



PROJECT MUSE®

A Rhapsodist at Mid-Century: Refiguring Disability in the
Poetry of Tristan Corbière

Tammy Berberi

Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies, Volume 3, Number 1,
2009, pp. 51-66 (Article)

Published by Liverpool University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/260593>

A Rhapsodist at Mid-Century

Refiguring Disability in the Poetry of Tristan Corbière

Tammy Berberi

Department of French, University of Minnesota, Morris

The essay uses Kant's notions of autonomy and heteronomy as a framework for examining the personal and aesthetic significance of figures of disability in Tristan Corbière's *Yellow Loves* (1873). Far from being an unmitigated reflection of a life lived with impairment in the nineteenth century, these poems highlight a preoccupation with subject-object relations that Corbière shared with his contemporaries—most notably, Flaubert and Baudelaire. Corbière's representations challenge Romantic lyricism alongside the positivist underpinnings of Realism, reaching toward Symbolism for its capacity to suspend aesthetic dualism. Corbière's explorations of disability reiterate its centrality to aesthetic innovation in the nineteenth century, and place Corbière and *Yellow Loves* at the center of mid-nineteenth-century debates about the modes and motivations of representation.

This is a companion piece to an essay published in the inaugural issue of *Journal of Literary Disability*, "Les Poses de l'Incompris reprises: Corbière, Caricature, and Critical Illness" (now available at www.jlcds.org). In that essay, I offer a composite of the critical assumptions that have shaped Corbière's legacy and explore how he seems to anticipate biases in order to overturn them, ensnaring critics with their own assumptions. A chronological look at criticism suggests obvious lineage from the positivism that so defined European culture at mid nineteenth century to the ceaseless repetition of ableist bias since that time. This is not to say that disability is not central to understanding both Corbière and *Yellow Loves* (*Les Amours jaunes*): disability is a constitutive element of both, disability studies a lens that allows us to reconsider the implications of physical difference as both a social and an aesthetic construct that posed an affront to norms in both arenas.

Kant's notions of heteronomy and autonomy offer a useful framework for understanding personal and aesthetic tensions in *Yellow Loves*. Briefly, heteronomy describes the marketplace of ideas and the inevitability of convention, and autonomy, the will to struggle against convention in a quest for alternative modes of agency and expression. In *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* (1989), Charles Altieri discusses Kant's influence on nineteenth-century writers, linking autonomy to imperatives of authorial composition

in a discussion of Flaubert and Baudelaire.¹ Altieri points out that by the mid nineteenth century, positivism and its claims to the truth value of objectivity and observable phenomena had supplanted the validity of subjective lyricism. For Altieri, *Madame Bovary* stages the conflictual coexistence of these two modes of representation, both in its depiction of a tragically lyrical Emma whose desires are trapped and co-opted by heteronomy and in her juxtaposition to the sycophantically scientific Homais. However, for Altieri, Flaubert's real achievement lies in his capacity to render such psychologically intimate depictions while distancing himself from them in order to thoroughly ironize their respective illusions and alienation. Baudelaire recognized the potential of Flaubert's authorial stance in the novel but condemned his relentless objectivity as both cold and preclusive of poetic lyricism. Baudelaire sought to expand the "range of constitutive rhetorical energies that can maintain complex purposive sites—and hence possible selves," recasting poetry in order to overcome dualism (Altieri 128). Rather than imagining subject and object caught in two-term oppositional relations, Baudelaire strove to foster a second nature that was "both capacious enough (and capricious enough)" to allow the broadest possible field of relations to emerge, even as he observed that process unfolding (129).

Corbière frequently associates disability with the two authors Altieri highlights as recasting rhetoricity during the 1860s, when a young Corbière was writing many of the poems included in *Yellow Loves*. Two of the poems examined here, "Deaf Man's Rhapsody" ("Rapsodie du sourd") and "Hunchbacked Bitor" ("Le Bossu Bitor") allude to Flaubert's cracked cauldron, described in an oft-cited passage of *Madame Bovary*: "Language is like a cracked cauldron on which we play melodies that make bears dance when we would like to move the stars."² Flaubert thus characterizes the central struggle that defines a quest at the core of human existence: language is by its very nature conventional. For Kant and Flaubert (and so many Structuralists after them), authentic communication and artistic production entail a relentless struggle against heteronomy. It is a struggle that is at once destined to fall short of our aspirations and compelling enough to draw us forward toward an elusive spark of originality. Baudelaire's critical response to Flaubert's stance in *Madame Bovary* inspires in Corbière an ongoing fascination with the dynamics of subject-object relations as they shaped iterations of physical difference in the nineteenth century.

1. See Altieri 108–130.

2. "La parole humaine est comme un chaudron fêlé où nous battons des mélodies à faire danser les ours, quand on voudrait attendrir les étoiles" (259).

