

The Issue of Corporations: Richard Powers' *Gain*

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In memory of Michael Sprinker



To dispel the idea that geography is only about maps, David Harvey begins his introductory geography classes with a few basic questions: what did you eat for breakfast this morning? where did it come from? Through these questions, Harvey unfolds the geographical trail of postmodern capitalism as one would expect of the author of *The Condition of Postmodernity*, the trail of African millet, Caribbean sugar, and Illinois wheat, which, through corporate alchemy, becomes your cereal. To transpose these questions, where are you when you read this? through what e-server? on an Aptiva, iMac, or cognate clone? on Weyerhaeuser paper? what kind of chair are you sitting in? what is it made of and where did its various component parts and material come from? These questions—pedestrian to the point of forgetting, to the point of a landscape of second nature—lead to a trail of corporate production, a mode of production that most of us probably disdain and condemn, yet that also permeates the

very texture of our lives and, in a fundamental sense, generates our everyday experience.

Richard Powers' recent novel, *Gain*, is, in my surmise, the most fully realized contemporary American novel of life in the epoch of corporations, mapping the nineteenth-century rise of the peculiar entity of corporate bodies, the twentieth-century habitat brought to us by our corporate sponsors, and what consequence that habitat has on individual people living in Y2K America. *Gain* does this by interweaving three contrapuntal strands. First, a tour de force historical narrative charts the course of Clare, a Procter and Gamble-like company, from its birth in a small office front of candle and soap manufacturers in early nineteenth century Boston to its contemporary apotheosis as an earth-spanning mega-corporation, producing everything from soap to fertilizers, from floor wax to pharmaceuticals, from artificial cheese to house siding. Second, a tour de force sentimental narrative depicts present-day citizens of Lacewood, the hometown to Clare's corporate headquarters, in particular real estate agent Laura Bodey, her diagnosis and treatment for cancer and its concentric effects upon her family and those around her.

Third, heterogeneous discursive and graphic bytes (ranging from nineteenth-century soap recipes and early advertisements to contemporary Clare fact sheets and slogans) interspersed between these two narrative strands provide intensifications of or rests between the two anachronistic plots.

In its narrative of the rise of Clare, *Gain* puts novelistic flesh on the bones of Ernest Mandel's course of capitalism outlined in *Late Capitalism*, from nineteenth-century entrepreneurial capitalism, through the expansion of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century mass industrial monopoly capitalism, up to late twentieth-century global, fully-industrialized, consumer capitalism (see Mandel 130-32). *Gain* details the shaky start of J. Clare's Sons, from the enterprise of three brothers, Samuel, Resolve, and Benjamin, out of their father, Jephthah Clare's, shipping business, drydocked because of early Republic protectionist tariffs. (Capital, from its earliest movements, is already international.) Following their diligent and somewhat accidental success as soap and candle manufacturers, *Gain* shows the mid-nineteenth century shift from household production to mass production, and the generation of needs spurred by the modes of production rather than by human necessity—a new conception of cleanliness, hence necessitating the consumption of soap. It does this, however, not in an abstract or wooden way, but in a captivating narrative of the interplay of the Clare brothers—Samuel is good with people, Resolve with money, and the young, prodigal Benjamin a scientific pioneer—and of their chief craftsman, a meticulous Irish immigrant soapmaker who mourns his dead wife, and their chief mechanic, who longs to make a fortune so that he can retire to read novels.

While drawing the progress of the Clare brothers, the novel also fleshes out the historical shift from local to national distribution, facilitated by the rise of railroads; the advent of advertising and promotions ("Any fool can make soap. It takes a clever man to sell it"), conjoined with national expansion, in effect providing action figures for the cultural history Richard Ohmann details in *Selling Culture*; the invention of packaging and product name recognition, with a trademark stamp of an Indian Brave on its Native Balm soap; the de-crafting, standardization, and intensification of production, enforced by international competition, particularly from Britain; the growth, depersonalization (Samuel comes to lament that he no longer "knew all his employees' names by heart" [165]), and unionization efforts of its workers; the implementation of technological advances, as Benjamin develops a laboratory that, though initially his hobby, provides the engine of product development for the company; the expansion from simple soap to diverse chemical production; and the consolidation of the phases of production—from raw materials to advertising—within one corporate entity. Again, the skill of the novel is that it embodies and dramatizes these broad-scale historical shifts in the characterizations and business of the Clare brothers, their wives, and eventually their children. (For instance, one memorable scene tells how a sickly grandson, Peter Clare, despite skepticism, comes upon the promotion of putting a gold dollar in a soap packet in every crate of soap, creating a run on it.)

