

THE BALLAD OF THE BODY

by

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A PLAY

OF THE NARRATION OF VARIOUS RECOLLECTIONS OF DRUNKEN BODY PARTS.

STARRING:

BONNIE NECK
TORTURED HANDS
GHOSTLY BRAIN

AND A GUEST APPEARANCE OF

THE LOVELY SPINE

**IT'S NOT A BALLAD.
DON'T EXPECT ONE.
IN HERE.
MAYBE SOMEWHERE ELSE.
SOME OTHER TIME.**

NECK: I've always been a long and bonnie one. I come to feel jealousy when the hands begin to expect more attention than I do.

They believe that they remain beyond grasp. Ironic, isn't it?

In my solitary confinement, I'm making plans for revenge.

Hey there Spine! Yes, you! The lovely one! Come here! I need your help. The wrist has to be broken.

SPINE: Well, you should take into account certain things dear. There is a little bone in me, yeah, a bone in the lovely one, that is not in the position where it should be and some nerves are touching upon it creating shooting pain.

You know what neck? The sensation is really, really horrible. The body cannot stand up straight. It can hardly walk. It can't even sleep.

You wouldn't know anything about it? Would you?

NECK: You appear to be of no service to me.

I have to get in touch with the brain in order to destroy the hands.

Brainy, I strongly recommend not wasting your talents.... You make her hallucinate things! Seduce the fingers! Did you say you've already implanted scenes of lucid splendor that will trap the hands for hours? That's it!

Aching will destroy the beautiful wrist.

Sometimes, for the sake of the whole bodily function, I have to obey and be restrained by the orders of the heart. But I still exist and dwell on a high class of bodily organs. I can turn the head wherever I want, order the brain as much as I like, and torment the spine as long as I wish. Beware of the neck!!

(The hands remain silent after the torture. They come in pairs. Voiceless recollections. Of thoughts. And beginnings. Maybe they have a poem to tell. Or sing. A ballad that still does not exist. But is about to be written in the weeks to come.)

THE IMPOSSIBLE NARRATIVE: REFLECTIONS ON “THE BALLAD OF THE BODY”

“Listening for stories is what we in health care must learn to do. To listen for stories,
we have to know, first of all, that there are stories being told.”
– Rita Charon, “Narratives of Illness.”

Narrative and storytelling are interwoven with the very core of the human subject’s existence, as they cluster links between the subject’s inner and outer worlds. In the epigraph above, Rita Charon – a pioneer of the emerging field of “Narrative Medicine” – underlines the importance of doctors listening to their patients’ narratives, as the existence of these stories depends on the ability of the patients to narrate them. Interestingly, Narrative Medicine shares some of the features to be found in psychotherapy. A trained neurologist, Sigmund Freud gave prominence to his patients’ stories by accentuating the importance of the talking cure, in an effort to heal the traumatic experiences of WWI soldiers. However, Charon’s particular contribution lies in her insistence that “illness and suffering must be told [...] not only in treating trauma survivors but in ordinary general medicine” (65). Through the examination of the different roles and stories particular body parts play and unfold, my piece entitled “The Ballad of the Body” tackles the importance of the patient’s narrative, while focusing on the repercussions of narrative dispossession that befall the body parts. With the ballad’s narrative form as a point of departure, “The Ballad of the Body” subverts readers’ expectations strategically, as it inspects the patient’s narrative by giving voice to different body parts while demonstrating the conflicting relations between them.

To begin with, narrative is utterly linked to communication, as it becomes the only way for the patient to stay in touch with the rest of her surroundings as well as bridge the gap between external reality and the individual’s inner world: “Without the narrative acts of telling and being heard, the patient cannot convey to anyone else – or to self – what he or she is going through” (Charon 66). When particular body parts in “The Ballad of the Body” are deprived of their ability to narrate and communicate “their ballad,” then the body is unable to sustain itself and keep all the body parts together. The body’s entity consists of an orchestration of “ballads” and “narratives” of each and every body part, all of them resulting into the ballad of the whole body. When a particular body part is silenced and unable to articulate its story, then the balance in the narratives is disturbed, allowing thus a particular narrative to dominate, that of the neck, whose aim is to tear the body apart. An attentive ear to the neck’s narrative, as well as to the silence of the non-existent narratives of the hands provides the means to track down the origin of this narrative lopsidedness.

