

Tourette in Fiction: Lethem, Lefcourt, Hecht, Rubio, Byalick

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Introduction:

Disorder - both in narrative and of narrative - is omni-present today, and trauma and syndromes proliferate: Tourette Syndrome¹ has become a trope for the whole post-modern condition... Amnesia is more widespread than in living memory... Attention Deficit Disorder adds up... These disorders and their names are more familiar to us than ever before, and the terminology of trauma and symptomology no longer belongs to a narrow professional (medical or therapeutic) register. We are disorder-, syndrome- and trauma-aware like never before. This greater awareness and label dissemination indicates that a popularisation of trauma terminology has taken place, and that these labels have entered a wider cultural field. The reason for this could be that we now like to mirror ourselves in the various offerings of available trauma images, trying on trauma for size. This is also reflected in the increasing number of popular culture treatments in various media of psychological disabilities, whether it be in books, TV or films (portraits of sufferers of mental disorders are always potential Oscar-winner material for movie actors).

The late 1990s and early 2000s have especially brought us numerous portraits of Tourette sufferers. A search on Amazon.com reveals no less than 1.327 books with references to the word Tourette in them, many of them offering personal testimonies about living, and presumably coping with the syndrome. This number alone seems to suggest, not only that the syndrome is widely known and discussed in the general public, but also that a certain voyeuristic interest has developed, since it is hardly possible that all these books are only read by relatives of Tourette patients or the patients themselves. That voyeurism is playing a part in the popularisation of Tourette could be said to be substantiated by the fact that several TV shows and feature films have had Tourette sufferers as protagonists in the same period (for instance several episodes of *Ally McBeal* (fourth season, 2000-2001), and movies such as *Niagara, Niagara* (1998)). There are also other instances of the dissemination of the label in the pop culture realm, and among these we may note the existence of punk bands such as *Tourette's Lautrec* and *Pussy Tourette*, both names which inscribe themselves in the tradition of subcultural *bricolage*, a practice where negative or stigmatic labels are embraced,

both for their (out-group) shock value and for their (in-group) semiotic value in signalling cool deviance. For a collection of images portraying Tourette in the pop culture realm please access my homepage, following the hyperlink given in this footnote.²

What interests us particularly here, though, is the growing number of semi-fictional and fictional treatments of Tourette. Books bordering on the fictional can be found in the semi-documentary and very popular work of Oliver Sachs. One of his books (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985)) bears the revealing subtitle “Clinical Tales”, thus using a telling mixture of archetextual or generic markers to place the book squarely between fact and fiction. Sachs’s books have also inspired several TV documentaries. Fully fictional treatments are, however, rarer to find, but another Amazon search turns up the existence of a keyword category in their databases, called “Tourette syndrome; Fiction”. The set of entries in this database currently consists of 5, and I list the titles and years of publication as evidence of the period in which the dissemination has reached the field of popular fiction: Peter Lefcourt, *The Woody* (1998); Daniel Hecht, *Skull Session* (1998); Gwyn Hyman Rubio, *Icy Sparks* (1998); Jonathan Lethem, *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999); Marcia Byalick, *Quit It* (2002). Of the five titles I have mentioned here, the first is a political satire, the second a thriller, the third a tale of a girl growing up in rural America in the 1950s, the fourth a detective novel, and the fifth a book for young adolescents. Tourette thus seems to have wandered effortlessly into the pop cultural realm, and to be particularly effective for light entertainment purposes.

The corpus

I will make a few remarks about four of the titles I have mentioned above, and then give a more in-depth analysis of Lethem’s novel.

Daniel Hecht’s book is subtitled “a neurological thriller” – in itself a tantalising label. Its protagonist, Paulie Skoglund, is an adult Tourette sufferer, which leads to him having problems with all kinds of human encounters and interaction. He is a craftsman, working with restoration and interior design, but also a would-be educator with a degree in teaching – a profession he has had no luck in finding employment in because of his syndrome and its disturbing symptoms which in his case include involuntary vocalizations and compulsive repetitive physical tics and actions. It is only when he plays the saxophone that he is entirely free of his involuntary tics. This is, in fact, a

common motif in books about Tourette: that art can at least temporarily alleviate, if not heal the sufferer of his or her condition.

Skoglund is haunted by both his socio-biological and genetic heritage. His father (apparently) committed suicide when Paulie was a young child, his mother is an alcoholic – and, what is most disturbing to Paulie, his own son Mark is exhibiting signs of developing not only Tourette, but perhaps a form of autism coupled with the tendency to throw tantrums where he literally goes berserk. The thriller component of the novel also deals with random uncontrollable acts of violence and their consequences and there is an element of detection involved in the novel's plot, as the perpetrator of these acts of violence and mayhem may be connected with Paulie and his own condition in a frighteningly intimate manner. Thus, by finding out the who, why and how of the crimes may help – it is suggested – Paulie to find out more about himself and how to cope with his Tourette.

