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“Its Own Concentred Recompense”: The Impact of Critical Disability Studies on Romanticism

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Abstract: The field of Critical Disability Studies (CDS) includes a diverse range of methodologies for the ethical re-evaluation of literary texts. CDS has a growing relationship with Romanticism, addressing themes such as sublime aesthetics and poetic symbolism. A major function of CDS is the re-reading of texts in terms authors’ lived experience of disability, and the social environments in which they produced. To that extent, CDS is a continuation of the process of re-historicizing Romantic literature. Complementary to the historicizing function, a range of more conceptual theories continues to impact on Romantic studies, opening up new possibilities for reading and scholarship. This article attempts to provide a critical overview of this ongoing work, and a sense of its diverse and at times contradictory nature. Concepts and theories for discussion include disability aesthetics, deformity, metaphor, and the Romantic fragment. The article includes a close analysis of Byron’s poem “Prometheus”, which connects revolutionary myth with ideas of pain and silence, demonstrating the fundamental contribution made by ideas of disability to literary Romanticism. CDS can help to disrupt the canonical and institutional nature of Romanticism, and to include dissident voices—not only the witness of the non-normatively embodied, but of difference in general.

Keywords: Romanticism; disability; Critical Disability Studies; metaphor

The term Critical Disability Studies is given to a broad spectrum of methodology in cultural interpretation. The field is innately interdisciplinary, consisting of collaboration, collision, and dialogue between social history, political activism, art history, cultural studies, literary scholarship, critical theory, the medical and scientific humanities, and various other disciplines. The relationship between Romantic literature and Critical Disability Studies (CDS) is still young and still developing. It is part of the expanding range of disability-aware scholarship, from matters of contemporary society and social policy, into the re-evaluation of historical cultures. Yet there is now sufficient breadth of published work in this intersected field to refer to a distinctively “Romantic Disability Studies”, and to know that this means something different from related work in eighteenth-century studies and Gothic, which preceded it in embracing disability scholarship. Certain key features and prominent tropes in Romantic-era literature make it distinctively conducive to a theorized re-reading in terms of bodily and mental difference. Among them are its myths of organic or irrational creativity, its veneration of unique subjective experience, the symbolic intensity of its poetic language, its use of sublime deformity and wilderness to counterbalance classical notions of beauty, and its aesthetic and philosophical attraction to the fragmentary, broken, and incomplete.

A major function of historical CDS is the re-evaluation of texts in terms of authors’ lived experience of disability, and the social environments in which they produced. To that extent, CDS is an aspect of historicism and a continuation of the process of historicizing and re-historicizing Romantic literature. Complementary to the historicizing function, a range of more abstract conceptual and ethical theories, loosely grouped under the term CDS, continues to impact on Romantic studies, transforming the field in complex ways and opening up new possibilities for reading and scholarship:

Disability provided limit cases for ideas of humanity and sympathy, while encounters with the disabled provoked questions about the nature of disgust and the sublime. The epistemological and intersubjective consequences of non-normative embodiment encouraged authors to test the possibilities of language and form, and invited philosophers to rethink the relationships between the mind and the body, the self and the other, and the body and the external world. (Stanback 2016, p. 2)

In historical terms, the late eighteenth century to early nineteenth century is held to be a contested transitional period in cultural perceptions of disability, with the gradual emergence of the medical model of disability, and the concept of the “normal” superseding earlier ideals of bodily perfection. Recent scholarship generally argues for a complex and ambivalent relationship between Romantic-era culture and the theme of disability, in which considerable positivity can be recognized: the disability theorist Lennard Davis, for example, has argued that the eighteenth-century literature of Sensibility shows a tendency to find in disability “a moral virtue, especially in its overcoming” (Davis 2002, p. 65), while the medical humanist Fuson (Wang 2011) has observed that Romantic-era writing often venerates alternative mental states and cognitive difference in its myths of artistic creation. The “transitional” view of the Romantic era is related to a narrative of social progress, in which civilization evolves beyond the medieval and early modern propensity to construct disability as a moral or religious category, in terms of “monstrosity” or “prodigy”—a warning against deviation from divinely appointed nature—towards a more rational modern society, in which medical diagnosis and charity are the key discourses which define and regulate the disabled body. This, in turn, may be interpreted as a prelude to the emergence of the social model of disability. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have called the Romantic era “perhaps one of the richest in Euro-American representational traditions of disability” (Mitchell and Snyder 2006, vol. 3, pp. 1389–90).

