Moving Objects, from Prosthetics to Affects: Metonymic Ontologies in Harry Parker's *Anatomy of a Soldier* and *Hybrid Humans*

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1. In "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" (1956), where he develops a theory of literary representation as being organized around two "poles" – metaphoric and metonymic – , Roman Jakobson takes the example of Russian novelist Gleb Ivanović Uspenskij to illustrate metonymic writing. He then quotes Anatolij Kamegulov (1930), according to whom the author's metonymic and synecdochic writing entailed such a proliferation of details that "the reader is crushed by the multiplicity of detail unloaded on him in a limited verbal space, and is physically unable to grasp the whole, so that the portrait is often lost" (Kamegulov 65; qtd in Jakobson 94). A few years later, taking up Jakobson's theories in *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (1977), David Lodge says of what he calls "the metonymic text" that it "deluges us with a plethora of data, which we seek to unite into one meaning" (111). Both theoreticians identify indeed the metonymic mode of representation as characteristic of "realist" writing (as opposed to Romanticism or Symbolism) and define it as relying on a principle of "contiguity": "Following the path of contiguous relationships, the realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. He is fond of synecdochic details" (Jakobson 92).

2. This theoretical stance needs to be questioned in relation to 21st-century literature as "realist" writings nowadays do not necessarily meet the traditional requirements of "plot", "atmosphere", "characters", or even have a specific "setting in space and time". Yet, what we may consider to be "synecdochic details" or a "plethora of data" can still be found in contemporary novels. In this respect, Harry Parker's debut novel, *Anatomy of a Soldier* (2016), can be defined as a paradigmatic example of metonymic writing given that the "soldier" from the title is, precisely, defined, perceived and apprehended through forty-five objects narrating the story. Thus, the correlation between the novel's title and its narrative strategy suggests that the "anatomy" with which the readers are going to be acquainted is not of an organic nature, but one that extends beyond the scope

of the human body. Furthermore, this narrative strategy might encounter – though not exactly for the same reasons – the very issue that Kamegulov identifies in Uspenskij's writing, that is, that it makes its readers "physically unable to grasp the whole, so that the portrait [might be] lost". This does happen at times: by narrating the various chapters of the novel, each object momentarily becomes the subject of its own story. The novel thus reverses the hierarchies between human and object to the point that the "anatomisation" of the soldier sometimes leads to his "atomisation", making him disappear in the background and become a mere "prop" in a story that is no longer his. Going back to Kamegulov's comment, we may wonder, in the case of Parker's novel, if the loss of the "whole", of the "portrait" is not exactly what the author is aiming for.

3. The structure of the novel allows it to cover two alternating timelines: the first one begins on the opening page and follows the "soldier", Tom Barnes, from the IED explosion that causes the loss of his legs to his final recovery as he eventually becomes capable of running with prosthetic legs; the second timeline narrates the events prior to the explosion, starting with Barnes's deployment to a foreign country which we understand to be Afghanistan. As a result, the "things" that the human character encounters – or rather, that encounter him – serve a wide range of purposes and entertain different kinds of relations to him or to the other human characters that take part in the story. This enables Parker to question the various degrees of dependence that organise our relations to "things", whether they are organic, even microscopic, like the Zygote Fungi that lodges itself into Barnes's leg, threatening to kill him, natural phenomena such as falling snow, or human-made and serially produced objects created either to kill – a bullet in Barnes's rifle – or to heal – the catheter inserted in his body.

4. Parker's concern with such issues becomes even more central in his second book, *Hybrid Humans: Dispatches from the Frontiers of Man and Machine* (2022), whose title clearly acknowledges the growing porosity of the boundaries – and the extensive dimension – of what we call "human". In this highly personal essay, the author makes his own voice heard in order to explore his hybridity – a trait he shares with the fictional Tom Barnes whose story is inspired by Parker's own. However, far from focusing his attention only on the more striking phenomena of interdependence and intermingling between human beings and objects, Parker asks us to reflect on the increasingly blurry frontier between resorting to objects to compensate for a disability and using them for bodily enhancement.

5. In this context, the metonymic issue of the relation between the "whole" and its "parts" takes on a much more complex dimension than what this figure of speech seems at first to entail. Parker's

explorations of hybridity lead him indeed to wonder to what extent the smallest of objects (that is, an infinitesimal "part"), such as an implanted microchip, could radically alter the very essence of the human subject (the "whole"). As a result, asking the question of what objects become calls up that of what becomes of humans, especially as it seems that the former can easily turn into the latter and vice versa. The ontological boundaries of the two entities become unstable. Thus, we should not merely ask ourselves how the growing interdependence between humans and objects might turn a disabled person into a cyborg but whether the human has not been completely relegated to the background.

