DANDELION
postgraduate arts journal & research network

VOLUME 4 NUMBER 1 SPRING 2013

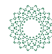
HARRIET COOPER is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English and Humanities at Birkbeck, University of London. Her research explores the figure of the disabled child in contemporary culture. Drawing on both her personal experience of growing up with a physical impairment, and on a wide range of cultural objects and texts, Harriet's work seeks to understand how the disabled child gets 'made' by culture, with a particular focus on the impact of gazes and discourses.

Email: harriet.aj.cooper@googlemail.com

Book review

Disability and Modern Fiction: Faulkner, Morrison, Coetzee and the Nobel Prize for Literature by Alice Hall

Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2012, 232pp., £50, ISBN 978-0-230-29209-3



Harriet Cooper

> 'Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind. Wise.'
>
> [...]
> One day the woman is visited by some young people who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness. They stand before her, and one of them says, 'Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead.'
>
> [...]
> Finally [the old woman] speaks and her voice is soft but stern. 'I don't know', she says. 'I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands.'
>
> From Toni Morrison's Nobel Lecture (1993)[1]

I was struck by two themes as I read Toni Morrison's Nobel Lecture and Alice Hall's discussion of it in *Disability and Modern Fiction: Faulkner, Morrison, Coetzee and the Nobel Prize for Literature*. Hall points out that the wisdom of the old woman in the story lies 'in her ability to recognize the limits of her own

knowledge'.[2] Meanwhile, the bird 'in [our] hands' is read by Morrison as a metaphor for language: we must attend to language 'as an act with consequences'.[3] These two notions—the recognition of the limits of one's knowledge and language as an act with consequences—resonate throughout *Disability and Modern Fiction,* and they also capture something of my own experience of reviewing the book. Later I shall refer to the book's treatment of these themes. However, first I want to reflect briefly on why these ideas have been meaningful to me during the review process, and on what they contributed to my thinking on the relationship between the practice of academic book reviewing and the notion of expertise.

I come to this book as a doctoral candidate working in the field of cultural disability studies. Whilst my background is in English literature, I would not regard myself as an expert on modern fiction. This has made me anxious. It is perhaps the practice of book-reviewing, with its convention of situating the reviewer as hierarchically 'above' the book—looking down on it, so to speak—which is the problem: I would prefer to regard myself as existing in a horizontal relation with *Disability and Modern Fiction*.

It seemed to me that an overt acknowledgement of my 'limit-position' might provide scope to reconceptualise such a position as a generative site rather than as a hindrance. Instead of seeing it as something which prevents me from speaking outright, might I not, in speaking of it, be better equipped to take full responsibility for my speech as an 'act with consequences'?[4] After all, if disability studies has taught us anything, it is that the experience of disability brings us into conscious (and sometimes painful) contact with our own limits as individuals—an experience which neoliberalism, in its celebration of autonomy and self-determination, would have us disavow and project (into disabled and vulnerable bodies).[5] As Hall notes, with reference to the work of disability theorist David Mitchell, '[i]f bodily variation and vulnerability constitute a point of similarity for *all* human beings then disability shifts from an 'integrable' perspective to become 'integral' to the theorization of the human' (14). In accepting that disability plays a role in structuring all experience—and, as theorists such as Lennard Davis have done, in shifting the spotlight onto the 'problem' of normalcy instead—might we not be liberated to do the thing we seem to find hardest of all as academics, that is, to celebrate the limits, the incompleteness, the partiality of our knowledge and expertise?[6]

So, whilst I seek to provide an overview of the book in this review, my critical engagement tends to focus on Hall's discussion of the work of J. M. Coetzee, and on the book's dialogue with key aspects of disability theory: these are my comfort zones. The book has taught me a great deal about the fiction and criticism of Faulkner and Morrison, whose work is less familiar to me.

Disability and Modern Fiction probes important questions about the ethics and aesthetics of choosing to represent disabled bodies, making an original and accomplished contribution to scholarship in this area. The opening of the book is immediately compelling: In choosing to reflect on the media's mixed (and predominantly reactionary) response to the unveiling of Marc Quinn's statue *Alison Lapper Pregnant* in Trafalgar Square, Hall demonstrates the abiding popular distaste for aesthetic representations of the disabled body. In the academy and popular culture alike, disability has 'remained, until recently, a critical blind spot', as Hall points out (3). This point is illustrated with a cogent reference to the failure of *The Daily Telegraph* to observe, in an article entitled 'Whatever would Nelson think?' that the statue of Nelson 'depicts a disabled, war-wounded soldier, blind in one eye and missing an arm' (3).

The first three chapters of the book treat the work of Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee as separate entities. In each case disability is interrogated from a slightly different angle, although Hall remains attentive to the connections between the three oeuvres. In the case of Faulkner, Hall is interested in the 'the problematic status of disability *as a fiction*' (22). How does the myth that Faulkner created about an impairment sustained during the war affect how we read his representations of disability? And what do his attempts to imagine a disabled other, particularly an individual with cognitive impairments, do to language and to the possibility of representation? The chapter on Morrison investigates 'questions of the beautiful and, in particular, the intersection between disability and beauty in [Morrison's] fiction and criticism' (49). Meanwhile, Hall's discussion of Coetzee's later writing is centred on themes of ageing and dependency. Coetzee's playful subversion of the conventions of both the novel format and the lecture format raise questions about the 'dependencies' of genre and of writing itself—such questions mirror and inflect literal concerns about frailty and care in the novels.

