Transcendence and the Aesthetics of Disability: The Case of The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

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One of the basic ways in which the newly arising epoch of performatism(1) differs from postmodernism is that it focuses on the possibility of achieving transcendence. Performatist works do this through artificially imposing closure on narrative characters by enclosing them in a frame of some kind; the active movement towards overcoming this frame constitutes the performance and transfers it to the reader. The feeling of transcendence, though, is constructed and artificial, and the reader is aware of this at all times. For this reason the closure involved must be formally binding. Even if readers critically reject transcendence as an idea, they are forced to experience it involuntarily *per formam*, as their consciousness passes through and is crimped by the material makeup of the work itself.

Because of its emphasis on transcending closed frames, performatism also treats subjectivity and ethics in an entirely different way than does postmodernism. By virtue of being trapped in a closed space, the performatist subject is able to shut out the endless regress of filiation that would normally keep it from establishing some form of unified self. However, because the performatist subject is radically separated from the outside world, it tends to remain simple, opaque, and constricted in its options. The typical entrapment of the subject in a closed frame weighs so heavily upon it that the subject is moved to escape it, to transcend. Whereas the ethical focus of postmodernism is on the passive, peripheral victim defined by its relation to an oppressive, active center, in performatism the ethical focus is on the subject caught in the center of a closed space and actively trying to get out. The goal of a performatist ethics would thus be to accompany the striving for transcendence, to chart the rights and wrongs involved when a subject tries to

break out of a frame that constricts it.

Mark Haddon's recent novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* exemplifies these qualities.(2) Haddon's book, which appeals to a crossover market of both young people and adults, has become something of a popular classic and as of this writing has sold over two million copies.(3) There are no doubt many reasons for the book's broad appeal, but one of its most engaging narrative devices is to make us identify with a mentally impaired narrator who is manifestly not interested in identifying either with us or anyone else. His own dissociated way of thinking and acting does not merely unsettle readers, as might be expected, but also exerts a curious, lasting attraction upon them.

The narrator of *Curious Incident* is a fifteen-year-old boy, presumably with Asperger's syndrome, named Christopher Boone. Asperger's is considered a type of autism, or something very similar.(4)People with the syndrome have a limited ability to feel empathy with others and often engage in stereotyped or rigid patterns of behavior making it difficult for them to interact with others socially. Although of normal or above-normal intelligence, Asperger's patients' knowledge is often very restricted and cannot be applied practically. The 15-year old Christopher, for example, excels at college-level math and has a vast knowledge of technical and scientific facts. At the same time, however, he is almost unable to do simple things like buy a train ticket or find his way to a nearby train station. This is because, as he himself says, he "notices everything" (175) in a rather literal way, and his mind is unable to sort out the surfeit of new information. As with many Asperger's patients, Christopher also has difficulties dealing with non-literal language and has trouble understanding common slang terms, paradox, poetic metaphors, irony, and humor. Christopher also likes to organize his life according to rigid habits and rituals that allow him to shut out disturbing outside influences. When confronted with such disruptive influences he reacts by screaming or moaning and occasionally also by physically attacking the person he believes is threatening him.

The author, Mark Haddon, worked with autistic children as a young man, so the stylization of his hero has a certain basis in clinical reality. What is interesting about the story is not, of course, that it simply transposes medical facts into an entertaining prose tale. Rather, it is the way the novel transforms this material into a particular scene of the human with which we as readers identify aesthetically. This means that the work in question, because of certain compelling qualities, moves us to transcend our mere individual desires and interests and appreciate the work in a common, binding way. Of particular piquancy in this case is that the teenage narrator in *Curious Incident* himself explicitly rejects the aesthetic, transcendent, and human implications of his own story. Christopher, for example, describes his own mind as a machine, he emphasizes the superiority of logical and

statistical reasoning over common sense, he considers all metaphor to be a lie, he is unable to feel collective experience or empathize, he disdains what he calls “proper novels,” and he adamantly denies the existence of God. The peculiar positive irony of this radically individualized, radically rational, and radically anti-aesthetic attitude is that collectivist, transcendent, and aesthetic qualities are restituted and redeemed in the course of the story, against the narrator’s own intent. The curious result of the book is that a character who steadfastly denies the existence of aesthetically mediated transcendence himself accomplishes that transcendence and practically forces us to identify with it through a work of art that he has created.

The plot of the story may be summarized quickly as follows. The teenage narrator, who is living with his father after his mother’s death, finds the neighbor’s dog stabbed to death with a pitchfork and decides to solve the crime in the manner of Sherlock Holmes. Because he has great difficulties interacting with others socially, Christopher’s detective work creates embarrassing situations for his father, who had been having an affair with the dog-owning neighbor, Mrs. Shears. After the father confiscates Christopher’s diary in which he has been collecting evidence on the murder, Christopher discovers letters from his mother revealing that she had in fact never died but was living in London with Mr. Shears. As it turns out, it was the father who hid the letters after his wife left and killed the dog after his relationship with Mrs. Shears went sour. Having lost all trust in his father, Christopher decides to travel to London to live with his mother. This short journey by train is made very difficult by his inability to interact with others as well as by his overwhelming fear of strange situations and people. Through ingenuity, applied willpower and some luck Christopher eventually makes it to his mother’s apartment in London. There, his surprise appearance creates difficulties which eventually lead his mother to break up with Mr. Shears. Both Christopher and his mother then return to his hometown of Swindon, where Christopher tentatively begins to reconcile with his father. The book ends not with any emotional resolution or particular twist of plot, but with Christopher taking and excelling in his college-entrance math exams. The book, indeed, closes with one of Christopher’s favorite math problems.

