
The Voice of “Reason”

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Said, Pull her up a bit will you, Mac, I want to unload there.
Said, Pull her up my rear end, first come first served.
Said, give her the gun, Bud, he needs a taste of his own bumper.
Then the usher came out and got into the act:

Said, Pull her up, pull her up a bit, we need this space, sir.
Said, For God’s sake, is this still a free country or what?
You go back and take care of Gary Cooper’s horse
And leave me handle my own car.

Saw them unloading the lame old lady,
Ducked out under the wheel and gave her an elbow.
Said, All you needed to do was just explain;
Reason, Reason is my middle name. (Miles 1983: 93)

Josephine Miles’s widely anthologized poem, “Reason,” appears in the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* and elsewhere with a note citing her most widely quoted statement: “I like the idea of speech—not images, not ideals, not music, but people talking—as the material from which poetry is made.”¹ “Rea-

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1. See Ellmann and O’Clare 1973: 823. The quotation comes from an interview with Josephine

son”’s focus on what Miles called “the spare and active interplay of talk” clearly appealed to academic editors of the postwar period (perhaps not surprisingly, since Miles was an academic herself, the first woman to be tenured in the English department at the University of California at Berkeley). The accompanying note in the *Norton* foregrounds Miles’s talk-based poetics as the reason for “Reason”: the poem’s material is its method. And yet the footnote screens as much as it reveals. Its focus on “people talking” deflects attention from what, in this particular scene, they are talking about—the other material from which “Reason” is made.

What they are talking about is the question of whether a disabled woman can get access to a movie theater. Although nothing in “Reason” identifies Miles with her “lame old lady,” and although she was by no means “old” at the time of the poem’s first publication in 1955, this was indeed material of intensely personal significance for the author. Miles lived with rheumatoid arthritis from the age of two, mostly in a state of severe and visible physical disability. For years, unable to use a wheelchair, she employed personal care assistants to help her move from place to place. (During the Vietnam War years, when she actively involved herself in antiwar politics, she was left behind more than once when a gathering was teargassed and no one thought to help her leave the space.) When I first met her in our common workplace in 1984, at a reception for new faculty, she was carried into and across the room by a young aide.

In the image of Miles as described in the previous sentence, I recognize her as disabled, relying on what Lennard J. Davis (1995: 12) has identified as one key modality through which disability is constructed: “The person with disabilities is . . . brought into a field of vision, and seen as a disabled person.” So crucial is the gaze to the process of constituting disability in this formulation that Davis goes on to put the point even more forcefully: “Disability is a specular moment.” “Reason” hinges on exactly such a specular moment. Interrupting its interplay of talk, the poem turns from saying to seeing: “Saw them unloading the lame old lady.” Yet the return of idiom in “Reason”’s aphoristic final lines (“All you needed to do was just explain; / *Reason, Reason* is my middle name.”) signals what I take to be the poem’s subject: how disability is also a spoken moment, one made in discourse.²

Miles conducted by Ruth Teiser and Catherine Harroun between 1977 and 1979, now housed in the oral history collection of the Bancroft Rare Book Library at the University of California at Berkeley. Marjorie Larney’s (1993) edition of excerpts of that interview has the “idea of speech” passage on its back cover.

2. A note on what I mean by “disability.” For two very useful summaries of the history and politics of the definition of the term, see Johnstone 1998: 5–13 and Epstein 1995: 13–17. Epstein reprints and

In this essay, I wish to gloss “Reason” differently, substituting for the usual footnote about the idea of speech another set of ideas from new work in disability studies.³ I wish to place “Reason” not only within the history of American poetry, but also within the history of American constructions of disability, following Miles in showing what the one has to do with the other. I also wish to reclaim Miles for disability studies. This last project matters not because the field needs to find exemplary literary ancestors (although disability studies on the whole still lacks the sort of basic archival groundwork that necessarily preceded, and indeed therefore made possible, the post-Foucauldian critique of “reclamation” that has occurred in feminist and queer studies). It matters because disability studies needs to understand its histories. And literary disability studies can benefit from a look at a writer whose professional role gave her a heightened consciousness of language-making and a particularly sharp set of tools for expressing a set of social ambivalences about disability that were by no means hers alone.

The very aspect of Miles’s work that most aligns her with recent “social model” theories of disability—her focus on discourse—may paradoxically have prevented some readers today from recognizing in her poems a significant body of writing on disability. Miles’s apparently affable and conciliatory rhetoric, her seeming poetics of cheerful overcoming, concealed a keener form of social comment. “The [politicized] anger I am talking about,” writes Albert Robillard (1999: 67), “does not arise within a general social order, but within the social order achieved through just this talk . . . and with *just* what these [social] members