It is important to note, however, that there are challenges to this progressive narrative. Some alternative theories assert more pessimistically that oppressive practices can be observed in any historical setting. Others, such as (Michael Oliver 1990), identify aspects of modernity such as industrialization and capitalist economics as the agents which have constructed disability as a category. According to Oliver’s materialist/Marxist interpretation, early capitalist institutions such as the nuclear family as an economic unit, the industrial intensity of the new factories, the concept of productivity, and the liberal cult of the individual have all contributed to the social pressures which identified people with disabilities as in need of separate treatment.

Disability Studies work on eighteenth-century culture has drawn attention to the ableist values of Enlightenment thinking. Tobin Siebers, for example, points to the cult of the rational mind and belief in the importance of non-dependence on others as examples of an eighteenth-century morality which perpetuated the exclusion of those with disabilities (Siebers 2008). As D. Christopher Gabbard argues, “During this time the criteria by which the question of what constituted the human were shifting from those based on physical shape and presence of a soul to those dependent on mental capacity and especially linguistic capability” (Gabbard 2011). There is clearly a direct line from this observation to further research on Romantic irrationality and creative “madness” re-evaluated through a theorized sense of cognitive difference and neuro-divergence, and a historicized view of the treatment of people who are different in mind. CDS work on the Romantic era has tended to foreground positive qualities such as agency and creativity and to find in the experiments of Romantic writers, new possibilities for exploring disabled identity. This generality, of course, invites qualification and complication: there are plenty of instances of Romantic texts harmfully appropriating images of disability. CDS scholarship does not argue that Romantic literature offers a consistently “positive” attitude, but that its relationship with disability is a rich and challenging one.)

Early attempts to interpret literary disability in the Romantic era concentrated mainly on disability as a theme within texts, rather than a context or condition for them. Surveys of the representation of specific impairments included “lameness” and blindness, often attempting to expose and redress negative stereotypes, moral prejudice, and general exclusion. Peter Hays’ *The Limping Hero* (Hays 1971)

is an early example of this approach. The work of recovery and re-evaluation is still very much a part of historicist scholarship; where modern critical practice differs more sharply is on questions of symbolic meaning. As Bradshaw and Joshua observe, “Interest in the symbolic uses of disability [. . .] can be seen as displacement of attention from lived experiences, as over-interpretation, or as critically naïve when not combined with a sophisticated understanding of social and historical processes” (Bradshaw 2016, pp. 10–11). Theoretical work by scholars such as Davis and Rosemarie Garland Thomson on the ethics of representation has been highly influential in CDS generally and continues to inform new interventions in Romantic studies.

It was the case of Lord Byron that marked the emergence of a more theorized evaluation of disability in Romantic writing, with Andrew Elfenbein’s special issue of the journal *European Romantic Review* in 2001. Elfenbein and his co-contributors set out not only to foreground the contested theme of Byron’s lower-limb deformity (variously diagnosed as “club foot”/*talipes equinovarus*, partial paralysis, and other syndromes) and its interpretation, but also to begin an overt conversation about the place of disability in Romantic literature more generally: “no-one had found a way to translate this fact into a starting point for critical analysis” (Elfenbein 2001, p. 247). In fact Byron proved to be a propitious starting-point, since the wealth of allusion to bodily difference in his writings—from juvenilia and letters to *Don Juan* and *The Deformed Transformed*—provides ample evidence that the disabled experience has both agency and eloquence, and cannot be contained in discourses of pity and tragedy, or unexamined symbolism.

