

Eleana Vaja

EPILEPSY METAPHORS

Liminal Spaces of Individuation
in American Literature 1990–2015

[transcript] Lettre

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Eleana Vaja

Epilepsy Metaphors

Liminal Spaces of Individuation in American Literature 1990-2015

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Between 1990 and 2015, American literature saw the emergence of a new corpus of epilepsy metaphors which tackle the stigma of epilepsy within three areas: society, body, and language. Eleana Vaja introduces concepts such as *protometaphors*, *relational metaphors*, *epileptic texts*, and *metastability* to categorize and examine these foci further. Applying philosophy as well as “hard sciences” (i.e. mathematics, medicine, physics) to disability studies, her study of selected works by Siri Hustvedt, Thom Jones, Reif Larsen, Dennis Mahagin, Audrey Niffenegger, Rodman Philbrick, and Lauren Slater shows how epilepsy metaphors redefine the notion of the “liminal” and the “normal”.

Eleana Vaja (PhD) taught American literary and cultural studies at the University of Cologne. Her research interests include U.S. American literature, philosophy and disability studies.

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Introduction

The implicitness and frequency in which epilepsy appears in documents as early as the Egyptian hieroglyphs (4000 B.C.),¹ the Babylonian *The Code of Hammurabi* (1750 B.C.) as well as the *Diagnostic Handbook* (1070-1050 B.C.),² the Indian *Ayurveda*,³ and the Hippocratic treatise *The Sacred Disease* (400 B.C.) underlie this books' overarching hypothesis that epilepsy is

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- 1 For further research see Hans-Werner Fischer-Elfert's *Abseits von Ma'at. Fallstudien zu Außenseitern im Alten Ägypten* (2005).
 - 2 See also "A Dialogue with Historical Concepts of Epilepsy from the Babylonians to Hughlings Jackson: Persistent Beliefs" (2011) by Umair J. Chaudhary, John S. Duncan, and Louis Lemieux, as well as J.V. Wilson's and E.H. Reynold's essay "Texts and Documents. Translation and Analysis of a Cuneiform Text Forming Part of a Babylonian Treatise on Epilepsy" (1990), or *Epilepsy in Babylonia* (1993) by Marten Stol.
 - 3 "Ayurveda, based on the Vedas was developed systematically more than 3000 years ago" (Kurup 3). It cannot be dated back to one specific era; in contrast to the other documentations, the Ayurveda was continuously adapted and refined so that it still serves as a philosophical treatise on the Indian "science of life"; it describes the ancient Indian holistic psycho-somatic interdependence which, in terms of epilepsy, resonates with nineteenth and twentieth century Jacksonian psychomotor-epilepsy and the "dreamy state" (Govindaswamy 204ff.). For further research consider Satish Jain's "Ayurveda: The Ancient Indian System of Medicine" in Orrin Devinsky, Steven C. Schachter and Steven Pacia's *Complementary and Alternative Therapies for Epilepsy* (2005), as well as Saligrama Krishna Ramachandra Rao's "The Conceptual Context of Indian Medicine" (1987).

intrinsically connected to our understanding of life.⁴ Looking at the dominant disciplinary methods for explaining epilepsy in its relation to life, one is confronted with biology and medicine on the one hand and religion and metaphysics on the other hand. This has held true over the millennia, for even today responses to the riddle of epilepsy tend toward the legitimization of this respective epistemological outline, be it medical researchers in search of “one of the ‘holy grails’ of modern neuroscience” (Cavanna 1) or neurotheologists working to articulate an interdisciplinary account of religious, if not spiritual, experience.

