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Rebirth and the Body: CA Conrad and The Book of Frank

Sean Hennessey

There are many ways to look at the word “body.” It can signify a physical body or a body of work; it can be the framework of a text (the body of the piece) or it can represent an organized group of people (a regulatory body). Taken as a whole, each of these facets of the word seem to signify a singularity that is created by the collective sum of its parts—the body is made up of limbs, trunk and head; a body of work is a collection of an artist’s output; the body of a text is made up of words, phrases, and sentences; and a regulatory body consists of the people who, together, form it. While these ideas find definition by forming a collective, it is perhaps more interesting to break them apart and find new meaning in the juxtapositions of their individual components. The poetry of CA Conrad does just this in many ways: linguistically, by calling his work “soma(tic) poetry”; thematically, by writing *The Book of Frank*, a text that tells the tale of a life by breaking it up into individual vignettes that each stand on their own merit; and physically, by literally dissecting the physical body in his poems, often replacing parts of it with foreign objects to find new meaning in their usage.

Conrad’s deconstruction of the body starts with his poetics, which he calls “soma(tic)” poetry, the parenthesis immediately signaling that the reader will need to look into the cracks between ideas in his work to find their meanings. Soma(tic) is a word made up of two parts, the first part being “somatic,” one of Greek origin that means “of the body,” the second being “soma,” which refers to a

herbal concoction drunk by Persians in an ancient ritual, stemming from the Vedic traditions and meaning, as Conrad himself points out, “to press and be newly born” (Conrad). The word somatic is also linked to the idea of the somatic marker, which is a sociological term that describes the physical reactions the body produces to help resolve complex choices that cannot be solved with purely cognitive process, such as a gut feeling, which is an experiential notion of the body. With the use of this term, Conrad is breaking up the body (the somatic) in order to create new meaning, which, by his definition, becomes one of experience and of rebirth.

This notion of the somatic came to Conrad as a kind of rebirth. He had an epiphany where he realized that he had turned the act of creating poetry into a factory of sorts, that he was “busy on the assembly line ... making the poems, setting them into special folders for ‘ready for magazines,’ then ‘ready for chapbooks’” (Conrad), and gave up writing. When his notion of the term “(soma)tics” struck him, it revitalized him and gave him new focus as a writer, but it could also be said to have given the word somatic itself a linguistic rebirth. In deconstructing the word as he does, Conrad grants the word a new life with a new meaning that stems from friction between the definitions of the individual terms. As the term asks us to look at its own meanings, it also asks us to look at his work as not just a collection, as a body of work, or as individual pieces, but as a way to see how the meanings of each idea collide with the others to create new definitions, therefore being reborn. This is an act that Conrad intimates happens anyway, with the body of readers, saying, “a thousand different readers of a poem will make a thousand different poems.” With this idea, we again have the notion of a body, here a collection of readings that combine to form the frame, or body, of the one work. Thought of like this, the work becomes both expansive and self-reflexive simultaneously.

It is then no coincidence that *The Book of Frank* documents the life of his titular character, Frank, or that this life, as depicted, is

broken into many poems that each stand alone as a work unto its self but also, collectively, frame a unity. This reintroduces the themes of body and of rebirth by being, as Conrad says, “broken into denote timeframes of a life from birth to the middle years to death/reincarnation/death again at the end” (Conrad). Written in this way, the poems become a series of births and rebirths, as the idea of Frank is reintroduced in each poem, revised in definition to explore a new facet of life and then again reborn as a collection that is the sum of the meanings of the individual pieces together and how each colors the interpretation of the whole. Viewed as such, the book itself becomes experiential, allowing the reader room to share in the creation of meaning through the individual interpretation of each poem and how that builds within them to create their vision of the whole, which dovetails nicely into Conrad’s idea of the thousand different readers.

From the very first poem in the text, in the first section, concerned with Frank’s birth and childhood, Conrad creates an image strong enough to sustain an individual work but one that is also used to set the tone for and comment on the tale of Frank’s life to follow. He begins his exploration of the body physically, using it to explore the notions of identity and personal definition. These are the themes that define the first section of *The Book of Frank*, particularly that of identity as thrust upon the individual, which becomes both a political statement, reflecting current events and the on-going fight for gender freedom and equality, and a starting place for the confusion of Frank’s definition of self that Conrad builds upon as the book continues.

