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Cognitive Impairment, Care, and "Defenses of Narrative"
in an Age of Neuroscience

1. The System and the Other

"*'How do you account for this?' The Assistant Commissioner nodded at the cloth rag lying before him on the table.' 'I don't account for it at all, sir. It's simply unaccountable.'*" Joseph Conrad, The Secret Agent (140).

The dialogue with those outside or at the limits of language has been ongoing at least since the earliest written narratives. Moses was "slow of speech"; Gilgamesh's companion Enkidu, initially like an animal, without language, then acquired it–and lost his animal abilities. Prophecy, revelation, the divine, on the one hand; and matter, the animal, filth, abjection, the traumatic, the apocalyptic on various other hands all have found representation in figures of linguistic or cognitive impairment. These figures appearing to stand at, or just beyond, the limits of symbolic usage become in our narratives the secret agents who define the symbolic and the social. But what does it mean to stand outside the symbolic loop? What does it mean, in fact, to conceive of the processes of symbolization *as* a loop that one might be in or outside of? And why should human beings with impaired ability to use language–whether that inability is physical, as with a stutter or certain cases of Tourette's or deafness, or whether it results from a cognitive deficit--be figured as essentially external, or at least liminal, to human social life? Why, that is, the need for such persistent, pervasive metaphorization of cognitive and linguistic impairment–and, I should add, the persistent conflation of these sometimes overlapping, but medically quite distinct qualities?

Let me begin with an ancient example: the fool, and specifically the contrast between the fool of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian fool. The fool of the Tanakh is a fool both

intellectually and morally: continually seduced by "forbidden" women (Proverbs 7:6-27);

ignoring good advice (Proverbs 1:22; Ecclesiastes 4:13); trying to persuade others to follow the

path of folly (Proverbs 9:13-18). But the fool is always punished: "He whose speech is foolish

comes to grief (Proverbs. 10:9); "a rod is ready for the back of the senseless"(10:13). In this

genre of wisdom literature, there is no overlapping of wisdom and folly. God created the world

on a foundation of wisdom (Pr. 3:19, 8:22), and wisdom consists simply in living according to

prevailing social norms. Folly is a dangerous, self-destructive deviation. There is no sense, as in

William Blake's wonderful reinterpretation of wisdom literature in The Marriage of Heaven and

Hell, that "if the fool would persist in his folly, he would become wise." The descriptions of the

fool in the wisdom literature assume the proper functioning of divine law, and so there is nothing

incommensurate about the fool here, nor about the divine. God's will is entirely commensurate

with social normativity. This view of the fool looks back toward the common sense

understanding of the divine expressed late in Deuteronomy that

> Surely, this instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too
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> baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens,
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> that you should say, 'Who among us can go up to the heavens and
>
> get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?' Neither is
>
> it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who among us can cross to
>
> the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we
>
> may observe it?' No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth
>
> and in your heart, to observe it (30.11-14).

Divine law, the human spirit, and human language all here are congruent. The

fool violates social norms, and thus also divine law, but he is in no way outside of them. There

does not, indeed, appear to be an "outside." As a famous Talmudic commentary on this passage

suggests, God's word is available to infinite interpretation; dialogue and consensus govern legal

practice; and even God h-/self does not have the final say in legal debate.[1] But when social

norms break down or are placed radically in doubt, the status of the fool changes markedly. At

such moments in Tanakh narratives, a prophet must appear, who brings with him the linguistic

traces of the original trauma of revelation. In prophetic discourse, there is in general, as Herbert

Marks writes, "a central moment of blockage" (4)–the coal on Isaiah's tongue, Ezekial's

muteness, a frequently disturbed and paradoxical syntax. The prophet's presence, behavior, and

language indicate that the divine no longer resides in social norms and that a new dose of

revelation is needed to reunite norm and divinity. His mission expresses confidence that this

goal is achievable, that there is not some permanent divide between the divine and the social

order. Thus, the prophet does his job and returns to private, non-prophetic life, in which foolish

behavior is again the province of the fool.

        The Christian fool, conversely, represents a permanent and essential divide

between divine rule and the social order. By the time of Paul, all prophecies had been delivered;

the messiah (in Christian terms, the true object of all prophecy) had appeared. And yet the

world, in its still corrupted state, endured, apparently requiring Christ's encore appearance for its

termination and salvation. In such a time of crisis, the norms provided by the Torah and its

rabbinic commentators were vastly insufficient.   To mark or testify to the divine presence in the

world, a fool was now required. As Paul wrote in a well-known passage,

Divine folly is wiser than the wisdom of man, and divine weakness

stronger than man's strength... [God] has chosen things low and

contemptible, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order

(Corinthians I 1:18-29).

The sacred fool is an apocalyptic not a prophetic figure. His call is not to bring a transgressing

people back to God's law. Indeed, in speaking truth to the world as it is, he is incapable of being

understood. His linguistic blockage is more extreme than that of the prophet who, after all, tried

urgently, and finally succeeded in making himself heard and comprehensible. The sacred fool's

language remains "a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to Greeks" (1:23). God's "hidden

wisdom" is inaccessible to the world's "governing powers, which are declining to their end...The

powers that rule the world have never known it; if they had, they would not have crucified the

Lord of Glory" (2:6-9). The sacred fool provides what, in contemporary terms, we might call a

total critique of a social order seen as irredeemably corrupt and absolutely incompatible with the

sacred.

After the religious and political triumph of Christianity in Europe, the character of

the fool changed. Total critique modulated into satire or was regulated into carnival–as, for

instance, in Erasmus, Rabelais, and Cervantes. But the more radical version of sacred folly

continued into modernity in the guises of wild children and a wide variety of depictions of

cognitively and linguistically impaired figures. The purest, most illustrative modern form of the

Christian sacred fool is Dostoevski's–not Myshkin in The Idiot, but Christ himself in Ivan

Karamazov's parable of the Grand Inquisitor. The church, in this tale, has established an

efficient, modern, secular order, and Christ must be executed again in order to preserve it.[2]

"I wander through each chartered street/ Near where the chartered Thames does flow." William Blake, "London."

Blake's famous poem lauds the triumphs of modern urban planning and natural science. Both city and nature have been placed under the charter of rational knowledge and guidance, and a just and fecund society prospers through this knowledge. Oh! Sorry; I was looking at the wrong note card! Of course, "London" is a bitter condemnation of modern forms of knowledge and their effects on nature and social life.   But this mistaken conflation points toward the central epistemological and moral tensions of modernity, which can be summed up as the problem of knowledge as system or model. As Isaiah Berlin argued, the epistemological premise of the Enlightenment was that knowledge was potentially total, that "all genuine questions can be answered" by means of rational, empirical inquiry (21), that knowledge takes the form of propositions that are compatible with each other (64), and that the totality of the world would form a "closed, perfect pattern" (105). Michel Foucault described this approach to knowledge in more detail in <u>The Order of Things</u>.   Enlightenment thinkers sought to achieve "an exhaustive ordering of the world" which could be "displayed in a system contemporary with itself" (74)–which is to say, that the means of representation would be entirely adequate to the objects represented, failing neither through lack nor excess. The ideal of knowledge entailed an ideal of language, of "signs, a syntax, and a grammar in which all conceivable order must find its place" (84). Such a language would "gather into itself...the totality of the world" and, just as important, "the world, as the totality of what is representable, must be able to become, in its totality, an Encyclopaedia" (85). Knowledge, in this view, relied on a language evidently

surpassing the capacities of natural language. And, as Foucault continues this history, the

project of knowledge becomes increasingly entwined with problematics of representation. If

knowledge is potentially total, but the symbolic means of knowing are necessarily flawed, then

the modern natural and human sciences must create symbolic processes that will make

knowledge actually knowable. Thus, Foucault writes of the "positivist dream" of a perfect

scientific language which would be the "unmisted mirror of a non-verbal knowledge" (296), an

unshakeable linkage of *les mots et les choses* (The Order of Things' original French title). And

this connection of words and things, or of a symbolic system and the natural and social worlds,

would not be a gnostic return to an Adamic, pre-Babel language of divine correspondance. It

would serve as the mechanism for a secular, practical, technical ordering of the world. It would

give the world its charter.[3]

This modern project of knowing, charting and controlling the world has taken

many forms: the Hegelian system; Weber's theory of instrumental reason, bureaucratization, and

the "iron cage" of modern capitalist development; Wittgenstein's effort in the Tractatus to

construct a symbolic network that would state as "atomic facts" all "that is the case"; the

industrial-administrative techniques of Taylorism; emerging theories in biology from the mid-

19th through early 20th-centuries of the organism and environment as homeostatic, self-

regulating systems; Saussure's theory of language as self-referential system, and its descendents

in structuralism and poststructuralism; Lacan's postulating of a symbolic order in which

individual consciousness and social ideologies are formed; modern systems theories of Parsons

and Luhmann; the cybernetics of Wiener; the dominance of quantitative models in economics

and the social sciences. Implicit or explicit in these theories is an understanding of language, as

Fredric Jameson, put it, "as a total system...complete at every moment" (<u>Prison House</u>, 5).

