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TEXT review

The poetics of breaking: Minds, bodies, codes and paradigms

review by Nataša Kampmark



Ann M McCulloch and RA Goodrich (eds)

Why Do Things Break?

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Why Do Things Break? is a book gathering material from three conferences hosted by Cardiff University (2014), the JM Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice at the University of Adelaide (2016) and The National Opera Center in New York (2017), where the questions concerning precursors, ruptures and breakages were first discussed and performed. It is a collection comprising fourteen discursive and creative pieces which approach the titular question from their particular angles thereby insightfully interpreting and inflecting the verb 'break' into virtually inexhaustible possibilities of its phrasal guises such as 'break down', 'break (away) from', 'break in(to)', 'break out', 'break up', and 'break through'. Similarly, the word

‘things’ is to be understood in the broadest sense, as the authors explore breakages including those of the body, mind, language, tradition, academic disciplines, relationships and so on.

Looking like there is some mystery about to happen, Dr Deborah Walker’s prize-winning painting *The Compass (with ladder)* graces the front cover of this collection which investigates the mystery of why and how cracks appear in peoples’ lives. Divided into four parts, the study looks at the psychological sources behind creative output, and the trail of broken minds and bodies left in the wake of trauma, historical and political developments. In addition, precursors are sought and found as the study navigates the cracks and shifting paradigms, offering a critical appraisal of philosophical, scholarly and artistic ideas and exploring their current relevance.

Part I: ‘Precarious Reach of Metaphor’ brings together four chapters concerned with memory and time. ‘[A]n exercise in creative misremembering’ (21), Michael Meehan’s self-reflexive piece ‘Blurred Memory: Creative Process and the Art of Misremembering’ uses the metaphor of ‘indistinct music’ (18, 21) to meditate on the source of its inspiration. It breaks away from the fact and enters the realm of fiction as it explores where stories come from and how fiction is written. A bricolage of theory, poetry, autobiography, and criticism, Marion May Campbell’s ‘Waterspout’ is a creative piece of autofiction which queers the narrative of childhood trauma. Centred on the metaphor of a cone, the piece is an intimate unburdening of grief in which ‘[g]enres & their broken names turn [the author] where they will’ (29) as the assemblage of their fragments swirl around, recreating the waterspout that downed the plane and killed her father. Set in the 1970s in the Former Yugoslavia, Jennifer Rutherford’s ‘April in Kumrovec’ pieces together fragments of (mis)remembered past to tell about a broken down romance, revolution, and country. Its central metaphor of a traditional circle dance helps the reader envisage how experiences of the past make us who we are in the present. After three creative pieces, Part I concludes with Antonia Pont’s discursive article ‘Inventive Temporalities’ which focuses on the question of ‘how an attitude or approach to time ... might impact upon creativity’ (38). Taking a view of temporality informed by Gilles Deleuze’s tripartite analysis and his take on Nietzsche’s ‘eternal return’, the author expounds on the concept of practice defined as ‘a kind of “strange doing” that involves repeating a bound set of actions intentionally over time’ (53).

Part II: ‘Broken Minds, Broken Bodies’ consists of three chapters which look into physical, psychological and emotional breakages. It opens with John O’Carroll’s ‘Broken Bodies: The Aesthetics of Cancer’ which records a cancer journey in a series of poems not unlike seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry with its unique take on metaphor. In that manner, cancer is personified as a ‘little visitor’ (62) and the patient becomes ‘meat on feet’ (62), a ‘bloodied kitchen onion’ (66), ‘Jesus from Australia’ (65) or a child learning vocabulary of the new world while ‘inspiration’, interpreted as ‘breathing in’, stands for life itself (67). Amelia Walker’s ‘This Order, Not Disorder: Break Down as Break Through’ advocates collaboration between art and science placing poetry at the forefront of the scientific investigation of the mind. By analysing how the linguistic (dis)order of poetry can grant

access to spaces of mental (dis)order denied to conventional means, the author shows how contemporary conceptions of mental health and illness can and should be revised, ultimately suggesting to view ‘disorder’ as ‘this order’ – one among many ways of ‘(re)processing the complexities life presents and which standard language and/as thought cannot necessarily accommodate’ (79). Indeed, the so-called mental illness or ‘breakdown’ is seen as symptomatic of greater ecological or ethical concerns and as such can lead to a ‘breakthrough’. Piri Eddy’s ‘A Body Broken: Creativity and the Grotesque’ draws on the ideas of Connelly, Bakhtin and Remshards in order to posit the grotesque as a vital ‘power to break through possibilities, to unearth that which has been denied and buried, to uncover forgotten realities, and to challenge’ (88). An excerpt from a novel-in-progress featuring a conversation between a grotesque character of Fishboy and the novelist is presented to reinforce the point that creative acts are needed to ‘unsettle the calmness’ and push the boundaries of reality.

