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Labyrinthitis and Postmodernism

ERIC ZENCEY

IN MARCH OF 2002, IN A VERY DRAMATIC way, I lost my sense of balance—my ability to tell up from down, ceiling from wall, vertical from any angle you care to name. Getting up from my desk one afternoon, I simply fell over. Suddenly, as if a switch had been thrown, I couldn't organize my body against the pull of gravity. All I could do was lie on the floor with my eyes shut because to open them brought a gut-emptying, sidereally-sized case of vertigo—as if all the motion of the cosmos had been pinwheeled to a spike in the center of my stomach. In the ER I was diagnosed with labyrinthitis, a viral inflammation of the inner ear, and was sent home to recover. “Lie him down, draw the shades, let him sleep,” I heard the discharge nurse tell my wife, as persons unseen maneuvered me by wheelchair to a car. Not that I could have done anything else; I was a limp noodle of a human, except when I wasn't, when I tried, eyes shut, to organize myself into some semblance of a coordinated body through sheer muscle memory, an effort that quickly exhausted me into a comatose sleep.

The diagnosis turned out to be wrong—a different story—but after a week I did begin to feel better. I regained enough sense of gravity to sit up, open my eyes, and take in my surroundings again. Within a few more days, I could keep my eyes open long enough to read.

One of the first things I asked for was the household copy of *Gray's Anatomy*: what is this organ that in me had gone so abruptly awry? In reading about the labyrinthine structure of the interior ear I came to a pleasing thought: the organ by which we register the pull of the planet disproves a fundamental tenet of postmodernist thinking.

THE EAR IS DIVISIBLE INTO THREE DISTINCT parts: the external ear, that cartilaginous appendage that teens prolifically pierce and boxers occasionally bite; the inner

ear, which contains the ear drum and those hammer-stirrup-anvil bones you learned about as a kid; and, further in, the internal ear, the labyrinth. *Gray's Anatomy* describes it in ten double-columned pages of latinate prose deep enough to swamp all but the most buoyant of readers. I don't recommend it for recuperative reading. The polysyllables build on each other, word after word, lapping against the poor raft of your understanding with the steady slap-slap-slap of imperious categorization: “the osseous spiral lamina is a bony shelf which projects from the modiolus into the interior of the canal . . .” The book is a textual version of the medical school anatomy theater, and its expository style is the scalpel slice and finger point: There it is, call it that. The only relief for the lay reader is the rare Anglo-Saxonism that hails into view, an antique-sounding name memorializing who-knows-what narrative of discovery: the Organ of Corti. The Handle of Malleus. If you aren't a doctor even a brief visit to the pages of *Gray's* is likely to make you glad that your formal education never took a medical turn.

The illustrations barely help. The half-page schematics offer a confusing geometry of sacs, ducts, and bulbous structures, seen first in “anterolateral aspect,” then “posteromedial aspect,” then in various transverse sections. The whole internal ear system looks like a warren of Jetson-era gerbil tubes built from stringy organs, arranged to intersect and brachiate in confusing ways. Which, of course, accounts for that name.

As you learn about the labyrinth and its operation, the perplexing shape melds into a kind of order. The delicate system of ducts and sacs of the membranous labyrinth (which mimics in shape the bony labyrinth, the bone-channels that contain it), floats in its cavity on a cushion of perilymph, which resembles the fluid that surrounds the spine and

brain and the aqueous humour of the eye. Inside the membranes is a very different fluid called “endolymph,” which is like nothing else in the body. (Alone among bodily fluids, its dominant ion is potassium instead of sodium. Doctors aren't sure how it's formed or how it gets where it is, or why, in some people, it breeds infection, causing the organ to swell and fill its cavity, leading to a loss of balance.)

