SYMPATHETIC IMAGINATION AND THE CONCEPT OF FACE: NARRATIVES OF BLINDNESS IN THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores how sympathy conditions blind narratives, and also how Otherness is constituted within them. Arranged in three sections, "Recognizing Blindness," "Representing Blindness," and "Retelling Blindness," I examine the nineteenth-century uses of "sympathy" in the literary representation of blindness. Drawing upon Emmanuel Levinas' (1906-1995) concept of "face," I read each narrative as an example of how historically and generically people's sympathy towards Others has been presented, transmitted, and *re*-presented. What I call the "sympathetic imagination" represents the point of contact between the understanding of disabilities in the nineteenth century and its relation to Levinas' ethical encounter with alterity, as I argue that each narrative uses "face" as a trope to represent the extended sympathies and enduring dilemmas provoked by encounters with blindness.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Levinas

AT   *Alterity and Transcendence*

DEL   *"Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas"*

DF   *Difficult Freedom*

EI   *Ethics and Infinity*

NTR   *Nine Talmudic Readings*

OBBE *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*

PP   "Peace and Proximity"

TI   *Totality and Infinity*

AN   *American Notes* by Charles Dickens

CH   "Cricket on the Hearth" by Charles Dickens

GD   *Gift of Death* by Jacques Derrida

IG   *Imprisoned Guest* by Elisabeth Gitter

OCS   *Old Curiosity Shop* by Charles Dickens

PMF   *Poor Miss Finch* by Wilkie Collins

SA   *The Star of Attéghéi* by Frances Browne

Introduction

The main objects of this thesis are nineteenth-century disability narratives, and particularly works written by and about individuals with visual impairment. Arranged in three sections, "Recognizing Blindness," "Representing Blindness," and "Retelling Blindness," this study examines both nineteenth-century uses of the word "sympathy" and British understandings of the relationship between vision and ethics. Drawing upon Emmanuel Levinas' concept of "face," I seek to explore how sympathy conditions blindness narratives, and also how Otherness is constituted within them. Levinas' two most important ideas on alterity are first, that we never comprehend others, and second, that we are nevertheless responsible for them. I will argue that disability life writing can offer valuable ethical insights into how nineteenth-century British writers viewed themselves in relation to unrelated others, and by extension, can illuminate how we ourselves consider those not ourselves.

For reasons that will become clear, when analyzing blind narratives by "blind authors," I confine the scope of research to individuals who were blind from birth, or from a very young and usually unremembered age. While not disregarding the experiences and representation of acquired blindness, this study engages with historically situated assumptions that not having vision from a young age impedes acquiring knowledge and memory. My concern is therefore with figures with literally no sense of sight, so individuals such as John Bird, a physician who lost his sight later in life, are not part of my discussion.

My dedication to this topic began with my memory of my uncle, who was deaf from the age of six months. The first interaction with him that I remember occurred when I had just learned how to write. I remember no hesitation, confusion, or any uncomfortable feelings about how we communicated, via writing. I recognized no difference in him. The question, therefore, is

when exactly did I begin—indeed, anxiously—to become conscious of the term disability? Or more to the point, at exactly what age, or on what occasion, did I first see him as a person who fit in the category of disabled? Did this recognition come to me gradually? What I do recognize for certain is that this self-awareness of my inexplicable anxiety, somehow bred into me, is where my concern with "different" bodies came from.

To cite some reliable statistics, according to recent research conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 56.7 million people in the United States—one out of every five adults—live with disabilities (Brault). At some point, it is more than likely that most of those with disabilities will be denied the full enjoyment of their basic human rights because of deep-rooted, systematic prejudices against their "different" abilities. In ways similar to the experiences of those distinguished negatively due to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion, people of any age with any form of disability are often highly vulnerable and marginalized in society.