This historical narrative dominates the first half of *Gain*, dramatically overshadowing the contrapuntal plot of Laura Bodey, who up to this point is in the midst of diagnosis and early treatment. A pivotal hinge of the Clare plot occurs midway as J. Clare's Sons

becomes incorporated, renamed Clare Soap and Chemical Company. Powers spends particular time defining the modern legal status of corporations, whereby they accrue the rights of an individual in the eyes of the law and are protected by the doctrine of limited liability:

The law now declared the Clare Soap and Chemical Company one composite body: a single, whole, and statutorily enabled person.... If the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments combined to extend due process to all individuals, and if the incorporated business had become a single person under the law, then the Clare Soap and Chemical Company now enjoyed all the legal protections afforded any individual by the spirit of the Constitution.

And for the actions of that protected person, for its debts and indiscretions, no single shareholder could be held liable. (158-59)

The Clare plot diffuses after this point, as the corporation is run by progressively more removed outsiders. There are still memorable characters, such as the self-made and slightly disreputable Chicago grain mogul, distiller, and financier, George Gifford, who injects money into the new corporation after the Civil War, and Hiram Nagel, a genius inventor of promotions who works his way up from answering complaint letters to president, but the Clare plot expands beyond its focus as a victorious family plot, culminating in the present-day impersonality of a gleaming corporate center in Lacewood. In a sense the very depersonalization of incorporation-epitomized by its name change, from J. Clare's Sons to Clare Soap and Chemical Company, and finally, simply to Clare International-engenders an emptying of character which flattens the narrative. In this, the novel issues a harsh knowledge of life in the epoch of corporations and the unbridled pursuit of gain, its byproduct the alienation of a contemporary world constructed of omnipresent, inescapable, denaturalized (Powers takes special note of different kinds of chemically produced food, with names like Nutrifruit or Olestra), and depersonalized corporate products.

However, whatever the novel's overall critique of the life that capitalism has wrought, and whatever its irony toward the success of the Clare brothers, in its depiction of the charismatic personality of the Clares the first half presents a species of the mythic narrative of individual American success, a success earned through pluck, savvy, and industriousness, and in turn blessed if not by the gods then by luck. The second half thus becomes a kind of elegaic narrative, representing the fall of the heroic ideal of American gumption and entrepreneurial spirit through mass production, depersonalization, and uniformity induced by the legal fiction of incorporation. This hinge is perhaps best exemplified by Samuel Clare's final days, wistfully wandering through the company offices as now titular head; as the novel declares, "The invention of the corporation killed Samuel's dream of progress by completing it" (181).

This historical narrative, which is temporally continuous but broken into discrete several-page chunks, is interwoven with that of Laura Bodey, a forty-ish present-day real

estate agent who lives in the vicinity of Clare in Lacewood. Particularly as set against the victorious rise of the Clare brothers, Laura's story starts slowly, depicting her everyday routine of gardening, showing houses, and dealing with her children Ellen and Tim, ex-husband Don, and married lover Ken. Upon a routine medical exam Laura is tested for and diagnosed with cancer (which, though its cause is left indeterminate, the novel suggests is caused by environmental pollution from Clare, who in turn becomes the object of a class action lawsuit). Laura's narrative builds through her treatment, progressive sickening, and death. In the second half of the book, Laura's story dramatically overtakes that of the Clare brothers, brilliantly if painfully depicting the medical industry and the horrific effects of chemotherapy, which ravages those around Laura, as well as her own body and mind.