The main feature of the labyrinth is the set of three hollow tubes called the semicircular canals. They depart from and return to a common chamber, the vestibule, which is why you'll sometimes hear balance referred to as the vestibular sense. The tubes look like three soggy batter-dipped onion rings that got joined in the fryer. One, the lateral semicircular canal, is nearly horizontal. The other two rise vertically from the vestibule at right angles to each other—one in a plane aligned front to back, the other in a plane aligned left-to-right. Each of the three loops is thus perpendicular to the other two, and it's this mutual perpendicularity that struck me as confounding the metaphysical assumptions of postmodernism.

Some postmodernists would say that the phrase “metaphysical assumptions of postmodernism” is a contradiction in terms; postmodernist philosophy supposedly proceeds without them. This aspiration to virgin birth helps make postmodernism difficult to criticize. You have a hard time getting to its fundamentals, since it argues for, and wants to embody, the idea that there are no objective fundamentals on which to build. And postmodern theorizing is notoriously opaque, the prose style of its theorists uncommonly difficult. Its writers don't believe that writers have a meaning to communicate; they want to honor the idea that meaning is constructed by the reader from among the many possible alternative readings. In conversation partisans of the school can sound Taoist:

the postmodernism that can be spoken is not the postmodernism that is, because words (or, “words”) don’t “really” have “settled meanings.”

Still, some general statements about postmodernism are possible. If it has any single core belief it’s that truth is never objective, but is always and everywhere socially and culturally constructed.

Whatever we count as true, in other times and places humans could have and usually did believe something else—and we’ve got no firm, objective ground on which to claim that our system of meaning is better than any other.

In *Gray’s Anatomy* I found evidence to the contrary.

The three semi-circular canals of the interior ear are oriented at right angles to each other, just like the Cartesian x -, y -, z -axes of solid geometry. Evidently the Cartesian system isn’t simply a social construct but has some greater trans- or supra-cultural warrant. What pleased me about this was not the particular support for Cartesian geometry, but a larger, personal vindication. Before my fall, I’d taught at a small college in Vermont where I’d been bedeviled by the smug condescension of postmodernist colleagues, most of whom treated my interest in environmental matters as the result of my old-fashioned, misguided faith that nature was in some sense “real.” They, having read queer theorists and Donna Haraway (“A Cyborg Manifesto”), relished the prospect of a future in which the old nature/culture distinction wouldn’t matter anymore, because it would be shown to be a social construct, a failed and failing attempt by Various White Males to impose yet another oppressive dualism on human experience. Since “Nature” is a cultural construct, Nature was really Culture so both were neither and any attempt to sort them apart was arbitrary, capricious—and oppressive to someone, somewhere. For some of my colleagues, my talk of an objective nature capable of being harmed by us wasn’t so much naive as immoral: white males had used their supposedly objective ideas of “Nature” as a club with which to beat women, gays, indigenes into submission, and by persisting I was giving them aid and comfort.

The faculty’s postmodern faith in the social construction of knowledge extended even to the most rigorous of

the objective disciplines: the adjunct my colleagues hired to teach math told me that the cutting edge in his field was based on a recognition that even concepts like “one” and “two,” “addition,” “subtraction,” and “multiplication”

The whole internal ear system looks like a warren of Jetson-era gerbil tubes.

were culturally specific and socially constructed. (“But two plus two is four,” I objected. The reply: “Only in base ten. And only if we accept your definition of ‘plus.’”)

I might have had natural allies in the sciences, but our small faculty offered Liberal Studies, and there weren’t any scientists among us. In the collaborative, faculty-run confines of our very small school, I couldn’t simply retreat to my own curricular corner and get on with the business of teaching as I saw fit; the faculty shaped the program, and they shaped it away from me.

It hadn’t always been that way. When I first arrived in the woods of Vermont to teach, back in 1980, I’d been a social constructivist with the best of them. I had read Thomas Kuhn in graduate school, and had been excited by his exposition of paradigms and intellectual revolutions and the idea that knowledge is socially constructed and essentially relative. In graduate school I’d also been part of a feminist study group, where I encountered and whole-heartedly accepted the idea that gender differences are socially constructed, that in essence there really were no socially or politically relevant differences between men and women. But by the end of the eighties my thinking had undergone a transformation, mostly as a result of my encounters with the second law of thermodynamics.

