranes, the birds that are the main touristic attraction of the region in the United States where Mark lives.

Consonant psychonarration is *the* narrative device to present a complete empathy between narrator and character, as Wayne Booth (*Rhetoric of Fiction*, 377-78) has argued. Suzanne Keen (*Empathy*, 96-99) convincingly discusses the pros and cons of various narrative techniques with regard to empathy, and opens her discussion with consonant psychonarration. In this case, the narrator does not merely look into the head and heart of his character, he follows the character's thoughts and feelings so completely that he adapts his way of phrasing to the character's way of perceiving. As a result, it is impossible to distinguish between the perceptions of the narrator and those of the character. To the reader, the narrator has almost become the character. This is precisely what separates the narrator of *The Echo Maker* from Weber. As a storyteller, Weber refuses to identify with his main characters. No consonance there. If a person does pop up in the reception of Weber's books, it is the author, and not the character. Weber's harshest critics attack him by complaining about his way of narrating. Again, there is no consonance between narrator and character: the critic attacks the narrator and laments the fate of the main character.

Consonant psychonarration combined with variable focalization enables the narrator of *The Echo Maker* to capture Capgras and thus to succeed where the narrating neurologist, Weber, fails. But there is more to the story-telling of the narrator than merely following the perceptions of his characters. There are also his own perceptions, and these all center around the link between his story and history.

### ***The history behind the story***

As we said, the rare chapters that seem to be externally focalized have to do with the cranes. These birds are presented as symbols of an archaic prehistory that still lives on in our present-day. Their flights of migration are determined by old patterns that have engraved themselves in their brains and bodies. They are "the oldest flying things on earth" (3): "Something in the birds retraces a route laid down centuries before their parents showed it to them" (4). In mythology, the cranes are called "the Echo Makers" (181), because they echo a long forgotten past. They ensure continuity in history, even though they are now being threatened by a development project that will destroy nature and especially the water supply needed by the birds.

As symbols of continuity, the cranes are the opposite of Mark, whose life is totally disrupted. Mark has lost his history. No matter how much of his youth he rediscovers, he fails to integrate his past with his present. The Karin he now knows cannot be reconciled with the Karin he used to know. When he and his sister visit their abandoned parental house, they are "reconstructing the past they no longer shared" (374). And that goes for himself too: "Boom! Suddenly, I've got a whole

new history” (144). When he is talking to Daniel, Karin’s boyfriend, he asks: “Little Danny; young Markie. You remember those guys?” He himself answers the question: “I sure as hell don’t. No idea who those guys ever were. Two different worlds” (387).

Seen from the perspective of continuity and discontinuity, the world of the cranes and of Mark mirror each other. This impression is enhanced by the time of Mark’s accident, “Feb. 20, 2002” (128). Not only is this date a double mirror (02/20 for the twentieth of February and 20/02 for the year), it also coincides with the arrival of the cranes in Nebraska: “It occurs to Mark: his accident happened right at the very start of bird season. Sure, that could be just coincidence” (256). But of course, it is not. The return of the birds with their archaic group history is the mirror-image of Mark’s accident, which erases his personal history.

Looked at from this angle, Capgras can be defined as a gap between history and story. The story Mark finds himself in has rewritten his past so drastically that he is no longer able to recognize the people, places and events from this past. His history is “out there,” it is no longer a part of his own story. That explains his paranoia: since the historical foundations of his story are no longer there for him, he has to make up new foundations. Since he cannot locate these foundations in his own past, he is forced to look elsewhere and turn to others, who—no pun intended—become the powers grounding his story.

## 2. Sensing Capgras

Capgras may be a problem of mimesis that highlights the mimetic problems of storytelling. It may be about losing the authorship of one’s story, and it may be about the gap between history and story. But first and foremost it is about the gap between seeing and feeling — two central dimensions of what narratology calls focalization. Mark sees his sister, he recognizes her, but he cannot feel that she is his sister, so she must be someone else. We will discuss three ways in which focalization captures Capgras in *The Echo Maker*. These three aspects are mirrors of the ones we discussed for narration: the problem of miming and mirroring is highlighted by means of hypothetical focalization; the problem of the real person is presented by means of variable focalization and the concomitant embedded narratives (in the sense of Palmer 2004:183-193); the problem of history is developed by means of the bird’s eye view and the discrepancy between memory and feeling. Taken together, these focalization techniques may well succeed where the various focalizers fail.

