

The Poetics and Politics of Disease in the Poetry of Jo Shapcott

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Abstract

References to disease, illness, sickness are recurrent in English; British and American, poetry due to living in epochs of anxiety that result in various types of physical and psychological diseases. Thus, in their different attempts to cope with such issue which directly affects people's way of living, way of thinking, and way of behaving, poets put their fingers on the problem of how to accepting, or not accepting the notion of being diseased. Some poets chose to commit suicide as a means of escape from being sick, whereas others preferred to accept their illness in all its consequences. Bearing this in mind, this paper aims to shed light on Jo Shapcott's special method of dealing with disease in her poetry, mainly, her "Mad Cow Poems." It is to find out a new perspective of accepting the notion of getting sick as a means of 'the new normal,' via finding creativity through and in illness.

Jo Shapcott is a British poet, lecturer and editor. She was born in London, 1953. She is the author of ten collections of poetry, most significant and popular among which are; *Electroplating the Baby* (1988), *Phrase Book* (1992), *My Life Asleep* (1999), and *Of Mutability* (2010), in addition to a book that contains the different versions of her poems by Rilke carrying the title *Tender Taxes* (2002). Due to the high quality of her poetry, Shapcott was able to win multiple prizes, like the National Poetry Prize (twice), the Costa Book Award, the Commonwealth Prize, the Forward Prize, and in (2011) she was also awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry (Dowson, 2005, p.97).

Shapcott's poetry style is characterized by her delineation of an exact, everyday diction. She used to have images and themes driven from uncommon sources, like, for instance, sciences and popular culture. The poet surpasses her contemporaries in her narrative forms, which are frequently derived from an oblique, displaced, but controlled perspective as well as deploying a surreal wittiness that are all helping her to explore political and sexual equilibriums along with animal and human power.

Shapcott's second poetry collection, *Phrase Book*, which is published in 1992, encompasses a multitude of recognizable twentieth-century voices, for instance, those of Tom & Jerry, Superman and Marlon Brando, to accompany her "Mad Cow poems," which are five poems written from the viewpoint of a cow developing the symptoms of Bovine Spongiform (BSE). This disease was officially recognized in 1986, yet it was not until 1990 that a surveillance unit was set in the United Kingdom to monitor probable links between BSE and the

deadly degenerative brain syndrome Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD). Then, the BSE predicament heightened in 1992, as sufferers from CJD succumb to the disease as late as 1995, and which resulted in a European and worldwide ban on British beef for four years. Therefore, the Mad Cow poems of Shapcott which are composed during that period of peaked fear and media frenzy, offer fragmented and disrupted accounts of physical and mental decline. Tonally, they are meant to act as tongue-in-cheek poems, fusing every stage of the cow's, human's and even the poet's own quick deterioration with a sense of black humor.

In this categorization, the poet enunciates a speaker's decline into fatal disease, with the accompanying boundaries and contradictory freedoms offered by it. The strategies delineated by Shapcott to portray such instinctive imagined experience are circular and almost even kaleidoscopic as the five poems circle and follow one direction before jumping to another. Viewing them as one series, the story of the five poems renovates the confusion and fragmentation of a disease when it takes hold of the sick person's brain, represented here by the cow. These poems are comic in a dark way, yet, they, at the same time, cross-examine power disparities, the struggles of artistic expression and, more significantly, a deep sense of eco-political helplessness.

Among the various connotations of madness inside of these poems, perhaps those of "frenzy" and "foolishness" are the most appropriate to describe all the five poems. As the poems are composed from the point of view of growing delusion, they tend to move towards a strange register of savage pleasure. The first poem in the collection, "The Mad Cow Talks Black," opens with the line "I am not Mad. It just seems that way," challenges the speaker's authority and disrupt the reader from the very beginning. Then, the poem moves rapidly to a site of playful openness, where the disease is portrayed as a generative thing, which gives the chance for a multitude of voices to speak:

There are wonderful holes in my brain
Through which ideas from outside can travel
At top spread and through which voices,
Sometimes whole people, speak to me
About the universe. (Lines 3-7)

Consequently, as the cow starts to gradually lose its physical ability and become less sturdy on its feet, it interprets and describes this physical deterioration as mind-and-soul-freeing experience, letting it to liberate, to practice a free-wheeling dance rather than as the signs of a deadly disease. Such ecstatic shakiness permeates the poem with a sense of exhilaration via performativity; the cow's inconsistent movement permits for "glorious" and "magnificent"

involvement, where it feels that it is spanning the world "turning and spinning across whole hard / Pacifics and Atlantic." (Lines 12-13).