The characteristic symbolic density of much Romantic writing, and a critical tradition of continually finding new ways to reach beyond the denotation of language to extrapolate symbolic connotation, means that this is an important focus of attention for “Romantic” Disability Studies. Again, it is often the work of the disability scholar to apply ethical caution to metaphorical and symbolic readings. The point is forcefully made by Christine Kenyon Jones in her recent evaluation of interpretations of Byron’s disability. Recounting a number of historical views of Byron’s “lameness”—personal tragedy, defiance of pity, (over)compensation, and so on—Kenyon Jones argues “To Byron, however, for whom the disability was a lived and not a metaphorical or fictional experience, these narratives would surely have appeared reductive and simplistic [. . .] for Byron himself, disability (his own and other people’s) provided a complex source of material and meaning to be explored creatively in a wide variety of ways” (Kenyon Jones 2016, p. 163). This is a simple but important *caveat* to the critic of Romanticism, and entirely in keeping with the re-centring of biography in much historical Critical Disability Studies—not to develop complex metaphorical interpretation in such a way as to neglect or occlude the material location of the disabled experience. In a similar spirit, Ato Quayson addresses the encounter between the aesthetic and the material in modern disability literature:

It is disability’s rapid oscillation between a pure process of abstraction and a set of material conditions that ensures that the ethical core of its representation is never allowed to be completely assimilated to the literary-aesthetic domain as such. Disability serves then to close the gap between representation and ethics, making visible the aesthetic field’s relationship to the social situations of persons with disability in the real world.” (Quayson 2007, p. 24)

Influential disability theorists such as Quayson, Davis, Mitchell and Snyder, and Garland Thomson have repeatedly indicated the saturation of disability metaphors in mainstream culture, arguing that this is a practice in need of ethical interrogation. The use of everyday metaphors such as “moral blindness” or “a lame argument” and so on effectively appropriates and redeploys the terms of a specific lived experience, rendering them into readily applicable symbols, to serve whatever opportunistic function the author chooses; often this function is a moralistic one, which has little or no connection with the historical experience of disability. The classic example of this syndrome, ably deconstructed by (David Bolt 2014; Rodas 2009) and others, is the dramatic or narrative use of blindness as a symbol for wisdom, spiritual “vision”, and “insight”. From a theoretical perspective, this is an exploitation of the disabled body. Accordingly, CDS scholars of literature often devote some of their energies to interrogating metaphorical appropriation and challenging with historical information “the metaphoric

opportunism of literature” (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, p. 18). As Bradshaw and Joshua point out, this does not imply a hostility to metaphor, nor an attempt to discredit its use, but a willingness to test metaphors ethically in relation to lived experience, and to re-activate them (Bradshaw 2016, pp. 8–9).

After Byron, it is probably Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (1818, 1831) which has attracted the most frequent interpretation in relation to disability themes. The central narrative theme of the creature’s “monstrosity,” together with the novel’s preoccupation with vision, visibility, and blindness, has made this iconic text a frequent reference point and case study. Critics have long noticed the creature’s entrapment in the visual sphere, his immediately becoming the object of hostile judgement when characters perceive his deformity (although Victor claims to have selected the body parts for their beauty), so that his physical form continually overrides his gentle and civilized power of speech. The creature’s brief relationship with the blind De Lacey thus becomes a pivotal moment in the narrative, when De Lacey’s exclusion from the visual realm which demonizes the creature enables a mutually accepting and sympathetic dialogue. The theme of blindness in the novel has been the object of various interpretations which precede CDS, or apply different methods, for example the Lacanian reading of Peter Brooks in “What is a Monster? (According to *Frankenstein*)” (Brooks 1993), and Edward Larrissy’s thematic study, *The Blind and Blindness in Literature of the Romantic Period* (Larrissy 2007). Larrissy reads the De Lacey episode in relation to blind fathers in Mary Shelley’s other works, observing how the motif invokes and then subverts the traditional aesthetic morality of blindness: “[De Lacey’s] blindness does not figure insight but its reverse” (Larrissy 2007, p. 194). Scholars such as (Essaka Joshua 2011), (Paul Marchbanks 2010), and (Wang 2017) have interpreted blindness in Shelley’s work in relation to both CDS and the Enlightenment theories of empirical knowledge which informed much Romantic writing. The most persuasive work on disabilities in *Frankenstein* emphasizes the complexity and contradictoriness of the narrative, using CDS approaches to reinstate the agency of the creature, rather than presenting him as only a victim of prejudice. Taking *Frankenstein* as a case study, (Wang 2017) promotes greater historical precision in disability-informed criticism, convincingly arguing that an ongoing “historicist turn” is a welcome and liberating move beyond the ideological constraints of the early days of CDS towards more culturally specific and nuanced invocations of literary disability. (Rodas 2016) has broken new ground with what may become a highly influential re-reading of the novel in relation to autism and autistic language as creative learning—a salutary reminder that the novel is multi-faceted, and that the classic instance of blindness is not the only form of human difference under investigation in Shelley’s work.