Linguistics, then, Saussure predicted, would "become the master-pattern for all branches of

semiology," that is, for all use of signs(68)–a prediction that Roland Barthes saw as fulfilled

forty years later, describing culture as "a general system of symbols, governed by the same

operations; there is a unity in the symbolic field, and culture, in all its aspects, is a language"

("To Write," 13).[4]

        This modern conflation of knowledge-representation-language-system-model-

production-administration-culture-ideology seeks to portray a social-symbolic world without an

exterior. It is all there; and what is there, is... what is. What is not known is simply not yet

known; an empirical, not a systemic lack.

        Running parallel to, and within, these articulations of totalizing systems of

knowledge, representation, and power have been what we might call *dys-* or *dis-articulations*.

As Michael Lemahieu wrote, "because the modern worldview acknowledges no limits to its

discursive reach, there is no metalanguage that would escape its discourses and consequently no

external perspective from which" to conduct a critique (74). If a system is presumed to be total

and without exterior or remainder, opposition must take the form of a failure of articulation (the

dysarticulate) or forcible exclusion– dismemberment--from the social-symbolic order (the

disarticulate). In response to this dilemma, we see the creation of the modern radical other,

conceived specifically as other to symbolization. And just as the development of modernity's

concept of system involves a conflation of linguistic, epistemological, economic, and political

categories, so the development of modern alterity brings together a variety of incongruous

entities "beyond representation." The older theological-political functions of the prophet and

sacred fool are often retained, but joined now with the workings of the sublime, the primitive,

the unconscious, the body, the traumatic, the abject, the ethically infinite other (e.g. of Levinas),

entities that have "neither word nor concept" (i.e. Heidegger's Being and appropriation,

Derrida's *differance*, *cendres*, and *shibboleth*), Lacan's "real," as well as a variety of socio-

political others: the woman, the racial other, the colonized, the proletarian, the Jew, the

homosexual. Note that the exalted others are close kindred to the excluded, debased others, and

that the socio-political "others" who have been *dis*articulated from the polity often partake of the

*dys*articulations of radical philosophical or theological alterity–e.g. Spivak's subaltern who

cannot speak or Coetzee's Friday whose tongue has been cut off.

   "The relief of speech," declared Kierkegaard's Johannes de Silencio in Fear and

Trembling, "is that it translates me into the universal." Thus, Abraham "cannot speak" (137).

The "universal," for Kierkegaard, is Hegel's vision of a dialectical totality moving toward

ultimate transparency and articulation, and of which ethics is a crucial part. But Abraham's act,

the sacrifice of Isaac, cannot be articulated in any language of ethics. The ethical, as

Kierkegaard writes, is "suspended" in Abraham–that is to say, in his direct relationship with God

(85). Regarding his attempt to kill his son, there is nothing he can say, or there are no linguistic

categories in modernity in which he might say it. He is indistinguishable from the psychotic

individual who murders his family on the evening news because God tells him to. There are, of

course, languages of psychopathology, social deprivation, religious fanaticism, stress, and so on–

all of these being categories within the universal. But, Kierkegaard emphasizes, there can be no

language of Abraham, only silence, nonsense, and circumlocution. And Abraham, for

Kierkegaard, is the limit case of a condition actually true for all–that is, true for all, yet not

universal because incommensurably different in each case. "The individual is higher than the universal" (84), which must imply that incommensurability will always puncture totality, and the system must collapse whenever it genuinely confronts experience–"the paradox that cannot be mediated" (95).

This opposition reappears in remarkably similar forms in many of the central documents defining the contours of modernity. In Derrida's pivotal critique of structuralism in "Structure, Sign, and Play," his principal object is structuralism's claim of a universal commensurability among cultures and symbolic systems–the presumed ability to occupy a coherent center amid social-symbolic flux. Derrida argues instead that such a presumed center is available for a process of infinite substitution, and so is not a center–a "fixed locus" that would ground all meaning and value–but is rather a "function by means of which meaning and value are continually shifting (280). The "center" is an ideological not an epistemological place, and the structure that follows from it derives from contingencies of social power. As Burke would put it, the center is the "god-term," the term bearing the power to determine; or, in Lacan's terminology, the center is the "quilting point" (*point de capiton*) where the inherently unstable, incomplete symbolic order is woven into seeming, ideologically motivated, wholeness. And the "real," the unsymbolizable, traumatizing, and inevitable failure of the symbolic order and its ideologies, generates ever anew those paradoxes "that cannot be mediated"–or, as Kierkegaard writes elsewhere, "keep[s] the wound of the negative open" (in Baker, 269).

But what is it, for Derrida in this seminal essay, that will move us out from the ideology of the center? For the problem always, in these kindred critiques of the totalizing system, is how to get out of it. It is not enough to demonstrate that the system is theoretically

untenable, to note, with Wittgenstein, that "the modern system tries to make it look as if

everything were explained" (TLP 6.372), but that "at the bottom of well-founded belief lies

belief that is not founded" (On Certainty 253). Even after one reveals centrality and its totalizing

reach to be a linguistic construct serving some concentration of power, the power to totalize

remains in place. Genuine destruction of structure can only be the work of some other of

structure, some other of language–the return of the dis/dys-articulated. And this is what Derrida

tries to usher in with his essay's final words:

> Here there is a sort of question, call it historical, of which we are
>
> only glimpsing today the conception, the formation, the gestation,
>
> the labor. I employ these words, I admit, with a glance toward the
>
> business of childbearing–but also with a glance toward those who,
>
> in a company from which I do not exclude myself, turn their eyes
>
> away in the face of the as yet unnameable which is proclaiming
>
> itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in
>
> the offing, only under the species of the non-species, in the
>
> formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity (293).

In this astonishing mix of metaphors, the biological merging with the historical,

the historical with the apocalyptic, and all converging in the figure of the not-yet-existing,

unrepresentable and unspeaking other, we see a vivid instance of the longstanding effort to

conceive of alterity in relation to an intellectual-technical-economic totality that would

assimilate, sublate, and colonize all others to its knowledge and method.

And yet, one can certainly conceive the situation differently, imagine a more genial birth than that of the rough, apocalyptic beast that Derrida seems to have borrowed from Yeats. One need not, as in all the aforementioned models, imagine language as "iron cage," "world picture," "totality," closed system, symbolic order as ideology, etc. To critique a social-symbolic order by means of some figure of radical alterity means to have accepted the premise of language/knowledge/representation as closed, imprisoning, and containing no terms for its own internal critique and reform. The problem, again, is how to get out. The problem is, how is change possible? But is this not a pseudo-problem? How is change possible? Well, clearly, it is. One of the key features attributed to modernity by both its proponents and critics is the pervasiveness and rapidity of change. To which the response would be, certainly change occurs, indeed vertiginously, but consistently in the direction of greater totalization, and moves toward potential freedom quickly are reappropriated into the ideological, hegemonic whole. Empirical evidence is mixed on this point.