Indeed, as I demonstrate in the previous essay, the misguided critical trajectory related to *Yellow Loves* is rooted in this fundamental conflict between subjective lyricism and objectivity. In their relentless effort to diagnose poetic figures in *Yellow Loves*, critics undermine Corbière's subjectivity by compulsively girding figures of disability with diagnoses, thereby essentializing the significance of physical difference. Yet to examine Corbière's figures is to realize that they represent a departure from embodied norms as much as forays into different paradigms of representation. Corbière deploys these figures precisely to examine instabilities, to question the limits and expose the theoretical weaknesses of the major aesthetic movements of his time, from Romanticism to Realism and Symbolism. This study strives to show that the preoccupations with disability that have so long served to marginalize Corbière from his contemporaries actually place him squarely within the defining debates that shaped nineteenth-century aesthetics. Although I will study a couple of poems from the earlier sections of *Yellow Loves*, my central focus is a core sequence of poems that bridges two later sections of *Yellow Loves*, *Armor* and *Seafarers*.

Corbière's experiences as a young person with a disability—he contracted rheumatic fever at age 14 and dealt with chronic, painful swelling thereafter—suggest that these preoccupations are not entirely aesthetic. Yet exploring what his life might have been like, with the many literary pastiches of *Yellow Loves* as our only compass, sends us quickly back into literature. Moreover, Corbière grew up with the rise and consolidation of the sciences, in a culture increasingly shaped by narrowly prescribed values that entwined physical and socio-economic norms to promote a utopian bourgeois hegemony (see Davis). One can imagine how difficult it must have been to forge an identity distinct from the positivist and patriarchal discourses that shaped local and European culture around him. As the first-born son in one of the most highly regarded families in Brittany, Corbière may have had a lot to live up to: more than half a century separated him from his father, a retired sea merchant and highly successful author of maritime novels, most notably, of *Le Négrier* (1832). In rare extant letters, Corbière expresses an ardent desire to meet the measure of his father's successes. As a teenager, he writes, "I've also got it in my head that I will write a *Négrier*, and my poor grades in History won't convince me otherwise."³ Thirteen years later, he would dedicate *Yellow Loves* "To the author of *Le Négrier*" and inscribe his father's personal copy, "To the author of the author of this book," dedications that capitalize on and entwine biographical and literary

3. "J'ai aussi dans la tête que je ferai un *Négrier*, et mes places 23^e et 32^e en histoire ne m'ôteront pas cette idée" (Corbière ed. Walzer 1013). Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Corbière are my own.

lineage and place Edouard Corbière in the pantheon of literary predecessors whom Corbière reveres, chides, and parodies with his verse.⁴

Corbière's confidence doesn't square with the numerous depictions in *Yellow Loves* of an abject, failed poet. In "THAT" ("ÇA") and "The Renegade" ("Le Rénégat"), this figure rejects the literary establishment rather jauntily. On the other hand, "The Poet in Absentia," ("Le Poète contumace") presents a solitary, wind-buffed figure whose poetic flights are grounded by the paradoxes that give shape to his melancholic preoccupations: after his death, he is remembered as "Too successful, as if a failure."⁵ In fact, Corbière is reproducing a stereotype that was in broad circulation in nineteenth-century France. Chateaubriand's René is a young man who leaves his ancestral chateau in Brittany and travels the world in search of himself, ending up in nineteenth-century America among natives. Much to the dismay of Chateaubriand, his antihero René spawned a whole generation of young writers and, in a reflexive movement, a generation of male protagonists in literature. Margaret Waller studies this cultural phenomenon in *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel*, and completes the portrait of this figure, a young man plagued by an epistemological crisis that prevents him from assuming his proper place in society, in order to ensure the respectability of his family's legacy. His meanderings carry him away from both father and fatherland, representing a symbolic departure both from mainstream values and classical aesthetics. Divided into seven sections, *Yellow Loves* progresses from "THAT," which includes the lengthy bildungspoem "Paris," to the northern coast of Brittany in *Armor*, then out to sea in the section entitled "Seafarers." Corbière thus constructed a geography that would chart the course for such a departure as well as a father figure he could leave behind.

The figure crafted in the image of René also sharpens and contextualizes the critique of religion that invariably accompanies Corbière's depictions of disability. Chateaubriand wrote *Génie du christianisme*, parent text to *René*, while in exile during the French Revolution. He disparages the austere civic aesthetic of the revolutionary period and laments the systematic destruction of so many Christian symbols and churches. For Chateaubriand, only Christianity offered a palliative adequate for the depth of tragedy and scope of loss experienced in the Revolution, its mysteries an open door to the abandoned recesses of the human imagination. Critics have touted the poems studied here as "more authentic" than earlier poems in the volume. Surely this assessment is the product of the

4. "A l'auteur du *Négrier*" and "A l'auteur de l'auteur de ce livre," respectively.