analyzes a 1993 U.S. National Institute of Health chart illustrating some crucial distinctions between the terms *impairment*, *disability*, and *handicap* as they have been defined in the contemporary literature of physical health and rehabilitation. The watershed definition is that of the World Health Organization in 1980, with its three-part distinction between impairment (defined as “any loss or abnormality of psychological, physical, or anatomical structure or function”), disability (difficulty with tasks), and handicap (social disadvantage resulting from impairment or disability). Epstein compares this with the later revisions suggested by the U.S. National Advisory Board on Medical Rehabilitation Research in 1993, in which “functional limitation” takes the place of disability, and disability comes to describe what the WHO had called handicap: the range of social, cultural, and environmental arrangements that stigmatize, isolate, and oppress people whose bodies deviate from a supposed norm in form or function. This 1993 revision is in line with the use of the term *disability* in much of the work of contemporary disability activists and theorists, and in general I will follow its model. I proceed here with the sense, informed by much recent work in disability studies, that, as Thomson (1997: 15) puts it, disability “is an overarching and in some ways artificial category. . . . The physical impairments that render someone ‘disabled’ are almost never absolute or static.” Rather, they are “dynamic, contingent conditions.”

3. For a survey of recent work in the field of literary disability studies, see Davis 1999.

make of the talk. . . . the perception of disabled bodies is . . . an interactional category.” In a variety of ways, Miles’s poetry of “just this talk,” I will argue, anticipates aspects of later social models of disability.⁴

This does not mean that Miles’s poems reveal her to be a premature disability rights activist in the guise of a modern poet, but that when we read her early poems within their own historical context we can find both a critique of and a swerve from the standard discourses of disability in her day. In a sense, too, we can read in her poems signs of the conditions for the emergence of a new contemporary social group—but only if that group is understood in both broad and complex terms. If Miles’s poems of the 1940s and 1950s seem to capture a version of the “language of the disabled” before there was a disabled community imagining itself as such, this may in part be because—as the recently rediscovered 1942 disability memoir, Katharine Butler Hathaway’s *The Little Locksmith*, has also helped show—some historical sources present discourses of disability that prove, upon critical examination, to be braver, subtler, and more ingenious than standard narratives of the development of contemporary disability consciousness can generally account for.

Two things complicate—perhaps even seem to contravene—my invocation of an activist, social model of disability as a tool for reading Miles. The first is Miles’s own public resistance to being identified, later in her life, with the broad-based disability rights movement—or indeed, from her youth on, with the cate-

4. The “social model of disability” was formulated in English by members of the Union of the Physically Impaired in the United Kingdom in the 1970s and then sharpened and refined across the next two decades by an international group of scholar-activists. The model is described succinctly by Paul K. Longmore and David Goldberger (2000: 3). Disability is no longer to be seen, they write, as “the exclusive and inevitable consequence of physiological impairment,” or as “a series of objectively determinable, pathological clinical entities located in . . . bodies.” Rather, disability is to be understood as a *process*, “the result of a relationship between individuals with impairments and socially created barriers,” and as a *role*, “a culturally constructed identity, an elastic social category shaped and reshaped by public policy, societal arrangements, and cultural values.” Some important recent work in disability studies has found the basic binary distinction between (physiological) impairment and (socially constructed) disability far too blunt a tool. “The relatively pragmatic character of the classification,” Henri-Jacques Stiker wrote presciently in 1982, “conceals a deeper analysis, in sociological or anthropological terms, of the collective figuring of disability and of what the issues are in this domain” (Stiker 1999: 204). Recent work that problematizes the distinction between supposedly objective, material “impairment” and the realm of the social includes Hughes and Paterson 1997 and Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare 1999. Still, the initial sharp edge of the distinction between impairment and disability allowed for the creation of a powerfully productive “social model” in disability studies, one that can attend to how someone like Miles was “disabled” not by rheumatoid arthritis per se but by a society that sometimes denied her access to schooling, saw her as desexualized, tokenized her, infantilized her, and medicalized her.

gory of "disabled" at all. The second is the striking absence of Miles's writing from the scholarly work on disability and literature that has been inspired and organized by social model theory.

Miles consistently refused to define herself in terms of her "medical condition"; she never represented herself in later years as part of any particular identity politics or collective struggle around disability issues. In a late-1970s interview, she commented breezily on a library that was inaccessible to her: "They didn't build it personally for me, that's all" (Larney 1993: 36). Often, she described her impairments as productive limitations, invoking Robert Frost's description of free verse as playing tennis with the net down: "One of the great problems in living now is that people have such a multitude of choices to face, and in an existential world making choices is everything. It's when choices are limited that it's easy to make intelligent decisions, and my choices were always very limited" (Larney 1993: 82). In 1979, though she did go on to stress the importance in her own life of her struggle for economic self-determination, she presented the Independent Living movement, which had originated in part on her own campus, as largely irrelevant to her concerns: "Independence today, especially in relation to disablement, means physical independence or personal independence. It's very curious, but neither of these crossed my mind very much" (Larney 1993: 81).

