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Absence and Presence

Both in relation to trauma narratives, and to epistemological questions of defining and imagining the “real” in changing spatiotemporal contexts, the dynamics of absence and presence in literature represents another relational polarity that can help to elucidate the workings of literature as cultural ecology. Absence and presence have been recurrent issues in literary and cultural history but have become especially prominent in postmodernism. The absence of a “transcendental signified” constitutes one of the hallmarks of the postmodern episteme, which was primarily interpreted as an ontological absence of the referent from language, of the world from the text. It was only with the ethical turn of later postmodernism that the relation of absence and presence gained new concreteness and existential significance in the context of holocaust and trauma studies. Discourse was historicized and reconnected to personal and collective experiences, which, even though they were never fully graspable in language and the text, nevertheless constituted inescapable manifestations of the Real. The indeterminacy of the signifier, with its elusive game of absence and presence of meanings, no longer designated a purely self-referential productivity of *écriture* but an explorative semiotic process, which was set free in special intensity and productivity in literary and aesthetic forms of discourse. The relationship between discourse and trauma represented an extreme version of the existential relationship between mind and body, language and experience, self and other, which was the core domain of ethics. As recent developments in ecocritical theory demonstrate, this ethical agenda has been extended toward an ecological perspective in new directions of ecocriticism and cultural ecology (Goodbody and Rigby, Müller and Sauter). The rendering present of absent worlds is a fundamental feature of literary texts. In their imaginative scenarios, absence and presence pose not merely

an epistemological issue but represent transformative agencies of cultural memory, ethics, and ecology.

As has been argued throughout this book, imaginative literature, in its self-reflexive, deprivatized use of language and narrative, can bring together in complex images and fictional scenarios what is kept apart in the institutionalized discourses of a culture. The act of fictionalizing, that is, of presenting an absent world as if it were present, has been an omnipresent feature of human culture since the beginning of cultural evolution (Iser).¹ Storytelling and fictionalizing open up possible, alternative worlds in which what remains ungraspable and unrealized in a historically given individual or collective reality can be symbolically articulated and integrated into the ecology of cultural discourses. Past and future, the time before one's birth and after one's death, the dimensions of dreams and the unconscious, the alterity of other individuals, cultures, and historical periods, and indeed of the more-than-human world of nature, are inaccessible in straightforward realistic or pragmatic forms of discourse but can be imaginatively presented in the form of fictional texts. In opening the civilizational system toward its defining exclusions and absences, literature contributes to continuous cultural self-renewal by turning these systemic absences into linguistic and communicational presences. In the following sections, I will again mainly rely on examples from American literature to indicate this transformative relation of absence and presence as part of the cultural-ecological dynamics of imaginative texts.

Classic cases: Hawthorne, Melville, Kafka, Beckett, Morrison

My first case in point is, once more, Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, in which the play of absence and presence is already visible in the conception of the plot. The main story of Hester Prynne's fate as an excluded outsider yet significant presence in early American puritan society is framed by an introductory sketch, "The Custom-House," in which the author relates his experiences two hundred

¹ In Mark Turner's conceptual blending theory, the rendering present of absent realities is even considered one crucial step in the development of human culture as a semi-independent sphere within the overall process of evolution (Turner 2006).

