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Being Through the Body: A Reply to Mark Gilks's "Narrating Being through Phenomena"

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In “Narrating Being through Phenomena: The Phenomenological and Sociological Insights of Harry Parker’s *Anatomy of a Soldier*” (2021), Mark Gilks defends a phenomenological interpretation of *Anatomy of a Soldier* (2016) by Harry Parker. The book is intriguing and puzzling because each chapter is narrated by one of 45 inanimate objects. These objects relate the story of a (semi-fictional) British soldier who loses both legs when he steps on an improvised explosive device (IED) and is forced to come to terms with an altered self and his disillusionment with the war. Gilks addresses two related interpretive issues that are raised by the object-narration device.

First, Gilks takes up the puzzle of the ontological status of the objects. He rejects an interpretation put forward by Catherine Bernard on which the object-narrators should be understood as animated beings in themselves. This interpretation draws on Jane Bennett’s theory of vital materialism, which views material objects as independent, self-determining entities with the power to affect humans. Bernard sees the object-narrator device as showing how the soldier is caught up in the material machinery of war and dominated by it.

Gilks argues that Bernard’s interpretation misses the key point that the experiences of the protagonist of the book, Tom Barnes, are apparently nearly exactly similar to those of the author, Harry Parker. This means that the book, although written from the perspective of objects, should really be understood as a first-person narrative, and thus a phenomenological interpretation of the book is more appropriate. According to this interpretation, the objects are not, in fact, independent of the protagonist (Barnes), but rather are intertwined with his being; he is constituted by and through these objects, and thus the “voice” of each object is really Barnes’ voice (and in a sense, Parker’s, as I explain below).

Gilks then shows how this interpretation leads to phenomenological insights about motivation, agency, and intersubjectivity that are interesting in their own right. First, it illuminates how motivation, understood as a meaning-complex that seems to the agent to be a basis for action, should be understood not in purely subjective terms, but as extended into and constituted through the material world. Second, it shows how even when a subject is thrown into a world of pre-existing meanings, the subject’s affirmation of those meanings through the process of becoming, e.g., a soldier, makes the subject complicit and responsible for the world they inhabit and the things they do. This is in contrast to Bernard’s view according to which “docile bodies” are dominated by the machinery of the military and war. Finally, the objects that narrate the stories figure in the lives of multiple characters in the book, revealing the mutual constitution of subjects through the objects they jointly intend—even subjects whose ends are directly in conflict.

The second interpretive issue that Gilks addresses has to do with the problem of what genre the book belongs to, and who it is about. Again, the phenomenological interpretation is key to resolving this. Gilks argues that *Anatomy of a Soldier* is neither memoir nor novel, but an auto/biography with a “phenomenologically implied author”. Parker, the author, is distinct from Barnes, the protagonist, and both are distinct from the (object) narrators, which conflicts with a standard interpretation of autobiography according to which the protagonist, the author, and the narrator are identical. Gilks argues that Barnes should really be

understood as a complex of the 'I' and the objects through which he constitutes himself. Parker should be understood as distinct from Barnes. But this distinction is not straightforward, because Parker has a special relationship to Barnes. Parker uses the device of separating himself from Barnes in order to gain a transcendental perspective on himself and in fact develop and reconstruct himself in a way that would not be possible if he were writing about himself explicitly and bound to all the demands of literal truth.

I agree that the phenomenological interpretation of the book is more powerful. The fact that the events in the book largely mirror those of the author means that the first-person dimension of the book cannot be ignored, and since phenomenology is precisely the study of first-person experience, it is the obvious place to turn. This does not mean that the sense in which the objects transcend the protagonist, which is emphasized by Bernard's vital-materialist interpretation, must be sacrificed. The objects, as Gilks says, are recalcitrant to the will and show that the subject is always enmeshed in a world that transcends its own subjectivity. The political dimension of the novel also figures into this kind of an interpretation, because on a phenomenological view, an individual is always both responsible for and conditioned by wider political forces.

Gilks's solution to the generic question is rich, and the idea that a work in which the author, protagonist, and narrators are all distinct can nonetheless project a coherent, phenomenologically-implied author has wide application, especially in a contemporary literary context in which the limits of the license one can take in writing about one's own experiences without violating the constraints of truth crucial to the memoir genre are under much examination.

