Narrative Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Narratology

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By

Daniel Punday

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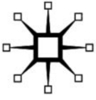

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Preface

A corporeal narratology approaches the writing and reading of stories in a way that may at first seem counterintuitive. To ask about the role of the body in narrative means suspending a long tradition that imagines reading as a disembodied, intellectual, and frequently spiritual experience. Frederick Douglass speaks articulately for this tradition when he describes coming to literacy as what makes him aware of his brute physical existence as a slave and starts him on the "upward" path to intellectual and political freedom. Douglass describes his first encounter with the disembodied life of reading as making his own corporeality all that much harder to bear: "I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out."[1] Critics today continue to urge readers to embrace literature in general as a means of moving beyond our individual bodies into a wider social understanding. As Harold Bloom has recently urged, "Read deeply, not to believe, not to accept, not to contradict, but to learn to share in that one nature that writes and reads."[2]

If insisting on the body's presence within the story seems to sin against narrative's spirituality, suggesting that we can speak about *the* body in the story likewise seems to sin against the particularity that we attribute to our own physical existence. Indeed, if asked about the body in the story many of us might think first of the uncomfortable body that intrudes on our reading—the stiff neck that comes from reading too long in bed, the squinting eyes from trying to read a bestseller on the beach, the momentary disorientation we feel when we close a book and reenter the everyday world. In such cases, the body seems to be distinctly individual; it is what designers of reading chairs and book lights seem never quite to get right. Likewise, while we may recognize that there are bodies in stories—and anyone who has seen the stage at the end of *Hamlet* littered with bodies can hardly think otherwise—these bodies seem to be precisely what intrude at the end of the narrative, what is left after the plot has run its course.

There is, of course, something quite appealing in the narrative's promise to lift us out of our individual bodies, just as there is something comforting in the idea that our bodies stubbornly resist plotting and give us a reference point for our individuality. What I argue in this book is that these appeals and comforts are neither natural nor inevitable. They are, instead, the result of a tradition that has worked to shape the body's relevance to narrative in very particular and sometimes contradictory ways. In a recent defense of the value of traditional reading in the face of technological change, Sven Birkerts describes the "shadow life of reading" as a matter of escaping our everyday existence in a way that nonetheless makes us aware of this escape: "When we read, we create and then occupy a hitherto nonexistent interior locale. Regardless of what happens on the page, the simple fact that we have cleared room for these peculiar figments we now preside over gives us a feeling of freedom and control. No less exalting is the sensation of inner and outer worlds coinciding, going on, simultaneously, or very nearly so."[3] This commonplace image of reading a story as being caught up within a wholly private experience depends in part on our having left the body behind. Not only do we escape from the body while reading, but the experience of that escape, the suspension of corporeality, is part of what makes reading pleasurable. Birkerts describes only one of many ways that we can imagine the body in reading, but the way that he describes the relationship between story, reader, and interpretation is typical for depending on the body even while it argues that stories help us to escape it.

In describing the "shadow life of reading" Birkerts is quite intentionally blurring the line between individual bodies and some general experience of corporeality that reading engenders. This elision is part of any attempt to articulate a phenomenology of reading, of course, but it is also the fundamental paradox of a corporeal narratology. What makes the body so important to narrative and to our ways of thinking about reading is how it seems to resist powerfully textual representation. When we examine our ways of telling and talking about stories, however, we discover very specific and regular patterns in the ways that the body manifests itself in narratives. In other words, far from being an irrepressibly individual "other" to narrative representation, the body is constantly given meaning and used as a part of textual representation. And, as Birkerts makes clear, often the value of the body to our ways of telling stories and talking about reading is precisely its "otherness"—its ability to stand in for what ought to be outside of representation. Both our ways of telling stories and the narratologies that we have constructed

for analyzing those stories deploy the body in very specific ways as part of a strategy of textual representation.