Quotations like this pose a problem for anyone attempting to enlist Miles in a contemporary poetics of disability presence.⁵ The biographical archives by and large offer few inroads for critics looking for the "ragged edge" of a subversive disability consciousness, and plenty of opportunity to pinpoint examples of internalized oppression.⁶ I am uninterested in this tack for many reasons (beginning with—but only beginning with—my sense that as a nondisabled reader I do better to examine my own relation to disability oppression than to criticize anyone else's).⁷ The problem in reading *Miles and disability* is in part a theoretical one;

5. On the "poetics of presence," see Morris 1995. As a literary figure, Miles preserved her privacy, relying on what Timothy Morris (1995: 105) calls "the larger social institutions of reticence" to maintain a critical decorum that muted, if not entirely suppressed, allusion to her physical impairments. Morris is referring to Elizabeth Bishop's identity as a closeted lesbian; critical queer theories of the closet resonate here for disability poetry as well. His argument reminds us that the best approach to "closet poetry" is not simply through recuperative reading (bringing Miles "out" as a "poet of disability") or condemnatory reading (criticizing her for denial) but by reading the poems as "existing . . . in their own irrecoverable, but identifiable, historical moment" (Morris 1995: 125)—a moment made no less irrecoverable for me by the fact that late in her life Miles and I were contemporaries.

6. With "ragged edge," I mean to recall the title of the famous disability journal; see Shaw 1994.

7. A brief note here on what I mean by "I am nondisabled." Of course, there is no firm binary divide between "disability" and "ability." "The longer we become theoretically absorbed in the question of who is disabled and who is not," writes Deborah Marks (1999: 18), "the more an answer seems

that is, it requires a calling into question both of *Miles* and of *disability* as organic and self-evident concepts. We might read Miles's refusals to identify with disability or with a disability rights politics in the context, for instance, of Henri-Jacques Stiker's (1999: 134) stringent critique of the category of "disability" itself in the twentieth century:

The "thing" has been designated, defined, framed. Now it has to be scrutinized, pinpointed, dealt with. People with "it" make up a marked group, a social entity. . . . The disabled, henceforth of all kinds, are *established as a category to be reintegrated and thus to be rehabilitated*. Paradoxically, they are designated in order to be made to disappear, they are spoken in order to be silenced.

And equally, or perhaps even more important, the problem of reading Miles and disability is a historical one, a task supported by new work in disability historiography.

Growing up in an era in which public policy consolidated a model of disability as "incapacity because of medical pathology" (Longmore and Goldberger 2000: 1–2), Miles consistently presented herself as both agreeable and capable. She came of age in the 1930s, a period in which the most obvious part given to her, the delegitimated role of "cripple," was countered or altered only by the ideology of rehabilitation modeled by that indomitable overcomer Franklin Delano Roosevelt.⁸ It is no surprise that she adopted a posture of "continuous, cheerful striving" (12). Poems like Miles's "Reason" enact a certain kind of contract with the reader: a poetics of affability, its liberal mode strikingly at odds with the more militant stance enacted and demanded by later movements for disability rights.⁹

Recent collections of disability writing have had no use for Miles, finding their

elusive." In the late 1980s, some activists began to employ the tongue-in-cheek term "temporarily able-bodied" to describe someone like me and to challenge the security of the "able-bodied" position. I prefer the equally tongue-in-cheek term suggested by Marks (1999: 18), "contingently able-bodied," which implies the possibility rather than the inevitability of a shift in status and which also calls into question "the fantasy of 'ability' and the denial of the universality of impairment." Eli Clare (1999: 67) offers another suggestive term: "But if I call myself disabled in order to describe how the ablest world treats me as a person with cerebral palsy, then shouldn't I call nondisabled people *enabled*?" That word locates the condition of being nondisabled, not in the nondisabled body, but in the world's reaction to that body. This is not a semantic game."

8. For discussions of the figure of FDR in the context of disability criticism, see Gallagher 1985 and Poore 2000. On the tropes of the cripple and the overcomer, see Longmore and Goldberger 2000. The critique of the narrative of individual "overcoming" is everywhere, and fundamental, in disability studies. For one forceful summary of this line of analysis, see Linton 1998: 17–22.

9. I take the concept of affability from Gerber 1993.

precursors in less deferential forebears. Kenny Fries's 1997 anthology *Staring Back: The Disability Experience from the Inside Out*, for instance, incorporates not a poem by Miles—or other possible representatives of her generation like Flannery O'Connor or Vassar Miller—but an invocation, from the play *P.H. *reaks: The Hidden History of People with Disabilities*, of the militant activism of the League of the Physically Handicapped. (The LPH was a group of organizers in the 1930s who occupied New York's Emergency Relief Bureau in protest of the Works Progress Administration's exclusion of handicapped people from access to federal jobs.¹⁰) *Toward Solomon's Mountain: The Experience of Disability in Poetry* (Baird and Workman 1986) includes Miller, but not Miles; Miller's own anthology, *Despite This Flesh* (1985), has no poems by Miles in it. Nor do the anthologies specifically focused on disabled women's writing.¹¹