That said, I think the resources of a phenomenological approach to Parker's book are even more extensive than Gilks appreciates. In particular, Gilks's interpretation does not provide as full a treatment of the embodied self as it could. Gilks does point out that Barnes/Parker's self is essentially embodied, and that this is why the loss of his legs leads to an "incomplete" (Parker 1) and ruptured self. But there is much more to say about the role of the body in Barnes/Parker's disillusionment-redemption narrative, as Gilks aptly calls it. I will consider two ways in which the body figures crucially here: 1) bodily skills, and 2) shame.

The Body as Subject and Bodily Skills

Why did losing his legs lead Parker to write a book about his experiences from the points of view of inanimate objects? Gilks's insight that the trauma caused a crisis of self and meaning sheds some light on this. According to Gilks, the reason for the object-narrators is to communicate that Barnes/Parker's self is embedded in the world of objects and that this dependence means his self is not stable or essential. But the disruption of self occurred because of something that happened to the soldier's *body*, not (on the face of it, at any rate) because of something that happened to his relationship with objects. The significance of this for the choice to write from the point of view of "objects" requires a fuller explanation. A phenomenological approach to the needed explanation reveals more about the essentially bodily nature of the disillusionment that faces the soldier, and his eventual redemption.

Merleau-Ponty's view that what bridges the subject-object gap is not mere consciousness but rather the lived body can supply some of the missing pieces. For Merleau-Ponty, it is our learned, bodily habits that intend objects, and the interdependence of subject and object is a fundamentally bodily interdependence. We understand objects through our intentional, bodily skills. Merleau-Ponty (1999) says:

In the action of the hand which is raised towards an object is contained a reference to the object, not as an object represented, but as that highly specific thing towards which we project ourselves, near which we are, in anticipation, and which we haunt (159).

That is, it is the bodily action of reaching for a cup that constitutes the cup, not an act of consciousness. To extend Merleau-Ponty's example, consider that one is drinking from the cup while reading. In this case, the bodily interaction with the object determines it as the kind of intentional object that it is, even while conscious awareness is directed toward the reading and not the cup.

Returning to the object narrative, this means that when Barnes/Parker's bodily skills were disrupted, so were his interactions with objects. If, as Merleau-Ponty holds, his bodily conduct with and towards objects constitutes both the objects and himself in important ways, then a radical transformation of his bodily capabilities will be bound to alter the way the world shows up for him. On this picture, moreover, the objects only are what they are because of the way the soldier conducts himself towards and with them, so their contribution to the narrative tells us important things about the soldier's body, and especially its bodily skills. It therefore has direct bearing on his story of coming to grips with his injury and its effects on his being.

How, then, do bodily skills with and towards objects figure into Barnes/Parker's redemption narrative? Gilks makes a useful distinction between who Barnes/Parker is before the injury and who he becomes after it. According to Gilks, before the injury, Barnes/Parker understands himself as a Soldier, and after it, he struggles to make sense of himself as a Wounded Veteran. Using this distinction, we can see how the Soldier conducts himself towards objects differently from the Wounded Veteran, and gain insight into how the Soldier gradually reconstitutes himself as the Wounded Veteran.

The Soldier's Conducts Towards Objects

At the beginning of the Soldier narrative, one of a pair of desert boots narrates a run that Barnes/Parker takes. Barnes/Parker is a habitual runner, and he runs easily, the boots fitting and supporting his movement naturally: "My tread folded and bent around rocks and grasped the mud with each stride ... my cloth surface formed creases as I flexed to the movement of the foot" (9).

Even before deployment, he has a sophisticated motility that prepares him for the rigors of war. The boots do however cause a blister, and this shows that the Soldier-self is still under formation. After adjusting to the desert and combat and developing the skills of a captain,

the Soldier ultimately uses the objects with ease to defend himself—against enemies, but perhaps more importantly, against his own vulnerability and fear. He effortlessly adjusts a dial on the night-vision goggles and, with an easiness based on long experience, focuses them on the parts of the landscape where the enemy might be hiding. His body has so completely adapted to his helmet that he doesn't need to think about it in order to use it: "My weight pulled his head forward but the muscles in his neck were trained so that he didn't feel me. I made him comfortable and safe in this environment . . . he wanted to understand everything that happened and control it and exist in it" (290). These conducts are performed through the intelligence of his body; the Soldier is someone who feels fear but is in control, smart, and brave.

