The Crippled Aesthetics of Modernism

A Dissertation Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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August 2020

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I must acknowledge the members of my dissertation committee, whose insight and encouragement were not only invaluable to my writing but were also a lesson in how I endeavor to teach and mentor in the future. Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud's course in affect theory changed the very foundations of how I intersect my personal experiences with my intellectual pursuits. Speaking alongside Adam Cureton in an effort to re-imagine campus accessibility and the importance of respect in conversations of disability confirmed for me the importance of imbuing scholarship with activism. I would take a dozen more modern drama courses with Stanton Garner, if given the chance. The sincerity with which he has encouraged me over the years is unmatched. And Lisi Schoenbach—I owe so much of my graduate studies experience to her remarkable mentorship. For nearly seven years, she pushed me to expand my ideas without once making me feel like I hadn't accomplished enough. When I felt ineffectual and lost in the weeds of my too-big ideas, she refocused me, laughed with me, and reminded me to be kind to myself. She is the precise sort of mentor and professor I would one day like to be.

Thanks, too, to those friends who not only supported me, but enriched my work and made me believe that it was worthwhile. Liz, Coralyn, Melinda, and Jake—to have friends that listen and absorb and bring my ideas to life by interacting with them is a great fortune. I thank them for being the invisible audience to which I wrote. Many moments of defeat were overcome by the thought that they were waiting to read my work.

My family, in all its changing shapes over the course of my graduate studies, has never once flagged in its resolute faith that I would one day finish this leg of the journey. I began this venture as the only scholar in the family and finish it with both of my sisters following their own intellectual passions. We are the daughters of parents who had few resources aside from encouragement and affection. We are profoundly lucky.

And finally, I thank Jared. My partner, my champion, my exceptionally well-read caveman. This project could never have happened without his unyielding insistence that other people hear what I have to say. He has been my steadfast reminder that learning is my favorite hobby, and he has helped me fill our home with creative energy and curiosity and love since the day he arrived. I cannot wait to keep learning and making with him.

Abstract

In the current sociocultural climate, conversations surrounding conceptions of identity are richer and more robust than ever. Disability Studies has long understood the disabled identity to be simultaneously constructed and embodied. This tension is echoed by the aesthetic tendencies of literary and artistic modernism, which encourage contradictions, messiness, and irresolution. Our present historical moment can benefit from a look back at a movement that not merely tolerated but valued fracture and difference. Through a careful analysis of works by high modernists and obscure artists alike, *The Crippled Aesthetics of Modernism* argues that our contemporary framework for conceiving of disability—not as an inherent fault in a person, but as a condition produced by society's inability or refusal to accommodate, to understand—can be strengthened by modernism's adamant dismantling of whatever we might call "normal."

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Introduction

Since its emergence in the 1980s, the field of Disability Studies (DS) has worked to revise our understanding of disability and reconceive of it as a socially and culturally defined identity intersecting with and functioning alongside other studies of embodied identities: race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. This line of scholarship has developed in opposition to the historically prevalent medical model of individual-based impairments that can only be reconciled with "normal" embodiment through treatment and/or cure. As the construct of disability has reached beyond questions of medicine and into the humanities, the need for an interdisciplinary approach to DS has become more and more imperative. Literary DS, in particular, supports the culturally determined model of disability by investigating the ways in which literature embeds disabled bodies into narratives to do what literature—and art—has always done: express the human condition.

In order to place disability in conversation with modernism, we must understand that the socially constructed nature of disability requires that it always be historicized. Impaired bodies have always existed, but they've not always been regarded as part of a separate, non-normative identity. In our post-Enlightenment and capitalistic state, disabled bodies are faulty and burdensome. In recent decades, the field of Disability Studies has worked to dismantle this assumption that for years has been accepted as the natural state of the world. But that challenge only comes so recently that I find myself personally glad to live during a moment in human development where I have access to things like electricity, my power wheelchair, a removable shower head, and spondylodesis (spinal fusion to correct scoliosis). Some of these advancements make my life easier, some of them make my life possible. Sometimes I try to imagine what my life would be like if I were born with Muscular Dystrophy even just a hundred years ago, but of

course I have no way of knowing what such a fate would look like. I mentioned this to an able-bodied friend who clarified my uncertainty immediately: "you'd be a shut in." Perhaps this is true. Without a power wheelchair, I'd have to rely on someone else to move me about. Without spondylodesis, I would have died by age twelve. But that answer and the assumptions underlying it are telling of an all-too-pervasive belief: that this moment is the best moment to be alive for someone with a disability, and in any past moment, life as a cripple would have been untenable.

I offer, in rebuttal, the case of Shanidar 1. A Neanderthal man who lived at least to the age of 40, the remains of Shanidar 1 tell the story of a man who lived with multiple debilitating conditions: a fractured eye socket early in life that likely would have caused visual impairment, a missing hand and forearm with signs on the remaining bone of an amputation, hyperstotic disease which caused an abnormal gait, and bony growths in his ears which would have resulted in total hearing loss in one ear and partial hearing loss in the other (Hublin, para 25). Some of these impairments would have only become a problem later in life, but at least one of them happened when he was still a child, meaning he managed to survive the hostile Pleistocene environment despite being very ill-suited for it. Anthropologists contend that he simply could not have lived to what was then old-age without the help of others. This paints a very different picture from "survival of the fittest" ideologies that often accompany discussions of evolution, but nonetheless, 50,000 years ago, a disabled body managed to live a full life. Moreover, nearly 450,000 years before Shanidar 1, a pre-Neanderthal child lived to the age of five despite having the earliest known case of cranial deformity that likely would have resulted in cognitive deficiencies. In "The prehistory of compassion," published in 2009 in the journal of *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, paleoanthropologist Jean-Jacques Hublin notes that "Despite her/his pathological condition, this individual was not

rejected at birth and survived until at least 5 years of age, apparently receiving the same attention as other children from the group" (6429). Any supposition that our modern moment is the only survivable moment for a disabled body is clearly mistaken, and belies a false assumption that progression is purely teleological. Certainly some of the hardships caused by a disability come from the impairment itself—chronic pain, psychiatric distress, and the general frustration that comes along with having a body which will not or cannot do what you'd like it to. But different points in history, and thus different sociocultural contexts have exacerbated those struggles to different degrees. We are starting to develop the language to talk about the malleability of the concept of disability. But modernism, at times intentionally and at times serendipitously, addressed the porousness and complexity of disability.

Intersections of modernism and disability are more complex and interrelated than a linear list would suggest, but it is helpful to locate the primary epicenters of disability within the modernist literary tradition. Eugenics, the trauma of World War I, and artistic preoccupation with deviance in reaction to spreading fascism intersect to complicate both the performance and representation of disability. Thus, this project conceives of modernism as engaging with disability in a way that grants it more subjectivity and generative representation than did the Realists beforehand, specifically through a re-envisioning of aesthetic standards that make space for disabled bodies.

The philosophical tradition of aesthetics reaching all the way back to Plato's *Republic* has routinely excluded disabled bodies from positive, generative categories, further marginalizing them from the supposedly able-bodied norm. Wherever aesthetics is contingent on morality, disabled bodies are labeled morally lacking. Wherever aesthetics is determined by supposedly objective criteria like symmetry, consistency, and coherence, disabled bodies are marked

deformed. Wherever aesthetics are based on utility (capitalist ideology, for example), disabled bodies are without use value. Perhaps aesthetics tied to the sublime leaves the most space for disabled bodies since, per its definition, the most valuable affective experience is not determined by beauty, but by awe, and there is no stipulation that prohibits disabled bodies from being awe-inspiring. But much of the tradition of aesthetics—particularly those branches of study that aim to pass judgment on matters of taste—are not overly fond of aberrance.

Aesthetics, for the purpose of this project, refers primarily to the sense of beauty of an object rather than a sense of taste regarding it, as differentiated by Kant. "If [a man] says that canary wine is agreeable he is quite content if someone else corrects his terms and reminds him to say instead: It is agreeable to *me*," because "Everyone has his own (sense of) taste." The case of "beauty" is distinguished from "agreeableness" because, "If he proclaims something to be beautiful, then he requires the same liking from others; he then judges not just for himself but for everyone, and speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things" (Kant, 55-56). Similarly, the ugliness of disability is not a matter of individual taste, but of a systematic exclusion of disabled bodies in defining what is beautiful—as if disability were a property of a body. Disability is not considered aesthetically valuable, even if it may be pleasing to an individual's taste. Individuals who find disability especially attractive are typically labeled fetishists[1], which supports the claim that disability is otherwise systematically removed from normative standards of beauty and only allowed desirability in "deviant" spaces.

To return to Kant's distinction between beauty and taste, in the case of disability, it is less a matter of "agreeableness" as much as it is "tolerability." Few people would mark disability

[1] See McRuer and Morrow's *Sex and Disability*, with special attention to Kristen Harmon's chapter "The Fetishizing of Hearing."

"agreeable." Therefore, I argue that modernist texts position disability as more than merely "tolerable" or "agreeable," but as beautiful in its own right. Modernists subvert the affective response to disability—one of disgust, unease, and fear—by elevating the artistic value of fragmentation and deformity, in the literal sense that modernism de-forms narrative expectations. Disabled bodies are often perceived by abled-bodies as a collection of parts, usually separated into the normative parts and the disabled parts. In my own experience, for instance, children who see me in my wheelchair and are moved to inquire about my disability ask me what's wrong with my legs, rather than what's wrong with me. This "part-ness" inherent in the social construction of disability naturally parallels the fragmentation prioritized by modernists. This particular phenomenon will be explored in this project by engaging most directly with cubism, in an effort to showcase the generative parallel between cubist aesthetics and definitions of disability.

While this project commends modernism's inclusion and representation of disability, especially at the formal level, it also recognizes a lingering use of stereotypes, metaphors, and recycled narratives of disability. Modernism is, in many ways, literature, art, and theatre made crippled. Modernist texts rarely offer resolution or coherence, but instead favor the richness resultant of such a crippling—beauty in the disfigured faces of Picasso's *Les Mademoiselles d'Avignon* and lyricism in the broken syntax of Stein's *Tender Buttons*. In doing so, modernism challenges the aesthetic standards that preface it and grant disability entrance into artistic realms at a level above passive objectification.

Ultimately, modernism takes a substantial step away from the lengthy tradition of ostracizing disabled bodies in art. Disability Studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson offers a possible motivation behind this convention of 'othering' disabled bodies in her introduction to *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*.

> Constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance, the physically disabled body becomes a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control, and identity…I want to move disability from the realm of medicine into that of political minorities, to recast it from a form of pathology to a form of ethnicity (6).

Garland-Thomson exemplifies the move in DS toward a social model of disability, which looks to "recast" disability as a socially determined identity rather than a fault on the part of the disabled: "Disability, then, is the attribution of corporeal deviance—not so much a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do" (6). In one of the most oft-cited defenses of the social model, Garland-Thomson points out that stairs are so pervasive merely because the majority of individuals found them to be a sufficiently efficient component of architecture. There is nothing inherent in stairs that should make them the default mode of accessing multiple levels of a building. By calling attention to the way that our world is constructed as if to take able-bodiedness for granted, DS invites the reader, viewer, or audience to question established norms. Modernist texts function much the same way in their active deconstruction of narrative and artistic conventions: coherence, resolution, and linearity are not inherently necessary in the creation of successful, valuable literature.

The next step in de-othering disability, per Garland-Thomson's argument, is to increase the visibility of disabled bodies so that society at large is more aware of the normative constructs in which it participates—this is best done through representation. In the contemporary/post-modern moment in which she writes, this extends not only to representation in literature, but in other media as well, namely television and film. But as promised in the title of her book, she begins with literature:

> Disabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability's cultural resonance (10).

Garland-Thomson acknowledges the presence of disability in literature, but notes that it exists as a tool to extract reactions from other able-bodied characters in the text. Thus, it is not sufficient for disabled bodies to merely appear in literature and art—they must be represented in a way that returns their agency to them. This project will argue that modernism manages to return at least some of this agency to disabled figures, thereby facilitating a disabled aesthetic. And in those moments where it represents disability in what we might instinctively call a negative way, the project tries to check that instinctive criticism and deconstruct our standards for evaluating representation.

From the perspective of DS, the disabled aesthetic is one that avoids fetish, flat symbolism, and stereotyping and considers the work of art without established expectations of what a body should look like or do. Other identity movements have begun to break through the expectations of art that once (and still) excluded them, and Garland-Thomson uses them as precedent: "Even though mainstream critics have long discussed, for example, the implications of Twain's Jim for blacks, when literary critics look at disabled characters, they often interpret them metaphorically or aesthetically, reading them without political awareness as conventional elements of the sentimental, romantic, Gothic, or grotesque traditions" (10). DS aims to be deeply aware of intersectionality, precisely because it is not limited to any particular racial, gendered, sexual, or class demographic. Modernism (particularly High Modernism) has faced hostility for its elitism and lack of accessibility and has often been criticized for prioritizing the

voice of wealthy white men.[2] This inaccessibility is something that will have to be reconciled with disability throughout the project.

In tandem with the work of Garland-Thomson, Lennard Davis' work will serve as the groundwork for literary DS in this project. As one of the earliest and most prolific scholars to approach the literary tradition with an eye toward disability, Davis' aesthetic interpretations of disability in general are foundational to this project's specific look at modernism's disabled aesthetics. Few works have addressed the aesthetics of disability as directly and thoroughly as Davis' *Enforcing Normalcy*. In the chapter "Visualizing the Disabled Body," he opens with a juxtaposition between the canonically beautiful and crippled form of the Venus de Milo and the crippled but rejected bodily form of a young woman with Muscular Dystrophy (taken from a memoir by Pam Hebert). Thus he begins his discussion with a question: why is one body glorified while the other is abhorred? The question itself goes unanswered, but it actuates the entire argument at hand:

> If disability is a cultural phenomenon rooted in the sense, one needs to inquire how a disability occupies a field of vision, of touch, of hearing; and how that disruption or distress in the sensory field translates into psycho-dynamic representations. This is more a question about the nature of the subject than about the qualities of the object, more about the observer than the observed (128).

Thus, Davis turns the gaze back in on itself in much the same way that Garland-Thomson lifts the burden of blame from the shoulders of the disabled and reassigns it to society at large. Per Davis' argument, discomfort with disabled bodies stems not from the disability but from the

[2] See Ewa Ziarek's *Feminist Aesthetics and the Politics of Modernism* for a discussion of misogyny in modernist tradition.

observer's anxieties. There is an abject fear of the disabled body because it represents an unappealing state of being to which everyone is potentially prone—anyone, at any time, can become disabled, and therein lies the strict boundary throughout history between disability and normalcy that has only recently been questioned. The inclusion of the disabled body in aesthetic determinations—or at least the advent of a disabled aesthetic—both complicates and enriches our discussions of what determines a body, an experience, or a piece of art as something valuable. Davis acknowledges that such an inclusion has been attempted before, but has ultimately failed:

> While the term 'grotesque' has had a history of being associated with this counterhegemonic notion of people's aesthetics and the inherent power of the masses, what the term has failed to liberate is the notion of actual bodies as grotesque. There is a thin line between the grotesque and the disabled (151).

Current discussions in DS aim for such a liberation—a reclamation and cannibalization of the 'grotesque' so that deviant bodies may exist safely and creatively while maintaining their abnormality. This project positions modernism as an alternative, albeit later attempt at such a liberation. While perhaps not fully realized by modernism alone, the movement makes great strides in opening up the bounds of aesthetics to incorporate and represent those bodies and minds that have traditionally been marginalized.

The first chapter will outline the ways in which disability has already been used as a means of critically reading modernist texts, focusing on the shortcomings of analyzing disabled characters as purely symbolic. Three characters from canonical, high modernist texts will serve as the primary points of analysis in this chapter: Jake Barnes, from *The Sun Also Rises*, Gerty McDowell from *Ulysses* and Benjy Compson from *The Sound and the Fury*. These particular characters are commonly discussed amongst literary disability scholars interested in modernism

since their texts are well known and their respective disabilities are central to their textual presence.

The second chapter will highlight the intersection of disability and gender/sexuality, focusing on the modern feminine experience of disability, as written by and about disabled women. The writings of Virginia Woolf, Olive Moore, and Flannery O'Connor will take center stage, as examples of highly embodied disability that intersects with gender, sexuality, and creativity—both artistic and biological. Embodiment of disability seems, perhaps, redundant. Disability is so linked with the physical, material form, that even mental disability is often discussed in terms of the brain's biological and chemical composition. But the reiteration of embodiment is especially important in discussions of modernism because the tradition—indeed much of all literary tradition—is preoccupied with discovering and representing the mind and its thoughts rather than the physical body within which it is contained. Woolf makes note of this in the opening of *On Being Ill*:

> [L]iterature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such a desire and greed, is null, negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes…the body smashes itself to smithereens, and the soul (it is said) escapes. But of all this daily drama of the body there is no record (14-15).

Written shortly after Woolf experienced a nervous breakdown, and from the "sick bed" in which she recovered, the essay positions illness as a theme worthy of literary attention. Her claims that illness and vaguely stated invalidity have never been properly addressed in literature may be a bit overstated. However, her call for more exploration into the way that "poor" health permanently

changes the perspective from which a person interacts with the world indicates that perspective's value. Her essay serves as the theoretical framework against which Spleen and "Good Country People" are read.

The third chapter looks at representations of disability wherein the bodies themselves, disabled and deformed as they are, take up space, move, and do things. These are bodies in action, in the process of becoming impaired and becoming disabled—two different processes that intersect. Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* presents us with a protagonist whose body falls apart over the course of the novella as a warning against the dangers of pursuing the non-existent American Dream. Meanwhile, Bernard Pomerance dramatizes the life of Joseph Merrick in *The Elephant Man* to encourage reflection on what it means to have agency over one's body and how agency over one's body is intimately bound up in agency over one's narrative.

The fourth chapter will investigate modernist form(s) and illustrate the way that fragmentation in cubist art promotes a disabled/deformed aesthetic. The poetry of Gertrude Stein in conjunction with the visual art of Picasso and Max Weber will act as models of cubist aesthetics that function parallel to constructions of disability and its often incoherent and difficult nature. Perhaps the most thoroughly canonized female poet of modernism is Gertrude Stein. At a practical level, her influence on the avant-gardes is immeasurable since she facilitated much of the coterie activities of many of modernism's great names. But while other modern poets toyed with punctuation, syntax, and grammar, Stein deconstructed language to the point of sound and association. What Saussure proposed about language and meaning philosophically, Stein attempted to express poetically. In poems like "A Little Called Pauline," this results in what seems like nonsense: "A little called anything shows shudders. / Come and say what prints all day. A whole few watermelons. There is no pope" (ln 1-2). Attempting to concretely tease a

meaning out such lines feels laughable, which is perhaps Stein's intent—one of the motivating energies in her work is the concept of play. Meaning is not communicated directly via a system of signs and signifiers. Rather, we are invited to play with words the way that she does on the page in the hopes that we might find meaning along the way. This playful free association is revolutionary, of course, in the wake of work of modernist like Eliot, Pound, and Joyce, whose verses and chapters are filled to bursting with heavily connoted references and allusions. Indeed, Stein often manages to avoid words that have any sort of cultural associations.

Unlike many other modernists whose poetry often engages more directly with contemporary historical events or sociocultural issues, Stein's work is so free of social critique or judgment that it seems to exist abstractly, outside of historical context. And yet in a poem like "A carafe that is a blind glass," we see a piece that is deeply rooted in a material, object-oriented present. The entire poem is only three sentences that get progressively shorter: "A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading." Stein really only attempts to describe a carafe—not a particular carafe, just any carafe, perhaps the Platonic ideal of a carafe. But a carafe is already a familiar, mundane, domestic object. So Stein seeks rather to *de*familiarize the reader with the object, devoting half of her time to definition through negation—"nothing," "not ordinary," etc. The effect is a deconstruction of all previous sociocultural associations that imbue a word or an object with meaning. The visual art of Picasso, Weber, and other cubists showcases this fragmentation so directly and literally that it seems almost pedestrian to read their figures as disabled bodies. Picasso's *Mademoiselles d'Avignon* are de-formed and dis-figured without the cultural and sexual liability of the label of disability. As a result, they become an entry point to discussions of

aesthetics of fragmentation without the weight of a stigmatized disabled identity.

Having presented both a critical and a historical context for the project, I would be remiss to ignore the personal context. From my own experience as a disabled scholar, writer, and lover of literature and art, theorizing disability often feels empty. My daily interactions with my disability are most significant and emphasized in mundane instances: the inaccessibility of an old building, the piteous stares of strangers at the grocery store, the frustration of not being able to stretch aching joints, the bureaucracy of having to prove my disability in a society that suspects any request for help. In these moments, I am grateful to lawyers, architects, doctors, and wheelchair designers for making practical, measurable, and occasionally immediate accommodations to my life. These are the improvements necessary for me to function as a scholar in academic spaces; these needs must be met before I can theorize about disability. But much of the other-ing (to borrow Garland-Thomson's language) that makes such accommodations necessary stems from a lack of representation and inclusion. If disabled bodies are not present and acknowledged, it is no wonder the world is not built for them. Art—of high and low form—has the capacity to remedy such absence and marginalization by valuing deformed and disabled bodies aesthetically in a world that has so long denied them even human value. It has yet to fulfill its potential, but perhaps it can look back to the modernist moment for encouragement.

Literary modernism is, deep down, founded on an aesthetic of disability and deformity. If we can dig past the racism and misogyny of the movement—a difficult task, since modernists as a canonized artistic group were, by and large, privileged, heteronormative, and white—we see a widespread panic over form and figure taking place under the surface of modern life. And as we dig down to the theoretical foundation of that notion, we must recognize that a crisis of form is

also the very condition of disability–what do you do with a body that's not doing what it's "supposed" to be doing? You almost certainly struggle, almost certainly consider it a crisis—and then you approach the world from a new angle.