This last omission especially troubles me, both because Miles's life was partly shaped by how—in Eli Clare's (1999: 123, 137) resonant phrases—"gender reaches into disability . . . disability snarls into gender," and because Miles's poems admit a wide variety of feminist readings. "Reason," for instance, is composed entirely of men's talk, dime-novel and Western-movie talk, hard-boiled detective talk, but also, first and foremost, *car* talk. Within this talk, cars as well as (disabled and old) women are gendered feminine: "Pull her up a bit." Surely, as Paul Friedrich (1991: 52) has noted, these are working-class men, and class as well as gender dynamics are part of the culture of "Reason" (as Friedrich notes, this is an exchange between "a chauffeur, a trucker [*sic*] and a valet"); but what I want to emphasize here for a moment is not the class markings of this dialect, nor its Americanness, but its masculinity. At the hub of the poem is the metonymy of "her"; both woman and car, the "her" is a machine, to be parked, pushed, and unloaded.¹² If, as Julia Kristeva writes in her review of Stiker's *A History of Dis-*

10. See Lewis 2000, "The Dramaturgy of Disability." On the LPH, Longmore and Goldberger 2000 is the key source.

11. See, for instance, Saxton and Howe 1987. More generally, feminist literary critics have produced some significant work on Miles: see Steinman 1990 and the essays in *Woman Poet 1, The West* (1980).

12. The association of woman with machine, not as driver or freely mobile passenger, is atypical of how vehicles (and their "tenors") work in Miles's poetry overall. In her insightful review of Miles's work, Nell Althizer (1994: 144) notes:

There may be more internal combustion machines in her poems than in those of male poets more commonly associated with auto mechanics. . . . We are on the road as we read and going somewhere with the poem as vehicle, and for detour directors the voices Miles creates as ragged with region as those we hear, rumbling from state to state, on the car radio.

Much of Miles's work might be said to explore, sometimes uncritically and sometimes critically, what Celeste Langan calls "the ideology of freedom as automobility" (see Langan, in this issue). In Miles's

ability, people with disabilities are to be seen as “ourselves—not as machines,”¹³ the men of “Reason” do not know this, especially where the woman is concerned. The joke of the poem—whether we read it as laughing at the men’s world or with it—lies in part, then, in the way that the playful pastiche of guy talk toys with Cartesian models of (woman’s) body-as-machine.

“Reason” seems to allude to the classical age in other ways as well, and perhaps to participate in something approaching, or congenial to, a postmodern feminist orientation. The poem concludes with a scene of cockeyed masculine chivalry toward a patronized “lady.” Whether that chivalry is meaningless is a question the poem raises, but does not overtly answer. It is certainly possible to read “Reason” as a gentle, wry exemplum in the tradition of feminist work described by Susan Bordo (1995: 41): “Feminist philosophers have frequently challenged dominant conceptions of rationality, morality, and politics through reevaluations of those ‘female’ qualities—spontaneity, practical knowledge, empathy—forbidden (or deemed irrelevant) to the ‘man of reason.’”

“Female qualities,” of course, were often forbidden or deemed irrelevant to Josephine Miles by the ableist construction of gender in her culture.¹⁴ One oral historian quotes Miles as saying that “some years ago a Dean of Women told her, ‘The very fact that you are a woman sets the cause [of women] back fifty years because you don’t pose the same problems another woman would’” (Teiser and Harroun 1980: 318). In another version of the same story, Miles describes the dean as saying, “You offer a substitute rather than role modeling. You’re more of a mascot; you’re an exception, so you don’t threaten people” (Marie and Offen 1978: 26). “It was a cruel remark,” the oral historian continues, “and more cruel because half true” (Teiser and Harroun 1980: 318). I encountered an even more extreme, but hardly unusual, version of this attitude myself in 1985, when I included Miles’s poetry on the syllabus of a graduate course at Berkeley on modern women poets. One of my colleagues, who had worked with Miles closely for many years, said to me simply, “But Jo Miles was not a woman.”

first small gathering of poems in *Trial Balances*, for example, we find the famous exploration, in “On Inhabiting an Orange,” of how the most “erect and sure” world traveler “mak[es] down the roads of Earth” only “endless detour,” for “All our roads go nowhere” (Winslow 1935: 21, 22). Against this critique of automobility we can place the remarkable figure, in “Portrait of the Artist,” of the self as paper blown into the street, at once deprived of agency, inadvertently moved, torn, already imprinted and read, and at the same time delighted in its state of rest, “stirring” in response, and ready—“curious, nerved”: “I have a body to be caught by the wind” (Winslow 1935: 22, 23).

13. Kristeva’s remarks appear on the back cover of the English paperback edition (Stiker 1999).

14. On gender and disability, see “Feminist Theory, the Body, and the Disabled Figure” in Thomson 1997, Fine and Asch 1988, and Wendell 1996: 57–84.

