Introduction

Disarticulate and Dysarticulate

The real title of this book is not “The Disarticulate”; it is “The Dys-/ Disarticulate.” My excellent and sensible editor at New York University Press, Eric Zinner, and series editor Michael Bérubé both advised me to keep it simple, lose the slash, and pick one title so as to avoid confusion. Let me now—now that my reader has picked up the book, opened it, and started to read—reintroduce the slash, the double title, the stutter, the confusion.

Why does a book about representations of cognitive and linguistic impairment require a neologism and, further, an awkward compounded one? Its components are homonyms, which form the most seductive and meaningless relations in language. Like other arbitrary combinations of sound and meaning (like rhyme and alliteration), homonyms remind us that language stands always in relation to the non-linguistic, and that the sharp outlines of meaning still shake off the loose sod of nonsignificance from which they emerged. My topic—the figure of cognitive or linguistic impairment; the figure outside the linguistic loop—is unstable and conglomerate. Its social and theoretical location slides from the domestic and personal through medical, scientific, and sociological discourses, religious metaphors of redemption, theories of genetic and cultural degeneration, and more recent theories and practices of neuroscience; and intermittently it bears a reader across the divide between language and all that is not language. The dys-/disarticulate is the figure at the boundary of the social-symbolic order, or who
is imagined to be there, and at that liminal place, there is no adequate terminology. One cannot even quite determine whether he is an object of desire or revulsion.

What is certain is that his articulation is negated, doubly or multiply. “Dysarticulation” is a term in speech pathology denoting the confusion of phonemes. “Disarticulation” is a term used in surgery, butchering, and cooking, meaning the separation or amputation of limbs at the joint. As *disarticulate*, the figure is forcibly severed from the social fabric, stigmatized, silenced, possibly physically dismembered. There are intimations of sacrifice, thus of redemptive violence, the severing that makes whole, the suturing that may be the basis of ideology; and the term contains as well the critique of such violence and suturing. As *dysarticulate*, the figure is blocked from language, standing at the convergence of all of language’s impasses: those of injury, trauma, neurological variation, socio-political silencing, and the working of language itself as language plots its own aporias. But the “dys” also renders the figure pathological, an object of diagnosis and treatment, and this, obviously, is a problem, for where truly does the pathology lie, and what would be required for its cure? The pathology entailed in “dys” is as much social as individual. Yet, as the dysarticulate figure is disarticulated, he remains at the center of the story, testifying to the injustice of his disfigurement.

The negated term, “articulation,” remains—negated but active. It is always language we are concerned with, even when we study discourses of its limits, failures, or exclusions. The dys-/disarticulate is the figure for the outside of language figured in language. But he is also a representation of a human being living as an individual subject in a social world. And as a person perceived and figured as “other,” he becomes the focus of ethical considerations. The texts to be discussed here consistently foreground and problematize these ethical questions, and in particular, issues of care. There is in these texts a dynamic of centripetal and centrifugal moral forces, as the dys-/disarticulate figure is thrust away from and drawn back toward the social order.

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I came to this project, or it came to me, primarily along two trajectories, one professional and one personal. My first book, *After the End:*

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Representations of Post-Apocalypse, explored, among other things, the status of language after some traumatic, definitive event—after, as Yeats put it, a world was “changed, changed utterly.” If we imagine—for one of a number of psychological, historical, and ideological reasons—the world ending, and thereby imagine the ends also of our means of representing or imagining, what would constitute our symbolic system for that imagined cataclysm? The question applies also to actual historical catastrophes. After trauma, after “apocalypse”—which is, I argued, a hyperbolic projection of some trauma—what will be the symbolic remainder? After the world, a world, ends, what is left, and what words will we have to articulate what seems a state of absolute damage and loss? The book was concerned with the limits of language and the relations between language and all that is not-language; it took its cue from Wittgenstein’s well-known remark that “in order to be able to draw a limit to thinking, we should have to be able to think both sides of the limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought). The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense” (Tractatus 27).