In 2016, two books were published which should give the field new impetus and direction. Emily Stanback’s monograph, *The Wordsworth-Coleridge Circle and the Aesthetics of Disability*, is a major historicist investigation of the interactions between medical science, philosophy, and literature in an extended group of writers and thinkers that includes Thomas Beddoes, John Thelwall, and Charles Lamb. The intrinsic yet neglected part played by concepts of disability and deformity in Romantic aesthetics is examined through the analysis of a wide range of writings, literary, scientific, and biographical. Stanback places disability at the centre of the Romantic endeavour, a phenomenon that continues into the modern era: “there is a compelling and fundamental relationship between disability and humanity” (Stanback 2016, p. 309). Stanback’s reading of the “blind beggar” episode in William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* provides a brief example of her method, in which anxious negotiations with sites of disability contribute directly to the philosophical effects which are celebrated as the “Romantic” achievements of such authors and texts:

Although Book 7 engages with the metaphorical and cultural significance of the beggar’s blindness, it also undercuts these associations—a vacillation between symbolism and realism that characterizes several Wordsworthian encounters with disability. The beggar similarly vacillates between stereotype and singularity . . . (Stanback 2016, p. 242)

The poet explicitly figures his confrontation with the Blind Beggar in sublime terms, as a moment of suspension and intense unity, and it completes the poet’s reorientation, as his “mind did . . . turn round/As with the might of waters” (245)

A complement to Stanback's specific historicist investigation, Michael Bradshaw's edited collection, *Disabling Romanticism: Body, Mind, and Text*, is a deliberately broad and inclusive collaboration, with contributors using a range of approaches, from politicized disability theory, to humanist scholarship focusing on textual and biographical themes. A key contribution of this book is the expansion of range beyond the usual suspects of the Romantic canon, to include "minor" and neglected Romantic authors such as Mary Robinson and George Darley. The intensity of Stanback's study and the variety of the work in Bradshaw's collection complement each other and should catalyse a further diversification of CDS work on Romantic literature.

One of the few orthodoxies observed by almost all scholars in the field is that of the "social model" of disability, which locates "disability" not in the diagnosed body or mind of the individual, but in the social environment and institutions which are poorly adapted to different needs and which therefore disadvantage her. The social model commonly distinguishes between an "impairment" in the body of the individual (such as blindness, dyslexia, or lower-limb paralysis), and the associated "disability" in her interaction with the social environment (such as a workplace which offers no alternative to textual information, or one which can only be accessed via a staircase). However, this distinction may also be interrogated, especially in its assumption that a difference must always be a deficit or misfortune requiring some special supplement. Stanback offers this observation, in explaining her preference of the term "non-normative embodiment" to the conventional "impairment:"

In 1790, blindness could be thought of as a curse or challenge from God, an indication of inner vision, a barrier to full participation in the body politic, a biological deficit, and / or a physiological variation that could offer insight into the operations of sensory perception and cognition. In all of these formulations there is a clear presumption of an underlying embodied, experiential difference. But the supposition that this underlying difference may be accurately identified as an "impairment", with the term's implications of inherent functional deficit, is much more reflective of twentieth- and twenty-first-century conceptions of disability than Romantic disability. By using the phrase "non-normative embodiment," I therefore intend to call attention to many instances in which Romantic disabilities may be understood as alternate—and in some cases advantageous—perceptual, epistemological, and aesthetic realities. (Stanback 2016, pp. 9–10)