years later as a custom house officer in Salem from 1846 to 1849. Above all, the narrator deplores in satirical acrimony the stifling influence of the political-bureaucratic routines on his literary imagination. A decisive turning point is his visit one day to the archives in the upper story of the Custom-House, where among forgotten dusty documents he finds a manuscript by one of his predecessors as Custom-House surveyor in the eighteenth century. This manuscript relates in a short version the remarkable "life and conversations of one Hester Prynne" (62) from the middle of the seventeenth century, which provides the core narrative of the novel. The manuscript is wrapped up in an official document in a package which also contains a piece of "fine red cloth" (61) in the form of the capital letter A. This material signifier of crypto-official writing irresistibly captures the narrator's attention, as if there was "some deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation, and which, as it were, streamed forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to my sensibilities, but evading the analysis of my mind" (62). As if under a spell, the narrator picks up the mysterious symbol and instinctively places it on his breast, an act which produces an unexpected, shock-like effect of "burning heat . . . as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron" (62). At this point of transition from reality to fiction, the narrator encounters an absent world of history which gains a vital intensity that is missing from his present custom house existence peopled by lifeless bureaucrats. The electrifying energy emanating from this enigmatic signifier announces the return of the narrator's long-dormant imagination and enables him finally to liberate himself from the repressive atmosphere of the custom house and write the novel *The Scarlet Letter*. This is clearly an autopoietic scene, which self-reflexively stages the emergence of narrative from the recuperation of significant absences of the cultural world—of memory, vitality, and creative energy. The sign of the scarlet letter becomes an absent presence in the narrator's experience, which he translates into the central imaginative force of the novel. The modern text of the *Scarlet Letter* is revealed as a palimpsest in which the historical sequence is reversed, and in which the oldest layer is deliberately foregrounded and turned into the main story and symbolic texture of the novel.

This transformative relationship between absence and presence in the autobiographical Custom-House sketch provides a metafictional framing of the narrative itself, which follows its own dynamics of absence and presence.

As has been seen, from her first appearance, the protagonist Hester Prynne is associated with both cultural and natural creativity—the scarlet letter on the breast of her gown was sewed by herself in an “artistic” manner (Hawthorne 61, 80), and is in turn linked with the child in her arms and the wild rosebush growing at the door of the prison-house as “biosemiotic” (Wheeler) markers of natural creativity. After an absence of two years, her husband Chillingworth happens to return to Boston on the very day of Hester’s public humiliation, and immediately decides to devote his whole life to the search for Hester’s unknown lover. Chillingworth soon suspects the young pastor Arthur Dimmesdale to be Hester’s secret lover and moves in with him, acting in the disguise of physician and therapist as his mephistophelian double who is out to destroy him. Dimmesdale is unaware of Chillingworth’s identity as Hester’s husband, whose presumed absence turns into a sinister presence in Dimmesdale’s life that undermines his whole personality. On the other hand, Hester and Pearl suffer from the absence of the lover and father, even as they transform their outsiders’ existence into an intellectually anarchic yet also, in Hester’s case, an ethically responsible form of existence. The resolution of the tensions and conflicts in the novel is brought about by a process in which the various absences that structure the plot and the character relations are reconnected to the present and to a shared reality. That way, the culturally excluded is integrated into a revitalized ecology of individual and communal life. The public revelation of the scarlet letter, which has grown as a psychosomatic sign on Dimmesdale’s breast, in the final climactic scene of the novel is thus only one moment in a textual process which turns the absent presences of the civilizational system into shaping agencies of the narrative process.

Differently from the postmodern paradigm and the notion of a primal absence, the signifier of the scarlet letter represents not only a negative energy of disruption and endless deferral of meaning but also a force of connectivity and intense, even magical interrelatedness. In a cultural-ecological view, the apparently self-referential play of cultural signifiers is embedded into living energy fields of ecosemiotic meanings, which connect heterogeneous domains of nature, culture, and the human mind. Absences are transformed into momentary presences, in which the reconnection of cultural to natural processes, of the cultural memory to the biocentric memory of the human

species takes place and is constantly reenacted as the source of literary creativity.

Another illuminating example is again Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," discussed above already in a different context. In a poststructuralist view, Bartleby is a figure of absence, who undermines any attempt at analysis, explanation, and communication, "based as they are on the fantasy of presence," as MacLure and others argue in their comments on a Derridean reading of the story (MacLure et al. 2010: 5). In this view, the strangely omnipotent powerlessness of Bartleby allegorizes the paradoxical power of literature and artworks "to voice secrets that philosophy and other disciplines cannot catch from within their own confines," and this power "to 'perturb' the conventional structures of Enlightenment reason" has made texts like "Bartleby" exemplary sites of poststructuralist theories (MacLure et al. 2010: 5).