Yes, but what vital, crucial, and significant nonsense!—as Wittgenstein himself was quite aware. The traumatic, the sacred, the sublime, the abject, the material (and maternal), the feminine, the queer, the dark, the transcendent, the obscene—all the unspeakables have their places here. This is where the post-apocalypse is at work, and also where we find the dys-/disarticulate. So my thinking on the limits of language continued, and I began to realize that, with a differently calibrated prism, all these rays began to focus on figures in modern fiction who had difficulty articulating: on central figures, for instance, in Billy Budd, The Sound and the Fury, The Secret Agent, Nightwood, and White Noise. I read further and discovered Richard Powers and Jonathan Lethem. A colleague suggested Wordsworth. I became interested in Helen Keller and took a year away from this project to edit a new edition of The Story of My Life. I pursued Wild Children into their textual forests. I sat on panels on naming with Adam, Cratylus, and Walter Benjamin. I had to learn and relearn everything I knew or pretended to know about language, modernism, post-modernism, neuroscience, narrative, disability theory, ethics, and all possible relations among them. It took a long time, and when I wasn't agonizing over the slowness, difficulty, and loneliness, it was the
most fun I’ve ever had doing research. And so this study of portrayals of characters with cognitive or linguistic impairments came into being.

But to answer the question, why this direction, and not some other, in pursuing questions about the limits of language, I would look toward my biography. I am the oldest of three children, all of us born in the mid- to late 1950s. My two younger sisters, Susan and Claudia, both have serious developmental disabilities (the general condition I grew up calling “mental retardation”; genetic evaluations have pointed somewhat uncertainly toward a condition called Angelman’s Syndrome). They cannot speak. I, on the other hand, grew up to become a college English professor and eternal student of modern literature and literary theory. There is clearly a connection between these disparate conditions, and this book is part of it. But I don’t know how to say exactly what it is. Our family handled our situation the way most families in the 1950s and 1960s would have. Susan, who has more difficulty communicating and caring for herself, was enrolled in a residential school—quite an excellent, nurturing institution—when she was quite young—perhaps seven or eight, as I remember. Claudia lived at home until she was about thirteen, then went to the same school Susan attended. This separation affected us all very deeply, but it seemed to be the best way to go. At any rate, it was the norm for the time. We visited the girls almost every weekend. My parents, now in their eighties, continue to see them at least once a month (now they live in group homes in residential neighborhoods). With my career, and distance, and now a young family, I am able to visit only once or twice a year, which makes me sad and ashamed, but it’s difficult to remedy the situation. I’ve always been very close to Claudia, with whom I lived through most of high school. And Claudia was always the more vivacious and communicative. Susan has had more emotional and physical difficulties, and our relationship has been more distant. It’s strange to think we’re all in middle age now, and about to turn the corner past that epoch. When our parents die, I’ll be responsible for my sisters.

It was always conveyed to me as I grew up—and I use the passive voice advisedly, for I don’t remember how directly or actively it was conveyed; it seemed often in the manner of a tacit understanding—that I should live my life as I wanted, and should not feel obligated to choose a college, job, career, or residence nearby in order to help care for Susan and Claudia. We all recognized, I suppose, that this obligation would come to me
eventually. But it was to be postponed until truly necessary. Till that time, I should live like any other boy or man with normal siblings. And so I did. I did not devote myself to my sisters, but rather to my own life, my experience, the directions of my thinking. This seems very modern, perhaps very American. I don’t know, in retrospect, if it was the right approach to life. I’m not sure, if I were a parent in my parents’ circumstances, I would try to convey quite the same understanding, though I very much appreciate what my parents wanted to do for me. For my own part, living with the independence that I’ve had—and not taking on a role of care-giver—has certainly broadened and enriched my life. But it must, in some ways, have impoverished it too. I developed, I think, a certain carelessness together with a fear of forming close relations. These qualities are being rectified now that I, at last, have young children of my own. I hope in the coming years that I’ll be able to form closer relationships with my sisters again.