### *Focalizing mirrors*

Mark’s mental world is only partially covered by the label of Capgras. The diagnosis becomes more vague as the so-called treatment of his condition progresses. Maybe

he is suffering from something in between Capgras and Fregoli syndrome (261); maybe it is Capgras mixed up with “Cotard’s syndrome” (397), and certainly his condition is affected by severe forms of paranoia. In narratological terms, paranoia is an exaggerated case of hypothetical focalization. Taking our cue from Phelan’s and Martin’s (*Lessons*, 95) description of the various forms of unreliable narration, we would say the paranoid focalizer is overreading the minds of the other characters, i.e. of his focalized objects. The paranoid character thinks he can read the minds of the others. To him, the reading is not mere speculation—as it would be in classical hypothetical focalization (Herman)—it is an empirical finding. He can see other people’s minds just as he can see their faces and bodies: “It’s pretty easy to read their real thoughts,” Mark thinks (253).

In terms of the empathy that was so crucial to successful and reliable narration, we might say Mark’s paranoid tendencies are exaggerated forms of empathy. He does not merely empathize with the objects of his focalizations, he actually thinks he can think as they do. With Alan Palmer (*Fictional Minds*, 230-31), one could study this conviction as an extreme form of doubly embedded narrative, “a character’s mind as contained within another character’s mind.” Mark actually believes the minds of others to be contained in his. Considered from the perspective of the Theory of Mind, which according to Zunshine (*Why We Read Fiction*, 4) holds that we read fiction as an exercise in mind-reading others, Mark’s mind-reading may be seen as a mistaken form of metarepresentation (47). The concept refers to the mindreader’s capacity to indicate the source or tag of the mental image (e.g. in acknowledging that a particular idea is derived from a particular person) and its content (e.g. in grasping the exact meaning of the idea). Mark Schluter mistakes both the sources and the contents. He thinks the threatening ideas that haunt him are in the minds of others, whereas actually they are his own conjectures. And he thinks their contents are all about the others’ hostility towards him, whereas actually the hostility is his own—a fact symbolically alluded to by his attempted suicide.

The Theory of Mind is also on the mind of Weber, when he explains the mirror neurons as the basis of empathy and of mimetic behavior: “The mirror neuron system extended beyond the surveillance and performance of movement. It grew tendrils, snaking into all sorts of higher cognitive processes. It played roles in speech and learning, facial decoding, threat analysis, the understanding of intention, the perception of and response to emotions, social intelligence, and theory of mind” (355).

Facial decoding is one of the crucial problems in Capgras, which may seem like the opposite of paranoia. Mark’s paranoia turns him into an overreading hypothetical

focalizer and a mindreader with metarepresentational problems, but this is only one side of his focalizing problem. Diametrically opposed to his over-empathic paranoia, there is his lack of empathy in his primal Capgras symptoms. This is a form of underreading. Mark fails to recognize his sister as a real living person. He thinks she is just a robot. In other words: he cannot see that his focalized object is also a subject, with its own mental world. When he meets Weber he asks him: "Did they build you from parts, as well?" (158).

The overreading and underreading in Mark's focalization are both extreme forms of mirroring and empathy: the paranoid overreading displays too much empathy, the Capgras form of underreading displays too little empathy. In the first case, the mirror image is really the person in front of the mirror; in the second case, the mirror image is locked up in the mirror and remains inaccessible to the person in front of it. Mark's condition is a constant vacillation between these two forms of focalization. As he learns to appreciate the Kopy Karin, he tries to read her mind, not in the exaggerated paranoid way, nor in the deficient Capgras way, but in the empathic way, which is half way between the two extremes. When Karin seems genuinely distressed at having missed the TV show in which Mark appeared to find the person who wrote the mysterious note, Mark thinks: "It's a good performance; he pretty much believes she had no idea" (369). This comes close to "regular" hypothetical focalization, in that Mark recognizes his hypothesis as a conjecture. But this is as close as he gets. He most often resorts to underreading or overreading. When Karin starts crying at the sight of their parental house, Mark is trying to read her mind, but alas, he has already made up his mind: "She snorts bitterly. Who knows why? It's only a job for her. But she's great at it" (372).