The typography of “The Ballad of the Body” constitutes a way of illustrating this imbalance visually, which also extends to a generic asymmetry, namely between drama and poetry. Sharing elements from both genres, “The Ballad of the Body” plays with literary forms and attempts to overcome the limitations they impose by subverting the forms from within. The first page introduces the characters and protagonists of the dramatic events that will be narrated in the ballad. It functions as a kind of prologue to the actual dramatic effects that are about to follow. The caption under the words “A PLAY” parodies a plot summary, as “the narration” and “recollections” derive from nothing more than the intoxication caused to the “drunken body parts” (“The Ballad of the Body”). Instability, inconsistency and unreliability are part of the narrative in an attempt to undermine literary standards of drama and poetry.

Under the word “STARRING” instead of the names of actors, one finds a list of various body parts. However, they are introduced with a first and last name, acquiring thus a human subject’s dimensions: “Bonnie Neck,” “Tortured Hands,” “Ghostly Brain.” The adjectives that match each name give the relevant body part particular characteristics that are crucial to the development of the narrative ballad. The adjective “bonnie” contrasts the neck’s sadistic nature, yet it very successfully reflects on its vanity. The aspect of the hands as “tortured” give away the plot of the ballad, as this word denotes their victimization.

The brain as being “ghostly” makes the audience anticipate its “ghostly” presence on stage; although one never sees the brain on stage, its agency is manifested via the neck’s words in the subsequent torture of the hands. Interestingly, the brain’s subordination and obedience to the neck deconstructs any preconceived ideas of the brain as the most powerful body organ that exercises its control on and monitors the whole body. This very deconstruction aims at highlighting the fact that even the most powerful body organ can be subjected to illness and be deprived of its power and control.

The “guest appearance of the lovely spine” highlights the story of the spine, as it is the only body part except for the neck to be given the chance to speak on stage. Although the spine is subjected to the torments of the neck, it is able to criticize and challenge the neck through irony: “You know what neck? The sensation is really, really horrible. The body cannot stand up straight. It can hardly walk. It can’t even sleep. You wouldn’t know anything about it? Would you?” (“The Ballad of the Body”).

Since a ballad constitutes a form of narrative poetry, the anthropomorphism of the body parts adds to the drama of the ballad and of the events that it will narrate while the readers build up their expectations for the upcoming narrative. However, the last stanza on the first page comes to subvert such expectations. Written in capital letters and in a different type font, the stanza warns the readers that this piece is not a ballad, and one should not expect one (“The Ballad of the Body”). The kind of forces that are at work here are centripetal and centrifugal ones. For in the first half of the page, a ballad and a play are announced, yet in the second half these expectations are subverted as no ballad is to be expected “in here.” Playfully and with the promise of fulfillment, the text moves this very promise as suggested by the very title “somewhere else” and at “some other time” (“The Ballad of the Body”). The uncertain character of such a promise creates a vague landscape in which the body organs are left to interact.

The second page of “The Ballad of the Body” follows the format of a play, with its characters, dialogue and stage directions. Despite the fact that the audience sees action on stage between the neck and the spine, the stage directions at the very end of the page subvert the conventional form from within, as their content is nothing more than verse. Within the parenthesis, the reader is informed about the silence of the hands and their inability to narrate their story. In contrast to the subtitle of the “The Ballad of the Body” that promises “the narration of various recollections of drunken body parts,” the recollections of the hands are “voiceless” and their manifestation is restricted only into “thoughts.” The use of the modal “maybe” both on the front page, where the stanza announces that no ballad is to be expected, as well as on the second page in the stage directions, expresses doubt as to whether the hands will be allowed their own narrative: “Maybe they have a poem to tell. Or sing” (“The Ballad of the Body”). The doubt of the narrative is confirmed by the next sentence of the “ballad that still does not exist” yet there is the promise of being narrated, “written in the weeks to come.” The echo of a promise of a narrative haunts the play till its end.

Lingering over Charon's remark on giving narrative "room to expand" (65), "The Ballad of the Body" has attempted to align the orchestration of the body parts' narratives, by giving space to their absence and actualization. Despite Charon's longing for patients' narratives "not being in the grip of the untold" (65), "The Ballad of the Body" underlines the fact that certain stories are not to be told; yet, as they slip away, the backwash of their spectral materialization agitates the readers of the piece.

Works Cited

Charon, Rita. "Narratives of Illness." *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*. Oxford University Press, 2006. 65-83. Print.