These experiences of separation, my parents’ difficult decisions, questions of home and institution, and the responsibility of siblings helped bring into focus for me the overarching issue of care for those with cognitive impairments. And my personal concerns soon coincided with my literary choices, for in many of the texts I studied, siblings relationships were of central importance. I can still remember reading *The Sound and the Fury* for the first time in high school and being most deeply affected by Caddy’s feelings for Benjy, which so paralleled mine for Claudia. Almost all the fictions examined here involve care, and point to the tensions between private or familial and public provision of care. The family can provide more steadfast love, but usually lacks resources. As Joseph Conrad puts it in *The Secret Agent* (and as I shall quote several times in this book), the private remedy has “the only one disadvantage of being difficult of application on a large scale.” As I worked on this project, my wife, the historian Jennifer Klein, was at the same time working with Eileen Boris on a book on home health-care-workers who, as a labor force, form a kind of interface between private, familial care and care provided by the state—and yet are themselves vastly underpaid and unrespected. And as I worked to understand the literary texts and discussed the history of home care with my wife, I came also to read philosophical accounts of care by Eva Kittay and Martha Nussbaum, and to immerse myself in disability studies writings which often regarded care as a more problematic, hierarchical activity.
The Disarticulate (or “Dys-/Disarticulate”) is, then, like most books, I suspect, an overdetermined mix of articulations and dys-/disarticulations. As in my family life, some things are uttered and some things are silent. My career and the intellectual trajectories that now converge in this book are both expressions and evasions of my experience with my sisters. Let me quote myself briefly, from a poem I wrote a few years ago:

I’ve established that my poetry’s principal quality is evasion.
I’ve always thought I was exploring the edges of language,
where language meets not-language—
sensation, neurology:
the unsayable, not just as trauma or the sublime or the sacred
but as experience in all regards untranslatable,
a massive bundle unable to be carried across intact
the boundary not a boundary—
uncontiguous,
not on the same plane.

Or such was my theory. Of course it has occurred to me that my most deeply defining experience of language was the fact of my two sisters’ inability to speak— their mental retardation, as we used to call it.
It has occurred to me
that my sisters are almost entirely
missing from my poetry—

like a great centripetal shove,
as if an orchestral composition
explicitly calls for a certain instrument,
say a somewhat unusual one,
maybe a euphonium,
and then for the entire piece
marks it “tacit.” (Prior 58–59)

What I wrote about my poetry applies also to my academic work—
though with more generic appropriateness since one does not expect to
see family dramas played out in a scholarly monograph. But the generic
convention has loosened somewhat in recent years, and so, in the interests of an intellectual-affective genealogy, I present a bit of my drama here. Some such mixture of experience, thought, and form must lie at the root of any human, symbolic expression. (Let me note also in passing that I play the euphonium.)

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The Disarticulate has five chapters which trace historical and theoretical trajectories in the representation of cognitively or linguistically impaired characters in modern fiction. Let me say clearly at the outset that this is not in any way a comprehensive history of cognitive impairments and disabilities, social attitudes, clinical approaches, etc. For such histories, see excellent work by James Trent, Patrick McDonagh, C. F. Goodey, and R. C. Scheerenberger.

Chapter 1, “The Bearing Across of Language: Care, Catachresis, and Political Failure,” focuses first on a prehistory, describing impasses of language in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and parts of the Hebrew Bible. As language comes to define the status of the human, the obstruction of language—for instance, at the revelation at Sinai—comes to figure the divine. The chapter then describes the distinction between the Old Testament prophet as a partly dys-/disarticulated purveyor of divine
instruction and the fool as depicted in the wisdom literature (e.g., Proverbs and Ecclesiastes). In the Hebrew Bible, divine ordinance and normative social order are not intrinsically in conflict. The prophet comes to return the divine and social to their proper relation; the fool is one who fails to comply both with divine mitzvot and social convention—which are, essentially, the same. This is in contrast to the subsequent delineation of the sacred fool of Christian thought, wherein the divine and social contexts are seen to have diverged. Insofar as the fool possesses divine knowledge, he is dys-/disarticulated and rendered radically other in the social world.

