

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Disabled in Popular Narrative*

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In the Indo-European languages as well as in Chinese there is no single, specific reality corresponding to the terms "the disabled" or "parents" (taken as a term for both father and mother together), if we understand them literally. *Behinderte* (disabled) is a euphemistic term like *Unterprivilegierte* (underprivileged) or *Senioren* (senior citizens), probably invented by German welfare officials as a common denominator for persons of entirely different characteristics, like the blind, the hard of hearing, the dumb, or the lame. In real life, however, each is unfortunate in his own manner, said Leo Tolstoi, whereas only the fortunate are all similar and can be lumped together.

In describing narrative the author uses another euphemism, the term *populäre Erzählungen* (popular narratives). In this way he circumvents the much-abused and sponge-like word *Volk* (as in expressions like *Volkserzählungen*). A popular narrative may be understood to be any story (as long as its "popularity" is not measured or compared), even one of literary origin, without any regard to its geographical or temporal origin. The above study is neither based on an *a priori* determined corpus of texts nor does it focus on texts confined to certain areas or periods. But this would have been decisive for judging the validity of the results. What the author had in mind are, first of all, characters, i.e. portrayals of blind, hard of hearing, lame and

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humpbacked people as motifs in the stories (*Erzählstoff*), especially when they are the main actors. A lot of material can be collected and much can be written concerning such figures, as already has been done about other types, such as stupid and clever fellows, the noble and the crooked, the young and the old, or scholars and hangmen, nuns and grannies. They are envied, admired or pitied, or at least portrayed in belles-lettres and cinema, which then are not necessarily so beautiful (*belles*). But the question, is *how* and *why* this sort of research into figures and motifs is undertaken, which has always been carried out in comparative studies.

Any research on characters or figures as motifs becomes instructive and scientifically sound only if we try to understand the history or the reception of a plot diachronically and/or synchronically. This is also applicable if one intends qualitatively and quantitatively to establish and demonstrate the latent stereotypes and tendencies in a certain literature, as, for example, that of a certain country or epoch, or in the work of a certain writer, or perhaps in the output of a certain publishing house. Such research uncovers some curious facts. For example, it appears that Russian children's literature does not know of "crippled children," and mentions a grandfather with a wooden leg only cursorily in order to glorify him as an old fighter and veteran of the Civil War. On the other hand, bourgeois literature for children explicitly deals with the sick. Such an analysis of characters, including that of the "disabled," affords a glimpse behind the curtain of literary and social convention, as G. Schenkowitz (1976) has clearly shown.

However, Uther does not analyze any corpus of texts, nor does he take up the popular narratives of any particular region or period. Although he confronts and contrasts types (*Gattungen*) one with the other, his approach is not comparative but rather phenomenological and encyclopedic. In fact, we are presented with a number of "studies" which offer plenty of material for future geographical-historical narrative research.

One must, however, understand his intention. The author notes with surprise "that until today there exists no comprehensive presentation of the history of disablement and of the disabled." As a beginner in narrative research, he hopes to make a contribution with his dissertation towards closing this gap in the book market in order to demolish discriminative stereotypes of the disabled. This is in any case a rare humanistic goal that certainly justifies the use of some profane means. The book was published in the Year of the Disabled, proclaimed by the UN.

It has to be questioned very much, however, whether it is scienti-

fically reasonable to write a "history of the disabled." It is even more doubtful whether such has to be done by a specialist in *Märchen*. The socio-medical literature concerning the care for the disabled which Uther discusses, does certainly not belong to folkloristics. The success of an Ariès who writes books about 'childhood' and 'death' does not establish that this sort of approach is scientific. Authors of treatises on 'the youngest son,' 'dragons,' or 'woman' and similar characters appearing in the *Märchen* still owe us a justification of their method, too. This kind of essay can be useful as a positivistic phenomenology of particular characters and motifs, as it might be, for example, if it were written by an author *ex officio* as a contribution to a dictionary. Its usefulness lies in its bibliography and comprehensiveness. It is useful only if the given information saves the future scholar time and effort. Uther's book will serve many as a rich mine into which we hope nobody would blindly fall while searching for a method.