6. This entails a complete reconfiguration of what Judith Butler identifies as the "frames" (2009) defining the norms by which certain existences are deemed valuable and, consequently, determining the very ability of a thing/subject to be perceived. This phenomenon has crucial ethical implications as it calls for a certain decentring of the human subject, recasting it as relational and interdependent. However, it also asks the question of the differential ability of certain humans to be turned into things, to be objectified – and this also raises the question of the distinction between "things" and "objects", which we will further explore. Parker thus directs our attention towards the risks of a reconfiguration of norms that would consist in a mere reversal of ontological hierarchies, especially in contexts where certain human lives seem to become "disposable". This is particularly the case in *Anatomy of a Soldier* which deals with post-colonial forms of violence and where the victims on both sides of the conflict are not deemed *grievable*, finding an echo in Butler's words when she wonders: "To what extent have Arab peoples, predominantly practitioners of Islam, fallen outside the 'human' as it has been naturalized in its 'Western' mold by the contemporary workings of humanism?" (Butler 2004, 32); or when she explains that

> in the name of defending people, the nation kicks some of its people to the curb. The body instrumentalized for the purposes of 'defense' is nevertheless disposable in the course of providing that 'defense.' Left defenseless in the course of defending the nation, such a body is both indispensable and dispensable. (Butler 2015, 17)

Eventually, in *Hybrid Humans*, Parker takes this reflexion even further when, considering the fact that "[t]hose who cannot afford to pay for health care constitute but one version of a population deemed disposable" (Butler 2015, 25), he leads us to ponder the ethical reversal of values that is at stake when a person has been so objectified that the very objects that would allow them to live decently (such as a wheelchair or prosthetic legs) are held out of their reach.

7. This article will explore the multi-facetted and complex relations that Harry Parker's objects entertain with human beings and the ways in which they bring about a reconfiguration of our

perceptions of disability and relationality. My analysis will revolve around the concept of metonymy as a means to explore the different ways in which objects manifest themselves and the various roles they take on in relation to the human subjects but also to the narrative itself. The first section of this article will focus on objects as metonymic remains in Parker's texts, taking them as essentially – in the etymological sense – different from human beings and as the metonymic signs of the human. However, Parker's objects also intermingle, on the ontological level, with the human, and the second part of this study will address the ways in which objects, in particular those that relate to disability, become metonymic excesses that are essential to humanity while threatening to alter it. Eventually, I wish to discuss the ethical stakes that these metonymic relations to objects entail, insofar as they question normative – and perceptual – hierarchies. Thus, I intend to show how this focus on objects orients Parker's writing towards a new representational *parti pris* whose realism is no longer grounded in Jakobson's metonymic digressions or proliferation of details but takes on an ethical dimension where the place of the insignificant or anecdotal is reevaluated.

Metonymic remains

8. In *Anatomy of a Soldier*, the object-narrators are widely different from one another and, therefore, entertain various kinds of relations to the human characters. Some are intimately linked to them, such as the clothes they wear or, more strikingly, the breathing tube inserted in Tom Barnes's trachea. Others are mere tools that the human characters use to achieve certain goals and are discarded once they are no longer needed, such as the battery used by the young rebel Latif to make a bomb explode or the high frequency radio through which the British soldiers communicate. Others again just happen to cross paths with some of the human characters and may become part of a game, like the snow used by a recovering Barnes to make snowballs, or may become responsible for their destruction, as is the case with the shockwave that passes through the soldier's body and mutilates it.

9. In any case, they all entertain metonymic relations to the human characters insofar as they are contiguous with them, or "close", to quote Zoltán Kövecses, who explains: "In the traditional view of metonymy, this feature of metonymy is expressed by the claim that the two entities are contiguously related, or that the two entities are in each other's proximity" (173). In the case of Parker's novel, this proximity is, first, spatial, since the objects always come into contact with the human characters about whom they talk, but it is also conceptual if we consider that most of these

objects belong to specific conceptual domains that are strongly associated with these characters. The object-narrators of what we may call the "Afghanistan timeline" mostly belong to the conceptual field of the military (night vision sight, beret, camp cot, helmet…), while those that narrate the "recovery timeline" are associated with the conceptual domain of medicine (O positive blood, catheter, wheelchair…). As such they become metonymic expressions and signifiers of Tom Barnes through his different experiences: the helmet is an attribute of the fighting soldier while the wheelchair represents the convalescent hospital patient.