Christopher Boone as a Performatist Hero

As I have suggested elsewhere at greater length, performatism involves four basic strategies that are inimical to postmodernism: using ostensive signs instead of dualist ones; creating closure instead of constantly undermining it; constructing opaque, simple subjects instead of inducing complex ones to dissolve in their contexts; and finally resorting to authorial (reliable) narration instead of creating an infinite regress of narrative undecidability.(5) All these strategies can ultimately be traced back to the binding projection of an originary, ostensive scene onto the

narrative text as a whole, or what I call a double frame. The “lock” between the scene (the inner frame) and the text as a whole (the outer frame) creates a free inner space that enables a transcendent act or performance to take place. Transcendence, in turn, may be achieved totally or partially depending on the work at hand. “Realistic” works of performatism, of which *Curious Incident* is an example, don’t represent transcendence directly. However, they do confirm that there are goals or values higher than the work itself, and they do ensure that the work as a whole is “set” towards achieving them.

We can begin by looking at how Christopher’s way of thinking takes place in terms of ostensivity. In some regards his use of signs has a superficial similarity with the ostensive, in the sense that he is fixated on the direct relationship between simple signs and things rather than between belatedly experienced, more complex levels of declarative meaning. Indeed, like Eric Gans, Christopher is a proponent of Occam’s razor, which suggests that we eliminate as much superfluous argumentation as possible (113). The problem is that Christopher not only occludes declarative meaning and its endless ironies, but also the paradoxicality which is intrinsic to the ostensive sign itself. Thus Christopher can analytically differentiate levels of reference contained in the humorously intended sentence “his face was drawn but the curtains were real” (10), but he cannot experience them synthetically and enjoy their paradoxical effect in the form of a pun or joke. It is also no accident that this inability to think paradoxically and synthetically also applies to the discursive level: “it is like three people trying to talk to you at the same time about different things” (10). Christopher, then, is only able to function by shutting out the discourse of others.

Another thing Christopher’s discourse has in common with the ostensive mode is that he can’t tell lies.(6) The reason for this has once again less to do with an ostensive mindset than with an inability to come to terms with the infinite possibilities of contingency: “A lie is when you say something happened which didn’t happen. But there is only ever one thing which happened at a particular time and a particular place. And there are an infinite number of things which didn’t happen at that time and that place. And if I think about something which didn’t happen I start thinking about all the other things which didn’t happen” (24). Christopher is, however, able to fabricate “white lies” (62), which involve telling the truth only partially and which enable him to undercut his father’s ban on doing detective work. Whiteness, rather than serving as a pejorative term applied to the dominant, naturally superior and unreflective culture, marks an opaque realm which allows the hero to develop his own self (albeit in a limited way) and eventually break through the paternal frame restricting access to his mother. This corresponds to the opacity typical of performatist subjects in general, who must appear as “white” or “blank” to others in order to constitute themselves as subjects in the first

place. Whiteness or opacity is not a virtue or end in itself but is rather a transitional point between the endless regress of postmodern subjectivity and some higher, transcendent subject status that is usually only realized in a partial way.

In Christopher's case, this opacity is closely tied to what Kyle Karthauser calls the awkwardness of being earnest—an attitude which is comically unaware of its own limitations and which creates embarrassing or tension-fraught situations for others.(7) However unlike quasi-fictional *agents provocateurs* of awkwardness like Sacha Baron Cohen's Borat, who intrudes on and disrupts real social situations with a fabricated anti-Semitic, sexist, and nationalist ideology, Christopher seems completely innocent because his dissociated behavior lacks any overt ideological or conceptual interest. As Karthauser puts it in regard to a similarly opaque character, he "frustrates the colonizing and assimilatory nature of the cultural matrix in that he is not found on a familiar 'map' but nevertheless presents a stable persona."(8) Christopher's literal-mindedness and defensiveness vis-à-vis the world around him have, in addition, the paradoxical effect of giving his disability a disinterested, aesthetic aura. As an opaque subject, Christopher is (like all performatist heroes) very close to being an object, but it is an object that attracts rather than repels us.

Another salient aspect of Christopher's literal-minded type of reasoning is that he refuses to recognize any form of transcendence. This can be found in his explicit rejection of the Name-of-God, which is contained in his very own name—a fact of which he is acutely aware. He notes that in Greek Christopher means "carrying Christ" and adds: "My mother used to say that it meant Christopher was a nice name because it was a story about being kind and helpful, but I do not want my name to mean a story about being kind and helpful. I want my name to mean me" (20). In rejecting both the extension and intension of his name, Christopher denies the originary scene of naming itself, which, as in this case too, involves a transcendent, higher agent and an immanent scene of helping another. In Christopher's thinking, the name should do nothing more than denote his own atomized self and nothing else; ideally, it would be a name without any horizontal social implications or an originary, transcendent charge, as is the case in GA's originary scene.