Since the body is a part of our narratives and our narratologies, we have two different paths of inquiry that cross and double back throughout this study. First, we can ask how the body is used as a component of stories, and can do so using traditional narrative elements like plot, character, and setting. A corporeal narratology pursued in this direction enriches these traditional terms for speaking about narrative, and provides practical analytic tools for categorizing stories and analyzing their effects. A corporeal narratology in this sense helps us to see the body at work in elements of the story where we may not have recognized it otherwise. Likewise, since different cultures and periods think about the body in different ways, we can see how these different conceptions of the body lead writers to construct plot or setting, for example, differently. Second, a corporeal narratology can ask how the body contributes to our ways of speaking about and analyzing narrative. Birkerts's description of reading in terms of the suspension of the body makes clear that the body is useful not just for telling stories, but for talking about why stories matter and for describing the experience of reading. A corporeal narratology in this sense moves naturally from an analysis of narrative terms to a theory of narrative hermeneutics—how stories become meaningful to readers. Most interesting, it seems to me, is the point where the historical comparisons occasioned by the different ways of imagining the body in different cultures and periods prompts us to think about the historical condition of our own narrative hermeneutics. In other words, although we tend to think that reading a story is a matter of stepping outside of our historical and social moment, it may well be that this way of thinking about reading itself is historically conditioned by, among other things, a conception of the human body. And if our terms for studying narrative have been developed by critics from the perspective of a particular historical moment—let us say, twentieth-century European and American culture—our most basic narratological terms and assumptions may bear the imprint of a particular way of thinking about corporeality.

I will, in fact, argue that modern storytelling, defined by the "rise of the novel" in the eighteenth century, depends in part upon the emergence of scientific culture and resulting changes in our thinking about the body. Narratology in turn has reflected this particular conception of human corporeality. We can say that modern narrative, the modern body, and narratology itself are all deeply entwined, and emerge out of series of mutually supporting assumptions about human identity, textuality, and

corporeality. As new paradigms emerge for thinking about human embodiment, so too we will see changes both in what it means to read a story, and in where writers put those bodies in their stories. A corporeal narratology, then, can not only correct theories of character or plot, and describe a richer sense of narrative hermeneutics, but can also help to anticipate the way that the writing and study of narrative will change as we begin to think about bodies, for example, as the result of a genetic blueprint or as infinitely reproducible through cloning.

I have many people to thank for helping me to think through and develop this study. The shape of this project developed during my summer at Cornell's School of Criticism and Theory (1998). In particular, Cathy Gallagher's session on narratives of "undoing" forced me to think about the historical context of narrative concepts in a way that is absolutely central to this study. In many ways, this book can be seen as an attempt to start a dialogue between narratology and new historicism. Back at Purdue Calumet, I have the School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences to thank for a series of partial releases from teaching that provided me with the time to write individual chapters. Among the faculty there, Judith Burdan was a constant source of information and suggestions about the history of the novel, especially in the eighteenth century, which is far afield from my period of training. Kit Hume provided advice throughout the project and a thorough reading of the first draft. Brian Richardson read an earlier version of chapter 2 as an essay for *Style*, and the advice and encouragement that he gave me had an impact on the rest of the book. Philip Jenkins provided suggestions and sources that helped to give shape to chapter 1. Many of these chapters were first presented in some form at the annual Narrative conference, and benefited from the response and advice that I received there. I would like to thank the reader for Palgrave, whose suggestions were helpful especially in conceiving the book's preface.

Part of chapter 2 appeared first in *Style* under the title "A Corporeal Narratology?" (*Style* 34.2 [Summer 2000]: 227–42). The figure that appears in chapter 2 is reprinted from Fredric Jameson: *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Copyright © 1981 by Cornell University Press. Used by permission of the publisher, Cornell University Press.

My thanks, finally, to Carol and Sam for their patience and support during the writing and revising of this book. They know as well as anyone that books are born not out of the disembodied mind, but from the often messy labor of the body.