Recognizing my own ability—or rather, my ability privilege—also allowed me to recognize that unconscious ableist assumptions[1] percolate through nearly every level of society I know. I now find it necessary to try to imagine how my uncle felt, and what he thought, while we were "talking." Although not to my relief, I later learned that I am not alone in this. As Martha Stoddard Holmes observes, when all her students, to a greater or lesser extent, expressed "discomfort" when discussing disability issues in class, at that moment she realized "where we might begin the real work of understanding ability and disability" (ix). The more I became aware of voices that have been silenced through the attempts of others to avoid, protect, defend, or

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[1] With respect to the term "ableism," I will follow the definition given by Sharon A. Groch, as it captures how the distinction between ability and disability is determined by arbitrary characteristics and our subjective convictions, or ideology: "the belief in the natural physical and mental superiority of nondisabled people and the prejudice and discriminatory behavior that arise as a result of this belief" (151).

speak for them, the more perplexed I became, asking "Why not me?" instead of "Why me?" My attitude somewhat resembled survivor's guilt. Instead of thinking about disabilities as misfortunes that happened to Others, I was finding my way towards "sympathizing" with Others.

Levinas grapples at length with the nature of our acts and sympathies. As one of his foundational principles, he often returns to asking what justifies "my place in the sun"—the phrase he takes from Pascal (DEL 24)—at the expense of others, who could equally and righteously claim their own place (Fleming 34–5). Levinas indeed had survivor's guilt; although he was not sent to a concentration camp, he was incarcerated in a labor camp, so he experienced and bore witness to the atrocity of the Holocaust

I make two arguments. First, it is crucial when reading narratives of blindness to understand Levinas' concept of "face" as an epiphany, a moral order without authority. Because to be "sympathetic," in the nineteenth-century manner, is nothing more than being ethical, sympathy—how and how not to act on it—is at the core of those writers discussed in this thesis. Each text chosen for discussion therefore deals with topics of "face" and vision, figuratively and literally. Second, these authors want us—and themselves—to imagine what others' lives are like, especially when supposedly less fortunate than our own, either because of less sensory phenomena or a total lack of vision. Since these states are often entangled with poverty and illness, imagination here necessarily invokes sympathy on several levels. Awakening its powers, and extending them towards Others, is a rudimentary step to towarding leading an ethical life, preceding "learning about" or "understanding" these lives. To imagine is to "feel with," to think of Others with sympathy. The powers and limits of what I call, although it is not my own term, "sympathetic imagination"[2] is another thread running through my thesis, often entwining with

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[2] The term was used at least as early as in 1781 by a Scottish Episcopal clergyman Reverend John Moir (II, 189) and kept appearing throughout the nineteenth century, including the work of Walter Scott (*Guy Mannering* 369), a

the concept of a face. Sympathy is often exercised by "abled" writers, but as I will show, blind writers can express their sympathy towards others, including towards those who can see.

The following chapters, as they explore the authors' statements regarding how they write about or from the positon of blindness, reflect their perceptions and experiences—their pain, anger, and liberation. In this introduction, I will elaborate further on the two axes of my argument: the understanding of disabilities in the nineteenth century, and its relation to Levinas' concept of face—and the sympathetic imagination represents the point of contact between them. I will then offer a preview of how my thesis is constructed, describing not only how each chosen narrative uses "face" as a trope to represent the extended sympathies and enduring dilemmas provoked by encounters with blindness. I will also offer some thoughts on how the chosen texts respond to each other, both directly, and indirectly.

Overview

The dissertation begins with a chapter that offers historical background on narratives of blindness, starting with the Age of Enlightenment. My focus here is on the initial development and the ensuing social and literary adaptations of the term "sympathy" in relation to representations of disability. Drawing on David Hume's and Adam Smith's[3] theories of sympathy, which profoundly influenced the intellectual landscape of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the following chapters I will advance my analysis through detailed

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review of Shakespeare's play (Verplanck II, 47), and a study on Adam Smith (Farrer 49). Recent literary critics refer to the idea in studies of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century. For Romantic notions of sympathy, the relationship between sentimentalism and imagination, and Romantic poets such as Wordsworth's influence on Victorian writers, see, for instance, Herdt 144, Bate 132, and White 43.

[3] John Stuart Mill shares Smith's theory of sympathy. In a critique of Bentham, Mill, who believed in human nature, its inherent goodness and capability of progress, identifies unselfish interest as a "motive of sympathy" (CW X: 13–4). Furthermore, Mill claims that should we not put ourselves into the other's place we cannot know ourselves (*On Liberty* 42–3).

readings of relevant texts. Though different in dates of publication, settings, authorship, and even

modes of writing, these works all respond to contemporary questions concerning the ethics and

politics of blindness, as well as the poetics and rhetoric of blindness. Throughout, my primary

concern will be Victorian assumptions about the degree to which knowledge about Others is

gained through visual perception, and about the extent to which any knowledge about the

experience of blindness is conveyable through language. Because research has shown that

sensory experiences and cognition systems[4] differ between those who are blind and those who

are sighted,[5] I will concentrate on texts representing those who are congenitally sightless, or

blind from an early, and therefore only vaguely remembered, age.