Another major difference between Christopher's thinking and GA is that Christopher is able to engage in mimesis in a very limited way. Although he is able to distinguish between positive and negative emoticons, he is unable to identify and react to more nuanced pictograms and, by extension, to human faces and emotions. This lack of mimetic ability leads to something which at first glance seems comparable to the state of separation described by Emmanuel Levinas in his *Totality and Infinity*. In phenomenological terms (and, of course, in his own self-image) Christopher appears as an entirely discrete subject, as a "way of being, [as a] resistance to the

totality."(9) Furthermore, his other symptoms and personality traits seem to correspond neatly to many of Levinas's criteria for the separated subject: his egoism, his atheism, his dependence on direct sensation,(10) and his ignorance of the Other.(11) The major—and decisive—difference between Christopher's separation and that suggested by Levinas is that Christopher has no way of overcoming it by experiencing the transcendence of the Other through discourse.(12) Levinas, for example, maintains that "signification surprises the very thought that thought it."(13) Christopher, though, isn't surprised by signification; he's confused and overwhelmed by it. His natural impulse is either to retreat even more into his separated state or to strike back physically at his interlocutor. Similarly, the face, which in Levinasian thought stands for the ethical, transcendent pressure on the subject exerted by the Other, has (as the case of the emoticons shows) an extremely limited impact on Christopher. Christopher's movement towards transcendence—if he indeed can be said to have one—does not take place through discourse.

The main narrative prerequisite for achieving transcendence in performatism is double framing. This means that a narrative work creates a homological relationship (a lock or fit) between an inner scene (or scenes) within the work and the logic of the work as a whole. The lock occludes outside discourse and draws the reader into the inside of the text under the conditions established by the text itself. This is indubitably the case in *Curious Incident*. We can think of the inner frame as being Asperger's itself. The syndrome generates countless scenes in which the hero either proves unable to deal with discursive paradox or unable to interpret events because of his lack of emotional awareness of others. The most notable example is perhaps the way his father fakes the death of his mother. Although saddened by the presumed loss of his mother, Christopher accepts and rationalizes her sudden disappearance and makes no attempt to investigate the many discrepancies in his father's story. Asperger's syndrome, in effect, creates a series of extraordinarily restrictive frames or scenes which the protagonist has almost no way of overcoming on his own.

The outer frame in this case is the book itself, which projects that dysfunctionality back onto the hero with full force. In narrating, Christopher raises his syndrome to a higher power and centers himself, in the sense that he becomes the creator of a narrative world that at first glance only serves to exaggerate his own limitations. Christopher's at first purely analytical search for a cause of the dog's death leads to a discovery that causes him to become separated from his father even more and forces him to engage in a (successful) quest for his mother. The inner frame and the outer frame work together to produce a positive synthetic unity. However, this unity is experienced by the hero and readers in different ways. Whereas Christopher takes it literally, we as readers take it metaphorically, as a story showing how even

someone with a separated mind and a complete lack of empathy can cause all of us to empathize with *him*. This aesthetic act of centering and creating identification is, however, not just limited to a metaphorical dimension, but also has a sacral one.

This peculiar set towards sacrality can be pinpointed more closely in the scene where Christopher is taking his A level math exams. During the test the proctor Rev. Peters reads a book by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937),(14) a fact which is mentioned twice in the chapter. In the original German, Bonhoeffer's book is entitled "Nachfolge," or literally "following after." In terms of word form and meaning it is very close to the German word for imitation (*Nachahmung*), confirming that discipleship is as a kind of mimesis or imitation of Christ. One of the more provocative theses advanced by Bonhoeffer suggests that the call of Christ results in a radical separation from others: "Christ wants to make man lonely; he should not see anything except him who called him."(15) And: "Christ freed man from his immediate relationship to the world and placed him in an immediate relationship to his own self."(16) The major difference here is that Christ himself inserts himself as mediator "not only between God and man, but also between man and man, between man and reality."(17) Obviously, this mediating relationship is lacking in the case of Christopher; this is not just because of a rationally motivated atheism, but because he is psychologically unable to accept any mediation at all.

Viewed against this background, Christopher is someone who (like Christ) has no need to imitate anyone else. If at all, he is able to imitate only himself, or, at the very most, other separated individuals.(18) However, by imitating or "following" his own peculiar type of separated logic he manages to change his life circumstances for the better by forcing his parents to deal with him truthfully, which is to say on his own literal-minded terms. In this regard Christopher can be said to "carry himself," he manages to transcend a situation in which he is trapped without resorting to a mediator (as mimetic theories like GA would require) or engaging in a fractured and obscure discourse with a transcendent Other (as is the case in Levinas). Indeed, like Christ, he comes to act a mediator for others: first for his parents and secondly for readers who come to identify with his separation in spite of themselves. Moreover, within the limited confines of his own perspective he may be said to become all powerful. Here are his last words in the main section of the book:

And I know I can do this [become a scientist] because I went to London on my own, and because I solved the mystery of Who Killed Wellington? and I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything. (268)Christopher has not experienced any inner psychological development in the usual sense, but he has, as it were, been deified in social or functional terms: like a

Durkheimian god, he can now “do anything.” Indeed, when one considers the formal structure of the book’s plot, he has in a certain sense also performed a miracle by metaphorically raising his mother from the dead. Christopher is what I call a first-person authorial narrator (in spite of the massive irony accompanying his way of narrating) because he is proven right by the entire thrust of the work itself; rather than cutting him down to size, the irony of the text serves to empower him all the more. The result is a powerful, unified, centering metaphor—a “white lie”—that makes positive identification with the hero possible.

The Aesthetics of Disability and the Ethics of Perpetration

Curious Incident represents disability in a way that with few exceptions has found a tremendous resonance among readers and critics. The way the book goes about this, however—by ironically sacralizing and centering Christopher—doesn’t fit in well with many of the assumptions being currently made in the field of disability studies, which, like all disciplines in the humanities, is heavily saturated with poststructuralist ideas governing otherness, representation, centering, categorical thinking, and the real.

There have not been very many scholarly treatments of *Curious Incident*, and of these, there are only a few in the field of disability studies. The most detailed, by Vivienne Muller,(19) compares *Curious Incident* favorably to what she calls the social and medical models of dealing with disability, both of which she disapprovingly cites as being “totalizing meta-historical narratives that exclude important dimensions of disabled people’s lives and of their knowledge.”(20) As an aesthetic fiction, *Curious Incident* seems to offer an alternative by providing a “fruitful alliance between the lived and the symbolic levels of culture”(21) and allowing the “valorization of the local and contingent expressed for example in a ‘recognition of the perspectives, voices and cultures of subordinate groups.’”(22)One of the basic strategies of this valorization involves centering the peripheral perspective of the disabled person and “destabilizing the disability/ability binary that often privileges the latter term.”(23)If successful, this deconstructive strategy would cause us to reassess our own notions of what is “normal” or “abnormal,” “able” or “disabled” by exposing the contingent character of such binaries and, one might add, categorical thinking altogether.

To a certain extent, there is an overlap between Muller’s deconstructive approach to disability and how *Curious Incident* actually works as a text. Because there is little or no narrative relief from Christopher’s unusual way of viewing the world,(24) the reader is forced to adapt to his peculiar dissociated perspective and to recognize in Christopher a “human face.”(25) Indeed, taken alone, most of his symptoms could be experienced by “normal” people, and readers have reportedly

caught themselves beginning to think like Christopher after having read the book (looking obsessively for series of yellow or red cars etc.).(26) However, Muller's deconstructive approach, by lopsidedly favoring the peripheral and the particular, has trouble describing (let alone explaining) a major aspect of our identification with Christopher, namely the sacral, aesthetic, and ethical aspects of his centered position.

If my interpretation of *Curious Incident* is correct, Haddon is not deconstructing our notion of the center, but reconstituting it: he deliberately assigns Christopher a quasi-sacral, metaphorical status that attracts and holds our attention. By making Christopher into a limited, latter-day Christ, Haddon (to use Christopher's frame of reference) is lying to us, although of course in a productive, indeed socially constructive, way. This strategy is unquestionably the opposite of deconstruction. Rather than exposing the center as a sham and quickly evacuating it again, the novel tries to occupy it anew by linking Christopher—albeit ironically—with *the* totalizing narrative at the core of Christianity. This is not to suggest that Haddon is pursuing a hidden Christian agenda. However, he is trying to make us overcome our ignorance and perhaps also fear of disability by forcing us to engage in a positive identification with a centralized, disabled figure whose separation acquires sacral, binding features rather than mundane, disposable attributes of the real.

The peculiar performatist character of *Curious Incident* can be made clearer by contrasting the novel to the victimary representations of disability employed by Tobin Siebers in his recent *Disability Theory.(27)* Victimary thinking, as Eric Gans has pointed out numerous times, makes a reciprocal relationship between a peripheral, oppressed position and an oppressive center difficult or impossible.(28) In this case, Siebers sets off the peripheral (disabled) position against the abled center by suggesting that the disabled are better equipped to reflect on their peripheral situation than is the dominant, exclusionary ideology of abledness with its illusions of bodily perfection and inviolability.(29) Furthermore, Siebers suggests that the disabled have a privileged proximity to the real, which is to say to the body, to pain, and, by implication, to mortality itself.(30) Summarizing Siebers's arguments (which can be conveyed here only in very reduced form), one could say that the disabled may achieve a positive social identity by combining a victimary critique of the center with mimetic representations of the real (disabled) body that run counter to both the mainstream ideology of "ableism" and to poststructuralist assumptions relegating the body to a mere effect of language:

Disabled bodies provide a particularly strong example of embodiment as mimesis because they resist standard ideas about the body and push back when confronted by language that would try to misrepresent their realism.(31)Victimary thinking of this kind couples a Nietzschean shattering of civilization's illusions with a Hegelian

empowerment of an oppressed, intellectualized subject that is alone capable of reflecting on its situation; both are standard postmodern positions. Siebers however breaks with postmodern thought when he suggests that things (in this case the body) act upon discourse in ways that discourse cannot always control. This, in turn, opens a field in which thingness and discourse interact in necessarily unpredictable ways—a position that Siebers calls “complex embodiment.”(32) In such a field things have independent qualities that exist in “relations of verifiable reciprocity”(33) with the language representing them.