Also inherent to modernism is the fundamental ambivalence and tension in both its recurring themes and formal innovations. In its novels, we see an understanding of modernity as both a moment for revolutionary change and of anxiety over insurmountable institutions. In an attempt to represent truths, modernists reject realism in exchange for the abstract. And without forcing inorganic narrative or thematic finality, modernism locates authenticity and insight in the messy in-between-ness of irresolution. In that same spirit, this project is a collection of carefully balanced tensions between often polemical and contradictory philosophies in regards to disability—many of which have divided and distanced scholars in unnecessary and destructive ways. These tensions include, but are not limited to the following ideas:

- It is important to value disabled aesthetics as both generative in and of themselves and as a subversion of normative expectations, but we should be wary of romanticizing the experience of disability, which at a pragmatic level, is still tremendously marginalizing.
- Framing disability as a social construct is crucial in unburdening disabled people of guilt over their impairment(s), but we must also realize that some of the embodied distress caused by impairments cannot be alleviated by a theoretical reframing. Ex.: for all its benefits, the social model cannot theorize away chronic pain.
- Disability exists on a spectrum and ability itself is highly relative, but some people have had very definitive disabled experiences and are oppressed by the category as if it were absolute. An inability to run a ten-minute mile is very different from an inability to stand.
- Any sort of scholarship or critical reading done on the subject of disability can be a boon

to the field and improves general awareness, but disabled perspectives ought to be especially valued—nothing about us without us, after all.

- Bodies should not have to be beautiful to be valued, but sometimes it is more generative and revolutionary to reconceive of disability and deformity as beautiful.

Taking an unwavering stance on either side of each of these tensions is easy. It requires very little critical thinking and avoids the messy business of making a potentially difficult choice. But as scholars, we should be capable of holding two conflicting ideas in mind at the same time. I take pride in my disability and I resent my disability. The trick is learning when to allow each emotion precedence. Modernism's contradictory, open-ended approach to all things facilitate the appropriate affective atmosphere for thinking through these difficult questions in Disability Studies.

As a final introductory note, wherever possible, and when doing so does not occlude its arguments and analyses, this project makes an example of the modernist and disabled aesthetics with which it engages. There will not always be one clear, resolute answer regarding the benefit or harm of a disabled character's inclusion, since neither modernism nor Disability Studies offer definitive or universal resolutions. The project's organization is based less on chronology and more on an organic process of crippling the aesthetics at hand—thus, texts are group neither by time or origin. Texts are chosen and included not in an attempt to offer a complete and totalizing reading of all disability in all of modernist literature, but more often as crutches to one another, sometimes reaching beyond conventional definitions of modernism to consider the movement's legacy.

Chapter 1

Tokensim and the Desexualization of Disabled Bodies

We could locate a number of historical moments as critical to the systematic oppression of an entire class of disabled individuals, but I believe that nothing has played such a singularly significant role in that oppression as industrialization. Upon the commodification of labor, bodies deemed "less efficient" would become less valuable to the market of their state. In accordance to this system of valuing, disabled bodies are less worthy by definition. This translates almost identically into social realms, resulting in a complete devaluation of disabled individuals. And along with being less valuable to the market, disabled bodies become regarded as problematic; because they do not fit neatly into a particular function of capitalism, society must find another place for them to occupy.

It makes sense, then, that early literary disability studies focused much of its attention on the texts and trends of the nineteenth century, amidst the rise of industrialization and capitalism. Victorian studies have long discussed the prevalence of disabled characters in Realist novels, typically as loci for pity and/or disgust—a repository for class commentary and metaphors for the crippling of society. The likes of Tiny Tim, Mrs. Clennam, and Rochester's mad wife come to mind as characters used to critique the environments in which they exist. Tiny Tim is the poor, innocent crippled boy who reminds everyone of the importance of charity. Mrs. Clennam is the cold and bitter, self-imposed recluse who represents Dickens' hatred of political economy. Bertha Mason, Mr. Rochester's wife, is the violent, angry, and frightening representation of social deviance—the shameful, dangerous kind of disability that must be hidden away. Having a disabled character—but never as the protagonist—became a staple of Victorian literature.[3]

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[3] See Miriam Bailin's *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994; Lillian Craton's *The Victorian Freak Show: The Significance*

Historically, this proliferation of disabled characters is concurrent with the rise in Enlightenment ideologies and the overwhelming interdisciplinary influences of Darwin's *Evolution of Species*. The resultant construct of understanding all life as classifiable and situated somewhere along a teleological path of progress toward biological perfection may have seemed like a helpful paradigm for improving society, but it immediately marginalized and devalued disabled bodies. These disabled bodies show up in Victorian realist literature as non-protagonists—metaphors for the deviant, devolved parts of society and humanity against which the protagonists can stand contrasted. It comes as no surprise, then, that the work of many foundational literary Disability Studies scholars like Martha Stoddard Holmes[4] and Lennard Davis[5] located itself in Victorian literature in an effort to investigate this sociocultural shift.

More recently, however, modernism scholars have taken up the task of reading for disability in a tradition of literature predominated by inquiries into all realms of human experience, especially those that have been traditionally marginalized. Perhaps most assertively, some literary DS scholars have posited that the overarching modernist aesthetic is disabled. Early in "On the Asylum Road with Woolf and Mew," Janet Lyon makes "the uncontroversial proposition that modernist aesthetics, with its emphasis on disproportion, fracture, and incompleteness, shares with disability theory a foundational contestation of the category of 'normal" (552). Uncontroversial as it may be, the proposition warrants more attention. Since the

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of Disability and Physical Differences in 19th-Century Fiction. London: Cambria Press, 2009; and Erin O'Connor's *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

[4] See Holmes' *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. Print.

[5] Much of Davis' earliest work in disability studies intersects with conventions of the Novel. See *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* New York: Methuen, 1987; and portions of *Enforcing Normalcy*. London, New York: Verso, 1995. Print.

article's publication in 2012, scholars like Maren Tova-Linett[6] and Suzannah Biernoff[7] have done careful work to explicitly address the shared aesthetics of modernism and disability. This line of inquiry necessitates a discussion of not only of aesthetics and aesthetic value, but of representations of disability. However, this project is less interested in evaluating whether a representation is good or bad and more interested in whether it's generative, and why it exists as a representation in the first place. While some of modernism's sub-genres embrace deviance and deformity, critical investigations of disability's presence in many of its most canonical texts is still over-simplified. It is not enough to decide if a representation is good or bad—any ruling one way or another effectively shuts the conversation down. Thus, this project expands upon and complicates this claim in an attempt to illuminate the simultaneously generative and problematic nature of such a generalized claim. Moreover, it looks to recuperate high-modernist, hyper-canonical disabled characters so that we can understand them as complicated representations of modernist aesthetics and questions and not merely as symbols of impotence and stagnation and/or as romanticized objects of sympathy and redemption.

This first chapter outlines the ways in which disability has already been used as a means of critically reading canonical high modernist texts, focusing on the shortcomings of analyzing disabled characters as purely symbolic. These representations of disability in high modernism have thus far been evaluated as either positive or negative. Of course, any representation of a particular identity that limits it to the realm of metaphor and does not acknowledge its lived experience is problematic and dilutes the lived experience of people who actually have disabilities. More interesting and generative than an evaluation, however, is a basic inquiry into

[6] See *Bodies of Modernism*, which will be engaged more directly in the second chapter.
[7] See *Portraits of Violence*, which will be engaged more directly in the third chapter.

why disability proliferates modernism. Good or bad in their representations, these broken bodies are given space and visibility in a way not previously afforded to them. Three characters serve as the primary points of analysis in this chapter: Jake Barnes from *The Sun Also Rises,* Gerty McDowell from the Nausicaa chapter of *Ulysses,* and Benjy Compson from *The Sound and the Fury*. These particular characters are commonly discussed amongst literary disability scholars interested in modernism since their texts are well known, their authors are lauded as canonical high modernists, and their respective disabilities are central to their textual presence.[8] I approach them here in some semblance of an order: how much potential each has to be recuperated into a generative reading of disability. To be clear, it's not their particular disability that does or does not have the potential to recuperated. Jake's disfigurement, Gerty's limp, and Benjy's neurodivergence are all equal in terms of how negatively or positively they can be represented. Instead, it is dependent upon how definitively the narrative presents the disability as a fault and how open it is to varied interpretations.

Jake Barnes and the Trope of Crippled Masculinity

Few disabilities in the history of literature are as symbolic as that of Jake Barnes. To be sure, Richard III's physical deformity is an outward manifestation of his intrinsic moral

[8] An overview of critical takes is crucial here, even though the critical discussions of each of these characters will be addressed more specifically in individual sections. Though recent readings have been more recuperative, even late-twentieth century criticisms tended to read these disabled characters in the following ways: Jake Barnes' unspecified but highly impactful groin injury comes to symbolize the impotence and emasculation of the twentieth-century man (see Wolfgang Rudat's "Hemingway on Sexual Otherness," 1994 and "Sexual Dilemmas in the Sun Also Rises," 1989). Gerty McDowell's limp becomes an object of fetish and thereby an opportunity to sentimentalize her narrative (see Suzette Henke's "Gerty MacDowell: Joyce's Sentimental Heroine," 1982). And finally, Benjy Compson's developmental disability becomes an impetus for desexualizing him so thoroughly that any invocation of his sexuality is vilified; more generally, his disability is read as emblematic of "the crippled South" (see Richard Feldstein's "Patterns of Idiot Consciousness," in *Literature and Psychology*, 1982).

deficiencies, and Captain's Ahab loss-of-leg represents the lengths to which his mania and obsession are able to push him. But Jake Barnes's disability—if we are to classify it as such—is meant to represent something beyond his individual experience and character. The victim of a war injury that is vaguely indicated to have castrated him, Barnes is the embodiment of all the people that remain from the Lost Generation. Conventional readings of the novel assert that his involuntary impotence stands in for humanity's lost vitality. Barnes' impairment and Hemingway's treatment of it represent, across disciplines, a touchstone of modernist commentary on masculinity.[9] World War I not only stole from the world an entire generation of men; more indirectly, it robbed humanity of any remaining idealism or innocence in regards to the assumed natural order of the world. As Jake Barnes is made impotent and incapable of preserving himself through procreation, the world loses its futurity as well.

And yet, while the novel concerns itself with members of the Lost Generation, it pushes back against the word "lost." Jake may be injured, and Brett may be disillusioned, but they're not entirely lost—only damaged. Of course, the term "Lost Generation" carries with it a variety of activities and aesthetics: drinking, dancing, small meals at cafes, preoccupation with fashions, meandering drives to nowhere, late nights, distant but clever banter, and coterie-style friendships. Jake indulges in these activities throughout the novel, but as early as the first dozen pages, the reader is already aware that Jake is weary of these things—he's no longer highly entertained by the company of pretty but vapid women like Georgette, he pours out unfinished liquor, and he turns in earlier than his friends.

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[9] In addition to Wolfgang Rudat's work on Hemingway and disability, see Aaron Shaheen's "Straight, Pure, and Natural: Spiritualization and Penile Prostheses in Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises" and Dana Fore's "Life Unworthy of Life?: Masculinity, Disability, and Guilt in The Sun Also Rises."

When he leaves Paris and travels to Spain, we learn more about his values, especially in regard to his craft and work as a writer. It becomes increasingly apparent that what he resents about Paris has something to do with what he feels it lacks—perhaps a certain work ethic or a kind of pragmatism. In contrast, Hemingway's description of Romero's bullfighting techniques mirror his own style of writing, so that the description reads like a manifesto of what any good artist or performer should do, no matter their chosen craft. But the description of Romero's performance (and Jake's and Hemingway's love of Spain) hearkens back to a handful of pre-modern, perhaps even Realist values: purity, authenticity, and courage.

Whether or not these values are accurate or a realistic interpretation of the pre-modern moment, the novel seems to suggest that at least part of Jake's ennui comes from a nostalgia for these characteristics. This is not to say that Jake is a full-fledged traditionalist or idealist. But some elements of the novel—especially his relationship with and conflicted opinion of Brett—are more informed by this nostalgia than the forward-looking progressivism of modernism would have us believe. Jake is not quite a modern man, even if the constraints of time require it of him, and his castration is the unsophisticated symbol of that inner conflict.

It is tempting to read Jake's physical injury as the impairment that makes *The Sun Also Rises* an investigation of disability—physical disability is often more visible, more easily recognized than mental or psychological disorder. And the boundary between disability and ability is seemingly much clearer when the impairment is physical; the transition between the two states of being seems immediate, located in the moment he is injured. But the narrative suggests that his real disability—while possibly triggered by physical injury—is more psychological. Jake is most disabled by severe depression and/or post-traumatic stress disorder. We see this at the start of the third chapter when Jake and Brett share an intimate moment in the

backseat of a taxi. Their mutual attraction toward one another results in a kiss that is clearly not their first. She pulls away from the affection, worried that she will be hurt by the inevitability of their relationship's failure. They have tried this before. "I don't want to go through that hell again" she says—this statement the only clear feeling she has regarding the matter. She loves him, but something keeps them apart. While Jake assumes the obstacle is his injury, in this scene, Brett seems unbothered by it. The impediment it causes only exists insofar as it makes Jake incapable of allowing himself the relationship. "But, darling I have to see you. It isn't all that, you know." If we assume the "it" she references is the injury, his response—"no, but it always gets to be"—acknowledges that the physical impairment itself is not so repulsive or grotesque that it should preclude him from being in a relationship with her. Instead, the injury festers psychologically, somehow dragging him—or perhaps both of them—into dysfunction. Here, Hemingway makes a move away from the physical into the psychological—a favorite trope of modernists. But he does so through the concept of disability. Whatever actual impairment he's suffered—whatever the state and appearance of the tangible tissue and the organs—it's the intangible damage to his psyche that disables him.

What follows is a bizarre conversation about the humor of such an injury. In releasing Brett of any guilt over the impossibility of their love, Jake says, "…what happened to me is supposed to be funny. I never think about it." The second statement is, of course, a boldfaced lie from the reader's perspective. As the narrator, Jake thinks about his injury and the ways it has affected him quite often. In saying otherwise, he tries to distance himself from its omnipresence and understate how it overwhelms him. He is also careful to not say that his situation is funny, only that it is *supposed* to be funny. Such a simple statement belies a bit of critical commentary about the way that society—the arbiter of what is supposed to be funny—interacts with bodily

difference. Some injuries are meant to be frightening—a face mangled beyond recognition as human. Some are meant to be tragic—an artist who loses a hand. And others—like a young man in the prime of his life being castrated—are apparently humorous. Even Brett agrees: "I laughed about it too, myself, once…it seemed like a hell of a joke." Neither Jake nor Hemingway make any recommendations as to the criteria that categorizes disabling injuries, but we can generally understand humor as a potential affective reaction to something that makes us uncomfortable. Jake may use humor himself as a method of coping with the psychological impact of his injury, as indicated by his internal monologue just after.

> I was pretty well through with the subject. At one time or another I had probably considered it from most of its various angles, including the one that certain injuries or imperfections are a subject of merriment while remaining quite serious for the person possessing them. (27)

Thus, humor is not inherent to any particular imperfection—it might be amusing when it is an othered experience but not always as a lived experience. This makes practical sense. When you are forced to experience the negative aspects of an injury or impairment, much of the potential humor fades. Perhaps, then, this is an indictment of Brett's affected amused reaction to the injury. Joking about a soldier's genitals being blown to bits in the middle of a war lacks compassion, on the individual level, and does not necessarily fit into a larger narrative of how society engages with disability. But if we consider humor to be the widespread social response, it fits with modernist absurdism. If the world is purposeless chaos, why not laugh at something tragic?

So rather than asking ourselves if Jake Barnes is a positive or negative representation of disability, we ought to ask why Hemingway chose to disable his protagonist in the first place.

Why give him a visceral, physical injury in addition to the shell-shock given to so many veteran characters after WWI? Jake's disillusionment could have been just as pervasive throughout the novel and his social life if it were entirely psychological and not related to a physical impairment as well. The easy answer—which has been posited over and over again—is that of symbolic impotence—one man's sterility representing an entire generation whose sense of future never returned from battle. But that reading oversimplifies the nuances of disability and abnormality as modernity conceives of them. Though perhaps not conscious, many representations of disability put forth during the modernist moment already understood the condition to be more than a simple binary. The language of a social model of disability or a spectrum of disability may not have existed, but Jake Barnes is an example of the porous nature of the category. Not only did he transition from able-bodiedness to disability by way of his injury, but he also fades in and out of the identity in terms of his own self-perception after he has suffered the injury. He never goes so far as to label himself "disabled"; nor does he apply one of the more often used terms of the time like "handicap" or "invalid." He doesn't call it an "impairment" or a "mutilation," but an "imperfection." Arguably everyone possesses some sort of imperfection. In another moment of understatement, he calls his disabling wound something as commonplace as an imperfection. In Jake Barnes, modernism gives us a protagonist internally at odds with his own body—despite his continued insistence that the injury isn't a big deal, in many ways, it stops him from actualizing an important relationship. Modernist novels often hyper-fixate on a lack of resolution in regard to plot progression, but it occurs within the self-actualization of many of its characters, as well.

Gerty McDowell's Agency

While Jake Barnes' impairment precludes him—in his own eyes—from a sexual relationship—this isn't the case with all disabled modernist characters. While James Joyce's

Ulysses offers a variety of social deviancy to consider, one of the more perverse, complex interactions is the one between the novel's protagonist Bloom, and Gerty McDowell in the chapter "Nausicaa." While wandering along the beach, Bloom spots Gerty sunbathing and becomes intrigued, eventually deciding to publicly masturbate to the image of her. In such a pluralistic novel, filled with free indirect discourse, it doesn't always serve to assign it a single, totalizing perspective. So while it might seem that some primary perspective of the novel shows us Gerty as a spectacle and the passive object of Bloom's voyeuristic gaze, other perspectives lend her agency.

Traditional criticism of Gerty's chapter of Ulysses read her disability as a narrative symbol and a commentary on Bloom's debauchery. In his 2001 monograph *Joyce Temporalities*, for instance, Tony Thwaites claims that Bloom's erotic interest "begins to limp" in step with Gerty's disability (104). Meanwhile, Suzette Henke, in 1982, seals Gerty's fate in the very title of her article "Gerty MacDowell, Joyce's Sentimental Heroine," wherein she argues that Gerty is little more than a receptacle for what we later learn is Bloom's Victorian sexual fantasies. Not until recently has Gerty been afforded agency in the narrative—and this is due almost entirely to an infusion of DS theory into readings of the modernist staple. This reading of "Nausicaa" aims to continue this trend by sloughing off the presumed asexuality of the disabled body and reconsidering the definitiveness of Gerty's impairment altogether.

We are introduced to Gerty as a sedentary member of a small group of young women watching over children who are playing on the beach. While her two companions are busy tending to the young boys, Gerty sits aside, presented like a sculpture. The narrator describes her preternatural beauty in excruciating detail. The usual romantically charged parts are present—ethereal blue eyes, a halo of perfectly waved hair—but so, too, is her pallid complexion, the blue

veins running through her tapered hands. The weak, vulnerable aspects of Gerty's appearance are noteworthy, if not outright beautiful. But there's a hyper-contextualized quality to her beauty, as well. We are told the brand names of the pills, tonics, and creams she uses to achieve her appearance—all taken as bits of advice from magazines. Gerty has some amount of organic beauty, to be sure, but she is also a product, crafted by careful attention to the mode of the day.

Our first admittance into Gerty's viewpoint happens as she pines. A romantic at heart, she longs for "a manly man with a strong quiet face who had not found his ideal, perhaps his hair slightly flecked with grey, and who would understand, take her in his sheltering arms, strain her to him in all the strength of his deep passionate nature and comfort her with a long long kiss" (336). Used as an example of so many girls her age throughout history, Gerty idealizes romantic love, going so far as to imagine a partner for herself that she has no realistic access to. She fantasizes so intensely about a future that she lists the ingredients she would use in a breakfast for this nonexistent lover. She mentions a passing interest in a local boy, but ultimately disregards him. Instead, her day on the beach affords her a flesh-and-bone receptacle for her longings.

Gerty uses the exhilarating fireworks spectacle and her desperate attempt to see the sky as an excuse to let her skirt slide up and expose her leg in an erotic display for her voyeur. Though Gerty never indicates that she touches herself, she watches the gazer with a clearly suggestive narrative in mind. But she never explicitly indicates a realization that he's masturbating in the moment and instead revels in her continued fantasy, even as he stands in plain view before her. Joyce takes advantage of the dreamy fluidity free indirect discourse allows us, blending the tangible moment on the beach with Gerty's timeless, placeless fantasy of this imagined man holding her tenderly, even in his hotblooded pantings. While overlapping an invented scene with

the real scene on the beach, Joyce parallels the rising sexual tension with the rising pyrotechnic show.

> And then a rocket sprang and bang shot blind blank and O! then the Roman candle burst and it was like a sigh of O! and everyone cried O! O! in raptures and it gushed out of it a stream of rain gold hair threads and they shed and ah! they were all greeny dewy stars falling with golden, O so lovely, O, soft, sweet, soft! (350)

The narrator waits until the interaction with the flirtatious beach man is mostly finished before he reveals it to be Bloom himself. So we spend the entirety of the eroticized scene assuming Gerty has agency. And agency, like any manifestation of power or influence, does not have to measurably, tangibly exist. Gerty has agency within her fantasy. And the whole of the novel, with its shifts in and out of linear time and perspective, blurs the boundaries of reality as far as place, time, and voice are concerned. Gerty's agency is no less valuable or powerful simply because she imagines the person over whom she has control to be different than he is. Between the pair of them, Gerty has far more agency—she controls the pace and the framing of the sexual narrative.

When the sexual and narrative climaxes have passed, the perspective shifts to Bloom and we learn of Gerty's limp from his point-of-view. In effect, Joyce enacts the social model of disability decades before the term's development. Gerty never mentions her disability—never conceives of herself as anything less than whole. It is crucial to note that Bloom—not Gerty, not the companions closest to her, but a gazing stranger—writes disability and pity upon her once her impairment becomes visible. Narratively, her disability is conditional upon it becoming visible to someone else, thereby making it socially determined. Intentional or otherwise, the

effect defamiliarizes the reader with the idea that disability is entirely definite and located exclusively within the body of the person in question.

After first mistaking Gerty's gait for the result of poor footwear, Bloom realizes her disability with shock and acknowledges it in a morally repugnant way:

> She walked with a certain quiet dignity characteristic of her but with care and very slowly because—because Gerty MacDowell was...Tight boots? No. She's lame! O! Mr Bloom watched her as she limped away. Poor girl! That's why she's left on the shelf and the others did a sprint. Thought something was wrong by the cut of her jib. Jilted beauty. A defect is ten times worse in a woman. But makes them polite. Glad I didn't know it when she was on show. Hot little devil all the same. I wouldn't mind. Curiosity like a nun or a negress or a girl with glasses. (PG #)

Bloom charges Gerty with a litany of qualities here that he determines purely on the basis of her perceived disability. He calls her a "poor girl," "[a] jilted beauty," "a defect," and "[a] curiosity." He assumes the condition has made her polite, perhaps out of necessity or to otherwise compensate for her shortcoming. And in a simultaneously ableist and misogynistic moment, he suggests that women are made even more undesirable by an impairment than a man would be. In one sentence, he claims to be glad that he wasn't aware of the disability "when she was on show," but two sentences later, he changes his tune and apparently "wouldn't mind" a sexual encounter with her. The above excerpt is densely packed with dehumanizing language that presumes a rather baseless narrative about Gerty. From Bloom's perspective, and indeed, per the arguments of many Joyce scholars who have critiqued the chapter, Gerty is a pitiable character with romantic tendencies—a mere vessel for Bloom's base fantasies. But Gerty gets her

satisfaction just as much as Bloom. She could be read as naïve and idealistic, but she moves and presents herself with clear sexual intentions—Joyce grants her that agency in the first part of the chapter instead of situating the entire scene around Bloom's experience. The sexual gratification comes from Gerty's perspective. Bloom, on the other hand, is left with the guilt and the viscerally described sticky mess of his indulgence.