“Epilepsy” derives from the Greek word “epilepsia” which means to seize or attack (Livingston 5). It defines the “occurrence of unprovoked seizures,” where seizures define “the disorderly discharges of interconnected neurons in the brain that temporarily alter one or more brain cells.”⁵ In drawing attention to the delicacy of consciousness, epilepsy poses significant challenges to our notions of life, death, pain and independence. The vague quality of the definition of epilepsy given above is largely due to the fact that epilepsy remains a conundrum, leaving scientists, given the status of neurological progress, still in agony. At the end of the twentieth century Robert A. Gross, although appreciative of recent achievements in this field, points out that

“[e]nthusiasm for the state of the art should be tempered, however, by the realization that we have yet to elucidate fully the ways in which seizures start, spread or terminate, or whether these mechanisms are the same as those underlying the development of epilepsy. Not surprisingly we have yet to come to an understanding of all the mechanisms by which antiepileptic drugs prevent the disorderly neuronal activity that causes seizures.” (40)

It is worth reiterating this statement’s core—physicians can neither fully capture the origin nor the concept of epilepsy, or rather *epilepsies*, but are limited to a symptom-based treatment—which leaves us with a rather basic questions: What is epilepsy, and how many forms, varieties and degrees are there? Even here, the state of the art is caught in a circuit. Regarding the

4 See also Peter Wolf’s “Sociocultural History of Epilepsy” (2010).

5 <<http://www.brainfacts.org/diseases-disorders/epilepsy/articles/2012/seizures-and-epilepsy/>> consulted: 10/22/14, 3:00 p.m.

etiology of epilepsy, the International League Against Epilepsy (ILAE) relies on Henri Gastaut's (1915-1955) classification, which was first formulated in 1969, in the form of the categories "idiopathic," "symptomatic," and "cryptogenic" (Berg and Scheffer 1059). These categories were revised by Anne T. Berg and Ingrid Scheffer in 2011 as "genetic," "structural/metabolic," and "unknown" (ibid.) in order to take into account new scientific findings in the fields of genetics and hormone metabolisms. They, nevertheless, fail in their aim of clarifying what, exactly, epilepsy is. In layman's terms, Berg and Scheffer's categories mean that epilepsy can either be inherited, developed in life through the different hormonal adjustments of the body, or simply acquired through some other means.

Provocatively speaking, but in line with what disability studies scholars have heard Lennard J. Davis continuously emphasize, merely being born, merely *living* could induce some form of disability/epilepsy. Walter J. Friedlander coined the term "seizure-threshold" (107) to capture this immanent, ontological potential of epilepsy in humans. Strangely enough, the "seizure-threshold" found strong support in 1997 in the 38th episode of the *Pokemon* series, whose flickering screen triggered seizures in many of the children watching. This event encouraged researchers to further investigate the correlation between seizures and epilepsy (Okumura et al. 981). Scholars are in agreement to try and distinguish between seizures and epilepsy. Yet, a clear-cut demarcation between the two is almost impossible. Seizures, tremors, shivers, and spasms are the hints of an upcoming epilepsy, blurring the boundaries of the two. Concludingly, let it be stated that this outline shall suffice to provide a working definition of epilepsy, as any further look into the medical understanding of it opens a Pandora's box of classifications and etiologies that outreaches the course of this thesis by far.

The goal of this book is to look at epilepsy from the interdisciplinary perspective of literary and cultural disability studies. Since the previously mentioned approaches, such as medicine and religion, share common ground in the overall effect they have on the life of people with epilepsy by perpetuating its stereotypes and thereby securing a notion of "normal," this book seeks to learn the degree to which literature participates in this tendency. It also works to understand if the trope of metaphor is capable of generating an approach to epilepsy that respects rather than stigmatizes the individual. Moreover, I work to disclose the mechanisms of stigmatization through metaphor, offering a theoretical means for disentangling the vari-

ous forms of metaphors that structure our understanding of epilepsy. This method can also serve as a novel approach to representations of other classified disabilities in literature.