Siebers’ rehabilitation of thingness and mimesis undoubtedly marks a theoretical break with postmodernism. However, in his actual approach to presenting embodiment he remains obligated to a conceptualist (i.e., postmodern) anti-art that limits representations of bodies to their crudest physical qualities. Typical of this are Mark O’Brien’s poems, which Siebers draws on in his discussion of sex and disability identity.(34) O’Brien, who contracted polio at an early age and was confined to an iron lung, wrote highly personal poems and prose pieces that, among other things, depict his own cross-dressing as well as graphic renderings of his sexual experiences as a disabled person. Of interest here are not so much the descriptions of sexual acts, which are in themselves banal,(35) but the transposition of his private experience as a disabled person into the public realm. Such writing works by creating an endless regress of conceptual otherness rather than a stable center of identification or a positive aesthetic focus. Siebers reads the poems as a strategy that “use[s] disability to confuse gender categories with sexual ones”;(36) the goal is to shatter stereotypes of disabled people as being asexual and to show that they, too, wish to be sexually active and attractive. Another example used by Siebers is that of Gretchen Anne Schaper, a paraplegic performance artist who staged a performance that consisted in crawling to her college classrooms without a wheelchair to “reveal her disabled status in full.”(37) Schaper’s performance, which was met with indifference, hostility, and silence, had the desired effect, at least for her, of transforming her physical pain into the political consciousness of disabled identity.(38) As is the case with O’Brien, Schaper’s performance has the effect of rubbing observers’ noses in the real rather than creating a positive focus of identification; the observer is always acutely aware of his or her belatedness, of the inability to experience the real as intensely as the victimized artist has. Identification in this postmodern mode takes place after the fact, by way of conceptualization, and not through the immediate positive impact of form, which in both cases is deliberately restricted to the representation of crude bodily functions. By carrying the private, peripheral experience of the disabled into the public, central realm while sabotaging any spontaneous identification with form, these works can truly be said to deconstruct prevailing norms, shake the illusions of the prevailing ideology of ableness and strengthen the identity of the disabled inasmuch as they wish to define themselves as an oppressed, peripheral minority.

The question is, though, whether disabled identity is realized “naturally” through conceptual anti-art or whether there are other positive—in particular performatist—alternatives.

One answer to this question is provided by Christopher’s own approach to thingness, which might be regarded as a kind of originary (and original) aesthetics in which things are not automatically assimilated to discourse. Christopher, as we know, is not interested in abstract notions of beauty. However, he does make a very elementary aesthetic distinction between colors: he likes red and he dislikes brown and yellow—in particular because he associates them with feces and urine (105-107). This elementary aesthetic distinction, which is rooted in a dislike of bodily excretions, allows him in turn to make verifiable judgments about the world around him (at least on his own terms). The curious thing in this case is not that he makes these idiosyncratic judgments, but the way in which he projects them onto the world as a whole: he attempts to use the red/yellow dichotomy to explain the contingency of things around him (four yellow cars in a row means a bad day, four red cars a good day). The fact that this ultimately doesn’t work is apparent even to Christopher. The point, however, is that Christopher has an originary or primary aesthetics rooted in what might be called “simple embodiment”: his extreme sensitivity to the things around him leads him to create a positive, sensual aesthetics rather than a conceptualized, negative one. This positive aesthetics, in turn, is forced upon the reader through the authorial irony already described above. While we don’t literally identify with his choice of colors, we do identify with his insistence on making them, with his ability to “carry himself” by constructing an aesthetic, ethical, and metaphysical system of his own. This type of positive identification is not “better” or “worse” than the strategies used in postmodernism to deliberately sabotage identification and make us dependent on a peripheral perspective. However, after nearly thirty-odd years of postmodern dominance it is beginning to emerge as a refreshing—and effective—alternative to yet another round of anti-aesthetic, conceptually guided deconstruction that “naturally” portrays the real as crude and base.