One can, nevertheless, proceed from different premises on how language or a social-symbolic order works, whether that ominous sounding term is even relevant, and whether some radical other of language is necessary as a utopian-apocalyptic point of opposition to the world as it is. While Kierkegaard required the non-speaking, anti-universal identity of Abraham to subvert the Hegelian system; and Levinas, similarly, theorized the radical, unframeable, infinite other to stand in opposition to a social-symbolic totality, William James repudiated entirely that opposition between system and alterity. The urge toward totality, James argued, is a psychological trait, a personal impulse for "generalizing, simplifying, and subordinating" (14). Particular portions of knowledge are valid, but bits and pieces of reality will "remain outside of

the largest combination of it ever made" (20), and this location outside does not render

something radically other. Outside of one discourse is another discourse, perhaps a set of terms

outlining things not known. We do not need, he writes, that "habit of thinking only in the most

violent extremes" (40). One can imagine, rather, a universe "connected loosely, after the pattern

of our daily experience" (39).

This Jamesian pluralism and kindred approaches entail very different premises

regarding language and its social consequences, including the location from which, and tone in

which, social critique can be directed. One need not, in this view, seek to get outside of

language. There is no barrier, such as Wittgenstein invoked in the <u>Tractatus</u> between language

and nonsense (<u>TLP</u> 3). The social-symbolic order produces its own oppositions, and alterity is

revealed through dialogue, or even conflict, but not through silence, folly, madness, sublimity,

abjection, or apocalyptic shattering. Arguing against Saussure's view of language as self-

referential system, Valentin Voloshinov wrote of language's "inherent semantic openness,

corresponding to a still active social process, from which new meanings and possible meanings

can be generated" (in Williams 75). Similarly, for Jean-Jacques Lecercle, it is "no longer

possible to think of [language] as a system of signs–we must view it rather as a locus for

contending forces. It is not a structure, but an unstable and potentially violent institution" (45).

In such views of social-symbolic life–as distinct from social-symbolic order–the exclusion of an

"other" can only be regarded as a political act, not as a necessity following from structural

constraints. To be excluded from a hegemonic discourse is not to be an other of language. In

these views of language, the conflation of dis-/dysarticulation can be disentangled. One is not

trapped in a structured totality of representation, knowledge, production, and administration; and

an external, radical other is conceptually unnecessary, for otherness is always present in language and in subjectivity. If certain language practices threaten to become hegemonic, they can be opposed with other language practices, or, as is probable, can be opposed using alternate modes existing within the same practice. And this is the case because, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham expresses it, "language is not just an autonomous formal system but rather a medium whose formal elements permit an unformalized excess to become legible, a medium saturated with otherness, and thus with ethics" (Getting 61). By this, Harpham means that insofar as language cannot be totalized, and so generates excesses, contradictions, incoherences, and other forms of resistance to composition and communication, interlocutors must work in order to understand each other–and, indeed, to understand themselves. Linguistic indeterminacy entails a practice that is both interpretive and ethical. In this sense, the imagined "fall" of language from Adamic, pre-Babel purity of meaning was a fall really into the recognition of others as subjects capable of speaking for themselves, not just as being correctly named and thus fixed into a linguistic totality. In this sense, the unnameable radical other is simply the reversed face of the perfectly named other. The first cannot speak at all; the second cannot speak for himself because his language has no interstices in which he might find his own utterance.

This sense of language as imperfect, unsystemic, open, not totalizing seems at least as plausible as the sense that it opposes, and would seem to provide social, psychological, and political advantages: it allows both for autonomy and for psychological and social limits to autonomy, and does not reify either self or other; it is able to imagine ethical relations arising from the limits, flaws, and vulnerabilities of language and self, rather than seeking some perfect language or completely autonomous self, then despairing at their failures. This is the view

shared, in broad terms, by Bakhtin, the later Wittgenstein, and Habermas, in addition to the theorists cited above. Why then hold a view that seems counterintuitive, hyperbolic, and paranoid? Why not dispense with the radical dis/dysarticulate other and return to the actual, familiar (if also somewhat uncanny) intersubjective lifeworld of language which, as Habermas puts it, would diagnose "Western 'logocentrism'...not as an excess but as a deficit of rationality"? (310)–with rationality here defined as something discovered through the unconstrained communication among different subjects, not as a mono-logic imposing foundational truths.

There seem to be several problems. First, it might appear that while the views of linguistic and societal openness are plausible and desirable, they are somehow illusory. All the apparent mobility in terms of technology, demographics, geographies, political regimes, economic development, social mores, may be construed simply as complex forms of stasis. Dominant ideological and economic power cannot be overthrown, and precisely for the reason that this power controls what is recognized as knowledge or sensible opinion. Dissent, too, has its place in this system, at least in its more liberal versions. And more sophisticated versions of systems theory, like those of Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann, attempt to insert openness into their theories and to account for relations between the system and what transpires outside it. Parsons stresses that society consists of multiple systems, and that no single system can be studied apart from its relations with other systems (108). Moreover, he acknowledges the abstract and selective nature of any social theory. Systems are porous, theories are partial, totality is an illusion (105). Likewise, Luhmann theorizes communication as providing the means for a system "to maintain closure under the conditions of openness" so that systems can

code novelty into their reproduction (13). System, for Luhmann does not imply predictability.

On the widest scale, no conceivable world system could be predictable owing to the particular

internal evolutions of its subsystems. There is no external other to the system–all discourse is

systemic–but there is an autonomy, or at least a sense of contingency in the evolution of

subsystems, and thus of the larger system. Given these possibilities of openness and change that

Parsons and Luhmann build into their notions of system, we might ask, why theorize a system at

all?

One might answer that it *appears*, at any rate, that the stronger imperative of even

the most open, non-paranoid theory of system is to explain continuity and reproduction, not

change. There seems to be an innate conservatism to the impulse to integrate all phenomena into

a comprehensible, and thus predictable, whole. The paranoia I have referred to in reference to

critiques of totality–the tendency to describe the system in the most unambiguous, hyperbolic

sense–is matched by the systematizers' own terror of chaos, or, more modestly, of contingency.

All must be subject to knowledge, thus control–even chaos itself!–or else all will be lost. We

need not appeal to fears of actual castration to see in the threats to totality an echo of Freud's

famous description of conservatism: "In later life, grown men may experience a similar panic,

perhaps when the cry goes up that throne and altar are in danger" (153).

A final example of this need for system even when the system has been so opened

that it no longer appears systemic can be found in the thinking of economist Joseph Stieglitz.

Accepting the Nobel Prize in 2001, Stieglitz critiqued standard economic models for their

presumtions that all participants in an economy will or can possess complete information, and

that, on this basis, markets will work as perfect, self-regulating systems. These models, he

wrote, "virtually made economics a branch of engineering," possessing transparent diagnostic and predictive powers (482). By "knowing preferences and technology and initial endowments," these models could claim to "describe the time path of the economy" (484). But this presumption of complete information, Stieglitz argues, is illusory. First, possession of knowledge in any economy is asymetrical, and economic models ignore inequalities of power that grant some participants more information than others (490). Second, Stieglitz emphasizes, events will happen that no model can anticipate. Random events will occur and "have consequences that are irreversible." Even the smallest failure of information will destroy a model's predictive power, and such failures are inevitable. The world as it is manifests "a high level of indeterminacy," and "one cannot simply predict where the economy will be by knowing preferences and technology and initial endowments" (521). Stieglitz essentially spells out the rationale for a narrative understanding of the economy, and yet, what he proposes, of course–and what won him the Nobel in economics–is another model, but one which creates mathematical mechanisms for incorporating the indeterminacies of history. But if the most compelling feature of an economy is unpredictable change over time, that is to say, its tendency to exceed the boundaries of any systemic description, then why not abandon the model altogether and settle for the task of trying to tell the story, with all its gaps, shifting values, and changes of direction?

Why such tenacity of belief on the parts both of proponents and critics? Theoretical impossibility and empirical failure seem not to be obstacles. Modernity, as Henri Lefebvre wrote, "is best characterized not as an already established 'structure,' nor as something which clearly has the capacity to become structured and coherent, but rather as a fruitless attempt to achieve structure and coherence" (187). Thus, every new set of discoveries or terminologies

in the sciences or social sciences provokes new initiatives of totalization and, consequently, new

visions of dis-/dysarticulation– alterity, incoherence, abjection and impairment--to counter them.

Such are many of the central statements of, or comments on, aesthetic modernism:

"The language of poetry is, then, a difficult, roughened, impeded

language." Victor Shklovksy, "Art as Technique."