Although disability is viewed through a different lens in each author study, two major overarching concerns emerge in the book. The first overarching theme is the 'recurring representation of disabled bodies that *endure*, that refuse to be removed from view even at the end of their novels and essays' (17). Here Hall argues, very convincingly, that that the literary works explored problematise Snyder and Mitchell's argument that fictional narratives often seek to 'cur[e] or kill[..] off disabled characters' in an attempt to control their disruptive bodies.[7] With reference to a wide range of examples, Hall shows that the texts in question subvert the trend identified by Snyder and Mitchell.

The theme of the enduring disabled body is developed in the chapter on Coetzee through an extended discussion of the concept of prosthesis. In the case of Coetzee's character Paul in *Slow Man*, a rejection of literal prostheses—'an artificial leg and a recumbent, hand-powered bicycle'—is paralleled with a 'refusal to accept the neat, tidy narrative endings that are offered to him' (125). If prosthesis is—in Snyder and Mitchell's terms, which Hall paraphrases —a 'conservative and normalizing strategy', which 'closes down' both the different body and the unruly text (127). Coetzee's novels resist its imperatives.[8] Bodies remain disabled, texts refuse to be categorised by genre. The term prosthesis seems to perform itself in Hall's text, refusing to remain a stable category but continually adding to itself, bringing a new dimension to the discussion, so that as the chapter develops, the discussion is no longer simply about disabled bodies, nor even about texts, but about language itself. Hall notes that for both Snyder and Mitchell, and for David Wills, prosthesis is understood as 'a metaphor through which to explore the relation of language to reality' (128). For Wills, whom Hall quotes, '[t]he word always augments a prosthetic relation to an exterior material that it cannot possess or embody'.[9] The notion of prosthesis, seen this way, brings us face-to-face with the gap between the hard, concrete fact of the lived experience of disability, and language as a frustratingly 'disembodied' system of signs. Can the gap be bridged, and what are the ethics of such a project? This question brings me onto the second overarching theme in the book: that of the challenge of representing and empathising with a body which one does not inhabit oneself.

How do we broach the 'problem of sympathizing with or imagining a pain which is not [our] own' (2)? Noting that the 'empathetic challenge' of disability is a 'point of intersection' between the works of Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee, Hall offers a subtle and nuanced discussion of this issue in their work (17). However, a more extended debate on questions of position and

authenticity would have been illuminating, especially given that 'Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee are able-bodied novelists writing about disabled characters' (180). What difference does it make, ethically and politically, if an author's engagement with the disabled body is an imagined one? Since, in her analysis of Coetzee's later writing, Hall makes illuminating references to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, I felt that a return to Levinasian ethics in the conclusion would have helped to draw out the debate. Does the other's experience always remain to some extent inaccessible to us? Do our bodies mark out the 'limits of [our] own knowledge' (156)? Although I very much subscribe to Hall's view of embodiment as a 'spectrum', and to a position which sees the 'diverse, shifting nature of *all* human bodies', such a position is not incongruent with one which affirms the specificity of each individual embodied experience, and which acknowledges the relationship between embodiment and differential access to the social world (180). Politically speaking, there is an important difference between identifying as disabled and identifying as able-bodied. For me, this distinction and its political implications might have featured more prominently in Hall's discussion.

Hall argues that Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee share an interest in examining the role that literary texts play in enabling 'empathetic identification' with the other (180). It is observed that for Morrison, 'art and fiction provide uniquely enabling perspectives through which to think about difficult cultural and ethical questions' (180). Although Hall comments from a critical distance on this elevation of the literary mode, depicting it in the introduction as a stance adopted by 'certain critics', it is implied in the conclusion that the three authors regard literary texts as uniquely equipped to promote identification with the other (5). A more detailed interrogation of the implications of this notion would have been interesting to read. The notion that 'high' cultural forms such as literature evoke a more sophisticated aesthetic response than 'low' cultural forms has been critiqued by Marxist cultural theorists including, among others, Pierre Bourdieu. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Bourdieu argues that the aesthetic response is a culturally constructed experience, which cannot be aligned with 'love at first sight'.[10] For Bourdieu, 'the act of empathy [...] presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code'.[11] If we follow Bourdieu's logic, we must regard the literary text as a cultural production associated with a particular social class and with the aesthetic values of that class. Is the 'empathetic identification' which the literary mode permits available to me because I belong to the social class which produces texts in that mode, and because I have acquired the tools with which to respond appropriately to those texts (180)? Since the concerns of the book are aligned around a literary centre of gravity, this question is perhaps of more interest to readers who, like me, have a background in cultural studies.

