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THE CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

DISABILITY POETRY: AN EXPLORATION IN THREE PARTS

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Disability Poetry: An Exploration in Three Parts

Preface

Poetry has a long-standing tradition of being a challenging form and of challenging forms. That is, while meaning in poetry is not always easily arrived at by the reader, there is a parallel tradition of poets who seek to problematize popular means of expression through their work. These means of expression – the common parlance, the vernacular – are, in many ways, viewed as “normal” uses of language. In this way, poetry has a tradition of (or at least a potential for) being an anti-normate form. The term “normate,” coined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, is defined as “the social figure through which one can represent themselves as definitive human beings” (Garland-Thomson 8). The term, adapted for the purposes of this study, is appropriate in discussing poetry as an embodiment of a society and the figures that people it. The poem may be seen then as a way to explore, in Garland-Thomson’s words, what defines us as human beings.

This question of defining personhood in relation to the normate is a central concept to Garland-Thomson’s field: disability studies. Disability studies is a developing academic discipline which explores the idea of disability as a social and cultural construct – this, as opposed to the strictly medical definition of disability. The field has allowed for a greater understanding of disabled – that is to say, embodied – experience in many aspects of modern life and especially in the fields of literature and art. The poet, and disability studies scholar Michael Davidson, for example, has called for the recognition of a poetics of disability as one which challenges the idea of the normal

body in poetry. In his writings, Davidson refers to representations of the physical human body in poetry, but also to the textual body of the poem.

The collection of essays that follows aims to explore the problem of disability and poetic form. While the three ensuing essays are self-contained studies with little explicit reference to one another – are, in a way, fragments – they do invite a dialogue that, I contend, achieve their purpose by way of the exploratory mode. Indeed fragmentation, as these essays show, is an alternative to, and in some cases a rebuke of, literary and bodily wholeness which have come to be viewed as normal.

The first essay takes as its starting point Michael Davidson's definition of disability poetics as that which "defamiliarizes not only language but the body normalized within language" ("Missing" 118). From here, the paper examines the use of aesthetic defamiliarization in the lyric tradition. While a particular emphasis is placed on 20th century American poetry, the paper takes an historical approach, ranging from metaphysical poetry to conceptual poetry, in order to trace the uses of defamiliarization across poetic disciplines. The essay then discusses the "fiction of the recessive body," in poetry which foregrounds physical and textual bodies in poetry and serves to reject theories of disembodiment.

The second essay explores Charles Baudelaire's *The Paris Spleen*, in which the poet likens his collection to a fragmented snake whose parts can exist, at once, independently and yet remain in dialogue with one another. "Remove a vertebrae," Baudelaire encourages us, "and the two parts of this tortuous fantasy rejoin painlessly."

To Baudelaire's contemporaries, his collection of prose poems was, as it remains today, a strange exhibition of disharmonious and fragmented parts.

Similarly, in the third essay, Wilfred Owen's war poetry is examined where we find the fragmented self of the shell-shocked soldier, appearing to the reader seemingly as multiple voices or split personalities. And while the medical understanding of these traits might suggest a diagnosis of schizophrenia, when read through the lens of disability studies, Owen's poems not only serve as a testament of the psychic injuries provoked by modern life, but as a challenge to the concept of *disinterestedness* – the notion that the pleasures and pains of art are separate from the pleasures and pains of the body.

While the poets examined in all three essays represent diverse cultural backgrounds and a broad range of poetic styles, it is my hope that bringing them into contact with one another will help to realign the poem as an expression of *embodied* experience – one which relies upon, and could not exist without, the human body in all its varied forms. And although the essays do not necessarily follow directly from one another, they are ordered with the intent of establishing a better understanding of what disability poetry is or could be. First, by outlining the role of defamiliarization in poetry and then by tracing back to the defamiliarizing techniques of poets who, while not typically identified as disabled, nonetheless remind us of the fluidity of disability and the fleeting nature of the able body.

Disability Poetics and Defamiliarization

In "Missing Larry: The Poetics of Disability in the Work of Larry Eigner," Michael Davidson defines a poetic of disability as that which "defamiliarizes not only language but the body normalized *within* language" ("Missing" 118). Davidson identifies the widely held perception of the "normal" body as symptomatic of overly familiar uses of language. Skepticism towards the use of platitudinous language has a long tradition in modern literature from Flaubert's Dictionary of Received Ideas (1911) to Martin Amis's War on Cliché (2001). And while Davidson's poetics of Disability is in this same tradition, it is also founded in a relatively new field of social discourse: Disability Studies.

According to Davidson, in the 1960's, a popular view of the normalized body emerged in the arts "through a set of imbricated metaphors-gesture, breath, orality, performance, "leaping" poetry, "action" painting, projective verse, deep image, happenings, [and] spontaneous bop prosody" (118). So the normalized body in art posed a limited and ableist view of embodied experience which persists to this day. As in any cliché, the inanity that is the "normal" body lacks nuance in its social and, indeed, in its literary representations. It is unsurprising, then, that Michael Davidson, a poet and Disability Studies scholar, would summon poetry to defamiliarize the problematic view of the normalized body in poetry.

This paper will focus on Davidson's challenge by discussing the history of the body in poetry and how defamiliarization can serve as a corrective to the resulting notions of a normalization. Specifically, the first section will discuss instances of embodiment (as well as so-called *dis*embodiment) in poetry. The second section will

discuss the historical uses of defamiliarization in poetry. And the third section will discuss how representations of the body in poetry can be defamiliarized with the intent of developing Davidson's notion of a Disability poetic. While the paper centers on a historical approach to defamiliarization in poetry, it benefits greatly from a more modern context provided by the field of Disability Studies and its scholars.

Disembodied Poetics

A preliminary search of Naropa University's past and current course catalogs yields little or no offerings on the subject of disembodied poetry. In fact, outside of Naropa's esoterically named Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, the term "disembodied" seems mainly absent from academic and literary discussions of poetry altogether. The term has apparently fallen out of favor, possibly for its mystical connotations, but the notion of disembodiment, for its various manifestations, in poetry has had a significant impact on modern poetics. Nowhere is this more evident than in the rise of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets in the late 1960's – an *avant garde* group of American poets who supported the primacy of method in poetry, especially where it served to emphasize a distinction between the speaker and the text. For L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, the poem was a construction of language in and of itself and the poet was the "natural" body behind the text, but distinct from it. In L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, then, the text and the speaker were separate and disjunctive entities, the result of which was a "disembodied text."

But L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, indeed one might suggest all poetics concerned with disembodiment, ultimately fail, if universality is their goal. This point is best demonstrated by the Disability Studies' view of the body in relation to art. Where disembodied poetics are concerned with removing or transcending the body through art, scholars such as Hillary Gravedyk contend that "all bodies are bodies that will not totally recede from consciousness, that human perception and embodiment rely in part on a constant awareness, on some level, of the lived body" (Gravedyk 11). In referring to what she calls "Chronic Poetics," Gravedyk further states that "the particularities of the chronically ill body, then, help to point out that the recessive body is a fictional structure" (11). So where the foundations of disembodied poetics are based on separating the body from the text, they rest upon the fictional structure of the recessive body. While Gravedyk does not necessarily diminish the accomplishments of "mind over body" type poetics, she is critical of the binarism this type of language propounds. The mind/body split is a longstanding poetic (and philosophical) concept whose debate has largely neglected "the import of the nondiscursive somatic dimension of experience" (Granger 119). That is, attempts (which are tautologous) to identify a "logical" connection between mind and body often result in a reductive and disjunctive view, as in the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. But the separation between mind and body, according to John Dewey, is largely a misperception, indeed a perversion, of the true "dissonance between organism and environment" (Granger 119).