In Part III: ‘Breaking Codes’ the authors concentrate on forward thinkers and artists who broke with the past, pioneered ideas and introduced innovative ways thinking. Placing Freud next to Darwin and Marx as a figure who ‘shaped twentieth century deliberations’ (101) in almost all arenas of human intellectual endeavour including ‘natural science, philosophy, economics, politics, jurisprudence, art and education’ (101), Douglas Kirsner’s ‘Freud: A Precursor Breaking into the Contemporary Zeitgeist’ gives an overview of Freud’s major concepts of the unconscious, neurosis and sexuality which revolutionized the way people perceive themselves as individuals and as a collective. The chapter demonstrates how Freud’s approach transformed not only the field of psychology and mental health, but how it continues to influence fields as diverse as the arts, sciences, philosophy and politics. Brian Castro’s ‘The World, the Sex and the Critic’ opens with a critical reflection on the status of poetic prose as a legitimate literary form and creative writing as legitimate academic scholarship, both breaking the conventional boundaries of the genre and discipline, respectively. Asserting the primacy of creative writing over literary scholarship which it gives rise to, Castro, in the second part of the article, exploits the possibilities of poetic prose, bringing together rhythmical patterns of poetry to punctuate an investigation into the genres of biography and memoir, the politics of gender and sexuality, and the intricacies of academia and prejudice. Pavlina Radila’s ‘Valentine de Saint-Point: From Modernist Destructivism to Digital Post-Human’ draws on Rosi Braidotti’s notion of the post-human as ‘the interlinking of human and non-human elements and environments’ (126) arguing that Valentine de Saint-Point’s early twentieth-century modernist performances and artwork, demonstrate that the ideas which preoccupy critics, theorists and artists of the contemporary digital era are not at all new. These include cultural diversity, depersonalisation and dematerialisation of body, fusion of all arts, and dance as an interpretation of poetry through geometry. Indeed, the boundary of what is human was broken much before Michael Jackson’s digitally-enhanced hologram appeared on stage.

Part IV: ‘Making Precursors, Breaking paradigms’ comprises four chapters which thematise the problematics of precursors. Aiming to ‘highlight the problematic epistemological status of

claims ... about artistic precursors' (147), RA Goodrich's 'Situating Precursors' first explores the concept of precursors as envisaged by Jorge Luis Borges in his 1951 essay 'Kafka and His Precursors', and in the critical enterprise of TS Eliot and AC Danto, revealing a potential incoherence of their common stance. By contrast, the field-theoretical framework formulated by Kurt Lewin is then offered as one affording the critic a more coherent engagement with past or anticipated precursors. Identifying speculative realism as a philosophical movement which promises 'a genuinely new perspective' in the first decades of the twenty-first century (160), Matthew Sharpe in his 'Camus' "Midday" Thought: A Precursor to Speculative Realism' nevertheless proceeds to uncover the voice of Albert Camus as the precursor of the new movement. David Harris's 'Assembling Spinoza, Guattari and Cormac McCarthy' adopts the Deleuzian notion of 'assemblage' in his search to meaningfully represent a genealogy from Spinoza to Guattari, then to McCarthy. The collection concludes with Christopher Norris's verse-essay 'A Plain Man Looks at the Angel of History' which satirically warns about the dangers of identifying precursors as well as of 'the arcane chat / of commentators' which has the power to 'twist / his words into some view of things that's grist / to any meaning-mill they're grinding at' (192).

Why Do Things Break? is a collection that itself breaks the boundaries of what is assumed by conventional study. It deploys the metaphor of a compass to assemble pieces in which authors look for directions and guidance after cracks appear in the architecture of life, and artistic and philosophical endeavour. It breaks the boundaries of the genre by arranging together creative pieces, including poetry, drama, and fiction, and academic criticism, sometimes sitting side by side in a single chapter. Most of all, it has an invigorating effect on the reader as the impression left is not that of decay but that of a new life bursting through the cracks.

Nataša Kampmark is a sessional academic in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, La Trobe University. She is the author of Tri lica australijkse proze [Three Faces of Australian Fiction] (2004) and the co-editor and translator of Priče iz bezvremene zemlje [Tales from the Timeless Land] (2012).