But ultimately this equipment cannot really protect him from the vulnerability of his body, and when the shockwave tears through him, he must begin to come to terms with himself in a different way.

The Wounded Veteran's Conducts Towards Objects

The amputation of Barnes/Parker's legs radically disrupts the bodily skills that the Soldier relied on. He can no longer *be* a Soldier, and can no longer defend himself against vulnerability in the way he is used to. In fact, the story of his recovery of his ability to walk and ultimately run can be understood as a story of learning to cope differently with vulnerability. For the redeemed Wounded Veteran, disruption of bodily skills is always a possibility, but that vulnerability is not one he seeks to eliminate; he has integrated it into his self-understanding.

Putting on the first prosthetic leg (we hear only the voice of one of the legs in each pair) is exhilarating, but the leg is also tremendously awkward and Barnes/Parker is frequently close to falling. The prosthesis also causes great pain and bleeding at the wound site of the stump. The leg reports Barnes/Parker's thoughts about it, and "how unfair it was that for you [Barnes] to progress, I had to damage you" (232). The larger point here is that the injury and disruption of Barnes/Parker's bodily skills is necessary in order for him to progress in the project of coming to terms with his vulnerability. He keeps going in an "addictive" (232) pursuit of progress, but no matter how much, as the leg says, "[i]t felt like I was a part of you" (232), he still falls. In these moments, he has only his old experience and bodily skills to fall back on, and they are ultimately inadequate for the new situation: "Each time you reacted with a lifetime of learnt experience and your stump jolted inside me as your brain braced your remembered foot out. I sheered away from you, pulling across your stump to an unnatural angle, and then you were in a heap with me bent painfully below you. She [the physical therapist] was there to help you up" (232).

Barnes/Parker eventually graduates to a second, computerized leg that performs many of the necessary adjustments itself. But here there is still disappointment—the adjustments do not make walking completely effortless, as Barnes/Parker had hoped. When Barnes/Parker is first presented with the new leg, the leg says, "Ever since they'd mentioned you were ready for me, I'd filled your dreams as a fetish of the possible, a high-tech solution to your problems...you wanted me to fix you" (284). But the leg can't do this. "I . . . couldn't spring

forward into a run below you or skip around obstacles or quickly adjust when you tripped,” it says (286-287). “You were still an amputee” (286).

Yet here we see that Barnes/Parker has made a kind of progress, namely in his ability to adapt to the new leg. He is not starting over from scratch; he has a bodily understanding of the basic skill of walking with a prosthesis that he did not have before he practiced with the first leg. The new leg might be awkward and unable to complete him in the ways that he wants, but the skills he has learned with the first leg transfer to the new one—he has built new habits that are beginning to replace the old habits that are no longer useful in his new bodily situation.¹

The last chapter of the book, in which the redemption culminates, is narrated by a carbon-fiber running blade. Here, we see a very different Barnes/Parker. He is as free and easy in his running as he was in the scene narrated by the boots. The running blade says, “And I compressed under you and sprang on, clicking with each step, whipping over the tarmac and down, bounce and on” (309). But then he falls. The words of the running blade echo the words of the first prosthesis: “I sheered to an unnatural angle” (310). This time, though, the fall isn’t a threat to Barnes/Parker’s self-integrity. He recovers quickly, smiles and laughs with the crowd that has gathered around him, and gets up on his own. Ultimately he thinks, “It was normal” (309). Vulnerability is no longer something he needs to protect himself from—it is affirmed as a part of who he is.

The form of Barnes/Parker’s final self-integration extends Merleau-Ponty’s view of bodily intentionality. Part of being a whole, intelligent body-subject means being ready for our experience and skills sometimes to fail us. We are always vulnerable to “falling”, and our coping skills are never perfectly reliable. The ability to accept the contingency of the self and recover from fractures and fragmentations is a skill in and of itself.

