

ON THE LYRIC BODY

"Nothing can be sole or whole / that has not been rent," says Crazy Jane in Yeats's "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop." Whether the crisis is spiritual or physical, the Greek idea that suffering is a metaphorical road to greater wisdom remains central to literary consciousness. Still "embodiment" can represent something more than the site of the psyche's "agon" — more than the psyche, for that matter. We must conceive of distributed intelligence, what the American poet Charles Olson called proprioception, the body's understanding of itself in space. Lyric space, lyric relation. Corporeal knowing. Robert Creeley echoes this idea, repeating famously: "The plan is the body / the plan is the body . . ." In effect, the difficulties stemming from our physical lives are the incitements of wisdom. We have long understood this notion in the context of aging. Kings Solomon and David are said to have grown virtuous on account of their advanced ages. The French say: "Si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait!" If you're lucky enough to grow old and infirm you may possess some virtues.

What about the bodies that must struggle daily with the body politic? If Crazy Jane is correct, bodies at all ages know something, something we understand as an admixture of sublimations, faiths, despairs, and determinations. There are secrets to the arts of the body and its accentuations are odd. One thinks of the Tao's "Ecclesiastes":

There is a time for being ahead,
a time for being behind;
a time for being in motion;
a time for being at rest;
a time for being vigorous;
a time for being exhausted;
a time for being safe;
a time for being in danger.

The Master sees things as they are,
without trying to control them.
She lets them go their own way,
and resides at the center of the circle.

— *Tao Te Ching*, Stephen Mitchell translation

One may usefully think of the Master as full embodiment, or in Jungian terms as individuation. What the body “knows” must be seen relative to things as they are and not suborned into easy stories of overcoming — the body knows it is all things at once. That this may be seen as a lyric intelligence is surely sensible. The lyric is fractious, ideogrammatic, uncensored, naive and wise, and it proposes that we carry through our lives as well as we can, that we absorb errors, that certain ideals may be undone, that we may get to knowledge by indirection. Embodiment in literary terms is not far from analytical psychology save for this distinction: writers who sense the body’s ways of knowing are not interested in the closures of self-help narratives. The body’s insights are not a compensation. The body offers steep truths all its own. Different truths, truths of difference.

And so whether it’s an autistic body, with its alternate sensory processing and proprioception; or a bipolar body, with its alternate neurochemical firings; or a physically impaired body, with its alternate mobility; or an ill body, a tumor in its thyroid; a dystrophied body, atypical proteins at work; an animal body mercilessly shot up into space and shocked into astronomical compliance, or simply euthanized in a pasture; a water-boarded body; a dark-skinned body presumed to be a terrorist (the man has a funny name and there’s a suspicious box outside his office); the hunchbacked body of Antonio Gramsci (who knew?); the lifeless body of a Vietnamese soldier; the rejuvenated body of a middle-aged boxer, a middle aged *female* boxer; a transgendered body; even the all too familiar body of a spouse or partner — “the” body presents a form for engagement, the only one an organism has. That engagement is always political, whether we recognize it or not, and always lyrical, whether we see it that way or not.

Illness and disability figure significantly in this volume, for they reshape the quotidian, defamiliarize the natural. They ask us to expand notions of the fully and vibrantly human. The writers here banish untethered abstractions, make thought sensuous, sensible. They pursue relation. They give words fingers, sometimes legs, sometimes synaesthetic eyes and ears. They mark time or push into mythic tempus. Understanding the dark, they move very fast or with deliberate delay. "Beauty must ever induce wonderment and a delicious trouble," wrote Plotinus, who, unknowing, might have been writing for the body itself.

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