

Literary Disability Studies: The Long Awaited Response

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I love you.

Answer came there none.

I love you.

Ah, it's official, nobody loves me.

While the absence of the appropriate response isn't too concerning in this context, a stranger addressing a group of people in a lecture theatre, it would be quite perplexing between two lovers.

Let's begin by considering this scenario for a moment.

"I love you," says one lover to the other, but answer comes there none.

The absence is conspicuous because both lovers are bound to be aware of the requisite response.

This conspicuous absence invokes a parallel with what Jacques Derrida has referred to as hauntology, a neologistic variant on the word *ontology* that describes the paradoxical state of neither being nor non-being.

In these terms, the irony is that the unspeaking lover raises a spectre of reciprocity, because the conspicuous absence contains a presence.

The problem is that the ghost of a response is at best perplexing and at worst damaging.

In considering the emerging field of literary disability studies, the hypothesis on which I'll expand is that regarding disability a conspicuous absence exists in literary studies. I'll identify a series of interrelated absences, the most fundamental being that disability is implicitly and/or explicitly present in all literary works, but too frequently absent from literary criticism.

Bearing in mind Derrida's notion of Hauntology, we might say that the critical absence from literary studies raises a spectre, because the presence of disability is neither denied nor acknowledged. All literary scholars analyse works in which disability is present, yet few engage with the subject on any level, let alone one that's critically informed by the discipline of disability studies. Much as the words of our lover are heartfelt and profound but wasted without reciprocity, disability is present in all literature but generally unappreciated in literary criticism.

Now, before acknowledging the recent progress of literary disability studies in the UK, I'll illustrate the conspicuous absence of disability from literary studies, firstly with reference to curricular and research profiles, and then with reference to a selection of standard literary publications.

In the last decade or so I've studied literature at G.C.S.E, Access, B.A., MPhil., Ph.D., and postdoctoral levels, discovering numerous representations of disability at every turn. I was never absent from my English classes at Stoke-on-Trent College, and rarely so from those at the University of Staffordshire, but didn't attend a single lesson, seminar, workshop, tutorial, or lecture that was informed by the discipline of disability studies. I was lucky enough to be educated by a host of brilliant scholars, many of whom were, and still are experts in the representation of gender, class, ethnicity, and/or sexuality, but none of whom had any expertise to impart about the representation of disability in particular. I encountered no resistance to my growing interest in the subject, indeed, many of my teachers supported, inspired, and continue to inspire me in my work, it's just that their research profiles didn't include critical work on literary disability.

This absence wasn't only notable because disability was present in all the set texts, as it always is, but also because for disabled students the University of Staffordshire was known to be by far the most accessible in the vicinity. That is to say, although the English department didn't draw on the discipline of disability studies in the way it drew on those of gender, Marxist, psychoanalytical, and post-colonial studies, disabled students were both welcomed and supported. It was nearly a decade ago that I enrolled as an undergraduate, which was before the Disability Discrimination Act became established here in the UK, but even then I took full advantage of screen-reading software, learning support workers, a talking lift, spending areas for my Guide Dog, and so on. I was also aware of some wheelchair access and translators for Deaf students. This manifest inclusiveness led me to suspect that the critical absence wasn't unusual, that it was typical of English departments in the British academy at the time. After all, if the discipline of disability studies wasn't acknowledged in such an inclusive English department, why would it be so elsewhere?

In order to expand a little on this hypothesis of institutionalised curricular deficiency, I proceeded to review the websites of ninety-six institutions, a sample provided in the UK University Ranking/League Tables (2003). The results of the study, which I published in a short paper entitled "Disability and the Rhetoric of Inclusive Higher Education", revealed that when advertising their undergraduate English courses, numerous British universities referred to literary criticism that was appreciative of ethnicity, sexuality, class, and gender. In contrast, only one institution referred to disability in relation to course content, a lone reference that didn't pertain to literary criticism; it was a notice that the field work aspects of the English course might have posed difficulties to disabled students, meaning alternative arrangements would have to be made. The conclusion at which I arrived was that the scholars in these prestigious English departments were oblivious to the relevance of disability studies. Perhaps this inference was harsh, based on such a cursory study, but it was certainly the case that unlike feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, and psychoanalytical approaches to literature, a disability studies approach wasn't posited as a selling point for the courses available at the time.

It must be emphasised, then, that I'm not criticising the English departments in which I was taught, have taught, and hope to teach again. The absence was, and still is standard in the vast majority of English departments throughout the UK and indeed the world beyond. I'm well

aware that in this respect the academy is far more advanced in, say, the U.S., as is reflected in the list of board members for the *Journal of Literary Disability* (JLD), but as some of the articles in the first issue indicate, disability is still too frequently conspicuous by its absence. The *JLD* website lists a handful of exceptional English departments in so far as the relevance of disability studies is already appreciated. This exceptionality, however, is bound to be read as a rule of absence elsewhere in the American academy.