5. "Trop réussi, comme raté" ("Epitaphe" 60).

essentialized readings this study challenges, for Corbière's tone in these poems is quite ironic. From cheeky, as in "Saint Tupetu de Tu-pe-tu," a poem depicting pilgrims who spin a wheel of fortune manipulated by a tiny granite saint and anxiously await its verdict; to embittered, as in the juxtaposition of Bernard de Claivaux's earnest twelfth-century appeal to the powers of the Virgin Mary and the raucous incident of realist rage that results in the death of Hunchbacked Bitor, Corbière challenges the spiritual, epistemological, and aesthetic claims of Chateaubriand's modern Christianity.

Even as Corbière sketches out the figure of René, he mocks it as one of many hackneyed poses that enhance one's literary marketability in the capital.

Poet—Afterwards? ... You need *the thing*:
Spiraling Parnassus,
The Disgusted Ones and Anemia,
Vergers, Madmen to restrain
Misunderstood, he sleeps with his pose.⁶

This motley collection of ready performances from one of the untitled poems in "Paris" includes a hybrid word, "dégouteux," which suggests at once "disgusted" and "disgusting," hinting at Corbière's derision for these figures. It also resonates with the adjective "goutteux," or "gouty," thus adding to the list of ailments that lend themselves to literary success. In a brilliant maneuver that parallels Flaubert's stance in *Madame Bovary*, Corbière co-opts the discourses that hamper efforts to forge an empowered identity by mitigating interpersonal and poetic self-expression. In doing this, he accomplishes a great deal. To parody a romantic poet is to render commonplace the subjective lyricism that Corbière purports to seek (and fails to find, if we are to believe his self-depictions). Recasting disability as a pose operates a fundamental shift from an essentialized, pathologizing discourse to the fertile—and less stable—terrain of social constructivism: "passing" as a worthy poet requires putting on pathology. Physical difference is thus simultaneously normalized and ironized, disability now an emblem for the marketplace values that Corbière both vehemently rejects and retools for his own poetic explorations.

"Décourageux" is a poem that probably comes closest to a manifesto, although its comic tenor and concrete metaphors belie the importance of its implications. Its title is not a word in French or English, but an inventive blend of the notions of "unencouraging" and "lacking courage." The first stanza begins and ends

6. "Poète-Après? ...Il faut *la chose*: / Le Parnasse en escalier, / Les Dégouteux et la Chlorose, / Les Bédéaux, les Fous à lier... / L'Incompris couche avec sa pose." ("Paris" third sonnet, first stanza; original emphasis. In translating Corbière's verse, I have sacrificed rhyme and meter in favor of a literal rendering in order to capture Corbière's tone.)

with twin paradoxes that point to both the motivation and strategies that shape Corbière's aesthetic:

He was a real poet: he didn't have a song
He saw too much, and seeing is a blindness.⁷

Paradoxes such as these are central to Corbière's poetic perspective: they point to and undermine aesthetic commonplaces and underscore the richness of the unstable ground Corbière delights in exploring. To take an obvious example: "seeing is a blindness" hardly leaps off the page as a notion in broad circulation, but may be read as an open challenge to a fundamental tenet of positivism. On the other hand, "blindness is insight" is certainly a generative paradigm for shaping narrative in the western tradition. It is precisely through these kinds of juxtapositions that Corbière awakens an echo and kindles originality.

Corbière goes on to invoke "les maçons de la pensée" ("masons of thought"), a brilliantly concise, concrete reference to the consolidation of the sciences and the systematization of knowledge in the nineteenth century. He contrasts these with his poetic figure, a "mineur de la pensée" (variously, a "miner" or a "minor" of thought), someone who innocently rifles his own thought processes in search of something new, a nugget of originality buried in the commonplaces that he also ceaselessly reproduces. In subsequent stanzas, Corbière constructs a series of paradoxes around blindness to question modes of representation, ending the reflection with a tentative question, a typical maneuver that awakens doubt in the reader just at the moment when Corbière seems to be formulating a new aesthetic.

What glazier painted! What blind man sang!
And what glazier sings while rattling his palette,

Or what blind man painted with his clarinet!
—Is this art? ...⁸

Aragon and Bonnin read these apparently nonsensical artistic propositions as representing Corbière's penchant for *art nulle*, that is, crummy art or art of no value. Their conclusion is so simplistic (in an otherwise indispensable annotated edition) that it seems equally reductive to point out that the blind musician is a stock character of western art. The presence of the glazier aligns Corbière's perspective with Baudelaire, whose own "bad" glazier falls prey to

7. "Ce fut un vrai poète : Il n'avait pas de chant. / Il voyait trop—Et voir est un aveuglement" ("Décourageux" 1, 4).