Interestingly enough, this gamble of such deluded performance is seen as similar to the very act and art of composing poetry. To publish, therefore, is to take risks, to renounce authorial control. Thus, the idea of failure is nothing to be afraid of, because:

It is risky when
 You are good, so of course the legs go before,
 Behind, and to the side of the body from time
 To time, and the there is the general embarrassing
 Collapse, but when that happen it is glorious
 Because it is always when you are travelling
 Most furiously in your mind. (Lines 13-19)

Significantly, collapse takes place when "travelling / most furiously in your mind," as the speaker is widening and mounting beyond anticipated confines, moving up the corundum of artistic and creative predicaments as the cow, and the poet, describe their brain heaving in two different directions at the same time; "constant little murmurs from its cells / saying this is the way, this is the way to go" (Lines 14-15). Here, the brain becomes holey, but, simultaneously, the disease is once more acting as an intensifier, as a place for a multitude of voices. These voices may be delusions or even hallucinations, but the spongy, permeable brain has permitted this; "you need this spongy / generosity to let the other in." (Lines 8-9).

Jo Shapcott's dramatization of a fragmented self, releases an imaginative or discursive field that outspreads to modes of visualizations of the afterlife in the second of the five Mad Cow poems, "The Mad Cow in Love," with its seemingly odd title. This poem, which comprises one stanza of thirty-two lines, is addressed to the Mad Cow's, may be the poet's, spouse and is set in familiar domestic area that is turned into a surreal one:

I want to be an angel and really think
 I am getting there with this mind of mine,
 Shrinking every day towards the cleanness,
 The size of a baby animal's brain. (Lines 1-4)

For the cow to become angelic is to have and let her brain to shrink. The poems in this collection seem to invite the reader to have a contemplation on the

disruptive and radical power of female disease which again parallels the anxieties of female authorship which have long preoccupied feminist literary scholarship. Gilbert and Gubar believe that "from the female point of view, the madwoman, the monster, the witch, the evil Queen are not simply antagonistic images used as a foil to the 'pure' heroine, but images of the woman author herself who 'seeks the power of articulation'" (cited in Frederico, 2009, p.7). Therefore, these poems propose a particularly female speaker looking for her force of enunciation through disrupting limitations, embracing the space, and deeply anxious for leaving her literary touch.

More interesting are the specific parameters of the lines themselves "shrinking every day towards the cleanness / the size of a baby animal's brain" which seem to allude to associations of purity, reduction, sacrifice and self-annihilation. Gilbert and Gubar state that

it is the surrender of her self – of her personal comfort, or her personal desires, or both – that is the beautiful angel-woman's key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead (Gilbert and Gubar, 1998, p.602).

The inclination and wish of the Mad Cow to become angelic inevitably encompasses a total subjugation of its own self. Such particularly feminist understanding of disease in Shapcott's poems suggests enticing glimpses into female power, powers of articulation, and rebelliousness.

Nevertheless, merely as some certain sort of coherent story sounds to be merging, Shapcott throws her readers off the sequence; it is the cow's-poet's lover who is skimming a newspaper "looking for news of the self" (Line 12), as the involvement of clinical deterioration spreads to both; the sufferer and the partner. disease is separating the cow-poet from the partner, resulting thus in the complete occupation of different kinds of areas under the same roof. The Cow, and the poet, situates itself as:

Foreign correspondent on the track of who you are
Looking for leads, your last screw, the food
You threw away, your strategic approaches
For living through the next door. (Lines 25-28)

The approaching departure moves the poem into an emotional territory, as the cow-poet want their lovers to accompany them even in the afterlife, though they know well that such journey must be taken alone; "do you want to be an angel? I know / the answer already and it's rough medicine" (Lines 13-14). Moving from the expansive line "letting other voices in" and the passionately performative line "I am a magnificent / skater" from the first poem in the series, this second poem then affords a register of confident artistic supremacy, with the cow as

creator putting its vision of what an angelic life will seem to be. in an imaginary roll-call of heavenly acts:

And angels do a variety of jobs:
 The post of perpetual adoration might suit,
 Or divine messenger but I fancy for you
 The government of the stars and all the elements.
 (Lines 20-23)

It is crystal clear then that the poem makes its way through multiple phases: from self-subjugation with brain-shrinking, over the embodied departure of the speaker and the lover, on the way to this ambitious imagined enticing of the lover towards heaven. Furthermore, the progress of the five poems loops once more, as the cow/poet drastically undercut their own narration in the final five lines "I don't mean it, / though, any of it" (Lines 28-29). In another unexpected twist, this projection or dream of angelic living is paused, carried down to earth and extended to encompass all the damage that might be brought forth by the future "I want you earthly / including all the global terrors and harms / which might come" (Lines 29-31).

This poem, "The Mad Cow in Love," is dexterous in terms of its circuitousness and paradoxes. At a first glimpse, it could be understood as a paean to imagination and/or a way out of the limitations of quotidian living. Yet, as the poem turns back to earthy or geo and ecopolitical issues, readers become confronted with a ruptured domestic scene where the abiding image is one of imminent departure. This poem moves, both in style and in tone, into an elegiac direction, that of foregrounding the involvement of a couple fronting ultimate separation, and are anxious of protecting each other from consequent pain.

Moreover, the next of the five poems in this sequence "Mad Cow Dance" employs additional instability images, and it is also placed at the point of rupture between tragedy and comedy. Being the only poem in the series not to start with "the," it suits this fragmented, disjointed poem that is set in the form of tercets, couplets and single line stanzas, with line-lengths reduction towards the closing point of the poem. To put it in performative terms, the cow/poet is now totally alone, and has moved to the center of the stage:

I like to dance. Bang. I love to dance. Push.
 It makes me savage and brilliant. Stomp. To
 My own rhythm, rhythm. I lead or I don't
 Have a partner. No market for partners,
 just this wide floor for the dance. (Lines 1-5)

The "savage and brilliant" cow, like the poet in her fight against cancer, is now in the advanced phases of BSE as its standing becomes impossible and it is now losing all control over its own body. The line "four legs increase splits into splats" (Line 30), refutes predictable descriptions of fragmentation with a specific emphasis on means of physical pleasure:

But fireflies
 Know I'm here, raving with light,
 They swirl down my spine. Swish. My tail
 Goes bam, thwack against the backs
 Of my legs. Pleasure, local pleasure. (Lines 13-17).

It is for the mad Cow that such physical decline signals the end of control "ceasefire / between my legs and my brain" (Lines 22-23). Various sociologists like, for instance, Talcott Parsons believe that health-care professionals are represented as agents of social control, which makes it pivotal that "asymmetry" becomes a fundamental part of the relationship between physician and patient. The Mad Cow, being undiagnosed, an animal not a human, works outwith the regularities of medical care, outside the ladders of social control which are frequently there in medical sessions. As is stated by Parson; "with respect to the inherent functions of effective care and amelioration of conditions of disease, there must be a built-in institutionalized superiority of the professional roles, grounded in responsibility, competence, and occupational concern (Parsons, 1975, p.271). The Mad Cow of Shapcott, as being not confined to bed or exposed to medical treatment or tests, rejects this world, and readers are stimulated to bear witness to this. Functioning outside of a hierarchical or controlled medical scenery, this poem becomes sensual and expansive, as it moves into a darker register of a somatic meta-world setting:

Just watch me
 Become
 Pure product, pure
 Use;
 Pure perfume
 Jasmine and fucked. (Lines 31-36)

The line "just watch me" in this poem foretells the uneven, direct feverish speech to readers of Shapcott's poetry as she stated in another of her collections, *Of Mutability*, via the technique of self-allusion as she was, this time, referring to her own disease and suffering:

If I appear

To be scanning the sky
 Head thrown back, curious
 Ecstatic, shy, strolling
 Unevenly across the floor
 In front of you, my audience,
 Forgive. (Lines 2-8)

This extract also foreshadows the energetically sensual voice in her poetry as the speaker states that "performing / on a tightrope / makes me feel wanton" (Lines 25-27), yet the cow at the end of this poem is "fucked" in a figurative and literal sense. Sex and sensual experiences of the weakening brain occur in a domain of pure sensation, of an embodiment outside the confines of linguistic representation. An additional intricacy in this poem originates from the notion that the female animal is entirely commodified, becoming product, with the "perfume" and "jasmine" as conventional clichés of seduction and sweetness, and "pure" implying at a return to Gilbert and Gubar's notions of virginal, selfless/dead angel. In this poem, the poet has intentionally misdirected her readers another time as she has set the stage for disruptive womanly space, she closes the poem with showing the cow in the situation of whole subjugation. This circularity and re-routing of the act of maddening leaves readers with a mixture of impressions rather than one clear cut and easy to follow chronology of disease.