Miles reacted to this oppression publicly in a variety of ways. She spoke about her feelings of having been betrayed and excluded by nondisabled women: “I not only didn’t have women role models, I don’t think women were very helpful to me at all. They were rather obstructive. I can’t explain it. . . .” (Marie and Offen 1978: 2). She allied herself with the Women’s Caucus in her English department in the 1970s, telling interviewers, “I realize that sometimes for sheer justice’s sake a category has to get some recognition. . . . You know, nobody philosophically believes in special treatment of categories . . . but what if a category has not been treated even up to par? So this is a philosophical issue which hit me pretty great, and there’s still plenty of people fighting it” (22). At the same time, she portrayed herself as resistant to all categorization and underscored in particular her complex relation to gender. She wrote a remarkable play during the 1950s, “House and Home,” in which gender and domesticity become so stylized, so alterable, so artificial and performative, that perhaps only now, with Judith Butler as a guide, can we begin to understand it as a very queer text, one whose mocking of heteronormativities might be said to have something to do with Miles’s departures from 1950s norms of domestic femininity.¹⁵ But Miles followed up her strongest statement of gender trouble—“I just don’t feel the sense of the significance of the woman’s category *for me*”—by dancing away from disability as an explanatory tool, and displacing it through reference to generational difference and professional ethos: “I haven’t had the whole child-family experience. But I think this is part of the past, in that professors in the old days didn’t, so that wasn’t so strange either” (Teiser and Harroun 1980: 36). Always the hint of, and then the backing off from, the “strangeness” of disability.

Academic studies that focus on Miles’s poetry or on biographical sketches of the author have tended to follow her lead, either downplaying the significance of Miles’s rheumatoid arthritis or framing her within a narrative portraying her as triumphantly transcending (or pragmatically avoiding) her physical condition.¹⁶

15. Robert McRuer’s work on how compulsory heterosexuality is intertwined with “compulsory able-bodiedness” is pertinent here and has influenced my thinking. See McRuer 2001 and McRuer n.d. The most interesting account of Miles and gender is developed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1982).

16. For instance: a review in *Choice* in March 1984 comments that “despite the adversity in Miles’s own life, the poems are notable for their consistent focus on happiness rather than on disappointment” (cited in Liang 1986: 304). The biographical blurb in the first edition of the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* also uses a “despite” clause: “Despite a lifelong struggle with rheumatoid arthritis. . . .” (Gilbert and Gubar 1985: 1759). There are two significant exceptions that I know of in the literary criticism on Miles: Sedgwick’s essay and Smith 1993—the one important piece that addresses Miles’s disability at some length in the context of a theory of aging.

Miles is commonly said to have addressed her own experience of arthritis only late in life, in the directly autobiographical sequence of poems that makes up the beginning of her 1979 volume *Coming to Terms*. In these late poems, the best known of which is “Doll,” Miles wrote her own version of autopathography, contributing to a historical moment in which autobiographical narratives of illness or disability were coming into their own.¹⁷ By the late 1970s, disability was becoming increasingly destigmatized, a trend that made books like *Coming to Terms* possible and that autopathographies like “Doll” sought to advance. This certainly accounts for some of the appeal of Miles’s late disability poems.

There is another reason, too, for the preponderance of critical focus on *Coming to Terms*. “Doll” and its surrounding poems return to the scene of the childhood onset of Miles’s arthritis. “Doll”’s subtle and spectacular disability effects—its exploration, through the figure of the doll, of the *corps morcelé*; its seemingly matter-of-fact but skittish and unsettled uses of the story of recovery; its depiction of a coming into identity embedded within a matrix of social relations—are worth exploring in detail, and are beyond the scope of this essay. What I want to emphasize here is another factor at work in the critical fixation on these late poems as the sole examples of writing disability in Miles’s oeuvre: the poems play out the “before-and-after” scenario identified by Yvonne Lynch as a dominant disability narrative. Lynch (1997: 127) points out that representations of disability in film and television commonly focus on the transition from “unimpairment” to impairment, a form that works to secure the identification of a nondisabled audience. “Why is there such a concentration on that transition?” she asks. “It isn’t the only dramatic thing that ever happens in a disabled person’s life.”

Long before *Coming to Terms*, in fact, Miles’s poems came to terms of disability, though not easily legible terms, since they neither employed the before-and-after plot nor utilized the autobiographical imperative that made her late poems popular. These earlier poems have not been recognized—at least not publicly—as poems about disability. In 1935, the same year that the League of the Physically Handicapped sat in at the Emergency Relief Bureau, for instance, Miles achieved her first major publication, a set of lyrics in the famous anthology *Trial Balances*.¹⁸ The group of poems concluded with “Physiologus,” a poem that ostensibly contrasts—and finally conjoins—curable afflictions of the body and irremediable suffering in the mind:

17. On autopathography, see Couser 1997.

18. On the history of *Trial Balances*, see Larney 1993: 45–49.

When the mind is dark with the multiple shadow of facts,
 There is no heat of the sun can warm the mind.
 The facts lie streaked like the trunks of trees at evening,
 Without the evening hope that they may find
 Absorbent night and blind.