8. "Quel vitrier a peint! quel aveugle a chanté! / Et quel vitrier peint en raclant sa palette, / Ou quel aveugle a peint avec sa clarinette! / —Est-ce l'art?" ("Décourageux" 31–34).

a passer-by who hurries up to his apartment to drop a flower pot that shatters the glazier's entire stock. The narrator/perpetrator is incensed because the glazier peddles only clear panes, not colored ones that would make life beautiful (I, 285–287). The poem, framed by a discussion of the causes of irrational behavior, is thus a double-edged critique that shatters the aesthetic claims of Realism, not only for its assumption of objective transparency, but for its reliance upon likely plot trajectories as the basis for original artistic production. Corbière's declarative statements lead up to the final question of the stanza, criss-crossing in such a way that the blind man becomes a peddler of clear panes and seeing is indeed "a blindness." A full stanza of artists apparently mismatched to their implement is a material rendering of the implications of synaesthesia, a hallmark of the incipient Symbolist movement. "Art" remains a question, a tentative endeavor that skirts ready paradigms of representation while upending the conventions of French versification, thus formally reaching toward Verlaine and later poets in this respect, as well.

Yellow Loves offers many caustic parodies of romantic predecessors, especially Lamartine and Hugo, but one poem thematizing the effects of hearing loss, "Deaf Man's Rhapsody" ("Rapsodie du sourd"), distances Corbière from romantic ideals with more subtlety but no less playful derision. In the opening stanza, the central figure is newly deafened thanks to a "treatment" at the hand of a "man of art" and offers a central paradox—"He understood very well, having heard nothing"—that sets off a series of burlesque encounters with passers-by.⁹ When someone shouts to him, he strains to hear him; when someone doesn't, he wonders if this indifference is masked pity. Rehearsing stigma, the narrator declares: "I am here, but absent ... They say: is he senile, a muzzled poet, a bristling porcupine?—A puzzled shrug, and that means: a deaf guy."¹⁰ As the poem continues, the deaf man laments his new condition, wishing to hear "A shell scratching plaster! A razor, a knife squeaking through a cork, a couplet, a living bone sawed through! A gentleman! A rondeau! ..." ¹¹

This figure's inspiration is undermined by his decision to deafen himself to the world around him, and the deaf man's experiment is a comic failure. Bracing himself for the poetic inspiration that is the reputed outcome of this procedure, he calls upon Flaubert's cracked cauldron—*ce bon tam-tam*—and waits. His tortured communication, characterized as "a rebus that I'm trying to

9. "Et lui comprit trop bien, n'ayant pas entendu" ("Rapsodie du sourd" 4).

10. "Je suis là, mais absent ... On me dit: Est-ce un gâteaux, / Poète muselé, hérisson à rebours / Un haussement d'épaule, et ça veut dire: un sourd" ("Rapsodie du sourd" 32–34).

11. "O musique céleste: entendre sur du plâtre, / Gratter un coquillage! un rasoir, un couteau / Grinçant dans un bouchon! ... un couplet de théâtre! / Un os vivant qu'on scie! un monsieur! un rondeau!" ("Rapsodie du sourd" 39–42).

catch off-guard” and “Hysterical torment of an acoustic Tantalus, I see words flying that I can’t lap up!” culminates with the only music he is able to conjure up in this deafened state: flatulence.¹² When nothing (else) happens, he bids his heart to sleep and invites his muse into the prison cell of his own making, a Stendhalian *oubliette* of sorts. Realizing that no poetry will come of his new condition, the poet quietly resigns himself to silence. In contrast to the awkwardness of encounters with others, he and his mute muse coexist with complementary impairments in Hugolian harmony—and absolute silence. The quiet epigraph, “Silence is golden,” suggests a poetic ideal that is, for Corbière, outmoded: inspired silence is one dimension of romanticism that seems to be worth its weight in gold.

With exaggeration and allegory befitting his critical legacy, Corbière conflates this deaf man with a martyred (albeit caricatured) Christ, who accepts drink from *une vieille limonadière* (“old soft-drink vendor”) on his path. Ironical doubling of both figures is the linchpin that entwines Corbière’s play on our emotions and aesthetic commentary. The compassionate feminine figure doubles as an eighteenth-century (i.e. “old”) woman writer, Charlotte Rouyer Bourette (1714–1784), whose nickname was *la muse limonadière* (“soft-drink muse”). She managed the Café Allemand, a gathering place for writers, and is known for rather sloppy verse but respectable bits of prose. She is yet one more implicit reference to Corbière’s “bad” poetry and seems to represent collaboration and camaraderie as one corollary of originality and success. The deaf Christ figure is then doubled twice more: the epigraph is attributed to Saint Jean Chrysostome, the golden-mouthed orator who considered a life lived among people to be worthier in the eyes of God than one lived in reclusive meditation. Corbière’s deaf man thus emblemizes failed communication between himself and others. Although the deaf man’s alienation produces a rhapsody, we may infer from the reference to Flaubert’s cracked cauldron that it falls far short of achieving originality, its content a rather tired reproduction of the commonplace coordinates of stigma as well as the stock themes and (relatively) regular versification of the romantic lyric.