It is metaphors, in particular, that are at stake, since metaphors constitute a trope of literary expression as much as they form idiomatic language, possessing, thus, the ability to mirror and reinforce a cultural zeitgeist. Concerning the stigmatization of epilepsy, metaphors are, as Michael Andermatt points out, in reference to Susan Sontag's by now classic research on metaphors, a "Vehikel [vehicle]" (Andermatt 107) to account for the lack of information of mystified diseases, shaping "modern fantasy" (Sontag 11). Since epilepsy still remains to be scientifically demystified, it abides in metaphors in the socio-cultural sphere be it on the level of daily language or fiction. Gerhard Sauder and Steffi Ehlebracht allow for other readings of the strict pathological materialism in Sontag's theory of metaphor that account for the integration of social norms (Sauder 10) as well as the hermeneutical potential of literature to encompass and envision existential human experience (Ehlebracht 33).

Taking these considerations as a starting point, the question arises as to why the two and a half decades, from 1990 to 2015, the time frame this book explores, are of interest. These years mark an exciting, unexplored period for a theorization of epilepsy metaphors, because they feature the discipline of neuroscience in its heyday as well as the political and academic establishment of cultural disability studies.⁶ With the beginning of the 1990s, research focuses on exploring brain disorders and diseases such as Alzheimers, autism and epilepsy. It was former president George Bush who announced in 1990, "The Decade of the Brain" and promised significant scientific breakthrough in this area. It is this announcement that sensitizes scholars such as Jeannette Stirling, whose book on the cultural negotiation of epilepsy is a landmark in the field, to the metaphors that define disorders as "enemies" yet to be "conquered." At the same time, the "Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990" (ADA) secured economic and social equality for people with disabilities, arguing, in contrast to the enemy-rhetoric of

6 On the conceptual metaphors of war that dominate the Presidential Proclamation 6158, see <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/proclamations.php?year=1990>> consulted: 11/23/14, 2:42 p.m.; see also Jeannette Stirling's *Representing Epilepsy. From Myth to Matter* (2010).

Bush's declaration, on behalf of the multiplicity of bodily and mental varieties. The neuroscientific core, on the one hand, and the promotion of corporeal diversity and alterity on the other hand, stand as reason enough for exploring the literature of this period as a cultural product of its time and to discern to what degree it mirrors, juxtaposes or goes beyond this ostensible tension.

Another ground for this timeframe can be found in Irma J. Ozer's essay which dates the beginning of the integration of people with epilepsy into the "part of the continuum of what we consider normal" (798) at the beginning of the 1990s, leaving open the decade following for adjacent research. Perhaps most convincing, however, is the increased thematic presence of epilepsy in fictional and nonfictional writings, namely in the genres of illness and life narratives. With Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (1997) and Terry Tracy's *A Great Place for a Seizure* (2013), readers receive the exhausting and depressing exposure to the bureaucracy of the health care system and the lethal outcomes of its cultural belief systems. Fadiman's work, in particular, sensitizes readers to the drastic consequences she witnesses in the Lee family after ten years of struggle. *A Great Place for a Seizure* focuses on the daily struggles a person with epilepsy faces, including the longing for integration into the 'normal continuum.'

My first chapter deals with the history of epilepsy, traces its literary presence and identifies it as a disability by looking at its historical and cultural heritage. Chapter I.A identifies five recurring motifs that define epilepsy throughout history—*sleep, falling, danger, intelligence, religiousness*—forming the foundation of its social stigma. Based on these motifs, Chapter I.B scrutinizes the contemporary American literary corpus on epilepsy and its critical reception in order to discern to what degree and by what means literature reiterates these motifs and thereby partakes in discriminatory attitudes toward people with epilepsy. The research affirms what cultural disability studies scholars suspect—namely, that metaphors are the central rhetorical device at work in strengthening rigid belief systems. This is due to the fact that metaphors rely on the interplay of known concepts. These concepts inhere in a certain stability, as mirrored in history on the one hand and the reference to epilepsy on the other hand.