Environment, a staple in the poetic tradition, is also a central concern in the field of Disability Studies. In discussing the work of Larry Eigner, a poet with Cerebral Palsy,

George Hart draws an important distinction between Eigner's so-called "environment poems" and traditionally ableist forms of "landscape poems." Regarding Eigner's poem "Environs," Hart states, "In emphasizing space over place, Eigner's [...] poetics realize a necessary corrective to the investment of the sacred and the sublime in *particular* (emphasis added) landscapes" (Hart 176). In the poem, the landscape is not static or particular but rather moves around its subject:

E n v i r o n s

Many shapes of wings
 on the sky and the table;
 and large men carefully at dusk
 lengthened by lights watering their lawns

turn, paterfamilias

and the sweet hay as I go
 from one foot to the other
 more so than I might
 mingled with barber's tonic
 from the morning's shops
 of papers and bright rag
 as if we could
 take time out for life
 and the afternoon's seas, like yards
 At some smell of smoke
 I found a spray behind me
 and the two on my right gone
 tending the grass, all night
 everyone beautifully
 (by themselves the same thing

time for the surroundings

against the strip of hill
 ending low, a space
 on this side, hut for clouds

(Eigner 117)

So while Eigner was less likely to have experienced a mountain top, as did, say, Shelley, he is no less capable of experiencing the sublimity that being environed provides – that which “can (and does) happen anywhere” (Hart 176). In shifting the mind/body paradox of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets to Dewey’s “dissonance between organism and environment,” we move toward a less exclusive, and more embodied poetic – one that rejects ableist representations of experience and that embraces the diverse and universal experience of the environed human body.

Embodiment

We are inextricably embodied, biological creatures, Dewey reminds us, and in an essay on Dewey, David Granger explicates further that “our chief mode of interacting with the world is through the body [...] and it is in virtue of this interaction that the habitual body becomes the primary medium of meaning” (Granger 108). The body as a meaning-making entity is a radical departure from the doctrine of disembodied poetry, where it is mainly viewed as a limiting object to be overcome. In Dewey, though, the body is a poetic construction in and of itself – dynamic and expansive. Such a view of the body is not absent from poetry in a historical context – the brief stylishness of disembodied poetry notwithstanding – and, in fact, can be traced broadly from the classical to modernist traditions.

Embodiment in poetry can be observed as far back as Martial. Known for his frank descriptions of bodies and their (especially sexual) behavior, Donald Lavigne describes Martial's as an embodied poetic that challenges our expectations "in and

through bodily acts" (Lavigne 289). Lavigne continues: "The concept of embodied poetics [...] necessities that the subject and objects of a given poem be made explicit" (Lavigne 289). In Martial, then, poetic control over the body complicates the idea of literary representation – that is, when Martial's subjects are so embodied, they become part of (Roman) society which has its own preexisting and normalized views of the body. And when Martial violates these views – as he does in his *Epigrams* by depicting an act of sodomy – the reader is confronted with confounding viewpoints and is forced to consider an alternative that is unfamiliar or abnormal. But challenging his contemporary Romans view of the normalized body becomes problematic when a simply alternate normalization is presented. As Lavigne notes, a familiar attitude in Martial is "that bodies have their proper sexual use" (Lavigne 300).

In an essay, Robert McRuer likens the idea of "proper sexual use" (using Adrienne Rich's similar term "compulsory heterosexuality") to the similarly problematic idea of compulsory able-bodiedness. Just as Rich challenged notions of heterosexual normalcy, McRuer confronts the idea that the normal body is an able body. Compulsory able-bodiedness, according to McRuer, "functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice" (McRuer 303). The presence of compulsory able-bodiedness can, arguably, be seen as an institution in poetry. Whether in the mountaineering of Shelley, the danced movement of Baudelaire, or the upright stance of Charles Olson, the able body has largely, not to say intentionally, dominated the poetic form. In Olson's "Maximus" poems, we encounter a normalized view of the body though the poem's explicitly upright and physical hero –

that which Charles Bernstein critically (and cheekily) refers to as "the phallacy of the heroic stance" (Bernstein 332). In "Maximus" we are placed not only in a very distinct landscape, but are so while poised in a deliberately "wide" and "balanced" stance:

Dogtown to the right the ocean
 to the left
 opens out the light the river flowing
 at my feet
 Gloucester to my back
 the light hangs
 from the wheel of heaven
 the great Ocean
 in balance
 the air is as wide as the light
 (Olson 296)

The presumption that we all are, or at least should be, able bodied is challenged in contemporary Disability Studies' by scholars, like McRuer, who writes "everyone is virtually disabled in the sense that able-bodied norms are intrinsically impossible to embody and in that able-bodiedness is always temporary for those who live long enough" (McRuer 374). Through the frame of Disability Studies, then, we may develop a corrective to traditional ableist views of embodiment in poetry where, the upright stance of Olson or the rambling feet of Shelley, are the ostensible primary conditions for meaningful experience. And where the physical abilities of the poet are not central, as in disembodied forms, so too is a corrective needed where thinking around or past the body is favored over thinking through it. In traditional forms of both embodied and

disembodied poetry, we see a perpetuation of the normalized body – a body which, in recalling Davidson, is in need of defamiliarization.

A Brief History of Defamiliarization in Poetry

In “Art as Technique” (1965), Viktor Shklovsky stated that the purpose of art is “to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (Shklovsky 2). Prolonged perception, according to Shklovsky, was to be achieved through defamiliarization, that is, through challenging that which is easily or quickly perceived. While the formal theory of defamiliarization is a relatively modern concept, we can readily observe its manifestations across centuries of poetic (and artistic) movements. A brief history of defamiliarization will serve to demonstrate this point.

Samuel Johnson described the metaphysical conceit as that where “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together.” The seeming obscurity and difficulty of the conceit became a hallmark of metaphysical poetry and would later be responsible for influencing the writing of modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot. Eliot felt that the extended metaphors used by the metaphysical poets fused feeling and thought in a way that engendered, what he called, a poetry of sensibility. The poet of sensibility, according to Eliot, should combine unfamiliar experiences and thoughts dialectically to form a unique and separate whole – or, in the Poundian sense, to make new and

unfamiliar the old and common. In this respect, one of the most prevalent approaches of the modernist experiment was to defamiliarize language by introducing to it nonliterary components which would revitalize people's sense of lived experience. Here, Davidson is poignant on the relationship between modernist defamiliarization and disability: "If one of the tasks of modernist writing was to defamiliarize the materiality of the linguistic medium and make strange the everyday, representations of disability lay bare the device of the normative body and make strange attempts to contain it" ("Introduction" 11).

It may be said, then, that defamiliarization was central to Eliot's poetry of sensibility. Further, Eliot was likely to have been influenced by the Metaphysical poets whose work, in Shklovsky's words, "make objects unfamiliar," and "make forms difficult" (Shklovsky 2). Indeed, one imagines that the term "defamiliarization," had it existed then, would have been used critically by Samuel Johnson to describe the "yoking by violence" of seemingly disparate ideas in Metaphysical poetry. This may have been particularly true of Johnson's assessment of John Donne who demonstrated his ability to form metaphors characterized by their unfamiliarity and difficulty. Johnson's opinion of Donne, however, was founded in a general disapproval of poetic difficulty (or what he referred to as "wit") where it served to replace sentiment. Here though, Johnson finds himself at odds with Eliot's modern analysis of the Metaphysicals. Eliot felt that poetry was valued not in "the intensity of the emotions, [...] but [in] the intensity of the artistic practice" (Eliot 76). Poetry, Eliot said, "is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape

from emotion; it is not an expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (Eliot 67).

To escape from one’s personality implies an escape from the habitual or familiar self, but, importantly, not necessarily an escape from the body. Eliot viewed the creative process, and specifically the poem, as a vehicle of escape by way of defamiliarization, but also recognized the primacy of the body as in his “First Debate between the Body and Soul” (1910), where Eliot is, though frustratingly, not able to detach himself from the “emphatic mud” of his bodily senses. The senses, then, according to Eliot, are inextricable from the body but are also the source of familiarity – a familiarity that Eliot sought to defamiliarize, or in his words, depersonalize. Eliot’s theory of depersonalization stated that poetry should be an articulation of “emotion that has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet” (6). So then, the familiar self (“The history of the poet”), should have less prominence in the poem (42) – the depersonalized poem is, in effect, a defamiliarized poem.