Shame

The body figures into the redemption narrative in another important way. The phenomenological interpretation, Gilks argues, has the advantage of not relieving individual humans of their responsibility for their participation in war, because on such an interpretation the individual actively takes over the meanings of the equipment of war that they discover. This does represent an advantage of a phenomenological interpretation over a vital materialist one. At the same time, the phenomenological interpretation also reveals how war can strip an individual of their subjectivity and agency. The reduction of Barnes/Parker to a physical body can be understood in terms of Sartre’s concept of shame, and thus part of the redemption narrative is Barnes/Parker’s struggle to escape shame by becoming a body-

¹ Merleau-Ponty (1999) describes how habits developed with one object can transfer to a new, similar object: “It is known that an experienced organist is capable of playing an organ which he does not know, which has more or fewer manuals, and stops differently arranged [...] He needs only an hour’s practice to be ready to perform his programme. Such a short preparation rules out the supposition that new conditioned reflexes have here been substituted for the existing sets, except where both form a system and the change is all-embracing...” (145).

subject again, which again requires the reacquisition of the bodily skills that allow him to determine his own world.

For Sartre, shame is the experience of being reduced to an object within the meaning-structure of another subject.² The Other has taken away one's ability to define one's own self and situation, and one is now just an actor in someone else's drama. One primary form of shame is being reduced to the ultimate object: one's physical body. When someone treats me simply as a physical body, my subjectivity is stripped away and I am no longer an agent. I am in an important sense no longer a human being.

This experience is something that Barnes/Parker feels intensely. The scenes where he is unconscious and his body is worked on purely as a machine reveal how utterly the injury removed his ability for self-determination. In the amputation scene in particular, narrated by an oscillating saw, the language the surgeon uses to describe Barnes/Parker's body contains nothing familiar to subjective experiences of the body: "There's no muscle in this region to do a myodesis, so I'll use what's left of the vastus valeralis and femoris to wrap over the distal limb" (82).

After the amputation, Barnes/Parker feels that he is no longer who he was in the world. He is now not a brave and admirable captain, but an object of pity; his subjectivity is stripped away, leaving only his physical damagedness and inability to function "normally". The wheelchair narrates a scene in which Anna, a woman Barnes/Parker had a romantic interest in before the war, comes to visit him in the hospital. He hides his damaged body from her and while she is aware of it, she looks only at his face, apparently intending to treat him as a subject. But Barnes/Parker cannot really accept that she sees him as a subject; as she leaves, she is crying, and the wheelchair says, "You thought she was crying because of the way you had been changed" (185).

Slowly, though, through learning to use his prosthetic limbs, Barnes/Parker is able to feel himself to be more than just a physical body. After his initial session with the first prosthesis, in which he walks for the first time since the injury (albeit with a lot of pain and difficulty), he says to his physical therapist, "It was great to be upright. It made me feel so much more human" (229).

Later, when he first uses the second, computerized prosthesis, he visits the grocery store. There he has an intense experience of shame, as he is acutely aware of the other shoppers staring at him as a miracle of technology—but not a body-subject. Still, Barnes/Parker has some ability to interact with others as more than a machine. When a young boy at the check stand tells his mother that Barnes/Parker is a robot, Barnes/Parker smiles at him and says, "I'm actually only half robot" (289). The smile, with what presumably he feels to be the human half of him, is a bodily conduct that shows that Barnes/Parker has progressed to being able to reclaim his lived body at least to some extent.

Finally, in the last scene of the book narrated by the carbon-fiber blade, we see a Barnes/Parker that has fully reclaimed his subjectivity. The blade describes itself as having

² See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 350-352.

its own agency: “You looked at your watch and then I was bouncing you forward again” (309). But since the blade really speaks for Barnes/Parker, what this means is that Barnes/Parker has finally integrated with his prostheses, and has regained the bodily intentionality he once had with his old legs. When he falls, he attracts onlookers wanting to help, and while not wanting to admit to being a bit hurt, he is able to get back to his feet fairly easily and gracefully declines the help of the onlookers with smiles and laughter. Their interest and concern do not deprive him of his subjectivity; he is more than an object to them.

Conclusion

As Gilks has shown, the function of the object-narrators in Parker’s book is in part to show how a subject is not self-sufficient but embedded in the world. Understanding intentionality as a fundamentally *bodily* intentionality links Barnes/Parker’s bodily rupture to a rupture in his self-constitution in and through objects. Additionally, being stripped of his bodily skills temporarily reduces Barnes/Parker to a mere physical object in the eyes of some others, which accounts for the deep shame that he experiences and eventually overcomes. Gilks rightly moves away from the vital materialism toward phenomenology, offering new resources for understanding the status of the object-narrators and the effects of the book. By including an analysis of how the body figures in Barnes/Parker’s life story, we can see how the phenomenological interpretation can be taken even further.³

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