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Introduction

The body has always been a contested site. In the Christian and Humanist traditions, it has often been seen as a mere auxiliary to the self, a vehicle or object that houses the mind or the soul. In these views of embodiment, the self is seen as a transcendent entity whose existence depends only contingently on the body, which the 'true' self will eventually shed like a defunct item of clothing. An alternative way of understanding the body, supported by more recent discoveries in science, medicine and philosophy, is that it participates in crucial ways in thinking, feeling and the shaping of our personalities and that precisely for this reason, the body is in fact constitutive of what we call the self. Yet these ways of understanding the body are never pure; there are always areas of openness to the contrary position. For the body is notoriously difficult to theorize or pin down, because it is mutable, in perpetual flux, different from day to day and resistant to conceptual definition. Hence, although many recent philosophers, scientists and writers seem to suggest that the body *is* the self, it also poses a serious challenge to received notions of identity and subjectivity.

In her well-known essay on illness, Virginia Woolf writes of the need in literature to represent such experiences as 'heat and cold, comfort and discomfort, hunger and satisfaction, health and illness', sensations and bodily expressions that are crucial to the everyday.[1] Writers from Chaucer, Montaigne and Shakespeare to Rimbaud, James Joyce, Kafka and Woolf herself have all written with profundity and compassion about the many varieties of embodied experience: sex and childbirth, eating and defecation, pleasure and pain, desire and repulsion. This volume has as its starting point the contention that literature – at least as much as philosophy or science – can help us understand the complexities of embodied life. Literary texts, after all, tend to deal with the more ambivalent and amorphous areas of experience where simple definitions break down or prove inadequate. The greatest literary texts seldom propose straightforward answers, but instead provide us with nuanced representations that question the reductive categorizations

that embodiment necessarily resists. This volume addresses the issue of how the immediate materiality of the body can be represented in literary texts, and how, conversely, the body can itself be 'written' – marked and changed by ideological and socio-historical forces. Responding to recent developments in the field, the volume investigates literature's ability to represent embodied experience and assesses the contribution literary texts make to our understanding of the body. It analyses the ways in which medical, scientific and technological advances have shaped our understanding of ourselves and addresses the manner in which literature reflects this shift in our experience. It combines historical, thematic and theoretical perspectives on the body, from the middle ages to the twenty-first century.

The current interest in literary representations of the body – and Body Studies more generally – was inaugurated in the 1970s by poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault (1926–1984), who foregrounded the centrality of the body in his discussion of knowledge, power and the regulation of physical difference and desire. In these analyses, the body emerged as a discursively organized product of institutionalized knowledge and control. Post-Lacanian feminism, for instance, emphasized the discursively-produced nature of gender, exemplified in the work of theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Another salient approach, one that stemmed from so-called identity politics that saw the body as the visible carrier of self-identity, generated a proliferation of various carnal standpoints, determined by considerations such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity or social class. Cultural-materialist approaches saw the body as a site of construction that responded to rapidly-changing cultural values and norms. For instance, theorists such as Frederic Jameson and Jean-Baudrillard (1929–2007) emphasized the shaping force of culture on the body, but in these approaches, it was the image of the body, rather than the body itself that became the carrier of cultural signs. By contrast, Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) – following the groundbreaking work of Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) – influentially analysed the shaping force of cultural practices on bodies themselves. He argued that the consumption habits of different social classes produced bodies that differed in shape, size, weight, posture and health, as well as in mannerisms and gestures. So-called phenomenological approaches, in turn, deriving from the writings of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1907–1961) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), privileged first-person experience and foregrounded the body's sensuous capacity.