Whether or not Eliot would look favorably on the defamiliarizing methods being used by modern Conceptual poets such as Kenneth Goldsmith is unclear. Conversely though, one does imagine that Johnson’s opinion of Goldsmith would be markedly unfavorable. Distaste for Goldsmith’s methods, which include unabashed plagiarism and appropriation, have engendered hostility toward conceptualism as a whole and, indeed, toward the poet himself. Not unlike John Donne, Goldsmith has been charged with superficiality. One of Goldsmith’s most notorious works, *Traffic* (2007), is a direct transcription of twenty-four hours of traffic reports in New York City – published in

book-form as a poetic work, *Traffic*, by many accounts, is pure method. And while not a few critics might cringe at the comparison of Donne and Goldsmith, both poets have the distinct effect (by distinctly different methods) of defamiliarizing language. Where Donne's unusual metaphoric juxtapositions confront and confuse readers, Goldsmith's appropriation of seemingly banal texts does something similar. *Traffic* takes the quotidian and, in the words of Viktor Shklovsky, "forces us to look again, to see, almost for the first time" (Shklovsky 28).

Returning to Shklovsky, we are told that "art restores experience to us by distorting and slowing down perception, by making the world strange again" (18). So then, does John Donne slow our perception of the traditional love metaphor in by invoking a flea ("It sucked me first, and now sucks thee / And in this flea our two bloods mingled be")? Does Kenneth Goldsmith make the world strange by presenting a traffic report to us as a poem? Both poets, whether intentionally or not, are clearly implementing defamiliarizing techniques that challenged the common language and ideas of their respective readerships.

Defamiliarization: The Body and Representation

Rosmarie Garland Thompson coined the term "normate" as a reference to "the corporeal incarnation of culture's collective, unmarked, normative characteristics" (Thompson 1997). In step with Disability Studies' critique of normalcy, the concept of the normate body, as far as it is compulsorily able-bodied, demonstrates how familiar notions of the body, and indeed of disability, are socially constructed. The social

construction of the normal body, through its literary representations, have, echoing Davidson, become too familiar insofar as they perpetuate compulsory able-bodiedness. Defamiliarization, then, is a method which allows for new (unfamiliar) modes of embodied experience. Recalling the work of Larry Eigner, we see the body itself as a site of perception – a body that refuses to fade from consciousness. In quoting Gravendyk:

This quality manifests itself as a reading experience that insists upon simultaneous perception – the perceiver cannot stop perceiving the body's insistent pains – but at the same time, the reader does not fail to examine other objects that are presented to his/her consciousness. This is not to argue that a "body that perpetually refuses to recede" is always an ill body or a disabled body. In fact, it is my contention that all bodies are bodies that will not totally recede from consciousness, that human perception and embodiment rely in part on a constant awareness, on some level, of the lived body (11).

The lived body, as a site of perception in Eigner's work, relies on the concept that the body and the mind are inherently connected. While the presence Eigner's own body in his poems is both significant and explicit, there is very little mention of his disability per se. As Eigner is the poet most frequently identified with modern disability poetics, it is important to note this omission insofar as it is indicative of who and how disability poetry is written. It is equally important, however, to avoid what Gravendyk calls the "lurking critical notion that a poetics of disability is always registering the effects of an "unstated physical condition,"" (Gravendyk 7). Whether represented in the poem or not, this oversimplified view of the body reinforces normalization through the

assumption that the disabled body is a deviation from the “normal” body – or further, that disability is simply something to be cured. Here is where we see the transformative potential of Eigner’s poetic of disability: “no poetry can raise anyone’s hopes for a medical cure, say, or any sort of miracle. Just ‘refresh the eyes / against the abyss’” (Eigner 155).

In his writings on Allen Ginsberg, Tony Triglio wrote, “the poem asserts that the act of being “about” something is contrary to being in itself: One is either “about” something, or one is a flesh-and-blood human with 10 fingers & two eyes” (200). Representation – or what a poem is “about” – was, for Triglio, of central concern to Ginsberg’s later poetics. Where representation may be viewed as a singular, isolated experience, as in Ginsberg’s earlier “consciousness without a body” (Howl, Part II), his later mantric poems, according to Triglio, are focused on allowing poet and reader to experience representation simultaneously. That is, Ginsberg’s poems “catalyze in the audience the same affects or emotions experienced by the poet during the composition of the poem” (Triglio 194). Ginsberg’s experience of representation, then, is less concerned with what the poem is “about” and more concerned with what it “is” – or, more specifically, what it is “doing.” Here, we see Ginsberg’s concern with language for its performative qualities and further for its ability to “undo its own referential power” (Triglio 188). Triglio cites Ginsberg in drawing a distinction between representative and performative language as “*doing* something rather than just *saying* something [I]n saying what I do, I actually perform that action” (235 via Triglio 188).

Ginsberg's performativity, though, is not simply a means of transcending representative language, but serves as a *physical* embodiment of a *physical* action "in a frankly *physical* (emphasis added) universe" (Ginsberg via Triglio 148). As such, we see the potential for performative poetics as a means by which to engage (through language) with the expressive bodies of both the poet and the reader – that is, with an embodied poetic.

The mantric poems of Ginsberg, focused as they were on breaths and speech, suggest a primacy of the physical and, indeed, biological body. Explicit, but no less generalized, representations of the body, from Martial to Olson, are prevalent throughout the history of poetry and extend into the modern era. And like Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath explores the possibilities of the "biological body," particularly for its implicit relationship to culture. In Jessica Luck's study of Plath's so-called "bee poems," she finds that Plath is attempting to challenge the binary body/culture distinction.

The box is locked, it is dangerous. I have to live with it over-
night

And I can't keep away from it.

There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there.

There is only a little grid, no exit.

(ll. 6-10)

Luck identifies Plath's "box" as the unconscious mind which her body must "live with," and Luck suggests that, here, Plath's form of embodiment presents itself in a way that "does not dissipate into script"(Luck 189). Therefore Plath's rejection of the receding body in relation to the text implies a recognition that textually based limitations can never fully constrain the body of the author. Although less so in Plath's poetry as compared to Ginsberg, we see the biological body as an active, indeed, performative participant in the poem.

Tired and clichéd metaphors have a long tradition of being antithetical to poetic values – indeed, of being characteristic of bad poetry. Where stock phrases assume stock roles, the poetic result is a generalized and, often, disingenuous quality which suggests a normalcy of experience for the reader. In this way, Lennard Davis's skepticism of sweeping theories which attempt to encapsulate a multiplicity of lived experiences within Disability Studies finds a counterpart. Davis is critical of prevailing identity theory for its tendency to oversimplify and suggests that such the foundations of identity theory should be "destabilized" ("The End" 270). Davis shares, no doubt, Michael Davidson's desire to defamiliarize a normalized view of the body within language, particularly for the body's implications within identity theory. Where destabilizing identity theory is an ends, then, defamiliarizing our language around it is a means.

Returning to Dewey:

The habitual body, the primary medium of meaning, is of necessity implicated in all forms of expressive behavior, including textual activity. Its cultivation conditions, and is in turn conditioned by, our ability to negotiate successfully and act intelligently within the diverse cultural spaces that surround us [...] To fail to recognize this is to presume the body little more than the intractable vessel of the mind. To fail to act on this recognition is to place very real and possibly oppressive limits on personal renewal (Granger 121).

An embodied and defamiliarized poetic attributes value to a wide range of ways of responding to the world and achieving personal renewal from it. It triggers new forms of embodied cognition for the reader through a kind of defamiliarizing prosthesis (Luck 461). Through a discussion on embodiment and the role of defamiliarization in poetry, this essay has echoed Davidson's call for a poetic that can report on both the quotidian and the metaphysical experience, that insists on self-definition and the ability to present a personal perspective that is shaped by authorial agency. The theory of defamiliarization presented here is, of course, only a theory and a limitation of this paper is its lack of discussion on what disability poetics might or do look like in the contemporary landscape.