The final chapter of the book explores the work of the three writers together in the context of their Nobel Prize lectures. Here, connections between the three oeuvres are skilfully drawn out. Is the notion of a 'literary lineage' linking the three authors relevant (17)? Interestingly, it is 'the authors themselves that invite connections between their works': Morrison and Coetzee have both engaged with Faulkner in their critical writing (15). Hall is clear that her approach is more about a 'dialogic relationship between authors' (17). This sense of a dialogue is conveyed strongly in this final chapter through an extended discussion of the authors' shared interest in metaphor. The act of thinking disability and metaphor together is a politically and ethically charged one, and Hall demonstrates that the three authors are alive to the complexity of

such a project. What is the relationship between 'metaphor and materiality' (174)? Do certain ethical problems arise for the author who allows metaphor to 'infect' the body? In Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, which Hall refers to in this section, metaphor is regarded as contaminating the truth of illness: 'My point is that illness is *not* a metaphor'.[12] This is a crucial point: the experience of impairment is not a metaphor and the figurative use of the language of impairment in other contexts can be experienced as undermining and even as obscene. Yet metaphor can also be enabling. Hall quotes Lakoff and Johnson, who observe that '[t]he essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another'.[13] Metaphor offers us a way to see things differently—the challenge is to use it responsibly and to remain aware of its potentially disabling implications. For Hall, the three writers in question are profoundly aware of their responsibilities. Borrowing Morrison's beautiful and incisive phrase, she states that 'in all three of these lectures, language is depicted as an act with consequences' (173).

Disability and Modern Fiction is an accomplished work of literary criticism, which undertakes close readings of a range of fictional and critical texts with meticulous attention to detail. In juxtaposing three oeuvres which are rarely read together, it highlights unexpected interconnections between the works of Faulkner, Morrison and Coetzee and draws out new critical insights. For me, what stood out about this book was its fascinating treatment of the notion of 'limit', a notion which, as discussed, has also characterised my own experience as a reviewer. On the one hand, this book has taken me beyond my limits—I learnt a great deal from it both about the authors in question and about key methodological differences between cultural and literary studies. On the other hand, my reading has brought me into conscious contact with the limit of my knowledge and the ways in which it impinges on my capacity as a reviewer. For *Disability and Modern Fiction*, the literal and figurative notion of limit provides a productive site for thinking dialectically about the relationship between the body and language. In what context can we go beyond a limit, and in what context must we allow limits to constrain and confine what we do, and what we imagine? On one level, language is hindered by its limitations: as a disembodied form, it is 'prosthetic' in its relationship to reality.[14] Yet metaphor potentially offers a means of overcoming limits, in allowing one thing to be thought 'in terms of another'.[15] However, the use of metaphor is beset with dangers, since language is an 'act with consequences'.[16] From an ethical perspective, then, limits must be set, and as Hall emphasises, the question of where to place the limit interests all three authors considered in the study. Can we, and should we, use language to explore what it might mean to inhabit the body of another, or does embodiment itself represent a concrete limit to identification?

Birkbeck College, University of London

Notes

[1] Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993, online at http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html [accessed November 2012].

[2] Alice Hall, *Disability and Modern Fiction: Faulkner, Morrison, Coetzee and the Nobel Prize for Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 156. All subsequent references are in the main text.

[3] Morrison, Nobel Lecture.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Many scholars have explored the experience of being disabled in these terms. See, among others, Tom Shakespeare, 'Cultural Representation of Disabled People: dustbins for disavowal?' in *Disability Studies: Past, Present and Future*, ed. by Len Barton and Mike Oliver (Leeds: The Disability Press, 1997) and the discussion between Judith Butler and Sunaura Taylor in Astra Taylor's film *Examined Life* (Zeitgeist Films, 2009).

[6] See Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 24.

[7] Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, 'Disability Haunting in American Poetics', Journal of Literary Disability [now Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies], 1:1 (2007), pp. 1-12 (p. 7), quoted in Hall, p. 178.

[8] Hall is referring to David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (eds.), *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

[9] David Wills, *Prosthesis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 138, quoted in Hall, p. 128

[10] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, transl. by Richard Nice (New York and London: Routledge, 1984), p. 3.

[11] Bourdieu, p. 3.

[12] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 3.

[13] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 5, quoted in Hall, p. 162.

[14] Wills, *Prosthesis* , p. 138, quoted in Hall, p 128.

[15] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, p. 5, quoted in Hall, p. 162.

[16] Morrison, Nobel Lecture.

Bibliography

Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, transl. by Richard Nice (New York and London: Routledge, 1984)

Davis, Lennard, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995)

Hall, Alice, *Disability and Modern Fiction: Faulkner, Morrison, Coetzee and the Nobel Prize for Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

Morrison, Toni, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993, online at http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html [accessed November 2012]

Shakespeare, Tom, 'Cultural Representation of Disabled People: dustbins for disavowal?' in *Disability Studies: Past, Present and Future*, ed. by Len Barton and Mike Oliver (Leeds: The Disability Press, 1997)

Snyder, Sharon L. and David T. Mitchell, 'Disability Haunting in American Poetics', Journal of Literary Disability [now Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies], 1:1 (2007), 1-12

Sontag, Susan, *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 1991)

Taylor, Astra (dir.), *Examined Life* (Zeitgeist Films, 2009)