Keeping this interaction in mind, if we return to Lennard Davis' distinction between disability and impairment, we can tease out the ways that these two characters' narratives of one another fail to incorporate the actual existence of the other person. Since Bloom's presence extends through the entirety of the novel, we are perhaps meant to identify more firmly with his perspective, and thus are encouraged to think Gerty's romanticization of Bloom foolish and inaccurate. But Bloom's take on Gerty misses her as completely as hers misses him. If she inaccurately inscribes him into the narrative of the romance novel or the melodrama, he inaccurately inscribes her into the narrative of the pitiable crippled girl—a mistaken disability narrative based wrongfully on what he sees of her impairment. Keeping Davis' distinction between the two in mind, "Nausicaa" represents the phenomenon of writing disability onto impairment by showing the reader how it happens erroneously.

Benjy Compson: A Disabled Lens

In contrast to Jake Barnes and Gerty MacDowell, Faulkner presents us with a disabled character whose disability is neither the center of his narrative, nor of the narrative at large. Much of Faulkner's work that takes place in his fictional Yoknapatawpha County, when read critically through the lens of literary disability studies, suggests that disability exists in the narratives to aesthetically symbolize a "crippled" South. In *Absalom! Absalom!*, for example, the so-called "idiot" character of Jim Bond represents, within the novel's frame narrative, the

doomed future of the South. Per this claim, in Jim's defective mind and body, we can locate all that the South has to be ashamed of and must get rid of in order to move on from a decaying past—its stunted traditionalism, its social isolationism, its so-called backward thinking. But this critical reading requires and then perpetuates a series of false dichotomies that are all constructed as running parallel with the assumption that disability is inherently negative. This needs readdressing in order to recuperate disability as not merely a symbol of decay, but as an experience and perspective from which modernism approaches the pursuit for authentic representation.

Part I of *The Sound and the Fury* is written entirely from the perspective of Benjy Compson—the intellectually disabled fourth child of the Compson family who, consequently, is its great shame. While the novel at large is nonlinear and written in the highly modernist stream-of-consciousness style, Benjy's chapter is particularly difficult to follow because it leaps across time without warning, shifts scenes unexpectedly, and relies heavily on an idiosyncratic, non-normative logic filled with synesthetic recollections. Yet despite the confusing nature of the chapter, it exists as the least biased, most authentic section of the novel. Benjy as narrator offers little in the way of judgment or critique, at least not in the intellectualized way that narrators often do. Any indication of his feelings is purely affective. When he and his caretaker Luster are traveling together, the latter chastises his behavior: "*Cant you shut up that moaning and slobbering, Luster said. Aint you shamed of yourself, making all this racket. We passed the carriage house, where the carriage was. It had a new wheel*" (9, emphasis original). Benjy merely presents Luster's words and moves on to his own observation about the carriage without commenting upon Luster's insult and insensitivity. Faulkner offers no indication of a voice shift or even any connective tissue, molding Benjy into a highly stylized and seemingly uninvested

observer. With the exception of his love for his sister, the novel hardly indicates that Benjy cares about or is concerned by any of the events that take place. By starting the book from Benjy's perspective, Faulkner does (at least) two things: first, he disorients the reader and establishes a non-normative thought process and narration as the fundamental language of the novel and; secondly, he calls attention to the fact that a chronological, smoothly-transitioned, rational retelling of events is by no means the most organic or truest way to receive a story or a memory. Here, Benjy's neurodivergence is a boon, rather than an encumbrance.

Ultimately, Benjy's "disabled" thinking strips the narrative down to its richest elements and rids the first part of the novel of the artificial structures of time, cause-and-effect, and logic. Of course, this amplifies those structures in the chapters to come, but it also enriches the reader's comprehension of Benjy and his embodied experiences in a more effective way than if Benjy or someone else had shared his medical diagnosis or tried to describe what it was like to think like him. Granted, there is still the problematic matter of the privileged speaking for the disenfranchised. Faulkner was not intellectually disabled as far as history tells us, but he attempts to write in the manner of someone who is. Per the recommendations of many disability scholars, the ideal scenario is to have a writer with a disability use that perspective to shape their writing, thereby expressing the experience of the disability (or pain) without trying to directly communicate it. But of all the high modernists—those texts that have secured themselves in the literary canon—the first chapter of *The Sound and the Fury* does something revolutionary by not just including disability, but incorporating the pragmatic effects of it into its form. Benjy's disability may, at first glance, seem more difficult to represent than the highly visible, physical disabilities of Jake and Gerty. But since his impairment is of the mind and effects his communication and verbal abilities, it can actually be more thoroughly integrated into the very

language of the novel. If—per the claims of modernism—language as we know it fails to authentically transfer meaning, then perhaps language as we do not know it—its non-normative iterations, like Benjy—may illuminate something we have thus far missed. Here, the very abnormality that marks Benjy as disabled better serves the form and aesthetic of modernism than neurotypicality ever could.

As beneficial as these characters' presence may potentially be, readings and analyses that fail to incorporate critical disability studies run the risk of merely perpetuating disabled stereotypes. In the case of these three characters—three beacons of modernism crafted by some of the most acclaimed modernists—their (de)sexuality and lack of future are too often reduced to simple symbolism. Benjy is desexualized—and literally castrated—for the well-being of nearby women who may become victims of his addled mind's inappropriate sexual drives. Gerty is over-sexualized by nature of merely being a woman in the eyes of a voyeur, but is immediately de-sexualized when her disability becomes visible, lest the over-sexualization also become a fetish of Bloom's. Jake Barnes is perhaps a more complicated case, because his disability maybe best classified as psychological—his sociability is stunted, particularly with women, because of his genital injury. For Barnes, his disability and desexualization are intrinsically linked.

If we reduce these characters to their disabilities in our attempts to make sense of their presence, it becomes far too tempting to assign them merely symbolic value. But this type of critique undermines some of the most crucial tenets of modernism. Symbolism resolves too much, feels too totalizing, and tries to make something neat and tidy of something otherwise messy. Disability is nonconforming, unwieldy, and not always something we can clarify or makes sense of. While it has certain associations and aesthetics surrounding it—non-categorical qualities and affects like fragmentation, struggle, and the lived experience of marginalization—

it's far too porous and varied to definitively name or qualify. Moreover, it is significant that so many modernist heroes—or protagonists, if we are uncertain of ascribing them heroism—are disabled in some way. They are included and centralized not just for their potential symbolism or the historically relevant subject matter of their disabilities. These characters are heroic because they are disabled; because they feel pain, because they feel like outsiders, because they are vulnerable, and because they don't feel "normal." Their disabilities are not merely symbolic—they signal a shift in the notion of what constitutes heroism in the first place and what warrants artistic representation.

Chapter 2

Disability and Womanhood

Modernism's often new and complex ways of conceiving of sexuality and reproduction via disabled protagonists necessitates a reading of the movement through the intersectional lens of disability studies and feminism. While womanhood is by no means exclusively a matter of sexuality or reproduction, those themes—gendered as they often are—cannot be responsibly explored in the historical context of modernism without a targeted reading of disabled women characters and writers. Thus, this second chapter focuses on writing by and about women whose often uncooperative and disabled bodies collide with traditional notions of femininity and womanhood. Feminism does not fully anticipate or encompass the issue of disability as a site of collision between the idealized body and the actual body, but female embodiment offers a similar logic and challenge to the abstractions of western philosophical approaches.

In a present moment so attuned to identity politics and the increased need for intersectionality in re-reading modernist texts, my impulse is to put *all* identities in conversation with one another. After all, no identity operates in a vacuum of itself. However, I want to draw specific attention to the intersection of disability and feminism for a few reasons, though these reasons are not exclusive to this intersection. Speaking very generally, disability and femininity have both been historically equated with embodied inferiority. That is to say, both the disabled and female identities have been positioned and then rationalized as subordinate because of the supposed inferiority of the bodies that determine their identity. Feminist scholars have made great strides to remediate this discriminatory practice on behalf of the female body, but the reality is that feminism still has to be rationalized in discussions of modernist literature—a literature traditionally and canonically claimed by masculinity. Moreover, feminism itself has not always properly addressed the disabled identity with which it so often intersects. This chapter

posits that the subversiveness of modernism makes it a rich locale on which to focus concurrent feminist and DS perspectives within broader literary studies.

Both mainstream and academic feminisms have long suffered from inefficient intersectionality with other categories of identity, and disability is no exception. Perhaps it is best, then, to turn to the field of Disability Studies to see scholars at work intersecting feminism and disability. Rosemarie Garland Thomson's 2002 essay "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory" establishes what work had already been done and needed to be done going forward at the turn of the millennium. Most importantly, it clarifies the ways in which each discipline helps enrich the other. Though it was written nearly twenty years ago, the impetus behind it remains. Garland-Thomson's fundamental premise of feminist disability studies asserts that "disability, like femaleness, is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority…Rather, disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body" (4). Put so clearly, the connection between the two fields of study seems obvious, and Garland-Thomson's proposed agenda to more explicitly connect them seems easy enough. But in practice, feminism still often forgets to include disabled bodies in its theorizing ideologies. Conversations regarding the fluidity and non-essentialism of gender are particularly conducive to understandings of disability—if there is no essentially "correct" or "right" gender or way of embodying it, that logic can be applied to supposedly non-normative bodies that would be regarded as disabled. However, any feminist discourse that is built on or primarily invested in defining womanhood or the feminine experience is beholden to an innately exclusionary construct, and it sets itself up to neglect disabled bodies that by nature do not adhere to normative expectations. Here resides the conflict. Barbara Hillyer's poignant phrasing of failed intersectionality may have originated a decade before Garland Thomson's seminal essay, but its crux remains: "Some women are genuinely, permanently weak. Much

feminist hope is based on the love of women for their potential strength" (6). Her point is valuable in and of itself, but perhaps even more valuable within the context of its origin.

By the time Hillyer penned *Feminism and Disability*, she was already a well-established feminist scholar, presumably with well-established but flexible foundations on which she built her feminist philosophies and pedagogies. But with the birth of her disabled daughter, those foundations had to be re-evaluated. So much of what she had hoped to teach her daughter about feminism simply could not be communicated to someone as neurodivergent as the young girl. This anecdote establishes the moment of ideological crisis, and the remainder of the book sees Hillyer working to reshape her guiding principles of feminism. But hers is not an isolated narrative. As I have immersed myself in the canonical texts and methodologies of Disability Studies in preparation of this project, I've simply lost track of how many scholars turned to the field after a visceral collision with disability. Thus, the draw towards the discipline seems particularly personal, and my own compulsion is no different.

When I was an emerging scholar learning the overarching themes, motifs, and renowned texts of high modernism, the movement initially seemed inaccessible—both literally and figuratively. I was a disabled woman reading about crises of masculinity and misanthropic expatriates traveling to Europe to reconnect with humanity's mythic past. But from my vantage point, a lack of masculinity was not disastrous. And I could not fathom the ordeal of getting my wheelchair on an airplane and across the Atlantic to maneuver cobblestoned streets and old-world staircases. Of course, this could be read as a critique of how modernism as a movement is introduced to emerging literary scholars. Perhaps these are not inherent shortcomings of modernism, but are instead simplified trends and themes that were overemphasized to me, pedagogically. Nonetheless, the distance between my feminine, disabled experience and the

modernist aesthetic nearly turned me off of the literary movement altogether. But when I use that experience as a lens to read not just individual modernist texts, but the movement of modernism as a whole, one thing becomes clear: radical femininity and disability run as constants throughout the entirety of its aesthetic. Traditionally, we have regarded modernism as an exploration of and preference for the depths of the human psyche. The recurring theme of shell-shock, the development of psychoanalysis, and the emergence of stream-of-consciousness narrative stylings all exist as signals of modernism's preoccupation with the mind. But this preoccupation often occludes the presence and representations of bodies throughout the movement. This chapter collects three texts, written by women, explicitly featuring disabled bodies, in an attempt to highlight the development of modernist understandings of identity as inextricably linked to the body.

But before addressing the texts themselves, it is also critical to illuminate how bodies and their normalcy (or lack thereof) were understood in the general narrative of the early 20th century—much of which culminates in eugenics. The notion of improving the human race by means of controlled procreation has existed at least as early as Plato's time. In Book V of *The Republic*, he asserts that, in regards to mating, "The good must be paired with the good, and the bad with the bad, and the offspring of the one must be reared, and of the other destroyed; in this way the flock will be preserved in prime condition" (Trans. Jowett, 147). Already we see the assumption that selective breeding will result in more capable "guardians" of the Republic, and that progress is humanity's ultimate goal. This ideology persists into ancient Rome[10], among

[10] From the *Law of the Twelve Tables*, Table IV: "A dreadfully deformed child shall be quickly killed."

Germanic tribes[11], through to the Christian middle ages[12], and becomes formalized at least as early as the late nineteenth century by gynecologist William Goodell. In an article published in *The American Journal of Insanity* in 1882, Goodell writes that in the progressive future, it would likely be "a matter of sound policy and of commendable statesmanship to stamp out insanity by castrating all the insane men and spaying all the insane women" (295). In over two thousand years, we have moved from selective breeding to selective sterilization—still, always framed as actions that should be taken for the benefit of the state. Both Plato's and Goodell's motivations are grounded not in improvement for improvement's sake, but for the sake of improving the state apparatus. This grounds our discussion of disability in a stringent societal construct in which a body's value is determined by its worth to the state, rather than to itself or its immediate interpersonal relationships. When situated in the context of the political rise of fascism, the dangers of a state-based system of valuing bodies moves from being purely theoretical to excruciatingly actual for all sorts of non-normative bodies.

Post World War II, eugenics is often associated with the Nazi regime and the inhumane experiments carried out by Axis powers. But the movement was in no way cleanly confined to the side that history has deemed fascist and inhumane. The poster pictured below reads, "Only healthy seed must be sown! Check the seeds of hereditary disease and unfitness by eugenics," and was distributed in the 1930s by the Eugenics Society of London.

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[11] From *Germania*, by Tacitus, article XII: Traitors and deserters are hanged on trees; the coward, the unwarlike, the man stained with abominable vices, is plunged into the mire of the morass, with a hurdle put over him."

[12] See Frances Giles' *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages*, which details the formal prohibition of marrying cousins as ordered by the Christian Council of Agde in 506.



Figure 1: "Only Healthy Seed" Eugenics Poster

To rationalize eugenics, proponents often turned (and still do so) to social Darwinism, imagining themselves and their cause as a kind of progressivism founded in scientific advancement and enlightenment. But the term "eugenics" came into its own after the death of Charles Darwin, when his cousin, Francis Galton, coined the term in a misdirected attempt to apply Darwin's theory of evolution from plants and animals to humans. Just before his death, Darwin expressed strong disagreement with Galton's then-nascent arguments. Though technically an animal, human development is highly influenced by culture, upbringing, and education, thereby making humans' environment far more influential on development and well-being than might be the case with other animal species. Despite his inaccuracies, Galton's theories, paired with the rising tide of genetic determinism facilitated the proliferation of eugenics in many academic and social circles, thereby legitimized its fundamentally misinformed philosophy. In turn, disabled people

were no longer simply a financial drain on their families or an eye-sore that their community could simply attempt to ignore—they were a threat to the betterment of society at large.

Disabled bodies may be the most vulnerable in eugenic ideology, but its ideal end would not stop with there—female bodies, too, were often subjugated within the schema of eugenics. In her introduction to a chapter on gender's function in modernism and medicine, Susan Squier draws attention to the bizarrely ableist writings of the early 20th century scientist, J.D. Bernal:

> As [Bernal] tells it, ectogenesis serves as the beginning stage—a kind of *larval state*—for the production of the reconfigured human being. [Bernal] envisions the three-stage creation of a 'perfect man such as the doctors, the eugenists and the public health officers between them hope to make of humanity' (Bernal 42). Once that ectogenesis larval stage is over…he has his perception amplified by the attachment of new sensory organs, his motor capacities amplified by machinic prostheses, and his mental capacities amplified by a system of connectionist networks bringing his thoughts instantaneously into communication with a shared, essentially immortal, complex mind…Significantly, the gender of this new human being is unmarked, that is to say: male. The eradication of physical gestation amounts to the eradication of women themselves. Instead of the 'new woman' of his time, Bernal gives us a 'new man [who] must appear to those who have not contemplated him before as a strange, monstrous and inhuman creature, but…is only the logical outcome of the type of humanity that exists at present' (Bernal 51)" (591-92).

Though perhaps an extreme example, Bernal's mindset highlights a remarkable shared fate for women and disabled individuals as eugenics reaches its "logical outcome." Of particular interest

here is Bernal's call for freedom from the "biological constraints" of having a body. The ideal man—and it is always a man, since women are no longer needed to produce more humans—has no organic body, but is instead a composite of mechanical prostheses. Here arises a personal conflict—I very much approve of the use of mechanical prostheses to make one's life easier and am suspicious of philosophies that revere only the natural and organic in regards to bodies. I'm absolutely dependent upon a wheelchair to serve the mobility purposes of normative, functioning legs, and have had my life saved more than once by mechanisms that function as artificial hearts and lungs. More widely, I also believe that it is crucial to normalize[13] prostheses of all sorts, in the same way that common glasses have become widely accepted to the point of not being popularly recognized as a prosthetic at all. This sort of normalization both removes the stigma of using prosthetics and makes them generally more affordable and accessible. But even just the philosophical proposition of perfecting the human form endangers disabled bodies and rationalizes their oppression, if not their eradication. In his defense, Bernal does not present his logical evolution of man as pleasant or even desirable. The final product would be unrecognizable and monstrous in its lack of human form. In that regard, his thought experiment sometimes reads like a warning against unchecked progression while also being mesmerized by the prospect of it. But if nothing else, it showcases the failure of a totalizing ideology toward bodies and what it means to be an ideal human. At one point along the progression of eugenics ideology, it was regarded as a pro-woman, perhaps proto-feminist philosophy because it might

[13] In an ideal society, "normalcy" would not exist in any capacity that might oppress or ostracize its members. In DS (and many other fields), normalcy is understood as highly subjective and detrimental to all varieties of bodies. My use of "normalization" should not be misconstrued as encouragement to make "abnormal" bodies more "normal." I mean only that all prosthetics should be visible and understood in a way that removes the abject taboo of a replacement or enhanced body part. A person who wears glasses is rarely subjected to the same sort of stares and hushed whispers as a person who uses a clearly prosthetic leg. Yet both are prostheses.

one day—especially in Bernal's eyes—free women of the responsibility of having a body destined to reproduce. They would then be sexually liberated and able to seek out pleasure rather than procreation. But that glimmer of potential positivity rings false as the philosophy plays out and results in the antithesis of a disabled woman—a man of perfected capabilities.

What eugenics never acknowledges is the position of disabled bodies in this future. It disregards them, along with feminine bodies, in favor of a decidedly un-messy image of mankind. While some pockets of modernism give credence to similar thought experiments (futurism, for instance)—and will be addressed in later chapters—many works can be read as pushing back against such progressivism; not out of a desire to preserve traditions or take refuge in nostalgia, but out of a keener interest in the present.

As that present moment diversified and gave a platform to more women artists and writers, they brought with them a deep investment in physical embodiment. This chapter turns its attention to three texts that complicate and enrich modernist feminism by incorporating disability: Virginia Woolf's essay "On Being Ill," Olive Moore's novel *Spleen*, and Flannery O'Connor's short story "Good Country People." I bring these texts into conversation with one another to highlight thematically different but similarly arduous experiences of embodiment that are made difficult by both the conditions of womanhood and of disability. I begin with Woolf's essay to establish an aesthetic framework for valuing the perspective of the "invalid," so to speak. Though arguably chronically disabled, Woolf does not identify as such in the context of her essay and does speaks of illness, rather than disability. Thus, this chapter starts with the presence, if not the absolute recognition of disability. Moore's novel *Spleen* comes next as an example of the disabling nature of pregnancy, and then of motherhood, with the added complication of having to care for a disabled child. Like Woolf, *Spleen*'s protagonist does not

identify herself as disabled, nor does she quite regard her son's disability as a social marker, but the conflict of trying to exist in a "wrong" body rather than trying to "right" it is undeniable. The chapter ends with O'Connor's short story that places a proudly disabled woman at its center. Though chronologically later than the era of high modernists, the notably modern irresolution and prioritization of form over action make for a story in which the protagonist's sense of self is determined by her embodiment. However, in a subversion of the standard narrative, her over-assuredness of her disabled self is the source of her ultimate strife.

As a triad, they are Transatlantic, chronologically distanced from one another, and heterogenous in their treatment of disability upon first glance. Woolf's text serves both as an example of illness represented, and as the theoretical framework for the chapter—the call-to-action for how to better appreciate the truths and authenticities that disability and illness offer literature. *Spleen* and "Good Country People" are case studies, so to speak, of (1) disability as the protagonist's adversary and (2) disability as the protagonist's experience, respectively. All three are written by women, and are deeply invested in non-normative bodies, thus they are examples of the intersection of feminism and disability. These are not the only texts primed for a disability-focused reading, but in conversation with one another, they showcase that texts about womanhood and disability as highly embodied experiences were not isolated anomalies.

"On Being Ill": The Advantage of the Invalid

In regards to the title of Woolf's essay, it should be noted that illness and disability are not synonymous, and thus are not meant to be used interchangeably. Whether wholly accurate, disability carries with it a kind of permanence, while illness seems temporary. Indeed, in order to be made permanent, the word "chronic" is typically added before "illness." Disability is often the term used when talking about accommodations and services—language for public use—while

'illness' is experienced privately and often in solitude. These are not absolute distinctions, but are instead patterns of language use. However, both are states of being in which the body or mind is somehow compromised or understood as failing. That is to say, in both illness and disability, the body and/or mind diverge from the normative concept of health. Thus, while Woolf's essay *On Being Ill* does not address the complex concept of disability head-on, the conditions are intrinsically connected, and her contemplations on illness prove useful for reevaluating the function of disability in art and philosophy[14]. This chapter illuminates the ways in which both illness and disability can enrich, rather than inhibit intellectual behavior, and how Woolf's attitude toward illness can be traced onto disability.

> Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to view, what precipices and laws sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us by the act of sickness, how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of the angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come to the surface in the dentist's arm-chair and confuse his 'Rinse the mouth—rinse the mouth' with the greeting of the Deity stooping from the floor of Heaven to welcome us—when we think of this, as we are so frequently forced to

[14] While this project is not invested diagnosing conditions whose definitions have changed with time, Woolf can be retrospectively regarded as disabled. While the label was never self-consciously applied, her writing regarding illness is more than relevant to disability as well.

> think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature (3-4).

I've pulled a substantial excerpt here, not only for its content but in order to emphasize the highly stylized nature of Woolf's essay. Though classifiable as nonfiction, it reads much the same as her fictive work: compounded and meandering in her trademark stream-of-consciousness style. It is both a paragraph and a sentence that sets up Woolf's simple initial argument: illness ought to be more present in the literary canon. The term "illness," much like "disability," may be better signified by a spectrum, rather than a definition. Both only function relative to some shared but flexible determination of a norm. How does a normal body behave? What does it look like? The answer, of course, is variable; or rather, it is determined by a set of agreed upon expectations that vary by culture, context, and historical moment. So, while illness and disability are by no means synonymous, they both encapsulate a deviation from the norm, and—according to Woolf—are thus able to facilitate "tremendous spiritual change." How interesting that in an historical moment of mechanization and synthetic production, Woolf credits illness with the capacity to return to nature. She evokes flowers, trees, and bodies of water in her description of the experience of illness, culminating in a sacred moment of mistaken death. Few moments call attention to life as dramatically as a near-death experience, and illness flirts with that mortality by its very nature. Illness, then, is just as charged an experience as "love and battle and jealousy." Of course, it is important to keep in mind that romanticizing disability can undermine the struggle of living with it, and Woolf's particular way of connecting it to nature presupposes that natural means better. These logical fallacies are legitimate concerns to be critiqued. But sometimes the first step in dismantling a binary (in this case, that disability is bad and able-bodiedness is good) is to subvert it and consider what a structure wherein disability is

good might look like. One way to value disability—or any traditionally non-normative identity—is to simply represent it and make the reality of it visible. Modernism, in particular, stands out as a movement that is deeply invested in representing non-normativity—and disability is a natural candidate for such representation.

But if we understand disability and illness as fresh, authentic subjects to be written about, and we know that modernists were urged to "make it new," why had they remained underrepresented even up to Woolf's literary moment? She has a theory for this as well. "Finally, to hinder the description of the illness in literature, there is the poverty of the language. English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache. It has all grown one way" (6). In much the same way that a heteronormative, patriarchal language fails to properly serve feminist discussions, there is likewise no language built around the needs of considering disability and illness. That is to say, though language as a system is impartial, its users shape it through their predispositions and expectations. Thus, language is constructed around the abled "norm." How often does literary analysis speak of epiphany as finally being able to *see* a truth, and thus undermine the experience of blindness? When we speak of a theory as *having no legs*, we suggest it cannot properly support itself. But in doing so, we neglect the fact that people with no legs find alternative ways to function and support themselves. But a writer that is familiar with disability is more capable of recognizing those linguistic shortcomings. Of course, part of the "poverty of language" in regards to disability comes from the phenomenon of embodiment. It is not always possible to accurately express pain, for example, because the sensation of it is so particular to the individual body experiencing it. And yet, the same could be said of thoughts and emotions, but literature has always sought to attempt those representations. In short, Woolf's essay showcases the necessity

of reading literature written from the disabled perspective, as it is more likely to cripple[15] the language.

Crippling language and incorporating disability into literature encourages us to remain aware of the constructive nature of normativity, which is a benefit to abnormal readers looking to be represented. But it also encourages potentially more authentic interactions for so-called "normal" individuals. "There is, let us confess it (and illness is the great confessional), a childish outspokenness in illness; things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals" (11). Etymologically speaking, the verb "confess" is rooted not only in the act of speaking, but in the notion of owning.[16] Woolf suggests that illness encourages confession, in that it facilitates ownership of the truth in favor of the distant performativity of health. No doubt, disability and invalidity are performative designations as well, insofar as disabled individuals attempt to function within an excluding, normative society. But the condition of illness reprioritizes matters and permits the invalid a pass. Both in daily life and in literary narratives, typically embarrassing revelations or impertinent declarations are allowed under the conditions of fever, exhaustion, and agitation. Here we see another benefit of illness or disability. I am reminded of the work of the photographer of Diane Arbus, which looks to showcase the strange and unusual; those individuals whom society should be embarrassed by and ashamed of—freaks, she calls them. "There's a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a riddle. Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in

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[15] The word "cripple" is used here in an ameliorative sense. It takes some getting used to, but it activates generative disorientation. If we are confused by it, we are more aware of the language we use and more likely to question the assumptions it carries.

[16] Oxford English dictionary cites this connotation being invoked at the originating moment of the verb, as early as the fourteenth century.

life. They're aristocrats" (Arbus, 3). Of course, most disabled, deformed, or otherwise freakish people I know, including myself, do not regard their disability as a kind of noble position; certainly, we are not made to feel noble about it. And it is also a bit shortsighted to think of trauma as being a discrete event—indeed, the trauma of disability is typically ongoing, and often lifelong. But there is some value in conceiving of disability as a tool for sloughing off society's expectations to be proper, contained, and in-control of one's self.

Woolf's essay should not, however, be regarded as an invitation to romanticize disability, and that is one of the most critical tensions of this entire project as indicated in the introduction: valuing the unique perspective of disability without sentimentalizing or idealizing the lived experience of it requires discretion and a close consideration of the circumstances surrounding each case of disability. Instead, the essay is an aesthetic framework upon which we can pin Moore's novel and O'Connor's short story. Woolf provides us with the very exigence of reading two such texts next to one another by asking us to reevaluate what the invalid perspective might have to teach us, and how it might set us free.

The Disability of Mother-/Woman-hood in Olive Moore's *Spleen*

In their 2006 collection, *Sapphic Modernities*, Laura Doan and Jane Garrity refer to Olive Moore as "a cross between Virginia Woolf and Djuna Barnes, with a bit more biting wit" (3). Despite a general critical consensus that places her writing amidst the likes of Woolf, Barnes, and other high modernists, Olive Moore has long been absent from the canon. Her sudden disappearance from the literary scene after 1933 left her body of work all but neglected until the mid-1990s when it was republished as a collection of fiction and essays by Dalkey Archive. Perhaps the most well-known of her novels is *Spleen*: the story of an introspective young woman named Ruth who flees to Italy from her home in England after giving birth to a deformed son.

The pregnancy and labor are told retrospectively from Ruth's memory, twenty years after she has delivered the baby, raised him, and settled on a small island off the coast of Naples. The first half of the novel details her physical and emotional discomfort at being pregnant and her rejection of her body's changes, while giving her room, as the narrator, to editorialize and interpret the condition. The second half happens in her present moment as she juxtaposes her self-perception as determined by her past with the persona she presents to others in the present: a foreign woman deep in the recesses of her intellect, situated in an earthy, physical world.

This arrangement of the novel's form, in which the mother figure reflects on a highly embodied traumatic process sets up a continuing curiosity throughout the work: how does intellectualizing embodiment change the physical experience of that embodiment? The novel, then, is ripe for a reading done in the manner of Woolf's invalid—with an eye toward issues of disability and supposed inferiority from a position of actual deviance. But it also begs for a critical engagement with its subtext. The reader is meant to sympathize with Ruth, the voice form which we hear the story. But her actions and reactions to her disabled son and her own femininity are a collective warning against deeply ingrained ableist and misogynistic ideologies. In this regard, Ruth is at once an insider and an outsider—a non-normative body and mind that cannot shed her shame in any truly liberating way.

This project tries to recall to the conversation of disability what it's like to actually live in and experience a body. This is something that feminism has, at times, abstracted away from in its moments of high theory. Thus, this project is more interested in feminisms that prioritize the embodied experiences of womanhood. The poetry of Mina Loy, in particular "Parturition," re-centers the body by expressing how such an intensely embodied experience—in this case, childbirth—can fling a person out of, then pull them back into their body. It's a traumatic event,

trauma is disabling in its own right, and thus pregnancy is not only an abnormal body state, but the event of childbirth is a violent and disabling event, even for all of the life it generates. And yet because pregnancy, childbirth, and reproduction are upheld as the ultimate goal of humanity, the literal embodiment of the pure and miraculous magic that women's bodies are capable of, the less positive embodied parts of the experience are sometimes lost. Loy brings our attention to the terribleness of the experience, beginning her poem with "I am the centre/of a circle of pain" (Loy, 4).

Choosing to title the poem "Parturition," immediately situates it as the antithesis of sentimentality. This isn't an ode to the miracle of childbirth, it's the recollection and representation of a biological function, an anatomically violent event that parts two things—the mother from the infant, the body from the mother, the pain from the sanity.

> The contents of the universe
> Mother I am
> Identical
> With infinite Maternity
> Indivisible
> Acutely
> I am absorbed
> Into
> This was—is—ever—shall—be
> Of cosmic reproductivity

The speaker's body seems determined to function without her permission, against her will, and yet she is not able to rend herself from it—she must experience the embodiment. The irony of a term like "indivisible" in the midst of a poem titled and very literally about separation breaks down the binary between union and division. The speaker is absorbed into eternity, something "cosmic" and beyond human comprehension or machinations.

In the context of Loy's "Feminist Manifesto," this poem positions itself as a genuinely new, visceral, modern woman's depiction of the highly gendered experience of childbirth—a bodily condition that is so often either medicalized or romanticized, in the same manner as illness and disability.[17] The process of labor itself is the one event related to pregnancy that *Spleen* doesn't descriptively detail; the conception, the expanding body, the post-partum depression, and taking care of the child are all addressed head-on, but delivery itself is theorized as an act of the body rejecting (Moore, 46). Loy's brand of modernist feminism as evidenced in "Parturition" is exemplified in Moore's novel as well—women theorizing about and defamiliarizing their bodies.

Thus, while Ruth's deformed son might have the most obvious disabled body in the novel, Ruth is a deviant herself, in ownership of a body and mind that, in her opinion, do not meet normative expectations. Theoretically, her first deviance is her woman-ness. Her second deviance, layered very directly upon the first, is her rejection of an essentialist gender binary. For instance, in the midst of her pregnancy, she confides in her only friend Dora: "But you see I do not care for men, Dora. I do not care for women. Why can one not have something else, something different, something new, something more worth having if one has to go through all this?" (18). She expresses this wish for something—presumably a child, since this confession happens after she becomes pregnant—that is nonbinary. Moreover, she expresses this to a fellow woman because she trusts her to take the concern seriously, rather than dismiss it as pregnant hysteria. In assuming that she and Dora share a bonded trust based on their mutual womanhood, she acknowledges the binary that she wants to escape. But in the same swift moment, she

[17] Both "Parturition" and the "Feminist Manifesto" are cited from *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, though the latter essay was not published during Loy's lifetime.

disregards it as a harmful force that silences women and dismisses their anxieties by locating them in some sort of pathologically faulty woman-ness: in this case, hysteria brought on by pregnancy.

In reflecting on the days just before her delivery, Ruth spends an extensive amount of time describing another female character: Nurse Gunn, the formidable woman who oversees her final weeks of pregnancy. Her arrival in the narrative initiates a section devoted to a bizarre consideration of the evolution of the human body. In doing so, she reveals her ideology on the status of mankind. Humanity has become complacent, she believes, and foolishly confident of their position as the most superior species. Her application of some theory of evolution is purely philosophical, rather than scientifically-based—reminiscent, in its misunderstandings, of those previously discussed defenses of eugenics. She talks of evolution as if it were a process in which a species consciously and actively engages, when it has long been understood to be a passive development that happens to us. And despite the fact that one woman's lifetime is nowhere near long enough to see substantial evolutionary changes in a species, she wonders at the stalled evolution of man: "Was this then why man had ceased to evolve: as though a doubtful perfection had been attained? And having ceased to evolve had fallen back on an invention: a crutch for an able leg" (46). Ruth's metaphor suggests that an able leg is somehow hindered by a crutch. But in doing so, she fails to acknowledge that crutches, prostheses, and tools in general serve to assist any level of ability: even an able leg can benefit from support. Moreover, her rationale here conflicts with her later assertion that "Swiftness of leg should have bred hooves; swiftness of thought wings; swiftness of mechanical labor a Siva-like many-handedness" (47). In one moment, she disparages invention as a crutch that enables complacency, and in the next, she suggests that the same mechanical labor should have brought us closer to the gods.

This is a critical moment wherein we can attempt a separation of text from narrator, or rather, to prioritize a reading of subtext over Ruth's literal ideology as expressed in the text. That is to say, if we read Ruth as the moral compass of the story, the overall novel is blatantly ableist. But if we understand her to be flawed—and the text itself makes that clear—we might also find flaws in her ideologies. She is not an unreliable narrator in the sense that she lies, exaggerates, or misremembers. She is unreliable in regard to her misinformed and ableist ideologies. She begs the universe for a "new" child, wherein the only prerequisite for "new" seems to be different from what is already expected. But when she gives birth to a child who is both physically and mentally different from what society expects, she is immediately ashamed of it and exiles herself away from all that she has known—problematic, to say the least.

It makes sense, then, that literary disability studies scholar Maren Tova Linett does not feel comfortable interpreting this narrative of disability in a positive manner. In her chapter on *Spleen*, Linett candidly details her reading process and admits that while she initially hoped to be able to defend a positive reading, in the end, the novel fails her assessment.[18] From the perspective of a disabled reader, Ruth's disgust and contempt for her disabled son is disheartening, to say the least. She dehumanizes him repeatedly, talking about him rather than to him, and leaving him to the care of others whenever possible, admitting that she cannot stand to face him. She dreams of him trying to murder her, her subconscious mind transforming him into a misshapen, monstrous thing, unrecognizable as a person whose head ultimately explodes. Through Ruth's characterization, Richard is all of the frightening, abjectly grotesque stereotypes that are so often coded into disabled characters. But when stripped of her commentary on his

[18] See the final chapter of Linett's *Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature*, "Deformity and Modernist Form."

behavior, the novel exposes brief moments of Richard's agency. For instance, when he grows too large to be carried, Ruth buys him a cart so that he can be wheeled around. One day, in transferring him into his cart, his caretaker alters the usual routine and sits him upright in a chair for a moment. Left to his own devices, Richard swings his legs and discovers that he can create enough momentum to rock back and forth and move himself around in the chair. Everyone thinks it a miracle, and even Ruth tells them to let him continue and learn.

I fear that the value of this moment actually being written into the narrative is lost to anyone who has not experienced disability or the need to accommodate firsthand. In my experience, few things regarding my disability are more joyous than discovering an adaptation. For example, my particular disability prohibits me from, among other things, being able to lift my arms at the shoulder. And because I sit in a wheelchair, most light switches (which are typically placed above my shoulder height) are impossible to reach. But as a child, I realized that I could crawl my fingers—which were perfectly capable of normative tasks—up the wall like a spider until I reached the light switch. Then, if I pressed the palm of my hand into the wall properly for leverage, I could flick my fingers up or down to operate the switch. It was a delightful discovery, quite literally, and to this day, unless the switch is placed unusually high, I can manage the task of turning lights on or off with complete independence. I hardly even register the action now that I've done it in such a manner for the last twenty years, but I'm reminded of its unorthodoxy any time a stranger watches me. While it was once mildly embarrassing to move in such a silly manner, it's now a point of pride. I like finding solutions, and I like adapting on my own terms.

When I read of Richard's realization that he could move himself, even in a terribly inefficient and bizarre way, I felt that my disability was seen and represented in a shockingly

intimate way. My disability is very unlike Richard's, and there is no indication in the novel that he registers the enormity of the act with any self-awareness. But that doesn't negate the scene's importance to a disabled reader. Representations of disability are so often focused on grand narratives of coming to terms with abnormality or discovering a will to live that small, tremendously real and pithy moments like adapting your body to a task, are often overlooked. In this regard, in this moment, even amidst its other ableist moments, *Spleen* is a victory.

The novel concludes nearly thirty years after it began. Briefly back in England as she returns to sort out the will of her late husband, Ruth imagines herself a foreigner—outwardly homogenous with the crowd, but inwardly elsewhere, having been permanently changed by her time spent in Italy. She seeks out the art of the one man in Italy she ever came near to loving. Now that he has died, his status as an artist is finally pregnant enough with significance and pain that his work appears in a museum. Ruth visits the gallery and sits before one of his paintings, where she recalls watching him create it, and even remembers the child that is the painting's subject. Much like her psyche, the essence of the boy—which was so elegantly captured in oil paint when she initially watched its production—is completely lost when brought outside of Italy's dusty warmth and placed in the artificial setting of the museum. At the novel's end, Ruth meets with an estate lawyer to sort out what to do with the money her husband willed her. She decides—against his advice—to donate all of the money toward constructing a vacation home for London's orphaned children. She finds the idea charitable, but in truth, it's the embodiment of misguided, tone deaf philanthropy. London's orphans could use food, clothing, and permanent shelter. She offers them fleeting luxury. To her credit, Ruth briefly considers that her kindness may in fact be cruel, but she sticks to the idea all the same, seemingly out of mere spite toward the lawyer who thinks she ought to keep the money for herself. This sense of victory in tow, she

steps out into a bustling London that feels foreign. The years since her departure have been a period of growth for the city, and she finds its development and the town dwellers grotesque. But rather than comment on the crisis of modernity, the novel focuses on how Ruth has emancipated herself from any guilt: "She turned away, again wondering what she could have told [the town dweller]. But now she smiled. She no longer reproached herself" (128).

This ending seems determined to situate Ruth in settled headspace, very unlike her thought processes throughout the rest of the novel. But more upsetting than its incongruous conclusion is its final moment with Richard. As Ruth prepares to leave Italy, she speaks of her son dismissively, articulating how it almost feels like she is leaving him for good—and would be perfectly alright with doing so. She hopes that he has forgiven her, but the wish feels empty—he's never been given the opportunity to express any anger towards her, so her belief that he hates her is a fiction of her making. The novel very clearly calls into question what it means to be a "good" woman and whether women should have to be good in the first place. Moore writes against a modernist tradition that has centered masculine self-discovery—a tradition that allows men to be messy, tormented, and malcontent—by showcasing a woman making the same journey to self-actualization. In the end, it would be fair to assess Ruth as selfish, egotistical, and often petulant. But the same can be said of Jakes Barnes and Jay Gatsby.

Perhaps in total, *Spleen* is just another in a line of novels-of-contemplation that become so engrossed in trying to turn idiosyncrasies into universalities that they manage to neglect the very margins that they hope to represent. Ruth wants to bring something new into the world but is by no means prepared for what that new-ness might entail. This could be reflective of one critique launched against modernism: for all its desires to "make it new," does it do its utmost to represent new perspectives? If our answer to that question evaluates only the high modernist

canon, then perhaps not. But if we seek out those more obscure moments—like where Richard accommodates the world to suit him—and we redefine how we evaluation representations of bodies, we see the victory in *Spleen*.

"Good Country People": Seduction, Prosthetics, and Non-Sensibility

Unlike Olive Moore, Flannery O'Connor's writing has been extensively canonized, anthologized, and critiqued, in part because of her early death and active presence in her contemporary literary scene. Also unlike Moore, by most critical standards, the work of Flannery O'Connor does not fall under the umbrella of modernism. She was born in 1925: the year Fitzgerald released *The Great Gatsby*, Woolf published *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Hemingway began his trip that would inspire *The Sun Also Rises*. And since the very name of modernism suggests how fleeting time can be, it's no surprise that the height of the movement passed when she was only a child. Sometimes by virtue of chronology alone, O'Connor is excluded from modernist studies. Instead, her work is situated as part of the Christian Realism movement of the mid-twentieth century that sought a more comfortable conservatism in response of Cold War stresses and fears. But perhaps the most persuasive reason to exclude her from modernism come directly from O'Connor herself. As a student of literature and an attendant of writer's workshops, O'Connor was clear and vocal in her pronouncements of how her work should be read. She did not consider herself a modernist, but a return to an earlier sort of American realism, exhausted by the detached secular humanism of experimental modernism. Following her death, her work was immediately canonized as postmodern and Southern Gothic, highly invested in the Christian realism to which she adhered.

In practice, however, much of her work's centering of representations of disability, along with its "deforming" of realist narrative techniques, echoes modernism's conventions and values.

For instance, she employs lyricism and metaphor more often than standard action-based plot devices and her texts are filled with free indirect discourse. And while the stories often end with a plot twist that might result in a kind of definitive resolution, the driving force of the narrative is rarely an action or series of actions, but rather the gradual uncovering of character—a modernist mode, indeed. So not only does "Good Country People" provide us with a story that centralizes a disabled character; it also participates in modernist conventions as it exposes the conceited heedlessness of intellectualism without common sense.

In the custom of many other examples of O'Connor's fiction, "Good Country People" features a disabled character whose impairment is fully integrated into their characterization. It is neither mentioned in passing nor used as a mere symbol of something else. Instead, the protagonist's prosthetic leg is visible, loud when she walks, constantly present, and a critical part of her personal development. Of course, it is difficult to consider the ramifications of including a disabled character without considering the author's own encounters with disability. But O'Connor was not always so comfortable with such connections, even mentioning in personal correspondence that [her] lupus has no business in literary considerations.

This raises an ethical question about criticism that is worth the momentary divergence: if an author explicitly requests that an element of their personal life be left out of critical discussions of their work, must the critic abide by those wishes? Of course, Barthes' seminal "Death of Author" removes this question altogether: the work should stand on its own, and the author's intentions or circumstances should not be read into the text as any sort of definitive interpretation. But I propose a different sort of reading that complicates the text's relationship with disability by complicating O'Connor's relationship with disability.