In the end Mark is put on pills Weber has read about in an article that is not merely part of the novel, but that exists in our real world (311). Whether these pills cure him, that is: whether they stabilize his focalization in the "normal" middle between the "abnormal" poles of paranoia and Capgras, remains unclear. When Karin enters his room, she gets the impression he does recognize her as the real Karin. "What took you so long?" he asks her. And "she watches him turn back into Mark, old Mark" (444). However, this is probably an illusion—an error in Karin's mindreading activity—because Mark says that she is not as thin as his real sister. "Who" Karin asks, and Mark responds: "Come on! Don't give me *who*. My sister" (446).

Significantly, this final scene with Mark is focalized by Karin. In the last part, the reader no longer enters the mind of Mark, as he is no longer used as an internal focalizer. The short fifth part of the novel starts with external focalization,

then moves to Karin as focalizer and finally to Weber. Mark is left out. That is: his mental world is left for the reader to speculate about. The reader gets involved in the game of mind-reading and may very well be underreading or overreading things. In that way, the reader must find a balance in his or her hypothetical focalization, a middle course that seems to elude Mark.

It is not just Mark who is having difficulty with hypothetical focalization. Karin is always wondering what people think about her and always fears that they do not think highly of her. She desperately wants to be loved, and therefore tries to adapt herself to what she thinks the others want her to be. It is also what she does with Mark: pretty soon, she begins to believe that Mark is right in thinking about her as a fake and a copy. In the beginning it looks as if this exaggerated empathy with what the other is (supposed to be) thinking is just a threat: "Another week of caring for Mark and she'd have begun believing his theories about her" (74). But then the threat becomes a reality. "I've done nothing at all for him," she says. "His real sister would have" (93).

Although Weber pretends to be entering the minds of his patients, he only does so within the safety of his non-empathic stories. His problems start when he begins to feel guilty for his remote stance. That is the moment when he begins to empathize not just with his patients, and especially with Mark, but also with his critics. He sees their point, and he decides to make amends by changing to the opposite pole, that is by overdoing empathy. He goes back to Nebraska: "He would never again leave himself open to charges of failed compassion. He would let Mark write the book. What did it feel like to be Mark Schluter?" (300-301). In this state of exaggerated empathy, he falls in love with Barbara, who becomes his mirror image: "I seem to be linked to her," he admits to his wife. "She reminds me of me" (353).

The empathy is mutual, and the two experience a brief but ecstatic sexual encounter while they are out with the birds. They become one: "One heartbeat, and he's strange to his body . . . Does not want her to see him as anything but what he well and truly is: hollow and graceless, stripped of authority. Borderless, same as anyone" (428). The self has become the other, mindreading has turned into mindmelting. In this respect, Weber has reached the exaggerated empathy that Mark reached in his paranoia. Weber and Mark mirror each other: they break up their lives with only the birds and Barbara as their witness. Through the sexual encounter with Barbara, Weber loses his identity. He is "falling backward toward the incommunicable, the unrecognized, the past he has irreparably damaged" (451). It seems he has succeeded in obtaining what he wanted all along: "He'd worked

his entire life to efface his past, no biography except what would fit on the flaps of a book.” (310)

To Karin, Mark and Weber, Barbara is the embodiment of empathy. She is always interested to listen to them and to empathize with their problems. According to Weber, she displays “the most natural shared feeling imaginable” (318). She cares for her patients, and in return they give her a sense of “Connection. Solidity.” (289). However, her empathy may be just a form of atonement, making up for her guilt in causing Mark’s accident. When Mark finally learns the truth, he and Karin break with Barbara. There seems to be no tolerance for empathy coming from a sense of guilt. Barbara seemed to be so easy to mindread, as she was always so open and empathic, but in the end it turns out she was misread by all—including the reader. “Empathy meant vertigo,” Weber thinks when he is falling in love with her (324).

Vertigo is indeed what the reader feels when he tries to make sense of the metarepresentations and the doubly embedded narratives in *The Echo Maker*. When Weber feels he is breaking down, he realizes there is just no way to know what others feel and think: “Powerless to know what anyone else might do. To know what it feels like to be anybody” (450). As a result, there is no way to read yourself as others read you: “No one saw his own symptoms. No one knew who others knew him to be” (357).