Making a similar challenge to the anachronistic application of the modern concept of interdisciplinarity, on the grounds that what are now regarded as discrete disciplines were not rigidly separated in the Romantic era, Stanback makes a compelling case for the historicist evaluation of disability themes in Romantic literature in relation to the complexity of its own time. Stanback's argument above is also a good example of one of the simpler ethical duties of the disability scholar—to challenge negative stereotypes and assumptions of disadvantage, discovering or reinstating agency in the literature and lives of the period.

Several distinctive features of Romantic literature, as traditionally constituted, are particularly closely related to themes of disability and conducive to disability-informed re-reading. The concept of the sublime, in Burkean and Romantic aesthetics, is defined in opposition to qualities such as beauty, smoothness, symmetry, and order; it is therefore aligned with disruptive alternative states such as deformity, madness, and irrationality. Stanback has argued for the connection between the sublime and mental disability and inarticulacy (Stanback 2016, pp. 435–56). In a study of disability in modern fiction, Quayson also makes this connection with the sublime, arguing that, "Disability might [. . .] be productively thought of as being on a continuum with the sublime in terms of its oscillation between a pure abstraction and a set of material circumstances and conditions" (Quayson 2007, p. 23). Joshua offers a complementary historical argument on the centrality of "deformity" to the picturesque aesthetics of the late eighteenth century, arguing that "the picturesque uses deformity aesthetics to challenge the neoclassical ideals in which culturally determined simulacra of standards of beauty were preferred to singular bodies" (Joshua 2016, p. 46).

Another distinctively Romantic preoccupation, the fragment, has become an integral feature of disability readings of this period. Tobin Siebers' discussion of modern art in *Disability Aesthetics* includes the concept of broken or incomplete form, observing that formal fragmentation in a cultural artefact may "summon images of disability," in a way that activates awareness and discussion (Siebers 2010, p. 2). There is extensive critical literature on Romanticism's relationship with broken forms, often drawing comparisons between textual fragmentation and sculptural or architectural ruins. Formal and modal discussions (Janowitz 1998; Bradshaw 2008) are complemented by deconstructive analysis (Rajan 1985) and historicist investigations (Levinson 1986; Thomas 2003, 2005). The language of fragmentation—both poetic and critical—returns time and again to bodily images and analogies, making the "Romantic fragment poem" highly conducive to disabled re-reading. Accordingly, Bradshaw and Joshua's discussion of disability in Romantic poetry draws attention to the modal similarity between the imaginative reading and projected completion, which critics and theorists attribute to the Romantic fragment, and Mitchell and Snyder's theories of prosthesis and supplementation at a textual or discursive level (Bradshaw 2016, pp. 4–9).

In order to examine and test the application of some of these ideas to the specific instance of Romantic writing, then, let us consider a close textual case study, in Lord Byron's mythological poem "Prometheus", a text that, while ostensibly unconcerned with disability per se, draws on a range of disability metaphors and issues of physical suffering and mental isolation, to offer a complex account of the human which is fundamentally affected by ideas of difference. A re-reading of Byron's Prometheus poem through the lens of CDS can release new and alternative meanings about traumatized and damaged communication, solipsistic enclosure in self, and the possibility of health and creativity through a common declaration of suffering. Consider then the following canonical Romantic text, Byron's "Prometheus" (1817), and how it may be re-read in terms of disability themes:

1

Titan! To whose immortal eyes
 The sufferings of mortality,
 Seen in their sad reality,
 Were not as things that gods despise;
 What was thy pity's recompense? 5
 A silent suffering, and intense;
 The rock, the vulture, and the chain,
 All that the proud can feel of pain,
 The agony they do not show,
 The suffocating sense of woe, 10
 Which speaks but in its loneliness,
 And then is jealous lest the sky
 Should have a listener, nor will sigh
 Until its voice is echoless.