Sacred fools in their secular variations in modernity occupy the remainder of the chapter. In Wordsworth’s “The Idiot Boy,” we see how cognitive impairment points both toward a radically new poetics and a renewed ethics, not explicitly Christian, in which the vulnerable must be cared for. Melville’s *Billy Budd* and Carson McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* emphasize the role of desire in the cultural imagining of figures at the margins of language. Those who cannot speak for themselves are imagined in the cultural-ideological shapes that are adequate to the symbolic resources available at the time. In *Billy Budd*, this imagining results in an astonishing overdetermination of the figuring of Billy as he is pieced together by a range of allusions, preconceptions, and wishes that preclude any knowledge of who he might actually be. McCullers’s *Heart*, with less allusion and more wishful projection, performs a similar constructive process with John Singer. In both McCullers and Melville, the dys-/disarticulate figure stands as an alternative to the prevailing social order, yet at the same time has neither clear definition nor power. Finally, it is notable that the desire to imagine a dys-/disarticulate other can be entwined with sexual desire, but that sexual desire in these texts is also dys-/disarticulated. The imagination of the dys-/disarticulate seems ideologically linked to a vision of radical, desexualized innocence. Any introduction of sexual desire, even covertly, as in the case of Claggert in *Billy Budd*, results in catastrophe.

Chapter 2, “Linguistic Impairment and the Default of Modernism,” places dys-/disarticulate figures in Faulkner, Conrad, and Djuna Barnes in the context of anxieties about totalizing, systematizing energies of modernity—the sense that in epistemological and administrative terms, the modern world sought to define and control all phenomena.
The dys-/disarticulate here is that which cannot be accounted for and which thus has some undetermined subversive power. And yet, as is clear in *The Sound and the Fury*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Nightwood*, modern science and social thought very much sought to place cognitively impaired people in a clinical and bureaucratic category, that of the “feeble-minded,” “idiot,” or “degenerate”—persons who, if they reproduced, would constitute threats to a well-ordered, democratic polity and who therefore had to be both cared for and controlled. The imagining of Faulkner’s Benjy and Conrad’s Stevie coincided with the expansion of state power into the lives of cognitively impaired people and their families in the forms of compulsory institutionalization and sterilization. Benjy and Stevie constitute imperatives for genuine forms of care outside the totalizing practices of modernity. But while in no way “degenerate”—and both novels critique the premises and consequences of this notion—the characters are genuinely impaired, and they require care. Yet neither novel can indicate any viable means for resisting modernity’s encroachments.

There is a problem here. If the forces of modernity are conceived as systemic and all-pervasive, then the critique of modernity must be total as well. The dys-/disarticulate other must embody some radical, unaccountable alterity in relation to the social-symbolic order; must occupy some utopian, apocalyptic, purely negative position and detach itself from any practical political program. The totalizing, dys-/disarticulated critique of modernity-as-totality paints itself into an epistemological-political corner. And there is the problem, again, of desire. To maintain the still-sacred innocence of the secular “idiot,” adult sexuality (especially adult female sexuality) must be banished. Care for the impaired boy comes from the sister, and so any emergence of sexual desire would encounter numerous taboos and stigmas. In *Nightwood* we see, among other things, the consequences of open desire for a dys-/disarticulate figure—a world in which all human definition slips into obscurity, and language falls into ever-more imbricated analogies whose only referent may finally be individual pain and social collapse.