### ***The real person behind focalization***

As we mentioned earlier, Mark’s mental world is presented not just via his own focalization, but also via that of Karin, Weber and sometimes Barbara. In between the reader may of course get a short glance from the perspective of other characters, such as Mark’s friends Duane and Rupp. The narrative of *The Echo Maker* thus becomes an alternation of embedded narratives. This is the horizontal complement to the vertical form of doubly embedded narratives we discussed in the previous paragraph. On the horizontal plane, the characters’ perceptions are confronted directly with each other; the reader has direct access to their perceptions and thought. On the vertical plane, a character’s mind A is accessed via the detour of another character B, who is speculating about A. This combination of horizontal and vertical confrontation forms the core of the complex mental world exhibited in *The Echo Maker*.

The novel confronts various worlds and embedded narratives without offering an integrated (meta)narrative that might help the reader in deciding whose focalization is reliable or unreliable. This is due to the fact that the narrator’s focalization is limited to the bird-paragraphs that introduce each of the five main parts. Putting

together the external focalization of the narrator in the bird-paragraphs and the internal focalization of the characters would require the reader to perform a trick next to impossible: “No one can say what a bird might have seen, what a bird might remember” (278). Even if the birds witnessed Mark’s accident, their mental image of it remains unreachable to humans. Weber asks himself: “What does it feel like, to be a bird?” (424). There is no answer. Even if the narrator, as external focalizer, has access to the birds’ minds and thus to the accident and to the mental processing of it, his knowledge remains out of reach for the mindreading reader. (We will see that there is just one instance in which the external focalizer turns into an internal focalizer, thereby performing the impossible trick, namely feeling and seeing what a bird feels and sees. We discuss that scene later, as it is important for the third dimension of focalization, i.e. its historical determination.)

The alternation of embedded narratives is not a sequence of clearly separated mental worlds. As we suggested, there is a form of contamination as every character becomes infected by the contagious form of Capgras Weber diagnosed. He himself develops Capgras symptoms, just as Karin does. In the end she concludes: “The whole race suffered from Capgras” (347). Weber’s wife defines people as “infinitely peculiar packages of walking symptoms” (272). What Mark feels about Karin, is what we all feel about the other: we do not know them, and we can only grasp a copy of them. Everyone is someone else in the eyes of every other person he or she meets: “How many lives was one supposed to dope out in this life?” (216). As a result, life itself is a copy, as Karin recognizes: “Soon her brother would be right: their whole life a copy of itself” (195). Love is very much a form of Capgras, as it turns the other into a pure invention of the self: “Love was not the antidote to Capgras. Love was a form of it, making and denying others, at random” (268). In the end, Capgras becomes the symbol of life as it really is: “Capgras truer than this constant smoothing-out of consciousness” (448).

The vertical, double embedding of narratives and the horizontal contamination of embedded narratives, suggest that the characters’ mental worlds have lost their center and their limits. However, *The Echo Maker* is not just a story about characters or persons falling to pieces through their thwarted forms of focalization. It is a novel that seems to give up characters as the centers of focalization. In the mind of the reader, the network of mindreading becomes an almost independent set of connections, much like the network of brain synapses transmitting all sorts of information. The reader him- or herself is implicated in the network, mapping his own set of connections onto those of the story world. The process is well described by Weber: “Those recording synapses, bent back onto themselves—brain piggy-

backing and reading itself as it read the world—exploded into hopes and dreams, memories more elaborate than the experience that chiseled them, theories of other minds, invented places as real and detailed as anything material” (364).

Looked at from this perspective, *The Echo Maker* is a novel that represents—echoes, one might say—the network of focalization rather than the people who are supposed to be behind that process. There seems to be no real subject behind the process of guessing, mindreading, interpreting. It is all echoes, and the maker seems to have gone, much like the people who populate the world of *The Echo Maker*. There is no self, no subject, as Weber admits: “The self was a mob, a drifting, improvised posse” (358). The initial sentence of Mark’s note sums it all up: “I am no one” (368). It is not that there is nothing. It is just that everything and everyone are constantly changing into something and somebody else. A constantly shifting network, much like a brain, has taken the place of the traditional subject and object.

### ***The history behind focalization***

Is there no continuity at all, then, in this constantly shifting network of mindreading? As we said, the cranes represent continuity in history, whereas Mark is separated from his own past. We further suggested that it is impossible for humans to get into the minds of cranes, but that there is one exception to that rule. It is now time to turn to that exception. In the externally focalized bird-section that opens part four, the focalization suddenly shifts and becomes internal. A young bird sees how his father is shot as the hunting season starts: “His father is hit. He sees his parent sprayed across the nearby earth. Birds scream into the shattered air, brain stems pumping panic. This chaos, too, lays down a permanent trace, remembered forever: *open season*” (277).