10. However, these metonymic relations are more complex than this, namely because Parker draws our attention towards the ontological gap between the human characters and the things that come into contact with them. This tension is namely marked by the difference between these entities in terms of life expectancy. Many of these objects seem to come to life when a human takes them out of their plastic cases or wrappings, and their lifespan can be extremely short, but it can also exceed that of human beings by a lot. This entails different kinds of metonymic relations.

11. For instance, the fifth chapter of *Anatomy of a Soldier* is narrated by a breathing tube and almost covers the whole lifetime of the object. The awakening of its conscience seems to take place in the first line when it suddenly comes into the light. As in a scene of childbirth, it is at first safely protected by an impermeable envelope: "I was taken from a drawer by a trauma nurse. […] I was sterile and sealed in a plastic bag" (20). As it is inserted down the soldier's throat, it becomes an artificial "part" of him that substitutes itself to his own organs, while becoming contiguous with them: "I was part of a system now. I was inside you, at the edge of your lungs. Oxygen-rich air pulsed through me and I started breathing for you" (22). The tube thus becomes metonymic of the soldier's ability to breathe and therefore, more largely, of his being maintained alive. However, at the end of the chapter, Barnes's healing makes the tube redundant. When the young man's ability to breathe is restored, it turns into the opposite of what it is meant to do: "your tongue started to push against me as you gagged around my pipe. You tried to force me out and were afraid you were drowning" (30). The object has thus become a "thing" that prevents Barnes from breathing properly since, as Bill Brown explains, "[w]e begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us" (4). Interestingly enough, in this case, it is not the object that has ceased to function but the body that has re-substituted itself to it: because the organs can once again function without external help, the object is expelled from the body. The end of the metonymic relation is highlighted by the tube itself which points out its own obsolescence:

> A nurse picked me up, pushed the foot pedal of a bin and threw me into a yellow surgical waste bag.

> I was no longer part of you. (30)

The relation of co-dependence is startling in these pages since, at first, the breathing tube replaces Barnes's organs and becomes responsible for keeping him alive. However, its very *raison d'être* is metonymically subjected to its function (it is a *breathing* tube) so that when it ceases to "work for" the patient, it can only be destroyed: being no longer "part of" him, it can simply no longer be. It thus appears as an unwanted *metonymic remain* of the soldier's former state of vulnerability. This remain is in excess since the patient's recovery makes it redundant. It is no longer able to be a metonymic supplement for his bodily functions and is therefore no longer wanted, discarded as irrelevant.

12. On the contrary, some of the narrators in *Anatomy of a Soldier* "outlive" the human beings that come into contact with them, and this category of objects occupies a central place in *Hybrid Humans*. This text is indeed more centred around the things that *remain* than those that have been discarded, precisely because parts of this essay offer a diachronic investigation of hybridity. The author thus turns into an archaeologist, attempting to uncover past experiences of disability through the objects that have been left behind.

13. In the chapter entitled "Metal Ghosts", Parker recounts his visit to Blythe House, where the collection of the Science Museum is stored, and his encounter with "iron lungs". Like the breathing tube, the purpose of these machines was to supplement human respiratory deficiencies:

> The machine […] enclosed the human body inside a metal tank; the head protruded through a rubber collar at one end, and at the other was a pump that raised and lowered the pressure inside the airtight chamber. Because the patient's head was outside the machine, sealed off with a rubber collar, lowering the pressure inside the tank caused the patient's chest to expand and air rushed in through the mouth. Raising the pressure in the tank compressed the ribs and the air was exhaled. (25)

Parker then goes on to explain how these machines became particularly necessary in the context of polio epidemics in the 1940s and 1950s, their usage varying, according to the severity of the young patients' affliction, from temporary to more permanent:

> Most patients spent a few weeks in the iron lungs […]. In a small fraction of cases, paralysis was more permanent and they became dependent on the huge, unwieldy apparatus. An iron lung would be installed in the corner of the living room, a massive presence that took over family life. Some might manage outside the iron lungs for a few hours, heading to school or college or work, then returned for respite. Some would sleep in them; and a few, where the paralysis was total, would spend their whole lives cocooned. (26)

In the case of these objects, the metonymic relation with the human is reversed, even if they serve the same purpose as Tom Barnes's breathing tube, first because of their size. Indeed, insofar as they

were made to *contain* the patients, they constitute the "wholes" of which the human bodies are only the "parts". This is particularly true for patients who had to remain bound to the machines for the rest of their lives. Parker discusses the case of one such woman who lived for sixty years in an iron lung: "She lived in her front room, cocooned in a technology that noisily breathed a lifetime for her. She passed all her schooling, received a degree and wrote a book, all from the confines of her iron lung" (29). Here, the use of the expression "breathed a lifetime for her" highlights the totalising dimension of the metonymic relation between the woman and the object. Not only has she physically fused with the iron lung, her body becoming a permanent part of the machine that keeps it alive, but the metonymic relation also goes beyond the mere substitution of mechanic functions to organic ones. With the word "lifetime", Parker shows indeed how the object has come to stand for – and contains – all that actually constitutes a life: family life, school, personal and intellectual achievements. It is both the place where all of these experiences have happened and the very thing that made them possible.