"My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands

me finally recognizes them as senseless..." Ludwig Wittgenstein,

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.

"The primary work" of western modernism "consists in strenuous

acts of unknowing." Philip Weinstein, Unknowing: The Work of

Modernist Fiction.

Modernism's focus and method reflect "the nebulous

consciousness of an idiot...its obsession with the morbid and the

pathological" Georg Lukacs, (30-31).

"Stupidity, the indelible tag of modernity, is our symptom." Avital

Ronell, Stupidity, 11.

"And if there is one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is

our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt

at the stake, signaling through the flames." Antonin Artaud, The

Theater and its Double.

"Linguistics is concerned with language in all its aspects–language

in operation, language in drift, language in the nascent state, and

language in dissolution." Roman Jacobson, "Two Aspects of

Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" (95).

But the question is not just theoretical. Let me add one more quotation of very different provenance to show more fully the working of modern dis-/dysarticulation: "Among the social tasks that confront state governments today, none is more pressing than the care of the feeble-minded... It is because they, at least as much as any other social class, complicate and involve every social problem, and because they, more than any other class, tend to increase on our hands." Editorial in Survey (1914, in Noll, 1). The question, then, is not just how to conceive of an alterity that might confront a totalizing social-symbolic order, but how the modern state should treat mentally impaired people who could not function under modern economic and political conditions. The mentally impaired often could not work in modern industry (while they had been able to perform tasks in a traditional agricultural economy), and they could not fully participate as citizens in a democratic polity (while they could maintain a valued status in traditional family and community settings). The question, or the problem, of mental defectiveness was transferred from the private, familial setting to public sites of science and administration, a process which, in Great Britain, culminated in the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913. This law provided for the institutionalization of the mentally defective on both humanitarian and eugenic grounds. The mentally defective were regarded as both helpless and dangerous, requiring both care and control. Regarded now as scientific, clinical, and administrative objects, British subjects deemed mentally defective were simultaneously brought into public discourse and excluded from the polity. In the U.K., anxieties concerning mental

deficiency reverberated with anxieties about class. In the U.S., these anxieties also brought in questions of race and immigration.[5]

These issues and tensions all converge in Joseph Conrad's novel The Secret Agent. A mentally impaired character, Stevie, is subject to the classifying gaze of modern science in a social system whose aspirations to total knowledge are revealed (largely through the novel's corrosively ironic tone) to be degenerate. Stevie proves to be "unaccountable" in the discourse of that system and also constitutes the system's absent moral center. Stevie's capacities for violent moral outrage and for infinite care, his difficulty articulating his moral concerns and his ultimate, physical disarticulation uncover the totalizing system's epistemic and moral limits and the incapacities of care as a private relation. The problem of modernity, as The Secret Agent portrays it, is how to get out. But in the world presented in The Secret Agent, there is no outside. The rival state powers, the police, and the anarchists all display the same attitudes, the same carelessness, the same dedication to self-interest and self-perpetuation. As the Professor, the novel's local bomb-maker, claims, "the terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality–counter moves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical" (94). It is, apparently, impossible even to imagine or find the language for some other ethical-political structure. Thus, in a moment that defines the novel's discursive attitude and atmosphere, another anarchist, Ossipon, responds angrily to the Professor's verbal quibbling over the use of the word "crime" with "How am I to express myself? One must use the current words" (95). This is the ideological dilemma Conrad presents in this novel: one can only employ the vocabulary that one finds at hand–the "current words"–and social reality is entirely defined by this vocabulary.

Stevie escapes the determining power of the "current words" through his inability

to employ them fluently. He is not *radically* outside of symbolic usage. He attended state

primary school and learned to read; and one portion of his moral perspective he acquired by

listening to the anarchists talk vividly about social injustices–and, as his sister complained,

taking their talk, which, indeed, was all talk, too literally. The other portion he learned through

personal experiences of physical brutality inflicted by his father, and the experience of protection

and care given him by his sister. Nevertheless, he is simple, slow of speech and thought, and

uncompromising in his commitment to justice and protection of the weak. He would be a sacred

fool except that the "current words" of the dominant ideology do not allow space for such an

entity. He is, rather, as Ossipon calls him, following the diagnostic method of Cesar Lombroso,

a "degenerate," indeed "a perfect type." Lombroso's categories pervade the novel, and all the

characters, often in perversely comic ways, are marked by them. Stevie is precisely the sort of

"feeble-minded" high functioning "moron" that caused such unease in Europe and the United

States in the early twentieth-century. Stevie thus is included in the discursive reach of the

"current words": "degenerate," "mental defective," "feeble-minded." But he also escapes this

reach.

After Stevie accidently blows himself up, the police find in his unidentifiable

remains a tag on his clothing with his address written on it–a label sewn onto his jacket by his

sister in case he became lost. If Ossipon's remark concerning the "current words" might be

considered one motto for this novel, the other would be Chief Inspector Heat's response to the

Assistant Commissioner's question regarding the discovery of Stevie's address label. "'How do

you account for this?' The Assistant Commissioner nodded at the cloth rag lying before him on

the table." 'I don't account for it at all, sir. It's simply unaccountable" (140). And it is not just his address label, but Stevie himself who remains unaccountable, even in the midst of a social-symbolic order that has devised a set of terms intended precisely to account for him. On one hand, Conrad links Stevie to an aesthetic of the sublime in his drawing of endless concentric circles. This "rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable" (76), signal Stevie's position at the boundary not just of this novel's social-symbolic order but at the boundary of symbolization itself. But this liminality shows itself more importantly in Stevie's attempt to articulate moral and political judgements. Stevie's struggle to articulate the moral-political problem embodied in the scene with the cabman and his horse is not an effort merely to locate a correct or adequate phrase; Stevie, rather, is forced to remake language entirely: "muttering half words, and even words that would have been whole if they had not been made up of halves that did not belong to each other" (168). And his result, grammatically amputated, without a verb or an agent, and arrived at through a torturous process that resembles the transformative fragmentations of modern art, is a marvelous, accurate, empathetic condemnation of the social-symbolic order. "Bad world for poor people" (168). Conrad rewrites alterity into the modern world by using a cognitively impaired character to reinvoke what is essentially a Christian ethics of care–without mentioning Christianity and at a moment when Christianity lacked much ideological force. Stevie's insights on justice for the weak, and his position in the novel as touchstone for others' moral attitudes and actions, are exactly congruent with Jesus's admonition in Matthew 25.40 that "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

This ethics of care, based in empathy and reciprocity, is, however, consistently ineffectual. Winnie's care for her brother ends in disaster. And Stevie's effort to imagine a practical form of care that would embrace the cabman and his horse leads to "the bizarre longing to take them to bed with him," a wish which even Stevie recognizes as impossible. Stevie bases this response in personal experience, recalling his sister carrying him "off to bed with her, as into a heaven of consoling peace" (165). To Stevie's experiential and empathetic moral imagination, "to be taken into a bed of compassion was the supreme remedy." The narrator qualifies this conclusion, adding that its "one disadvantage" was that it was "difficult of application on a large scale"(166). Conrad here puts his finger on the general critique of care as a broader political ethos. Even when posited as universal, care is generally conceived as private, familial–how one treats the least of one's *brothers*

The Secret Agent provides an exemplary instance of the modern tension between a totalizing social-symbolic system and a radical otherness imagined as the systems's only alternative; and with a cognitively or linguistically impaired, dis-/disarticulate figure straddling the boundary between the two. We see this pattern repeated through such modernist and postmodern works as Melville's Billy Budd, Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, Barnes' Nightwood, McCullers' The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, Kosinski's Being There, and DeLillo's White Noise. Particular historical contexts, of course, vary. Faulkner's intellectual, emotional, and moral engagements are with the effects of modernity on a declining southern society (including changing attitudes toward mental retardation, especially as embodied in the work of Henry Godard, who advocated institutionalization and sterilization); DeLillo's novel centers around American consumerism and the longings for an apocalyptic rupture from a world of

Warholian or Baudrillardian simulation. But both texts are deeply concerned with the possibilities and problematics of representation per se, and Wilder can be regarded as a highly ironized rewriting of Benjy.[6]

2. The Ideology of Neuroscience and the Defense of Narrative

"And this turns out to be not only 'true' but really true. True at the molecular level." Jonathan

Franzen, The Corrections (318).