As epilepsy is classified as a disability in society, Chapter I.C offers a general outline of cultural disability studies and juxtaposes this academic field with the cultural notion of epilepsy. Concepts which crystalize disability and, thus, epilepsy as ‘undesirable,’ are namely ‘the normal’ and ‘the able.’ As the discrimination against disabilities goes hand in hand with their deviation from the normal, epilepsy metaphors mirror this intimacy. However, between the 1990s and 2015 novel approaches to epilepsy metaphors enter into literature, promising a shift away from this fetishization of ability and the normal.

Chapter II deals with the theorization of epilepsy metaphors in order to renegotiate the concept of epilepsy and, thus, approach the individual on three levels: society, body and language. Central to this task is an analysis of the implied stability of epilepsy’s associated concepts found in motifs of its history and of the normal. While the motifs transport a historical stability, the normal designates a social and somatonormative stability. Stability is, nevertheless, required in order to account for epilepsy and the person living with this disorder. People with epilepsy experience auras, pain, fear, seizures and the exposure of their vulnerability on a daily basis. These experiences define the individual and thereby play a stable factor in his or her life. To ignore the effects these experiences have on the individual, is to display an indifference to his or her emotional states. Furthermore, the notion of stability is required by the rhetorical trope of metaphor per se, whose success depends on recognition.

The recognizable, the known, is, however, the criterion that ultimately sustains discrimination: referring to the person with epilepsy as a genius displays the same mechanism as the association of epilepsy with possession. Still, it is via metaphors that novel ways of viewing epilepsy and disability are introduced. Since stability cannot be completely abandoned or sustained, it forms the kernel of this theorization of epilepsy metaphors. Along the literary corpus three renegotiations of the stable are addressed and applied: the *flexible*, the *relational* and the *metastable*. The *flexible*, *relational* and *metastable* moment describe how novel epilepsy metaphors position themselves in relation to the stable (discrimination) and renegotiate the individual through emerging liminal space. Each of these moments grounds in a different theory and embeds the respective metaphors accordingly.

Flexibility, as discussed in Chapter II.A, allows for a social renegotiation of epilepsy metaphors. These metaphors still function within the realm of a quantitative normal and a clinical notion of epilepsy. Jürgen Link's theory of proto- and flexible normalism answers the question 'who is normal?'. This notion of the normal is introduced in connection with Michel Foucault's observation on the clinic and aids in the formulation of *protometaphors* and *flexmetaphors*. Following this, in Chapter II.B, George Canguilhem's biosocial approach dissolves the connection between the normal and the statistical in favor of a *relational* materiality of the body and its environment. His leading question is, therefore, 'what is the normal?'. Metaphors of this second theory focus on novel interpretations of epilepsy because Canguilhem emphasizes the individuality of each body by liberating them from any comparison. Gilbert Simondon's notion of the *metastable* forms the concluding chapter, II.C, of this section. The metastable helps to reveal the hidden potentiality of daily—normal—language through the consideration of epilepsy as a new ontological "event structure." Here the cognitive linguistics of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson enter the discussion in the form of what they coined "conceptual metaphor."

Chapter III turns to the literature, structuring the nine works it examines according to the theorization of epilepsy metaphors in the preceding chapter. This means that the first three works in Chapter III.A offer, through their respective epilepsy metaphor as *proto-* or *flexmetaphor*, a platform from which to decipher the social mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion and their relation to the individual, answering, thereby, the question of 'who is normal?'. As this section's underlying theoretical bias rests on a statistical approach to define a society's normal or anormal participants, these metaphors mirror this outline in terms of what I call *calculated individuation*. Chapter III.B looks at individual bodies as metaphors and defines the normal as individual, arguing for a necessary alterity. As epilepsy is "the disorderly discharges of interconnected neurons," electricity defines the phenomenon from which these three texts build their *relational metaphors*, delineating, I argue, what comes to be an understanding of *electric individuation*. Chapter III.C scrutinizes idiomatic language and focuses on the utterances, expressions and motifs usually associated with a signification and deprecation of epilepsy but now contributes to its renegotiation. As these last three novels display a poetics that seeks to introduce epilepsy as

metastability, they come to terms with what Gilbert Simondon calls a “transindividual.”