14. However, the *raison d'être* of these objects is bound to the humans they serve. Their presence in the Science Museum's collection makes them take on a metaleptic dimension – that is, they are temporal metonymies – as these modern sarcophagi are now the only things that *remain* from these existences and that allow us to imagine what they may have been. Here, the machines have become historically obsolete as the polio vaccine has successfully put a stop to the epidemics. Thus, it is once again not exactly the machines that have ceased to function, but the bodies they served, that is, their owners who eventually died and were not replaced. This hints at an interesting form of reversal if we think about Bill Brown's definition of "thingness": here, the human body that can no longer be supplemented by the machine becomes the "thing" that prevents it from functioning. Yet, the object itself does not exactly become a "thing": its initial function is transformed and it becomes worthy of entering a museum as an artefact that encompasses a fraction of human history.

Metonymic ontologies

15. Such forms of interdependence between the human and the object that supports or augments its bodily functions invite us to question the ontological boundaries that might separate one from the other. As he is wandering through the collection of the Science Museum and looking at various kinds of prosthetics and medical devices, Parker describes them: "Many of the objects in this room might look like tools from a torture chamber, but this is the stuff of healing, diagnosis, pain relief – of making the body complete again. Keeping humans being, and feeling, human" (27). These sentences put an emphasis on the fact that humanity is fundamentally embodied, thus relying, or so

it seems, on the idea of a human "nature" or "essence".

16. Yet, this passage hinges on a radical redefinition of what "human" means and is. First, it has to be maintained ("keeping") and it is not only a passive state ("being") but also has to do with how one perceives themselves ("feeling"), which means that being "human" is not a given but something that one has to aim and struggle for. More importantly, the idea that the body has to be made "complete *again*" highlights the artificiality of this process and the in-organicity of what results from it, thus questioning the very notion of completeness. The addition of external elements (the indeterminate "stuff" that only takes shape when associated with a body) to reach this completeness is such that the physical envelope has completely deviated from what it was initially: it is no longer self-contained but made up of various parts and materials that make it "whole". Thus, Parker re-qualifies the "human" as something that is fundamentally made, fabricated and, therefore, artificial.

17. This line of thought gives way, in the following pages, to an ontological reflexion that leads him to reflect on the way in which his own altered body affects not only his sense of self but also his very essence:[1]

> […] my body – the one I identify with and embody – is atypical. Of my 68 kg, 60 are flesh-and-bone wetware and 8 kg are prosthetic hardware. (That's almost all legs, plus a few milligrams for my contact lenses.) This makes *me* 12 per cent machine. What does that mean for how human I am? If being able to walk alongside Stewart, at a similar height, and look him in the eye is some measure of how human I feel, then that 12 per cent is critical to my humanity. (29, italics in the original)

In this passage, the author-narrator identifies his body as a composite material, a mix of "wetware" and "hardware". Here, Parker's approach is quite original because he moves away from a more traditional description of amputated bodies which consists in seeing them as "missing" a (sometimes artificially replaceable) part. Such a vision manifests itself in *Anatomy of a Soldier* when Barnes first takes stock of what happened to him: "You looked at where you now finished. You would never feel a foot on the floor again" (116). The traumatised soldier perceives his body as an impermeable and self-contained entity, so that facing amputation also means facing the scandal of sudden incompleteness, the irrecoverable loss of ever being "whole" again.

18. However, the outlook that Parker proposes on his body in the passage quoted above – more than ten years after his own amputation – is radically different. The missing "part(s)" of him have been replaced by prosthetics but, rather than considering this artificial matter as other than himself,

1 This ontological reflexion can be said to be the main topic of *Hybrid Humans* which, under the pretext of exploring various forms of hybridity, seems to be a more introspective exploration of Parker into his own – technically and medically altered – nature, trying to define himself as a veteran, a disabled person, a cyborg and, eventually, a hybrid human.

as something that will remain fundamentally alien to him, that is, as the metonymic part that is *contiguous* with the whole but can never blend with it, Parker seems to have completely fused with the objects. By using the figure "12 percent machine" to refer to his prosthetic legs (and the "contact lenses"), he uses a metonymy that Kövecses defines as "the material constituting an object for the object" (180) (as in "wood" for "forest"). This metonymy – where the legs are named through the material that constitutes them – is derived from another one, so that the progressive merging between Parker and the objects that allow him to walk is highlighted through a semantic and referential glide that produces embedded metonymies.