Neuroscience, the most colossal and ultimate offspring of biology, is the final discipline. It encompasses all others, and all knowledge begins with it and returns to it, and no knowledge can exist apart from it. Neuroscience is the accomplished dream of a materialist epistemology. The mind is the brain, the brain the product of genes. Once we know the genetic code–and we apparently do, for the most part–and once we then unravel the brain's synaptic pathways and the chemistry of its neurotransmitters, then we will know how the mind works. And when we understand how the mind works, we will understand all the products of the mind, which is to say, all culture, institutions, social relations, and individual experience. Neuroscience has become the latest incarnation of the modern quest for a method of total knowledge.

The actual accomplishments of neuroscience are, of course, astonishing, barely credible to a lay person. Emily Dickinson's poem "The brain is wider – than the sky" has been revealed to be not a metaphor, but literal truth. The human brain contains approximately one-hundred billion neurons. The cerebral cortex has something on the order of sixty trillion synapses. The total length of myelinated neuron fibers is 150,000-180,000 kilometers. Through

advanced technologies of brain scanning, neuroscientists can study with more precision than

previously imaginable the mental mechanics of perception, cognition, and emotion. As

neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux argues, our synapses are who we are, neither more nor less. The

self is a synaptic self. And with this avalanche of knowledge over the past twenty to thirty years

have come significant consequences, both practical and theoretical. Contemporary neuroscience

has fundamentally transformed clinical practice in psychiatry. As Hyman and Nestler wrote in

their 1993 textbook, the use of purely psychological methods has "reached roadblocks" in the

"ability to treat severely disabled patients" (xi); and while "all illnesses have biological,

psychological, and social dimensions... ultimately, it is the biological understanding of a disease,

an understanding of its pathophysiology, that leads to definitive treatment and prevention" (xii).

In the late 1980s through the early 1990s, in particular, there was a widespread sense among

clinicians and the public that traditional "talk therapy" was obsolete–that mood, consciousness,

self-knowledge were governed by specific neurotransmitters and receptors in particular areas of

the brain, and that complete knowledge of these processes had nearly been achieved. Thus, as

Peter Kramer wrote in his best-selling book on the prevalence of pharmaceutical therapies,

Listening to Prozac, "we are edging toward what might be called the 'medicalization of

personality'" (37).

       It is important to note that leading neuroscientists do not share these totalizing

impulses. The brain's very complexity prevents the full understanding and possibility of

accurate prediction that a totalizing methodology requires. Researchers in the field appear to

agree that total knowledge of the brain/mind is not even a theoretical possibility for

neuroscience. Nevertheless, as an ideology, neuroscience makes these totalizing claims. The

ideology of neuroscience represents a composite of mystified specialized knowledge, a conventional wisdom that values precision and finality, powerful economic interests with expensive and lucrative research agendas, and political biases dedicated to maintaining a status quo and suppressing fundamental dissent. Roughly speaking, the ideology of neurology links the extraordinary progress in research on brain function with the financial interests of pharmaceutical companies, the insurance industry, and research universities, and with political and economic institutions that legitimate themselves through a fetishizing of scientific and scientistic disciplines that rely on quantitative methods.

Methodologically, the victor in this dominance of neuroscience (as well as of economics and the biological determinism that has accompanied the progress of contemporary genetics) is the *model*: the static representation of a fluid state, which, by accounting for relevant variables, claims to provide a picture of the reality of that state. The model is never final; it can always be improved as new variables and algorithms are incorporated. Moreover, its validity is judged pragmatically, according to its diagnostic and predictive effectiveness. Thus, the model is valued by clinicians and policy-makers, by the industries that provide their instruments and ideas, and by the interests and media that legitimate them. Yet, two facts here must be noted. First, the predictive accuracy of models in practice is dubious. Psychopharmaceuticals have not proved to be the miracle cures for all ailments of the soul, as had been thought and hoped. They have helped, of course, especially in the most severe cases, but depression, bipolar conditions, psychoses, and other diseases often resist them stubbornly. And economic predictions have proven, as we now see, to be not only dismally inaccurate, but misguided in their basic assumptions regarding value, productivity, and motivation. The second fact, though, is that the

industries that make use of these models appear oblivious to their limitations. The model will be tweaked, not abandoned; the ideology remains triumphant.

As the model continues to triumph in spite of its failures, the methodological loser is narrative. Since the earliest written documents, many of which transcribe and redact much older oral texts, the profoundest knowledge of the psyche, of social behavior, social relations and institutions–the knowledge of humanity in its interiority and social being–has come through forms of narrative: in myth, epic, and subsequent forms of literature; and in philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, and narrative aspects of the social sciences. The achievements and potentials of neuroscience would seem to put all these forms in doubt. If we can, indeed, know, or are on the verge of knowing how the mind really, invariably, necessarily works, then the humanities can do no more than add colorful examples to our true knowlege; they cannot constitute knowledge in themselves. In a parodic description of a dubious physician dispensing psychopharmaceuticals on a cruise ship, Jonathan Franzen, in The Corrections, encapsulates the ideology of neurology. As the doctor tells an elderly woman who feels depressed and ashamed over her difficulties caring for her ailing husband, "the fear of humiliation and the craving for humiliation are closely linked: psychologists know it, Russian novelists know it. And this turns out to be not only 'true' but really *true*. True at the molecular level" (318). The remedy, of course, is the purchase and ingestion of a drug that will regulate the patient's serotonin levels.

The ascendence of neuroscience has put in question traditional narrative forms of understanding the self and social relations. What narrative is and what are its ideological valences are, of course, highly contested questions. Certain moments in the history of narrative theory have stressed narrative's tendencies toward closure and toward an inevitablity of

ideological inflection. Frank Kermode, Hayden White, and Roland Barthes can be regarded as markers, in very different registers, of critiques of a determinist, teleological, ideological view of narrative. But a defense of narrative would be oriented toward more open descriptions more akin to Gary Saul Morson's Bakhtinian account of narrative, or the accounts of Louis Mink, David Carr, or Paul Ricoeur. To conjoin and abbreviate these writers' views, we can say that narrative is a form of knowledge specific to understanding events in time, that it articulates the subjective and social experiences of time in language, and so provides a knowledge of contingency and ambiguity. As Morson writes, "one needs story because the world is imperfect. One needs story because there is no goal. And one needs story because things do not fit" Conversely, "thinkers who seek to overcome narrative typically insist on the complete orderliness of the world. Though things may look messy, order lurks beneath, and the task of science or philosophy is to discover the order that will make the mess, and along with it the need for narrative, disappear" (66). Narrative's gift is to show not only the genealogy of events and of their meanings, but that events could be other than what they are and can have meanings other than those we have ascribed to them. Unverifiable and lacking predictive powers, narrative is the mode best suited to depicting the lived experience of people and groups, and it does so in the languages and dialects in which life is, in fact, experienced. Unlike the model, it proposes no metalanguage that would step outside of lived experience. Yet, at the same time, as narrative contains numerous languages in dialogue and conflict, it is always a metalanguage that provokes further dialogue. Narrative travels at the speed of time, it wears winged sandals; but it splits its reader, throwing half of him outside of time and holding the other half within. One experiences the narrated events and pauses to interpret them, sometimes sequentially, sometimes

simultaneously. But narrative as a form of knowledge is not part of any rationalized, scientific,

econometric understanding of the mind or society. Thus, neither novelists, poets, nor even

historians advise political leaders on policy or are asked by media for their commentary.