The second question regarding the possibility of a performatist alternative to postmodernism is ethical. Eric Gans has suggested numerous times that victimary ideology has exhausted its potential and that it is now time to move past it into a new era of non-resentful dialogue.(39) This is easier said than done, especially if one doesn’t share Gans’s neoconservative ideology. This is because even conciliatory movements from the periphery to the center generate tension between that center and the encroaching otherness from its perimeter (the perhaps best example of this is when the sacred, central ritual of heterosexual marriage is opened to include gays, a subject which I’ve touched on elsewhere in regard to performatism(40)). In the case of *Curious Incident*, we would at first seem to have

an ideal instance of a peripheral figure occupying a center position without provoking too much resentment, let alone resistance or violence. However, even in the fictional world of *Curious Incident* this ideality is not achieved, and I think for good reason. For one of Christopher's peculiar traits is that he insults (and possibly also pushes around and strikes) other disabled children in his school.(41) It is also evident that his almost complete lack of empathy and mimetic ability makes life very difficult for his parents and others around him (at one point he is jailed for punching a policeman). Why, then, do we still identify with Christopher in spite of this transgressive behavior?(42)

Since centered, sacralized persons by definition always carry the "charge" of the collective and in turn act upon that collective, they necessarily acquire a power that spills over and encroaches on others. In the ideal, dogmatically regulated world of religion this excess power is by definition benevolent; in our profane world it is not. Thus the prime paradox involved in the overcoming of victimary ethics is that they are immediately and necessarily replaced by an *ethics of perpetration*.(43) Christopher is only very mild example of this, but there are numerous, more extreme ones (the recent Quentin Tarantino movie *Inglourious Basterds*, for example, rewrites the history of WWII by portraying Jews as vengeful, sadistic perpetrators, and Lars von Trier's *Dogville* makes a central, annihilating perpetrator out of a peripheral, helpless victim(44)). Perpetration is also an issue in comedy that represents disabled people physically or verbally abusing other disabled people. In the comedy show *My Name is Earl* (season 3, episode 18) an extremely physical wheelchair sport called "killerball" is described by one of the participants as being about "people who are already hurt try[ing] to hurt each other more"; the players constantly engage in comic sports banter touching on disability, one of the more tasteful examples of which is "Let's go out and kick some chair!" By comically representing disabled people as earnest perpetrators of abuse, this kind of humor confirms their ability to occupy a center and engage in "normal" transgressions against others around them. The immediate gags may seem tasteless (a paraplegic player at one point exclaims "Over my half-dead body!") but the overall ethos is one of centering and inclusion.(45) In the case of Christopher, it would seem that the absolute, quasi-sacral character of his separation—his innocent and earnest indifference to the mimetic conflicts afflicting the rest of us—allows the more problematical elements of his persona to appear as comic and redemptive.(46)

The shift from an ethics of victimization to an ethics of perpetration highlights another important aspect of performatism, namely that there is no "white" or "neutral" scene in which dialogue or conciliation in the center can naturally take place. The persons who divest themselves of what Gans calls "white guilt"(47) (persons who forsake the role of passive, resentful victims) become structurally speaking active perpetrators of some kind (the German word for perpetrator, *Täter*,

expresses this relation most economically: the word literally means “doer”). For if I feel no “guilt” I have effectively separated myself from and deified myself vis-à-vis others; I can act as freely as I want. Unfortunately, there is no “natural” center (whether that of either current neoconservative ideology or Obama’s conciliatory brand of liberalism) that would regulate the excesses which inevitably result from this freedom.(48) This is also why performatism is not an ideology of acquiescence or, strictly speaking, even an ideology at all: it is simply an aesthetic mode that forcibly focuses our sensibilities on centered, closed spaces and the opaque figures within them and lets the ideological chips fall where they may.

The problem of how best to empower disabled people and/or Asperger’s patients is a complicated question of public policy that exceeds the scope of this article. My main point has been that a positive aesthetic representation of disability —*pace* Siebers, Muller and many others—is now beginning to take place without recurring to postmodern modes of representation, which these scholars assume exists in a natural, immutable relation to their progressive politics.(49) My suggestion is that aesthetic strategies involving centering, metaphorical sacralization, closure, and a set towards transcendence may be more productive in representing disability than the by now tired conceptualist techniques that mercilessly deconstruct prevailing norms by confronting us with unpalatable details of the real that allow only a belated, conceptual identification with otherness. It might also be added that Siebers himself, in a noteworthy article from 1998,(50) once raised the possibility of linking the Kantian, formal notion of beauty with otherness and the political; it would appear that in *Disability Theory* he has slid back into the standardized anti-aesthetic posture of poststructuralism, with its Nietzschean and Hegelian conceits. Finally, it should be noted that a Kantian approach linking beauty and disability theory already exists. The noted disability scholar and activist Anita Silvers has repeatedly criticized postmodernist disability studies for being “too much obsessed with existing socio-political relations and too little inspired by the potential of aestheticizing”(51) and has argued that “aestheticizing disability elevates otherness to originality”(52) in an inclusive way that makes “the human variation we call disability . . . meaningful.”(53)

In this spirit I would like to conclude by giving an example of how a sacralizing, centering kind of strategy and a “deconstructive” one that undercuts the boundaries between private and public can work together to empower the disabled. The example is provided by Siebers himself, in a kind of coda to his call for a new discourse on human rights for the disabled. Siebers calls attention to the city of Geel in Belgium, which since the Middle Ages has served as a haven for people with mental disabilities and is now considered “a model for community-based mental health care.”(54) In Geel, citizens serve as hosts and supporters of the mentally disabled, who move around freely and work there according to their wishes; as