19. First, the legs are indeed defined through one of their properties – Kövecses's "defining property for category" (181) – that is, their weight: "8 kg [of] prosthetic hardware". Then, these eight kilos are transformed into a percentage: "12 per cent machine". As a result, the non-organic matter that constitutes his body is more and more abstract, it loses its consistency to become units of measurement; first, a weight, that is, something that has a referential materiality, and then a mere abstract mathematical piece of data. Thus, the "12 percent" to which he refers are still only a "part" of him but they are no longer clearly identifiable as objects: instead of the prosthetic legs through which one could metonymically define him as disabled, what we are given to perceive is a certain – non-discrete – quantity of "something" that constitutes the composite living matter he has become.

20. Eventually, and most importantly, these metonymies are embedded within another one, expressed in the last sentence of the passage and whose meaning has much wider implications. By saying that "that 12 per cent is critical to [his] humanity", insofar as it allows him to walk side by side with another human, Parker re-materialises the abstract percentage to remind us of the purpose of his prosthetics and thus reverses the metonymic relation previously established. Indeed, the prosthetics, whose materiality seemed at first to have lost its importance through their merging with a human body suddenly become essential – also in the strongest sense of the word – as that on which Parker's humanity hinges. Acknowledging the paradoxical nature of this statement, the author pushes the blurring of the boundaries between the organic and the inorganic to the point that it engages an ontological transformation. Here, the metonymic "part" that made him stand out as disabled, mutilated, amputated, and as less of a human because of its artificiality, becomes precisely the thing that allows him to feel as one. It becomes the critical "part" without which the very essence of the "whole" would be altered.

21. Pursuing this line of thought, Parker imagines how things would be without the prosthetics:

> If you removed my legs and left me on the floor, the list [of what I am] would shuffle again. *I am shameful*, *I am vulnerable*, *I am less of a person* would rise quickly to the top – it would be very similar to stripping me naked in public. And I'd have to shove along the floor on my bottom, swinging my body between my arms to keep up with Stewart. (29, italics in the original)

Here, his body, unable to move on its own, becomes a "thing among things" (Merleau-Ponty in Brown 4), its "thingness" asserting itself precisely because it has "stopped working" (Brown 4) for the speaker. It becomes a "broken" thing – a term that Parker uses repeatedly to describe his body – whose human essence can only be restored through these artificial legs, illustrating Donna Haraway's idea that "machines can be prosthetic devices, intimate components, friendly selves" (61).

22. The objects that supplement the body thus become metonymic excesses insofar as they redefine the "whole" to which they belong or with which they are contiguous. The "core" of the "hybrid human" that Parker defines has been de-centred, externalised and relocated into the things on which we rely. Talking about the impressive computational power of his prosthetic knee, he compares it to another brain, explaining, "I've delegated some of the cognitive load of walking to a second brain, and it's an important part of me and the way I experience the world" (32). Parker's body thus becomes part of a larger system of interconnected mechanisms through which information and movement circulate, echoing Katherine Hayles's analysis of the posthuman:

> Central to the construction of the cyborg are informational pathways connecting the organic body to its prosthetic extensions. This presumes a conception of information as a (disembodied) entity that can flow between carbon-based organic components and silicon-based electronic components to make protein and silicon operate as a Single system. […] Moreover, the idea of the feedback loop implies that the boundaries of the autonomous subject are up for grabs, since feedback loops can flow not only *within* the subject but also *between* the subject and the environment. (2, italics in the original)

This idea of a body whose boundaries have been blurred also appears in *Anatomy of a Soldier*, not only when Tom Barnes tries to learn how to walk with his prosthetic legs but also earlier in his recovering process and in a far less technological way. Like the patients in the iron lungs, he finds himself completely reliant on medical devices but unlike them he is not contained within these objects nor do they replace parts of him. However, he clearly becomes part of the "feedback loop" described by Hayles, even though what circulates is not exactly information but bodily fluids.