The problematics of the critique of a totalizing modern social-symbolic order continue in chapter 3, “Post-Modern Wild Children, Falling Towers, and the Counter-Linguistic Turn.” In novels by Paul Auster, Jerzi Kosinski, and Don DeLillo, we see the old Enlightenment figure
of the wild child reinvoked and reimagined. In the modernist texts discussed in chapter 2, descendents of the sacred fool contended with ideologies of degeneration and eugenics. In the post-modern texts of chapter 3, the biologistic ideologies have fallen into disrepute. This post-1960s moment contains Rousseauean, utopian echoes of primal, innocent man who will challenge the fallen social-linguistic order. The modern sacred fool gives way to the post-modern wild child, imagined to have not merely diagnostic but redemptive powers. These are necessary because the world in these texts is portrayed as broken or fallen. Auster’s *City of Glass* conflates a post-Babel linguistic condition of shifting signifiers with the economic and social crises of New York in the 1970s. In Kosinski’s *Being There*, the Edenic, unfallen garden merges with the blankness of television broadcast, and Chance, the wild child, emerges from that mixed but homogenous domain. In DeLillo’s *White Noise*, American consumer culture is presented as a Baudrillardian simulation whose surface cannot be punctured even by death. The drug Dylar restores an Adamic connection between word and thing, and Wilder, the wild child, appears to embody a deeper relation between post-modern media and some primal lack of mediation. All these post-modern wild children are, however, explicitly presented as sites of fantasies of unmediated, prelapsarian life—in instances of, we might say, a counter-linguistic turn in post-modern thought. While these post-modern dys-/disarticulations bear close resemblances to the modernist instances discussed in chapter 2, they differ chiefly, I argue, in the more explicitly fantastical and projective nature of their exclusions from language. Wilder differs from Benjy, for example, in large part because the sacralizing language connected with him is spoken by his father while that connected to Benjy is voiced by the purportedly objective narrator of Part IV. Finally, these fictional wild children are further contextualized through a discussion of some case studies of cognitively and linguistically impaired people written by the neurologist Oliver Sacks. Sacks’s “cases” appear to be wild children, too, figures possessing vision surpassing the capacities of language even as they have difficulty living in the “normal” social-symbolic world. Sacks is an enthusiastic supporter of his subjects as he tries to reveal a deeper humanity beneath their dys-/disarticulations. Insofar as Sacks’s moving narratives lack the ironic undercutting that characterize the fictions discussed in this
chapter, they render more clearly the late twentieth-century longing for the innocent and revelatory dys-/disarticulate wild child—a longing, and an ideology, that the post-modern fictions place in question.

Chapter 4, “Dys-/Disarticulation and Disability,” turns to a question that builds over the course of previous chapters: it concerns the relation between this project and some of the projects of literary and cultural disability studies. Clearly, there are important overlaps. Not only are disabled characters at the centers of the fictions analyzed here, but the fictions tend to be critical of the stigmatizing and oppressive treatments often visited on these characters and to insist on at least some degree of agency for them, even though it may prove ineffective. My arguments regarding dys-/disarticulation differ from certain well-established directions in disability theory in three main areas: metaphor, trauma, and care. I argue against what I see as an iconoclastic tendency in disability theory that regards all metaphorical use of disability as suspect. This seems to me an impossible position to maintain. It is legitimate to criticize representations of disability that are clearly hostile and derogatory, but it is not always easy to know when this occurs. Moreover, as virtually all sophisticated views of language agree, it is impossible to avoid the use of tropes; there is no language that might depict disability, or anything else, “as it really is.” Metaphor—or, as I have argued, catachresis—is how language emerges out of not-language, and we should encounter it with the cognitive, aesthetic, and ethical tools at our disposal. The problem of metaphor leads into a discussion of the incongruous gap between theories of disability and those of trauma. While pursuing overlapping topics, the two fields have little to do with each other, and, I argue, the consequences for both are deleterious. Trauma theory, with its apocalyptic tendencies and its emphasis on the obliterating effects of traumatic events, often appears to be, in effect, a theory of catachresis—of how terms are constructed for events that seem to be beyond linguistic expression. Thus, it has no interest in events that may be merely disabling. Conversely, disability theory, in its adherence to a social (rather than a biological or medical) model of disability, often rejects the notion of damage or pain altogether, except what is caused by social barriers. Thus, as I argue, disability theory seems marked by an inability to mourn while trauma theory suffers from an inability to stop mourning. With regard to care, I argue that disability studies’
emphasis on autonomy and independence, though in many ways correct, can also make it difficult to account for vulnerability, pain, and the need for care on the part of disabled subjects, particularly those with cognitive impairments. Like its rejection of the notion of trauma, this ambivalence toward care (and with it, the realities of universal vulnerability, interdependence, and the lives of people who cannot live without care) limits disability theory's effectiveness.

