

Dispoetics

Mark Jeffreys

University of Alabama-Birmingham

"Both constructionism and essentialism, then, are theoretical strategies. . . . Strategic constructionism destigmatizes the disabled body. . . . Strategic essentialism, by contrast, validates individual experience. . . ." Rosemarie Garland Thomson

"Tales are human marks invested with desire. . . . The speaker/writer posits the self against language to establish identity and to test the self with and against language, and each word marks a way toward a future different from what may have been decreed. . . ." Jack Zipes

Mark the paronastic construction, descriptively incised through all its layers by scalpels sharp as penknives. Puns disfigure figures, deform formalities, and paralyze analysis. Once infected by punning all eloquence is marred and all wit diseased - which is to say, disabled, which is to say, incapacitated, legally disqualified, suppressed. Dismissed. Apart. Asunder. Not. Absent. Opposite. Undone. Deprived. Removed. Freed from. Used as an intensive. Browning's Caliban: "I am not I; pity the tale of me."

And yet these paronymously compromised signs comprise a kind of beggar's carnival, a harlequin charactery of "supplicants and minstrels" (Thomson 13). We have ways to make you comfortable. We can tell a joke from a calamity. Brother, can you paradigm? All bodies are equally constructed, but some are more equally constructed than others. Hath not the amputee legs? Wait! Don't be armed. We can be human again. We will remove our formidable prostheses if you ask politely. Please do not run away. We are the Cyborg. Assistance is futile.

It's base, this punning, this twisting and jerking and slobbering of meaning. It's a base of mistaken identity, the crippling symbolism of the symbolic cripple. Who wants to be a mistake and delete it too? "The theoretical bind is that deconstructing oppressive categories can neutralize the effects of real differences" (Thomson 23). One tactic: alternate mutably exclusive epistemologies, tacking like a sailboat back and forth into a headwind. Here there be monsters. Skilled historicism and caring individualism leave little navigable space between them. If the body is a historical construction, the words of the flesh codified in the guts of the paradigm, then no body can claim an autonomous reality. If personal testimonial must be respected as the guarantor of real difference, then every construction can claim genuine pain in the general cacophony. All constructions are embodied differently, but some are more differently embodied than others.

A few questions: has the troping of physical deformity as indicative of moral, ideological, or sexual deformity ever been supported by a demonstrably

quantifiable correlation between the base pairs of such tropes? Are amputees more likely to be monomaniacs, for instance? Are limping males more likely to be impotent? Conversely, are normate bodies reliably productive of well-formed ethics? Is there any predictive value to associating marked or asymmetrical bodies with either divine retribution for sin or the general pathological decay of a society that coddles them? No? If not, then consider a broader form of those questions: do any aspects of physical form directly correlate with any aspects of social worth? Or: can we predict any body's social character based on that body's form? Broader still: is there any demonstrable correlation of formal characteristics of texts with their ideolects? Or with their author's bodies? Could we have predicted that Alexander Pope would pour forth buckets of gracefully symmetrical couplets if we knew beforehand that he was misogynist, Roman Catholic, or possessed of a painfully asymmetrical body?

If such correlations can't be established, and if we object to centuries of symbolically stigmatizing and identifying madmen, villains, witches, and monsters by their extraordinary physical forms, why should we toy with such troping at all, even to claim it, even to transvalue it? What core epistemological assumption undergirds all our transferred epithets, and why not blow it to pieces? It doesn't seem utterly impossible that we should be able to distinguish between a broken rhyme-scheme, a broken bone, and a broken mind. Or a closed form, a closed fracture, and a closed mind. Nor does it seem entirely absurd to observe that an able-bodied fascist with a cultist's fascination for beauty might compose poetry in revolutionarily fragmentary and broken forms. And yet, throughout this century, the manifestos of both modernist and postmodernist poetics have continued to pursue metonymic webbing with a vengeance. An open form is a sign of a democratic poetics at work. A subversive form is a sign of a subversive poetics. A tightly closed form is a sign of reactionary tendencies. If dialogism is liberative, then monologue must necessarily be complicitous in repression of the voices of the othered. A cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind. Yes, and an empty desk of an empty mind. And so on.