23. This is notably the case with the catheter that expels Barnes's urine and which not only describes its own function – "Your urine trickled out down my silicone tube and collected in a bag at my other end" (Parker 2016, 125) – but also that of the other tubes connected to his body: "a bag of brown food [attached] to a hook above [whose] sludge started to slip down the feeding tube

through your nose" or "bag full of bright yellow drugs that dripped into you to stop an infection from taking hold" (126). Here, Barnes's basic bodily functions, such as urinating and feeding, have been externalised and he has become part of an interconnected system. This process is painful and invasive. Like Hayles, Parker opposes the idea of a potentially disembodied interconnection between humans and machines and he seems to adhere to the idea that "human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival" (Hayles 5).

24. We could say that he goes even further than Hayles precisely because his reflexion on hybridity – or posthumanism – is fundamentally grounded in the exploration and experience of disability. The forms of interconnection he addresses in both books – even when they are digital – are indeed centred on how they affect embodied experience, whether through a "lack" or an "excess" in the "system" thus constituted. Therefore, the metonymic relations he stages and questions do not entail a subjection of the object to its user. On the contrary, they allow for dynamic interactions between the two, and even for metonymic ontological transformations, thus re-casting objects as relational entities and giving way to what Jane Bennett calls "thing-power" (xvi).

Metonymic ethics of representation

25. Because they modify the human subjects' perceptions and experiences of the world, Parker's objects tend to emancipate themselves from a relation of subjection to human beings. Thus, in the passage quoted above, the catheter-narrator seems to progressively autonomise itself while Barnes not only becomes aware of his complete dependence on the objects connected to him but also finds himself alienated from his own body. As Bennett explains when developing her theory of distributive agency, "[a] lot happens to the concept of agency once nonhuman things are figured less as social constructions and more as actors, and once humans themselves are assessed not as autonomous but as vital materialities" (21). This process is clearly illustrated in the chapter from *Anatomy of a Soldier* quoted above, where the patient's body has, indeed, become *patient*, passive, and where its organic materiality appears as the vessel through which the more vital materiality of the medical instruments is enacted. Barnes is therefore alienated and the various functions that used to be his body's are metonymically distributed through the tubes, bags and other machines connected to him. Interestingly enough, the loss of the human subject's autonomy in this passage is directly equated with the end of the body as a self-contained entity:

> You could feel me snaking from your groin across your abdomen and you counted the cords and pipes

> that fed in or out of you, each one invading your sense of self. You would die in a sloppy pool of your own excrement and agony if you weren't plugged into this wall of machines, if we weren't here to take away discharge and feed the drugs and medicines into you. You understood how completely dependent you were. (Parker 2016, 128)

In this passage, it is not only the organic entity of Barnes's body that has been invaded, but also his very "sense of self" and, in this respect, the choice of the words "cords and pipes" or the verb "snaking" associate him with the referential domain of machinery or animality, thus placing him on the side of the monstrous.[2]

26. Furthermore, this passage highlights the human subject's passivity as the only verbs of which he is an active subject refer to intellectual processes that do not require physical action ("could feel", "counted", "understood"). On the contrary, the "cords and pipes" assert their agency as they "snake", "invade", "take away" or feed". What these things do, therefore, is facilitate the circulation of fluids towards and outside the body. Furthermore, the narrator's insistence on the nature of the fluids it takes care of – "excrements", "discharge" – compounds the human subject's hybrid monstrosity with a sense of abjection, which Julia Kristeva defines as follows: "These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. […] Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere,* cadaver" (Kristeva 3). The medicalisation of such processes does not attenuate the sense of abjection but, on the contrary, seems to enhance it because it externalises them, making the patient's bodily dejections visible.

27. Sara Ahmed adds to Kristeva's abjection the notion of disgust which, according to her, results from metonymic processes:

> It is not that an object we might encounter is inherently disgusting; rather, an object becomes disgusting through its contact with other objects that have already, as it were, been designated as disgusting before the encounter has taken place. It is the dependency of disgust on contact or proximity that may explain its awkward temporality, the way it both lags behind and makes an object. (Ahmed 87)

However, through the narration of the catheter, the metonymic relation of contiguity associated with Barnes's bodily fluids does not place disgust on the side of the object. The fluids are at first dissociated from the patient's body as shown by the technicality of the passage quoted above – "Your urine trickled out down my silicone tube and collected in a bag at my other end" (Parker 2016, 125) – and where the catheter merely connects the body to another object, the bag. Its

2 According to Margrit Shildrick, "[w]here normative embodiment has hitherto seemed to guarantee individual autonomous selfhood, what is monstrous in all its forms – hybrid creatures, conjoined twins, human clones, cyborg embodiment and others – disrupts the notions of separation and distinction that underlie such claims" (2).

contact with urine is therefore not seen as problematic and does not seem to make the object disgusting. However, it is the body that is later re-associated with the fluids it has produced.