You remember the second law. It tells us that in any transformation of energy, some useful energy is lost to us. You can’t push a car backwards and fill the gas tank: the chemical energy of the fuel, released as motion and heat and exhaust, can’t be collected and converted back into usable liquid fuel. If it could, you’d have no energy crisis. You’d also have no

death, no decay or rot, no scarcity, no economic problem whatsoever—and you’d have nothing like life as we know it, on this planet or any other. The entropy law describes a one-way flow in time; it’s why we perceive time in the first place. While the measurement of time may be socially constructed, the experience of it is a cultural universal. Of course humans—Dead White Males—had articulated the law of entropy at a particular historical moment with its particular constellation of socio-economic-cultural forces, but as I came to see it, the second law of thermodynamics transcends its particular origins to encompass an important truth about life on the planet. It’s about as objective, as non-socially-constructed, as you can get. And it’s crucial to the science of ecology, which owes its modern origin to the thermodynamic revolution of the 1920s, when biologists realized that energy flows in food chains are the fundamental warp of the complex webs of natural relations that form ecosystems.

Clearly, social constructivism is a powerful tool against prejudice, and hence for social justice. But just as clearly, the law of entropy is a powerful part of arguments for ecological sanity. For a time I kept these two areas of concern apart, maintaining separate epistemologies for each, but eventually some bleed-through occurred. My understanding of thermodynamics subverted my confidence in the social construction of gender.

The transition was gradual, and I never consciously styled it as an argument from premises, but it went something like this:

Premise one: Since Descartes, the western tradition has been characterized by a mind-body dualism that denigrates the physical and corporal, valuing instead the mental. Some part of our ecological problems traces to this conceit. But mind and body are (and ought to be recognized as) one. They evolved together, in mutual interaction; they function together, inseparably—as the operation of our sensory organs, including the labyrinth, amply demonstrates.

Premise two: the laws of thermodynamics are true and universally applicable. No species or process on the planet has dispensation to work in violation of them.

Observation number one: in nature, plants pursue one of two general reproductive strategies. They either make a great many seeds, investing each with only a tiny amount of food energy, or they make very few seeds, investing each with a relatively large amount of food energy. ("Relative" here is relative to the progenitor species' energy-gathering abilities.) A third strategy, which would promise even greater reproductive success, would be for plants to make a great many very large seeds; but that strategy is foreclosed by the general competition for food imposed on all life by the laws of thermodynamics. To any individual living thing, energy is scarce, and the struggle for it makes a spend-thrift strategy unsuccessful.

Observation number two: among animals, the genders pursue different reproductive strategies. In most species, males make many seeds, each with an infinitesimal investment of energy, while females make fewer seeds (or eggs or babies), investing more energy in each. If no other considerations were to come into play, the successful evolutionary strategy for males would be clear: scatter as much seed as possible and don't look back. Females, in contrast, would achieve their highest rates of reproductive success by brooding and rearing far fewer offspring than males are capable of begetting.

This doesn't imply that men should philander and women should stay home with the kids, though that is of course exactly how most of my feminist friends and colleagues immediately misperceived it. (Other considerations do come into play: many species, ours included, have evolved hard-wired and soft-wired adaptations that increase reproductive success through gender cooperation in brooding and rearing.) To say, as I did, that gender is in part a biological fact and not completely a social construct was, in that place and time, an absolutely heresy; it marked me as a supporter of the Oppressor. But the observation seems commonplace, even obvious; when I came to it I felt as though I had had my first contact with the real world outside the hermetic compound of a cult.