But if novels are still to be written, both writers and readers now must ask what

knowledge or understanding can novels still impart? A novelist who takes seriously the claims

of the ideology of neuroscience is in something of the position of the poet in early modernity–of

a Sidney or Shelley–who felt impelled to defend the social and epistemological efficacy of

poetry against the claims of history, philosophy, and the discourses of practical politics. The

novel becomes a defense of the novel, or, more broadly, a defense of narrative, or, most broadly,

of language itself. In recent work like Rick Moody's Purple America, Jonathan Haddon's A

Curious Incident of a Dog in the Night-Time, Jonathan Lethem's Motherless Brooklyn, Jonathan

Franzen's The Corrections, Ian McEwan's Saturday, and Richard Powers' The Echo Maker, we

see, first, a heightened attention to clinical descriptions of cognitive or linguistic impairments

based on insights from neuroscience. This attention is in contrast to depictions in modernist and

postmodern fiction–e.g. The Sound and the Fury, The Secret Agent, Nightwood, White Noise,

Being There, City of Glass–which show little interest in clinical accuracy and whose intentions

are, from the outset, metaphorical. (Or, it would be more accurate to say that the modernist texts

presented their impaired characters in the contexts of contemporaneous medical and sociological

discourses, but in overtly antagonistic ways; the postmodern texts tend to ignore medical and

scientific discourses on impairment entirely in favor of philosophical and metafictional

concerns). Second, we see in these recent fictions explorations of possible consequences for

narrative of a neurological perspective on mind and impairment. The first practice–the concern

with clinical, neurological accuracy premised on some knowledge of and respect for contemporary neuroscience–entails the second, the defense of narrative and questioning of the totalizing claims of neuroscience as ideology.

Such defenses of narrative conducted in uneasy alignment with neuroscientific knowledge of cognitive and lingustic impairment, but in opposition to the ideology of neuroscience entail two further consequences. First, the notion of radical alterity, which was so crucial to modernist and postmodern narratives, must be revised. Contemporary neuroscience, to its credit, does not stigmatize neurological difference, in distinction with earlier totalizing biological theories of Lombroso, Goddard, Fernald, et.al. Neurological "others" are not threats to be contained. Rather, neuroscience posits neurological spectrums on which people assume different and variable positions.[7] The radical other is not a necessary tool for critiquing the ideology of neuroscience, for in terms of neuroscience, alterity, we might say, is relative.

At the same time, neuroscience describes a distinctly non-unified, non-Cartesian self, continually composed and amended through new and repeated synaptic connections, most of this happening beneath the connections that constitute conscious awareness. *Je est un autre*. The self is other to itself; the other also is other to itself. Self and other are, then...others, but share that internal alterity as a crucial commonality. To again cite Franzen: French symbolist poets knew this, but now we *really* know. But what does this knowledge entail, particularly the sense of the shared quality of otherness?

In the space between neuroscience and narrative stands the singular figure of Oliver Sacks, the neurologist and writer who has done the most to introduce a neurological perspective to popular audiences. Since Sacks began his popular writing career with

Awakenings in 1973, other clinicians and neuroscientists have written popular works for lay

audiences, but Sacks remains distinctive for his eloquent writing, the range of his intellectual

concerns, and his profound humanism. In his accounts of impairments of memory, cognition,

speech, and perception, Sacks seeks always to locate and redefine a core humanity that may take

so many outward forms. Sacks continues, of course, the tendency in neurology to focus attention

on impairments, deficits, and excesses as conditions that help us best define the ranges of

normative humanity, and it can be argued that there is a voyeuristic or even exploitative element

in Sacks's work. Disability theorist Tom Shakespeare, for instance, attacked Sacks as the

neurologist "who mistook his patients for a literary career" (137). But Sacks, in his studies of

impaired subjects, many of whom negotiate the world and the self with limited use of language

and narrative, remains committed to narrative as a mode of knowledge. He has called his

method a "romantic neurology," following the example set by the Russian neurologist A.R.

Luria, in which the *story*, with its vernacular openness and dialogic character, its potentials for

empathy and recognition, and thus for a knowledge that implies an ethics, is the privileged mode

for presenting the "organized chaos" in which the impaired subject fashions a self. Sacks closes

this Introduction to The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat with a challenge to quantitative,

normative neurology: "What would Hughlings-Jackson and Goldstein have said of *this*? I have

often in imagination asked them to examine Dr. P., and then said, 'Gentlemen! What do you say

now?'"

   Sacks, then, would, under any circumstances be an important figure in the

discussion of defenses of narrative in an age of neuroscience. But he is especially important in

that several of the most significant novels engaging in this defense rely on Sacks' work to inform

their presentations of neurological disorders. And, in the case of Richard Powers' The Echo Maker, a character based on Sacks presents directly the conflict between narrative and neuroscience.

Gerald Weber, the Sacks figure in EM, is summoned to study and try to help a young man suffering from Capgras Syndrome which, we learn, is a problem of *recognition*. To choose this disorder and to frame it in this way, Powers brings together some of the most critical elements in neuroscience, psychology, narrative, and ethics. By telling the story of Mark and his treatment, Powers forces on us the question, what does it mean, in all these realms, to recognize or to misrecognize another or oneself.

Weber's first conversation with the neurologist treating Mark sets out the terms of the debate between neuroscience and narrative. Dr. Hayes expounds an entirely neural description of the disorder, in which, as he concludes, "cortex has to defer to amygdula" (131). Weber, feeling himself "turning reactionary," suggests that "we need to look for a more comprehensive explanation"-- to which Hayes responds with some incredulity, "something more than neurons, you mean?" (132). The neurologist treats neurons, and any narrative approaches to Mark's problems–Weber mentions the possibility of exploring "psychodynamic responses to trauma"–are simply outside the range of scientific clinical practice. As the novel proceeds, Weber comes increasingly to question his narrative methods as he acknowledges the enormous power and even greater promise of neuroscience's physical understanding of the brain. Weber realizes that as he was composing his colorful, anecdotal case histories, it was neuroscientists who had been making the "first real headway into the basic riddle of consciousness." Indeed, he feels that "every problem facing the species [is] awaiting the insight that neuroscience might

bring. Politics, technology, sociology, art: all originated in the brain. Master the neural assemblage, and we might at long last master us" (226). Weber's doubts are exacerbated by negative reviews of his new book that accuse him of disregard for current research and of serious ethical failure–of a "sideshow exploitation" of his patients even while arguing for "tolerance for diverse mental conditions" (221).

As Weber studies Mark's failures of recognition, he is increasingly unable to recognize himself. His wife's reassurances and admonitions to ignore the criticisms of his work– and to jettison the persona of "famous Gerald" the best-selling author–serve only to reinforce his sense that she does not recognize him, that they no longer recognize each other. Concurrently, other characters in the novel, particularly Karin (Mark's sister, and the particular object of his misrecognitions), experience varieties of misrecognitions of themselves and others. The plot of the novel is in large part a dance of misrecognitions and revised cognitions, and readers are invited to conclude, with several of the characters, that Capgras is universal. "No one on the planet was who you thought he was," observes Karin (296). Barbara, Mark's nurse whom Weber both misrecognizes and recognizes, laments that America has become "a substitute. I mean: Is this country anyplace you recognize?" (433).   And Weber concludes, "The whole human race suffered from Capgras"(347).

Two problems follow from this formulation: a particular, and very rare, neurological condition, becomes a metaphor for a universal condition; and yet the means to represent the condition may be restricted to the domain of neuroscience. Or rather, three problems face us, for these questions arise in the context of a therapeutic situation, a situation of healing and, more broadly, of care. The universalization of a neurological impairment is a

constant feature of fictions of impairment, and in the culture at large. In <u>Motherless Brooklyn</u>, the entire world is Tourettic; in <u>Curious Incident</u>, familial and social relations take on qualities of autism. Neuroscience, then, becomes the vehicle for a new category of metaphor, or synecdoche. But in <u>Echo Maker</u>, this procedure is problematized, since the terms of neuroscience are, at least temporarily, given precedence over natural language, and so the metaphoric transfer from neural understanding to psychological, social, or existential description cannot be achieved without further conceptual work. And since, in this text, the other two just mentioned, and, indeed, in the whole repertory of literature depicting cognitively and linguistically impaired subjects, the relation of care is foregrounded, <u>The Echo Maker</u> places before us the question of a neuroscientific understanding of care. And it does so not by implication, but quite directly: "Of all the alien, damaged brain states...none was so strange as care" (94).