Finally in this chapter, I discuss what seem to me the more promising recent directions in disability theory suggested by work by Michael Davidson, Robert McRuer, Tobin Siebers, and Tom Shakespeare. More accepting of metaphorical transformations, these approaches take into account the imperatives of care and, as Siebers put it, the “blunt, crude realities” of life with disability and, indeed, of all corporeal mortal life.

In the final chapter, “Alterity Is Relative: Impairment, Narrative, and Care in an Age of Neuroscience,” I describe the shift in representations of figures with cognitive or linguistic impairments that comes with the enormous acceleration of knowledge in neuroscience. The imaginings of radical alterity that were so crucial to modernist and post-modern imaginings no longer seem so relevant in the context of late-twentieth- and early twenty-first-century neuroscience in which all differences in brain function and dysfunction are seen as falling across a spectrum of abilities. At the same time, neuroscience, in its guise as one of the most powerful contemporary ideological constructs, insists that knowledge of brain processes ultimately holds the key to understanding all aspects of human thought, feeling, behavior, and culture. If true, this would signal a massive epistemological shift. The traditional means of understanding the human soul, social relations, and cultural products—i.e., religion, philosophy, literature, psychoanalysis—would be obsolete, or mere addenda to the more fundamental understanding given to us by neuroscience. As ideology, neuroscience is successor to the totalizing ideologies of modernity discussed in chapter 2, and again portrayals of dys-/disarticulate figures provide a critique of this sense that some final, unambiguous knowledge of the mind is possible. At stake, I argue, is a “defense of narrative,” or even, more broadly, of language in the face of methodologies that claim to bypass narrative’s and language’s intrinsic ambiguities and contingencies. Texts like Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Jonathan Lethem’s *Motherless...*
Brooklyn, and Richard Powers’s The Echo Maker draw heavily on neuroscientific knowledge and present precise clinical descriptions of the impairments at the centers of their stories—in contrast to the far vaguer depictions in modernist and post-modernist fictions. These are, as one critic called them, “neuronovels,” but they understand neuroscience in an expansive, not a reductive, sense, one in which the complex, productive-receptive, and irreducible structure and function of the brain finds its most characteristic expression in human language use with all its indeterminacies. And this sense, I argue, is closer to the science of contemporary neuroscience than is the ideological fantasy of total explanation.

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The figure and concept of the dys-/disarticulate as I have described it is as old as our oldest recorded uses of language, but is also peculiarly modern. At each historical moment, representations of some figure outside of language will serve as a point of intersection and conflict for the most powerful discourses of its time—of theology, politics, semantics, ethics, science, and aesthetics. Each points in its own way to some place beyond all discourse that would provide a final affirmation or negation to the social-symbolic world. The dys-/disarticulate is that place, relocated among us. The figures discussed here thus serve, I think, as revealing sites of social fantasy, pointing as directly as any cultural production we could name toward our utopian, dystopian, apocalyptic, traumatic, and healing projections. At the same time, these dys-/disarticulate figures are portrayals of human beings in particular social circumstances and thus embody ethical challenges that remain unanswered.