First, it may be worth noting that lupus was not a concern of O'Connor's until after she had already decided to become a writer. Today, we have a litany of ways in which we can describe our identity—perhaps we are even hyper-aware of it. For instance, I can identify as a woman, a writer, a scholar, a disabled person, an Appalachian, an American, a millennial, etc. Oftentimes, one or more identity will move to the forefront as I conceive of who I am. Even the order of my above list could indicate the priority that I give each identity. If O'Connor conceived of herself as a writer before she ever imagined herself to be chronically ill or disabled, it might make sense for her to de-prioritize her disabled identity. Moreover, disability as an identity marker is a somewhat recent psychological/sociological phenomenon—while individuals could have been capable as identifying as Disabled all throughout history, the social impetus to do so certainly did not exist in the form it does today.[19]

At any rate, her father died from lupus when she was only sixteen, but since her mother never gave a name to his illness, O'Connor was not aware that his death had been caused by a chronic disorder. Soon after she finished her training at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, she began noticing soreness and fatigue in her arms, and was accordingly diagnosed with arthritis—painful, but treatable and in no way fatal. But when she returned home to Georgia to visit the same doctor that had treated her father, the diagnosis was changed to lupus—a fact that the doctor and her mother kept from her for years.

We understand this now to be an extremely distressed and dysfunctional relationship with disability; one that has the potential to lead to self-loathing and denial, only made worse by the failings of the then-predominant medical model. We cannot assume this to be the case with

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[19] For a brief outline of disability identity, see Dana Dunn and Shane Burcaw's "Thinking about Disability Identity" in The American Psychological Association's *Spotlight on Disability Newsletter*, November 2013.

O'Connor for certain, but we cannot rule it out, either. And we cannot deny that knowing about her complicated relationship with her disability facilitates a more nuanced reading of her work. In "Good Country People," this kind of reading positions Hulga as a foil to O'Connor, for better or worse: a woman determined to make her disability known, even at the expense of the comfort of others and sometimes her own well-being.

The primary dichotomy in the story is that of ideology. Hulga, the protagonist, stands alone among her neighboring "good country people" as a secular humanist with a doctorate in philosophy. In the rural southern setting, she represents all that is abnormal and pitiable in a woman: she is unmarried, in her thirties, overly intellectual, lacking in spirituality, full of spiteful attitude, and physically disabled. While everyone around her pities her failings, Hulga relishes in them and the way they attract her mother's constant admonition, clearly considering herself to be superior both to her mother and to those around her. She does not dislike them; ironically, she pities them as much as they pity her, and occasionally, she's amused by their naivetes. Ultimately, she finds them inconsequential to the world at large.

When she meets the young Bible salesman who her mother hopes might persuade her into some sort of a romance, her sense of superiority becomes hubris and leads to her ultimate shaming. Hulga decides that she will seduce the boy who seems naïve and overly reliant on the word of God. She agrees to a tryst in a barn where he eventually professes his love and asks her to remove her prosthetic leg. In the midst of her charade, she develops genuine affection for the boy, thinking him sincere in his innocent admiration of her.

But he turns out to be just as cynical and deceitful as her and exposes himself as a nihilistic atheist. He opens his briefcase to reveal not Bibles, but a flask, erotic playing cards, and

condoms. After briefly trying and failing to win her support, he steals her prosthesis and flees, leaving Hulga in shock that she had overestimated his morality.

Jumping from a quick summary of the short story to a critical overview of what has already been said regarding it, seems both tedious and prosaic, since scholarship abounds. A close reading of a few points might serve better. Hulga's given name is "Joy Hopewell." Three simplistically positive words comprise that name, but once she's old enough to leave home and attend school, she changes her legal name to "Hulga" because it is the ugliest sound she could think of. It's a wonderful moment of self-ownership and push-back against her mother who pities her and hates the name. Today, we are increasingly familiar with people in the trans community determining their own name as a glorious kind of self-actualization. Hulga does something similar, perhaps in an attempt to better claim or represent her disability. She waits over a decade after the accident to make the change, but given her mother's treatment of her after the impairment, the reader has to assume that the disability has impacted the development of her self-conception that would one day move her away from the saccharine "Joy" to something arguably more disagreeable but more authentic to herself.

Hulga's mother treats her like a child, even after she's earned a PhD in philosophy. "It was hard for Mrs. Hopewell to realize that her child was thirty-two now and that for more than twenty years she had had only one leg. She thought of her still as a child because it tore her heart to think instead of the poor stout girl in her thirties who had never danced a step or had any *normal* good times" (173). This sort of infantilization and overbearing behavior is common in parents whose children become disabled when they are not yet old enough to be independent.[20]

[20] A 2002 study published in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* confirmed that parents (particularly mothers) of children with spina bifida were much more likely to show signs

But Mrs. Hopewell's disappointment is more specifically rooted in her daughter's abnormality, rather than her struggles or difficulties. Her mother's pity prompts Hulga to behave in a way as far removed from her mother as possible: openly showcasing her disability, repudiating the expected behaviors of "normal" women, and refusing to conform her appearance or manners to that of a proper Southern lady.

Because of this temperament, Hulga immediately decides to toy with the young Bible salesman who calls himself Manley Pointer. She assumes him to be naïve and gullible, so she pretends to be persuaded by his flirtations. But she has some sort of genuine investment in the interaction with the boy, as thoughts of their planned tryst preoccupy her thoughts once she goes to bed:

> She imagined…that things came to such a pass that she very easily seduced him and that then, of course, she had to reckon with his remorse. True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind. She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful (186).

According to Hulga's fantasies, the seduction might be superficially sexual, but would truly be an exercise in flexing her intellect and wisdom. Above all else, she is interested in teaching the boy a lesson. So when her plan fails, what she ultimately experiences is the rude intrusion of embodiment into the seemingly protected realm of the intellectual. This intrusion—or collision, if we echo back to the language at the start of this chapter—of the embodied upon the intellectual

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of overprotection to a point of excess that strips the child of autonomy later in life than were mothers of able-bodied children.

encapsulates the modernist project to blur the boundary between those two traditionally separated components.

Given such a narrative feat, O'Connor's story is the apotheosis of the disability-centered, denaturalizing vision of modernism that throws into question the boundaries of "normal" by allowing embodiment to intrude into its narratives. These elements in O'Connor's work, and often in Faulkner's work as well, have been read as "Southern Gothic" and "grotesque" in ways that locate them into postmodernism, but the centering of disabled experience and the deforming of texts find their start in modernism's representations of disability. "Good Country People" is the culmination of that process.

Before disability is even posed as an identity, all of the women in this chapter are already marginalized by the nature of being female in modern Western society. But these women are further stripped of agency when their bodies become disabled—be it by illness, pregnancy, or the theft of a prosthetic. Does their automatic embodiment of a marginalized identity give them any sort of advantage when they are faced with disabling forces? The next chapter considers the stories of two disabled men who—unlike all of the women in this chapter—do not survive to the ends of their texts. Being a disabled woman is arguably more challenging than being either an able-bodied woman or a disabled man, from a practical standpoint. But the benefit (and drawback) of intersecting identities is perhaps a heightened awareness of the constructed nature of it all—an ability to see the often invisible system of social categorization at work. The subsequent gift is insight.

Chapter 3

Disabled Bodies Claiming Space

In her 1997 monograph *The Invention of Women*, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí begins by establishing the shortcomings of Western culture's construct of the body.

> Early in Western discourse, a binary opposition between body and mind emerged. The much-vaunted Cartesian dualism was only an affirmation of a tradition in which the body was seen as a trap from which any rational person had to escape. Ironically, even as the body remained at the center of both sociopolitical categories and discourse, many thinkers denied its existence form certain categories of people, most notably themselves. "Bodylessness" has been a precondition of rational thought. Women, primitives, Jews, Africans, the poor, and all those who qualified for the label "different" in varying historical epochs have been considered to be embodied, dominated therefore by instinct and affect, reason being beyond them. They are the Other, and the Other is a body (3).

We cannot extract this excerpt without acknowledging its context—a set-up of the predominant Western construct of the body so that its rigidity and shortcomings can be made visible in contrast to what Oyěwùmí presents as an alternative conception of womanhood founded on African cultural constructs. But in her list of Othered persons, we could easily include the disabled. In fact, their embodied Otherness is perhaps more readily understood than that of any of the listed groups because their bodies are widely understood to be at the very forefront of their identities (whereas a Jewish person's body might not immediately be listed as the thing that determines their Jewishness, even if much of the Othering occurs in regards to stereotypical appearance, hygienic and culinary practices, physical rituals, etc.). At any rate, Oyěwùmí's introduction to her monograph locates a critical fault in the Western binary between the body and

the mind—one that modernism engages and sometimes works to deconstruct. Often taught and classified as a movement of art deeply invested in the psyche of humanity, concurrent with Freud's psychoanalysis and the previously discussed surge in psychological conditions like PTSD (shell shock), modernism would be tremendously reduced if we were to limit our understanding of the movement as an exclusively, or even primarily, cerebral project.

In our contemporary moment, public discourse on bodies—those conversations accessible to thinkers outside of the academy and the studied tradition of critical theory—invests itself largely in issues of representation and identity politics. We are perhaps hyper-aware of our bodies, as representation and projection of the self is yoked to the vehicle of social media and publicized ad nauseum. It's a highly visual act—the language of public persona has changed so that we no longer worry about our "reputation" so much as our "image."

As a voracious consumer of contemporary media, I encounter no conversation about disability as often as that of representation. If we are a 21st century constantly engaged with screens, where are the broken, deformed and non-normative bodies on those screens? According to the 2018 U.S. Census, 12.8% of Americans live with a disability as defined by the ADA. However, GLAAD's 2018 "Where We Are on TV" data reports that only 2.1% of characters that appear in a primetime scripted series on broadcast networks have a disability, and 95% of those characters are portrayed by someone without a disability.[21] In short, representation is lacking. Psychological and sociological research has shown that seeing a representation of one's identity proves hugely helpful in accepting, embracing, and exploring that identity—that alone is an advantage of better representation. But giving disability a presence helps able-bodied individuals as well. It is, perhaps, the best the way to share an unfamiliar experience with another person,

[21] https://www.glaad.org/whereweareontv18

and even if that experience is fictionalized or stylized as a piece of art, it encourages engagement with an identity that has long been othered. I am always pleased when a friend tells me that, after spending time out in the world with me, they become more aware of wheelchair accessibility, even when I'm absent. They wonder how I would participate in an activity or how someone else in a wheelchair might be excluded because of a set of stairs. That awareness has the potential to lead to more considerate and accessible designs, planning, and engagement. Representation, then, is not just a favor done for a marginalized group, but is the first step in a strategy to improve accessibility and inclusion.

This chapter analyzes two late-modernist texts of different genres in an attempt to distinguish what constitutes disability representation, consider how disabled bodies are used to advance narratives, and evaluate when a representation does more harm than good. *A Cool Million* tells the story of a young man who, through a series of terrible accidents and poor judgment of character, has his body destroyed piece by piece until his only use value is how others can use his disability to garner sympathy for themselves. Similarly, Joseph Merrick's disability in *Elephant Man* is used by others to further narratives of charity and self-sacrifice. This representation of disability is complicated by the nature of its being a drama, and therefore enacted, in the flesh, by actors who are often not disabled themselves. The result, then, is an increased awareness of the performativity of disability.

Bodies in Pieces

The literary canon typically excludes Nathanael West's *A Cool Million*. *The Day of the Locust* and *Miss Lonelyhearts* represent his literary contributions at a time when the world of novels and the world of Hollywood began to interact. West scholar Henry Claridge's introduction to his collected works reflects much of the critical opinion surrounding *A Cool*

Million, which tends to reduce it to a rushed, campy work filled to the brim with overly eccentric and erratic characters, and lacking any sort of cohesive plot. West's transitional novel between his two hits did not see significant commercial success aside from its film rights being sold, and is often regarded as failing to reflect his "narrative gifts" (Claridge, 21). These criticisms are by no means unfounded. The plot is, admittedly, a bit disjointed, and the satire is arguably heavy-handed at moments.

In addition, the character of Lemuel Pitkin, our supposed hero, is not particularly sympathetic despite all of the ill fortune that befalls him. His unshakable naiveté is sometimes infuriating. The stick-to-it-ness that we are told should endear Pitkin to us eventually sours the reader, who likely finishes the novel unable to decide if his tragedy was the fault of an inescapable system or his own inescapable foolishness. But the satirical tone of the novel—a tone that intentionally pushes circumstances to their most ludicrous results—should keep us from dismissing poor Pitkin and the novel as a whole too quickly. If we take a moment and set West's (overly) obvious project to critique the American Dream[22] aside and instead take up the ramifications of Pitkin's literal "dismantling," we see a West who manages (whether purposefully or inadvertently) to showcase the jarring systematic mistreatment of the physically unfit in a historical moment betrayed by Progressivism and threatened from abroad by fascist ideology.

Though Progressivism held fast during America's industrialist boom, the reality of the First World War disillusioned a society that had once thought itself constantly improving. Weakened further by the Great Depression, West likely found America to be in a particularly

[22] In a letter to fellow writer Josephine Herbst, West stated bluntly that he would write "the breakdown of the American Dream" (1932).

vulnerable state. Though reviews of his novel varied, in terms of being concerned for the state of America, he was not alone. In reviewing *A Cool Million*, John Chamberlain of the *New York Times* laments that "…one must either laugh at this sort of thing or go mad because of the insane reality that lies behind it" (June, 1934). That being said, West's text was not only written in response to disenchantment toward the past, but also as a warning against a particular nationalistic future. As Claridge identifies, "Shagpoke" Whipple's presence in the text is resultant of West's anxiety about the possible spread of fascism to his own country (20). West's inclusion of fascism is worth noting in its own right, as it makes up much of the political message behind the novel. But beyond exerting a basic political statement against it, West's inclusion of fascism is of additional interest to discussions regarding disability because the movement so thoroughly excludes broken bodies.

As per the youth-centered social tenets of fascism, a good citizen is a fit citizen—either a man fit for battle or a woman fit for motherhood. The disabled body, as a result, finds no place in the fascist narrative or in the eugenic movement that often accompanied or preceded it. Though Pitkin's disability is, in no way, the central focus of West's novel, there is use in exploring his disability as a spectacle and the way that, via his disability, Piktin eventually finds utility. There is certainly something provocative in the idea that disability can be an advantage rather than a burden, but West complicates that notion by showcasing that Pitkin's use value is only established at the point of involuntary, martyred death and the fictitious eulogy Whipple creates after it.

It is not unusual for individuals with disabilities to be excluded from nationalistic and capitalistic political regimes because of their inefficient bodies and/or minds. As detailed in Michael Oliver's *New Politics of Disablement*, such marginalization is systematic and has been

commented upon for years amongst Disability Studies scholars—in that regard, this project does not assert any sort of novelty. But among intersections of Disability Studies and literature, few characters are as violently and wholly dismembered by capitalism as West's Pitkin. Given the biting critique that the novel levels at American society, considerations of disability's role in his message can no longer afford to be left out of Disability Studies conversations, many of which are working to deconstruct similarly harmful, modern-day narratives of disability. Pitkin's experience and posthumously derived biography shows stark parallels with twenty-first century tropes of "disability as an inspiration" and "disability as a societal burden," resulting in death after disability being alternately motivational or pitiful, depending on each narrative's use value in their respective contexts.

The narratives written around disability are often determined by how comfortable they make non-disabled individuals and/or how profitable the narrative will be. To defend this claim, it is important to note that Pitkin becomes most financially successful when he is most disabled, suggesting that disability is only lucrative when it is a spectacle.[23] Pitkin may or may not be aware of the spectacle that he performs his disability allows him to perform. As emphasized in the title of the novel (and remarked upon by scholar David Galloway), Pitkin is "dismantled" rather than "dismembered," suggesting that his experience of disability while he is alive may not be fully embodied—he is less of a disabled person than he is a broken machine, highlighting his automatonic behavior (124). Galloway's point is no doubt a vital one, but it may be equally fruitful to consider the opposite and suppose that Pitkin self-identifies, toward the end of the novel, as "something of a cripple" (172). The words are certainly his own, but whether he claims

[23] For a detailed dissection of narratives surrounding disability as spectacle, particularly in the context of freak shows, see Robert Bogdan's *Picturing Disability: Beggar, Freak, Citizen, and Other Photographic Rhetoric*.

his disability as identity or not is debatable. Regardless, there is irony in the fact that in his job as a stooge, "One of Lem's duties was to purchase newspapers and out of them fashion the clubs used to beat him" (171). He is, undoubtedly, complicit in his own spectacle and mistreatment. But this does not account for Whipple's commodification of his disability and death at the novel's end.

Before we can determine what it means to label Pitkin as a disabled character, however, it is necessary to contextualize what it meant to be disabled, generally speaking, during the 1930s.[24] At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, American city ordinances were flooded with the implementation of "ugly laws." In her book titled after the laws themselves, Susan Schweik, a notable Disability Studies scholar, investigates the origins and ramifications of a set of laws which prohibited "any person who is diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object"[25] from appearing within "public view" (1-2). The causes and ramifications of this legalized form of discrimination are far too extensive to be explored in this paper, but the simple existence of the "ugly laws" sets the scene for the American regard for disability and the historical moment about which West would write.

Schweik notes in her book that "ugly laws" were a uniquely American article of history, for while similar prejudices and impulses can be found institutionalized outside of the United

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[24] The project of determining what life with a disability would have been like decades ago has too vast a scope to be thoroughly addressed here. The ensuing discussion of Susan Schweik's book will consider only one aspect of disabled life, particularly because it does an especially good job at reflecting the general American mentality toward disability in the years leading up to and during West's historical moment. For further information, see Paul Longmore's and David Goldberger's article, "The League of the Physically Handicapped and the Great Depression: A Case Study in the New Disability History."

[25] As cited by Schweik from the Chicago City Code of 1881.

States and outside of the moment of history in question, the laws themselves were distinctly American. Schweik determines this idiosyncrasy to be a result of a distinctively American preoccupation with conformity. Citing Stuart Murray, Schweik argues that the project of conformity is challenged "by the ways in which disability offers its characteristically double movement: a seemingly anomalous and deviant version of humanity that nevertheless focuses all too uncomfortably for many on the central issues of the human condition," resulting in a sort of anxiety surrounding the disabled body and its potential contagions (4). Disabled bodies make society nervous because they do not coalesce easily into conformity and they often serve as a reminder of human fragility.

Oftentimes, the individuals persecuted by these "ugly laws" were already impoverished due to the disability that prevented them from being able to work. Schweik begins her book by recounting the story of the woman who inspired the Chicago City Code's inaugural "ugly law." The woman, who had lost her job after being injured in a woolen-mill, sought to financially support her two children by performing on the street. A city councilman wrote a scathing admonition of her presence, which would thereafter result in the first "ugly law" (1). Schweik offers no more information regarding her future, but this unnamed woman represents a blended social category that still exists today, which consists of impoverished individuals with disabilities, whose poverty is often caused by disability and whose disability is sometimes perpetuated by poverty. While Pitkin is an illustration of this cyclical oppression, such oppression is, by no means, limited to his historical moment or the outlandish parody that West constructs.

Looking more critically at the mechanisms of capitalism, which debilitate individuals with disabilities, Michael Oliver, the Disability Studies scholar who introduced the field to the

social model of disability in 1983, recently updated a collection of essays that discuss the politics of disability. One particular chapter of *The New Politics of Disablement* considers the effects of capitalism on the construct of disability. "The Rise of Disabling Capitalism" offers a Marxist critique of industrialized modernization. Oliver traces the habit of categorizing bodies back to the escalation of social Darwinism and eugenics, implicitly putting the origins of disability as a social category in the same historical moment as the "ugly laws."

Oliver notes that as a result of the rise of social Darwinism—which roughly coincides with industrialization, for Oliver's purposes—"unruly bodies became a sign of animality, and a rationale for the spatial segregation of increasing numbers of disabled people. This encompassed a general individualization of the body as a self-contained and controlled entity" (62).[26] The medical model of disability, which is now considered outdated within DS but still dominates in public and legal spheres, would have been the predominant means of defining disability in the 1930s. This model is characterized by its insistence that disability is defined as an impairment that an individual is either born with or acquires at some point during his or her life. In this regard, disability is intrinsic to the individual, and not socially constructed, as would later be argued. In the face of inequality and discrimination against disability, the medical model sees a cure or a treatment as the only way to reinstate a disabled individual into public society and presumes that such reinstatement is necessary and universally desired. Critics of this model chastise it for placing blame onto the individual's body and for ingraining "wrongness" that must be fixed onto disabled bodies in favor of "normal" bodies. But the medical model also fails to

[26] Disability Studies commonly offers two major ways to understand disability: the medical model and the social model. The second will not be discussed at length since it arose decades after West's lifetime. Another project, however, could argue that Whipple's treatment of Pitkin anticipates more recent discussions of disability as an entirely social construct.

take into account the way that political and economic structures further marginalize and oppress disabled bodies. To address this, Oliver offers a Marxist critique of the effects of capitalism on the disabled body and society's perception and evaluation of it in light of capitalist ideology, concluding that capitalism is designed to perpetually tyrannize disability just as it tyrannizes poverty.

It is important to note that the historical moment of *A Cool Million* sees an impoverished class that is in no way limited to disabled individuals, but is largely the result of a widespread misapplication of capitalism. Capitalism fails our hero before he ever becomes disabled. In fact, West wastes no time in commenting upon this societal state, as his novel opens with a widow whose house is being foreclosed upon, a miserly banker obsessed with interest (Whipple), and then quickly jumps into a New York City filled with individuals desperate for work. At its most superficial level, West's recurrent satirization of the American Dream critiques the American mentality of exceptionalism, which strengthens an attachment to capitalism that would eventually lead to the destabilization of the nation's economic system and the Great Depression. And while a detailed explanation of capitalism is better suited for another paper, a few general tenets ought to be outlined here.

First of all, capitalism is a closed system, in that whatever money one person earns must be coming from the pocket of someone else. Any advantage gained by one person is the disadvantage of someone else along the line of production. Moreover, capitalism privileges efficiency and use value in its labor force. Once wages are determined by the amount of time a worker is willing to sell to an employer, efficiency will always equate to more money, thus a more efficient worker is a more valuable worker. If and when members of a capitalistic society exploit the mechanisms of capitalism, the result is a small percentage of people holding a

disproportionately vast amount of the money, leaving a large portion of the population disproportionately impoverished.

Upon the commodification of labor, bodies deemed "less efficient" would become less valuable to the market of their state. In accordance to this system of valuing, disabled bodies are less worthy by definition. This translates almost identically into social realms, resulting in a complete devaluation of disabled individuals. And along with being less valuable to the market, disabled bodies become regarded as problematic; because they do not fit neatly into a particular function of capitalism, society must find another place for them to occupy.