The critic Isabel Galleymore, speculating on the choice of a cow as a major character in the series, asserts that when readers indulge in reading the poems in Shapcott's Mad Cow collection:

the importance of cows as traditional elements in the pastoral scene must be remembered. The wander Constable's landscapes, modern dairy product advertisements and the promotional materials of English tourism alike. The anthropomorphizing of the cow marks a shift from the environment as background to the environment as foreground (Galleymore, 2013, p.157).

Via shifting the environment into the very foreground, the speaker in the poems focuses on the notion that it is not only the body, but even nature itself is uncontrollable. In this connotation, though one might postulate that these Mad Cow poems are a sort of "ruptured pastoral," still one must admit that the term pastoral is itself a slippery one. Hurley and O'Neill draw attention to the idea that rural landscape is far way from being a straightforward idyll. They assert that "in pastoral, the rural is explored as a place of temporary resolution of life's complexities, only for these complexities frequently to reassert themselves (Hurley and O'Neill, 2012, p.4). Alongside, Terry Gifford goes even further, considering the pastoral as a place of dissent with his observation of the

notion that "there has always been something suspect about pastoral writing; nostalgic escapist, comfortingly timeless and stable, in a word 'Arcadian'" (Gifford, 2012, p.46).

The satirical and darkly playful explorations of BSE to be found in Shapcott's poetry, delineate the pastoral as an irresolute, intricate place for the sake of attesting to a deeper and more profound concern, a one that is negotiated through the experience lived by anyone who is seriously sick; the feeling of impotence and a sharp awareness of time running out. One of the probable reactions to such feebleness is to use it for creativity. The struggle to afford one's sign of creativity in this life is the focal idea of the next poem in the series, which is "The Mad Cow Tries to Write the Good Poem." A poem shifting between creative aptitudes and the frustration of that potential in its reference to the parameters of artistic illustration.

Keeping on the dramatization of the fragmentation of the self, yet, shifting the cow from being passive back to the role of an active creator, this poem is established on a gentle fulcrum between subjugation and power:

I used

My hooves as gentle weapons in the air. A bit of newspaper

Fame came my way that day, but shit, it was a performance

Ephemeral, and certainly not the good poem. Lasting.

How can I last when I live in a shed and even

The postman doesn't know how to find me? (Lines 4-9)

It is in this poem that the speaker is overwhelmed with an urgent need to have an individual voice, to leave a particular trace behind. The eagerness about performing an act has been overlapped with anxieties about making a mark, and it does not matter how untraditional the method. The cow dung imagery in this poem, "I hear it written in streaky emulsion on the walls / in my own messing on the floor, in the nation's smeary dailies (Lines 19-20), interrogates and destabilizes concepts of femininity, because the cow, which was beforehand concerned with becoming an angel, moves on the way to a place of that is termed by Luce Irigaray as "a feminine disruptive excess" (Irigaray, 1998, p.571).

The poet inspects the notion of feminine "disruption" via bodily acts in many of her poems, for instance, "With the Big Tray," which is the second poem in her collection of 1988, *Electroplating the Baby*. This poem concentrates on a housemaid who "surprises herself" thru breaking wind as she serves tea:

Secretly, her large smell

Made her feel as real and salty

As a merchant adventurer (Lines 26-28).

Surprisingly enough, bodily acts, which are more frequently regarded as private or even disgraceful for women, become themselves an act of embodiment, an act of becoming "real." In the same vein, in "Birthday Surprise," the poet tells the narrative of her seven years old self when she used to experience the "surprise" of a "tickle down the leg":

'Power!' I was thinking

'A puddle on the rug.' Then mother

Got out a tissue and blotted the wet shape

So carefully mapped and steaming on the Wilton –

My Florida, my Amazon, my Indies (Lines 5-9).