Siebers notes, “the presence of mentally disabled people [in the town] was so common that mental impairment lost its stigma.”(55) Geel attracts mentally disabled people from all over the world who are allowed to live there as citizens—the only requirement being that they be mentally impaired. The original—one might also say originary—reason for Geel becoming a center for the deinstitutionalized care of the mentally ill was however an act of sacralization. According to legend, a certain king of Oriel (in present-day Ireland) decided after his wife’s death to wed his own daughter, Dymphna; Dymphna then fled to Geel, where her father found and killed her. Because her father’s actions were regarded as insane, and because Dymphna was thought to have special powers resisting that insanity, she became the patron saint of the mentally ill, and Geel became the center for treating the mentally disabled that it is today. The model of Geel suggests that the aesthetic, performatist model of dealing with disability is not without correlates in the real world. Geel has an *originary*, *sacral* legitimization; it is a *center* of decentered care for the disabled, and it is subject to *closure* in the sense that a categorical criterion (being mentally disabled) is a prerequisite for living there freely. And, if one follows Siebers’ argument, it also involves a specifically disinterested *aesthetic* motivation in the Kantian sense: “The entire population protects, *apparently without regard for its own interests*, the members of their community least likely to be accepted elsewhere.”(56) If the model of Geel as Siebers describes it is correct, then there is considerable potential in the real world for a performatist, rather than a postmodern, approach to representing and dealing with disability directly.

Notes

1. For a more detailed definition of performatism see Raoul Eshelman, *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (Aurora, Colo.: Davies Group Publishers, 2008) 1-38. (back)

2. London: Vintage, 2003. (back)

3. In addition it tops the bestseller list of all Man Booker books (both long and short lists). See *Bookseller.com, News*, 10 September 2009 <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/96336-page.html> .(back)

4. Asperger’s is never mentioned in the story. However, the blurb on the back cover states that Christopher has it, and there is general agreement that Christopher’s behavior corresponds well to the syndrome. Haddon apparently was unaware of Asperger’s clinical definition while writing the book, but he had previously worked with autistic children and drew on that experience in creating the character. See his remarks in the interview in *Powell’s Books. Author Interviews*, “The Curiously

Irresistible Literary Debut of Mark Haddon," 22 September 2009 <http://www.powells.com/authors/haddon.html>. (back)

5. See *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* 36-38. (back)

6. The originary ostensive sign as described by Gans is structurally always true in the sense that it performatively creates a present scene of temporary reconciliation without a content or signified that could be falsified. (back)

7. See Kyle Karthauser, "Popular Culture after Postmodernism: 'Borat,' 'The Office,' and the Awkwardness of Being Earnest" (forthcoming in *Anthropoetics*). (back)

8. "Popular Culture after Postmodernism." (back)

9. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 54. (back)

10. See *Totality and Infinity* 58-59. (back)

11. *Totality and Infinity* 62. (back)

12. See *Totality and Infinity* 205: "The originality of discourse with respect to constitutive intentionality, to pure consciousness, destroys the concept of immanence: the idea of infinity in consciousness is an overflowing of a consciousness whose incarnation offers new powers to a soul no longer paralytic—powers of welcome, of gift, of full hands, of hospitality." (back)

13. *Totality and Infinity* 206. (back)

14. New York: Touchstone, 1995. (back)

15. *Discipleship* 94. [The translation is my own.] The freer translation by R.H. Fuller reads: "It is Christ's will that he should be thus isolated, and that he should fix his eyes solely upon him." (back)

16. *Discipleship* 95. [My translation.] (back)

17. *Discipleship* 95. (back)

18. Christopher in fact models his story on those about Sherlock Holmes, who was able to detach his mind from reality in a way that Christopher admires. (back)

19. "Constituting Christopher: Disability Theory and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*," *Papers* 2 (2006): 118-125. *(back)*

20. “Constituting Christopher” 118. (back)

21. “Constituting Christopher” 118. (back)

22. “Constituting Christopher” 118. (back)

23. “Constituting Christopher” 121. (back)

24. Some relief is provided by Siobhan, Christopher’s teacher, who encourages him to write a detective book and who insists that he stick to certain established norms while doing so. By naively quoting her normative suggestions while he is fulfilling them, Christopher however effectively subverts them by marking them as foreign to his own way of thinking. (back)

25. “Constituting Christopher” 120. (back)

26. See the anecdotes at the end of the interview with Haddon in “The Curiously Irresistible Literary Debut of Mark Haddon” <http://www.powells.com/authors/haddon.html>. (back)

27. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008. (back)

28. For a full discussion see his *Signs of Paradox. Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), esp. Chapter 12, “Originary and Victimary Rhetoric” 168-183. (back)

29. “Ideology creates, by virtue of its exclusionary nature, social locations outside of itself and therefore capable of making epistemological claims about it. […] Oppressed social locations create identities and perspectives, embodiments and feelings, histories and experiences that stand outside of and offer valuable knowledge about the powerful ideologies that seem to enclose us” (*Disability Theory* 8). (back)

30. “For better or for worse, disability often comes to stand for the precariousness of the human condition, for the fact that individual human beings are susceptible to change, decline over time, and die” (*Disability Theory* 5). (back)

31. *Disability Theory* 2. (back)

32. Siebers defines complex embodiment as “theoriz[ing] the body and its representations as mutually transformative” (25). (back)