The insight rippled out into other consequences. No longer could I accept data about social or economic differences between men and women as *prima facie* evidence of discrimination against

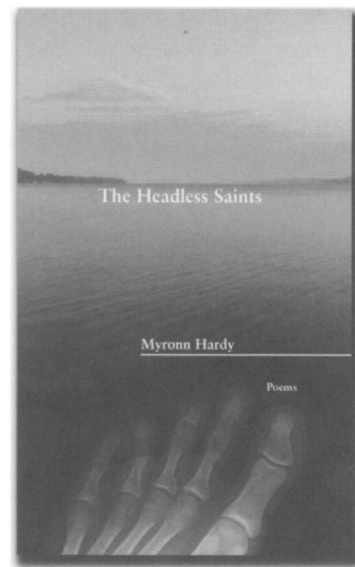
women. The fact that well more than half of all NASCAR drivers are male doesn't by itself prove that women are denied access to careers in motor sports, or that we need to raise more daughters to play with cars and trucks and more boys to play with dolls. Males, those many-seeders, evolved greater levels of a hormone, testosterone, that makes them more competitive and less wary of risk than females. In any social grouping of primate males some of the ambitious ones want to climb to the top of whatever status hierarchy they can because that is how they gain access to breeding females. Put the two together, and of course men want to race each other and win; of course more race car drivers are male than female.

Nor did my colleagues like another corollary I drew: since it is an invariable rule of nature that the gender that invests the most in offspring is the choosier sex partner, in general women choose and males vie to be chosen; this means that whatever men are by nature they are because reproducing women have over millennia chosen them for those traits. "It's a partnership, a co-evolution," I would tell them. "You can't vilify one and valorize the other."

In the search for social and cultural equality between men and women, the easy way out is to insist on numerical parity, fifty-fifty in all things. But, if gender is not completely a social construct, then the task of measuring our approach to social and political equality is much more difficult than that—and one of the few things we can be certain of is that fifty-fifty is for some, maybe for many things an arbitrary ideal. In those cases, imposition of it through external compulsion is likely to create more oppression than it relieves.

In the mid-1990s, the prejudice in favor of social construction of gender ran very deep in the academy (it still does, as former Harvard president Larry Summers recently learned). Still, I'd read my Plato, and believed that my role as a teacher was to encourage the search for truth, even if it meant speaking against faith in the gods of the city. I wasn't forced to drink hemlock, but I was increasingly isolated and marginalized, frustrated that what I thought to be a crucial area of curriculum for a progressive school—the examination of the probable future of culture's root in

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—Cyrus Cassells

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nature—was being neglected in favor of conferences and workshops on social constructivist, politically correct themes: Expressing the De-Gendered Self. Writing Women's Lives. De-Centering Racial Discourse.

And so, I was pleased to find support for my rejection of postmodernism in something so far removed from thermodynamics as the structure and functioning of the labyrinthine interior ear. There, in the orientation of those fleshy gerbil tubes that give us our sense of balance, I spied proof that our abstractions about space aren't simply conventions that we impose, aren't simply social constructions that could have gone otherwise. Clearly, I thought, the shape of the labyrinth says that the x -, y -, z -axes of Cartesian space have objective reality.

In my residually dizzy state, lying on a couch reading about the interior ear, my thinking wasn't as sharp as it could have been. I neglected to remember that there are non-Cartesian systems for locating points in space: latitude and longitude, for instance, will find a point on the surface of a sphere, and the length of a line drawn from the center of that sphere can locate any point on, above or below its surface. I found out later, in additional reading, that while every living thing that moves has some organ for sensing balance, not every animal has a structure that embodies Cartesian reality. The lobster, for instance: inside its head, reporting to its nervous system, it has a motion-sensing organ built around an *otolith*—small bit of stone—suspended in a hollow shell, like a pasha atop an elephant in his howdah. The shell is lined with hairs rooted in nerve cells, just like the hair-and-cells found in our own semicircular canals. Move this unit any way you choose, and the otolith will deflect some hairs, registering the motion as an electrical pulse. The greater the acceleration imparted, the more hairs deflect, and the more electrical pulses the lobster brain collects, sorts, finds patterns in. Thus does the lobster register three-dimensional motion in its limited lobster brain without in any way replicating the x -, y -, z -axes of Cartesian space.