Both of these poems, with their compressed theme of exploration or adventure, are linked with the narratives in the Mad Cow collection on a corporeal, bodily level; the lack of control, the notion of shock lead to a sense of authenticity or power, which let the speaker to have creative as well as physical domain. There is also an analogous reference to the "Mad Cow" turning and spinning across whole hard / Pacifics and Atlantic". Here, in this sense, the simplest bodily acts as the breaking of wind or even pissing become acts of creation and performance, leaving a momentary mark. Significantly, upon contextualizing these poems in the context and background of disease, it is the concept of letting go that permits the "power" of these poems. Abandoning any effort at control, or approving of one's impotence in facing bodily weakening and decline, proposes a surprising, if not shocking, path on the way to liberation.

Moreover, the closing poem of this collection alludes to the danger of untreated and untethered disease; "I'm dangerous to the earth. / I spat and a blanket of algae four miles long / bloomed on the Cornish coast" (Lines 19-21). The crisis accompanying the spread of the BSE was worsened by a practice done by British farmers in the mid-1980s, which is grinding some certain useless parts of other cows in order to feed their cattle. Such abnormal procedure, of course driven by greed, parallels the ecological destruction that inspires Shapcott's queasy pastoral verse. The closing lines of this last poem in the Mad Cow collection, the inconspicuous "I have been sad recently / and now the weather has changed for good" (Lines 24-25) refer to her much recent poem "Forecast," with its final line "it's a sad child / that destroys its own weather" (Lines 9-10). Thus, the narrative of the cow has become that of slaughter and sacrifice, it is now defeated, and the admission "it's harder now / here in the future" (Lines 13-14) looks as if to function as a poignant forewarning not only of the poet's later poetry about her own ailment, but of the environmental damage in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

There is so much of this circularity in the poems composed by Shapcott in her Mad Cow series; resisting sane territory, looped, resisting linearity or neat endings, that is captured by the "amazing circular music which had entered a gap / near my cortex" (Lines 2-3). Reading these lines recollects Colm Toibin's statement that they look for "a scheme that can accommodate disease, however fitfully or sadly" (Toibin, 1997, p.3), and also of a quotation from Shapcott herself, when she stated that Helen Chadwick inspired and stimulated her "not least because she offers a route outside the dialectical, deliberately questioning dualistic definitions to weave loops, twists and turns around binary categories" (Rees-Jones, Interview).

Conclusion

The fantasy-pastoral scenery of the Mad Cow, which is pregnant with separation and crammed with vicious, decaying life, is a peculiarly appropriate setting for Shapcott's fragmented investigations of individuals who are aiming and working to have center stage even when their bodies are performing unpredictably and are out of their control. The poems in the Mad Cow collection focus on the opportunity of fronting boundless space and deliverance during the period of clinical deterioration. Despite that the notion of finding out pleasure or creativity from collapse or frailty might be understood as naively positive and optimistic, Shapcott's Mad Cow poem series advocates as an alternative an intensely humane quest by means of the paradoxes that permeate human embodied experiences. In this sense, her poetry, concurrently renders, and complicates, more nuanced understandings of the poetics and politics of both notions; creativity and disease.

شعرية وسياسة المرض في شعر جو شابكوت
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المخلص

تتكرر الإشارات إلى المرض في الشعر الإنجليزي: البريطاني و الأمريكي، بسبب العيش في عصور من القلق تؤدي إلى أنواع مختلفة من الأمراض الجسدية والنفسية. وهكذا، في محاولاتهم المختلفة للتعامل مع مثل هذه القضية التي تؤثر بشكل مباشر على طريقة معيشة الناس وطريقة تفكيرهم وطريقة تصرفهم، يحاول الشعراء تشخيص و حل مشكلة كيفية قبول أو عدم قبول فكرة المرض. اختار بعض الشعراء الانتحار كوسيلة للهروب من المرض، بينما فضل آخرون قبول مرضهم بكل تبعاته. واضعة ذلك في الحسبان، تهدف هذه الورقة إلى إلقاء الضوء على طريقة جو شابكوت في التعامل مع المرض في اشعارها، وخاصة "قصائد جنون البقر". تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية الى اكتشاف منظور جديد لقبول فكرة الإصابة بالمرض كوسيلة ل "الوضع الطبيعي الجديد"، عن طريق إيجاد الإبداع من خلال المرض وفيه.

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