The curricular and epistemological absences have perpetuated, and been perpetuated by, the same conspicuous absence of disability from many standard literary publications, including critical anthologies. For instance, as a graduate I read David Macey's *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* from start to finish, pleased to find that it contained hundreds of instructive references to feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, and psychoanalytical theories, but frustrated to discover disability studies wasn't mentioned once. While I didn't expect the relatively new discipline to have the same presence as the others, this absence seemed remarkable in a dictionary of critical theory that was published at the brink of the twenty-first century.

More recently I conducted a comparative study of the online contents of a sample of literary publications. I was pleased to find that of the twenty-eight journals listed under the heading Literature on the Taylor and Francis website, twenty-five offered the option to search their online contents. However, there were yet more absences to consider, because twelve searches for the word *disability* generated no results.

This is all rather negative, but it's largely from these absences that my interest in literary disability studies has arisen.

That said, I'm not here to present a lone voice, but to represent a journal that is contributing to a growing literary movement.

Yes, the fact that disability was absent from the online contents of twelve of the twenty-five Taylor and Francis literary journals was perplexing; yes, the absences were conspicuous because the journals were abundant with conceptually comparable subjects such as ethnicity, gender and class; but the other thirteen, indeed the majority of the journals contained between one and twenty-three references to disability. *Prose Studies*, for example, contained articles by eminent literary disability scholars such as G. Thomas Couser and Stephen Kuusisto. In other words, while twelve of the literary journals raised the spectre of disability, thirteen chased it away. This is a sign of progress.

I've mentioned the conspicuous absence of disability from critical anthologies. So as not to obscure the progress of literary disability studies, I must add that I was introduced to the pioneering work of Lennard J. Davis about five years ago, when my then doctoral supervisor, Shaun Richards, spotted extracts from *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. This was an exception that proved the rule of absence in other critical anthologies, but it was also a sign of progress.

It should also be stressed that during the last few years there has been progress in the British academy, thanks largely to the work of Martin Halliwell at the University of Leicester, Lucy Burke at Manchester Metropolitan University, Gavin Miller at Edinburgh University, Irene Rose here at Liverpool John Moores University and Stuart Murray at the University of Leeds.

The University of Leeds has shown promise since the opening of its Disability Research Unit (DRU) in 1990, which recently became the interdisciplinary Centre of Disability Studies (CDS). This interdisciplinarity has obvious potential for scholars of literary disability, as is substantiated by the fact that one member of the CDS, Stuart Murray, is also a senior lecturer in the School of English. Because one of his main interests is in the representation of cognitive impairment, the school now boasts a research profile that refers to, rather than raising the spectre of, disability. Indeed, this English department's research profile is one of the few in the UK that uses the word *disability*, referring to the fact that Stuart's editing a forthcoming series of books about the representation of disability, health, and culture. Moreover, I have been reliably informed that a disability studies approach to literature is now being taught at the university on various core modules.

The names of these literary disability scholars, Stuart Murray, Lucy Burke, Martin Halliwell, Gavin Miller, Irene Rose, Lennard Davis, G. Thomas Couser, Stephen Kuusisto, and so on, all point to the reason I have been invited to speak today, as all are actively involved with the *Journal of Literary Disability*. This new publication will be freely available online as from today. A year ago the journal was just an idea, but it became a reality when forty of the world's top literary disability scholars agreed to join the editorial board; when Jim Ferris agreed to co-edit an issue about poetry ; when Michael Davidson agreed to co-edit an issue about dependency ; when Lucy Burke agreed to co-edit an issue about the literary representation of cognitive impairment; when dozens of authors submitted proposals and articles; when Stephen Bolt and Jane Goetzee agreed to help with graphic design and copy editing; and when hundreds of readers subscribed in advance of the inaugural issue. The enthusiasm of everyone involved is indicative of the fact that the publication of a journal that focuses on the literary representation of disability has been long overdue.

In conclusion, then, let's return to our lovers for a moment.

"I love you," says one to the other, but answer comes there none.

Well, what if the absence were merely a pause? We could call it pregnant, Pinteresque; we could interpret it as a profoundly positive sign that adds weight to the requisite response that would follow: "I love you too."

My central proposition is that the literary disability studies movement will turn the critical absence into a pause; it will chase the spectre of disability away and introduce a real presence in the English departments of the British academy.