The system the lobster has is good enough for a creature with a barely negative buoyancy, subject to being moved about by currents, but it doesn't have the precision a mammal needs to keep a mammal-sized body oriented against the

pull of gravity on land. For that, you need a labyrinth and more brain power.

The example of the lobster could be used to argue that in some sense our use of Cartesian space is a subjective choice made by evolution. But even a lobster-

You remember the second law . . . you can't push a car backwards and fill the gas tank.

adding postmodernist has got to admit: our internal ear's use of Cartesian space isn't a socially constructed choice and its selection under evolutionary pressure wasn't in any sense arbitrary. The objective reality of the world we move through determines the kind of sensory, cognitive and intellectual schemes that will work, and the discipline of competition under evolution eliminates the schemes that fail. In *Art as Experience* John Dewey captures this sense, describing a "live creature" for whom "the skin is the most artificial of places to begin drawing distinctions." When I first read that in graduate school I took it for hyperbole, a bit of poetic license: *there's my skin, John, and there's the world. Separate. See?* But I think Dewey meant what he said, meant it literally. We inhabit an environment and our environment inhabits us—physically as food, cognitively as sensory input, mentally as images, memories, ideas, conclusions ("warranted assertions," he called them, signaling his wariness of faith in a known and settled truth). Digestively, we are a toral tube—a donut, only longer in the hole—taking in the not-self, squeezing energy and sustenance out of it, and excreting (in accordance with the second law) degraded matter that can't offer us nourishment anymore. Cognitively we are toral tubes as well, sucking in the not-self through our senses, using what we catch to construct our ideation of the world (and of our selves in relation to it), and excreting . . . what? Language? Thought? Action? Postmodernist philosophy?

Okay, the analogy doesn't hold. But the point: we are much more Dewey's live creature than we are the mind-body dualism posited by Descartes. Nor are we the presuppositionless puppets of

perceptual convention described by post-modern philosophy; we make the world, sure, but we make it from material at hand, and with the head start given us by our physical equipment, including the decision-making protocols and predilections encoded in our genes. Colts know how to walk moments after they're born; we don't, but there are things we do know how to do from birth, useful programs and learnings that our species has long since submerged to an unconscious level, efficiently transmitting them to offspring through inherited hard-wiring instead of through laborious post-natal acquisition. Babies can recognize faces. Every (normal) human has the capacity to learn a language, though the particular language learned is a bit of later programming left to the happenstance of birth. This is the pragmatism of evolution: if a cognitive adaptation gives an edge, it stays, and the capacity for it is passed on in the genes.

If evolution is pragmatic, so too is culture: the Cartesian system supplanted other models of spatial organization not because the might of Western civilization was arrayed behind it, enforcing it on subject peoples, but because it passed the simple pragmatic test: it worked in the world—economically, elegantly, for the purposes we brought to it, at least cost. Its effectiveness is transpersonal, trans-historical, even (as the labyrinth shows) trans-specific—which is about as close to objectivity as we are likely to come. Contrary to the implicit assumptions of postmodernist thinkers, we are not isolated individuals alone in the world who achieve cognitive companionship only when locked into an oppressive system of perception and definition that is culturally defined for us and enforced by social or legal convention. "Up" and "down" aren't social constructs (not anywhere within life-sustaining distance of the surface of the planet, at any rate), and as I learned when I lay on my floor, helplessly incapable of organizing myself against gravity, any animal that has to treat them as purposed constructs is an animal in dire straits. The orientation of the semicircular canals in our interior ears tells us that there is an objective world out there, a world of essences and potentially essential truths, and that on occasion we have warrant to say that our systems of knowledge are in demonstrable congruence with it. □