This is the economic scene into which Lemuel Pitkin tries to make his fortune, and this is the public regard for disability that he will eventually experience. He is never warned that the rags-to-riches narrative no longer plays out to the advantage of the poor, as Whipple has tried to convince him. To make matters worse, West gives our hero no marketable skills to speak of—he is a vacant and roomy vehicle through which West can transport various social critiques across different social settings. Perhaps because this is a direct parody of the Horatio Alger myth,[27] Lemuel's emptiness is not a bad thing, but a necessary one; indeed, it allows West to write disability onto Pitkin at the very end, which is ultimately what makes him so memorable in the legend Whipple invents.

No one is as representative of opportunism in this novel as "Shagpoke" Whipple. While it is tempting to disregard him as outlandish based on his erratic behavior, West must have regarded Whipple's mentality as believable enough to be potentially dangerous. A former

[27] Written by Horatio Alger Jr., stories featuring the eponymous myth often lauded individuals who moved from poverty to financial success with little more than an America ethic of hard work and optimism to guide them. For more on the myth and its successors, see Richard Weiss's, *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale,* 1969.

President of the United States, Whipple has made his great name and fortune as a Rockefeller would, with a lowly start of thirty-five dollars to his name and a stringent faith in his nation to provide him and every young man with all of the opportunities to prosper. At the start of the novel, Whipple is like an aged Alger protagonist—a vision of what happens long after the rags turned to riches (West, 95). Once capitalism, in the form of bad investments, fails him, Whipple resorts to his opportunism—an ideology that is even more fundamental to his character than his economic or political alignments. It is no surprise then, that West would write fascism onto a man of such character. Fascism suits Whipple's talents and needs, since he has a penchant for inspiring speech and could benefit from the support of a youthful revolution. Being an old man in danger of becoming irrelevant, surely the best defense against a youth-centric movement is to be its voluntary harbinger.

Moving beyond the general dangers inherent in fascism, its ideology is especially damning to disabled individuals. Barbara Herberer, from the Holocaust Memorial Museum, offers insights into the direct results of fascist ideologies regarding the disabled community during World War II. The precise aim of her project is to put faces to the names of individuals who were deemed unfit, based on their abilities, to belong in the Nazi state. She cites the official euthanasia program instituted by the Nazi party, whose aim was to weed out "life unworthy of life" ("'The Unfit:' Disability Under Nazism and Fascism"). While Pitkin's experience predates the eugenics programs of Nazi Germany, the mentality that eventually ended in genocide is the same mentality that instituted "ugly laws" and instigated the mockery of Pitkin's physical state. Herberer's discussion of the sterilizing and euthanizing of disabled populations and the fascist ideals that led to it are also relevant to West's anxieties about fascism as showcased in *A Cool Million*. We have already established that, by the end of the novel, capitalism and the American

Dream have failed Pitkin, arguably because they never had the potential to improve his life in the first place. And though Whipple promises him a revolution of American greatness as compensation for his "sacrifices," he never benefits from fascism either. Even if his life had been spared, as Herberer's presentation supports, a fascist nation-state was in no way welcoming to disabled bodies.

One of the most ironic—and frustrating—aspects of Pitkin's story is the fact that he never shows real potential to cultivate any sort of successful career. At the start of the novel, Pitkin is described as a "strong, spirited lad" in whom Whipple sees plenty of potential for success. But while Whipple believes success to function as a meritocracy, the simple fact is that Pitkin possesses no discernible skills or talents, as far as our narrator tells us; even if success were based on a meritocracy, Pitkin has very little merit. He is gullible, but otherwise unremarkable. Once Whipple inspires him enough, Pitkin leaves his home and mother and arrives in New York City with no promised job and is immediately swindled. Pitkin only finds work after he is framed and taken to prison—where the warden removes his teeth—and is later nearly trampled by a horse—which results in his loss of eye (172). The shady job with the tailor lands him in jail for a second time, and while he spends a brief time venturing westward to search for gold, he fails to find a steady source of income until he becomes a professional stooge. By this point in the story, he not only lacks teeth and an eye, but his thumb, leg, and scalp have also been removed. Despite his variety of disabilities, Lemuel finally has a legitimate job—if it is not respectable, it is at least legal. In fact, Pitkin is considered most valuable when he is most piecemeal; his grotesque appearance is the only reason he is hired in the first place and the more discombobulated he looks as a stooge, the more profitable his performance. In a crushed economy, freakishness and

spectacle will still bring in money.[28]

The irony, of course, is that Pitkin lands his stooge job after attempting to make his fortune mining for gold. He makes his way back to New York because he is terribly "disturbed" by Mr. Snodgrasse's travelling "freak show" and is motivated to escape it (165). If he were looking for a way to simply survive, he could have continued traveling with Snodgrasse's show, but he seems so bothered by the attraction's performance of the exploitation of the impoverished that he cannot tolerate it—strange, since he would go on to make his living by being exploited. Though such a paradox is in keeping with his typically illogical behavior, the question, then, is whether Pitkin simply does not consider himself a "freak" and thereby, not part of a "freak show" that can take advantage of his marginalized state, or whether he simply does not care as long as he is able to make money. The narrator is never quite willing to enter into Pitkin's psychology, even if he enters his mind, so the reader is left to question the hero's motives. But no matter how helpful it may be to know Pitkin's mind about his disabled identity and its use as spectacle, it is the narrator who constructs his story, with the help of Whipple, so a quick consideration of the narrator is worth a moment.

Nancy Bombaci's takes up our narrator in *Freaks in Late Modernist American Culture*, which touches on a variety of writers, but hones in on what she calls the "freakish *flâneurs*" in West's novels. For Bombaci, the narrator of *A Cool Million* is a "pre-mirror stage *flâneur*"[29] who assumes the disparate mindsets of all of the characters, primarily for amusement. Despite the

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[28] It is worth noting that before Pitkin lands the job, another unemployed man tries to vie for the position by threatening to remove his eye; such is the desperation of America's unemployed (169).

[29] Pairing Walter Benjamin's idea of the *flâneur* with Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror-stage, Bombaci defines a pre-mirror stage *flâneur* as an infant-like crowd-watcher who "fantasizes that he can become one with everything he sees" (29).

simplicity of the narrator, Bombaci concedes that he/she takes "a moral stance against the American tendency to create colonizing spectacles…which abound in the American capitalist hell [and] encase people within cultural stereotypes and blight their dreams" (42). Bombaci's primary cultural case study here is that of racial and ethnic distinction—she transitions here to an analysis of Wu Fong's culturally coded brothel, for instance, to discuss the narrator's ability to inhabit each culture as a sort of complicit performer (43). But the idea that *A Cool Million* turns cultural stereotype into spectacle for specifically capitalist purposes can be applied to a disability culture as well.

Admittedly, there are some conflicting opinions among the various branches of the disability community—both within and outside of academia—regarding the existence of a disability culture.[30] But if we loosely define the term "culture" as a set of shared narratives, then disability can certainly qualify. Additionally, there may be argument as to whether the spectacle of Lemuel Pitkin is based on his disability or his freakishness, but since at least part of the distinction between disability and freakishness and their respective connotations is a result of more recent changes in disability language, it is fair enough to treat his disability and his freakishness as one and the same.

At the very least, Pitkin self-identifies his disability when members of Whipple's National Revolutionary Party ask him to support their cause and do them a favor. He agrees to help, but warns that he is "something of a cripple" (172). He takes on this identity voluntarily, though not necessarily proudly. But his title of martyr is something that Whipple and,

[30] Opinions on whether or not the social category of disability qualifies as a culture are largely determined by the field in which it is being discussed, such as literature, psychology, sociology, bioethics, etc. Carol Gill offers valuable insight to this discussion in "A Psychological View of Disability Culture," *Disability Studies Quarterly*.

presumably, future generations project upon him as a subject—not a narrative that he claims as his own or ever attempt to disseminate. In an unsettling speech in honor of Pitkin, Whipple relates that, "although dead, yet he speaks. Of what is it that he speaks? Of the right of every American boy to go into the world and there receive fair play and a chance by industry and probity without being laughed at or conspired against by sophisticated aliens. Alas, Lemuel Pitkin himself did not have this chance, but was instead dismantled by the enemy. His teeth were pulled out. His eye was gouged from his head. His thumb was removed. His scalp was torn away. His leg was cut off. And finally, he was shot through the heart. But he did not live or die in vain. Through his martyrdom, the National Revolutionary Party triumphed, and by that triumph this country was delivered from sophistication, Marxism and International Capitalism. Through the National Revolution its people were purged of alien diseases and America became again American" (175).

Aside from the detailing of Pitkin's dismemberment, all of what Whipple presents in his speech is a constructed narrative to be used for his own political gain. Though Whipple claims that Pitkin speaks, he was never particularly vocal in life, and more often talked at (by Whipple) than given a chance to speak. Moreover, he is silenced by a gunshot after beginning his final speech and getting no further than to say, "I am a clown" (173). When he is given a platform to speak, the only thing he is able to utter is self-mockery. He was never given "fair play" in his ambitions—ill-advised as they were—he was routinely laughed at, and those "enemies" who foiled his dreams were not "sophisticated aliens," but Americans with some form of corrupted power (Whipple, the warden, his lawyer, etc.). It is necessary that Whipple list Pitkin's injuries, because those injuries and the emphasis on his suffering establish the narrative's credibility—they are the only verifiable facts in Whipple's speech. But their context is entirely falsified—if

these injuries were not suffered for the cause of the National Revolution or even as sacrifices for his own success. His injuries were freak injustices leveled against him for the crime of exaggerated gullibility.

Ultimately, Whipple invents an alternative history to justify his party's complicity in Pitkin's death. The projection of Pitkin's disability onto a chronicle of pity and sacrifice may be historically contextualized for West's anti-fascist purposes, but similar narratives abound in the twenty-first century as well. Prominent disability activist Stella Young wrote a watershed article in July of 2012 for Australia's ABC website, titled "We're not here for your inspiration." Young, a writer, activist, and comedian wrote the article in response to a phrase that athlete Scott Hamilton had recently popularized: "the only disability in life is a bad attitude."

The sudden popularization of the mantra came in the summer of 2012, which brought a rise in the fame of Paralympic runner, Oscar Pistorius.[31] In the history of famous disabled individuals, Pistorius offered the highly consumable story of a man with no legs accomplishing a feat meant to challenge people with particularly good legs. Pistorius himself wasted no time disseminating messages of inspiration like Hamilton's, and appearing in advertisements with disabled children. With Pistorius' fame as an impetus, Young commented upon the dangers of reducing the lives of people with disabilities to motivational adages. She posits that the narrative of disability as something to be admirably overcome exists so that "non-disabled people can put their worries into perspective" (para. 10). While Young argues that such a narrative actually serves to soothe able-bodied individuals rather than credit disabled people with any sort of

[31] In 2013, Pistorius was tried for shooting and killing his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp. As of December, 2015, the Paralympian was found guilty of murdering Steenkamp. The turn of events offers a bit of irony in the story of someone who was once lauded as an example of overcoming disability to do great things.

success, it is perhaps more dangerous because it discredits those individuals with disability who are unable or unmotivated to perform the trope of the "supercrip."[32]

The overarching concerns of disability representation in literature are still centered on issues of oversimplification and stereotyping. Oftentimes, this happens without much thought, resulting in the use of disabled characters as tools or signs in plot development rather than fully formed and well-rounded characters. Perhaps it is overly presumptive to label Lemuel Pitkin an example of a disabled character—certainly, there are other aspects of his development that have been given more attention and are more fundamental to character. The eerie, cult-like response to Pitkin's death leave the reader with the sense that our hero—gullible and impulsive as he may be—did not deserve to have his death memorialized as purposeful on his part. Even more disturbing is the notion that someone as false and pitiless as Whipple should benefit from a fictionalized account of Pitkin's experience. Only after he is broken, mocked, and disabled is our hero valuable, and then, only for his tragically designed death.

Bodies on Stage: *Elephant Man*

Where Lemuel Pitkin's once-abled body is dismantled by a force outside of his body, the body of Joseph Merrick—more famously known as *The Elephant Man*—contains within it the force that will eventually disable him, growing more and more deviant from the norm with each passing year until his head grew so large that he suffocated under its weight in his sleep at the age of twenty-eight. Unlike Pitkin, Merrick was an actual historical figure. But his life's story is somewhat fictionalized in Bernard Pomerance's play, with special instructions for the lead actor to perform the role without any prosthetics or makeup. As a piece of drama, it is self-aware of

[32] For a discussion of the "supercrip" trope in narratives of disability, see Amit Kama's "Supercrips versus the pitiful handicaps."

the its performativity, and thus highlights the performativity of disability. But as is the case in *A Cool Million*, *The Elephant Man* also showcases the tendency of able-bodied individuals to only incorporate disability insofar as it suits their narrative.

Chronologically speaking, *The Elephant Man* is well into the realm of post-modernism. First staged in 1977, it was conceived of long after the defining events and movements of modernism as it has been defined in this project thus far. Moreover, the story itself takes places in the late Victorian period and hearkens back to that era's treatment of disability and deformity as both a freakish spectacle and medical mystery. By all accounts, *The Elephant Man* straddles modernism without being part of it. But it is included here, nonetheless, for its treatment of the body on stage. While no piece of work can be removed entirely from the historical moment in which it was created, drama is perhaps more temporally flexible since it is re-represented over and over again on stage. Moreover, while we cannot claim that a text prior to modernism could have modernist influence or echoes, such a claim can be made of a text after modernism. It is for those recollections and imprints of modernism that Pomerance's fascinating representation of an abnormal body is included here.

In December 2014, Broadway buzzed with talk of the then-current production of Bernard Pomerance's *The Elephant Man*. More accurately, however, it buzzed with talk of the production's titular star: Bradley Cooper, a classically trained actor, recipient of several Academy Awards, and sex symbol of the celebrity industry. The hype surrounding his participation in the play had little to do with his critical-acclaim, nor did it involve his personal attachment to the role of Joseph Merrick, despite the fact that he had played the Elephant Man on stage twice before in his career. Instead, Broadway, Hollywood, and much of the media entered near hysterics because Cooper, named *People Magazine's* "Sexiest Man Alive" in 2011, would

somehow be expected to transform into a character that represents the very essence of grotesque deformity. Interviewers and reviewers latched onto the amusing absurdity that Cooper could make such a transformation in any way authentic.[33] But authenticity of appearance was hardly Pomerance's intent in imagining Merrick's portrayal. In his introduction to the play, Pomerance says that "Any attempt to reproduce his appearance and his speech naturalistically—*if* it were possible—would seem to me not only counterproductive, but, the more remarkably successful, the more distracting for the play. For how he appeared, let slide projections suffice" (v-vi). Following the playwright's instructions, Cooper foregoes prosthetics and make-up, and instead contorts his body and face in order to assume Merrick's posture and speech.

Cooper's rendition of Merrick is hardly the character's first celebrity treatment. In the summer of 1980, David Bowie temporarily stepped outside of his musical career to make his first appearance on the American stage in a touring production in *The Elephant Man*. As the original *New York Times* announcement of the casting explains, Bowie—like Cooper—was drawn to the role and sought it out specifically because of an empathetic response to the character.[34] In an interview *New Musical Express*, Bowie discusses a moment during rehearsals when he realized that he was focused too much on perfecting Merrick's movements, instead of engaging with Merrick's character.[35] But I argue that Merrick's movements, and therefore Bowie's and Cooper's attempts to embody Merrick's deformity, are vital to the development of his character

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[33] David Rooney's review of the 2014 production for *Hollywood Reporter* regards this transformation as successful because of Cooper's "powerhouse performance."
[34] Interestingly enough, this announcement appeared in the *Times* alongside a piece on actor Larry Kert, who, in 1980, was campaigning to play the role of Al Jolson—an actor famous in part because of his blackface performance in *The Jazz Singer*.
[35] "The Future Isn't What It's Supposed to Be" published in the September 1980 issue of *NME* focuses primarily on Bowie's music career at the time, but touches on *The Elephant Man* production as well.

because movement is the key component in conveying Merrick's disabled experience to an audience that, otherwise, has little-to-no experience from which to base their understanding of such an anomalous life.

Though I write, read, and view from the perspective of a disabled body, my argument presumes that the vast majority of the play's intended audience is comprised of able-bodied viewers. It is simple enough to claim that casting an able-bodied actor in a disabled role allows the predominantly able-bodied audience an opportunity to relate more easily to the character. While this may be true, the effect delves deeper than mere relatability—instead, casting an able-bodied actor allows the figure of Merrick to transform from able-bodied to disabled as Treves narrates Merrick's various deformities. The visual performance of this process of disablement is critical because it displays the becoming of the "other" as a development, rather than an intrinsic or stable quality that a person definitively does or does not have. As a result, the audience is forced to consider Merrick not as some kind of freak or creature, but as a man whose body dysfunctions in unusual ways—ultimately, ways that anyone's body could conceivably dysfunction. It is helpful to see an abled-body go through the process of becoming disabled—it allows a predominantly able-bodied audience a better opportunity to sympathize with the character and the experience. Disability scholars, however, often lament performances or portrayals of disabled characters by able-bodied actors because they have much the same effect as a white actor putting on blackface to play a black character. The act suggests that disability is an identity that can be adopted or artificially projected without losing its authenticity.[36] But no acted performance can be entirely authentic—it is meant to serve a representation.

[36] Another valid complaint of many disability studies scholars involves the double standard against disabled actors in Hollywood. While able-bodied actors can play disabled characters, few visibly disabled actors can be cast as able-bodied characters. This would perhaps not be such a

In his article "In Search of Merrick," Stanton Garner argues that an audience that sees a body move through Merrick's various abnormal postures and movements is better able to empathize with the character and, thus, with his disability. Garner calls this phenomenon "kinesthetic empathy," which can be defined as "the ability to experience the movements of others through inner simulations or reenactments" (83). So while Pomerance's introductory note says that, "anyone playing the part of Merrick should consult a physician about the problems of sustaining any unnatural or twisted position," the call for an able-bodied actor is not merely a result of the physical toll of the role (ix). The role also demands an able-bodied performer because the performance must begin from an abled embodiment, in order to facilitate kinesthetic empathy. That being said, if the primary requirement of a Merrick performer is to be physically fit enough to carry his posture and movement, theoretically, any able-bodied actor could portray Merrick to the desired ends, resulting in a performance of the process of disablement. But two of the most renowned productions of the play cast actors who are already full-blown celebrities. Ultimately, we cannot know the exact motivations behind the various castings of Merrick, but the play pays special attention to the concept of celebrity and what it means to be regarded as famous. By casting celebrities to portray a man who was once a celebrity for unconventional reasons, producers of the play embed an additional layer of commentary regarding what it means to be and to cope with being culturally extraordinary.

A review of Bradley Cooper's performance as Merrick, published in *The Guardian* in December of 2014, serves a primary source in reading public response to and regard for celebrity

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pervasive problem if it were not for the lack of roles in film and television that incorporate disability. For a current and thorough outline of the casting of disabled actors in Hollywood, see *The Washington Post*'s "Almost all disabled TV characters are played by able-bodied actors. Can we fix that?"

in a production like *The Elephant Man*.[37] Alexis Soloski begins her review with a tone of disregard for the play, calling it "another revival of Bernard Pomerance's 1979 play about a cause celebre, famous for his deformities." She criticizes that "his portrayal at first seems tiresomely showy, the kind of acting that demands the audience applaud each drop of sweat trickling from the thespian brow." It is difficult to critically disagree with a review, since it is ultimately based upon the subjective opinion of the reviewer. But what Soloski reads as "tiresomely showy acting" may in fact be Cooper's strain at moving a body that should be clumsy, pained, and inefficient. Soloski goes on to characterize Pomerance's writing as "speechifying" and possessing "a little philosophy," suggesting that the style lends to a melodramatic effect; she is not alone in this claim.[38] What audiences may be reacting to regarding Pomerance's characterization of disability and Cooper's attempts to embody it are the one-dimensional, sensationalized stereotypes and narratives that tend to typify disability.

In the introduction to their book *Bodies in Commotion*, Carrie Sandhal and Philip Auslander posit that disability is inherently performative, and thus enriches conversations in performance studies about what it means to possess, manipulate, and portray a body on stage. The introduction also outlines various pervasive stereotypes, explaining that "disability scripts are often limited to a handful of archetypes: the obsessive avenger, the sweet innocent, the comic misadventurer, the inspirational overcomer, the charity case, the freak, and the monster" (3). Merrick personifies nearly all of these types: he is innocent in that he had never seen a woman

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[37] The genre of the review is obviously very different from the genre of the academic article—reviews rely more on reader response than close reading, they often use more informal language in an attempt to draw in rather than intimidate readers, and their critical inquiry is limited to short comments that typically do not engage deeply with the literary text. Therefore, in discussing Soloski's review, I do not mean to merely disagree with her opinions regarding the performance. Instead, I attempt to critically read her reaction in conjunction with the play's text.

[38] David Rooney makes a similar claim in his review.

naked, he is framed as an inspirational overcomer in his attempts to lead a more normal life, he is a clear charity case once he arrives at the hospital, and he is called both a "freak" and a "monster" quite directly. The effect is overwhelming, resulting in what seems like melodrama, but which, I argue, is actually Pomerance's attempt to highlight the artificiality and flatness of these narratives.

Instead, Pomerance does justice to the narrative of disability in a way that few other texts manage. In his rendition of the Merrick story, Pomerance accomplishes the following: he destabilizes the idea that disability can be fully defined according to science or religion, he subverts the narrative that disability is a permanent or definitive, other-ed condition, he calls attention to the notion that disability is just as performative as a theatrical performance, and he inquires as to what determines celebrity and how celebrity functions in the context of disability.

In reality, Merrick's is not an inspirational story—he lived miserably, he died young and in pain, and much of his life was spent as a spectacle of one sort or another.[39] Any inspiration that he provided was likely contrived in the minds of those who interacted with him and felt better for it. Ross, manipulative as he may be toward Merrick, recognizes this trend when he returns to Merrick to ask for money. In reference to the new acquaintances that Merrick has made and the attention they pay him, Ross suggests that it "makes 'em feel good about themselves by comparison" (51). Moreover, at the end of the play, after Merrick dies, Gomm goes out of his way to write into the paper about Merrick's death because he thinks that those who donated to Merrick's cause would like to know what happened to their investment. Thus, the impetus for his obituary has very little to do with the good he did in his life or how much he

[39] For a biography of Merrick, see Michael Howell and Peter Ford's *The True History of the Elephant Man*, or Frederick Treves' *The Elephant Man and Other Reminisces*.

will be missed—instead, the focus is redirected toward the way that others consumed his personality and image. Within the play, Pomerance positions Treves as the character that goes through the most drastic change in terms of his conscience and comprehension of what Merrick's lived experience meant. As a result, when Gomm asks Treves if he would like to add anything else to the obituary, Treves says, "He was highly intelligent. He had an acute sensibility; and worst for him, a romantic imagination. No, no. Never mind. I am really not certain of any of it" (70). Ultimately, Treves cannot fully reconcile his still-developing perception of Merrick with the public's image of him, but his proposed addition grants Merrick more humanity and agency than any other description that occurs in the play.

