

The Representation of Disability in the Work of Tristan Corbière and Louisa Siefert

‘Poetry [...] with its attention to the textures, sounds and nuances of linguistic expression, plays with [the] process of defamiliarisation and challenges standardised conceptions of bodies, minds and literary forms’.¹ Deviating from traditional prosaic forms of literary expression, and thus allowing for greater flexibility, poetry is a fitting medium for the representation of disability and the non-normative body. In view of this, one would anticipate the disabled voice to shine through critical readings of many poetic works. Upon examining the field of nineteenth century French poetry, however, it quickly becomes clear that the inclusion of disability both in the Canon and in modern-day poetic analysis is predicated upon gender. By undertaking a close analysis of the poetry of Tristan Corbière, a male canonical poet whose works are recognised amongst critics for their disability representation, and the poetry of Louisa Siefert, a female non-canonical poet whose works are mostly read at face value for their themes of sadness, loss and fear, this gender divide becomes apparent. As academic, Tammy Berberi, observes: ‘in their relentless effort to diagnose poetic figures in *Yellow Loves*, critics undermine Corbière’s subjectivity by compulsively girding figures of disability with diagnoses, thereby essentializing the significance of physical difference’.² In light of this perspective, alongside an exploration of these elements of disability, this essay will offer alternative readings of Corbière’s *Les Amours jaunes*, with particular focus on his depiction of Breton culture. Following this, it will then seek to compare critical interpretations of Corbière’s poetry with those of Louisa Siefert, going beyond the aforementioned themes commonly attributed to female poets to examine undeciphered elements of disability representation, the identification of which heavily relies on the interpretation of contemporary disabled critics.

Given his premature death from a plethora of chronic illnesses, namely pneumonia, rheumatic fever and tuberculosis, the *topos* of death in Tristan Corbière’s poetry can be linked to his personal experience with disability, as multiple critics affirm. Centred around a young poet who invokes his muse as a sounding board for his reflection on literary life and death, placing himself amongst deceased, revered poetic *maîtres*, *Un jeune qui s’en va* is a striking example. Throughout, ellipses and enjambment feature heavily at the end of lines, most notably in the thirteenth stanza wherein there features two instances of ellipsis and a double enjambment. As Dansel comments: ‘Corbière’s predilection for ellipses lends an “asthmatic” quality to his writing’.³ Placed emphatically after the verb ‘mourir’,⁴ ellipsis

¹ Alice Hall, ‘Voice and Poetry’, in *Literature and Disability* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp.149-163 (p. 159).

² Tammy Berberi, ‘A Rhapsodist at Mid-Century: Refiguring Disability in the Poetry of Tristan Corbière’, *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 3 (2009), 51-66 <doi: 10.1353/jlc.0.0004> (p. 53).

³ Michel Dansel, *Langage et modernité chez Tristan Corbière* (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1974), p. 76, cited in Tammy Berberi, ‘Les Poses de l’Incompris reprises : Corbière, Caricature, and Critical Illness’, *Journal of Literary Disability*, 1 (2007) 34-48 <doi: 10.3828/jlcls.1.1.5> (p. 38).

⁴ Wikisource, *Un jeune qui s’en va*, ([n.p]: Wikisource, 2018)

<https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Un_jeune_qui_s%27en_va> [accessed 2 December 2022].

reflects the inevitable interweaving of death into disabled life. Increasing the pace of the stanza, the lack of punctuation causes the reader to experience the same sensations of breathlessness which Corbière suffered as a result of his own conditions. Alongside the double enjambment, a technique which 'usually serve[s] to create a rhythmic effect in harmony with the emotional content of his poem',⁵ the reader's expectations are further distorted by a rhythm which becomes yet more irregular. Highlighting a previously fulfilling life in the first instance, and the longevity of a poetic legacy in the second instance, it draws attention to different facets of loss and mortality which coincide with the fears of a non-normative body. Another overarching feature of *Un jeune qui s'en va* described as 'estropiés'⁶ in contemporary contexts, the dash carries connotations of disability. Creating an audible pause, its position after 'La gloire n'attend pas demain',⁷ for example, causes the reader to reflect on the immediacy of death. Once aligned with its above modernistic association, the dash unites the *topos* of death and disability, presenting mortality as a comorbidity of certain disabilities. In short, given his personal preoccupation with death as a result of chronic illness, reading Corbière's work through a lens of disability theory can yield valuable insights.