“Hunchbacked Bitor” (“Le Bossu Bitor”) is a tragic poem about a hunchbacked seaman who goes ashore to buy himself an evening at a brothel, the Stella Maris. Having paid off the madam for her help, Bitor arranges to meet Mary-Saloppe in the darkened kitchen. The next stanza cuts to bedlam in the bar, where Bitor is being savagely beaten. Eventually, he is put on a blanket and repeatedly tossed into the air, a sickening parody of Bernard of Clairvaux’s

12. “Hystérique tourment d’un Tantale acoustique! / Je vois voler des mots que je ne puis happer” (“Rhapsodie du sourd” 35–36).

twelfth-century appeal to the Virgin Mary: “If you are tossed upon the waves of pride, of ambition, of envy, of rivalry, look to the star, call on Mary. Should anger, or avarice, or fleshly desire violently assail the frail vessel of your soul, look at the star, call upon Mary” (Doctor Mellifluus 31). Once he falls off, the partiers delight in whipping him with lengths of rope. Certainly, Bitor fights back, biting and lashing about, but his efforts to protect himself are met with redoubled mockery and violence. Bitor surrenders with a groan that only encourages his abusers. As his abusers pull weapons, Mary-Saloppe intervenes. Bitor shuffles out the door and is never seen again: the ship leaves port without him. Another line of ellipses marks a narrative break, and the last stanza describes the corpse that washes up on shore and children playing under the sun in the water, tapping on its hump.

In creating a hunchback, Corbière reproduces what is perhaps the most popular figure of abjection of the post-Revolutionary period and establishes the centrality of physiognomy to the poem. Physiognomy, an enormously popular science in nineteenth-century France that had by mid nineteenth century become one of the pillars of positivist discourse, was a science founded upon the notion that physical appearance was an index of character, intelligence, and ability. Corbière immediately undercuts the truth value of Bitor’s hump by turning his attention to superstition. Bitor is a “true hunchback, and “everyone knows” that a hunchback at sea brings good luck, while the opposite is true on land. A note inserted by Corbière instructs the reader that Bitor’s name, literally “twice-twisted,” refers to a sailing knot that is twisted twice and tarred. Bitor is thus so reliable as to be coextensive with the machinery of a ship (like Melville’s and so many other literary sailors of the period). His name also emblemizes a biographical twist gone by—he incurred injury in an earthquake in Chili—and a narrative twist to come. Like Bitor’s name, the names of the prostitutes (Jaynie-Freebie, Bottom-Out, Vase-Bottom, etc.) also reference their objectification. Yet the name of Bitor’s destination, Stella Maris, is a lure, an earth-bound simulacrum of a symbol of the Virgin Mary and a universal beacon of hope for sailors. Of course, Bitor does call on a Mary of sorts: Mary-Saloppe incarnates the tarnished counterpart to the Virgin Mother. The juxtaposition of Bitor’s misadventures—a tragically literal, land-locked rendering of Clairvaux’s extended metaphor—sharpens the tragedy of Bitor’s fate as well as Corbière’s trenchant critique of the capacity of religion to assuage human suffering.

As he makes his way to the brothel, Bitor is transported by the exploits of literary and historical figures like himself: for a fleeting moment, he is Lauzun, a dwarfed hunchback loved by many women for his charm and wit; he is Triboulet, a vengeful hunchback of biting sarcasm and humor; he is Alain Chartier,

an unattractive poet who was kissed by Margaret of Scotland; he is Le Chevalier de Lagardère, a fictional superhero contemporary to Corbière who assumes the appearance of a hunchback to entrap his enemies (Aragon and Bonnin). These literary models give rise to a false consciousness, the fictions of which are quashed and replaced by another as Bitor arrives at the brothel. Overcome by stigma, he carefully modulates the visual field to avoid an encounter, shielding his twisted body behind the door, paying his way through to the kitchen. From behind the kitchen door, he allows his “corkscrew” gaze to survey the prostitutes, finally settling on one “like an albatross tracking its prey.” The objectification and resulting fear is mutual, but Bitor’s resignation—however silent—in the fourth movement is a rejection of this consciousness. As he looks on Mary-Saloppe with a “shady” and “swampy” eye, Bitor sheds a single crocodile tear (“une larme de crocodile”) of disillusionment. The high seas of moral turpitude are transformed into murky swamps of venality, and the episode at the brothel has given Bitor a thicker skin.