Howsoever sunset and summer bring rest
 To the rheumatic by change, and howsoever
 Sulphur's good medicine, this can have no cure—
 This weight of knowledge dark on the brain is never
 To be burnt out like fever,

But slowly, with speech to tell the way and ease it,
 Will sink into the blood, and warm, and slowly
 Move in the veins, and murmur, and come at length
 To the tongue's tip and the finger's tip most lowly,
 And will belong to the body wholly. (Miles 1983: 7)

Employing the 1930s discourse of rest and rehabilitation (perhaps at FDR's Warm Springs, or in Palm Springs, where Miles was sent to recover as a child), "Physiologus" opposes to this therapeutic theme one narrative of remedy only, that which comes "at length / To the tongue's tip and the finger's tip."¹⁹ The poem offers a kind of counterdiagnosis of *rheum*, or stream, in which the dark, unconscious "fact" of a congealed rheum thaws into written or spoken language.²⁰

We can read here vestiges of Miles's own experience of unpredictable flare-ups and remissions, and of early-twentieth-century systems of physical rehabilitation—and perhaps, also, in the poem's initial stark distinction between the cured rheumatic body and the incorrigible mind, traces of another history of disability in Miles's life. In the 1920s during her teen years, according to Miles, her father fought a bitter legal struggle against his insurance companies for his right to compensation for the dangerously high blood pressure that had forced him to retire. When brought to court, the case hinged on a contested definition: whether hypertension was to be understood as a *disabling condition*. Eventually, Miles's father won his case; he died within the year, when Miles was eighteen, of a massive stroke. According to her testimony, Miles's adolescence occurred, therefore, in the context of a life-and-death economic and legal struggle, close to home,

19. On the therapeutic theme, see Whyte and Ingstad 1995: 4. The poem can also be read within the context of the mind/body split in lyric tradition.

20. My thanks to John Shoptaw for this point.

over what constituted *disability*.²¹ “Physiologus” may be read as a poem in which that which is visible and can abate (some flare-ups of arthritis, for instance) is set up against that which is invisible and cannot (a father’s high blood pressure, but also the strong pressures of memory, worry, grief, trauma), and both are finally collapsed, as distinctions between normal well-being and abnormal malady blur, into the single mode of resolution the poem accepts as possible—the talking or writing cure.

This poem complicates a model of Josephine Miles as cheery prevailer. Miles’s public stance in 1935 may have generally resembled that of the liberal polio survivors working in high-level positions in FDR’s administration, whose view of disability Paul K. Longmore and David Goldberger (2000: 46–47) characterize as “a private tragedy most appropriately dealt with by sympathetic public support of individuals’ striving.” But “Physiologus” suggests she also had something in common with the far more radical organizers of the League of the Physically Handicapped: a critique of the basic opposition that underlies the framing of the category “physically handicapped”—the binary distinction between “normal and disabled” (or between “sick” and “well” or “incurable” and “cured”) that operates not just as “a description of a group . . . [but] as a signifier for relations of power” (Baynton 1997: 82).

Throughout her career as a poet, Miles consistently countered sentimental, charitable, medical, and heroic narratives of disability. She did this in a variety of ways. Her earliest poems employ diffused, submerged, and refracted images of the body; her poems of the Vietnam War years extend to a broad concern with the body politic and body politics.²² But these poems still write disability. To look for its traces in Josephine Miles’s poetry is not to reduce her or her work to (one aspect of) the corporeal; it is to recognize how the poems *incorporate*—involve, re-cognize, work out of, work into—the totality of Miles’s experience: social, physical, and emotional.²³

21. See Larney 1995: 32–34 for Miles’s account of her father’s “battle” for “compensation from his insurance companies.” I have as yet found no independent corroboration of Miles’s narrative. Whatever it had to do with the facts of what happened between her father and his insurers, her family story tells us much about the importance to the poet of making sense of her father’s death and his relation to a social category of disability.

22. See, for instance, Miles’s (1983: 216) Vietnam-era poem “Officers,” in which a campus police officer who smashes “his billy club down on the elbow of my student driver” stays his hand when he recognizes the disabled woman he ordinarily assists.

23. Compare Sally Stein’s (1994: 58–59) argument about the connections between “the experience of illness, the effects of disability, and the making of the woman and the artist” in the case of Dorothea Lange, who said of herself, “I was physically disabled, and no one who hasn’t lived the life of a semi-cripple knows how much that means.” Stein offers an excellent model of the nonreductive,

Take, for instance, the poem "Care" (Miles 1960: 126), which winds around the double meaning of its title: *care* as (giving) aid, as (feeling) distress. Addressing an unnamed "you," the poem contrasts this "you / That makes me worsen" to "Most that I know" who "make me better than I am, / Freer and more intent, / Glad and more indolent." I had read this poem indifferently many times over many years before the obvious occurred to me: it explores not so much general forces of sociability as the specific dynamics of personal assistance service, the relationship between "attendant" and "client."