The brain synapses are “recording synapses” (364). Every information they pass on, every trail they make, leaves an imprint. The system of imprints is what we usually call memory. It is a case of mind-rereading. Already in its title, *The Echo Maker* suggests that we never read or interpret anything from scratch. Our reading is always a form of re-reading. To everything we think, feel and do, we bring much of what we have thought, felt and done before. Whatever we make or create, is just an echo. It is never a creation out of the blue. Even Mark’s world is not completely new. It is a copy, an echo. Even his changing name shows that everything new is just another version of something old. After his accident, we meet Mark II, and after his failed suicide attempt he himself ironically speaks of “Mark Three” (414).

If everything we create is a form of recreation, then we think of earlier readings whenever we read. Hence, every reading is a form of rereading. That also goes for mindreading and for all forms of feeling and thinking. In that sense, history is a matter of focalization as we have just discussed it: a network of ever changing connections. But it is also a matter of telling and narrating, since we continually reread and rewrite what has gone before. The extreme form of rewriting that the brain accomplishes in Capgras is just an extreme case of the constant transformation of history. We are constantly reformulating our past and in so doing we create an identity for ourselves. This identity is not something we can grasp, it is a way of making echoes, i.e. a way of rearranging our past into our present. The cliché that a person is constituted by his past is transformed in *The Echo Maker*: a person exists only in the continual transformation of the past. Sometimes that transformation is smooth and continuous, as it is in the crane population. Sometimes, it is abrupt and drastic, as it is in the world of Mark, Karin, and Weber. To conclude our section on narration and focalization as ways to capture Capgras, we will now zoom in on one extreme example of mindreading, the initial paragraphs that describe the chaotic experiences of Mark in a coma just after his accident.

### **3. The initial representations of Mark's consciousness**

In a long section focalized through Karin (53-65), Mark tells her she is not his sister, and this is the point where his Capgras first comes to the fore. In the next section, which is focalized through Mark (65-69), he himself comes up with a thought confirming that he suffers from the syndrome: "Problem is, the Karin look-alike seems real" (67). But this is far from the first section that limits representation to his consciousness. Five earlier sections do the same, and we will now try to see how these connect to our findings.

When his sister visits him for the first time in the hospital after the accident, and Capgras has not set in yet, at least as far as Karin sees it ("His face knew her" [7]), Mark is described as having "animal eyes" (7) and his fingers are said to "feather" at Karin. In the first and most hermetic section devoted to Mark's consciousness (10-11), which immediately follows upon Karin's visit, Mark does not seem to mirror the cranes as much as he seems to coincide with them: "A flock of birds, each one burning. Stars swoop down to bullets. Hot red specks take flesh, nest there, a body part, part body" (10). This extreme form of identification anticipates Mark's extreme form of mimetic behavior at the heart of his paranoia.

There is almost no story in this first section, and hardly any history either—this is not even the mind reading itself in terms of what it knows locally, but a very low level of consciousness that seems to be informed by and perhaps even jointly

focalized with the local birds. In fact, in terms of the representation of brain trauma, this is the most remarkable and tentative passage of the novel. At first change is completely absent: “Lasts forever: no change to measure” (10) and “Body flat water, falling an inch a mile” (10), but then Mark’s accident and perhaps its immediate aftermath as they apparently occupy his brain become a part of the mental experience evoked on the page: “Face forcing up into soundless scream. White column, lit in a river of light. The pure terror, peeling into air, flipping and falling, anything but hit target” (10). Is this Mark’s rudimentary replay of the accident, or is it the bird’s eye view (though not quite in the classical meaning of the term)? It might very well be neither, or even both, perhaps indicating the narrator’s effort to imagine the basic level of Mark’s consciousness. The description just quoted in fact resurfaces at the end of the novel in a conversation between Barbara and Weber. They discover that the white column and the pure terror derive from a whooper who appears in Mark’s headlights, and together they come close to repeating Mark’s early processing of the accident: “Something huge and white streaks across the field. . . . ‘My God. A whooper.’ Ghosts in that flash of light, some private terror. . . . ‘That was it. What was in the road. He said he saw a column of white. . . .’” (429-30). The parallel between the two descriptions suggests that the narrator exerts a degree of control over Mark’s consciousness, even in its most precarious form. We will return to this narratorial control at the end of our essay.