The opening poem starts with the question, “Where’s my daughter’s cunt?” (4), as asked by Frank’s father as he looks at the child handed to him by the doctors. This poem itself is an inversion, another way Conrad twists his exploration of the body by looking at its opposite. Here, rather than following the traditional model of a father being handed a daughter and wishing for a son, wanting him to

have a penis, we have one bemoaning his child's lack of a vagina, or, looking the reproductive organs in traditionally opposing terms, his lack of lacking a penis.

In this initial poem, Conrad puts Frank's identity into question, using his body to illustrate the concept of sexual identity in a similar way to how he illustrates the meanings within the word (soma)tic—he puts it on display by dissecting it and focusing on its parts just as he does the word by opening it up with parenthesis. By using the word “cunt”—a strong term if there ever was one and one that is immediately evocative—Conrad produces an almost physical reaction in the reader due to the weight of its imposed meaning (the response of a somatic marker?). “I had no intention with this opening piece to say I WILL SHOCK YOU!!” says Conrad. “The main thing for me was the kid having a violent sexual confusion put on him, which is the doorway to the violations of all matters to follow in the book for Frank” (qtd. in Dimond). With this in mind, the poem stands on its own, as a study of the societal impress of the notions of gender on the body of the individual, but it also becomes a piece in the collective body of words that shapes the meaning of what we are to read as we move forward.

Continuing his exploration of the body to understand identity in relation to Frank's childhood, Conrad's poem on page eight of the text further subverts the literal idea of the physical body by having Frank take his mother's eyes, while she sleeps, and view their world through them. It becomes a world with “the devil in every room / twirling his asshole / cooking small rodents / masturbating in Father's E-Z chair” (4-7). This is a twist on the first poem as Frank's world is no longer being defined by the vision of his father yet it is still defined by another's perceptions, as he is now seeing the world as his mother does, seeing how religion and fear color the way she sees everything. It is a sign of Conrad's playful method of exploring connectivity—in the body of humanity—that Frank is allowed to literally experience the world as his mother does. Having Frank's

mother come into his room the next morning, shrieking that “ONE OF [her] EYES IS UPSIDE DOWN!” (13) only emphasizes this inversion and, perversely, shows how Frank’s use of her eyes has changed how she sees the world herself.

The piece on page twenty-one, still in Frank’s formative section, takes the metaphor of the body and applies it to linguistics, playing with the ideas of the immutability of language and of the body, ultimately finding both to be mutable. “Oh the burden of / nouns no / verb can budge” (1-3) opines Frank before his sister asks him what noun cannot be moved, to which he answers with the single word, “corpse” (5). His sister then yells “TOSS THE CORPSE!” (6-7), showing how the verb “to toss” moves the noun quite easily, leaving his sister to note that “there is NO noun / a verb can’t cure” (16-17). Another playful piece, it explores the idea of language the way children often explore the idea of the body, with a certain fixedness that becomes undermined by the growing understanding of its flexibility. Every verb can move any noun because words, that together comprise the body of language, are as much metaphors for what they refer to as the corpse Frank’s sister verbally tosses around is for language itself. As Conrad points out “They print new dictionaries each year because the fringe of the world is always throwing us new ways of speaking and writing. And that’s great. People who LIVE by EXACTLY what the dictionary says lose out on the possibilities” (Conrad).

In a nod to Conrad’s own enjoyment of the deconstruction of words, the poem on page forty-five has Frank doing some deconstruction of his own. “The sign read / HARMACY after / Frank shot / the P out” (1-4). The removal of a letter changes the meaning of the word from a place of aid—a pharmacy—to one of danger. It is a simple act that irrevocably alters the meaning of the word, leaving it incomplete, altered, redefined, and reborn. It cannot be discounted that “after Frank shot the P out” can also refer to the act of urination, here becoming the bodily act that alters meaning after it happens.