For a long time, this subject was simply illegible to me. We have no literary history of the "poetry of attendance," no named genre within which to place this lyric interaction, however intensely charged with feeling the dynamic might be. Collections of love poems, for instance, do not generally include examples of erotic or affectionate poems addressed by disabled clients to paid personal care assistants or vice versa. Miles's poem to a bad attendant takes the relationship seriously.²⁴ In a move with implications not just for attendant-client relations but for interactions in general between disabled and nondisabled people, "Care" reassigns and complicates *lack*, transferring lack off the body of the disabled speaker and onto the inadequate and projecting attendant: "Or do I learn your lack, / Not mine, and give it back, / As mine, the empty lack as mine / That makes me worsen?" By its end, the poem takes the phrase put into the mouths of disabled people thought to be in need of care—"Help me! / Help me"—and alters it, both by making the question of whether to say it the subject of the lyric speaker's meditation and by changing its conditions: the speaker considers herself at risk not physically but spiritually, threatened by the hate and disdain she feels for her clueless aide. Miles is commonly understood as a poet of the everyday. The poem "Care," a meditation on the effects of being improperly assisted, is one of many in which Miles's "quotidian" incorporates the daily life of disability.

politicized study of the kind of incorporation I explore here. Her epigraph from the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty—"It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world. . . . To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the actual, working body—not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement"—links her work on *Lange* to the recent phenomenological turn in disability studies, exemplified by texts as varied as Georgina Kleeg's *Sight Unseen* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), Gelya Frank's *Venus on Wheels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), and the work of Russell Shuttleworth.

24. Compare recent work in disability theater in plays by Susan Nussbaum and Judith Wolfe, in which the relation between assistant and client is more fully explored. Several examples are described and quoted in Lewis 2000.

“Care” may be the most moderate hate poem ever written. Its affability is marked both at the beginning of the poem, with the assertion that most caregivers do far better than the one addressed, and throughout, in its staging as a meditation on the state of hate rather than as an expression of rage itself. Here is a poet who seems, in the words of an influential review of her work by Denis Donahue (1975: 442), to have no ax to grind.²⁵ But in Miles’s poems, affability goes hand in hand with avowal, not denial, of the intricate set of social relations that constitutes “disability.”²⁶

Though rarely articulating them in the form of complaint, these poems do express grievances: against the negligent and hostile assistant, for instance, or the clinician or social worker, or—to return to “Reason”—against the man who blocks access in the parking lot. They may be *contained* grievances, compressed into poems like the grievances in Miles’s 1966 poem of the same name: “I keep one or two and press them in a book, / And when I show them to you they have crumbled / To powder on the page.” But, as that poem concludes: “The stems of grievance put down their heavy roots / And by the end of summer crack the pavement” (Miles 1983: 156). There is—as the poem itself makes clear—anger in “Reason” (and in reason). Think, for instance, of the way the man’s final giving of an elbow to the “lame old lady” suggests not only chivalry, but also shoving, “elbowing aside”; think, too, of the charged use, twice, of the harsh word “unload.” Enough pavement-cracking ammunition lies behind the wisecracking in that “unload” to justify the speculation that Emily Dickinson’s (1955: no. 754) “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun” may be an intertext for this poem, which is tense with the dynamics of being loaded and unloaded, of being animate with anger but dependent on another to move one about.

But Miles’s emphasis on interchange, “the idea of speech,” shifts the scene of grievance away from the “plight” or tension of the disabled individual and toward the “cracking” of the public, the civic, the social. Disability theorist and photog-

25. Note, however, that Miles provisionally praised poets with axes to grind: “She believed that madmen move the world forward, even as they move poetry. ‘They have some axe to grind,’ she wrote, ‘and they are better at the grinding than at the poetry.’ But often too they have more to teach than ‘major’ poets, who ‘tend to use most fully the emphases already accepted and available to them in the poetry of their time’” (Miles 1985: 10).

26. David Gerber (1993: 8) writes of the actor/veteran Harold Russell and others who commonly maintain “an affable public presentation of self that is, in effect, acting, the purpose of which is to put able-bodied people at ease during their first encounters. But this affability is not an end in itself. For it is accompanied by ‘display and avowal,’ a presentation of the body that openly challenges the able-bodied stranger to confront visible physical differences and move beyond them—or, failing that, to move away.”

rapher David Hevey lists progressive stages of disability representation; the last two, most advanced levels are as follows:

The sixth move, then, is to travel off the body. . . . The seventh move would be to record the interface between the person and their space or non-space . . . between impairment and disablement: the wheel of the wheelchair against the first step of stairs; the gawking of schoolchildren; the lean-over of patronizing men and women; and so on. Such a narrative would record the clash, the paradox, the struggle between the person with the impairment and his or her disabling environment. (Hevey 1992: 31)²⁷

"Reason" travels off the body in just this sense. Miles is not alone in this strategy; other disabled poets of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s explored verbal forms of traveling off the body that may be read as precursors to the more direct activism of poets such as Cheryl Marie Wade or Mark O'Brien. Take, for example, the views through window frames that occur so frequently in the poems of another Bay Area writer, Larry Eigner—texts that also uneasily invoke poetic tradition's usual mode of "traveling off," lyric transcendence. Like Eigner's work, Miles's poetry both complicates and accentuates a social model of disability by making it clear that what that poetry travels into, and what it travels in, is (accessible and inaccessible) language. "Reason" does this in two ways. One may be read as a form of social comment on how people talk about, and hear each other talk about, disability; the other refers to nothing but poetry itself.