Rubio's debut novel – also published by Viking, as was Hecht's – is a *Bildungs*-tale, set in rural Kentucky in the 1950s. Its female protagonist, Icy Sparks (there is an interesting oxymoron for sure), is orphaned at a young age, ostracized in school because of her Tourette which makes her croak like a frog, and left with very few friends and no medical aid at all, since no-one can diagnose her condition correctly. She eventually finds redemption through her voice which, apart from croaking, also allows her to sing religious songs with a very powerful alto voice. In the novel's climactic scene Icy performs with five different church choirs in a local 4th of July pageant, covering all the denominations from Pentecostal to Episcopalian, and for the first time she is accepted into the world by her community through the healing power of song.

Byalick's novel for pre-teens is the most didactic of the five works, and it basically covers a year in the life of its protagonist as she starts middle school, is the freaky center of attention for the whole class for a while, makes a false friend while almost abandoning her true friend (another outsider) etc., etc. In the end she is able to educate her own parents about accepting her as she is, Tourette and all, and she can then move on to her next stage in life. She is a dancer and a performer in the school play, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and these activities help her create (Tourette) free spaces where she can express her true inner beauty without the restraints her condition otherwise imposes on her.

Finally, Lefcourt's novel about political life in Washington, DC has a more tangential representation of Tourette, as none of the protagonists are sufferers themselves. The role of Tourette in the plot is merely that legislation to further Government support for Tourette sufferers is being promoted by some of the politicians in the book's plot – but actually the foundation that is set up as an endowment for Tourette patients turns out to be used as a front for lobbyists who wish to illegally contribute to the Congressman protagonist's re-election campaign. Tourette thus only functions in the novel as an image of the latest *cause celebre* in the political game. The choice of Tourette as this cause by Lefcourt seems to indicate that already in 1998 Tourette was becoming sufficiently well-known in the general public to elicit a nod of recognition from even readers of light summer entertainment novels such as Lefcourt's.

I turn now to the best (and funniest) of the five novels, Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn*. What marks this novel is Lethem's use of Tourette as a master metaphor for postmodern American society, and for the problems inherent in finding or constructing a stable identity in such conditions. The protagonist, Lionel Essrog's, Tourette in many ways disqualifies him from being a good detective (echolalia and other compulsions make it hard for him to work undercover), but in other ways makes him a unique detective (his compulsive attention to detail is, for instance, a great help). He is also an orphan, who suddenly finds himself without a mentor, when his adopted father figure is murdered in a rather gruesome fashion.

Thus, even the field of detective fiction (which used to be the epistemological genre par excellence) has become infected with representations of this particularly ontologically unstable disorder. Postmodern detective novels have become increasingly common in the last twenty years (particularly pastiches of the hard-boiled sub-genre), but Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* is a strikingly fresh contribution to that emergent sub-genre, and in its treatment of identity issues even points beyond the postmodern narrative form. Lethem's novel is, indeed, both a pastiche of, and a substantial addition to the hard-boiled tradition. This duality is evident in the occurrence of metageneric comments on the detective tradition, such as: "Have you ever felt in the course of reading a detective novel, a guilty thrill of relief at having a character murdered before he can step onto the page and burden you with his actual existence? Detective stories have too many characters anyway. And characters mentioned early on but never sighted, just lingering offstage, take on an awful portentous quality. Better to have them gone." (Lethem, 1999:119)

The Tourettic detective, or towards a poetics of Tourette

The Tourettic detective is in many ways a perfect postmodern detective. Not a professional sleuth by a long shot, the Tourettic detective is unable to master many of the basic techniques of the profession of urban, hardboiled detection. Tailing or discrete shadowing is impossible due to his tics and echolalia symptoms. Womanizing in order to gain information about suspects (and in order to bolster the detective's ego/manhood) is not feasible because of the stigmata of Tourette symptoms often being misinterpreted as freakishness (cf. Lionel's nickname "The Human Freakshow") or imbecility. Violence and coercion is not even a possible strategy, thanks to the erratic behaviour of the Tourettic body, more likely to throw away a gun than to wield it with any form of accuracy. Take this bumbling detective type, and set him loose in a confusing world such as New York City at the end of the 20th century, and the ensuing interpretation of this world through the lens of his Tourettic mind sets the scene for a non-epistemological devolution of the crime in question: clues become indistinguishable from his own symptoms; the disorder infects the sequentiality and causality of events, and leads to order becoming contingent and at best temporary; ultimately, to the Tourette sufferer, the whole of New York, from its subway system to its social hierarchies, resembles a Tourettic body, always in motion, never going anywhere with teleological certainty. In such a world good and evil are extremely relativistic, locally negotiated and situated states, always in slippage and flux. When appearances are deceptive and remain so, all you are ultimately left with are just that: appearances without depth, surfaces without profound meaning.