2

Titan! to thee the strife was given 15
 Between the suffering and the will,
 Which torture where they cannot kill;
 And the inexorable Heaven,
 And the deaf tyranny of Fate,
 The ruling principle of Hate, 20
 Which for its pleasure doth create
 The things it may annihilate,
 Refused thee even the boon to die:
 The wretched gift eternity
 Was thine—and thou hast borne it well. 25

is an aspect of Prometheus' punishment, but also his deliberate choice: he actively rejects vocal communication. Prometheus is thus defined by his enforced/embraced experience of pain without external communication, a function which is replaced by his representation in the poem itself. Byron's treatment of the revolutionary myth of Prometheus differs from that of his friend Percy Shelley, in whose *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), the Titan's eventual victory over the tyrannical Jupiter is achieved through an act of morally superior forgiveness, breaking the cycle of repressive and vindictive violence. That is to say, Shelley's Prometheus is finally able to liberate himself through expressive and righteous speech. In another notable allusion to the myth in Letitia Elizabeth Landon's elegy, "Felicia Hemans" (1838), Prometheus becomes an allegory of poetic and female creativity through pain: "The fable of Prometheus and the vulture, / Reveals the poet's and the woman's heart" (Landon 1997, pp. 55–56). The world, which judges women and poets alike, and inflicts cruelty on them, also exploits them by feeding on their expressive emotional distress. Contrastingly, Byron's version not only emphasizes the absence of speech and hearing but locates the expressive power of his myth of revolutionary suffering in this very silence.

It is in the second stanza that Byron explicitly introduces the concept of deafness: the "inexorable Heaven, / And the deaf tyranny of Fate/The ruling principle of Hate" (18–20) have decreed that Prometheus may not find relief from his pain in death. The general foregrounding of silence, loss, absence, and alienation in the poem suggests that more significance is attached to the word "deaf" than merely a synonym for "unresponsive". The education of hearing-impaired people in the early nineteenth century was predicated on a general belief that the inevitable accompaniment of deafness was an inability or struggle to speak, and consequent alienation from language. Joseph Watson's *Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb* (1809), for example, introduces the idea at the very outset: "To be born deaf [. . .] is invariably followed by Dumbness" (Watson 1809, iii). Watson's educational treatise is typical also in a solicitous concern for the spiritual welfare of the deaf, who may be excluded from religious truth in living outside the majority audist society, and therefore need an education which is not only functional but also focused on moral and spiritual redemption:

We are ready to think there is something spiritual and enlightening in the sense of hearing, which, in truth, resides not in hearing, as such, but in language, of which hearing is only the inlet, with those who possess it. (Watson 1809, xx)

We may define [language as] *the expression of thought*; that is, thought rendered cognoscible, by means of impressions on the external organs of sense: or, in other words, it is the medium by which mental operations are transmitted from mind to mind. (40)

According to this theory, people who do not hear are not only excluded from specifically auditory language, but from truth, thought, and communication in general; the educator sets out to supplement this entire range of experience. However, Davis' work on cultures of deafness has complicated the belief that deafness was assumed to be connected to an imperviousness to language, arguing that, in the eighteenth century, the rapid expansion of both literacy and access to print was accompanied by a fascination with the alternative language of signing. Davis calls this chapter "How Europe Became Deaf in the Eighteenth Century," since it explores the analogies between literacy and reading and the practices of deaf/signing people, both of which derive meaning from visual cues, in silence: "As the hearing person became deaf, the deaf person became the totemic representation of the new reading public" (Davis 1997, p. 62). So, does the deafness of "Fate" in Byron's poem contain rational and linguistic thought, or only its absence? The phrase "the deaf tyranny of Fate" seems to imply that heaven is able to hear Prometheus' screams of pain but refuses to respond, but we are also told that Prometheus chooses to be silent, to deprive his tormentors of any sadistic satisfaction: "All that the Thunderer wrung from thee/Was but the menace which flung back/On him the torments of thy rack [. . .] And in thy Silence was his Sentence" (26–31). Both the torturer and the tortured exist in self-imposed silence, and all that is exchanged between them is inarticulate hatred. As in Shelley's later poem, Byron portrays the cycle of oppressive violence as an abusive relationship; unlike Shelley, Byron declines to resolve this deadlock with any narrative of liberal progress.)