Trauma and Lyricism in Baudelaire's *The Paris Spleen*

It was in a letter to the book publisher and editor, Pierre-Jules Hetzel, that Charles Baudelaire first mentioned the title of his collection of prose poems: *The Paris Spleen*. The spleen, in Baudelaire's time, was known as a bile-producing organ whose functions were thought to bring on melancholy. It also signified various mental and physical conditions, most of which implied some sort of chronic or lingering imbalance. French dictionaries predating Baudelaire identified the word "spleen" as one borrowed from the English to indicate a state of consumption (tuberculosis), a mental condition involving a general nausea toward life, and hypochondria involving ennui and antipathy (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* 1835). By the late 19th century, the word "spleen" tended to the latter definition; a mental malady of degeneration (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* 1879). Variations aside, one consistent attribute of spleen's definition through 18th and 19th centuries was a connotation with a repulsion towards one's own existence and, by implication, towards the human condition. Ultimately, though, the prevailing understanding of the word in Baudelaire's lifetime made a general shift from a somewhat imprecise state of mental volatility to a more clinical term denoting a medicalized psychological disorder. So then, the title for Baudelaire's collection of prose poems is suggestive that they (the poems) are a symptom of the disease that was modern Paris.

Baudelaire defined modernity as that which is "transitory, fugitive, contingent." It may be said that for Baudelaire, being a modern artist was to be aware of the artist's own mortality and further that being modern signified a deeper understanding of what

it meant to be embodied. After all, the artist's body is all of these things: transitory – inhabited only temporarily; fugitive – never to be fully controlled; and contingent – dependent upon the environmental factors that sustain it. So at a time of rapid modernization in urban existence and in medicine, Baudelaire was striving for a similar revolution in art.

In the dedication of *The Paris Spleen*, addressed to his publisher Arsène Houssaye, Baudelaire cites the origin for his work:

J'ai une petite confession à vous faire. C'est en feuilletant, pour la vingtième fois au moins, le fameux Gaspard de la Nuit, d'Aloysius Bertrand [...], que l'idée m'est venue de tenter quelque chose d'analogue, et d'appliquer à la description de la vie moderne, ou plutôt d'une vie moderne et plus abstraite, le procédé qu'il avait appliqué à la peinture de la vie ancienne, si étrangement pittoresque.

[I have a little confession to make. It was while glancing, for at least the twentieth time, through the famous Gaspard de la Nuit, by Aloysius Bertrand [...], that the idea came to me to attempt an analogous plan, and to apply to the description of modern life, or rather of a life modern and more abstract, the process which he applied in the depicting of ancient life, so strangely picturesque.]

Aloysius Bertrand is widely accepted as the first to employ the prose poetic form in *Gaspard de la Nuit* (1908) and Baudelaire was just one of the many famous readers of Bertrand. Baudelaire, though, was unequivocally the greatest champion of the form insofar as he launched the genre and gave it a name. The hybridization of the prose

poem was also mirrored in the Baudelaire's naming of *The Paris Spleen* – whose alternate title was *The Little Poems in Prose*. Prose poetry was, as it remains, a problematic form which underscores the challenges of genre. And this was especially true in the mid-19th century when a surge in genre classification led to an increasingly discriminating literary discourse with regard to form. In poetry, lineation, rhythm, and even content were used to specify “proper” verse forms. Ultimately, as Zawacki notes, this taxonomic debate on appropriate form led to “severe and even artificial distinctions [being] enforced between poetry and prose” (Zawacki 1). Baudelaire reveals his desire to hybridize these forms in his letter to Houssaye:

Mon cher ami, je vous envoie un petit ouvrage dont on ne pourrait pas dire, sans injustice, qu'il n'a ni queue ni tête, puisque tout, au contraire, y est à la fois tête et queue, alternativement et réciproquement. Considérez, je vous prie, quelles admirables commodités cette combinaison nous offre à tous, à vous, à moi et au lecteur. Nous pouvons couper où nous voulons, moi ma rêverie, vous le manuscrit, le lecteur sa lecture ; car je ne suspends pas la volonté rétive de celui-ci au fil interminable d'une intrigue superflue.

[My dear friend, I send you this little work of which it cannot be said, without injustice, that it has neither head nor tail, since, on the contrary, everything in it is both tail and head, alternatively and reciprocally. Consider, I beg you, what admirable convenience that offers us all, you, me, and the reader. We can cut wherever we want, I my reverie,

you the manuscript, the reader his reading; for I do not bind the latter's recalcitrant will to the endless thread of a superfluous plot.] (Baudelaire 25)

The idea of “cutting” the poem is suggestive of Baudelaire’s ambitions for the prose poem. Where traditional verse relies on its lineation – indeed would be ruined upon its removal – the prose poem is able to accommodate the cut. Baudelaire’s vision for the prose poem is that which can endure fragmentation:

Enlevez une vertèbre, et les deux morceaux de cette tortueuse fantaisie se rejoindront sans peine. Hachez-la en nombreux fragments, et vous verrez que chacun peut exister à part. Dans l'espérance que quelques-uns de ces tronçons seront assez vivants pour vous plaire et vous amuser, j'ose vous dédier le serpent tout entier.

[Remove a vertebra, and the two parts of this tortuous fantasy rejoin painlessly. Chop it into particles, and you will see that each part can exist by itself. In the hope that some of these segments will be lively enough to please and to amuse you, I venture to dedicate to you the entire serpent.] (Baudelaire 25)

For Baudelaire, then, the prose poem is a resilient body; one which may even be regenerative. But, for all of its adaptive qualities, it is not a form that transcends all limitations. Where many formal constraints are seemingly flaunted in prose poetry, the singular physical constraint – that of the margin – is made most relevant. For lineation does, in fact, exist in the prose poem but only insofar as it is dictated by reaching the margin of the type-set. Baudelaire’s prose poems are “so malleable,” says Zawacki, that “the principle of vertebra-removal applies even at the level of the individual moneme:

words can be broken if the space on the page does not allow them to be completed in their entirety” (Zawacki 292). Wholeness and harmony are not attributes in the prose poem; rather we see in this hybrid, a celebration of what Arthur Rimbaud would call a “sacred disorder” – a disorder that is indeed “transitory, fugitive, contingent.”

The Paris Spleen advances a poetics of discord with its striking contrasts and its devotion to the experience of shock. As Walter Benjamin has noted, this tendency towards “shock” in Baudelaire’s poetry is representative of his portrayal of modern existence as that which is experienced by fragments and fractures. More specifically, Benjamin identified the shock experience as a form of intellectual trauma and further stated that Baudelaire’s reaction to this trauma was inscribed in his poetry – the “conspicuous absence of traditional forms of beauty, the cognitive dissonance, and the fragmented form” (qtd. in Ramanzani 203).

The tendency of traditional French verse to normalize both the form and content of poetry was, to Baudelaire, inadequate in seizing on what it meant to be truly modern. And if the constraints of French poetry in the mid-19th century can be seen as a microcosm of that era’s propensity to normalize, then I am proposing, that Baudelaire’s prose poems provide a critique of cultural normativity itself.

As Lennard Davis notes in his introduction to the *Disability Studies Reader*, the idea of normalcy came into use rather late in the history of the European languages. The word “normal” was likely first used in English around 1840 to denote the perpendicular shape of a carpenter’s square and by 1860 the word had developed into

its more modern meaning as we know it today (Davis 2). This development likely had much to do with the increasing popularity of statistics and, particularly, with the work of French statistician Adolphe Quetelet. Quetelet applied statistical methods, previously used by astronomers, to chart the range and distribution of traits among human beings. By surveying features such as weight and height, Quetelet developed what he referred to as *l'homme moyen* – the average man. His contention was that *l'homme moyen* embodied – in fact, empirically represented – the average of all human attributes. Quetelet's "average man" had two components: *l'homme moyen physique* and *l'homme moyen morale*. So the average man was not purely a physical manifestation of observable physical traits, but also contained a moral implication. In *l'homme moyen*, then, the physically and morally average man is to be found in the normal distribution of his physical and character traits. While there are no explicit references to Quetelet in Baudelaire's work, it is almost certain he was aware of Quetelet as a contemporary and public intellectual.

I have chosen *The Paris Spleen* not only for its representations of non-normative bodies but also because the genre of prose poetry itself is a non-normative poetic form. I hope to demonstrate how disability pervades the very material of which these texts are composed. While the discussion that follows will examine figural portrayals of disability in the text, it also places an emphasis on the disability aesthetics of both the prose poetic form in general and the fragmentary nature of *The Paris Spleen* in specific.