Thus, though the chords of each plot interweave at relatively regular intervals throughout, they are not parallel (cf. Harris) but inverted. In dramatic terms, the two plots take opposite trajectories, the Clare plot one of a bustling and entertaining ascent, Laura's a tragic and moving descent. To put it another way, they are symphonic, reporting the rise and recession of one movement, ceding to the growing resonance of the alternative movement. In a sense, the third strand, the collage of ads and other material, provides a kind of antiphonal force upon these plots, contiguously reinforcing them and discursively complicating their otherwise simple and straightforward narrative pacing. (One could locate this as a distinctive postmodern trait of pastiche, but, in the remarkable-and affectively powerful-simplicity of the narrative, I would site it as a retro-modernist tendency, after the manner of, for instance, the Aeolus chapter (seven) of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which compends a series of headlines, or the "Newsreels" and snapshots in Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*)

The two plots also take opposite but mirrored thematic charges, the Clare plot one of growth through taming nature, its resources and processes, Laura's one of wane through untamed, unnatural growth, succumbing to manmade forces. This in fact is the governing emblem if not conceit of the novel, the equivalence of untrammelled gain, growth, and cancer. On the one hand, *Gain* represents the unparalleled material plenty issued through modern corporate production; on the other hand, as in a sci-fi movie, Clare becomes an all-absorptive, amorphous mass, a correlative to Laura's cancer, and which possibly causes her cancer as well as other forms of environmental devastation. A related emblem is the chemical change of properties-of fat transmorgified to its component parts, eventually to soap, which in turn cleanses the dirt of fat, as well as the ecological catalyst that turns Laura's cells to rogue, cancerous ones. This transformation of matter is also, literally and figuratively, the mechanism of capital, as Powers spells out: "[The Clare] laboratory tinkered away at ... Turning soda and animal waste to balm. Sulfur and soda to bright bleaches and colors. Gaslight waste to fertilizer. Medicaments from bicarbonate and lime.... All things chemical came from some other chemical thing. Man might learn to become matter's investment banker" [179]. That is, technology is the mechanism of gain, the alchemy of corporations which transform valueless material into valuable commodity. The heart of the novel is this paradox of gain and its consequence.

Both narratives, too, are family plots, representing not simply the rise or fall of individual characters but the dynamics of family and others, not simply a focus on atomized heroes but on the social web. The sheer affective power-and I confess, I cried-of Laura's story results not only from its portrait of what it might be like to be stricken with cancer, but the effect on all of those around her, especially her children and ex-husband. This narrative is a sentimental tour de force, rivaling that of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (with whiteheat lines like Laura's rumination on health insurance, "Anyone who denies modern progress has never watched a parent die from inability to pay for treatment" [114]). This is especially remarkable given Powers' previous novels and reputation as a cerebral novelist, typically placed in the company of Pynchon and DeLillo, more at home depicting the techie world of computer programming and dealing more with the "mindful pleasures" of the head than the heart.

Laura's story is also a precisely drawn realistic narrative of the medical industry, showing her visits to various specialists, her time in the hospital ("A day dripped out in microseconds outlasts the idea of time" [113]), her interaction with staff, and, with disconcerting precision, the course of her treatments ("4:30 p.m.: the start of the taxol, 200 mg in 1,500 cc of saline... 'What's next?' she asks at 10 p.m.... 'Cisplatin, 120 mg, plus mannitol, 37.5 mg, for about six hours." Alan is on shift again. Somehow, she's missed Tracy's shift all together" [112-14]). Less overtly but more pervasively than the Clare story, this is a narrative instantiation of the ways in which corporations permeate our lives and are visited upon our bodies, as, for instance, when Laura tries to negotiate for a drug that the insurance companies won't cover. In a deep irony, Clare and the drugs it produces are Laura's only hope in fighting the cancer that wayward Clare chemicals might have induced.

Finally, the conclusion that Laura faces and that Powers leaves us with is the irony of the intransigence of life produced by corporations and their issue-material plenty and comfort along side of, in fact, generating devastating illness and ecological poisoning. In a climactic moment after Laura returns home from one hospital visit, she wants to purge her house of all Clare products:

No longer her home, this place they have given her to inhabit. She cannot hike from the living room to the kitchen without passing an exhibit. Floor by Germ-Guard. Windows by Cleer-Thru. Table by Colonial-Cote. The Bodey Mansion, that B-ticket, one-star museum of trade. But where else can she live?