Such narratives offer access to common assumptions about the interrelation between

object and subject, self and other, and also provides examples of how, and under what

circumstances, the sympathetic imagination works differently (or not) for those lacking a sense.

For personal testimony on these matters, I will draw upon such famously analytic nineteenth-

century deafness narratives as Harriet Martineau's memoir and John Kitto's well-known

autobiography to place my chosen blindness narratives within the larger context of sense-loss

disability. By examining both fictional and non-fictional narrative voices, I will also show how

the idea or goal of sympathy affects the tone, the textual nuances, and our mode of reading, but

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[4] Differentiating between types of blindness does not of course imply that one is superior or preferable to another. Such an assumption is critiqued by Rod Michalko through an account of an inappropriate belief and practice adopted by an Orientation and Mobility (O&M) instructor whom he met: "totally blind kids 'don't have concept development'" ("Estranged-Familiarity" 177).

[5] Until recently, it was believed that visually impaired people are "limited" in acquiring knowledge, especially of spatial concepts (Ungar et al. 1), and therefore significant visual impairment from an early age would disadvantageously impact an individual's cognitive development (Hupp 2). While the most recent research that uses MRI detects "structural, functional, and anatomical differences" between the brains of blind people and sighted people (Bauer et al.), the research does not imply that visually impaired people are conceptually or cognitively impaired. For instance, Susanna Millar's and others' extensive research had already shown that visually impaired and blind people derive information and ideas from other sources than vision (Miller 2; Bauer et al.; Nilsson and Schenkman 231). Examining such research, Gregory Scott Hupp argues that "with sufficient support and integrated settings appropriate to their needs, visually impaired or blind persons would develop "different [not impaired] cognitive pathways to acquire, process, and accommodate sensory information" (2).

also how this desired end constrains, limits, or even absents itself within the texts, as part of the unceasing interplay between Victorian constructions of normalcy and alterity.

This dissertation explores the relationship between sympathy, knowledge, and imagination, with the last term linking the first two. I argue that a "sympathetic imagination" not only plays an important role in eliding what for Victorians were arguably minute differences between sympathy and empathy, but also becomes enlisted in reading texts by and about individuals who have a different kind of knowledge, or "sight." Discussions of these dynamics occurred even before the texts I will be evaluating had been written. In his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), David Hume attributes to imagination the power to synthesize thought and vision:

> Nothing is more free than the imagination of man; and though it cannot exceed that
> original stock of ideas furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited
> power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing these ideas, in all the varieties
> of fiction and vision. (48; sec. V, pt. II)

Adam Smith completes my circuit of concepts by asserting sympathy relies on the faculty of imagination: it is sympathy that allows us "fellow-feeling with any passion whatever" (6; pt. I, sec. I, ch. i). This dominant intellectual history that foregrounds vision as a necessary and irreplaceable faculty for any kind of knowledge acquisition would implicitly seem to extend blind individuals' separation from the sighted world, by removing them from the capacity to think, or genuinely communicate with others—and especially others who are blind.

The Historical Context

Regardless of whether the authors I examine were physically disabled or not, at the time

of publication, their books were marketed and consumed at least in part as "disability narratives," to employ the modern term, and therefore read as advocacy for the disenfranchised, or as educational material about disability intended for the public, both disabled and nondisabled. In a broader sense, I argue, these texts can also be read as a call to an ethical sense of responsibility to fellow human beings. But clearly, the pitfall of such labelling is that it reduces the range of initial and subsequent interpretation, since the narrative voice or subject of the discourse is always first received and consumed, through some filter of presumption, as "disabled." Historicizing the context of disability narratives—how they were written and consumed—is therefore a priority in this dissertation. The time frame of the nineteenth century must be part of what is described and evaluated, because of several distinctive and momentous changes that marked the era, which I will examine below in relation to the specific texts to be discussed.