The second section of *The Book of Frank* looks at Frank's middle years, his rebirth as an adult. The poem on page fifty-five takes the metaphor of the body and uses it to illustrate time. The opening image equates Frank's mother's arms, one longer than the other, with those of a clock. When asked by a stranger for the time, Frank becomes absorbed, staring at the watch, "held by the memory of Mother" (9). It is a striking image, equating the body with time as well as timelessness, showing how a moment contains all those that came before it. When Frank finally breaks free of his reverie, everyone is gone, and his beard is now ten foot long, its length reflecting the time he was immersed in his thoughts. The most effective aspect of this piece, though, is in its form, its body, which uses white space to disconnect the phrasing and slow its rhythm, allowing the lines "his beard was / ten / feet / long" (12-15) to feel drawn out and adding weight to each word. Similar to Conrad's use of the word "cunt" in the opening poem, this becomes a moment of experience, a somatic marker that allows us to feel the drag of time within the poem as the words weigh down upon us.

It is important to note the shift in tone in this poem, as well as the others of the second section. The humor becomes lighter and the imagery somewhat less violent than in the first. Frank's adolescence is marked with the pain of growth and the search for identity, the second section, his adulthood, slows that down, starts an exploration that becomes more inward, as in the image of Frank pondering time. It is an important distinction that the first, adolescent, section starts with "cunt," a provocative, explosive word that we feel in our gut, the second slows time, allowing itself room to explore an idea and to reflect on itself.

The body metaphor is not lost in this section but expands beyond Frank. The poem on page 84 extends to include the idea of religion. In it, Frank is in church and is handed a collection plate. Not having any money to give, Frank "offered himself / weeping / climbing onto the plate of coins and bills" (8-10). The reaction of the congregation to

his actions is to love him while they “sopped his tears with bread / and ate the bread” (15-16), perversely emulating the act of communion—the ultimate metaphor for the body and its deconstruction, in the name of faith, that allows for a rebirth in the meaning of Christ’s body as nourishment, physical and spiritual. By climbing onto the plate, Frank’s body takes on new meaning, both in spiritual purity, through the act of completely giving himself to his faith, and in how it is used by the congregation to fulfill their own needs, for “the bread was truly good” (17).

In the final section of *The Book of Frank*, Conrad looks at Frank’s death and reincarnation. It is here where the overarching metaphor of Frank’s life as (soma)tic rebirth comes to fruition, where the meanings of all the prior poems that collectively make up Frank’s life come together and begin to sum themselves up in the body of the work.

The poem on page 137 returns to the idea of the clock. Again, the tone of the writing has changed, away from the violence of the first section and the more reflective tone of the second. The clock is no longer a reminder of his mother but instead foreshadows Frank’s end. “Frank wonders / if the approaching / mouth of the / clock is opening / to swallow / or blow him / out of its / way?” (1-8) the poem asks. Again, the clock has developed aspects of a body but this time it is a mouth that can be used to end his time, to swallow him whole, or to blow him away, to erase him from time. Neither is a cheerful thought but both ideas capture the tone of the final section of the book, which is of a life coming to completion while time continues to move on. As the image is still linked to the earlier sections, the use of the clock ties the new meaning of mortality found in this poem to the reflection of the earlier poem, just as that clock tied its reflection to the violence of his parents in the first section. This is indicative of how Conrad uses the collective meanings of these images to build up to the larger one that unites Frank’s life. Each image is new but contains the seeds of the ones before them.

By the time he reaches the final poem, on page 148 of the text, Frank has been used and abused, he has grown up, questioning his identity in the face of his terrifying parents, lived to be an adult who has pondered his life while searching for love, has married, has died, been reincarnated as a goldfish that his widow feeds to her pet piranhas, and finally freed. “Frank,” it says, “rode / the dandelion seed / floating above / the street” (1-4). This is Frank reborn through the book-length deconstruction of his life, just as the meaning of (soma)tic is reborn through its deconstruction. Just as a floating dandelion seed represents the destruction of the dandelion itself yet contains within it the possibility of rebirth as a new one, the story of Frank’s life is renewed, carrying both the new meaning of life reborn and the collective meanings of the poems that, together, have become the story of his life.

In *The Book of Frank*, CA Conrad uses the idea of “body,” representing a collectivity summed up as an idea in the form or shape of a text, and of the physical body itself, to explore his notion of (soma)tics. Each of the poems that he uses to build the story is, in itself, a rebirth of idea, standing alone but also adding to the collective meaning of the work. Together they make up a “body of work” that, like the idea of (soma)tics itself, is reborn in meaning through the intermingling of its root definitions.

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