28. It seems therefore that the catheter asserts its agency by reminding the addressee (Barnes) of the metonymic relation of contiguity between himself and his bodily excretions, when it says: "If it wasn't for me, you'd be lying in a patch of your own piss" (125) and "You would die in a sloppy pool of your own excrement and agony […] if we weren't here to take away discharge and feed the drugs and medicines into you" (128). The "I" and the "we" highlight the power of the things that maintain Barnes alive, while the graphic dimension and crudeness of the expressions "*patch* of your own *piss*" and "*sloppy pool* of your own excrement" place disgust on the side of the human subject. The repetition of the words "your own" stresses this metonymic relation between the producer and the product and sounds like a reminder of the abject nature of the character's body. Indeed, the insistence on the contiguity between Barnes and his bodily fluids seems to serve as a warning against the idea of a self-contained body, as if the fantasy of autonomy were bound to result in abjection from oneself. Thus, the object's agency expresses itself by asserting the human body's embeddedness within an interconnected system and, therefore, takes the form of an injunction to acknowledge and experience relationality.

29. This passage clearly illustrates how the human body has become an element among others – and contiguous with them. It is therefore embedded within a series of metonymic relations whose purpose is not to compose the "full picture" of the soldier's identity. Rather than a relation of subjection between objects and subject, these metonymies create an almost cubist image, "where the object is transformed into a set of synecdoches" (Jakobson 92) and where all the elements appear as equally important. Yet, Parker's metonymies are fundamentally political and ethical, so that he distances himself from the more pragmatic approach which makes Jakobson and Lodge associate metonymic representation with realism:

> Since we cannot describe everything in a given context, we select certain items at the expense of not selecting others: this is true of all discourse. […] what is present implies what is absent, the whole stands for the part, the thing for its attributes, unless the part or attribute is itself vital to the message, in which case it is brought into the message as a whole or thing in its own right. (Lodge 94)

Describing metonymy as a figure that consists in "connecting topics on the basis of contiguity not similarity" (99) and that relies on a principle of relevance, Lodge fails to address the ways in which this figure can reconfigure representational hierarchies. What Parker's texts do, however, is precisely assert that every "part or attribute [in his story] is itself vital to the message". Thus, if every part becomes "a whole or thing in its own right", the "whole thing" to which it was initially

related ultimately becomes secondary.

30. Although Parker's narrative stance in the non-fictional text of *Hybrid Humans* does not imply giving a voice to objects, he nevertheless enacts the same metonymic reversal by taking the objects as his main focus, human bodies being only contiguous with them. Thus, when he observes people walking in the street, what he sees are imperfect bodies and the things that supplement them:

> I notice almost all the adults making their way down the street have a slight limp, an asymmetry to their gait or glasses, or one shoulder lower than the other. Further on there is a man on a mobility scooter. […]
>
> A woman is shuffling past my car now, rotating her waist around a walking stick. Hip transplant probably, or on the waiting list for one. (5)

Even if they are not given a narrative voice, the objects are once again the ones that, for Parker, tell the stories of human lives. The walking stick tells us about the body with which it is contiguous and that it supplements; and the two of them together tell yet another story, that of the medical system on which they depend, its improvements ("hip transplant") and its insufficiencies ("waiting list").

31. In this respect, Parker's attention to objects and the way in which he questions our frames of perception does not consist in a mere reversal of representational hierarchies that would be oblivious to its political and ethical consequences. On the contrary, looking at objects becomes a means to reflect on the objectification of human life, especially when questioning their affordability. In a chapter entitled "Freedom is Expensive", Parker recounts his visit of the REHAB European trade fair and reflects on the economic market of healthcare:

> There are posters of beautiful people with their mobility aids in beautiful settings under slogans: *It's time for boundless freedom*; *LIFE WITHOUT LIMITATIONS*; *It's not just walking – it's More Than Walking*. The market forces of capitalism are in play, and they are after us: the limping, wheeling, blind, deaf customers who have come to find out which of the latest products will make our lives easier. As you'd expect, some of this tech is mind-blowingly expensive – someone has to pay for all those clever scientists and all this branding.
>
> […] But what price do you put on being able to walk, or get upstairs in your home, or read the paper, or drive a car? (102-103)

The slogan "LIFE WITHOUT LIMITATIONS" appears as cruelly ironic, first because the notion of limitation, initially marketed in a metaphorical sense, has taken on a literal meaning. It suggests that not being limited in one's physical ability to move, having an "easier" life, is not an inalienable right but something that can be sold and bought, far from the idea defended by Butler in *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* that "[m]obility is itself a right of the body, but it is also a precondition for the exercise of other rights" (138). Secondly and consequently, the

possibility to live "without limitations" depends on the ability to overcome the first and most important one, that is, the financial limitation.