As pointed out above, a cultural-ecological reading of "Bartleby" would go along with this view of the story and its main character as representing literature's critical power of subversion and perturbation of conventional structures of Enlightenment reason. But it would complement the notions of radical absence and absolute difference by a concept of connectivity, of fundamental interrelatedness and interaction as ecological conditions of all life and discourse. Cultural ecology views connectivity not in terms of conventional or otherwise enforced logocentric structures but as features of living processes and conflictual energy fields which, in literature and art, become sources of aesthetic creativity. Connectivity and relationality have been under suspicion by poststructuralism of falsely stabilizing and harmonizing discursive cultural practices. But connectivity and relationality, in an ecological sense, are not to be confused with closed structures and the conformist pressures of sociocultural power systems but, on the contrary, designate forces of interaction, tension, conflict, and complex feedback dynamics that are a fundamental feature of all life. As an ecological force within language and discourse that reconnects what is culturally separated, literature combines a critical-deconstructive with a connective-reconstructive dynamics of texts in their relation to the general culture.

In his bizarre withdrawal from the world and from life, Bartleby illustrates the absence of humanity from its self-created civilizational structures. But the

absence of shared meaning and humanity is not absolute. There are moments of short, if inconclusive communication—such as when the narrator finds Bartleby in his office on a Sunday or when he proposes various possible jobs to him, offers which Bartleby does not unconditionally reject. And when Bartleby is already in the prison of the Tombs, he greets the lawyer with the words: “I know you,” (42) indicating an almost uncanny knowledge of the narrator’s deeper self, an existential affinity and kinship of human beings even in a world literally and symbolically dominated by walls. At the end of the story, when the narrator finds Bartleby’s dead body in the prison yard, the cold meaninglessness of this human alien’s fate seems to be confirmed. But in the narrator’s final encounter with Bartleby, a moment of communication occurs within a larger biosemiotic connectivity of human with more-than-human life, which translates the absence of meaning into symbolic, momentary presence for the narrator and the reader.

Many more examples could be given from European and American literature of this dialectic of absence and presence as a generative signature of imaginative texts, which semiotically empowers the culturally excluded and reinscribes it into the ecology of cultural discourses. In German-speaking literature, Kafka would again be a prime example, exploring the search for identity in a labyrinthine world dominated by absent centers of power as in *The Castle* or *The Trial*, and especially in the parable “Vor dem Gesetz,” “Before the Law,” in which the man from the country never gets access to what he defines as the source and center of his life’s meaning. In British literature, Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is probably the most famous example of a central absence dominating the lives of literary characters, illustrating the fate of modern humans being exiled from their own constructions of meaning and presence. In American literature, this paradox of absent presences as narrative agencies is again exemplified, for example, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, where collective absences of the cultural system—the forgotten victims of slavery, the death of love, the obliterations of cultural memory—are turned into textual presences that break up paralyzed psychological states, personal relationships, and cultural realities. It is also at work in post-9/11 literature, in which the paradox of trauma narratives drawing on the relation of absence and presence are pointedly epitomized in the very title of Art Spiegelman’s graphic narrative *In the Shadow of No Towers*.

Absence, presence, and the music of life: Richard Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*

I would, however, like to turn in the concluding part of this chapter to a novel which deals with absence and presence in a more general framework of history, trauma and art: Richard Powers' *The Time of Our Singing* (2003). The novel is unusual in its scope in that it interrelates history, music, and physics, more specifically the transatlantic history of racism, classical music, jazz, and the relativity theory of time in a complex interpretation of twentieth century civilization. In the novel, Powers translates into narrative structure not only historical formations and relativity physics but also the "music of life" which is also a conceptual metaphor employed in the systems-biological life sciences, to the extent that they emphasize a complex-relational rather than genetic-deterministic interpretation of life (Noble). The family of the Stroms is presented as a utopian enclave of a race-free cultural biotope in which music plays a central role in the relations of the family members to each other and to the sociocultural environment. Delia Strom, the African American mother, who was prevented from realizing her musical talent as a singer in racist America, David Strom, the physicist and Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, and their three children Jonah, Joseph and Ruth, form an intimate community in mid-twentieth-century Manhattan, surrounded by a hostile society blaming them for ignoring the sacrosanct race divide. While Joseph Strom is the main narrator, Jonah is the main focalizer in a novel in which, however, other voices and other perspectives are also foregrounded to create an effect of polyphony and multiple interpretive frames.

