

An Interview with Greg Fraser

by Hani Sarji and Michael Hepner

Strange Pietà

By Gregory Fraser

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Gregory Fraser earned a Master of Fine Arts in poetry at Columbia University, where he won the David Austen Best Manuscript Award, judged by former poet laureate Stanley Kunitz. In 1999, Fraser completed his Ph.D. in English and creative writing at the University of Houston, where he was awarded the Donald Barthelme Prize and the James Michener Award for Poetry.

Dr. Fraser has taught literature, critical interpretation, and creative writing at various institutions, including Wittenberg University, Ursinus College, and St. John's University. He currently serves as an assistant professor of English at the University of West Georgia, fifty miles outside of Atlanta.

Fraser's poetic achievements include being a two-time finalist for the Walt Whitman Award from the Academy of American Poets, as well as a finalist for the National Poetry Series. His first book, *Strange Pietà*, won the Walt McDonald Poetry Prize and was published in April 2003 by Texas Tech University Press. (Find further information on *Strange Pietà* at www.strangepieta.com and <http://www.ttup.ttu.edu/books/PIETA.html>.)

In *Strange Pietà*, Fraser largely focuses on the life of his brother Jonathan, who was born with spina bifida, a condition that rendered him disabled both mentally and physically. *Strange Pietà* begins with "Ars Poetica," and ends

with “Strange Pietà,” both telling recollections of family and personal life with and without Jonathan. The collections also provides the reader with poems dealing with personal journeys through adolescence and adulthood.

For the theorist, *Strange Pietà* enriches the discourse in disability theory. For the general reader, Fraser provides a heartfelt look into his brother’s life—a life that has always been deeply intertwined with his own. Emotion and wit never cease to flow from *Strange Pietà*’s pages. That emotional force is perhaps the most powerful remnant that stays with the reader.

The following is an interview with Dr. Gregory Fraser that discusses poetry and teaching, as well as the author’s views on disability theory and the subject of disabled bodies.

SARJI & HEPNER How do you feel about being a poet tied to institutions of higher learning? Does teaching help your poetry or does it take away time that could be devoted to your writing?

FRASER Often, when I’m stuck inside a poem, I ask myself: “How would I advise a student in this situation?” Sometimes, I seem to gain “poetic confidence” when talking to students. The best students are passionately open to ideas and new questions, and I need to relearn that openness and questioning presence every time I sit down to write. So my students are constantly teaching me, and I am internalizing their ideas as they hopefully are mine. Ideally, there’s a generative exchange. But your question about time is a valid one. Good teaching requires as much commitment, as much creativity and drive, as good writing. In both practices, one has to court the unexpected. Poetry and pedagogy can be mutually informing, but the demands of both can be draining at times. I guess that’s why many of us take summers off. To reflect, breathe, refuel. Strangely enough, I think the academy has been one place in our culture that still embraces poets. I actually like university life, though many poets find the university setting confining. I like a community of generally like-minded people. And I cherish the eternal energy of students.

S & H Which poets have inspired your notion of poetry? Which poets do you aspire to be like?

FRASER These are good but difficult questions to answer because poets go through many phases of developing allegiances. I started out with a passion for the shimmering surface veneers of Mark Strand, and I struggled and largely failed to emulate his style. Later, I sought out poets of overt force: James Dickey, Ted Hughes, Richard Hugo. The appeals of greater subtlety came as I began to study Elizabeth Bishop. Then I met and studied with Adam Zagajewski, who introduced me to a host of Eastern European poets. Right now, I'm reading Sandor Csoori and longing to produce a poem informed by his vision, his voice. But the point, in the end, is that all these other voices mix in one's head, enter one's blood. And of course, every poet has his or her own particular outlooks and modes of expression, which can't be fully traced or located. Other poets help us grow into poets. We learn by reading, internalizing, chanting what has come before us. But there come times when we have to shed the skins of those we've wrapped ourselves inside.

S & H How did you find your poetic voice?

FRASER I'm not really sure, because of course poetry is an art of dictation, a process of using language and being used by it. It is a practice that requires one simultaneously to "dictate" language and to "take dictation" from it. One works in a threshold space, both willing poetry into being and being willing to let poetry become itself, on its own terms. This is the oldest story of poetry, its myth of origins, I suppose. We've always known the poem to be both inside and outside of the poet, and vice versa.

S & H What is the role of self-examination in your poetry?

FRASER I think good poetry performs self-examination—not so much about a particular issue like disability, but as a mode of thinking. Poetry is a way of being in the world that embraces self-examination. I think it pays attention to will, to power. The poet can't be tyrannical with respect to language. He or

she can't use it as an instrument to serve some pre-determined end. Poetry is much more open and embracing of discovery. I think an "outsider" discourse like disability theory can do that, too.

S & H Your poetry is informed by breakups and fractures—especially of the body and of cultural ideas and ideals about the body. Yet despite these disunities, the poems are still structured. Can you elaborate on this competition?