Despite offering a reading of the disabled self, enhanced by Le Clech and Yvan's etymological assumption that Corbière's decision to change his name from Édouard to Tristan, '*Triste en (son) corps(=)bière* [sad in his body (=) casket]', was an expression of his degradation of physical health,⁸ Corbière's *Les Amours jaunes* also presents alternative readings. His opposition to positivist poetic movements characterized by physiognomy is one of the most prominent of these, as evidenced through *Le Bossu Bitor*. The positive characterisation of the hunchback in the opening of this poem as someone who brings good luck at sea ('en mer un bossu porte chance'⁹), counters the portrayal of the hunchback as 'the most popular figure of abjection of the post-Revolutionary period'.¹⁰ As such, it condemns the conflation of physical appearance and ability within prevalent nineteenth century poetic movements, including Romanticism and Realism. A subsequent likening of the hunchback to historically notable figures who have either been accepted regardless of their hunchback, or who have used their hunchback to good avail, furthers such criticism. Emphasised by the strength of the 3-3-3-3 accent of 'Un Lauzun qui se frotte aux plus gros numéros', the 3-3 hemistich of 'comme un ver par sa haine' and 'Lagardère en manteau',¹¹

⁵ Lindsay Marshall, 'The Versification of Corbière's *Les Amours jaunes*', *PMLA*, 78 (1963), 358-368 <doi: 10.2307/461248> (p. 360).

⁶ Tammy Berberi, '*Les Poses de l'Incompris reprises* : Corbière, Caricature, and Critical Illness', *Journal of Literary Disability*, 1 (2007) 34-48 <doi: 10.3828/jlcs.1.1.5> (p. 38).

⁷ Wikisource, *Jeune*

⁸ Marthe le Cloch and François Yvan, *La Métamorphose du crapaud* (Plourin-les-Morlaix: Editions Bretagne d'hier, 1995), p. 48, cited in Tammy Berberi, '*Les Poses de l'Incompris reprises* : Corbière, Caricature, and Critical Illness', *Journal of Literary Disability*, 1 (2007) 34-48 <doi: 10.3828/jlcs.1.1.5> (p. 38).

⁹ Wikisource, *Le Bossu Bitor*, ([n.p]: Wikisource, 2018) <https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Le_Bossu_Bitor > [accessed 2 December 2022].

¹⁰ Berberi, *Rhapsodist*, p. 59.

¹¹ Lindsay, p. 367.

and the repetition of exclamative punctuation, these figures stand out to the reader. Thus, the poem reinforces the virtue of the hunchback and Corbière's objection to physiognomy, a hegemonic concept both within social and literary discourse.

Transitioning from Paris to Brittany as *Les Amours jaunes* progresses, 'meanderings [which] carry him away from both father and fatherland, representing a symbolic departure both from mainstream values and classical aesthetics',¹² Corbière's poetry also gives voice to the Breton people and their culture. Most notably, *La Pastorale de Conlie* shows his empathy with Breton civilians in light of their mistreatment by mainstream French forces during the Franco Prussian War. Strengthened by enjambment at the end of the line, the simile 'et parqués comme des troupeaux',¹³ situated in the opening stanza, brings Corbière's allegiance to the fore. Visually illustrating the way in which Breton civilians were rounded up like a flock of animals, this literary device draws attention to their dehumanisation at the hands of the French, forcing the reader to recall their incarceration and persecution within Camp Conlie, interpreted in modern terms as a concentration camp led by the *Gouvernement de la Défense nationale*. The inclusion of Breton phraseology which both precedes and follows this simile further reinforces Corbière's adherence to Breton culture. In addition to further accentuating the wintry, lugubrious conditions enforced upon Breton civilians, the italicisation of '*Mois-noir*' and '*Mois-plus-noir*'¹⁴ denotes a translation from the Breton of 'miz du' and 'miz kerzu',¹⁵ thus drawing attention to the Breton language. Combined with the over-translation of 'miz-kerzu' to *Mois-plus-noir* rather than 'mois aussi noir',¹⁶ Corbière's support for Breton nationalism is therefore evident from the outset. Especially considering he was not mobilised himself, the repetition of 'nous'¹⁷ throughout the poem also signifies Corbière's affiliation with the Breton civilians of 1870. Undoubtedly, 'se projetant dans les faits, il devient un des Bretons englués à Conlie, dont il va clamer les malheurs'.¹⁸ By drawing upon the account of his step-brother, Aime Le Vacher,¹⁹ to uphold a factually accurate representation of Breton hardship within Camp Conlie, Corbière demonstrates his loyalty to the Breton region. The decision to portray himself amongst the enlisted Breton civilians evidences his solidarity with them. Particularly prominent in the nineteenth stanza, whereby sibilance across the second and third lines creates a harsh sound reflective of his denigration of French conduct, 'nous'²⁰ brings to the fore Corbière's

¹² Berberi, *Rhapsodist*, p. 54.