If in what follows I give a detailed description of the book, I do not intend to spare my colleagues the time and effort to read it for themselves. On the contrary, one should carefully read this eloquently written book, and then supplement it for one's own benefit and that of others. It would even be worthwhile to base on it an international research project instead of organizing endless congresses on disparate topics that lead nowhere.

In the first part, "Attitudes towards the Disabled," the author discusses briefly the non-folkloristic literature about public care for the disabled (pp. 1-3), and considers the cultural history of such attitudes (pp. 3-9). The Ancient Orient and some modern Asian states (Iran, Pakistan) are briefly touched upon and compared with the care of the poor in Prussia and Western Europe in regard to penal practices and mendicancy in order to show the problematic nature of the "image of the disabled." A considerable amount of secondary material is listed bibliographically in the footnotes. However, the causes and results of the "attitude" under inquiry are not discussed—a bad habit of modern sociological erudition. All of this has but little relation to the subject of the dissertation itself, that is, popular narratives. This could hardly have escaped the attention of the author when he put this "ouverture" before the discussion "On theme and method" (pp. 10-16).

It is wise of the author simply to avoid the problem of the types of narratives and their affinity to motifs by relegating the question to an irrelevant footnote (n. 50), where he mentions both scholarly and non-scholarly writers on this question. He declares his intention to investigate *Stoffe* (materials), no matter in which sort of literature they may be found. Unfortunately the methodological validity for such a re-

search of the "Stoffe" based on "characters," i.e. on ordinary everyday motifs, or "themes" in the author's sense, is assumed without further reflection (and this even in the present situation of comparative narrative research, which has often been discredited by this kind of approach). It would take us too far afield to try to undermine this cornerstone of the author's argumentation by exposing such things as the subjective character of the superfluous category "theme" in contrast to "motif," although the term "thematology" (*Thematologie*), being more attractive from a publisher's point of view than *Stoffgeschichte* (history of materials), has spread like a cancer. The erudite remarks on pp. 12-15 concern sundry publications and cover in one way or another the social situation of the disabled (making use also of literature and art). Such a presentation would be welcome in a preface, but not here, where it is important to clarify the attitude of the author not towards the really disabled, but towards those earlier scholars of literature who, without being disabled themselves, have applied invalid methods to this subject. We wish and need to know whether or not their methods are still valid, and what the advantages of the author's so-called method might be. We hope that he made his choice after careful reflection, although he did not reveal that choice to us.

The reader has to figure out the method by himself and he has to go to similar trouble if he wants to come to grips with the textual sources of those 'popular narratives' from where the characters under analysis have been borrowed. (In the bibliographical appendix such grains of primary sources are scattered in thick layers of chaff.) The statement is made on page 10 that "with special attention to European narrative, we use as documentary sources principally texts from the thirteenth to the twentieth century." But this is not adequate to ground his method upon valid source material, especially since non-European material, dating even from the thirteenth to the twentieth century B.C., is at times also used. But as we are told it was not at all intended to delineate a picture of the blind or the deaf, etc., in diachrony or synchrony. "Rather, lines of development in the depiction . . . of the disabled are to be shown." It may be of some comfort to the expert to note that to the degree in which these intricate "lines" that are supposed to delineate the "picture of the disabled" are in fact recognizable, there is never a word about evolution. It has to be admitted, however, that some fixed and selected points, taken from such sources as literature, dramaturgy, oral speech material, and non-fiction, all traces of "day-flies," are woven into "lines" which are able to keep many a reader in suspense.

In part two the "Causes of Disablement" are cursorily enu-

merated and thematically formulated on the level of motifs, but there is no real order recognizable. 'The Bible' (most probably taken as a uniform source; p. 19) follows Aristophanes, and later on (p. 31) the Icelandic Edda is joined by an excerpt from Mas'udi about India.