First, the social comment. In her public statements on the pleasures of "Reason," Miles followed her stress on "the idea of speech" with this statement: "The accents of a limited and maybe slightly misplaced pride interest me. Good, strong, true pride we need more of, and the oblique accents of it at least sound out the right direction" (Larney 1993: 57). This genial, comic view of "Reason"'s blocking, blustering character, the man who refuses to move his car and then says "all you needed to do was just explain," offers only the mildest of critiques; the "accents of his pride" are "limited," "maybe slightly misplaced." But the focus—however gentle—on his limits, on his misplacement, still strongly revises prior models of the politics of narcissism in scenes of disability.

As Lennard Davis notes in his important essay "Bending over Backwards," people with disabilities "are often seen as narcissists, particularly by psychoanalysts" and by judges in ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) court cases. "By

27. Carolyn Smith (1993: 275) points to an early Miles poem, "Dec. 7, 1941," written on the day of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which contrasts the "little wars" of civilians—including the fight of "crutch with stair"—with the wars of soldiers.

definition,” writes Davis (2000: 197), “a concern for one’s disability is seen as self-concern rather than a societal concern.” Or, in Miles’s own words: “I can never quite say why I don’t hit it off with people. I think part of it is that they just fear that I’m going to ask favors” (Teiser and Harroun 1980: 43). Davis tracks this association between narcissism and disability by turning to a well-known psychoanalytical reading of one of the most powerful representations of disability in poetry: Freud’s discussion of the opening soliloquy in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*. Richard explains to the audience that he is “determined to prove a villain” since, because of his deformities, he cannot “prove a lover.” In Freud’s analysis, Richard’s real message (one with which the audience identifies, even as it projects it onto “deformed” Others) is: “Nature has done me a grievous wrong in denying me the beauty of form which wins human love. Life owes me reparation for this, and I will see that I get it. I have a right to be an exception, to disregard the scruples by which others let themselves be held back. I may do wrong myself, since wrong has been done to me” (Freud 1989: 593).

In “Reason” and other colloquial poems, Miles devises a vigorous alternative to this particular tradition, one in which colloquy replaces soliloquy. The poem deflects identification, or at any rate renders it elastic and provisional. In “Reason” and elsewhere, Miles develops a (counter)narcissistic poetic that challenges a dominant equation of disability with aggrieved self-absorption, not by evacuating narcissism, but by revealing and reveling in it—as the basis of *all* (un)reasonable spoken interaction, and as a force that both generates and is tempered by conversation.

This is conversation *in poems*, and this leads me to my second, and final, point. I want to return to Miles’s “idea of speech” as “the material from which poetry is made.” To read “Reason,” we must finally return to the poem’s claim to make something of “the spare and active interplay of talk”; we must take poetic talking seriously, as a mode in dialogue with, but not identical to, other forms of discourse. “All you needed to do was just explain,” says the man who has been hogging the spot with the best access to the theater, as he ducks out from under the wheel to offer his elbow to the “lame old lady.” “Reason” offers no overt comment on this late attempt to replace selfishness and rudeness with patronizing courtesy: this is a comic resolution, one that mediates as much as it mocks. The poem itself will not explain. Its dialogism exemplifies civility, and in the process, if it skirts the political and emotional risks of open judgment and complaint, it also declines the endless task of “just explaining” that people with disabilities are forced to do, over and over again. To the debate over reasonable accommodation at the curb,

it offers not the argumentative voice of reason, but the voice of "reason"—misplaced and re-placed, citational, deflected.

Nowhere is this deflection clearer than in the poem's final line: "*Reason, Reason is my middle name.*" There are two pleasures here. One is the ridiculousness of the man's claim, the send-up of a long tradition of appeals to so-called reason (and the funniness of the assertion, in crime-novel style, of the "middle name," which simultaneously claims rationality as inherent and places it in a secondary position).²⁸ This line, and the whole poem, wittily capture in redoubled form what F. Davis (1961: 123) calls "the familiar signs of discomfort and stickiness [in encounters between disabled and nondisabled people] . . . the artificial levity, the compulsive loquaciousness." The second pleasure is a lyric pleasure: the rhythmic repetition and italicizing of the word "Reason," which mark the poem's conclusion not with the effect of the overheard, but with the effect of writing and refrain—of poetry calling attention to itself.

I close by invoking these pleasures, mindful of Simi Linton's (1998: 112) forceful point that the

capacity to engage in pleasurable activity—experiences sought for their own sake, for the stimulation and enjoyment they provide—is assumed to be out of reach of the disabled. This notion is fed by deterministic arguments that accord tremendous weight to disability, in effect saying that it eclipses pleasure, joy, and to an extent, creativity. . . . The humanities and the arts can benefit from an analysis of who in society is believed to be entitled to pleasure and who is thought to have the capacity to provide pleasure.

Focusing on the pleasures of Miles's poetry, I hope I have shown how those pleasures incorporate, and help us to grasp, "disability." "Writers are needed," Linton continues, "who can demonstrate that success in terms of disability is more than a personal triumph over physical adversity; it is a life that consciously reckons with the social forces that oppress and control." In her own time and in her own way, Josephine Miles provided such a reckoning.

28. The citations given in the Oxford English Dictionary for "—— is my middle name" all come from sources like Agatha Christie novels, as John Shoptaw has pointed out to me.

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