In his book on classical composers, Joseph Strauss focuses on what he calls their “late style.” Interested mostly in work completed in the later years of a composer’s life, Strauss suggests that these works are characterized by the composer’s tendency to “narrat[e] their fractured minds and bodies” (Strauss 82). That is, the works in Strauss’ analysis tend to be sporadic, fissured, paratactic, torn, and discontinuous – they are, Strauss claims, an account of the composer’s experience of living with a disability. These descriptors of late style generally engage in attributing mental or bodily states to musical compositions and are largely suggestive of impaired minds and bodies. So where Strauss associates musical “late style” with “disability style,” this paper attempts to apply the same methodology to lyric poetry: specifically, to the posthumous collection of prose poems by Charles Baudelaire, *The Paris Spleen*. As yet, there has been little discussion of the relationship between disability and lyricism. This may be due to the notion that the lyric is both loved and hated for its nonfigurative qualities and by the somewhat unfriendly terminology which underpins it – both of these characteristics tending to insulate lyricism from greater social movements.

Alternatively, much has been written on bodily trauma in Baudelaire’s late style poetry, especially the fragmented, and often female, body in *The Paris Spleen*, which has been interpreted convincingly as Baudelaire’s exploration of the realm of femininity (DalMolin). Where the female form in *The Paris Spleen* is fragmented – literally cut in many instances – we find the poet engaged in a sort of violent investigation of the unknown other. But while the other in Baudelaire is undoubtedly female, so too is it disabled. Bodily fragmentation implies an impairment, a trauma. The discourses of

trauma and disability have clear intersections and Siebers highlights the benefits of expanding the dialogue between the two:

“[...] a merger between disability studies and trauma studies will allow us to conceive of wounds as disability representations on a par with those typically considered in disability studies, [...] and [...] it will allow us to enlarge the concept of mental disability to include the psychic impairments, psychological injuries, and mental traumas provoked by modern life.” (Siebers 102)

I hold that Baudelaire’s late style poetry offers a poignant example of how disability can be expanded in the way Siebers describes. Siebers has suggested that art based in traumatic experience can not only serve as a mark of culture, but can influence what “culture” means. “Art,” Siebers says, “represents trauma as the primary indicator of modern life, whether defining it as human alienation, the love of violence, or the susceptibility of human beings to disease and disability” (103). Much of what Siebers describes as “modern” would be familiar to Baudelaire who bore witness to the arrival of the modern city. In 19th century Paris the unique conjunction of the city’s rhythm and its violence was something not previously experienced and warranted, in Baudelaire’s mind, a new poetics of urban existence. This, in contrast to Baudelaire’s predecessors, the Romantics, who reacted against human violence by withdrawing into nature. The wanderlust of Baudelaire’s *flâneur* is contained by the limits of the city – informed, I suggest, by the Romantic’s ultimate realization that human violence, frailty and mortality transcend social borders.

The prose poems of Baudelaire – the “poet of modern life” – demonstrate a preoccupation with trauma and, I suggest, a dependency on it. In accordance with DalMolin’s premise that “there cannot be lyric composition [in Baudelaire] without the decomposition of [the female] body” (DalMolin 23), this section further explores the relationship between trauma and the lyric tradition. Here, I accept DalMolin’s notion of the centrality of trauma to Baudelaire’s lyric prose, but in conducting a close reading of several poems from *The Paris Spleen*, suggest a supplemental reading through the lens of disability.

“The lyric poem,” we are told, is fundamentally hierarchical, “by virtue of its lineation [...]: words rhyme more strongly here than there, this line is longer than that, the ratio of stanza length to space between stanzas is so and such” (Zawacki 286). So then what better form for Baudelaire, with his antipathy for the social order and penchant for warring opposites, to make his mark? Baudelaire’s first attempts at the *prose lyrique* were made in 1855 – a time when, as Walter Benjamin put it, “the climate for the lyric” had grown “increasingly inhospitable.” This in contrast to the French traditionalists of the same era who disdained formal impurities, characteristic of Baudelaire’s prose poems, and which mixed the bourgeois lyric with working-class prose discourse. Baudelaire’s project, a “yoking together by violence” of the two disparate forms, then, is marked from the outset by a violent act of creation.

The frequent traumatic incisions carried out in the *The Paris Spleen* emphasize a textual landscape in which “penetration and rejection, fusion and fragmentation” are central to both the poet’s form and subject (Krueger 68). The reoccurring connections

between the fragmented body and the fragmented lyric confront the reader by associating mutilation with reading and birth with rebirth. Similarly, the poem's variations on typically able-bodied behaviors not only challenge notions of the normal body throughout its narrative and metaphorical structures but, in this way, also underscore the uncertainty of genre central to the prose lyric. Put in other words, the genre ambiguity of *The Paris Spleen* is mirrored by its fluid identities where differently abled, as well as differently gendered, bodies are represented. So by reading Baudelaire's lyricism as a means by which to express and exhibit the body (both physical and textual) we may identify a doubly defamiliarizing approach to his late style poetry – a poetic prose which was, in his words, “supple and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul.”

Baudelaire's letter to Arsène Houssaye, which is widely regarded as an introduction to the text and a prose poem in its own right, prepares us for the trauma that is to follow. Baudelaire compares his collection to a snake, which Houssaye and the reader, are invited to “take out a vertebrae” here, and “slice into any number of chunks” there. The vulnerability of the poetic text is rendered by the image of a dissected body. And while there is scholarly debate as to whether the letter was meant to serve as a formal introduction to the poems, the prominence of its fragmentary and traumatic imagery remain undeniably indicative of the collection's poetic project. Here, boundaries are to be assaulted – the collection is to have “neither beginning nor end, as everything it is both head and tail.”

The boundary most distinctive of verse – lineation – then, may be seen as one “vertebrae” to be removed in Baudelaire’s prose poem. Where the lineated poem is not able to accommodate incision, for its impact on meter and rhyme, the form of the prose poem meanders, snake-like. Its content, too, rejects linearity with “its endless thread of a superfluous plot.” Baudelaire imagines *The Paris Spleen* a living body able to survive, and indeed thrive, under the reader’s scalpel.

But the figure of the fragmented snake may also be read as more than Baudelaire’s *ars poetica*. The image of the fragmented serpent presents a portrait of *The Paris Spleen* as a project in cognitive dissonance. The act of fragmentation and the energy it requires are reinforced by the text’s violent language – each of these having further implications for the acts of editing and reading as those characterized by violence. So the cognitive dissonance of *The Paris Spleen* may simultaneously be viewed as a powerful dissonance of cognition. The dispersed parts of Baudelaire’s “serpent” metaphor imply the opportunity for a poetic discourse whose meanings could be at once restricted and also unbound. Amputation both represents and suggests a creative undertaking. The act of bodily cutting, I claim, speaks more to the tenuousness of ideal beauty than to any tendency toward sadism or emasculation. The constituent parts of the collection that result from fragmentation, offer a digression from the tyranny of ideal beauty and, as such, invite an analysis of the representations of “natural” or “normal” beauty where it is portrayed in *The Paris Spleen*.

An analysis of the figurative snake, now made literal, underscores the mutability of plot in the prose poems and further challenges the idea of bodily difference where

the text can be sliced and reorganized without end. Or as Krueger states, “This narrative equivocation parallels a penetrability of genre reflected throughout the text in images of alterable gender and identity” (Krueger 57). And we see such varying identities in the poem “Mademoiselle Bistouri” where the poem begins with an encounter between Bistouri and the poem’s flaneur-narrator:

Comme j’arrivais à l’extrémité du faubourg, sous les éclairs du gaz, je sentis un bras qui se coulait doucement sous le mien, et j’entendis une voix qui me disait à l’oreille : Vous êtes médecin, monsieur?

Je regardai ; c’était une grande fille, robuste, aux yeux très-ouverts, légèrement fardée, les cheveux flottant au vent avec les brides de son bonnet.

— Non ; je ne suis pas médecin. Laissez-moi passer. — Oh ! si ! vous êtes médecin. Je le vois bien. Venez chez moi. Vous serez bien content de moi, allez!

[I was just reaching the fringe of the suburbs, under the gaslamps, when I felt an arm slip gently into mine and I felt a voice murmuring in my ear, “You must be a doctor, Sir?”