Because it lists the most recent narrative literature in the footnotes this whole part is valuable as a compilation of *collectanea* and *prolegomena* for encyclopedias, especially for far-distant Asian areas. However, it cannot be recommended to any student anywhere as a model of historical and comparative narrative research in the year 1981.

In part three the "Characteristics and Capacities of the Disabled" (pp. 41-63) are described in full detail according to the method mentioned above, once branded as "positivistic overpreoccupation with the material" (*positivistische Stoffhuberei*). The author, being a collaborator of the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, is in a position to provide documentary evidence for the "special characteristics of the disabled" (3.1)—accessible only with difficulty elsewhere—as, for example, in providing illustration for the theory of compensation (*Kompensationsgedanke*; pp. 41-50). But it is precisely here that Alfred Adler, the 'father' of the theory of compensation, has been overlooked. Furthermore, euphemistic synonyms for 'blind' that probably exist in any language have been neglected.

The part on "Cunningness and Ready Wit" (*Listigkeit und Schlagfertigkeit*) is broken up thematically and supported by examples that make reading a pleasure and may also prompt further collecting. Texts that describe "disabled persons with a symbolic function" are quoted in part 3.2 (p. 56-59). It does not frequently occur that blind persons are represented in romantic or mystic terms. However, unfortunately not enough use is made of this phenomenon in literary history (e.g. blindness in R. M. Rilke!). Part three ends with the enumeration of 'negative attributes' (pp. 59-62) which in fact constitute the stereotypes wherein the topic of mockery (*Spott*) is already articulated. Part five under the title "The Disabled as Leading Images" (*Behinderte als Leitbilder*) should logically have followed here. (For methodological reasons we leave part four aside for the moment.)

In part five the topic "Disablement and Healing" is first isolated. Accordingly there is a change in the level of the material analyzed. The subject matter is no longer any particular character as carrying the action. Rather it is a piece of action and, consequently, a more complex motif, in fact, an episode. It may be left to others to decide whether it is scientifically meaningful to treat such pieces of material after they have been separated from their type (*Gattungen*). After all it is still better than writing about characters. At this point, the author

returns to the classic conception of types, which he had attacked earlier. And so part 5.1.1. speaks of disablement and healing in the *Märchen* (unfortunately in the singular instead of in the plural), and part 5.1.2. of miraculous healings in legend (*Legende*) and saga (*Sage*) (also in the singular, with an affinity between *Sage* and *Wunder*, [miracle]), no doubt a theoretically promising undertaking.

Attempts are made by appealing to Propp to justify the approach of Lüthi and the object of research itself. Both have been discussed in the foregoing parts. It is quite clear from footnotes no. 8 and no. 13 that the author is keenly aware of the range of such action. In contrast to his earlier treatment the author here makes an effort to arrange the evidence of *Märchen* somewhat historically (not geographically, which is unfortunate) according to the episode "a sick, blind king has his vision restored by a healing substance" (cf. AaTh 550). It then becomes evident that this episode cannot be historically analyzed by using only European evidence. The same applies to other motifs. Scholars from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries have analyzed the Tobiah material to some extent, but its previous history in the Near East remains an open question (p. 111-112). The grouping of healing episodes into basic forms remains a provisional arrangement which cannot replace regular monographs on types (*Typenmonographien*). We would expect that a skilled dissertation would do precisely this.

A summary that might perhaps be helpful in an encyclopedia says "that disabled persons of all three basic forms receive help; they loose their defects through substances procured by the disabled themselves or by others. . . ." But this gives little insight and scarcely lends itself to geographic and historic interpretation.

As I see it, the author has unwittingly proven that Propp's motif sequences and minor motifs (*Motifeme*) are irrelevant for the history of the material. This is a positive merit of the book, although we can attribute it to this work only in a negative sense. It further proves that only type monographs succeed in moving science ahead.