The brain and its processes, as neuroscientist Jean-Pierre Changeux writes, have been "secularized" (96). And so our sense of alterity must be translated. If care for the other remains a privileged topic and ethical imperative, we must ask in altered terms what is the subject and what is the object of care. If the norm–or the universal--is now to be expanded to include impairment in its spectrum, and if impairment is no longer to be regarded as "other," no longer that position on the other side of the boundary of symbolization that allows that boundary to be known, why then do impairments remain the crucial topoi for defining the norm? In practical terms, from a disability studies perspective, the answer would be that impairment (both physical and mental) is still stigmatized, therefore still disruptive of normative thinking; and thus, while secularized from the standpoint of neuroscience, still retaining its aura in popular

usage. But in the texts under discussion here, Powers' in particular, the stigmatization of

disability is not a primary concern. Powers tries to address these questions of alterity and care

from within the terminology of neuroscience, and from there to reimagine narrative in a way

responsive to neuroscience's formidable conceptual and clinical presence.

                At the basis of Powers' rethinking of an ethics and epistemology of narrative

consistent with neuroscience is the function of mirror neurons. These are specialized brain cells,

identified first in monkeys, then found in humans, which appear to facilitate both the imitation of

others' actions and the ability to interpret or understand others' actions (Rizzolati and Craighero

2004, 169). They are, as Giacomo Rizzolati, one of the principal researchers of mirror neurons

writes, "a particular type of neurons that discharge when an individual performs an action, as

well as when he/she observes a similar action done by another individual" (Rizzolati 2005, 419).

Powers' Gerald Weber, citing Rizzolati's work, concludes that mirror neurons provide two

revelations: first, they made clear "the neurological basis of empathy," and second, the basis of

symbol use and representation. "Images of moving muscles," Weber asserts, "made symbolic

muscles move, and muscles in symbol moved muscle tissue" (355). Thus, we are meant to

conclude, ethics and mimesis–recognition in all its senses--arise from the same neural systems.

Intersubjectivity and genuine communication are not unattainable, utopian ideals. They are the

norm. It is Cartesian or poststructuralist solipcisms that are fantasies–the thought that one is

trapped in an intransitive subjectivity or an ideologically preclusive symbolic system, or, to cite

the Social Darwinist fantasy, the thought that ethics is a thin veneer of socialization barely

covering a primal barbarity. And this ethical and representational adequacy of the norm is due in

large part to what have often been regarded as the inadequacies of natural language–its

imprecision and availability to ambiguity, lying, and manipulation. As neuroscientist Gerald

Edelman has observed, these features constitute language's strength, and are the legacy of neural

systems that work through the recognition of patterns rather than through logic (Edelman 90-1).

Our minds are constructed to recognize, and recognition is the basis both of ethics and of art. As

Weber again tries to situate his devotion to narrative in the context of a neuroscience that he

feels has made him obsolete, he thinks, "lying, denying, repressing, confabulating: these weren't

pathologies. They were the signature of awareness, trying to stay intact" (381). "Some part of

us could model some other modeler. And out of that simple loop came all love and

culture...(384).

 Why then put impairment at the center of the narrative if Mark's Capgras

delusions and paranoias are of a neural piece with all other mental constructions? Several

explanations seem pertinent. As Heidegger described, when a tool functions, one does not need

to theorize its functioning. Only when the hammer is broken does one think about the working

of a hammer. Likewise, as disability studies theorist Ato Quayson argues, the unsettling,

disruptive quality of physical or mental impairment initiates what he calls an "aesthetic

nervousness" in a literary text, a formal dislocation which occurs in conjunction with an ethical

dislocation as the literary representation of the disabled subject collides with the problematic

social status of disabled people. Or, one might say, the inevitable symbolic appropriation of

disability collides with the real lives and treatment of disabled people, which includes their roles

in cultural narratives and iconographies. The disabled subject is the broken tool, and yet this

metaphor as well places the subject in a category not of his making and so throws the aesthetic in

tension with the ethical. The disabled subject, then, is always doubled–as Powers has contrived

to portray all the characters in <u>The Echo Maker</u> as doubled, as miming and mimicked, misrecognizing and misrecognized. The object of mimesis is already representing another, even if that other is himself.

But these thoughts have only led us back to our original question. To paraphrase Powers' concern, what is it that we recognize in impairment? Why does one care for the impaired? Why do Weber's mirror neurons suddenly fail to fire at the sight of his wife of nearly thirty years, and then blaze into being when he is with Barbara, whom he barely knows? Why does Karin know that the devoted, saintlike Daniel does not know her, while Karsh, whom she knows as a cad, recognizes her entirely? What is recognized in recognition? In these cases, the self that recognizes its own division and alterity recognizes and can only be recognized by an other who is likewise divided and other. Care, as in Eric Santner's formulation, means care for the other who is other to himself, and so Levinas's account of the ethical relation to the other who takes on the single, impermeable face of a negative divinity must–like all mental products in the age of neuroscience–be secularized. The other is not unrecognizable; he is simply misrecognized, or, rather, recognized as being in a state of constant and necessary misrecognition. And here, we might add, parenthetically, that this is a point that Lacan knew, but that now, in the age of neuroscience, we really *know*.

Our selves exist in a state of fundamental incohesion, as Weber asserts as he experiences his own self lose its stability, which most of us negotiate by means of common histories, cultures, and languages, and by the ability of our brains to establish recognizable neural patterns of our experience, which includes both the kinesthetic sense of our personal being in the world and the movements of our social and symbolic relations. Weber's conjectures

on the desperate connections that fabricate consciousness and the self echo neuroscientist Joseph

LeDoux's observation that, given the fragile, contingent character of what he calls "the synaptic

self," the wonder is not that it falls apart at times, but that it maintains coherence at all (LeDoux

307).

"'God, what is *wrong* with us?'" Karin asks Weber, near the end of the novel.

"'You're the expert. What *is* it in our brains that won't...?'" (425). She is unable to finish the

question. That won't what? That won't connect; that won't recognize? And the remedy is not

the creation or rediscovery of some perfect language or a transcending leap outside of

symbolization into the consciousness of the animal or angel, sacred fool or wild child. As

Joseph LeDoux writes, with understatement, the evolution of language "was not a trivial

process." The brain, already "fully booked," had to condense and relocate some existing

functions as it expanded to allow for new ones (LeDoux 302-03). These changes, quite rapid in

evolutionary terms, produced, in LeDoux's view, the problems of neural connection that

characterize both our pathologies and our norms. Cognitive systems are not fully consonant with

emotional and motivational systems. When such failure of connection occurs dramatically in an

individual–in psychosis, Capgras Syndrome, or some other serious disorder–the individual is

sick. When cognition, emotion, and motivation are not in accord on social and political levels,

we find injustice, cruelty, war, exploitation, systems of thought that stigmatize difference: all the

social failures of recognition that have so largely characterized human history.

Where, then does narrative fit, and what is its defense? One might cite Dr.

Matthew O'Connor in Djuna Barnes' Nightwood: "Do you know what has made me the greatest

liar this side of the moon, telling my stories to people like you, to take the mortal agony out of

their guts, and to stop them from rolling about, and drawing up their feet, and screaming, with

their eyes staring over their knuckles with misery which they are trying to keep off, saying,'Say

something, Doctor, for the love God!' And me talking away like mad. Well, that, and nothing

else, has made me the liar I am..." (135). This is more or less what Weber proposes to do in his

revised case study of Mark, to tell "just the story of invented shelter, the scared struggle to build

a theory big enough for wetware to live in" (274). The encouraging message of contemporary

neuroscience–at least, I'll take it as encouraging–is that new patterns of synaptic connection are

always being formed and recognized, and that our thoughts themselves produce new patterns all

down the neural pathways. In other words, we can learn, and our cultural products reshape our

neural patterns and so contribute to our learning. The defenses of narrative undertaken by

Powers and, in less explicit ways, by Haddon, Lethem, and others, are not really defenses against

neuroscience itself, but against the ideology of neuroscience and all the related reductive, model-

based ideologies of genetics, economics and some of the other social sciences.[8] Narrative is in

accord with neuroscience not because narratives can be interpreted in terms of clearly

understood brain functions (as some work in cognitive science approaches to literature would

like to do), but because the way the brain works, particularly after the addition of language, and

its sheer complexity result–organically, we might say–in ambiguity, indeterminacy, and the need

for continual interpretation. Gerald Edelman makes this point repeatedly. "A fully reductive

scientific explanation of [human] nature and its ethics and aesthetics is not desirable, likely, or

forthcoming" (66). "[T]he necessary price of successful pattern recognition in creative thinking

is initial degeneracy, ambiguity, and complexity." And while in the sciences, we may arrive at

"laws or at least strong regularities, in the case of historical analysis, qualitative judgement and

interpretation are usually the most we can achieve" (83-4). Finally, he writes, "the ambiguity

that is inherent in natural languages is not a critical weakness... On the contrary, it is the basis of

the rich combinatorial power that we recognize in imaginative constructions. These properties

are just what one would expect to result from the operation of a selectional [that is, one that

works through complex pattern recognition] brain" (90-1).