Is it the irresistible appeal of the lowly pun? Here's a mark containing many meanings at once, arbitrarily linking apparently unrelated domains, prompting the pleasurable or horrific contemplation of unsuspected relations. Is it the rich tradition of noncorrelational thinking still traded through our arguments despite centuries of occupation by imperially empirical Science? Perhaps it's to do with the stubborn faith among humanists that there must be something to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis after all, the devout conviction of those who work in texts rather than labs that language is the Urgrund of reality, that every language constructs the world so uniquely that any deconstruction or reconstruction of our language amounts to an actual remaking of our world. Perhaps we can't ask for quantification of such convictions, any more than we could demand that a physicist back up her theory of

dark matter by producing theologically sound evidence from the Bible. The epistemologies are incompatible.

Certainly, this poor, dense construction can't begin to sort out the hierarchies of reality validation involved in the arguments among empiricists, cultural constructionists, and pragmatic social activists. Two halting steps toward a poetics of disability are all that these disjointed puns can take. Hayfoot: all signs stigmatize. Strawfoot: all stigmata can be reassigned. Tottering conclusion: rather than claiming or disclaiming any set of stigmata, a successful poetics of disability would operate from a relentless skepticism of the motives and the truth-value of any signs (marks, names, jargon) but inoculate itself against crippling paranoia by the canny (yes, just canny) observation that signs have no more an essential, autonomous existence than the categories they represent, and no sign can indelibly mark or irretrievably erase a meaning. A successful poetics of disability, then, might simply extend to all reading and writing a few of the survival skills already well-honed by persons of disability: challenge those terms and representations that seem charitably sent to your aid, including those coined by people who identify with you, but never forget that even the most meaningfully demeaning figures can be made to kick at air when strung up by a gallows humor.

Consider for example the very sign, "disabled," by which we are this moment marked. Terrible prefix, that "dis-." It negates nearly every morpheme that follows it. From the Latin meaning "apart, asunder." Homonym and sometime substitute for that other vicious prefix, "dys-." Abnormal. Impaired. Difficult. Bad. "Disease" is descended from "dys-," which itself is a Latin derivation from the Greek *dus*, bad. Also the Latin name for Pluto, god of the underworld, lord of the dead: Dis. You just can't get more othered than to get dissed. And yet this is the politely correct nomenclature that we seem to have chosen for our preferred stigmata. Why? What was so hideous about "handicapped," a word with a colorful gambler's etymology, "hand in cap," a word primarily used to indicate that some impediment is required merely to even the odds of a contest?

Disability, in fact, is just another category under construction. Americans with Disabilities. Perhaps it sounds better to the anglophone ear, somehow, more sibilant, more latinate, more scientific than that hunchback "handicap." Perhaps its cold, clinical lisp is meant to stave off the mockery that swiftly descends on such fluttering euphemisms as "special" or "challenged." It didn't take two years for society, flashing on the turn like a synchronous school of fish, to collectively intuit that "challenged" no longer signified a noble or heroic condition, but rather, now, a lack. Once again, the stigmatized body became the model other, as a murder of mockeries flapped noisily around the euphemism's corpse: "vertically challenged," "organizationally challenged," "folicly challenged," and so on. Retardation was once a kinder word, too, remember? No longer were certain children to be called

“idiots,” “simpletons,” “fools,” or “cretins.” Now, in an enlightened age, they were to be understood as ordinary children, somewhat impeded in their mental development: delayed. But the kindergartners were not so easily fooled, and soon the thunderous insult, “RETARD!” echoed across the schoolyards.

But the very reassignability of old stigma to new sign, while reminding us that culture’s meanings have a residuum that evades all signification, also reminds us that etymology is not destiny. Once upon a time, we were crippled. Later we were handicapped. We have since been disabled, or perhaps we have disabled ourselves. These tales imposed upon us, upon our diversity, even by each other, should be queried, should be challenged, should be handicapped. Tomorrow we may find ourselves marked by terms we have never yet considered. Fine. We must therefore continually remark upon ourselves, reconfigure our own bodies, unchain our aims from any one strategy or terminology or theory. We can mutate, mutate, mutate. But for now at least, a poetics of disability, because it is a poetics of *disability* as such, may serve us best as a dispoetics, at play in the fields of the word. That is, a poetics marred, a poetics not poetics. Have pun, will unravel. An absence of poetics. An opposite poetics. Poetics undone. Deprived of poetics. Removed from poetics. Freed from poetics. Used as an intensive. Wade’s “Woman with Juice”: “I’m a French kiss with cleft tongue” (qtd. in Thomson 25).

Works Cited

- Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997.
- Zipes, Jack. Ed. *Spells of Enchantment: The Wondrous Fairy Tales of Western Culture*. New York: Penguin, 1991.