The poem stands apart from the other poems in *Yellow Loves* not only for the complexity of its character development, but for its deployment of novelistic convention and its unimaginable cruelty. The perspectival realism of Bitor’s rotting corpse is the culmination of what is essentially a realist short story in verse. Bitor’s deformed body is cast as the exception that drives a narrative largely shaped by convention and predictability. Early stanzas frame Bitor’s deformed figure to describe his steadfast reliability and the daily rhythm of his solitary life, regularity reinforced by the lapping of the water on the dock, traditional versification, and the consistent use of the imperfect tense. His annual foray on land is equally predictable: he always wears the same breeches and, like clockwork, returns to the boat two days afterwards, drunk and disappointed. Corbière gradually stretches the implications of both conventionality and exception, seeming to balance attempts to normalize Bitor’s body against rationalizations that would make his brutalization acceptable. As if to contextualize Bitor’s hunched back in a visual field shaped only by variation, the poem draws our attention to a room full of seamen from ports across Europe, all of whom are a bit rough-hewn: Dutchmen are syphilitic and splotched with rosacea; Norwegians are “Herculean” and anemic, the Spaniards have jutting, bony features; whalers are as oily as their prey. On the other hand, one sailor’s offering Bitor a friendly drink (as if to say, “All is well that ends well”) marks the end of his beating and seems to place it on a continuum with the ordinary roughing up that makes for a good time on land.

Although the visual and auditory registers are entwined in the opening movement and the final, quiet stanza, middle movements develop one register

at the exclusion of the other. The brief amorous encounter in the kitchen is cut short by restless amalgam of shouts and communicative misfires that calls us to reconstruct the scene before us. A reference embedded in each of these movements tethers both the auditory and the visual to *Madame Bovary*: the bedlam of the auditory stanzas begins with the charge “Charivari!” and, in the poem’s quiet dénouement, Bitor’s hump is compared to a busted drum. *Charivari* refers to a provincial custom dating back to the Middle Ages in which villagers express their disapproval (typically, of a marriage) by throwing pebbles at doors and windows. Flaubert derived the name for his male protagonist from this tradition, and the mockery of the novel’s opening scene (a glimpse at Charles’s boyhood and his pathetic patchwork cap) goes underground to gradually detach itself from the visual register and become deafening authorial opprobrium expressed in this auditory register. Corbière seems to emulate many aspects of Flaubert’s stance: we are offered fleeting glimpses of Bitor’s consciousness in Flaubert’s free indirect style, as with Bitor’s gleeful anticipation: “The earth is ours!”¹³ Like Emma, Bitor is portrayed as a romantic protagonist whose desires are trapped by heteronomy; ultimately, Corbière’s treatment of Bitor seems to warrant the same criticism that Baudelaire leveled at Flaubert: he enjoys Bitor’s cruel turn too much. His delight is evident in the devastating irony of the poem’s final verse, “—The poor body had known love!”¹⁴ Like Emma, Bitor ultimately serves the agenda of his creator, his cry, “like the screech of a pulley,” a metaphor for the puppeteering Corbière masters as he manipulates Bitor, subjecting him to the worst abuses. Corbière’s rhetorical successes elsewhere suggest that this is simply sport for Corbière as he strives to dramatize the failures of positivism, which, aesthetically and interpersonally, foster objectification and misapprehension.

“Sailors,” a poem that immediately precedes “Hunchbacked Bitor,” is its intentional complement, thematizing solidarity to mitigate Bitor’s isolation, offering up explanation to counter stigma, and imagining new modes of story-telling while recasting masculinity. It begins by openly mocking landed representations of a sailor: he is a “gas lamp sailor” at the Opéra Comique who curses the elements in a sky-blue frock; a survivor of a legendary shipwreck turned street-corner charlatan selling ointment to kill dead rats; a young man with a wounded arm singing of his troubles after a shipwreck; and a woman immersed in a bath of sea salts who twists her arms in the “waves” (presumably awaiting rescue).

To these, the narrator contrasts real sailors who constitute a breed apart that towers over the faltering race that is (landed) humanity. Like the ships they

13. “—La terre est à nous!” (“Le Bossu Bitor” 76).

14. “—Le pauvre corps avait connu l’amour!” (“Le Bossu Bitor” 255).

sail, they are rough-knotted with rock-solid hulls but wear their hearts on their sleeve. They shed easy tears for mum and for the girls they leave behind but wreak havoc at port. The narrator admits that on land, these men are awkward, spineless, and seasick: no matter how inebriated, they are unable to shed their sea legs to walk on solid ground.