The narrative, then, in neuroscientific terms is in fact a truer form of knowledge

than the model and certainly a truer form than the ideology of neuroscience would allow. We do

not *really* know anything now that we did not know before, except that we are creatures selected

for mimicry, empathy, and ambiguous representation–which we should have already known, and

which diminishes the possibility for any totalizing deterministic systems or models. The

problem is not how to reduce a narrative to an efficient model. Rather, the success of a model

should depend on its ability to be expanded into a compelling story.

A Short Post-script on desire:

Questions remain, however, even after Powers' complicated crane dance has

reimagined the Talmudic gloss of "It is not in heaven"--or in the genes, the structures, the

synapses, the origins, the ends, the model, or the system. "My children have defeated me," God

says with delight after the rabbis reject all divine signals and get on with their human business of

interpretation. But what about desire and the erotic? Modernist texts, following Victorian and

romantic antecedents, carefully separate care from desire. The relation of care, particularly as it

involves cognitive or linguistic impairment, is, as we have seen, typically between siblings,

especially between a sister (who takes on the role of a mother) and her impaired brother–thus, in

effect, doubling the incest prohibition. Incest, we recall, is an important element in <u>The Sound and the Fury</u>, but it involves Quentin, not Benjy. There is a rigorous chastity enclosing characters from Billy Budd to DeLillo's Wilder. To desire such characters or to attribute desire to them is to wound them, to hasten their dis-/dysarticulation. Claggert's hidden desire for Billy leads directly to the fatal episode of Billy's stuttering. Benjy is castrated after a misattribution of sexual desire to him at a moment when he was, in fact, "trying to say." When desire does enter into a relation of care in <u>Nightwood</u>–the universal desire and care directed toward Robin–the result is a series of catastrophic psychic and social breakdowns into masochism and chaos. Countering, I would argue, early twentieth-century ideologies of degeneration and eugenics, modernist texts place the dis-/dysarticulate in capsules of innocence who require premodern, Christian, familial care, which proves ineffectual against totalizing forces of modernity. Again, Robin is fascinating in her distinction here: in <u>Nightwood</u>, innocence is itself a category of broader social degeneration.

Powers changes this format in <u>The Echo Maker</u>. The novel recognitions of changes in subjects–of Weber by Barbara or Karin by Karsh–are accompanied by disorienting jolts of desire. Those who care faithfully, unchangingly–Weber's wife, Daniel–misrecognize, and sexual desire is absent. Recognition of a change in subjectivity is accompanied by erotic force. This recognition is also the recognition of vulnerability, loss, and error. Karsh understands the dynamics of betrayal in ways that Daniel cannot. Barbara understands the vertiginous crisis of facing professional failure and loss of faith in what one took to be oneself. As writers like Martha Nussbaum, Eva Kittay, Sehla Benhabib have argued, ethics cannot be based (as in John Rawls' writings) on an autonomous, rational subject. Its basis, rather, must be

on shared vulnerability, on the knowledge that undeserved misfortune and suffering can happen

and, at some time, will happen to everyone. And, as Nussbaum stresses in particular, one must

struggle to work through one's shame at being vulnerable, fragile, mortal, imperfect; for it is the

defensive reaction to these feelings of vulnerability that lead to cruelty and evil. And the work

of overcoming the shattering of one's omnipotence may also be a form of play, of eroticism? Or,

is it out of that very collapse that the erotic is configured? This insight appears to be part of

Powers' contribution.

Notes

1. A group of rabbis are arguing about a passage of Torah. Rabbi Eliazer, in the minority, calls on a series of small miracles to affirm his position, and these occur, but the other rabbis dismiss these events as having no relevance to the debate. Finally, "Rabbi Eliazer said to them: 'If the *halachah* [Jewish law] agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!' Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out, 'Why do ye dispute with R. Eliazer, seeing that in all matters the *halachah* agrees with him!' But Rabbi Joshua arose and exclaimed, 'It is not in heaven.'
        "What did the Holy One do in that hour? He laughed with joy, saying, 'My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me'" (Babylonian Talmud vol. I, 353 [BT BM 59b]).

2. See McDonagh for a detailed account of the sacred fool in Western Europe in his important study of the concept of "idiocy." See Kobets for an analysis of the distinctive features of the Russian sacred fool.

3. Foucault's Madness and Civilization would appear to be the natural intertext for this study. It provides an social-institutional case study for the intellectual trajectories described in The Order of Things, as a population that in medieval Europe had been generally assimilated into cultural life became disarticulated as a result of the rise of modern, rational-scientific thought. Our narratives are parallel concerning the force of totalizing, rationalizing ideologies to stigmatize and exclude those defined as outside the symbolic realm of reason, while trying, unsuccessfully to purge the irrational from language. My focus, however, moves toward the figurative use of cognitive and linguistic impairment–what I call the dis-/dysarticulate–as a means of imagining a counter-(non)discourse of alterity whose ethical basis is care, a move that Foucault in Madness and Civilization does not concede.

4. See also Harpham (2002) for a discussion of the modern notion of language as a closed system as constituting a kind of "critical fetish" which has "served as a proxy for other issues that resist resolution on their own terms" (65).

5. For historical accounts of the movements in the United States and United Kingdom in the early twentieth-century to classify and institutionalize people having (or assumed to have) cognitive impairments, see Snyder and Mitchell (2006), Soloway, Thomson, Noll, and Trent.

6. See Berger (2005) for fuller discussion of the relations between Benjy and Wilder.

7. The disability community and writers in disability studies might contest this sympathetic depiction of neuroscience's view of neurological impairment, citing the continued widespread stigmatization of neurological difference by "neurotypicals" (or, in Rosemary Garland Thomson's term, by "normates" of all kinds), and the continued use of a "medical model" of disability to appropriate the experience, subjectivity, and voices of the disabled. Neuroscience would be yet another instance of viewing all physical and psychological impairments as primarily medical conditions rather than viewing them in the context of dominant social and institutional attitudes, practices, and structures. In addition, some might point to the persistent use of disability as metaphor–a "narrative prosthesis," in Mitchell and Snyder's term (2000)–by which the experience of disability is subordinated to more general social concerns (as, for instance, might be said of the present study). I would point out that the idea of a neurological spectrum derives from neuroscience (the diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorders, for instance– with the implication that all minds find some place on this spectrum), and this idea of the inclusiveness of disability is of vast importance. Disability theory stresses the universality of disability–the fact that all people lack certain abilities at different points in their lives--as well as stressing the particular group identity of the disabled as a minority facing discrimination. These two emphases, I would argue, sometimes appear to be in conflict. The research, as opposed to the ideology, of neuroscience, I believe, encourages a sense of human commonality that *should* work against the stigmatization of those occupying particular places on a neurological spectrum. For a discussion of the significance of metaphor in disability theory, see Berger (2004).

8. See, for instance, the biologist R.C. Lewontin on the determinism characteristic of an overly broad belief in genetics: "Genes make individuals, individuals have particular preferences and behaviors the collection of preferences and behaviors makes a culture, and so genes make a culture" (14). "We will understand what we are when we know what our genes are made of" (13). Barbara Hernstein Smith writes similarly of totalizing ambitions of evolutionary psychology. At issue, "is whether such explanations trump the understandings of the human scene, interior and exterior, developed by myriad other social scientists (ethnographers, psychologists, sociologists and so forth) over the past century and by myriad chroniclers (historians, diarists, diplomats, journalists, travelers, essayists, poets, novelists, playwrights and so forth) over the past two or three millennia" (146). What they thought might be true, we can now know, in a newly privileged vocabulary, is really *true*.

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