Contemporary approaches to the body, as this collection exemplifies, tend to display an eclectic theoretical pluralism. The overtly theoretical stances of the twentieth century have in this century been internalised, and they now – often more implicitly than explicitly – inform readings that are

broadly speaking historico-materialist in their approach. This theoretical pluralism is matched by a rich array of thematic approaches, in this book alone ranging from medieval ideas of embodiment (Bill Burgwinkle) to posthuman bodies (Paul Sheehan), from considerations of the body's own modalities such as language (Andrew Bennett), sensory perception (Steven Connor), childbirth (Clare Hanson) and eating (Maud Ellmann) to the ways in which culture marks bodies, for instance through the invention of race (David Marriott) or normative ideas of sexuality (Heike Bauer) or disability (Jonathan Hsy) or body weight (Ellmann). The essays also focus on the literary representation of the varieties of bodily experience, including pleasure, pain (Peter Fifield), ageing (Elizabeth Barry), the representation of death and dying (Sander Gilman), the place of affect (Jean-Michel Rabaté) and the non-representability of the traumatised body (Josh Cohen). Our understanding of the body is also increasingly shaped by scientific and medical ideas, which have cast doubt over notions of free will and agency, and reconfigured agency and intentionality as modalities of the body rather than as exclusive properties of the mind (Ulrika Maude). And this may seem odd, since the shaping of conceptualisations of embodiment by early modern proto-scientific ideas appears to have worked largely in the opposite direction, generally diminishing the body's (so-called pre-Cartesian) role in agential and consensual conditions (David Hillman). Finally, culture and science are also addressed in the question of technology – those prosthetic senses that are modelled on us and augment and reconfigure our sensory capacities (Connor).

The fact is that there are no bodies in literature. Not only there is no obvious way for the concrete materiality of the body to be fully present in or on the written page; even more profoundly, there would seem on the face of it to be an apparent mutual exclusivity of the body and language – the one all brute facticity, the other presupposing precisely the absence of matter. And yet, over the last three or four decades, critics and theorists have found myriad ways of addressing the representation of the body and embodied experience in literature.

As the essays in this volume suggest, literature may after all be the body's closest companion. Threading through these essays we find a number of ways in which the body and literature appear to be intrinsic rather than extrinsic to one another. For the body is, for us, always already mediated through representation; in fact, as Bennett's essay suggests, it may be the ur-object that is given to discourse; and conversely, writing, as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, 'in its essence touches upon the body'.[2] So that literature might in fact be understood as *the* place par excellence for the body to express itself, for an engagement with the problem of the relation between language and

the body and for interrogating the enigma of embodied consciousness. The body, from this perspective, is not simply as immediate a presence in literature as anywhere else: rather, here, precisely in its illusory absence (and, by the same token, its illusory presence), it is perhaps most intimately engaged with the endless aporia of corporeal presence and absence.

If it can seem at times that writing is perforce 'an art of discarnation' (in Ellmann's words),[3] it is worth considering too (as Ellmann's essay among others in the volume shows) how writing can forcefully return us to the body, or, perhaps better, return the body to us; as Barry puts it, 'writing can be both an escape from and a reinstatement of the body's knowledge'. Like psychoanalysis, the literary field is preoccupied with the body's 'strange and insistent messages' (as Cohen expresses it). It produces 'a subjective affect' that, as Rabaté's essay underlines, creates 'sensations as pure and separate beings'. 'If we know the senses as a kind of immediacy', suggests Connor, 'it is largely due to the mediations of literature. Literature gives the necessary supplement of sensory form to the senses themselves, allowing the senses to be perceived as well as conceived'. Moreover, there is in many forms of literature a kind of substitutability of words and flesh, a relation between bodily and rhetorical dilation, and a 'physiology of style' (in Walter Benjamin's expression),[4] or 'a symbiotic relationship between disability and literary form' (as Hsy writes). Even silence comes across (in, for example, the writings of Teresa de Cartagena, beautifully analysed here by Hsy) as a fully enfleshed experience, 'a form of embodied spiritual discipline' – just as the silence of Thomas Mann's Leo Naphta is as 'sharp' as the features of his physiognomy (evoked in Gilman's essay).