Part 5.1.1. could be printed in an encyclopedia under the heading "Disablement and Healing in *Märchen*," whereas the three pages of part 5.1.2. "Miraculous Healing in Legend and Saga" will hardly do anybody a service. A reference to Mensching (n. 104) concerning the healings and activities of Jesus do not bring the reader any further, since there is much more to be found on this topic. In regard to the "blind and lame" in 5.3, it must at least be pointed out that only *one* story is a suitable object for investigation. At this point the author came across some material that really and objectively exists and whose text and sources are solidly established. It is the "parable of the

blind and the lame." Considering the present state of scholarship, especially on Assyriology and on Oriental Studies in general, this kind of material would have been quite appropriate for a dissertation. It is unfortunate then that the author, with his main interest focused upon social history, uses only secondary and tertiary sources for the history of the material. Today it is inadmissible to dismiss the reader with a reference to René Basset who in 1889 indicated a Babylonian origin for this story. It must be said, however, that the references to *slavica* are less antiquated. Had the author taken his own footnotes seriously and researched his material more thoroughly, he would have gained insights into the relative position of the parable and into the value of attitudes towards the crippled on the level of synchrony, insights valuable enough to have been transmitted.

The author is extremely reluctant in his criticisms of statements about the parable's origin. It does not come as a surprise therefore that he tries to offer dubious neoanthropological compromise that the parable originated spontaneously at several times, for he well knows that there is evidence for the story's existence among the Indians, Jews, and Greeks. From a philological point of view this part is the most important and the only point of critique the reviewer has to make is to indicate that the *collectanea* simply remained a preconcept instead of being worked out into a monograph. I wish orientalists will be found who will take up at least the pre-European history of this material.

Part four, "Bodily Defects as the Object of Mockery," treats the literature of jokes and farces (*Witz- und Schwankliteratur*). This brings the material into clearer focus for folklore scholars. European aesthetics have been preoccupied with this phenomenon since Greek antiquity without, however, succeeding in coming up with anything more appropriate than what could have been found in Kuno Fischer's *Über die Entstehung und die Entwicklungsformen des Witzes* (1871). In most cases the author is more concerned with theoreticians a hundred years younger than Fischer, but then sometimes old skins better preserve the wine of knowledge.

Since he also includes beggars in his treatise it becomes evident that the author is not against considering the narratives as reflecting some reality. He attempts to decipher a history of customs from the stories of mockery. As is well known, this is not done without danger. Very often real history and historical philology are lost in such attempts. In this respect the author is rather moderate. It is difficult to see alms-giving reflected in this way in the Near East, where it is founded upon religious beliefs.

Readers will be grateful for the inclusion of the *Gaunerbüchlein* (books on crooks) and, in general, the obscure *Vagantenliteratur* (literature of the vagrants), although all of this is only conditionally related to the disabled.

Further subdivisions are again organized according to motif-complexes: 4.1.2. "Blind and Guide for the Blind" (pp. 73-78), where the sources originate mainly from Romania, and 4.1.3. "The Deceived Blind" (where the author attempts to orient himself following the types of the *Märchen*). In both cases the classification assists the investigation. These subdivisions are rich in evidence not easily obtainable, although we would have wished for a more culture-historical approach. "Married couples" (4.2.) contains again medieval, mainly Romanian material, that is evidently of Near Eastern origin! "Counterfeit Defects of the Non-Disabled" (4.3.) relates thematically more to cleverness. The types of *Märchen* containing those kinds of motifs are numerous and fundamentally different from each other. The common denominator 'disabled' is a clamp much too weak to bring things together into a solid object for investigation. Since there is quite early evidence for some narratives in the Orient, especially in India and China, it should have been unavoidable, even given the author's point of view, to approach the material and the motifs from the history of culture, if they could indeed be interpreted at all. For example, AaTh 1380 of the butter-blind Brahman should make it evident that the "thematic" complex of the "disabled" is not to be investigated ahistorically—or we may also say "encyclopedically" from a Eurocentric standpoint. A quick survey of the contents of various farces (according to different editions) is to little avail, even if the reader does find some entertainment in it. However, it is possible to make a virtue of this necessity. Folklorists in Asia should read this part carefully and try to supplement the evidence from material of their own vernacular and their own special knowledge of the literature. When they do so they should reflect on the function of such narratives and on their stability. Aarne, who has already analyzed about a hundred and fifty texts of farces about the hard of hearing (1914), has tried to write the history of their tradition. Since then numerous pieces of evidence from Asia have been published, but even more records lie idle in archives. (Numerous editions from the Tadzik corpus of jokes are currently in press). It would pay to work out a collective typemonography instead of scattering the material in individual papers.

