

Of the Crab and Corporations: The Growth Motif in Richard Powers' *Gain*

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ABSTRACT

The novels of Richard Powers reflect the powerful impact of post-modern science and technology on everyday life. The present article looks at his sixth novel, *Gain* (1998), in which cancer that 'grows' in the protagonist's body symbolises the ecological malaise that has gripped the biosphere itself. The novel becomes a telling statement on a globalised world, the tastes and even aspirations of which are constructed and governed by corporate conglomerates. As man creates new devices to make his life more comfortable, he also leaves behind a trail of accumulating debris that poisons the planet's basic life-support systems.

KEYWORDS

Growth motif; Richard Power; *Gain*; Cancer.

Worn to her bones by total hysterectomy and subsequent chemotherapy sessions, Laura Bodey discovers that she is trapped in a world determined almost entirely by multinational corporations. She feels that even her linen closet, "that last refuge of her mother, the pristine hangout of buttons, thread, tissue, hot water bottles, all that is innocent and obsolete", is now "crawling with trade names like crabs in a bucket" (*Gain* 304).

Etymologically the word 'cancer' is related to 'crab' and the comparison of the brand names to the crustacean correlates Laura's physical ailment with its possible cause, industrial toxins. Despite Susan Sontag's strictures against the use of illness as a metaphor; "the most truthful way of regarding illness – and the healthiest way of being ill – is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking (Sontag 3)," cancer and its

associated images have become potent tropes for the fragmented, degenerate, decadent and largely pathological condition of twentieth-century human reality. This figure is especially powerful in bringing out the ecological trauma the planet and its occupants have been passing through since the second half of the twentieth century.

Gain (1998) by Richard Powers is a compelling statement on the ecological predicament of the late twentieth century brought about by man's disastrous dependence on consumer goods, produced, marketed and consumed at the cost of the planet's health. The novel presents alternatively through contrapuntal narrative strands the history of capitalism in the U.S. and the story of Laura suffering from ovarian cancer. The saga of the growth of Clare International from its simple origin as a small family soap and candle business to a giant

multinational conglomerate forms the first of these narrative lines. The second narrative set in the 1990s traces the fate of Laura Bodey, a forty-two-year-old divorcee and real estate broker, who lives with her daughter and son in Lacewood, Illinois, sharing the neighbourhood with the headquarters of Clare's North American Agricultural Products Division.

Reviewing the novel, Tom Le Clair observes that the two narrative strands of *Gain* converge at the horizon of ecology. The growth of the Clare business from its early days when production was for subsistence to its present state of unscrupulous overproduction for financial gain, is to the disadvantage of Gaea the mother figure who tries to be equal to all of its offspring. The image of Gaea embedded in the title of the novel blends with the image of the living organism or 'body' implied by the name Laura Bodey. The novel is ultimately about the 'body', the individual human body as well as the whole corpus of the biosphere.

Jeffrey Williams feels that the idea of growth is the most potent motif or the central conceit in *Gain*. Incidentally, growth is the central force that sustains the Gaea. It is through this force that across millions of years multifarious life forms have evolved along the geological time scale into their present forms. Changes are an essential corollary of growth and all natural changes are evolutionary. Life forms have changed over millennia from unicellular entities through gigantic monstrosities and oddities to the current forms including *Homo sapiens*, "the roof and crown of things". The physical environment of the earth has also gone through cataclysmic changes. There have been ice ages and periods of extreme warmth. Whole landmasses with all the species that inhabited it have become inundated and new landmasses have emerged from the ocean. But never has any organism and its deeds resulted in the kind of changes in

the biosphere as having been caused by human activities during the second half of the twentieth century.

Growth is the most fundamental natural force that permeates all living organisms. It is the regulated replication of healthy cells. Laura's garden in her backyard, where she liked to work before the onset of her illness and where she longs to work in the days of her deteriorating health, is a potent symbol of this growth. In sharp contrast with the farming methods of the Red Man, who with "his native insight penetrated Nature's deepest intricacies" and knew how much to interfere with the natural laws of growth, Laura had used a variety of chemicals in her garden to attain a kind of growth she desires. Chemical products, all of them from Clare, are used liberally in the garden to enhance the growth of the flowering plants and to curtail the growth of weeds. The fact that emerges is that Chemicals never know when to stop killing or to stop promoting growth. The resultant growth is a mutation, the rampant proliferation of aberrant tissues. It is strongly implied that ovarian cancer that ultimately kills Laura has been the baby of the very chemicals she had lovingly toted home in her shopping bag.

During the days following her surgery weeds take over her garden. The regulated growth is supplanted by uncontrolled replication of "noxious plants" (138). Laura's struggle in her garden has always been "to reduce the number of weeds in her universe". She has always fought a losing battle against the weeds, for growth is a force that just cannot be trammelled. Still, she had tried, for: "Only on her small parcel of ground she needs to tilt the scales slightly towards sweeter growth" (138). It is exactly this kind of sweet growth that Clare promises. Clare International is synecdochic of all the multinational conglomerates that decide the tastes, needs and even desires of the people in

the global village. To borrow a Chomskyan expression, they have been so much successful in manufacturing the consent of the society that they rule even the most intimate whims and aspirations achieved slowly but surely through advertisements, samples of which are interspersed in the novel.