Reading these essays provokes the thought, then, that there are deep kinships between literature and the body. Literary thinkers have always been particularly interested in concrete, non-conceptual aspects of knowing and feeling; often these emerge most potently through the sensuous immediacy of embodied cognition. And indeed the project of charting such epistemological realms is well underway in contemporary literary criticism, sparked in part by advances in the cognitive sciences. Again, in the body's innate propensity, through its autonomous forms of being, to reinstate ways of knowing and to escape cognitive forms of control, it is perhaps closer to the literary than to most other disciplines. In confronting us with the legible materiality of the body, literature often provides powerful forms of resistance to socially instituted perceptions and demands. In its very existence, the literary field constitutes a challenge to the disciplining of embodied discourse and affect: for, as several of the essays in this volume remind us, from the point of view of authority, literature is usually felt to be little more than an unruly waste product, a non-normative body, a leaky vessel or a

bloated, flabby thing. Literature can help us to move beyond such disciplinary regimes and habits of thought; it can help us, for instance, to see that 'our current mythology of fat is not eternal but historical' (Ellmann); that racial thinking is 'lodged in the body' through 'the dissemination of epidermal myths' (Marriott); and that similar structures can be seen to be at work in relation to ageing bodies, disabled bodies, gendered bodies, the 'troubling, disruptive' maternal and pregnant body (Hanson), the leaky or permeable humoral body and so on – all those forms of unruliness whose object (rather than subject) is the human body. As Connor reminds us, this confrontation 'is presented in Christian terms as a moral struggle, between the soul and the body, the senses being routinely seen as corrupting and distracting'; or as Burgwinkle expresses it, for the medieval Christian community, the body was 'a sign and surface upon which were inscribed the eternal struggles between sensation and cognition, will and desire, the human and the divine'. But modernity has its own versions of this struggle – witness Benjamin's 'exploration of the modern body as a traumatized body, its nervous system brutally readapted to the conditions of urban life' (in Cohen's words). 'It is', writes Bauer, 'in the literary archives of sexuality where we find the most compelling representations of modern sexual discourses, subjectivities and social norms' – and by the same token, it is there that we find compelling representations of the ways in which sexualities can unsettle normative discourses and identities. For what the literary body offers us is 'a reprieve from identity and agency, a kind of negative capability' (Ellmann again). Literature's enmeshment with the body offers not a loss of control but an acknowledgement of the illusory nature of control over our bodies (and, concomitantly, of identity and agency).

Authorities (medical and socio-economic and political) have powerfully vested interests in *constructing* bodies in particular ways; literature, throughout the ages, works to remind us of this fact and thereby to *deconstruct* these myths, often by reinstating the delirium and the scandalousness of the body. For the body is never simply a passive depository of cultural fantasy or the workings of power; it resists all reification and fixity. The authoritarian construction instils ideas of normativity, health, discipline, 'petrification' (to use Frantz Fanon's term, ably explicated here by Marriott) – ideas that literature often challenges. The literary, like the somatic and through its relation to the somatic, opens the path to the unbinding of all forms of fixity – those of individual identity as well as the stereotypes and hierarchies that accompany them (including relatively 'abstract' hierarchies such as those of the five senses, which, as Rimbaud wrote, are 'disordered' by the literary, or of the elements and the humours that are associated with them, with all that that implies for different genders and ethnicities).[5]

It is for these reasons that the essays here frequently show us the places and ways in which the body in literature is the locus of socio-political resistance. We find, for example, the recurrent motif of the dysfunctional body politic in medieval (Hsy), early modern (Hillman) and modern (Ellmann) worlds. Similarly, the disabled body, the ageing body, the maternal body, the racialized body – all, in their acknowledgment of varying forms of difference or subjectification, pose challenges to established orders, showing the ways in which we see 'a failure of society to accommodate itself to the needs and changed abilities of the old' (as Barry writes); for 'old', one can insert any number of ostensibly 'non-standard' bodies. It is one of literature's roles to show these failures.