The three literary works addressed in Chapter III.A are Lauren Slater’s *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* (2000), Audrey Niffenegger’s *The Time Traveler’s Wife* (2004) and the poetry collection by Dennis Mahagin, *Grand Mal* (2012). These publications mark the end of “The Decade of the Brain” and are thus offered to the audience two decades after the ADA, promising insight into the nexus of scientific research and its socio-cultural negotiation. *Lying*, furthermore, is the only book in this selected corpus that initiates a cultural disability studies discussion of its epilepsy metaphor, emphasizing even more so the need to address it in this chapter. As Audrey Niffenegger’s debut secured her a huge audience, Lauren Slater relies on a fanbase established with the successes of *Welcome to My Country* (1996) and *Prozac Diary* (1998). Dennis Mahagin’s work is the only one in this section whose publication and audience remains scarce prompting the question as to why. What resonates quite vividly in these works are the calculations according to which these metaphors operate, elevating mathematics, among the historical reiteration of motifs attached to epilepsy, as necessary lenses for understanding the means of their operation.

Chapter III.B begins with Thom Jones’ short story collection *The Pugilist at Rest* (1993), before it discusses Rodman Philbrick’s *The Last Book in the Universe* (2000) and then closes with Reif Larsen’s *I Am Radar* (2015). This section formed itself, however different their various epilepsy metaphors are, because they all rely and play in some form or another with the connection of epilepsy and electricity. As these metaphors stress the relational aspect—that is, how the protagonists evolve to become themselves due to their epilepsy—it is electricity that further defines the *relational*. In line with the variety of bodies, epilepsy and electricity open up a cluster of readings that, at their core, destigmatize the individual as he or she acts out his or her own norm. These epilepsy metaphors include a reading of epilepsy in terms of boxing and compassion (*Pugilist at Rest*, and its eponymous short story), epilepsy as denoting instead of threatening the brain’s archive function (*The Last Book in the Universe*), and finally epilepsy as a means to communicate with the world on a level of electric wave lengths (*I Am Radar*). As these books cover the entire timespan my thesis examines (1990-2015), this suggests an affinity of epilepsy with electricity worth unfolding.

Chapter III.C argues that within Siri Hustvedt's oeuvre a new conceptual metaphor of epilepsy manifests, which simultaneously discloses her poetics along her rhetoric and which destigmatizes the disorder. A reading of Hustvedt's literary debut *The Blindfold* (1992) marks the beginning of this final section on epilepsy metaphors. It is followed by readings of her second novel *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* (1996) along with one of her more recent publications, *The Summer Without Men* (2011). Although these three novels provide only a glimpse into her oeuvre, they capture her unique style.⁷ What is at center stage are the allegedly inconspicuous usages of three concepts: falling, shaking and the em dash; the em dash denotes the moment of a pause. While terms such as falling, collapse, and dropping will lead to a new means of addressing experienced fragility, they form the lens for zooming into *The Blindfold*. Shaking, trembling, shivering, and spasms define the means for addressing *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*, before the various grammatical positions of the em dash explore the possibility of endurance. Hustvedt subtly and slightly but ever so effectively redefines these concepts by reintroducing them, almost unnoticeably, into daily—normal—language, and thus tackles discrimination and stigmatization practices at their very core.

7 Siri Hustvedt's entire body of work—fiction, non-fiction, art—would require a dissertation of its own in order to be grasped in its philosophical, psychological, phenomenological as well as psychoanalytic and neuroscientific outreach and interconnectedness. For an updated look onto the author's continuously growing oeuvre, please consider her website <<http://sirihustvedt.net/>> consulted: 07/17/17, 8:45 a.m.