I looked round at her, a tall well-built woman with wide-open eyes, her face a bit made-up, her hair blown in the wind with the ribbons on her bonnet.

“Oh, no, I’m no medical man. Please let me go.”

“Oh yes, you are a doctor! That’s quite obvious to me. Come round to my place – you’ll be quite satisfied with me, I’m sure.”] (Baudelaire 184)

From here, the flaneur-narrator, in spite of lively yet half-hearted protests, allows himself to be drawn into Bistouri’s fantasy and become a character in it – the

roles of client and prostitute being reversed. Bistouri, whose name means “scalpel” in French, proceeds to show the narrator head-shots of local surgeons with whom she has had acquaintance: “Oui ! c’est X. Le nom est au bas d’ailleurs ; mais je le connais personnellement” / [“Have a look – so you know this one?/Certainly – it’s X – the name is written down below in any case – but I happen to know him personally.”] In Bistouri’s photographs, the image of a series of figuratively disembodied heads is presented in a sort of clinical dialogue where, again, a role reversal takes place. The supposed doctor is now in the place of patient. But Bistouri’s subsequent request that the narrator provide his own picture to add to her collection also reveals the narrative qualities of the heads themselves – each head is a new story to tell. The scene is a narrative act of inclusion where the poetic “penetration” of the surgeon transforms him into a character in Bistouri’s sexual fantasy. Here, the prose poet, in Krueger’s words, “plays doctor, performing multiple and concurrent operations on the doubly prostituted textual body” (Krueger 66).

Indeed, upon closer (one might say clinical) inspection at the grammatical level in *The Paris Spleen*, we find resonances of the metaphorical serpent in the collections cut-up titles. In a fascinating study, Miner examines *The Paris Spleen* for its grammatical tendency to “connect[...] altered or ambiguous syntax with interrogations of truth, subjectivity, and referential language” (Miner 38). Of particular interest to Miner are Baudelaire’s use of coordinate conjunctions where they serve, fundamentally, to connect the elements immediately surrounding but that nonetheless “do not coordinate very well.” Miner suggest that the linguistic uncertainty of several titles within *The Paris*

Spleen reinscribe the central question of the text – a question of whether the reader is to conjoin or disperse the constituent poetic parts:

“...at least five prose poems draw instant attention this question because their titles all feature a conjunction: "*Le fou et la vénus*," "*Le chien et la petite-maitresse*," "*La soupe et les nuages*," Even the most cursory review of this list shows that to coordinate, or at any rate that it coordinates could imagine, for instance, a flat-footed editor's campaign to join the title more tightly to their texts by replacing *et* with something else: "*La soupe ou les nuages*," "*Le Chien contre le flacon*," "*Le Fou avec la Vénus*," "*Le Femme sauvage est la petite-maitresse*." With differing degrees of savagery, moreover, the last substitution or mutilation (the homophonous *est* for *et*) lurks within of all five titles." (Miner 39)

The discontinuous nature of the titles in *The Paris Spleen* can also be found in the content of the poems themselves. The numerous, and occasionally random, insertions of the em dash reopen the textual cuts initially inflicted in the titles. In the first poem of the collection, *The Outsider*, we see a rather traditional use of the em dash where it marks a line of dialogue:

"Qui aimes-tu le mieux, homme énigmatique, dis ? ton père, ta mère, ta sœur ou ton frère ?

- Je n'ai ni père, ni mère, ni sœur, ni frère.

- Tes amis ?

- Vous vous servez là d'une parole dont le sens m'est resté jusqu'à ce jour inconnu.

- Ta patrie ?

- J'ignore sous quelle latitude elle est située.
- La beauté ?
- Je l'aimerais volontiers, déesse et immortelle.
- L'or ?
- Je le hais comme vous haïssez Dieu.
- Eh ! qu'aimes-tu donc, extraordinaire étranger ?
- J'aime les nuages... les nuages qui passent... là-bas... là-bas... les merveilleux nuages !"

[Tell me, enigmatic man, whom do you love best? Your father, your mother, your sister, or your brother?

- I have neither father, nor mother, nor sister, nor brother.
 - Your friends?
 - You are using a word whose meaning to this day remains unknown to me.
 - Your country?
 - I do not know in which latitude it lies.
 - Beauty?
 - I would love her gladly, goddess and immortal.
 - Gold?
 - I hate it as you hate God.
 - Well then! What do you love, unfathomable stranger?
 - I love the clouds... the passing clouds ... up there ... up there ... the marvelous clouds!]
- (Baudelaire 29)

However, when we realize that this is the only poem in the entire collection to use the em dash in this way, we are forced to question its presence in this particular place. The natural back and forth of the speakers in *The Outsider* represent a conversational tone that is not reached in the remainder of *The Paris Spleen*. So are the em dashes a suggestion that the flow of this conversation be disrupted? Do we err in assuming that the conversation is between only two people? Why is the first poem the

only one to punctuate dialogue in such a way? Stopping short of offering any definitive answers to these questions, I would suggest that the comparatively excessive number of dashes imply an increase in rhythmic breaks, which impart a cutting in the fluidity of the lines. Like the titular conjunctions, these dashes segment the rhythm of the lines and also the figurative portrayal of the poetic body. So the form and the content of the poem are similarly impacted by the slicing tendency of the em dash.

The fragmented lyrical facade of *The Outsider*, with its isolated and distinct textual chunks, may be read as a symbolic reenactment of bodily degradation – a physical severing; a loss of natural harmony and unity. So in moving from the introduction of *The Paris Spleen* through its (supposed) first poem, the reader already becomes aware of material obstacles and impairments – an entry into an arena of pain and struggle.

Some have sought to separate Baudelaire's fragmentation from the concept of mutilation altogether, suggesting, rather optimistically, that the cutting in the poems does not mark a limitation of the text, but instead makes the text "infinitely adaptable" and that the traumatized text overcomes its impairment to achieve some kind of textual wholeness. I argue the opposite. That the cutting of both form and content in the prose poems marks – must necessarily do so – a clear limit in the text. And that, in Wendell Berry's words, "[...] our human and earthly limits, properly understood, are not confinements but rather inducements to formal elaboration and elegance, to fullness of relationship and meaning" (Berry 36). But the dismembered lyric self in *The Paris Spleen* is also a trap. It foregrounds a desire for unity; for bodily harmony, and, indeed, the

language to achieve this end. The collection in its entirety examines the inclination toward both constraint and a predisposition toward authority over meaning.

So the necessarily unappeasable desire to know in Baudelaire frequently results in knowable (see legible), textual objects only insofar as they are fragmentary – never as an image of wholeness. Here too we see a distinctly modern preoccupation in the prose poems in their desire to “know the body by way of a narrative that leads to its specific identity, to give the body specific markings that make it recognizable, and indeed make it a key narrative sign” (Brooks 26). Indeed, some of Baudelaire’s modernist successors are also cited for their attempts to portray disfigured and traumatized bodies through methods akin to the narrative fragmentation as seen in *The Paris Spleen*. However, readings of Baudelaire and the modernists have largely neglected to identify aesthetic trauma as an appropriation of mental and physical disability. So by embracing the intersectionality of trauma and disability and by recognizing that both textual *and* physical bodies in *Spleen* are marked with meaning, we may foreground disability as an essentially modernist concept.