Throughout these essays we also find various implicit and explicit reflections on the ways in which bodies (in literature, but not only there) always need other bodies. Bodily satisfaction (in pain or pleasure) is of the essence of human identity; but such satisfaction is never fully achieved by a body alone; as Burgwinkle puts it: 'one body is insufficient' – even if that body belongs to an ascetic hermit. Literature, medieval or modern, offers 'an admission that your body is never really yours exclusively, that it can change and evolve through ingestion or penetration, even while retaining its putative identity' (Burgwinkle again). Satisfaction is achieved somatically, through ecstatic identification or fusion with another (whether divine or human), or, often, through the corporeality of performative (and interactive) display, which is why drama and cinema figure frequently in these essays (e.g., Maude, Connor, Hillman). As Connor puts it: 'The theatre allows us to imagine the self as the frame or setting in which the images provided by the senses make their entrances and exits, but it also acts as an image of the unreality of that picture'. Corporeality animates the theatre while at the same time seeming to undo itself.

The dramatis personae in this theatre have of course changed in many ways over the centuries, as addressed by the essays in this volume (and indeed, they vary enormously within each period). But what is perhaps surprising to note are some of the apparent continuities between medieval, early modern, Enlightenment and modern conceptualisations of embodiment as they are reflected in the literary field. As the early essays in this volume show, the ostensibly quite different (sacramental, non-dualistic, environmental) premodern ideas about the body reflect deep continuities between medieval and early modern thinking about embodiment and personhood. Similarly, any attempt to differentiate sharply between Renaissance (or 'pre-Cartesian') and Enlightenment (or 'Cartesian') somatic worlds comes up against formidable difficulties: indeed, Descartes's own writings about the body are everywhere marked by rhetoric that would not be out of place in earlier writing on the subject; nor is his dualism as absolute as some have described it, as his famous Sixth Meditation clearly exemplifies.

And yet, the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed a more clear-cut move away from dualist conceptions of the self, supported by scientific and medical discoveries. Darwin's synthesis of evolutionary theory in *The Origin of Species* (1859) was fundamental, but the ideas advanced in his work had already been inaugurated in the late eighteenth century. Darwin and his predecessors postulated that the mind was a function of the body and its various organic processes. Twentieth-century anti-rationalist thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) and Paul Ricoeur have similarly refused to privilege the mind over the body. Instead, in their thinking, the mind is always already of the body and inherently embodied in its workings. This stance can already be witnessed in the anti-rationalist philosophy of Henri Bergson (1859–1941), whose work profoundly influenced modernist writers such as Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf. Even while Bergson articulates a Cartesian dualism of body and mind, central concepts in his thinking such as the *élan vital*, the embodied experience of time found in his notion of *durée* (duration), and the emphasis on laughter in his theory of comedy ultimately privilege the body over the mind. The anti-rationalism prevalent in the modernist period can also be witnessed in authors such as D. H. Lawrence and Samuel Beckett, in whose writing embodied agency takes centre stage. In the first half of the twentieth century, Merleau-Ponty developed his influential philosophy of the embodied subject: 'The body is our general medium for having a world' he argued, the precondition of any experience at all.[6] For these writers, the disembodied mind or consciousness was a metaphysical substitute for religious speculations of the soul.

Neurological research since the late-eighteenth century has likewise tended to be profoundly anti-Cartesian by nature, pointing towards the centrality of physiological operations in our day-to-day actions, motivations and emotions. Neurologically-oriented cognitive philosophers such as Antonio Damasio have also persuasively argued that thinking and feeling are intrinsically embodied processes:

> [L]ove and hate and anguish, the qualities of kindness and cruelty, the planned solution of a scientific problem or the creation of a new artefact are all based on neural events within a brain, provided that brain has been and now is interacting with its body. The soul breathes through the body, and suffering, whether it starts in the skin or in a mental image, happens in the flesh.[7]

The fact that literary examples figure prominently in the work of Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and Damasio is itself indicative of the power of literature to capture and represent the full range of embodied experience in all its intricacy and complexity, its fragility and delight.