¹³ Wikisource, *La Pastorale de Conlie*, ([n.p]: Wikisource, 2018) <https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/La_Pastorale_de_Conlie> [accessed 2 December 2022].

¹⁴ Wikisource, *Pastorale*

¹⁵ Pascal Rannou, 'L'Image des Bretons dans *Les Amours jaunes* : du Réalisme à l'Idéalisme', *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 1 (2018) 127-138 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26368954>> [accessed 4 December 2022] (p. 136).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁷ Wikisource, *Pastorale*

¹⁸ Rannou, p. 134-135.

¹⁹ Rannou, p.134.

²⁰ Wikisource, *Pastorale*

willingness to reject 'l'identité française, imposée par l'état civil et les aléas de l'histoire'.²¹ In short, this first person plural pronoun highlights his desire to stand with Breton civilians in support of regional justice within an exclusionary Republican France.

Despite taking a stance in favour of the Breton people in some of his works, a view which was in opposition to the French state, Corbière is both placed in the traditional French Canon and analysed in modern times as a disabled poet. On the other side of the coin, however, stands Louisa Siefert, a female poet who likewise experienced a multiplicity of chronic health conditions, including an overlapping experience with tuberculosis, yet is analysed as neither canonical nor disabled. Given contemporary attitudes towards chronic illness and the feminisation of certain conditions such as migraine, one of the illnesses communicated most prevalently in Siefert's work, this exclusion from the Canon and from the category of disabled poets appears to be predicated in part on gender. 'Depicted as "frail and perfectionist women"',²² people with migraine have historically, and still are currently, considered neurotic rather than disabled, even though the World Health Organisation states migraine as one of the most disabling neurological conditions.²³ With such stigma in mind, it is therefore possible to analyse Siefert's poetry through a lens of disability, contesting critical interpretations of her work which focus on feminized themes of sadness and loss. Commonly discussed in the context of lamentation as the title itself suggests, *Tristesse* is a clear illustration of this. Although the poem's focus on an absent lover and the frigidity of loneliness is most prominently symbolic of lost love, a disabled meaning prevails upon considering Siefert's youthful experience of chronic illness defined by limitations and loss. With a knowledge of her biographical information, details such as 'Contempler mollement mes quinze ans ingénus'²⁴ take on a new meaning. A seemingly irrelevant number out of context, *quinze* alludes to the age at which Siefert was diagnosed with arthritis of tubercular origin. Intensified by the adjective 'ingénus'²⁵ which accentuates the instantaneity of her illness, portraying it as an unforeseen impediment to her fulfilling childhood centred around amorous affection, the *topos* of sadness broadens out to encapsulate a deterioration of physical health in addition to amorous loss.

A similar effect emerges through reference to age in the third line of *Morte!*. Highlighted by the interrogatory punctuation at the end of the line, a grammatical feature which intensifies the poet's surprise and bewilderment at the early onset of chronic pain,

²¹ Rannou, p. 134.

²² Khatia Gvantseladze and others, 'The Stereotypical Image of a Person With Migraine According to Mass Media', *Headache: The Journal of Head and Face Pain*, 60 (2020) 1465-1471 <doi: 10.1111/head.13846> (p. 1465).

²³ T.J. Steiner and others, 'Migraine remains second among the world's causes of disability, and first among young women: findings from GBD2019', *The Journal of Headache and Pain*, 21 (2020), 137 <doi: 10.1186/s10194-020-01208-0> (Table 2).

²⁴ Wikisource, *Tristesse* ([n.p.]: Wikisource, 2014) <[https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Rayons_perdus_\(1869\)/Tristesse](https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Rayons_perdus_(1869)/Tristesse)> [accessed 5 December 2022].