Music becomes a central elixir of life and survival, and singing turns into a polyphonic form of human self-expression which unites body and mind, verbal and nonverbal meaning, time and timelessness. The novel's title designates this sphere of timeless time, in which the characters meet in real life, but which also connects them beyond their death in the time of their singing, which is conjured up in different historical and biographical layers of the novel's nonlinear narrative. This structure of musical memory crystallizes around the central trauma of the narrative, the death of the mother Delia in a fire, which may have been the result of racially motivated violence, and which causes a painful absence in the lives of all the surviving family

members. The family idyll breaks up, and the characters go their own different ways, the father withdrawing into his academic world of theoretical physics, the daughter Ruth developing into a political radical affiliating herself with the Black Panthers, and the brothers Jonah and Joseph starting a musical career in Europe as singer and accompanying pianist of classical *Lieder*. After some years abroad, Joseph splits up with Jonah and returns to the States to become a bar pianist and eventually a music teacher in a school for the socially underprivileged that his sister Ruth has opened in California. His brother Jonah, however, continues to live in Europe and to perform classical music, founding an ensemble of ancient music called *Voces Antiquae*. In his brother's eyes, he "plays the white culture game," (381) but on his visits to America he also repeatedly becomes a witness of violent race conflicts, as if drawn to them by his repressed other self. He finally finds his death in the Rodney King riots in 1992, in which he gets involved during a tour of his *Voces Antiquae* group in Los Angeles. Different styles of music are thereby confronted, contrasted, and yet also interwoven with each other and with the sociopolitical issues making up the composition of the novel. The spectrum ranges from jazz to classical music, from folk songs to spirituals, from African American to European traditions of music. All of these are combined in the family's game of "crazed quotations," in which the family members join in an improvisational performance that fuses elements from different musical cultures in experimental hybridity, expressing in the medium of song and music the transcultural, transracial heterotopia which the Stroms are trying to build, and which in fact pervades the musicalized texture of the novel itself as a counter-discursive metanarrative to the sociopolitical divides and traumatizing experiences related in the narrated world.

Much like Toni Morrison's notion of "rememory," of storied places and deep time, which go beyond the immediate perception of the here and now, music in Richard Powers is a trans-temporal force of memory, turning an absent past into an ever new imaginary presence. In the novel's retrospective narrative, Jonah's beautiful voice especially, his music, his person, and his life are still present as they are recalled in the memory of Joseph Strom. This memory, however, is not just a construct of Joseph's subjective mind but a strangely transpersonal form of memory that seems to be part of music itself. "In some empty hall, my brother is still singing" (3). This is the novel's opening

sentence, which indicates some kind of transcendental continuity of music, and indeed of the literary recollection of music, through and beyond the traumas of the characters' lives. The scene that Joseph recalls is a performance of Franz Schubert's musical setting of Goethe's *Erlkönig* and of John Dowland's *Time Stands Still* at America's Next Voice Competition at Duke University in December 1961, in which Jonah wins the first prize and which opens the door to his musical future. On the evening of the contest that takes place after their mother's death, Jonah in a way fulfills her unfulfilled dream of a musical career as a singer. But in his singing he also expresses the trauma of her loss. His mother is an absent presence in the performance, which is not only musically expressed in the motif of the Earl King, whose shadow haunts Jonah throughout the song with his seductive promise of a dark fairy underworld, in which "meine Mutter hat manch gülden Gewand" ("my mother has many a golden garment"), but also in the John Dowland song, which spellbinds the audience in its time-transcending beauty and in which Jonah clearly addresses his dead mother (Powers 1):

Time stands still with gazing on her face,
Stand still and gaze for minutes, hours, and years to her give place.
All other things shall change, but she remains the same,
Till heavens changed have their course and time hath lost his name.