The first section showing Mark’s consciousness exhibits a degree of closure: “At last only water” (11). Still, there is no conventional chronology here, as various aspects of the event such as Mark’s pain, the river and perhaps even the drip of an IV tube seem to distribute across the whole passage. If there is any sign of an individual personality here after all, it would reside mainly in this distribution as it affects the evocation of what the motto to the first part of the novel describes as the fossilic nature of human existence, carrying within the body “the marks of a world in which living creatures flow with little more consistency than clouds from age to age” (1). Beyond this distribution, Mark’s consciousness reaches its clearest expression of individual human existence in his low-level awareness of the struggle for life: “One sound gets not a word but still says: *come*. Come with. Try death” (10).

In the next section focalized through Mark during his early days in hospital (18-20), the first three sentences echo the elements of water, pain and sudden event that constituted the core of the first section: “Rises up in flooded fields. There is a wave, a rocking in the reeds. Pain again, then nothing” (18). While this opening would allow for a further coincidence between Mark and the cranes, it turns out

that the birds are much less prominent in his mind. Capgras still has not set in, and Mark is clearly regaining his bearings, which results in a much less complicated representation of consciousness. Compared to the first section, most paragraphs in this second evocation of Mark's consciousness are longer and it is relatively easy to figure out an unambiguous meaning for all the sentences.

While these elementary differences between the two sections create an impression of growing control and individuality on the part of Mark, it is also quite clear that he has not quite recovered mentally. His sense of time is back, but still very imprecise, and as such, for the briefest of moments, it recalls the timelessness of the birds: "This may be days. No saying. Time flaps about, wings broken" (19). Mark wants to talk, but "words change to flying things as they hit the air," a final reminder in this section of the bird-like state he found himself in immediately after the accident (20). The birds are metaphorically linked to time (flapping about with broken wings) and to language (words changing to flying things). They are metonymically linked to the water, where the cranes reside. The consciousness representation in this section focuses on time and language. It does so, not in a logical and philosophical way, but in a figurative way, by using and combining images, figures of speech (such as bird and water), that represent the way Mark is fighting to regain speech: "One need tries to tear out of him. Need to *say*, more than the need to be" (19). The first word he utters is the first step back towards a self: "The skin grown over his mouth tears clear and a word forces through the bloody opening: *I*" (20).

A crucial aspect of Mark's consciousness at this stage is the tension between active and passive. It is not clear whether he thinks or is being thought. Is he using language, or is he being used by it? Is he forming a (split) personality, or is a personality splitting itself off from him: "Something splits out from him" (19). The conflict between active and passive is thematized in a reflection on the word "patient": "*Be patient, be a patient* is what he must be" (19). Whether active or passive, Mark is much more aware of the seriousness of his own condition, and death is still clearly an option, perhaps it "is done already" (19). His individual take on the situation is further expressed through his impressions of the room he is in, through his fury at the interaction with a woman, probably Karin, and, early on in the section, through a memory of near-death by drowning when his father was teaching him to swim at the age of four. His other memory in the section seems to concern the accident itself, once more recapturing and developing part of its description in the first of Mark's early consciousness representations: "There comes a pyramid of light, burning diamonds, twisting fields of stars. His body threads

triangles of neon, a tunnel rising. The water over him, his lungs on fire, and then he explodes upward, toward air” (19).

The opening of the third representation of Mark’s consciousness (32-34) is a variation on the opening of the section we have just discussed, and as such it indicates both the continuity and the changes that constitute Mark’s early experiences in the hospital. It even incorporates the element of death from the first two sections, but it also introduces new metaphors and attempts new combinations between the constitutive parts of the earlier opening: “A rising comes that isn’t always death. A flight that doesn’t always end in breaking. He lies still through every imaginable light, the beams passing through him like he is water. He solidifies, but not all at once. He collects like salt when the sea evaporates. Flaking apart, even as he sets. / Now and then, a current floats him. Flings through his broken body. Mostly he falls back into accident. But sometimes a river lifts him, over the low gray hills, elsewhere” (32-33). The contrast between the positive upward movement and the negative downward movement represents Mark’s attempts to return to life, to resurface from the pre-historical waters. It goes together with a process of solidification, putting together various identity parts encountered in the first two sections.