FRASER If we as a culture start to think about bodies poetically, I wonder what that might offer us. It's an interesting question. There is a desire to use the space of the poem as a place where rules are put into interesting tension with each other. I'm interested in using the container of the page and resisting it at the same time. Discourse and cultural rules can be thought of in similar terms. You want poems to be surprising, you want to go into them with no idea what's going to happen, and I guess you have to let them be broken and unshapely somehow, sometimes. Thinking about the poem as a space, and thinking about culture as a space, we recognize that there are always competing needs. Maybe that "competition" doesn't have to be destructive or relentlessly subordinating. I think in poetry no voice is given guaranteed meaning. The words in a poem support one another, not in a neat New Critical unity, where everything is resolved, but where everything is echoing off of everything else—reinforcing multiplicity and openness. It's a different way of thinking about unity. It's a unity that allows disunity to happen, and vice versa, depending on the engagement with the reader in a particular cultural context. The poem then is never static, but always open to re-seeing, revision by reader and writer alike. If culture could be more poetic, in that way, I think it would be less destructive. A poem is not trying to kill off parts of itself, or say that this part over here is insignificant. A good poem knows that it relies on everything. And it knows that it isn't one thing. It embraces that. It is willing to discover what it can be at all times. That's my sense of poetry. Maybe it is my hope, as a disability theorist, for culture and bodies as well.

S & H You have asked and we ask you: How does poetry's liminal nature connect to disability?

FRASER I guess this is one of the primary questions of my book. First, I see the disabled body as a site of contest—certainly social and political struggle, but also linguistic contest—in the same way that every sign inscribes ideological debate and philosophical wrangling on the limin, the intersection of differences. The disabled body, in my work at least, “enables” language, meaning, debate. It actually permits meaning to occur—all meaning, but especially poetic meaning, which is never fully present or decidable. In the same way, the “normal” body is never fully present or decidable. Neither is the “abnormal” one. Each is a threshold leading to the other, endlessly. One wonders if there might someday be a way cross a threshold and enter a space where bodily differences would not sites of prescription, moral law, charity, loathing, violence, neglect. I think poetry, frankly, has been outcast by the technologies of late capitalism in much the same way that disabled bodies have. Neither fit acceptable norms, neither obey the rules; both disrupt the status quo, both shake us out of our complacencies. Poems and disabled bodies: they’re siblings if you ask me.

S & H What are your assumptions about embodiment? How are embodiment and disability connected with changing power relations? In addition, is the naming, or defining of “disability,” just a construction of language, a play between signifier and signified?

FRASER I think my work in disability poetics proceeds under various, perhaps self-contradicting, assumptions about meaning and embodiment. I wrote my first “disability poem,” entitled “Ars Poetica,” at about the same time that I was starting to read Barthes and Derrida and especially Foucault. I had absorbed from these thinkers that meaning is not only linguistically produced through the play of arbitrarily determined conceptual differences, but also that meaning is always traced through with power relations, anxieties and desires over questions of empowerment. So part of my early poetry had to do with speaking truth to and about power (understanding “truth,” of course, not as something absolute and fixed and final). My work set out to speak for the disabled person, who, as in the case of my brother Jonathan, couldn’t speak poetically for himself. But this work lead me to realize that meaning also arises out of embodied experiences that cannot be understood solely as constructed in a language of hierarchical binary oppositions. In other words, any understanding and representation of the disabled body must account for the ways in which our experiences of reality, our sense of what is “real,” is simultaneously and undecidably shaped by the relational, hierarchical, and contingent natures of language. By contingent, here, I mean both that language can never supply a mythic full presence, the

final essence or Being, but also that language and meaning may have “no say” in some instances—that the body speaks for itself, and that language is contingent upon the disabled body, that it depends on this, its Other, to exist and mean. The disabled body, especially the disabled body in pain (the way my brother’s body has so often been) may be a kind of Ur absence that permits meaning.

S & H Do you think that your brother’s body can articulate itself, somehow become self-evident inside its rejection and inside its pain? Can it reach a “full” inside status—an essence outside of language? Or is his body always already mediated by language?

FRASER I’m not sure, but I want to suggest that language both can and can’t do justice to his body, or my relationship to it. The notion of anything having an a priori essence or significance (any human body, for example, no matter what its physical characteristics) is to me bankrupt for any serious poetic or critical practice. But does my brother’s body at some points exist “outside” of language? No. But maybe also yes. I’m not sure. If I were, I fear that I’d stop writing.

S & H Is the continuum of bodily existence different and varied from culture to culture, thus being culturally constructed? Or is the continuum biologically determined? Does the essence of disability precede culture, our lived existence? Does the disabled person determine what he or she is to be? Or does “normal” culture determine what bodies mean? Who defines who or what is beautiful, and conversely, ugly or disabled?