This concept of musical rememory, which is in manifold ways connected in the novel's structure to the nonlinear time concepts of David Strom's relativity physics, not only characterizes Joseph's retrospective narration from the early 1990s, but various levels within the reconstructed narrative.

A paradigmatic case is the day of the funeral of Delia Strom, when Jonah performs his mother's favorite song from Mahler's song cycle *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (*The Youth's Magic Horn*) titled "Wer hat dies Liedlein erdacht?" ("Who thought up this little song?") The song is taken from a collection of German folk songs by the romantic poets Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim, who collected and edited folk songs in a similar way as the brothers Grimm collected fairy tales in the search for expressions of the imagination of common people rather than of the norms of high classical culture. The song is about a girl with dark brown eyes looking out of the window of a "hohes Haus," a "high house," but originally having her home elsewhere, in an open land in

nature, “auf grüner Heide,” on the “green meadow” (Powers 145). In Brentano and Arnim’s folk version, the second stanza relates that potential suitors must raise 1,000 Thalers to be admitted into the house, linking any possible romance with the girl to the social world of money and class. Mahler significantly changes this second stanza, reinterpreting the relation of the poetic self to the dark-eyed girl in terms of intense passion, in which the magical gaze of the girl’s eyes causes a deep wound in the speaker’s soul that can only be healed by her rosy lips, a metonymic symbol of erotic attraction but also of her voice, which, as Mahler’s new version has it, can cure pain, heal wounds, and even make the dead come alive (Powers 145).

Your rosy mouth
 Makes hearts healthy
 Makes boys wise,
 Makes the dead live.

In Jonah’s performance of the song at Delia’s burial, the dark-eyed maid of the folk song turns into the face of his mother, the face through whose gaze time stands still, bringing his dead mother alive again in the imaginary space of the song. As the narrator comments:

What did this darling girl in her mountain house have to do with the matter-of-fact, irreverent black woman from Philadelphia, burned alive at the age of forty? But the girl in the song was Mama. Who could declare how her sons saw her? Death mixes all the races. Now more than ever, she was that girl, looking out forever on the original green meadow. (Powers 145)

The song is the translation of a European folk song into the context of American racism. It is also the song of a Jewish intellectual and composer, who was always also an outsider of the German culture in which he participated so intensely, and which he creatively transformed in unique ways in his music. Music, like narrative, is a mode in which such interpersonal and cross-cultural translations can take shape, because in one important sense, forms of cultural creativity like music and, in different ways, poetry and narrative, are in themselves translations of a pre-cultural dimension of natural creativity. In this context, the third stanza of the song, which is identical in the Mahler version and the folk song, is particularly relevant (Powers 146).

Who, then, thought up this pretty little song?
Three geese carried it over the water,
Two grey and one white.
And for those who can't sing this little song,
These geese will whistle it.

It is not at once evident to which song the definite article, “*dies Liedlein*,” “this pretty little song,” actually refers. The phrase is rather like a recursive commentary on the song itself as it emerges from the question about its own origins. These origins, in the fairy tale language of the song, are in a faraway and yet strangely familiar world of nonhuman nature, evoking some deep-rooted knowledge about the shared evolutionary origins of life itself. The song is carried across the water by the three geese, whose honking translates the absent origins of life into the nonverbal code from which the verbalized song is a human translation. The song is a *synecdoche* for the novel's creative process, a self-reflexive embodiment of its multivoiced “time of our singing,” which translates the absent origins of music from nature to culture, from sound to text, from one culture to another. It is a counterdiscourse which represents the “threat of all singing,” (630) as Powers calls it at the end of the novel: “We do not fear difference. We fear most being lost in likeness. The thing no race can abide” (630). Music and its narrative staging in the text are a force that both articulates and transcends differences within a vibrant world of living interconnectedness, a counterforce to cultural divides and separation lines, which continuously displaces presence into absence, and translates absence into imaginary presence in a holistic conception of life that is the ecocultural domain of art.