She vows a consumer boycott, a full spring cleaning. But the house is full of them. It's as if the floor she walks on suddenly liquefies into a sheet of termites. They paper her cabinets. They perch on her microwave, camp out on her stove, hang from her shower head. Clare hiding under the sink, swarming her medicine chest, lining the shelves in the basement, parked out in the garage, piled up in the shed.

Her vow is hopeless. Too many to purge them all. Every hour of her life depends on more corporations than she can count. (303-04)

This conclusion is echoed at other points, notably by Don, who, visiting a friend at Clare headquarters to try to find out inside information about the lawsuit against Clare, observes, "The hum of a hundred people, helping to ensure the national harvest. Couldn't go back now, if we wanted to. And who wants to?" (257-58). Finally, then, *Gain* delivers what seems a harsh truth about the inevitability of life under corporations, and it is here where those of us on the left might cite the damning flaw of the book and its politics. Powers does not offer a utopian prospect envisioning life without corporations and modern production; in this sense, it is not an "eco-novel," as some reviewers have called it, proposing the prospect of a returned nature.

However, *Gain* is hardly an apology for corporations. I think one of its strengths is resisting either justifying or politically condemning corporate life. (Its ambivalence has precipitated a wide range of critical commentary, from condemnations of Powers' rote blame of corporations [see Caldwell; Kakutani] to praise for its realistic depiction of American business [for perhaps the best review, see LeClair].) On the one hand, through its dense historical reconstruction, it refuses nostalgia, in particular the nostalgic view of an adamic America and the political prospect of a return to a halcyon past. Even though it gives a somewhat heroic narrative of the rise of Clare-and one could easily imagine an academic reading that spots this as undermining the novel's critique, therefore performing a covert ideological reversal-this rise is not entirely innocent and is inseparable from its consequence, from its long history. And on the other hand, *Gain* resists rote political judgment through its detailed depiction of the way in which corporate production underpins contemporary life, providing both the material comfort one experiences in ordinary households, as well as potentially endangering our lives.

One prospect that the novel does hold out occurs at the end, in a brief epilogue segment proleptically telling what happens to Laura's son, Tim, who becomes a computer programmer, and develops a program to predict the result of an amino acid sequence-thus promising a cure for cancer (354-55). And, in one of the novel's many ironic turns on the issue of corporations, Tim uses the settlement money he receives after his mother's death-admitting no cause, Clare settles the class action lawsuit-to fund a corporation devoted to this research. That is, Powers suggests one avenue for positive change is precisely through our technology and mastery of the physical world, and through our corporate organization. Lest we blanch at this prospect, we should recall that in Marx, after all, as well as in most socialist thinking, the problem is not industry or technology per se, but the distribution of the material fruits of our productive capacities. The solution for Powers seems to be rooted in more humanistic terms, in the question of responsibility. The problem with incorporation, noted at the moment Clare becomes a corporation, is the concerted disavowal of responsibility.

The political program of *Gain*, then, is modest, but I think its particular value is not in offering a proposal for change but in attempting to draw the sweep of modern social history and interweaving the strands of what can only be called the social totality. This

sweep and historical sense distinguishes Powers from the great majority of contemporary novelists, who might show the jaundice of the postmodern world, but root it, for the most part, in individual dramas, in domestic plots or plots of crisis of identity. For instance, two examples from significant novels also published in 1998 by male writers around forty, David Gates' *Preston Falls* and Bret Easton Ellis' *Glamorama*, though in very different ways, play out plots of postmodern alienation. *Preston Falls* tells the story of a forty-ish public relations worker who checks out of the professional-managerial class track, and dramatizes the effect of this mid-life crisis on his wife and two children. For Gates, the problem is the anomie of our epoch--what does one do after getting a house in Westchester but sell one's soul?--but the solution is self-reclamation. Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama* parodically portrays the lifestyles of the jetset crowd of high fashion, intermixed with a bizarre fantasy of terrorism. For Ellis, the culprit is more our mediatized world and its fragmenting identity. However, for Ellis there is no solution and he, in *Glamorama* as well as his other novels, finally aestheticizes this alienation. Against the grain, then, *Gain* forges the political ambition to paint a totalizing picture, and presents the underside of the long "American Century," without attendant rockets red glare, densely interweaving its social history at the same time as it moves us, searing the image of what the abstract forces of production do to people, who if not like us, might live down the street.

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