Fragmentation in Owen's Trench Lyrics

Trauma had an especially influential impact on twentieth century poetics. With the World Wars and the rapid mechanization of weapons, the century and its poets were marked by violence. Mobility was also a fundamental aspect of the global wars, and while industries (military and otherwise) mobilized *en masse*, a sort of intellectual mobilization also occurred. The global military conflict of the era necessitated a literary movement that would seek to understand the largescale violence through verse; from the backdrop, war poetry was born. But even putting these so-called war poets aside, the notion of trauma held a place of privilege in poetic development both before and after the world Wars. From the English Romantic poets' withdrawal into nature as an escape from of human violence, to the "wounded self" of the American Confessional poets, poetry of the modern era has been inscribed by traumatic experience. Indeed, the body marked by trauma in the poetic tradition can be traced back to Homer, but in the war poets the language of the wound becomes more distinct and begins to transcend metaphor. These poets, soldiers experienced in war, and who often died in battle, assert the primacy of the wounded body – a body that speaks. In Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum Est," the wound is, quite literally, given a voice:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace

Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

(Owen 21)

The pronounced voice of the wound begins to disassociate itself from the voice of the poet and, as such, the wound has a disabling effect on the on the narrator's authority. Here, though, it is important to distinguish between the wound and its natural successor – the scar. For, as Sychterz notes, “while the wound evacuates the body of authority and opens it to semantic appropriation, the scar closes the body's narrative and reinvests it with authority” (Sychterz 140). So where the wound exposes the body and disrupts what would have been an otherwise closed narrative, the scar distinguishes the survivor as an individual to be heard, with the authority of a storyteller. Sychterz further contends, “The concept of the wound as pre-narrative communication suggests that if we can associate the scar with narrative, then we can associate the wound with the lyric. After all, while the scar carries a story inscribed on the body, the wound speaks with a voice” (Sychterz 144). Lyric poetry, then, shapes meaning not through syntax or plot, but through the language of the body's senses (e.g. touch and sound.) In this regard, the lyric speaks a similar language to the language of trauma. While it is not necessarily my intent to suggest a fundamental connection between bodily wounds and the trench lyric *per se*, I do aim to show that by giving a

voice to their wounds, the English soldier poets force us to hear the traumatized body as it exists, as genuine and authoritative. And further, while some scholars have taken up this same purpose (Hipp, Slawek), I contend that, by locating the traumatic war lyric in the context of disability studies we gain a new and nuanced reading of the war poets – a reading that allows us to, in the words of Tobin Siebers, “view wounds as disability representations” and expand the concept of disability to include the “traumas provoked by modern life” (Siebers 102).

As editor of the Oxford Book of Modern Verse, W.B. Yeats famously excluded the war poets from the anthology stating that, “passive suffering is not a theme for poetry” and that “if war is necessary, or necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of a fever” (qtd. in Black 2). Yeats’ reproach of World War I poetry was a shared sentiment of the day’s criticism. These poems were seen as reportage, as a first-hand account of an experience, but *not* as poetry. T.S. Eliot would later echo Yeats in a poem titled “A Note on War Poetry”:

In the effort to keep day and night together.

It seems just possible that a poem might happen

To a very young man: but a poem is not poetry —

That is a life.

War is not a life: it is a situation;

One which may neither be ignored nor accepted,

A problem to be met with ambush and stratagem,
Enveloped or scattered.

The enduring is not a substitute for the transient,
Neither one for the other. But the abstract conception
Of private experience at its greatest intensity
Becoming universal, which we call 'poetry',
May be affirmed in verse.

(Eliot 55)

And while Eliot and many of the Modernists remained largely dismissive of the soldier poets as “young men” writing “poems, not poetry,” *all* of the poets mentioned seemed to fail at one task: responding, in words, to the Great War. Eliot, in particular, struggled with the ineffability of the age, his most famous manifestation of this struggle is in his long poem *The Waste Land*. A prototypical modernist text, *The Waste Land* is characterized by, among other things, its fragmentary language – a trait it shared with war poetry. Fragmentation as a literary subject took on a new meaning in the modern war-era as topics such as shell-shock and bodily mutilation entered the poetic imagination. Outside of the realm of war poetry, the idea of the fragmented subject was seen as part of a shift in poetry toward abstraction and depersonalization. Put in other words, it was seen as *modern*. Even Yeats would adapt fragmentation as a central part of his aesthetic, stating that, “the moment we attain greatness of any kind, by personal labour and will, we become fragmentary” (qtd. in da Silva 110). So, given the praise of fragmentation among the Modernists, why was it not considered an attribute

when found in war poetry? This paper explores fragmentation as both a literary trauma and as a crucial aspect of war poetry. I aim to make this case by analyzing the fragmented body – both physical and textual – in war poetry’s most recognizable poet, Wilfred Owen.

The eldest of four children from a lower middle-class family, Owen’s friend, and fellow soldier poet, Siegfried Sassoon called him both “a rather ordinary young man” and “perceptibly provincial” (qtd. in Cyr 109). Unable to afford tuition at university, and with the Great War now in full swing, Owen enlisted for military service in 1915. Whatever innocence Owen possessed, was quickly dispensed of as, within five months on the front lines, he began to show signs of madness and shell-shock. It was during his recovery at Craiglockhart War Hospital when, many scholars say, Owen had his most productive poetic period. Writing under the directive of his doctor’s “healing-by-work” therapy, Owen began to mature as a poet. Whether this was due to the influence of Sassoon, an older poet and fellow resident at Craiglockhart, or to his traumatic loss of innocence on the battle field, is a much discussed topic among Owen scholars. And while a shared influence of these two aspects is most likely, the body of work from this period remains small as Owen would soon return to battle and become a war casualty by the age of twenty-five. Of specific interest, though, is the final year of Owen’s life that scholars identify as the point at which he realizes his fullest poetic potential. According to C. Day Lewis in the introduction to Owen’s collected poems, “The language and rhythms of Owen's mature poetry are unmistakably his own: earlier influences have

been absorbed, and we recognize in the style an achieved poetic personality” (Owen 24).

One poem from this period is “Strange Meeting” which holds a somewhat ambivalent spot in the Owen cannon. It was hailed by some critics as his best works and by others as his worst. Adding to the complexity of the poem’s legacy is the fact that it is considered by some to be incomplete – the fragment of an unfinished poem (Panajoti 103). “Strange Meeting” depicts a dreamscape in which a soldier is faced with the vision of an enemy who he himself has killed; “And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—/By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.” The soldier entreats his fallen enemy, “Strange friend,” I said, “Here is no cause to mourn.” To which the enemy responds:

“None,” said that other, “save the undone years,

The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,

Was my life also; I went hunting wild

After the wildest beauty in the world,

Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,

But mocks the steady running of the hour,

And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.

For by my glee might many men have laughed,

And of my weeping something had been left,

Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled..."

Further complicating the legacy of "Strange Meeting," is the fact that in Sassoon's 1920 edition of Owen's works, he placed directly following it, a poem entitled "Another Version." The poem, which Sassoon named himself, was thought to be just that – another version of "Strange Meeting." The sister poem had also been known by a foreshortening of its first line as "Earth's Wheels." The poem begins:

Earth's wheels run oiled with blood. Forget we that.
Let us lie down and dig ourselves in thought.
Beauty is yours and you have mastery,
Wisdom is mine, and I have mystery.
We two will stay behind and keep our troth.
Let us forego men's minds that are brute's natures,
Let us not sup the blood which some say nurtures,
Be we not swift with swiftness of the tigress.
Let us break ranks from those who trek from progress.

Miss we the march of this retreating world
Into old citadels that are not walled.
Let us lie out and hold the open truth.
Then when their blood hath clogged the chariot wheels
We will go up and wash them from deep wells.
What though we sink from men as pitchers falling
Many shall raise us up to be their filling
Even from wells we sunk too deep for war
And filled by brows that bled where no wounds were.

A sort of lyric confession, we see a style distinct from that of "Strange Meeting." We are less aware in "Another Version," for example, of split personas in the poem. The straightforward first-person narrative of "Another Version" seems an account of the poet's convictions where both teller and listener are, in all likelihood, soldiers. Each of these aspects helps to support Sassoon's assumption that the two poems, although complimentary, remain distinct in their own respect; each poem a complete and whole work. However, an ironic detail of "Another Version" is that its final line ("And filled by brows that bled where no wounds were") itself has an alternate version: "Even as One who bled where no wounds were." That Sassoon omitted this alternate line from his collection was, possibly in his mind, a simple editorial act. But the suggestion that "Another Version" was in some way, incomplete – a fragment – is an intriguing one.

There is a sort of metapoetic implication to the idea that a supposed alternate version of one poem itself contains an alternate final line. One begins to question if either of the works is complete in the conventional sense or if, indeed, they are fragments. In John Stallworthy's 1990 edition of Owen's works, he goes so far as to suggest that "Another Version" (which he calls "Earth's Wheels") is not, as Sassoon claimed, an alternate version at all, but rather a "fragment [...] written between November 1917 and January 1918" of the more well-known poem "Strange Meeting.."