In the third stanza, Byron moves his theme on, from the story of Prometheus' suffering, towards its moral significance for humanity in general: "a mighty lesson we inherit" (44). On one level, Prometheus appears as a Christ-like martyr, who has been punished for his crimes of compassion and altruism. Byron complicates this simple idea with a brilliant pun on the word "baffled" (39): the archaic meaning of the word is something akin to "pilloried", when a disgraced knight or other person convicted of treachery was shamed in public, typically by being hung up by the heels; to this, Byron adds the more usual modern metaphorical usage, meaning confused or thwarted. The phrase therefore alludes visually to Prometheus' punishment, on the gory details of which the poem remains elegantly silent. And it also yokes this image with the concept of mental confusion. Prometheus' "endurance" (42) of his baffling torture is a combination of mental and physical strength, and his victory keeps him fully enclosed in self, unable to exchange comprehension with another. There is a further dimension to this idea, which may relate to the person of the author himself. The poem avoids direct allusion to the precise nature of Prometheus' torture, which, as Byron's reader well knows, is having his liver torn out daily and re-grown (the nearest allusion is the phrase "The rock, the vulture, and the chain") (7). By introducing the image of Prometheus as "baffled", Byron relocates his suffering from his visceral organs to his feet, allowing his reader to interpret the Titan's pain and public exposure in relation to his own lower-limb deformity, with which his enemies tried to hurt and shame him. Prometheus' defiance of Jupiter's sentence then becomes another of the poet's mythic performances of self, a disabled hero whose spirit is "Triumphant where it dares defy" (58).

In the closing lines of the poem, the Titan is invoked to typify humanity, in being "in part divine, / A troubled stream from a pure source" (47–48). "Man" (49) is imagined as a pollution of divine purity, and yet this purity is deeply suspect—the same "inexorable Heaven" (18) which deprived humanity of self-consciousness and decreed Prometheus' barbaric punishment. Better by far to be the vulnerable human, troubled and polluted by mortality and impairment, than the callous Olympian judge, perfect only in tyranny. Byron's meditation on the Romantic revolutionary myth consequently identifies humanity with both pain and disability, and celebrates this condition, epitomized in the difficult phrase "concentred recompense" (57), which again gestures towards self-enclosure, self-sustenance, and self-defeat. Like Prometheus, humanity is a travesty of the divine, a being defined by pain and confusion; unlike Prometheus, humans know that they are mortal. "Even in torture," the human spirit can perceive "Its own concentrated recompense" (56–57). The only victory, for both Prometheus and for the humanity which he has supposedly liberated, is in defiance of those who injure them; and the only satisfaction is felt within the irreducible singularity of the individual subject, a language which does not break out from its own silence.

The odal form of the poem, combined with Byron's smooth mastery of a public oratorical style, is in uneasy tension with these themes of suppressed pain and avoidance of communication. Byron uses a polished, eloquent style to explore the situation of a broken body locked in self-imposed silence. It is also significant that the odal voice celebrates Prometheus in the second person, while giving him no words of his own. Byron's Prometheus myth turns on a paradoxical interplay of ability and disability, pain and pain control, and sense and sensory impairment. Heaven's quality of deafness and blindness to suffering enables the continuing oppression of humanity. Yet it is Prometheus' capacity for suffering, including his self-imposed mental isolation, which enables his revolutionary purpose.

Re-reading Romantic literature through the lens of CDS does not depend on there being specific disability content or a known lived experience of disability in the underlying biography. A theorized re-reading informed by disability studies can release new and alternative meanings about the distinctive aesthetic and political preoccupations of Romantic writing. The application of CDS methods can also help to disrupt the canonical and institutional nature of Romanticism, and to include dissident voices—not only the witness of those different in body and mind, but of difference in general.

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