Mark’s identity reconstruction still has a long way to go, his body image is still badly disrupted: “His pieces still send and receive, but no longer to one another” (33). Moreover, Mark is not at one with himself: “He never knew himself” (33). His old identity is like a container that has now become empty: “A good kid once, the one he was in” (33). Nor he is at one with the world: “Signals of the disconnected world buzzing through him, a swarm of gnats he would catch and kill. They scatter when he reaches for them” (33). Again, the friction between active and passive is central to Mark’s consciousness: “Ideas hit him, or he hits them. . . . People don’t have ideas. Ideas have everything” (33). Once more, miming plays an important role in this passive kind of activity: “His body, formed through the flung ball. Knows repeats. Even without him, or anyone thinking so” (33).

The transformation of the early mental impressions after the accident at the beginning of consciousness representations two and three offers proof of the constant rewriting that might lead to a full-fledged and functional identity. The early focalizations through Mark can thus be seen to combine into a history of consciousness from low-level awareness to the complete story that keeps us humans going on a daily basis. In Mark’s case, as we have already said, it may not feel like the story will eventually be all his, but maybe that is also the case then because he needs to render explicit the ever changing network of connections underlying the concept of mind evoked in the novel. While the transformation and further

narrativization of earlier impressions can be construed as evidence of progress, his own prevailing impression in consciousness representation three is still one of helplessness, particularly when it comes to his sense of identity. An object of words and ideas rather than a subject, he nevertheless has one positive experience when realizing, through his ability to count, the human capacity for improvement.

The fourth representation of Mark's consciousness (41-43) consists of two parts, both of which imply rebirth. The first one develops a surreal image that connects metonymically with the central element of water in the earlier Mark sections. Living in "a bed bigger than the town" (41), he is a whale, still in pain and longing for death, but "death rolls away with the retreating water" (42) and he becomes a "rotting mountain of animal subside" (42). Birds appear in this part as well, but they play a minor role—along with squirrels and coyotes, they remove his flesh. In part two of this section, "[h]is parts come back to him, so slowly he can't know" (42) and other people's words hold out the possibility of a new identity: "Something settles out, a him big enough for him to climb back in" (43). It seems the empty container of his former self ("the one he was in" 33) is ready to be filled again. He recovers his name, "Mark Schluter" (43). Words come out of his mouth again, and he seems on the way to recovery: "His parts come back to him, so slowly he can't know. . . . Makes a list of himself, like old rebuilt machines" (42). The machine metaphor suggests that the reconstructed identity and body image is that of a robot, of someone who is not really in control of one's actions. Mark's idea of Karin and Weber being machines, which we have mentioned earlier, may therefore be rooted in this early phase of Mark's consciousness reconstruction.

Again, active and passive are essential dimensions in this struggle for consciousness. Mark may rediscover the use of language, but it also works the other way round: language claims him. "The place that threw him away now wants him back too bad. People push sounds on him, endless free samples. Words, by the way people say them. . . . They merge him, move him on, make him up from scratch" (43). And as always, this process is a form of mimesis: "Steps he takes. Round around and back again. Repeat as needed" (43).

The fifth and final section (49-50) focalized through Mark before Capgras is diagnosed, is all about language—his own and that of the people who talk to him. They make him go through the pain of learning to talk again, and in the process the birds come up once more. Mark contrasts their intelligence and self-evidence ("Animals must be more like rocks. Saying only what they are" [49]) with the chattering of humans, who, for all their verbal bravado, only seem to cover up for a fundamental lack. "Echo caca. Cocky locky. Caca lala" (49) at the beginning

of the section is shortened to “Echo. Lala” (50) and thus suggests the induced echolalia. Maybe language is no more than echoing, miming. And maybe Mark is here echoing Dr. Hayes, who explained the phenomenon to Karin: “‘Echolalia,’ Dr. Hayes called it. ‘Perseveration. He’s imitating what he hears’” (36).

Mark’s recovery is not complete. “Some things” still “say him” (49), indicating that he does not have the full grip yet. The sentence suggests two problems. First, Mark still thinks that objects talk. In the fourth section he had the same idea: “He never knew that all things talk” (43). Second, he is not in control of the language he uses. Moreover, the words seem to replace the experiences he has lived through in the first four sections. He vaguely remembers “living in the place he’s just come from. He knew what that place is, but now it’s just saying” (49). Words replace the past and thereby become dissociated from experiences. This verbal dissociation may constitute the foundation for the full-fledged dissociation typical of Capgras.