Yet it is important to stress that the body is subject to historical and cultural change. It is open to 'atavistic reawakening', prosthetic enhancement, cloning and genetic re-coding. As Sheehan argues, DNA technology implies a new 'kind of "essence", like those metaphysical cognates of mind, soul, spirit, self, and so on, which confer uniqueness on a human being'. However, this technology can also be read differently, for 'the processes of coding also suggest replicability, and hence loss of singularity; essence becomes non-essence, and uniqueness is converted into sameness' (Sheehan). Biomechanical technologies have other far-reaching consequences for our understanding of the embodied subject. Technologies of reproduction, including IVF, egg and sperm donation and surrogacy interrogate the essentialist notion of genetic inheritance as the only authentic form of family connection, as Hanson's essay shows. They therefore cast doubt over the most fundamental assumptions about origin, nature and nurture. As a number of the essays in this collection suggest, the conception of 'selfhood' is itself recast by the notion of the embodied subject. Even our most intense affective states, as Rabaté argues, are not so much manifestations of a self, as a-subjective embodied sensations that, akin to nerve and reflex action (Maude), are governed by the exterior world rather than interiority.

Sexuality, likewise, is another modality of the body that resists essentialist reduction. Following the sexologist Kraff-Ebbing, Bauer argues that 'a somatic understanding of human sexuality benefits from the insights of the poets'. The notion of transgender, for instance, figures prominently in Woolf's novel *Orlando* (1928), as well as in the 'Circe' episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) in which Bloom metamorphoses into Bella and then Bello and back again a number of times. But in the medieval period, too, as Burgwinkle writes, 'tales of losing, then gaining, and losing again bodily organs and bodily heft remind us that, for medieval people, bodily transplants and the re-assignation of sexual identity were already part of the cultural imaginary and that they were already evoking identitarian concerns'. Premodern authors, like those of (post)modernity, are endlessly engaged in interrogating and reimagining the living body and its relation to its surroundings and to others. In the end, it is above all our perplexities regarding enfleshment and its meanings that we share with earlier times.

The essays in this collection address those perplexities and aim to give them shape. Each chapter focuses on its own theoretical and / or thematic approach to the body, with emphasis on a particular literary-historical period. Collectively, the essays provide an overview of the rich variety of ways in which literature has represented, analysed, explicated, understood and taken pleasure in the intricacies of embodied experience from the medieval period to the present day.

NOTES

1 Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill' in *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, ed., intro. and notes David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 101.
2 Jean Luc-Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 11 (cited from Bennett's essay).
3 Ellmann is here describing the thesis of her book *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (London: Virago, 1993).
4 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 214 (cited from Barry's essay).
5 Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works, Selected Letters: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Wallace Fowlie, ed. Seth Whidden (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 2005), 375 (cited from Connor's essay).
6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1992), 146.
7 Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes's Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (London: Papermac, 1996), xix.

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BILL BURGWINKLE

Medieval Somatics

> I sing the body electric …
> And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?
> And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?[1]

Medieval bodies were no more easily contained or defined than their modern equivalents; nor is there any one view of the body in the period that could be said to be definitive. Theologians, romance authors, sexual humourists – they all present wildly conflicting pictures that produced the complex of fantasies and fears through which the medieval body was (and is) imagined. None of this is terribly surprising, however: human flesh is infamously resistant to categorisation and mastery and well beyond our control. Trembling, blushing, sexual arousal, digestion: the body does as it will, attending little, if at all, to the will of a master. One medieval response to this wayward character of flesh was to envisage the body as a simple add-on to the dominant soul, a foreign intruder that could inhabit and direct our actions. The implication of that sort of thinking is that, ultimately, we will not need the body; it can simply be shucked off as we move from this world to the next. Perishable and unreliable, it begins its process of decay even as it is supporting the soul on its journey to salvation. That soul, on the other hand, what today we might call a 'core self', a conscience or an identity, can remain intact and consistent, potentially unravaged by time.

Although such a scenario might strike some as charmingly medieval, it is not really so far from much contemporary thought. The splitting of the subject into a body, on the one hand, and a soul on the other, in which the body acts as the uneasy ally, and sometimes enemy, of the soul: this is an image that has held sway over the popular imagination beyond any one culture or epoch. As contemporary geneticists are discovering more about the brain's role in determining personality, there is a temptation to imagine that all experience is but a function of physiological activity, including emotions, identity and sexuality. What is mental, unchartable, unquantifiable – the double-thinking in which psychoanalysis is heavily invested – all of this is relegated to the status of an outmoded fiction that subsists against