

Book Reviews

these male and female attributes are social constructs, or biologically given—one suspects she intends the latter—thus, while she may interestingly describe how meaning was carried, she cannot discuss how meaning was historically constructed and situated.

This a-historical tendency may be discerned in her discussion of physiognomy where she describes Antoine-Joseph Pernety's *Maladies de l'âme* of 1777 as "an important prolegomenon to Lavater's semiotic" (p. 89) yet tells us later (p. 91) that Johann Caspar Lavater had published his *Physiognomische Fragmente* two years earlier in 1775. She invokes psychologism in a broad historical sweep in her attempt to dispel confusion—grounding human activity in "ancient neural pathways along which our ancestors groped", whereby, after the fall of the Roman Empire, "Paleolithic hunt magic became transformed into pleasurable bodily diversion associated. . . with aristocratic power. . ." (p. 121). I could find no explanation as to how this transformation occurred.

There is also a traditional art historical search for origins: studies of musculature by Jaques Gamelin "adumbrated" Théodore Géricault's male figure studies (p. 75); "Goya, not Courbet, first transported the caricaturist's phantasmagoric mixture of distorted corporeality and animality to the level of the modern, or 'real', allegory." (p. 199).

It is essentially the usurpation of the bodily by the mental, the physical by the theoretical, the feminine by the masculine, which is Stafford's theme. But this is not simply an intellectual exercise. Occasionally a tangible wrath erupts as when she describes how the logocentric legal profession dares to interpret the visual evidence of video tapes in medical liability cases (p. 180). The art historian, she claims, by virtue of specialized knowledge would much more sensitively and expertly deal with such information. Need one ask: who educates the experts?

It would be difficult, in the fragments of text reproduced here, for the reader to appreciate the veiling verbosity of this volume which evoked an immediate and sensory resentment in this reviewer; a pity, for there is much stimulating material here.

Ian F. Sutton, University of Essex

PETER W. GRAHAM and FRITZ H. OEHLISCHLAEGER, *Articulating the Elephant Man: Joseph Merrick and his interpreters*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, pp. x, 212, £18.00 (0-8018-4357-X).

GORDON R. SEWARD, *The Elephant Man*, London, British Dental Association, 1992, pp. 15, illus., UK £3.99, overseas £7.00 (0-904588-35-1).

In February 1937, Dr Charles Humberd presented a case of "preacromegalism" to the readers of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*: Robert Wadlow, an eight foot eleven inch boy of seventeen. Wadlow was not named, but the initials "R. W." and mention of his home town were enough to make the identification simple. Within a few weeks, Wadlow and his family were besieged by pressmen and freak hunters, their lives invaded by letters and round-the-clock telephone calls. Robert had become "the Giant Wadlow", a public spectacle born out of medical discourse and sustained by the needs of modern culture to celebrate and censor difference, to feel a part of and yet repelled by *lusus naturae*. "Anyone", Wadlow complained, "in the name of science has a right to come into a home, make whatever cursory observations he could, and then broadcast these observations to the world."

Wadlow, who was highly intelligent and did not feel ill, quickly learned that freaks possess no privacy. Their minds, bodies and lives are open to the gaze of public and professional alike; they are probed and prodded like patients in a hospital, however much they resist being labelled sick and demand to be treated like "a normal person."

The interest in freaks of all kinds remains today as strong as it has ever been, although "freak shows" are no longer common. These two studies, the latest of the hundred or so devoted to the "Elephant Man" illustrate at once how our perception of human difference has, and has not, changed since the days of Robert Wadlow. Seward presents briefly the medical case, commends to us the diagnosis that Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man, suffered from proteus syndrome (rather than, as thought until recently, neurofibromatosis), and prints many contemporary and

Book Reviews

modern illustrations. The result is a somewhat undernourishing pamphlet which, so far as I could judge, tells us nothing new about Mr Merrick except that he had bad teeth.

Graham and Oehlschlaeger embark on an altogether more exciting project, not a study of the Elephant Man but of “articulations” of him. They are interested in how myths about the Elephant Man have been manufactured, and in why it is that we should be tempted to invent Joseph Merrick had he not actually lived. Indeed, they show that the Elephant Man has been invented and reinvented over the past century—by doctors, showmen, journalists and readers, and more recently (and memorably) by the playwright Bernard Pomerance and the film-maker David Lynch. These constructions are carefully described and analysed and the result is to present a narrative of affecting, terrible enchantment. We are presented, in fact, with a series of intertwining stories which collectively form a myth. In descending order of specificity, these stories tell of the pitiable freak rescued by the arm of benevolence (the surgeon Frederick Treves), a patient and pious creature forced to survive in a hostile world, the unsullied mind trapped in a hideous, corrupted body, and of how society—all of us—confront the Other (who may, of course, lie hidden within ourselves).

Both Robert Wadlow and Joseph Merrick were described as “real gentlemen”, as kind and intelligent, and both sought (in vain) to lead unfreakish lives. Neither lived into maturity and neither seems to have formed any intimate relationships. The outstanding difference is that while Wadlow mounted a campaign to protect himself from the intrusive attentions of medicine and the media, Merrick knew that his only hope of survival was to commit himself to the care of the London Hospital, where he lived after his rescue by Treves.

It is difficult to imagine poets and playwrights being drawn to Wadlow as they have to Merrick, for Wadlow refused to submit to the authority of those that told him what he was (a monster) and what he could not be (normal); so far from relishing the help extended to him by the medical profession, he fought it doggedly. Merrick was on the whole a more passive and accommodating patient: he offers the opportunity of a warming counterposition between the hideous, hopeless case and the miracles of modern medicine. Tales about the Elephant Man are able to transmute horror into kindness.

While medical historians will find much to enjoy in *Articulating the Elephant Man*, many will regret the paucity in the book of medical or intellectual context. A complete study of Joseph Merrick—man and myth—is inconceivable without some understanding of Victorian teratology and theories of degeneration, of the development of the medical profession (which, after all, sequestered the Elephant Man) and, not least, of the theory of maternal impressions. In folk belief, freaks were thought to be born of mothers whose foetuses were “impressed” by a powerful image which the weak, feminine brain was incapable of containing. The hostility accorded to Merrick’s mother by many (including Treves), which puzzles Graham and Oehlschlaeger may well be part and parcel of the blame meted out to women who gave birth to defective babies.

Michael Shortland, University of Sydney

GLORIA SYBIL GROSS, *This invisible riot of the mind: Samuel Johnson's psychological theory*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992, pp. x, 198, £22.00, \$25.95 (0-8122-3146-5).

Few men of letters have attracted medical historians’ attention more than Samuel Johnson. As recently as 1991 there appeared a first-rate overview of health and medical themes in Johnson: John Wiltshire’s *Samuel Johnson in the medical world: the doctor and the patient* (Cambridge University Press). Equally impressive, and covering quite different ground, is Gloria Gross’s study of Johnson and the human psyche. In this well-organized and powerfully written monograph, two different but related inquiries are deftly combined. On the one hand, Professor Gross (who is a literature specialist) is concerned, from a biographical viewpoint, to probe Johnson’s own psychological make-up and its interpretation. On the other hand, she seeks to analyse Johnson’s vision of the human mind in general, and his readings of the