In his groundbreaking article, "The Poetics of Tourette Syndrome: Language, Neurobiology, and Poetry", Ronald Schleifer (2001) argues that there exists a connection between poetic diction and utterance and the phonic tics, echolalia and coprolalia typical of the TS sufferer. He points to the connection between orality and performance found both in poetic practice and Tourettic expression. Further he argues convincingly that much of the fascination of poetry is linked to rhythmic phenomena and partially conflicting urges towards repetition and variation, all of which may stem from a bodily origin, common to the poet, the listener/reader of poetry and the TS sufferer. This bodily origin may refer back to the oldest portions of the brain, thought to govern exactly such functions as pertain to motor activity and basic instincts and drives, but which also may possess a language capability, which in poets as well as TS patients can occasionally override the more sophisticated regions of the brain and emerge as improvised, shocking, punning, Spoonerist, or obscene language. Schleifer suggests that a figure such as T.S. Eliot might be said to embody all

these qualities in his use of poetic language, and further remarks – half-jokingly one might hope – that the T.S. in T.S. Eliot has a more than incidental similarity with the TS of Tourette Syndrome.

Schleifer also offers a few passing comments on Lethem's novel and he is particularly incisive in his analysis of Lionel's penchant for word play. The perhaps most illustrative word game of Lionel's is his ability to transform names into nicknames ("Leshawn Montrose" can thus become permuted via "Shefawn Mongoose" and "Lefthand Moonprose" to "Fuckyou Roseprawn" (47)) which can be extremely telling of the character of the person behind the name. Lionel refers to this ability as Tourette's muse (15), indicating that Lethem and Schleifer are on the same page at least. The Spoonerist facet of TS functions particularly well with Lionel's own name, ("Lionel, my name. Frank and the Minna Men pronounced it to rhyme with *vinyl*. Lionel Essrog. *Line-all*. Liable Guesscog. Final Escrow. Ironic Pissclam. And so on." (7)). Thus, Lionel's name may hide more than the "verbal taffy" he himself compares it to.

Neither Schleifer nor other critics have noted the interplay between Tourettic language on the character/narrator level (i.e. language which in the fictional world is produced by Lionel) and paratextual language such as chapter titles (obviously produced by the author without being filtered through a narrator). The chapter titles of *Motherless Brooklyn* all consist of two words, and many read like fragments of larger syntactical units ("Walks Into", "Formerly Known"). Others are punning and laden with double meaning ("Bad Cookies" and "Auto Body"). At least one would qualify in Schleifer's sense of the poetic power of a Tourettic utterance: "Interrogation Eyes", but then that particular phrase would not be out of place in any hardboiled detective novel. My point here is that this stratum of language in the novel is highlighted by the poetic genius arranging the apparently chaotic utterances of Lionel TS Essrog, and this posits Lethem and not Lionel as the parallel entity to Eliot. Thus Lethem, who is not a TS sufferer, has presumably exercised more than just his reptilian brain to produce and arrange the poetic/Tourettic language both Schleifer and I rightfully admire.

Concluding remarks

Most of the Tourette fictions seem to have inscribed in them that their protagonists grow – partly because of, partly through the constraints enforced on them by their syndrome. These books are therefore readable as *Bildungsromane* in disguise, even though they also participate in the other

popular genres they label themselves after: thriller, satire, detective novel etc. This dedication to seeing Tourette as laying out a path for its protagonists through pain, toward joy, satisfaction and at least conditional peace within, points towards a paradox in much late post-modernist literature: They have built into them an identity quest, yet simultaneously an incredulity towards older, more totalizing grand narratives such as religions, ideologies, or even Freudian psychoanalysis. They are therefore perhaps best seen as life laboratories where the power of micro-narratives can be tested against an obviously fragmented, tic'ing social reality where Tourette symptoms may in fact be the best available metaphor for post-postmodern normality.

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¹ The syndrome is variously referred to in the medical literature as "Tourette's Syndrome", "Tourette Syndrome", or "TS". For simplicity I use the abbreviation "Tourette" whenever appropriate, or, for reasons that will become apparent, in a few cases the acronym "TS".

² Hyperlink http://www.hum.aau.dk/~i12bent/Recent_Lectures/TourettePop.html