The first description of Merrick comes from Ross, and is highly narrativized—that is to say, rather than merely listing Merrick's various deformities, Ross constructs a story of the Elephant Man's life, dramatizing his appearance. Treves, on the other hand, approaches Merrick's condition empirically, diagnosing him as he describes his disfigurements. Neither of these configurations of Merrick incorporates any kind of self-identification, but instead, they each objectify him into a spectacle and a patient, respectively. After Merrick has settled into the hospital, Gomm and the Bishop engage in an argument over which force is responsible for the injustice of deformity against Merrick. The Bishop contests that "God does know, sir, and Darwin does not" (20). While Merrick is described by the Bishop and briefly by Treves as having faith in religion, that faith seems to be in a bit of crisis, since he cannot conceive of a God that would make him suffer so, just to ease his pain after death. Similarly, he does not agree that Mrs. Kendal's naked body is somehow unholy or sinful—instead, he sees it as beautiful and speaks of her in much the same way he speaks of St. Philip's Cathedral. Thus, his engagement with religion takes place at a nearly aesthetic level and not as an iteration of absolute morality or

predetermination, as the Bishop suggests. Pomerance even suggests that religion and science have become blurred in their struggles to determine human bodies when Merrick calls out "Jesus" and the Policeman, unable to understand his speech, assumes he is saying "Treves" (14). If Jesus—the ultimate representation of Western religion—has become conflated with Treves—who for the purpose of this play, represents science—then all binary distinctions within the play must be called into question.

The primary example of disability's instability within the play is the casting of an able-bodied actor, which has already been discussed at length. The language of the text lends to this suggestion as well, however, and particularly in scene XVIII, wherein Merrick describes Treves to an audience of pinheads, in precisely the same way that Treves introduced him to the audience of doctors. The scene subverts Treves' objectification of Merrick so thoroughly that Merrick is able to write just as much dysfunction into Treves' normalcy as Treves was able to highlight in Merrick's condition. This bizarre, alternate universe, wherein "freaks" can pity someone who is overwhelmingly average, serves as a lens through which the audience can conceive of the arbitrariness of definitions of normativity and the consequential arbitrariness of definitions of abnormality, like those that Merrick embodies.

From the start of the play, Pomerance makes it clear that Merrick's disability is a performance. This is not to say that the disability is not authentic, but merely that disability as an identity is something that one *does*, not something that one *is*. The audience is first introduced to Merrick in the context of a freak show. In this regard, Merrick is first and foremost a spectacle on display—here, disability's performativity is driven to its most literal iteration. But many disabled individuals perform disability on a daily basis. As a disabled person, I can attest to this performativity when I go to the grocery store and other shoppers watch me fill my basket or

stretch to reach an item on the top shelf. Similarly, Merrick performs his disability during everyday tasks. At lunch, for instance, he must perform his disability when Sandwich drops the tray upon seeing his ugliness. Essentially, whenever another character reacts to Merrick's deformities, he is required to perform the disability. Merrick seems to be aware of this performativity, as made clear in the following conversations with Mrs. Kendal:

> MERRICK: You must display yourself for your living then. Like I did.
>
> MRS. KENDAL: That is not myself, Mr. Merrick. That is an illusion. This is myself.
>
> MERRICK: This is myself too (32).
>
> …
>
> MERRICK: I have never seen a naked woman.
>
> MRS. KENDAL: Surely in all the fairs you worked.
>
> MERRICK: I mean a real woman.
>
> MRS. KENDAL: Is one more real than another?
>
> MERRICK: I mean one like the ones in the theater. The opera.
>
> MRS. KENDAL: Surely you can't mean they are more real (47).

If Merrick shows understanding of the performativity of disability, both he and Mrs. Kendal recognize that it complicates the notion of a "real" self, as opposed to an illusive self. Merrick himself invokes Platonic idealism, though he does not give it such a label. In his discussion of his cathedral model, he remarks that when he saw the real cathedral in person, it seemed like an imitation of some heavenly iteration—thus he calls his model an "imitation of an imitation" (38). Mrs. Kendal, however, moves the notion of imitation into the realm of theater and purposefully artistic performance.

Mrs. Kendal's presence in the play is not accidental—Treves brings her to Merrick specifically because she is an actress and he assumes that she will be able to suppress any feelings of disgust that she may have toward him through the use of her acting skills (29). But Mrs. Kendal does not seem to need any acting skills in order to maintain pleasant and genuine conversation with Merrick. The suggestion, ultimately, is that she is able to relate to Merrick because of her familiarity with performance. More notable, however, is their shared experience with fame. The issue of fame or celebrity is difficult to discuss critically because it is unquantifiable and, ultimately, phenomenological. The etymology of the word "celebrity" involves the same Latinate root that forms "celebrate," suggesting that a celebrity is a person whose presence is worth celebrating on a public scale.[40] Historically, celebrity has denoted anyone from a political ruler, to a well-known criminal, implying that celebrity is not necessarily dependent upon the social role or position of the famous person.[41] Mrs. Kendal suggests that she is famous for being able to disguise her true feelings. Merrick is famous, first for being an aberrant freak, and later for suppressing that freakishness in favor of a "normal" disguise. The play, then, is rife with discussions of fame and celebrity, bringing the casting of celebrities like Bradley Cooper and David Bowie full circle. Do producers assume that celebrities will draw in audiences that possess a perverse desire to see a body that belongs to someone so extraordinary, by cultural standards, forced into a grotesque role? This may very well be one motivation behind casting celebrities, but celebrity, much like disability, is a performed, assumed role. Celebrity departs drastically from artistic acting, and is thus a different kind of performance than a public audience expects to see enacted on a daily basis. When a celebrity appears in public without the

[40] This etymology is taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
[41] For a chronicle of celebrity, see Fred Inglis' *A Short History of Celebrity*.

accouterments of their celebrity persona, the public reacts with disdain. Similarly, when a disabled person fails to perform their disability in an inspiring or predictable way, the narrative is shattered and the public (audience) must reevaluate their understanding of the identity.

Returning one last time to Soloski's review, the most surprising component of the article reveals itself at the very end, when Soloski makes her final statement:

> As a meditation on disability it's a lot more sophisticated than what's on offer just up the road in *Side Show*, but under Scott Ellis's brisk, stylish and slightly hollow direction, the ideas never seem emotionally connected to the experience of the characters. The dramatic events – a crisis of confidence and conscience for Treves, a scandal involving an uncorseted Mrs. Kendal – seem obvious contrivance on the part of the playwright rather than incidents demanded by character and circumstance. And yet what does that matter? Well before opening, the show had set box-office records. So step right up, ladies and gentlemen, and see something that will astonish and amaze you: a bona fide Hollywood star in nothing but his skivvies. Really, why bother with a play at all?

It is difficult to determine whether Soloski blames Pomerance, Ellis, or both for what she judges as the failure of the production, but at the very least, she suggests that Cooper's star-power and sexual appeal (note the mention of skivvies) are more remarkable and more worth a playgoer's time than the play itself is. On the contrary, the crisis of conscience that Treves experiences and Mrs. Kendal's self-display are not "contrivances" without organic attachment to the development of the characters, but examples of the play's worth. "Why bother with a play at all?" Because a play offers audiences an opportunity to face their own assumptions about the experiences of bodies that are somehow other-ed from theirs. In the case of *The Elephant Man*, the other-ing

involves ability, function, and abjection. By requiring a person onstage to become hyper-aware of their body and then contort, impede, and deform it, *The Elephant Man* makes a valiant attempt to help an audience empathize with a lived experience with which they would otherwise remain unfamiliar.

Toward the end of her essay "How Shape Structures Story," Garland-Thomson tells the story of the annual Society for Disability Studies conference and the ensuing dance held at the end of the gathering. In particular, she tells of a quadriplegic scholar who dances with his tongue, as his tongue is the only part of himself that he can move. The text becomes poetic, likening the man to famous dancers and comparing his actions with various dance moves, erotic and graceful alike. His innovation motivates many of the other scholars with disabilities to join and discover for themselves the delight of such an unconventional but thoroughly enjoyable activity. Odd as it may seem to anyone whose idea of dancing involves full-body movement, this is the type of inimitable story that disability as a narrative can offer. Garland-Thomson finishes both her story and her essay with the justification for this type of tale.

> Narratives do cultural work. They frame our understandings of raw, unorganized experience, giving it coherent meaning and making it accessible to us through story. By turning the experience of the dance into a narrative, I can extend the celebration of the community enacted by the dance. This story is a way then to provide access to some elements of my community to both disabled and nondisabled audiences alike.[42]

Within the plots of *A Cool Million* and *The Elephant Man*, the protagonists navigate a world in which their respective narratives are determined for them by others and spectacularized so as to

[42] Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, "Shape Structures Story," 122

be made politically and commercially useful. Their stories—made consumable by the attachment of affects like pity, inspiration, and abject fascination—are at times a fiction within a fiction. But both the novel and the play endeavor to make their audience hyper-aware of that fact, and in doing so, hold the act of narrativizing someone else' life accountable for the harm it does.

If the first and second chapters of this project are interested in the ways that modernism rethinks the sexualization and reproductive potential of bodies, the narratives included in this third chapter bolster the claim that the commodification of the body as required by capitalism was transformed and rethought during modernism as well. The disabled body, as evidenced in these stories, has not been present merely in these reimaginings—rather, it is the perfect site to see that commodification in action. It can be difficult to recognize the tremendous power of capitalism's ability to commodify the body—the capitalist elite can argue, to some extent, that the labor and time demanded of the working class is necessary to the basic survival of a society rather than a manipulative process by which ruling capitalists can accrue wealth. But the disabled body amplifies the artificiality of such a commodification, and modernism recognizes that potential. Capitalism is not organic or universal—the disabled body that manages to survive (and in conditions alternative to capitalism, thrive) is proof of that.

Chapter 4

Disabling Form, Disabled Aesthetic

This chapter looks at three different avant-garde movements in an attempt to triangulate the ways in which disability is not merely tolerated, but is aesthetically desirable to the modernist project of making things new. Futurism, cubism, and Dada each offer us a different engagement with disability and deformity, such that they force a re-evaluation of the entire concept of normativity. Futurism's investment in an aesthetic that champions technology and machinery seems compatible with the disabled community's imaginings of an accessible future made possible by wheelchairs, prosthetics, and bionics. But how can we reconcile that socially progressive notion with Futurism's violently ableist and intolerant manifesto? Cubism, on the other hand, relishes in the subjectivity of reality and the truth in each individual's interaction with any piece of art.[43] When read through the lens of disability, cubism is an aesthetic that praises the mutability of experience and refuses the assumption that there is any objective basis for determining what is "real" or "normal." It is all—pardon the cliché—in the eye of the beholder. Dada takes one step further into the futility of meaning-making by dismissing it altogether. Art is play, the world is absurd, and any system of rationale is merely a forced way of explaining something already understood. In his Dada manifesto, Tristan Tzara writes:

> Some people think they can explain rationally, by thought, what they think. But that is extremely relative…There is no ultimate Truth. The dialectic is an amusing mechanism which guides us / in a banal kind of way / to the opinions we had in

[43] There is nothing real outside ourselves; there is nothing real except the coincidence of a sensation and an individual mental direction. Far be it from us to throw any doubts upon the existence of the objects which strike our senses; but, rationally speaking, we can only have certitude with regard to the images which they produce in the mind (Du "Cubisme" 45-46)

> the first place. Does anyone think that, by a minute refinement of logic, he had demonstrated the truth and established the correctness of these opinions? (9).

Dada, then, frees us from the bounds of logic and sense so that we might find and come to value relative truths. Tzara's distaste for any sort of system makes Dada an experiment that is always somewhat contradicted by the very act of trying to understand it. The end of this chapter, with its attempted reading of the Dada play *The Gas Heart*, finds in neurodivergence an analogous mode of finding value in unfamiliar notions of sense and meaning made by thinking.

Futurism:

Taken at face value, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism* places absolutely no value on disabled bodies; in fact, it is revolted by them. It is meant to be generally aggressive, since violence is futurism's method, but it is especially nightmarish to consider if you do not possess a strong body. It is rife with the seeds of fascist ideology—which seeks to eradicate disabled bodies—as illustrated by its ninth tenet: "We want to glorify war - the only cure for the world - militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for woman." Moreover, one of its concluding statements calls out "invalids" specifically as a class of people for which futurism has no space: "Indeed daily visits to museums, libraries and academies (those cemeteries of wasted effort, calvaries of crucified dreams, registers of false starts!) is for artists what prolonged supervision by the parents is for intelligent young men, drunk with their own talent and ambition. For the dying, for invalids and for prisoners it may be all right. It is, perhaps, some sort of balm for their wounds, the admirable past, at a moment when the future is denied them. But we will have none of it, we, the young, strong and living Futurists!" In the end, it is both an impetus for Italian fascism and an

ineffective, horrifically misogynistic thought experiment, doomed by its own tenets to be unsustainable.

While it can be worthwhile to recognize the artistic contributions of a movement like Futurism, it is also an act of violence against the self to genuinely engage with it as a disabled woman. Why should I lend it any credence, beyond acknowledgement of its existence, when it blatantly denies me space in its idealized future and glorifies explicitly destructive methods of participating in the future? This presents a larger question: at what point does a text overwhelm its aesthetic virtues with its moral and political shortcomings? Futurism, when broken down into separate components, certainly has merits. Its investment in speed, for instance, feels fresh and provocative, as does its adoration of mechanical, seemingly unartful objects like automobiles and machine guns.



Figure 2: Umberto Boccioni's *Dynamism of a Cyclist*

We see this preoccupation here, in Umberto Boccioni's *Dynamism of a Cyclist*, painted four years after the publication of the *Futurist Manifesto*, whose fourth tenet reads: "We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed." That speed is achieved on canvas by alternating curved and straight lines overlain on top of otherwise abstract shapes and swaths of color. Thus, the viewer doesn't see the outline of a cyclist so much as the flash of movement as the cyclist passes by them.

Technological advances and machinery are, generally speaking, helpful to disabled people. Without the mechanical configuration that is my power-wheelchair, the world would be far less accessible to me. I would be largely immobile and prohibited from any sense of independence. There is something subversive about prioritizing mechanical movement in configurations of aesthetics, and so one component of Futurism sides with the goals of disabled

aesthetics. A movement that admires the aesthetics of the hinges of a prosthetic elbow or the bellowing sounds of an iron lung would be revolutionary. But given its disdain for immobility and weakness, that does not seem to be the type of technological advancement that Futurism values.

I invest time and energy analyzing an artistic movement that would be reviled by me, despite the affective anger it sparks in me, because its dismissal of women and invalids is so bitter that it's indicative of a crucial reactionary force. Futurism—which is founded on aggressive misogyny (among other flavors of bigotry)—and its perversion, in the form of fascism, are born of and rely on fear. The field of affect theory might define fear as a kind of "ugly feeling"—a feeling that affects us negatively and that we try to avoid, extinguish, or hide from others in some way. Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection is useful here, too, as it endeavors to explain the horror we experience when the boundary between the Self and the Other begins to blur. When an able-bodied person sees a disabled body, they see the Other, but also recognize the Self because the able-bodied person is not automatically aware of their able-bodiedness as an identity marker. They must usually be informed or otherwise come to realize that their able-bodiedness is not the default state that they presumed. Thus, in a disabled body, they see an abled body gone wrong. And since they possess an abled body, they are prone to becoming disabled. The porousness of the category of disability has the potential to incite abject fear and disgust, so it only follows that a movement like Futurism—so aggressively interested in vitality—would aggressively fear what it regards as its opposite.

Futurism exists—amidst otherwise generative and restorative modernist treatments of disability—as an instance of ideological resistance to the value of disabled bodies. If we are to appreciate the ways in which modernism recuperates disability, we must acknowledge when it

fails disability as well. This is a crucial push back against what might otherwise be a flat, overly romanticized reading of disability in the modernist moment thus far. Factions of disgust and disregard for disabled bodies remain in the historical moment and fester into tenets of fascism and oppression. For all its potential to imagine a kind of inclusive progress, futurism is instead an example of the fact that wherever the disabled body is rejected, other identities will be oppressed as well. Like eugenics, futurism may begin with seemingly well-intentioned tenets—that we must embrace the machinic future—can bely a far more complicated and ultimately destructive ideology. To fight such ideologies, we must perpetuate those movements and aesthetics that find merit in pluralism, abnormality, and the value of the subjective experience. Fortunately, other avant-garde movements of modernism do just that.

Cubism: Stein's *Tender Buttons*

Despite similar preoccupations with movement, abstraction, and geometric expression, Cubism and Futurism differ both in terms of visual aesthetic and ideological goal. In contrast to Futurism, which sought to invoke motion on the canvas, Cubism aimed to capture that motion in a static representation. And where Futurism calls for violence and aggression and thus finds meaning in action, Cubism locates meaning in *re*action—specifically the viewer's perception of a picture, in which both the picture and the viewer are participants in meaning-making. One way to conceive of a work of art is to think of it as a spectacle—a momentary disruption of the organic nature of things by the insertion of a purposefully crafted thing that we are invited to sense in some way. This notion is, of course, related to the much broader concept of the "gaze" as defined by all manner of philosophers and critics, but in matters of disability, "gaze" is far too subtle. Seeing disability, and thus writing disability onto the Other, is often accompanied by staring. Compare the following passage from Du "Cubisme

> To establish pictorial space, we must have recourse to tactile and motor sensations, indeed to all our faculties. It is our whole personality, contracting or dilating, that transforms the plane of the picture. Since in reaction this plane reflects the viewer's personality back upon his understanding, pictorial space may be defined as a sensible passage between two subjective spaces (29).

—with this passage from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's "Staring at the Other":

> The stare is a highly charged interpersonal encounter that we snap up in a variety of contexts to put a sharp point on what we mean, think, or want. Staring is a way of strongly reacting to another; it bespeaks involvement (para. 1).

While a painting or sculpture may not qualify as a participant in a "highly charged interpersonal encounter," these excerpts from vastly different texts both contend that meaning and recognition happen in the moment of reaction.

Another element of Cubism that also exists in the construct of disability is the breaking down of false dichotomies and misapplied associations.

> We do not mechanically connect the sensation of white with the idea of light, any more than we connect the sensation of black with the idea of darkness. We admit that a black jewel, even if of a dead black, may be more luminous than the white or pink satin of its case. Loving light, we refuse to measure it, and we avoid the geometrical ideas of the focus and the ray, which imply the repetition-contrary to the principle of variety which guides us-of bright planes and sombre intervals in a given direction. Loving colour, we refuse to limit it, and subdued or dazzling, fresh or muddy, we accept all the possibilities contained between the two extreme points of the spectrum, between the cold and the warm tone (39).

Cubism, then, asks the artist and the viewer to really look, to really see, and to shed preconceived notions in an attempt to denaturalize the experience of perception. Moreover, the language of a spectrum is familiar to even the most novice scholar of Disability Studies, as is the imperative to recognize the value of all experiences spanning that spectrum. But it is the "principle of variety" that stands out most as a proto-echo of DS attempts to advocate the pluralistic nature of disability.

Interpretations of cubism often focus on concepts like simultaneity and diagrammatic representation.[44] The movement is more invested in comprehension than cohesion—that is to say, cubist art often expresses many things at once without trying to shape those layers of meaning into something cohesive and unified. This makes sense, given the historical context of increasing travel speeds, the standardization of international time, and an exponentially broader awareness of the world's interconnectivity—all of which leads to modernism's preoccupation with time's rapid, persistent passage and the omnipresence of movement. Everything moves all the time, and depending on the subgenre of modernism, that reality is either invigorating, exhausting, or both at the same time. This is perhaps most effectively exemplified in the realm of visual arts, where cubists explored ways of representing time and motion in static media like canvas and sculpture.

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[44] In *The Moment of Cubism*, John Berger posits that "The metaphorical model of Cubism is the diagram: The diagram being a visible symbolic representation of invisible processes, forces, structures. A diagram need not eschew certain aspects of appearance but these too will be treated as signs not as imitations or recreations."

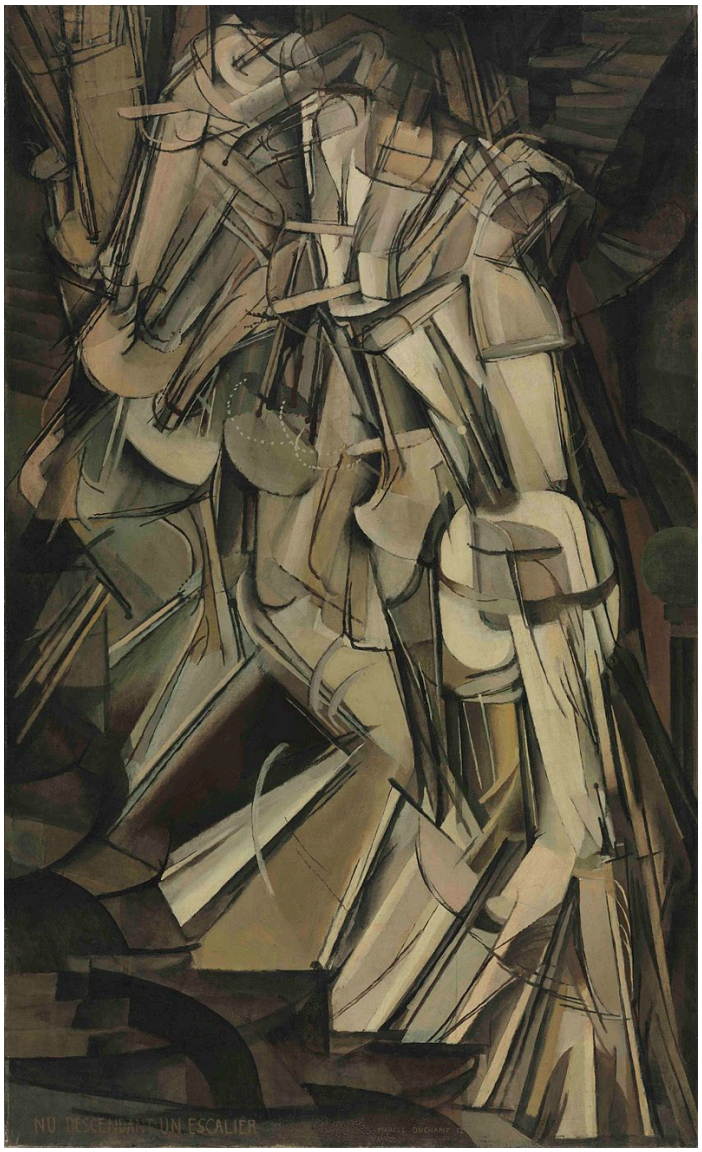


Figure 3: Michel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*

Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" captures authentic movement, despite its abstraction, because it layers moments of kinetic motion on top of themselves, like the frames of an animated scene compressed into a singular moment. Though completed, it looks sketched and in-progress, only adding to its mobility. In its willingness to portray a seemingly normal, natural movement in such an abstract, unrealistic way, the piece reaches beyond realism to represent what is unrepresentable in its medium. A camera that records and plays back a moving picture of a nude figure descending a staircase is mimetic with the least amount of incorporated interpretation. It represents reality plainly and in a familiar way. It is accessible and therefore easily consumed, usually without much consideration paid to its method of illustration. But a painting of the same movement necessitates interpretation and defamiliarization by virtue of the medium's limitations. It must layer repeated images of the body in order to express movement, but in doing so, it invokes an over-awareness of fragmentation and disfiguration.