32. Parker then writes, "[t]his huge fair is a shop front. It also represents the fact that there's a hidden tax on being disabled. Being a hybrid human means expensive kit – you have to pay for the privilege of leading a normal life" (Parker 2022, 104). The opposition between the words "privilege" and "normal life" highlights the unequal distribution of the ability to access certain objects, thus redefining the notion of dis-ability in an economic sense: if disabilities can be overcome through the acquisition of certain objects, then the most salient form of disability lies with those who cannot afford them.[3] As Butler explains, this directly calls up the question of the price that is put on human life:

> In this time in which neoliberal economics increasingly structures public services and institutions, including schools and universities, in a time in which people are losing their homes, their pensions, and their prospects for work in increasing numbers, we are faced in a new way with the idea that some populations are considered disposable. […] These developments, bolstered by prevailing attitudes toward health insurance and social security, suggest that market rationality is deciding whose health and life should be protected and whose health and life should not. (2015, 11)

In a neo-liberal system, therefore, the importance granted to objects sheds light on the concomitant erasure of those who cannot afford them.

33. A similar question is asked, albeit from a different perspective, in *Anatomy of a Soldier*, when Kushan Hhan, the leader of a small community near the soldiers' base, comes to see Tom Barnes and demands that the soldiers be accountable for the death of his son who was a collateral victim of the British troops' bombing of Taliban fighters. This chapter, narrated from the perspective of a twenty-dollar bill given by Barnes to the grieving father, highlights the soldier's inability to empathise with the man standing before him as he proposes to metonymically replace the dead teenager with money. This passage presents a double metonymy as Barnes gives Kushan Hhan a "receipt for his son" (259), that is, a piece of paper, metonymically standing for the money he will receive, which is itself metonymically substituted to Faridun's life. To the question of the price of human life, raised in *Hybrid Human* and asked by the grieving father – "How much is his son worth?" (2016, 257) – , the soldier has an answer: "Probably two thousand dollars" (257).

34. Through this metonymic erasure of human life, Barnes thus becomes himself a metonymic

3 Through these reflexions, contradicting Bassam Sidiki's somewhat caricatural reading of *Anatomy of a Soldier* (2021), Parker evidences a vision of posthuman technological advances that is far from naively optimistic and criticizes the economic, (post)colonial and racial structures organizing the unequal access to technologies of rehabilitation and healthcare.

representation of "'the West' as articulating the paradigmatic principles of the human – of the humans who are worth valuing, whose lives are worth safeguarding, whose lives are precarious, and, when lost, are worth public grieving" (Butler 2011, 125). Thus, although Parker's metonymies encourage us to decentre the human, they do not do so only for the sake of reversing frameworks of representation but, on the contrary, they invite us to approach the human from a different perspective and to reflect on the ethical implications of visibility and invisibility.

35. As Catherine Bernard explains, *Anatomy of a Soldier* "channels an experimental phenomenology that re-energises subjecthood. Such vital materialism pushes against the logic of reification and speaks against the necropolitics dictating 'who may live and who must die'" (online). This analysis sheds light on the ethical reflection at the heart of the novel and, therefore, on its implications in relation to the human. Thus, if we ask ourselves what objects (can) become in Parker's texts, we find out that this question is fundamentally related to that of what human beings (can) become. Whether they stay behind, replace, reject or even destroy humans, Parker's objects testify to the interdependence at the heart of the human-object relation.

36. However, the metonymic structures within which they are embedded open up a literary space where the traditional relation of subjection between object and human is not only reversed but also redefined. Indeed, if we consider, along with theoreticians of metonymy, that this figure relies on a principle of salience or relevance, then it appears that the objects that Parker places at the centre of his books have emancipated themselves and become a privileged means to approach the human.

37. By showing how they can exceed the life of their owners or even become the very things on which humanity hinges, Parker asserts the precarity of human existence and the need for a reconfiguration of our frames of perception: it is only by shedding light on the things of which we are usually oblivious that we can become aware of our collective interdependences with the living and non-living things surrounding us. Eventually, as this reflection leads him to question the notion of grievability and the price given to human life, it appears that Parker's objects warn us against the dangers of objectification, asserting an essential affectivity and "vitality of matter' (Bennett xv) inherent to both living and non-living things.

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