FRASER First off, I think it’s important to pay attention to the ways in which the dominant “normal” culture expects disability discourse to step in and teach the so-called “abled” how to see, how to understand disability. Certainly, on some level disability writers and theorists need to raise awareness about the conceptual apparatuses that govern our real-world relations to people with anomalous bodies, cognitive differences, and so on. For instance, it seems useful to reiterate the distinction between “impairment” (which disability discourse locates in the body) and “disability,” which resides in culture, in the minds of the non-disabled and in the public and psycho-social spaces that “disable” people with bodily difference that

don't fit these spaces. My brother's spina bifida is his bodily fact, his paralysis from the waist down is his bodily fact, his need of a wheelchair is a fact of his lived existence. But these are not disabilities. "His" disabilities are socially manufactured when a building entrance lacks a ramp. The absence of the ramp is "his" disability. He doesn't carry "his" disability—we do, as a culture that has neglected to address his needs (which are also our needs in many profound ways, not the least of which is the fact that many of the "able-bodieds" will one day require wheelchairs and become disabled by absent ramps). A wheelchair-bound person like my brother Jonathan is "disabled" by the culture because the impairments inherent in his spina bifida prevent him from walking up steps. His impairments are culturally converted into disabilities. But with the addition of the ramp comes the erasure of the disability. That being said, I think it's important as critical thinkers to demand that non-disabled culture do some self scrutiny. We need to realize that terms like "abled/disabled" and "normal/abnormal" are both arbitrary and motivated simultaneously. We need to discover for ourselves some of the pitfalls of a binary abled/disabled mentality. I don't think I answered your question.

S & H How is the body constructed in society? How is it written into place or acted on?

FRASER In our culture, you the individual are responsible for your body. That's why there are all those products out there to help you care for your body. And if your body doesn't look right, then it's your fault. You carry this guilt of the body all the time, and when you go to the hospital, that guilt is intensified. The rhetorics of medical power exacerbate that guilt. The hospital can be a kind of panopticon. There's an implicit judgment and punishment in the hospital: your body is not living up to what it's supposed to be. And you're not living up to the responsibility of tending to your body. So when you walk into the hospital door, you're carrying this blame already, which is reinforced sometimes by the discourse inside the institution. You're made doubly small, doubly diminished. If we had a different attitude about the body, this often unconscious dynamic of guilt and blame might not present itself so powerfully. I'm not sure, but maybe it wouldn't be so individualizing, and the onus of care might be more culturally collective. Starting in the seventeenth century, when metaphors for the body shifted into something more mechanistic, we really did begin to think of the body as a machine that we're responsible for keeping in good running order, something that has to be fixed when it breaks. It's all very particularized. Today, it's still the able-bodied

people making room for the occasional individual disabled person. And this really enforces a sense of difference and separation.

S & H How can thinkers critique disability theory without condemning the entire discourse? Does disability discourse need to be critiqued in order for political change to happen? Is political advocacy for the disabled to be connected to aesthetics? How should we act in the presence of disability?

FRASER Disability discourse needs to be able to critique itself, yes. This is one of the things I like about the theorist Lennard Davis. He's willing to talk about disability discourse and critique the discourse from within. He's not afraid to say that disabled peoples need to maintain solidarity, because we're an oppressed, outsider group, and unless we hold onto this unity, then we're going to be silenced again. But I think he also realizes that any discourse has to examine its own centers for any real change to take place. Davis models for non-disabled culture what's necessary. Whether we can follow that model, or whether our privilege and power is too complete, I don't know. At least that's one thing I like about disability discourse: people are starting to deconstruct it from within, which can only strengthen its mobility, its potential for cultural and aesthetic interventions. It seems as though the theoretical category of disability needs ultimately to be dissolved. It's tricky, though, because legally there are important laws in place to protect the rights of people with wide-ranging bodily and cognitive impairments. Ultimately, my sense is that we want a society in which we don't need laws to protect civil rights, that these laws will become obsolete as the rights are guaranteed and become transparent. We shouldn't need special articulations that say this is an established protocol that protects against a certain kind of discrimination. Ultimately, the goal would be to erase those laws, not to preserve them—because preserving them only maintains the hierarchical difference. You tell me: Isn't the goal to try to get rid of the hierarchical part of difference, and simply to acknowledge that everything is different from everything else? Davis advocates a notion that every body is inherent in every other body. To atomize and separate bodies off, to make each person responsible for his or her individual body, is ultimately problematic. Is it possible to create a collective-body mentality, a more shared notion of our bodies as unified? Aren't our bodies worthy of being cared about as existing on a continuum, and becoming meaningful through their relationships with one another? We need to remember that bodies become meaningful through social arrangements, and we have to focus our attentions on those relationships, as opposed to thinking of the body as raw material that we control and fix and beautify, and that sometimes gets out of our control in ways that we seek to

subdue. It means disposing somehow of the notion that our bodies have essential identity, that the deformed body somehow means something essentially different from the “non-deformed” body. That, I think, is the place to start. For me, it started in poetry dedicated to my brother, whose body is my body, and vice versa.

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