The painting's subject matter is neither the nude figure nor the stairs themselves, but the act of descending the stairs. The body is faceless, unmarked in every possible way, and at a practical level, is really on the invocation of a human body. The stairs, similarly, are suggested rather than explicitly distinguishable as stairs. But the movement is undeniable. It's also a relatively commonplace activity—easily recognizable and identifiable. But for many disabled bodies, it is an impossible task. I think of stairs every day. Every first visit to a place—be it a public restaurant or a private home—requires me to consider stairs. Are stairs the only way to access the space? Are the stairs expansive, or are they small enough for me to traverse with a portable wheelchair ramp? Do the stairs lead to a space that I absolutely need to be in, or can I make use a different space within the restaurant? Stairs are familiar to me, but simultaneously inconceivable. I did not always use a wheelchair. I showed no signs of any physical impairments

until I was six-years-old. The first thing I suddenly struggled to do was walk up the flight of stairs into my family's apartment. My young mother, for all her care and concern, assumed that I was having behavioral problems—that I simply didn't want to walk up the stairs myself and instead wanted to be carried. I *did* want to be carried, of course, because trying to walk up the stairs physically pained and exhausted me. But without the understanding or language to explain that something was "wrong," the miscommunication continued for weeks. The staircase was so ubiquitous, so certainly familiar and basic, that we could not recognize them as an obstacle.

The value of cubist defamiliarization, then, is tremendous. Garland-Thomson uses the scenario of a woman in a wheelchair encountering stairs as a means of explaining how the disabled body cannot merely be theorized—it exists in, is defined by, and is then ostracized by a physical, material world. "People with disabilities become misfits not just in terms of social attitudes—as in unfit for service or parenthood—but also in material ways. Their outcast status is literal when the shape and function of their bodies comes in conflict with the shape and stuff of the built world".[45] This material "stuff of the built world" is oftentimes the subject of defamiliarization for the visual cubist artists, but is perhaps even more central to the poetry of Gertrude Stein.

Though cubism is most remembered for its work in the visual arts, associated with the names of Picasso, Duchamp, and Metzinger, the movement was multimodal and its tenets reached into poetry as well—perhaps most notably, the poetry of Gertrude Stein. Her collection *Tender Buttons* remains one of the most avant-garde engagements with language and approaches to poetry that literature has ever offered. But in addition to its ingenuity, the collection is

[45] Rosemarie Garland Thomson, (2011), Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept. *Hypatia*, 26. 594.

seemingly inaccessible and uniquely difficult as it aims to completely break down the expectations of language and grammar to reach something more authentic. This is a wonderfully challenging text to those who are invested in everything from modern art to semiotics, but as nearly all of my Late American Literature students would attest, trying to engage with it is difficult, uncomfortable, and ultimately frustrating. And it's frustration—as an affective response to the unfamiliar and irreconcilable—that this project is most interested in. What makes Stein's poetry to frustrating is relatively obvious—what's more interesting is how frustration can be a generative force and why the strategies we employ in getting resistant college freshmen to read Stein are can be useful in tackling the much higher stakes frustration of inaccessibility.

Given the goal of Stein's poetry, any attempt at meaning-making is just that—an attempt, never an argument that can be confirmed or denied. But each section of *Tender Buttons* has to start with something. We have to read the text in some way, and we cannot remove our schema for reading, so we have to start at a start—why not the first poem of each section? "A Carafe that is a Blind Glass," perhaps the most canonized of Stein's poems for its pithiness and provocative imagery, leads the collection's "OBJECTS" section.

> A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.

It makes irregular use of grammar and lacks both rhyme and meter—but it is undoubtedly poetic. Rather than invoking language to provoke an image, "A Carafe" does the inverse. It plays with language, to be sure, but the goal of the poem is not so much to describe or represent an object as it is to tease out some authentic meaning with which we have surrounded the carafe. The poem sets up a tension between motifs of transparency and opacity in concrete terms—glass, spectacle,

and the carafe from the title all being clear while the "hurt color" that's "spreading" reminds the reader of red wine spilt across a tablecloth. Much can be said about the opaque contents being held within the clear vessel. For all their clarity, these glass objects distort that with which they come into contact. The carafe and the glass both serve to force a shape upon the colored contents within. And one interpretation of "spectacle" can be as a synonym for "eyeglasses"—an object which further distorts already distorted vision in an attempt to correct it.

This tension between transparency and opacity is no doubt a commentary on the clarity of Stein's collection as a whole. Like a mission statement, the brief poem filled with definition by negation suggests—and only ever *suggests* but never dictates—that meaning in the poetry to follow will not decreed in any direct fashion but can instead be found in the difference between any in the associations the reader might make.

At first glance, the poem may not seem related to Disability Studies in any direct way. But it calls into question the universality and definitiveness of our attempts at meaning-making. Prior to the poetry of Stein, 19th century semioticians had already argued that individual words and phonemes do not contain within them any intrinsic meaning, but are given meaning through association with other words and phonemes. Stein makes an example of that claim in the very form of her poetry by playing with the reader's language expectations and presenting them instead with a series of associations. Wine is never explicitly invoked—I think of wine when I think of a "hurt color" in association with a carafe and a glass. In this way, meaning can only be made of her words when they are contrasted against our expectations. The claim that meaning only exists within a contrasting context is groundbreaking enough in regard to language. But when we apply that same claim to disability, we end up with the previously discussed social model and the aesthetics of difficulty, discomfort, and defamiliarization.

In his book *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism & Other Difficult Positions,* Davis reiterates that most basic idea of disability studies that there is a difference between impairment and disability. Impairment is the concrete abnormality—the lack of a limb, the mutated chromosome, etc. Disability, on the other hand, is society's reaction to or failure to accommodate the impairment that then results in inaccessibility, prejudice, oppression, etc.[46] Thus, while the impairment is incorporated in the person's physical body (including the physical and chemical elements of the brain that cause and/or create mental and/or emotional impairments), a disability is socially constructed and projected upon the individual with the impairment. Disability is not intrinsic to anyone's personhood.

Along this line of thought, Davis also cites the problematic definition of disability per the ADA, which states that:

> An individual with a disability is defined…as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.[47]

The rhetorical purpose of this definition is legal as it was initially created to determine who should be deemed in need of government-provided services and interventions. It has since been appropriated to socially define disability, which is partially to blame for the difficulty in understanding what it means to have a disability. I would argue that the legal definition was never meant to be applied in a social or personal sense. Having first-hand experience, I have never thought to define myself—or even the disabled aspect of myself—as the ADA would.

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[46] Lennard J. Davis, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 12.
[47] *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990*. http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/pubs/ada.txt

Misuse of the definition places emphasis on limitation and inability—perfectly understandable when trying to substantiate the need for assistance, but otherwise obstructive when developing an identity.

Furthermore, while this definition highlights the constructed nature of disability—particularly the "perceived by others" phrase—it is far too vague to serve the types of purposes that definitions often do. This ambiguity has developed into a confused attempt at political correctness, epitomized by phrases like "differently abled." Such haziness is a double-edged sword. On a positive note, it stresses the porousness of disability as a category of identity and the seemingly arbitrary borders that separate it from the realm of "normalcy." If the ADA requires that a disability "limits a major life activity," we must then decide what constitutes said "major life activity." Trying to do so becomes highly subjective and anyone who attempts soon realizes how artificial, subjective, and unstable the borders are. For all the good that a legal definition of disability certainly does, it inherently misses the crux of disability, which is its existence on a spectrum and its tremendously varied manifestations.

In her second section of *Tender Buttons*—"FOOD"—Stein begins with a poem entitled "Roast Beef." Approximately halfway through, she writes what could be interpreted as the entire work's philosophy: "Claiming nothing, not claiming anything, not a claim in everything, collecting claiming, all this makes a harmony, it even makes a succession." Her poetry does not claim, it merely suggests. But if it were to claim, it collects those claims up—dozens upon dozens of highly subjective and purely associative "claims" regarding objects, food, and rooms—and "makes a harmony." One loosely unified invocation that is always recognized as a compilation of individual parts. Our attempts to define disability function much the same way:

no one totalizing claim or denotation can successfully point to every manifestation of disability, and yet collected up, the individual experiences of disability are recognizable as an identity.

Dada and *The Gas Heart*

Excerpt from Dada Manifesto 1918:

"I write this manifesto to show that people can perform contrary actions together while taking one fresh gulp of air; I am against action; for continuous contradiction, for affirmation too, I am neither for nor against and I do not explain because I hate common sense."

Despite its tenets, the Dada manifesto is actually quite readable and comprehensible, even if its playfulness sometimes teases the reader out into tangents. To appreciate the movement's aesthetic in action, I turn to Tzara's bizarre play—if it can even be called such—*The Gas Heart*. A punchy—if not bewildering—expression of Dada, the play offers us speaking, independently moving body parts as characters. In the performance which is framed by a narrator—who quite literally describes the action and movements of the characters—Eye, Mouth, Nose, Ear, Neck, and Eyebrow interact with one another through nonsensical dialogue and non-sequiturs. The narrator—and presumably Tzara himself—encourages the audience "to treat the author—who is not a genius—with no respect and to note the levity of the script which brings no technical innovation to the theater" (133). With such explicit instructions, it's tempting to regard the play just as Tzara wished—playful, nonsensical, and pointless. But the play exists nonetheless; a person was compelled to express the concept of discrete parts of a face functioning as separate characters on a stage. And while we might not be able to make sense of it, that does not preclude it from having meaning and value. Sense—like language and identity and so many other concepts explored in this project—is determined by means of a consensus. In order to communicate and cooperate, people decide what words and behaviors seem most appropriate to a

given situation—thus we make sense. By this line of reason, sense is flexible, if not completely subjective, and dependent upon participation in a coherent and agreed upon system of logic and reason. To complicate sense, I offer neurodiversity.

First popularized in the late 1990s by sociologist Judy Singer, neurodiversity refers to the variability of the human brain in its modes of processing, learning, creating, and otherwise functioning in a non-pathological sense.[48] Closely related to the overarching social model of disability, neurodiversity began as a way to talk about autism and individuals on the autism spectrum without shaming those individuals or disparaging their modes of thinking. Since then, it has been expanded to include all manner of intellectual, developmental, and psychiatric disorders, and has become more specific in its language. The neurodiversity paradigm, which holds that these conditions are not disorders to be treated or cured, but simply different ways of being that have strengths as well as weaknesses that require support and accommodation. Critics of this model—like many critics of the general social model of disability—cite practical concerns because of some of these conditions are genuinely distressing to the people who live with them and their lives could be made easier and more enjoyable with some level of treatment. Moreover, critics worry that neurodiversity has the potential to encourage rhetoric which dismisses the very Othered experience of people with these disorders by saying that everyone simply thinks differently. The same phenomenon is seen with the proliferation of terms like "differently-abled" in place of "disabled." Certainly everyone has different levels of ability and thinks differently, but my inability to stand up is a vastly more disabling experience than someone else's inability to run a mile, because my inability inhibits my participation in so-called

[48] See Singer's chapter "'Why can't you be normal for once in your life?' From a 'problem with no name' to the emergence of a new category of difference" in Mairian Corker and Sally French's essay collection *Disability Discourse*.

"normal" society. However, for all its critiques, the concept of neurodiversity succeeds in highlighting the potential value and advantage of simply "thinking differently, " and from it, we have developed a term that compromises—neurodivergent. An identity term for people with disorders that fall under the umbrella of neurodiversity, that at once acknowledges their experienced marginalization while emphasizing that theirs is a different way of thinking—not a wrong one. Reading *The Gas Heart* through the lens of neurodivergence, then, is an exercise in finding genuine value in nonsense by recognizing it as divergent instead of dismissible.

To be clear, I do not wish to romanticize neurodivergence without acknowledging the difficulties that neurodivergent persons face. Just because some pockets of scholars, artists, and activists recognize and celebrate the value of neurodivergent thinkers and creators does not mean that society at large has realized the same. Though neurodivergent disabilities are often far less visible than physical disabilities, and are thus a less obvious concern, much of the world poses accessibility issues for non-normative modes of thought. The institution of academia with which this project engages is, itself, often inaccessible to many people with psychiatric, intellectual, and developmental disabilities. But there is undeniable value in unconventional ways of thinking—both modernism and Disability Studies know this to be true. Though logic and reason are so foundational to even the smallest components of our day-to-day lives, we often take them to be universal absolutes. But like so many other socially constructed concepts, they only exist so far as we have determined them. They are crucial to maintaining certain modes of thinking and social structures that have value—the scientific method, the institution of law, and philosophy more generally all depend on an agreed upon understanding of logic and reason.

Under that agreed upon understanding, *The Gas Heart* makes very little narrative sense, so that its obtuseness paired with the general ephemerality of avant-garde performance keep it

relatively absent from histories of modern drama. When analyzed at all, it is often extracted from its historical moment and studied for its aesthetic value rather than situated within its cultural context. But as Stanton Garner points out in "*The Gas Heart*: Disfigurement and the Dada Body," given its preoccupation with fragmentation and defacement, the play cannot be separated from the historical context of post-World War I Europe, "where disfigurement achieved a corporeal severity unimaginable in the context of earlier European warfare" (501). In his essay, Garner draws attention to the rise of facial reconstructive surgery in response to the devastation of the war and posits that Tzara's play implicitly engages with that cultural reality. Thus, the fragmentation and isolation of body parts is not merely a playful act—it is a dramatic reenactment of de-figurement. This claim can be substantiated by the character list and opening narration alone; the conceit of fragmentation is immediately established. But the apparent nonsense of the play's dialogue enacts the frantic confusion and dissolution of the self that no doubt follow a traumatic facial disfigurement. Here we see the first advantage of nonsense—or rather, "non-sense," as in the previously established concept of neurodivergence. Not a lack of sense as much as a kind of sense so divergent from what we would normally call sense that we cannot recognize it as sense.

The central focus of the play's content is impossible to determine with any certainty, but there is some recurring mention of love throughout it which is particularly emphasized at the end when each body part character delivers the same line, one at a time—"This will end in a lovely marriage"—and then in unison, say "l'amour." But love is never really represented in the play via any show of interconnectedness, nor is it conceived of as anything but a concept, made more meaningful by its associations—in this play's case, beauty and marriage—than by any actions taken in the performance. Of course, love serves as the impetus for and central theme of an

unfathomable amount of art throughout history, but the modernist moment remains notoriously unconvinced of its importance, or perhaps even of its existence. And yet Tzara chooses it as his something-like-a-subject, and in doing so, does not dismiss its existence altogether, but presents his audience with an opportunity to deconstruct. Do the body characters love each other? Or does one particular body part function as the receptor and distributor of love? Is the object of love outside of the body or does it only exist within the body, just as fragmented as the facial features presented to us? Love is typically thought of as an extremely interpersonal matter, connecting the Self to an Other is some fulfilling way. But a nonsensical approach to love like *The Gas Heart* investigates how love operates when the self is fragmented and thinking is neurodivergent. That investigation is at times playful, and at times tremendously frustrating. Thus, like so much of modern literature, *The Gas Heart* challenges its audience to not merely push past the frustration of it, but to be aware of that frustration and sit with it.

Disability, be it of the mind, the body, or both at once, is difficult. The lived experience of it is difficult, and the attempt to theorize it is difficult. So, too, are the avant-garde modernisms that sought to agitate the systems of a world changing so rapidly that its crises and traumas overlapped. In a sense, both disability and modernism are concepts that push against a construct of normativity that has the potential to create as much harm as it does good. They are frustrating. They defy reductive definitions. They revel in fragmentation and disfigurement. No artistic movement has captured, in its very form, the nature of disability to the extent that avant-garde modernism has managed to do so. It values an aesthetic, but never one based on mass appeal or normative expectations. It seeks to shock, awe, and at times terrify its audience out of complacency. What is a manifesto if not a call to action? A form of activism so inspired by itself

that it briefly punches back against the encroaching cynicism of modernity in the hopes that some sort of authentic art might be created. Perhaps a disability manifesto is in order.

Conclusion

The process of both starting and completing this project has been rife with disability related challenges. As much as I might want to separate the inconvenient and burdensome parts of my disabled experience from my scholarly work, it seems impossible. In the course of this project, I was hospitalized, I was verbally assaulted by a caretaker, my wheelchair broke, the only accessible vehicle I have broke down, and I became the primary caretaker of a newly disabled acquaintance. And every time one of these incidents occurred, I would turn to this project in complete bewilderment—what good would a generative reading of a hundred-year old text do in the wake of my disability's aggravations? In retrospect, it was an unfair question to ask of the project. And it was also terribly short-sighted.

The final disability-related disruption to this project would be the Covid-19 pandemic. It continues on as I write this conclusion, having incited an economic collapse and now somewhat overshadowed by race riots and mounting fascism. But its devastation is still in progress and I remain under self-imposed quarantine as a high-risk individual whose disability turns a potentially fatal virus into an almost certainly fatal virus. My historical moment has more in common with modernism's historical moment than proponents of social progress would like to admit. And in this similar moment, so many of us on the margins have turned to what the modernists turned to in an attempt to make any sort of sense of a world in crisis—creation. In the face of destruction and chaos, much can be said for the necessary restorative work made possible by an investment in the humanities. I watch friends and relatives, tired of and frustrated by quarantine measures make grand claims about survival of the fittest while they place more value on the vitality of the economy—an abstract conceptualization of wealth—than on the lives of the people who make that economy function. I hear not mere echoes, but deafening call backs to

turn-of-the-century eugenics in protests where the privileged healthy demand access to non-essential services at the expense of the disenfranchised who have no money for healthcare—all while holding a sign that reads “SACRIFICE THE WEAK.”



Figure 4: Protestor with sign in Nashville, Tennessee April 20, 2020

In seeking refuge from such a personal affront and in trying to find some way to do ameliorative work, I turn to the task of literary scholarship and the written word. So often in moments of great change and unrest, we are tempted to believe our circumstances are unprecedented; and sometimes, in some ways, this is true. But many of our present crises are bits of unfinished business from the same crises modernism responded to—concerns that were tucked out of sight or blatantly disregarded and left to fester until they could no longer be ignored. Few people have been unaffected by some part of the current pandemic. But the disabled community, in particular, has been a nexus of innovation by necessity for adjusting to so-called "unprecedented times." From the disabled community's perspective, the pandemic response—particularly in the United States—has been nerve-wracking but not novel because we have been struggling with these suddenly pervasive problems all our lives. We've been asking for educational accommodations, the opportunity to work from home, more paid sick leave, and assistance with bills for years. We've been homebound for years. We've been deprived of basic necessities for years. But for all of the progress that disability activists have made, a pervasive narrative remains which says the disabled body is a drain on social resources. And yet as soon as society at large was faced with these same struggles, the society began accommodating. This has been at once aggravating and comforting—the powers at be have the resources to accommodate me, even if they rarely offer them before I must demand. For all of the struggles the pandemic has amplified, it has also cleared pathways for improved accessibility by removing false narratives.

And so I circle back to the phenomenon of Disability Studies being filled with scholars who have a personal stake, even if their academic careers ended immediately, in the experience of disability. Though disabled people existed long before the age of modernity and will continue to exist and hopefully be represented even more authentically in the artistic movements of the

future, that modern moment—the crisis of it, both sudden and lingering—remains transformative to art and to the human condition. When I encounter modernism, however it be defined, I am startled by the familiar sensation of coming undone. I suspect anyone who has experienced traumatic injury or illness recognizes the inescapable moment of realization that your body has been irrevocably changed. I recall being eleven-years-old, laid out on a surgical table on my stomach, as a team of doctors endeavored to put my spine into something resembling a straight line. At the time, it was a dangerous but life-saving eleven-hour surgery, and toward its conclusion, I was pulled out of the anesthetic haze, numb to pain but aware of sensation, and asked to wiggle my toes; a test to ensure that my nerves had been rearranged properly. A back is not meant to be flayed open, and in my experience, the body still has not mastered how to communicate that sensation to the mind. Once you feel air on your spine, the border between the self and the outer, material world never quite recovers its rigidity. As a reader, a writer, and a scholar who lives in a disabled body, the desire to feel my human experience expressed has been best met by the collisions of modernism. I have quite literally been "etherized upon a table." Thus, in my own scholarship, I seek out the modernist predecessors of my marginalized, fragmented, and often contradictory experience of disability—be they character, author, narrative, or form. And in that search, I find a rich vein of strange and disqualified bodies and minds in various states of unrest and unmaking. In their determination to represent authentic experience, even if that meant writing and painting works that lack resolution and cohesion, the modernists and the legacy they left behind give de-formed and dis-abled bodies permission to remain messy, confused, and all the richer for it.

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Vita

Hannah Widdifield was born in rural West Virginia in 1991, where she spent most of her childhood. At age six, she began experiencing muscle weakness and after three years of diagnostic testing, was told she would live the rest of her life with an incurable disability. The new set of constraints led her to a deep love of reading and learning, thus igniting a lifelong pursuit of knowledge. After graduating from public high school, she enrolled at Coastal Carolina University in South Carolina, where she received her BA with Honors in English in 2013. She began her graduate work at the University of Tennessee and received her MA in Literature, Criticism, and Textual studies in 2015. She remained at the University of Tennessee to earn her PhD in in Literature, Criticsm, and Textual Studies with a focus on Modernism and Disability Studies in 2020. Her work is deeply invested in disability activism and its intersections with conversations of race, class, gender, and sexuality.