Them, they're sailors—Through tortures
Struggles, perils, and grand adventures
Their *axe-hatched face* took on a nervous twitch
Of carefree disdain for all that is not Them
Because they feel great, these dogs, these are men!¹⁵

Until the last stanza of the poem, the sailors are a collective; indeed, here they share a single wind-worn visage, a rhetorical move that underscores their solidarity and contrasts with Bitor's narrative and embodied singularity. Collectively, they are a "living poem." The phrase is meant to refer their tendency to improvise raucous, drunken songs aboard their ship out at sea, but it also aptly captures the content of a later stanza in which sailors react to curiosity about their various wounds and scars. Amid the pitches and rolls of a poem built primarily with sound, rhythm, and metaphoric abstraction, the narrator draws our attention to the visual, beginning:

You see them come back, you know: shipwreck debris
Scurvied salvage made mincemeat by collision...
Broken, disfigured, disoriented, crippled:
—One eye missing?—And you, do you have an extra one?
—Yellow fever.—And how about you, is yours pink?
—A scar.—Hey, it's signed!...That's really something!¹⁶

They are improvising. These bodies do not so much tell a tale as offer the opportunity to talk back, to write one's own story. Their variegations offer stable ground on which to dispel misperceptions and to foster empathy.

"Blind Man's Cries" ("Cris d'aveugle") offers the strident counterpart to both the burlesque confusion of "Deaf Man's Rhapsody" and the empowered solidarity of "Sailors." The tidy procedure performed on the deaf man and his apparent anesthesia contrast vividly with the sustained wail of the blind fig-

15. "—Eux, ils sont matelots.—A travers les tortures, / Les luttes, les dangers, les larges aventures, / Leur *face-à-coups-de-hache* a pris un tic nerveux / D'insouciant dédain pour tout ce qui n'est pas Eux... / C'est qu'ils se sentent bien, ces chiens, ce sont des mâles!" ("Matelots" 23–27; original emphasis).

16. "On en voit revenir, pourtant: bris de naufrage, / Ramassis de scorbut et hachis de d'abordage... / Cassés, défigurés, dépayés, perclus: / —Un œil en moins.—Et vous, vous en avez en plus? / —La fièvre jaune.—Eh bien, et vous, l'avez-vous rose? / —Un balafre.—Ah, c'est signé!...C'est quelque chose!" ("Matelots" 77–82).

ure—another, very different figure of a martyred Christ—and the synaesthesia that results from his suffering. “Blind Man’s Cries” describes the central figure’s martyrdom in detail, from the incessant pounding of the wedge through his head to the vultures that swarm to feed on his wounded flesh. His subjectivity is a jarring combination of hallucinatory images that are a rehearsal and rejection of various clichés associated with Christian suffering. By juxtaposing these clichés within an utterly subjective consciousness, Corbière seems to stage the very conflict at issue in this study. Blindness is used yet again to symbolize a rejection of observable phenomena in favor of the cultivation of interiority. Lunn-Rockliffe rightly identifies the poem as a masterful fusion of the oral and the visual, as the central figure’s interior vision is literally wrought by pain, the incantatory quality and masculine rhymes reinforcing the rhythmic pounding (70). At the poem’s end, the martyred figure awaits death as he listens to the faraway sounds iconic of a Breton setting. Although excruciating pain prompts him to imagine both Heaven and Hell, the quiet sounds of the coast are a subtle confirmation that suffering has not transported him anywhere; the martyred figure has not transcended anything, least of all the coordinates of religious discourse. The gains in this haunting poem are thus less epistemological than aesthetic, although the poem succeeds in testing the limits of dogma, representation, and sensation.

“The Wandering Rhapsodist and the Pardon of Saint Anne” (“La Rapsode foraine et le pardon de Sainte Anne”) contrasts with both the static oppositions of “Hunchbacked Bitor” and the pained subjectivity of “Blind Man’s Cries.” “The Wandering Rhapsodist” is surely one of Corbière’s crowning achievements, for the complexity of both its themes and its verse. Comprising five poetic movements, each of which marks a shift in perspective as well as subjectivity, the narrator offers a varied panorama of the implications of disability while observing yet another pilgrimage. In the first movement, the narrator develops a typical Breton scene evoking quaint images and turns of phrase to describe the figure of Saint Anne. The second movement, ironically described as a seraphic choir and a drunken song, offers the spiritual canticle, voicing directly a mixture of earnest prayer, quaint images and cheeky humor. In the third movement, a narrator amid the pilgrims offers a visual account of their bodies and ailments in order to ironize clichés associated with illness and debility. Lunn-Rockliffe notes that throughout the poem, biblical imagery is rendered in simple, everyday language, a register that creates a strikingly intimate impression and transforms biblical abstraction into concrete reference, rendering it a bit ridiculous (84).