The author was wise to exclude the worst "disablement" of mankind, namely foolishness (*Dummheit*). With the help of this and of the existing scholarly literature on the topic, it is possible to show

how prone we are to repeat what is already known and how short-lived some innovations are (because they are the consequence of 'creativity' resulting from a lack of thorough reading).

Apparently as a result of his analysis in the concluding part six (pp. 137-139) the author states (*quod non erat demonstrandum*) that the figure (*Gestalt*) of the disabled depends on the type, which therefore has to be conditioned directly by the "social determinants." "The 'worldview' (*Weltbild*) that is transmitted by the popular narratives reflects cultural and social phenomena conditional by their time," concludes the author. This is something Soviet academic folkloristics affirmed even at the time of a still immature socialism. However, the proof for that thesis as well as for the other, that a complete world view finds expression in just *one* type or in a cycle of thematically limited narratives, and for why such an endeavor may be successful, exactly this kind of proof is lacking in the book.

The book is published with great care by the serious scientific publisher Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, in the once highly esteemed supplement series to the journal *Fabula*. It is fitted out with a bibliography striving evidently (and intentionally) to achieve completeness in modern fashion (pp. 141-163), and further with an index of the narratives, types and motifs (pp. 163-164), and finally with an index of sources, subjects, and motifs. This should turn out to be especially helpful to a less well-read researcher.

If we recall that in early Christianity there existed a sect (Kukaje) which completely in line with the priestly codices of the Ancient Orient shunned any kind of coming into touch with the sick and the injured, then we shall have to see the problem of the "disabled person" in still another context. In Syria ritual or apparently God-given purity was essential. From time immemorial the opinion was dominant in the Orient that sickness and abnormality are a just punishment inflicted by God. As a consequence, cruelty towards people punished in this manner would really be an expression of piety. It needed a great amount of magnanimity, courage, and benevolence from a messenger of God like Jesus in order to touch the sick and heal the lame and blind. This implies the forcing of God to change his decree by the power of one's charisma or of juridical justice! It is precisely here that the phenomenon of the "disabled" would have to be treated from the point of view of intellectual history (*Geistesgeschichte*), if one intends to write the social history of the disabled in the realm of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

An openly negative or rather ambivalent attitude towards the disabled is after all only too human. Only the Talmudic teachings

which Jesus preached gradually succeeded in having charity bestowed on the helpless. To smile at the sick (*Belächeln*) is perhaps already a reduced form of a sublimated kind of cruelty, which the author is fighting against. However, it is decisive to love men as they are, just and only because they are human beings and not only because they are blind or lame, scabious or foolish. That is what prophets were preaching and saints were putting into action. To do this one needs a kind of self-denial, maybe even a new way of thinking, that can transform someone into a *new* human being. Since no organ of the body makes man into a human being (neither eyes nor ears, hands nor legs, not to mention the tongue—all of these the animals possess, too), everybody has to meditate and question himself: can *I* manage to live without this or that particular organ, also without the five senses, and not become a senseless being? And *how* do I do this? That kind of untimely thought, suggested clearly enough through the renewed danger of war, may perhaps promote change toward the better more than the dissertation reviewed. And it may perhaps free us from the superstitious belief that God dwells only in a healthy body, and that a healthy mind can be found only among athletes.

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