The sections of the novel which trace the history of Clare devote much attention to tracking the early impulses that led to the craze for growth or development of a very materialistic kind. The geographical explorations since the mid-fifteenth century, which laid the foundation of major colonial expansions, were impelled by the Biblical injunction to go out and subdue. Speaking of the advent of the whites into what they saw as the wilderness of the red-skinned natives of the American continents Powers writes:

The Indian lived in harmony with the measureless tangles of life . . . Guided by Nature's light, the Indian walked noiselessly upon the ground and, ear to that same earth, listened across unthinkable distances. He could pull fish from the streams with his hands. He could sense a bear before its appearance. He could stalk and snare the most skittish deer.

Whites thrust into this wildness had survived as well. More than survived, they had subdued the earth to the extent of their reaches, as their Book instructed them. (116)

Benjamin Clare's extensive explorations into the native life in the Pacific lead to the discovery of a herb that his brothers grow in hothouses and use in their new soap named Native Balm. The natives had cared very little about their complexion and the white man cared very little about the wellbeing of the natives they had subdued. But the word 'native' in the label with all its associations of purity and even sagacity makes the gain grow.

Coming to the conflict here is one weltanschauung which is in distinct

contrast with another; one that believes in a growth that is commensurate with the natural biological laws, and the other that believes in instant profit through domination and exploitation. At the time of Laura's funeral, the priest pertinently reads out from the Bible, "about God making man in His image and telling him to be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it". Don her ex-husband cries out, though a bit melodramatically, "It's subdued". He refers not just to the dead body subdued ultimately by the growth of cancerous tissues, but the whole town of Lacewood being subdued by the toxic emissions from Clare International.

Life in the modern industrialized society in which all possible needs basic to life are fulfilled has its attention focussed on peripheral and superficial concerns like the complexion of the skin. On the contrary,

The Red Man never worried about his skin. For that matter, the Red Man had very few modern anxieties. He lived in a state of noble simplicity and rapport with the world about him. His native insight penetrated Nature's deepest intricacies, giving him true knowledge, however unscientific (116).

The inhabitants of Lacewood, on the contrary, are obsessed with multifarious needs that are not needed at all. Their greatest obsession is with growth; the growth of health, wealth and comforts, preferably in geometric progression. Powers subtly draw a parallel between this obsession and cancer, which is also an inappropriate growth, malign and inordinate. This desire for an unnatural pace of growth matched with the compulsion to enhance industrial production, sale and gain, results in highhanded steps like growth hormones being added to breakfast cereals, resulting in premature pubescence and perhaps

equally premature degeneration. The complicity of the consumer is underscored in the reference to a young athlete who is given bovine growth hormones by his parents.

Powers traces in the novel the systematic development of the Clare business to its current status as a corporation, constantly maintaining a parallel with the progression of Laura's cancer. Along with the weeds in Laura's garden, the Clare industry and the cancer cells too grow by the day. The production chain diversifies into umpteen new fields, from candles to soap and salves, to tonic and alcoholic beverages, to lard and foodstuffs, to bleaches, anaesthetics and disinfectants, to agricultural chemicals and what not. The profit grows. The research division, the personnel division, the marketing division, everything grows. There is also a simultaneous growth of toxic chemicals in the air, water and earth of Lacewood: "Area's top carcinogenic chemical emission. Benzene formaldehyde, dichloro-difluoromethane, epichlorohydrin . . ." (139). To convince the authorities about the presence of harmful chemicals in the environment is not easy. To fight a legal battle against the polluting industry is even harder, due to the manipulative powers of the corporate giants. This is akin to the cancer cells that grow along with the non-pathological ones which are not easy to locate, even more difficult to weed out. Laura's cancer is not an isolated instance. A local agency comes up with a database of innumerable cases that may be related to environmental causes almost directly linked with the Clare establishment.

All natural patterns of growth have been vitiated in multiple levels. From the picture of the profusely overgrown garden of Laura, Powers invites our attention to the lilacs along the sidewalks that are

"budding in confusion" totally out of season, which might, it is hinted, be due to Global warming. Lacewood with its Clare Corporation emerges as the microcosm of all highly industrialised capitalist societies, while the sick body of Laura becomes the corpus that is the biosphere. The ideologies and forces that exert their powers on this body are too profound and intricate even to comprehend. The mighty industrial conglomerates creep like crabs into the most private recesses of life. As Laura finds out with alarm, "Every hour of her life depends on more corporations than she can count" (304).

Realising her own complicity in the predicament she is, Laura initially refuses to be part of the joint lawsuit being moved again to Clare. She feels that if cancer had blown in through her window, it was because she had opened the latch for it. The greatest ecological impasse that modern man faces is the fact that he is addicted to the very causative factors of the doom that threatens to overwhelm him. To continue Laura's line of thought, "It makes no difference whether this business gave her cancer. They have given her everything else" (320). Like her compatriots in the industrialised world, she too is a construct of the very same corporation that has caused her distress. This issue of corporations and complicity can be poignantly summed up with the words of Hardy Green:

In the end, the victimizer is not so much a corporate evildoer as it is humanity itself. 'People want everything. That's their problem', [Laura] announces from her deathbed. Indeed we do want it all, and, as Powers reminds us in this sombre yet ultimately incandescent work, there are few indications that we'll stop trying to get it.

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