²⁵ Wikisource, *Tristesse*

'Qui donc l'a pu frapper avant qu'elle eût vingt ans ?'²⁶ once again recalls Siefert's traumatic adolescence, dominated by some of the conditions that would later lead to her premature death. Combined with the preceding oxymoron of 'morte, pleine de vie',²⁷ which calls further attention to short life expectancy through its juxtaposition of life and death, it is clear that this poem goes beyond a generic representation of death, to one informed by an experience of disability. With its *topos* of death and frequent use of enjambment echoing that of Corbière's canonically classified *Un jeune qui s'en va*, the question arises as to the inferiority of Siefert's work both in the 19th century poetic field and in present-day critical analysis. Despite sharing elements reflective of disability, the representation of disability is only acknowledged and afforded a position of literary prestige in the work of the male poet, thus demonstrating an element of gender bias.

Not all of Siefert's references to disability require specific elements of biographical detail such as age to be successfully interpreted, however. The *Préfaces* to her *Rayons Perdus* collection, published in 1869 following the onset of her chronic conditions some seven years prior, exemplifies this. Centred around the fear of a doe in crossing a road, *Préface I* appears to conform with critical analysis of feminised themes of apprehension. Consequently, the *double entendre* of certain linguistic features remains unacknowledged, with interpretations focussing solely on the representation of animalistic fear and overlooking the foreshadowing to a fear over the accommodation of the non-normative human body within society, as depicted in the latter half of *Préface II*. The lexical field of fear is a good illustration. Expressed through a plethora of words in the opening two stanzas, namely 'craintive', 'hésite', 'cacher', 'fugitive', 'redoutant', 'frisson', 'l'épouvante' and 'l'effroi',²⁸ it accentuates the extent to which fear is deeply embedded within the deer. Nonetheless, combined with the depiction of a doe rather than a stag, a portrayal reinforced in and of itself by the preponderance of femininely declined adjectives and the repetition of 'elle',²⁹ the lexical field foreshadows to the closing stanzas of *Préface II* in which Siefert proclaims her own fear regarding the prejudices she faces in accessing a literary career as a female, disabled poet.

Moving in to *Préface II*, these foreshadowed fears are voiced by Siefert, validating a disabled reading of *Préface I*. Differing from the typical CCDEDE rhyme scheme within a French sonnet, the versification of the last two stanzas heightens such foreshadowing. Intensified by the ellipsis after 'là-bas' and the enjambment after 'route',³⁰ both of which visually illustrate the distance Siefert must travel to reach a fulfilling poetic career, the CDCDDC rhyme scheme creates an unsettling rhythm, contrary to tradition. As such, it

²⁶ Wikisource, *Morte* ([n.p.]: Wikisource, 2014)
<[https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Rayons_perdus_\(1869\)/Morte](https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Rayons_perdus_(1869)/Morte) !> [accessed 5 December 2022].

²⁷ Wikisource, *Morte*

²⁸ Wikisource, *Préface* ([n.p.]: Wikisource, 2014)
<[https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Rayons_perdus_\(1869\)/Pr%C3%A9face](https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Rayons_perdus_(1869)/Pr%C3%A9face)> [accessed 5 December 2022].

²⁹ Wikisource, *Préface*

³⁰ Wikisource, *Préface*

emphasises the uncertainty of reaching glory as a female disabled poet. Reading the two *Préfaces* together, it is therefore clear that the two interpretations of *Préface I*, those of animalistic fear and fear over a female, disabled body, co-exist and are equally worthy of critical analysis.

Following a close analysis of the poetry of Tristan Corbière and Louisa Siefert, there are undoubtedly elements of disability representation within both of their works. However, only Corbière's writings have received critical attention as disabled poetry, while Siefert's works have been solely ascribed feminised themes of loss, sadness and fear. As Paliyenko observes: 'rather than writing about her particular diseases along the lines of an autopathography, Siefert transcends the embodied experience of suffering through creative reverie and philosophical detachment'.³¹ Thus, it is the stigmatisation of feminine disability, stretching from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, that is accountable for the overlooked disabled reading within the works of Louisa Siefert. A similar element of gender bias contributes to her status as a non-canonical poet, while Corbière's poetry, influenced by many of the same conditions experienced by Siefert, is elevated to the Canon. Therefore, when reading the works of female, disabled poets such as Siefert, it is important to transcend stereotypical contemporary thought in order to fully appreciate the multiple facets of their work.

³¹ Adrianna Paliyenko, 'The Poetic Edges of Dualism in Louisa Siefert', in *Genius Envy: Women Shaping French Poetic History, 1801-1900* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2016), pp. 164-196 (p. 165).

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