"Strange Meeting" falls into a genre identified by James Campbell as the "trench lyric." Where "trench" does not necessarily imply the poem's place of composition, but rather its most typical setting, Campbell defines the trench lyric as "constitut[ing] a formally conservative, realistic text based on the direct combat experience of the junior officer" (Campbell 204). Formal conservatism, in the mode of traditional English verse, is likely the mark of the trench lyric which avant-garde modernists found most disagreeable. At the time of the First World War, Georgianism was steadily becoming the accepted mode of both the poetic and political conservative movements, and the realism of the trench lyric was, on its surface, agreeable to both these audiences. But as Campbell notes of the trench lyric, traditional poetic forms are employed to "portray the heretofore unknown gruesome details of the physical and psychological situations of the trench as seen from a participant's viewpoint" (Campbell 205). So in this sense, the trench lyric counters the celebration of beauty characteristic of Romantic poetry and instead gives privilege to the ugly and horrific conditions of the front line. The intent of the trench lyric being less that of reportage and more a communication of the shock of

battle, with a relatively insulated reading public as the audience. The trench lyric, then, may be seen as embodying a revision of the classical lyric's aesthetic aims as well as the naïvely romantic view of the heroism of war.

Owen's contemporaries, the Modernist poets, were, like Owen, also attempting to revise classical poetic forms. In his study of T.S. Eliot's poetry, Anthony L. Johnson examines Eliot's use of "discursive fragmentation" which he theorizes as having three origins: "[...] a text may be known to have become fragmentary because (1) part of it could not be written, though it had once been accessible [...], or (2) because it was censored, or else (3) because fragmentariness is part of an authorial strategy" (Johnson 399).

Each of these origins of the fragmented text, I suggest, can be observed in Owen's late style poetry. This first origin was discussed in a previous section of this paper which attributed the fragmentary nature of Owen's poetry to the ineffability of the Great War. The second origin is, indeed, a fascinating one in considering the history of censorship during the war and its capacity to silence soldier's and prohibit their communications with family. Owen certainly experienced censorship during his time at Craiglockhart as Paul Fussell has discussed, citing a wartime form-letter known as the Field Service Postcard, which dictated exactly which phrases could be used in letters home and further advised that "If anything else is added, the post card will be destroyed" (Fussell 184). But it is this third origin which is least remarked upon in Owen's poetry and to which I will now turn.

In a further analysis of fragmentation as an authorial strategy, Johnson suggests that strategies which have the effect of breaking textual continuity tend to “increase the degree of the text’s openness” (Johnson 400). That is, the “break” in the text invites the reader to be actively involved in connecting fragmented pieces and, in so doing, take part in the meaning making of the text. Such is the case, I am contending, in Owen’s poem “Dulce et Decorum Est.”

According to some scholars, poetry was therapeutic for Owen – a way for him “to examine his own psychological injury” (Hipp 34). Written in 1918 when Owen was hospitalized for shell-shock, “Dulce de Decorum Est” depicts life in the trenches in their least of heroic terms and possesses angry and violent qualities that seem to be expressions of Owen’s coping with his psychological injuries. Johnston and Hipp both note that the poem is composed at a time of intense conflict in Owen’s career (qtd. in Hipp 28). At this stage, Owen is confronted with an overwhelming skepticism towards the merits of war as well as to the efficacy of the “protest poetry” he had written in the months prior. This conflict is borne out in “Dulce de Decorum Est” with a striking break at the poem’s center which leads us to regard the poem as two fragments. The poem begins:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,

Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,

Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,

And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

These first two stanzas adhere to a Shakespearean sonnet rhyme scheme with the exception of the final two lines which omit the final couplet. The opening octave describes the speaker's communal bond with his fellow soldiers as he tells of a shared exhaustion as "men marched asleep [...] but limped on." The connection being made in the first lines, Hipp suggests, enables Owen to speak simultaneously for himself and for his men in a way that allows him to confront his own "psychological trauma by enabling his sympathy for others' sufferings to become the cause for Owen's own self-healing"

(Hipp 35). All men are marching in unison ahead with the same objective and all suffer equally.

But in the second stanza, their shared experience changes rather abruptly. The speaker now assumes an active voice, one that both warns and commands: “Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!” The unanimity of the group is fractured by the speaker’s command which disperses the group into “an ecstasy of fumbling.” But the tonal shift this command represents is doubly fracturing as the active voice now assumed by the speaker also identifies him as an officer – his rank separating him from his men. And as one man fails to secure his gasmask amid the chaos, the dissolution of the group continues. The active speaker can now only observe passively “As under a green sea, I saw him drowning,” and his passivity emphasizes the insurmountable distance between the two men.

In spite of the shifts in both tone and voice found in the first half of “Dulce de Decorum Est,” the section remains relatively clear in its organization when compared to the second half which is marked by its clouded and, as Hibberd calls it, “choking syntax”(Hibberd 115):

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace

Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,

His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
 Pro patria mori.

Here, the poet employs the second-person pronoun for the first time, causing the poem to transform from an account of an experience to an indictment of the reader; “If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood/Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs [...] you would not tell with such high zest/To children ardent for some desperate glory/ The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori.” Attention is now turned to the audience as readers are addressed directly (if *you* could hear, *you* would not, etc.). Owen alludes to Horace with a culminating proverb which translates to “Tis sweet and glorious to die for fatherland,” (qtd. in Hipp 38). The arresting rhetorical change from the first half of the poem to the second brings the poet, in a sense, outside of the poem and draws readers along with – the poem now operating on multiple narrative planes. An additional narrative, still, is uncovered upon inspection of Owen’s original manuscript of the poem. Though its dedication was removed upon publication, “Dulce

de Decorum Est" was originally addressed to Jessie Pope – a popular author and illustrator of children's books who glorified war through her patriotic verse (Norgate 520). In this way, Owen, the war poet, is drawn out of the passivity of the trench in order to compel Pope to recognize the horrific reality of war.

On the formal level, too, "Dulce et Decorum Est" is marked by fragmentariness. There are a number of unexpected shifts in tone as well as seemingly unjustified substitutions of one voice/actor for another. The reader is invited by these fractures in the text to make connections where linearity and cohesion do not exist. So if we are to envision the poem as a text composed of "broken" narratives, then we must also acknowledge fragmentation as an authorial technique in *active* operation in Owen's poetry. Or, as Johnson surmised of Eliot's work, fragmentation is "actively transforming and transfixing and breaking up [...] the "body of the world" and the "body of language"" (Johnson 414). Ultimately, this view of Owen as authorially active in his fragmented lyric style, in addition to his reader's active engagement in bridging his text's gaps, is at odds with Yeats' notion of war poetry as simply a record of "passive suffering."

Ultimately, the image of the war poet as a passive sufferer simply does not hold up. The soldier's body, marked by trauma, cannot be dismissed or forgotten "as we do the discomfort of a fever." Wilfred Owen's trench lyrics do not attempt to write *around* the traumatized and disabled bodies of soldiers but *through* them. His poems are not exercises in forgetting. Indeed they help us remember: "Earth's wheels run oiled with

blood. Forget we that./Let us lie down and dig ourselves in thought./Even from wells we
sunk too deep for war/And filled by brows that bled where no wounds were.”

Afterword

If one of the goals for increasing awareness of disability issues is to challenge the authority – or what Lennard Davis calls the “hegemony” – of normalcy, then the essays collected here are an effort to do just that. The “normal” physical and textual bodies, when problematized through aesthetic defamiliarization, demonstrate the ways in which disability exposes the body as a “transient, fleeting, and contingent” site – one which is uncontainable and imperfect. In a similar sense, this fragmentary study of poetry (an “exploration in three parts”) acknowledges its own incompleteness. At its worst, it lays bare its textual body in hopes that the reader might bridge its gaps and, at its best, hopes to reassert the physical body as a primary source of meaning-making. The poets studied here, each engaged in the lyrical mode of representation, each portrayers of bodies, and each working at various stages of modernity, anticipate the concerns of the postmodern era and its identity politics. Attending to the lyric tradition and its relationship to both trauma and disability, ultimately this collection of essays engages in exploring the ways in which poetry can both reflect and construct disability.

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