If these early representations of Mark’s brain activity make up a history of emergent consciousness, they certainly do not mimic the history of consciousness representation in literature as it has developed (in Dorrit Cohn’s terms) from psychonarration over narrated monologue to interior or quoted monologue. Mark’s is a recovering brain, so the representation of its increasing activity might, for all its simplicity and incoherence, be thought to require the stylistic and grammatical freedom usually associated with interior monologue. But it does not, and as such, these early sections provide a test case for the claims about consonant psychonarration we have made earlier on in relation to *The Echo Maker*’s solution to Dr. Weber’s lack of empathy.

Considered from this angle, it seems hard to miss that the first representation of Mark’s consciousness, while clearly focalized through Mark, is indebted to the narrator’s external focalizations of the cranes elsewhere in the novel. Psychonarration remains consonant, but its content partly derives from the narrator’s presentations of the birds as symbols of brain continuity. Even if the appearance of the cranes in Mark’s “thoughts” can be motivated by the fact that they are a staple of the region and also by the fact that his accident takes place near the river where they flock, the narrator’s use of the birds in the first representation of Mark’s consciousness alerts the reader to the presence of a fictionalizing contribution on the part of an external voice. This contribution adds to the unity of the overall narration and may thus show that the narrator is not unlike Weber after all. The narrator’s miming is definitely more empathic than the doctor’s, but it is not entirely free of fabulation. So even at this early stage, Mark’s story, in so far as his brain activity can be described with such a term, is not entirely his.

In the remaining sections focalized through Mark before Capgras is diagnosed, his recovery seems marked by the diminishing importance of the narrator's external contribution. As we have suggested earlier, the loss of history in the form of the cranes is an indication of what is wrong with Mark, but in the early sections its growing absence simultaneously marks an increasing independence from the storytelling initiated and controlled by the narrator. In section two, the birds still inform the representation, but it is clear that Mark's consciousness is much less obsessed with them than in section one. In sections three to five, the birds pretty much disappear altogether, with rebirth and language taking center stage and Mark's recovery of speech a sign of mental recovery that, in the end, may turn out to be a form of mental destruction. If, as we said, *The Echo Maker* suggests that a person only exists in the continuous transformation of the past, then Mark's development of the cluster birds-water-sudden event in section three is another proof of his budding individual awareness.

However, consciousness representations three to five also seem to feature other indications of the narrator's fabulating presence. In section three, the narrator comes very close to exemplifying the distance thematized in his later description of Weber's approach: "He is awake, or someplace near it. His body drifts on and off. Possible that he himself is here straight through. Only he doesn't know it, when what his mind hooks to comes and goes" (33). The extended whale metaphor in section four may be seen as a shining illustration of poetic intrusion. If the big mammal connects with the cranes because it is an animal living in the water and could thus be considered a more or less motivated presence in Mark's mind, the sophistication characterizing this passage may for some readers run counter to the rather elementary brain activity of which Mark gives proof elsewhere in these early representations of his consciousness. In this case, the whale metaphor would largely be the narrator's doing. Finally, when in section five Mark's attempts to talk coalesce for the briefest of moments into "Echo. Lala" (50), the suggestion of echolalia and the link with Dr. Hayes' explanation of the phenomenon once more indicate the narrator's guiding light in the relative darkness of Mark's psyche.

Whether focalized through Mark or through the fabulating narrator, the information offered to the reader always calls forth a variety of correspondences between the different sections and parts of the novel. The feeling of blinding terror that Mark experiences in the first sections reappears after Capgras has been diagnosed. It even resurfaces in the final sections focalized through Barbara and Weber. This is just one of many examples illustrating that there is no radical break between the five initial sections showing the activity of Mark's traumatized brain and the later

Mark sections in which he is officially defined by Capgras. The reformation of his mind does not essentially differ from the deformation of his mind as perceived by his surroundings. More generally, *The Echo Maker* suggests that any search for meaningful integration and coherence does not drastically differ from paranoia, Capgras and similar forms of misreading that are considered deviant. The reader of the novel cannot escape this predicament: he or she looks for coherence, but in so doing does not differ all that much from Mark. When connecting and interpreting passages, the reader is making up his or her own guiding light, which may be just as pathological as Mark's or just as hard to pin down as the narrator's.

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