If our bodies are stinky on earth
 Your grace bathes us in well-being
 Spread over us in the cemetery
 Your good smell-of-saintliness.¹⁷

The third movement begins as the narrator offers a panorama of pilgrims on their knees circling the chapel. Accompanying the panorama is a discordant jumble of rationalizations for suffering that runs the gamut from “The meek shall inherit the earth,” to the notion that their bodies have been marked by God to recall original sin. The juxtaposition of commonplaces from the Bible exposes the paradoxes and contradictions and the fault lines between them, making them arbitrary and meaningless. Among the social commonplaces evoked in this section are the father who exploits his disabled child as a beggar, a cognitively impaired figure who is closer to Heaven thanks to his condition, a huddle of disabled figures who may turn and take their revenge on the able-bodied, and a girl who is encouraged to turn her eyes away, lest staring spread contagion. The third movement is thus sustained commentary on misperception and stigma, its proportions hyperbolized by the phantasmagorical disarticulation of bodies in the visual field and by sudden shifts in register. The narrator’s gaze jumps from an amputee elbowing an epileptic to a man whose ulcer is indistinguishable from the mistletoe growing on the tree he’s leaning against, and past a pair of forked arms and a “flowering leper,” as he rehearses comedy, reprehension, disgust, fear, menace, and irony.

The poem turns full circle as the narrator introduces the rhapsodist in the final movement. Named “Misery,” she is described as “a human form that bel-lows” and as having no home, ragged clothes and rotten teeth. After describing her as an animal, the narrator appeals to the humanity of “the poet” who, if he crosses paths with her, ought to offer her some tobacco for her pipe. The smile that illuminates her face transforms her: she is suddenly human and yet bears striking figural resemblance to the statue of Saint Anne as described in the first movement. The rustic wooden statue is carved with the blade of an axe, her face worn hollow and grooved by tears of love. Likewise, the kindness of the poet “carves, as if in wood” a smile on the rhapsodist’s face, and she in turn offers “a real sign of the cross.” The last two stanzas thus efficiently shift the entire foundation of the poem: from incantatory adoration by the masses to quiet accidental encounter, from obsessive objectification to a simple willingness to find the humanity in another, once again debunking the authority (and effectiveness) of religion.

17. “Si nos corps sont puants sur terre, / Ta grâce est un bain de santé; / Répands sur nous, au cimetière, / Ta bonne odeur de sainteté” (“La Rapsode foraine et le pardon de Saint-Anne” 109–112).

Of course, Corbière himself emerges as the wandering rhapsodist. The dualism of the poem's full title belies the dynamics of the poem; ultimately, the saint, the rhapsodist and the poet merge into a single figure, suggesting a rejection of dogma in favor of empathy and humanity. Moreover, the poem not only demonstrates Corbière's capacity for a broad range of rhetorical energies, but the journey toward that achievement, as he moves from the quaint irony of the opening movement (so reminiscent of Tupetu) through the caustic opprobrium of his critical gaze and finally toward a more humane empathy in his chance encounter with Misery.

In charting a trajectory through *Les Amours jaunes* that takes him from the capital to home and out to sea, Corbière takes leave not only of his father, but of the fatherland, his "living poems" an energetic rejoinder to a culture whose predominant values would stifle agency and self-determination. I understand these poems as both a personal and aesthetic appeal for a new paradigm that might reflect and foster empathy, mitigating the dualism that so marked both Romanticism and Realism. In a previous article, I revealed the mechanics of biases that have shunted reception of *Yellow Loves* into an impasse of medicalized readings. In this essay, I have revisited these figures of disability to examine their rhetoricity from a Kantian perspective. Far from marginalizing him as a poet whose preoccupations were too unique to be of mainstream value, the figures of debility and impairment studied here place Corbière at the center of mid-nineteenth-century epistemological and aesthetic debates. They embody Corbière's tendency to engage with convention in order to subvert it, every echo an open challenge to existing models of representation, his experimentation in form and sensation heralding the promise of Symbolism.

Works Cited

- Altieri, Charles. *Painterly Abstraction in Modern American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989. 108–130.
- Baudelaire, Charles. "Le Mauvais vitrier." *Œuvres complètes*. 2 vols. Ed. Claude Pichois. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1975–1976.
- Berberi, Tammy. "Les Poses de l'Incompris reprises: Corbière, Caricature, and Critical Illness." *Disability and/as Poetry*. Ed. Jim Ferris. Spec. Issue of *Journal of Literary Disability* 1.1 (2007): 34–48.
- Chateaubriand, René. *Génie du christianisme (extraits)*. Paris: Librairie Larousse, n.d.
- Corbière, Tristan. *Les Amours jaunes*. Eds. Elisabeth Aragon and Claude Bonnin. Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1992.
- . *Œuvres complètes de Charles Cros et Tristan Corbière*. Eds. Pierre-Olivier Walzer and Francis Burch. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.

- Davis, Lennard J. "Constructing Normalcy." *The Disability Reader*. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. New York, London: Routledge, 1997. 9–28.
- Flaubert, Gustave. *Madame Bovary*. Paris: Editions Folio, 1986.
- Lunn-Rockliffe, Katherine. *Tristan Corbière and the Poetics of Irony*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Mellifluus, Doctor. *Encyclical of Pope Pius XII on Saint Bernard de Clairvaux, The Last of the Fathers*, 31. 7 July, 2008 <www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_24051953_doctor-mellifluus_en.html>.
- Waller, Margaret. *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993.