33. *Disability Theory* 2. (back)

34. See *Disability Theory* 170ff. Excerpts from O'Brien's work can be found at <http://www.pacificnews.org/marko/> (back)

35. An example : "My balls knew what was coming/ when that washrag touched my hardening dick./ Seared by shame and lust,/ I restrained myself until she turned me…/ The old black janitor stepped through the curtains,/ wiped the come off the linoleum, not saying a thing./ Letting me down on my back,/ she spanked my crotch,/ her face stony with boredom" (Quoted in *Disability Theory* 165).(back)

36. *Disability Theory* 173. (back)

37. *Disability Theory* 191. (back)

38. See *Disability Theory* 193. (back)

39. See, for example, "Victimary Thinking Forever?" *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* 230, Saturday, March 31, 2001 <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw230.htm>. (back)

40. See Raoul Eshelman, "Originary Aesthetics and the End of Postmodernism," in Adam Katz, ed., *The Originary Hypothesis: A Minimal Proposal for Humanistic Inquiry* (Aurora: Davies Group Publishers, 2007) 59-82, esp. 72-76. (back)

41. Cf. the following statements: "I'm not a spazzer, which means spastic, not like Francis, who is a spazzer…" (33). "All the other children at my school are stupid. Except I'm not meant to call them stupid, even though this is what they are" (56). "[S]ome dogs [are] cleverer and more interesting than some people. Steve, for example, who comes to school on Thursdays, needs help to eat his food and could not even fetch a stick" (6). Siobhan, his teacher, also tells him "You must never punch Sarah" and admonishes him "not to push people off the swings if they're already on," (39) implying that he has perhaps already done so. (back)

42. Muller's reading is so strongly obligated to victimary ideology that she is unable to conceive of Christopher as a perpetrator, instead blaming his school for inculcating him with an emphasis on identifying disability and imposing standards of normativity on others: "Within this [institutional] environment, Christopher is encouraged to see other disabled children in the institution as 'abnormal' and to disassociate himself from them" ("Constituting Christopher" 123). Even a very superficial reading of the text demonstrates that precisely the opposite is true: it is Christopher who insults other children of his own accord and it is his teacher Siobhan who tries to keep him from doing so. (back)

43. Perpetrate has distinct sacral roots: it consists of the intensifier "per" and the

verb “patrare,” which means to “carry out” or “perform” and which my Langenscheidt Latin-German dictionary identifies as an “old sacral word” that is perhaps also derived from *pater*. (back)

44. One could probably make a very long list of recent works in which the aesthetic and ethics of perpetration replace those of victimization. In regard to the Holocaust—for Gans the origin of the postmodern victimary attitude—these include Spielberg’s movie *Schindler’s List*, Martin Amis’s novel *Time’s Arrow*, and Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader*. For a discussion of the latter see Raoul Eshelman, *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (Aurora: Davies Group Publishers, 2008) 67-75. (back)

45. One of the gags involves an able-bodied player pretending to be paraplegic in order to participate in killerball, which because of its aggressive nature has become an attractive venue for the abled.(back)

46. That the opposite is possible when representing limited consciousness is demonstrated by the Slovak writer Daniela Kapitáňová in her novel *Kniha o cintoríne* [Book of the cemetery] ([Levice:Koloman Kertész Bagala L.C.A., 2000]; available in French as *Le Livre du cimetière* [Woippy: Éditions L’Engouletemps, 2006]), in which the mentally retarded narrator is a snitch, bigot, and racist who longs for the return of communism. (back)

47. See, for example, “Ending White Guilt,” *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* No. 337: Saturday, August 5, 2006 <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw337.htm> or the systematic treatment in *Chronicles* 310, 311, 313, 316, 318, 323. “Whiteness” refers not to skin color but to lack of an identifying mark: “[T]he white in white guilt is defined not by skin color but by unmarkedness: white guilt is the guilt of the unmarked toward the marked, the mark as at the origin designating the victim.” (“White Guilt VI – From Vietnam to Today,” *Chronicle* 323 <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw323.htm>) (back)

48. It could be argued, for example, that certain members of the Bush administration, most notably Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, successfully overcame white guilt in their attitude towards America’s Islamic foes, resulting in the excesses of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. The Bush administration’s ideological counter-reaction to this was to recognize the guilt principle once more and to institute internationally accepted ethical guidelines for treating prisoners, as well as to eject Rumsfeld himself from the center of power. (back)

49. For a programmatic exposition of this see Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare, “Mapping the Terrain,” in Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare, eds., *Disability/Postmodernity. Embodying Disability Theory* (London: Continuum, 2002)

1-17. (back)

50. “Kant and the Politics of Beauty,” *Philosophy and Literature* 1 (1998) 31-50. (back)

51. See her “The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Disability, Ideology and the Aesthetic,” in *Disability /Postmodernism* 228-244; here: 242. (back)

52. “Crooked Timber” 241. (back)

53. “Crooked Timber” 242. (back)

54. *Disability Theory* 186. (back)

55. *Disability Theory* 185. (back)

56. *Disability Theory* 186 [The emphasis is my own.]. (back)