First, as pointed out by the critics, this was the period in which the concept of "normality" became especially prominent in people's consciousness in Europe, with important implications for developing notions of evolution, and also of disability. Lennard J. Davis argues that the representation of disability in novels had its "transitional moment" in the nineteenth century, following the introduction of the term "norm" into the English language in 1855 (*Enforcing Normalcy* 3).[6] In accordance with the the idea of the "norm," the period witnessed a rising interest in "popular science"—that is, phrenology, progressive evolutionary theory, and eugenics, which all claimed that there were scientific patterns of development and significance within the conduct of life itself. But conversely, to establish developmental norms is also to establish such concepts as degeneracy, retardation, viability, and even elimination of non-functioning or

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[6] Other literary and disability historians have identified the nineteenth century as a pivotal phase, when the concept of disability was conceptualised, articulated, and experienced. See Davis "Disability Normality and Power," Newman "Disability and Life Writing," and Schweik.

inadequately functioning individuals.[7]

Secondly, the ascendancy of the middle-class must also be foregrounded as one of the contributing factors to the prominence of disability narratives in the nineteenth century. Although many activities and debates are understood in terms of this transition, I would especially emphasize here the expansion of middle-class authorship and readership as the social phenomenon most relevant to my discussion.

Described in a 1814 article as the "greatest improvement" in printing technology "since the discovery of the art itself" ("Our Journal of this Day" 3), the mass production of publications in the nineteenth century transformed education, commerce, the distribution of information, how people spent their leisure time, and their perspectives on "the pedestrian description of everyday reality" (Hobsbawn, qtd. in Howden and Kawachi 102).[8] Through widely available publications, nineteenth-century citizens gained both interest in and access to the lives of other people just like themselves—and, presumably, "different" from themselves, those whom people did not normally see up close—to an unprecedented extent. And disabilities, along with poverty, illness, and crimes, were part of an immediate and unavoidable reality for them, as well.

As disability scholars have noted, the nineteenth century was when people with disabilities, aided by then-emerging technologies, found the means not only to "record their thoughts and experiences" (Newman, "Disability and Life Writing" 262), but also to "read" their fellow human beings' lives. G. Thomas Couser's observation on the current popularity of disability life writing can be applied to the emergence of nineteenth century disability narratives

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[7] Davis here argues that disability and normalcy are two sides of the same coin, so to speak, and cannot be discussed separately from each other (2).

[8] On the subsequent changes following upon the expansion of the readership and authorship and its causes in the nineteenth century, see M. Lyons 313–32 and Saunders 199–203. And on reading and writing lives in particular, see Broughton 12.

as well. Narratives of illness and disability flourished because, "located on the borders of the literary, they are particularly accessible to marginalized individuals" (*Recovering Bodies* 4), and "pose a significant challenge to the stigmatization of illness and disability and to the general valorization of mind over body in Western culture, the tendency to deny the body's mediation in intellectual and spiritual life."[9] Such texts could therefore improve the intellectual and social lives of disabled people in the nineteenth century, but also provide telling evidence that despite the years between then and now, the challeges such people face have not changed much.

Critical works such as Juliette Atkinson's *Victorian Biography Reconsidered* have increasingly turned our attention to nineteenth-century representations of unknown people's lives. Following her lead, in this study I extend her distinction between "heroes" in the Carlylean hero-worship sense and the lives of the less known and unknown beyond matters of class and gender to encompass disability. Such a project demands foregrounding the cultural context of disability narratives at that time. While until recently people with disabilities were routinely labeled, categorized, confined, and at times even eliminated from society at an institutional and national level, the nineteenth century also witnessed massive growth in municipal charities. Motivated by philanthropic impulses, these organizations carried out a host of reforming and ameliorating activities, with disabilities capturing particular attention among those social ills these organizations sought to cure.

Although such activies have a long-held, often exaggeratedly negative reputation, most notably embodied in constitutional ineffectiveness and the cruel, insensitive operations of the poorhouse (Henriques 355, 366; Fishman 727, 774), at the core of much Victorian charity legislation lay an Evangelical ideal of Christian ethics and a willingness to relieve the

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[9] On an emerging demand for disability life writing as a contemporary literary trend, see also Newman ("Disability and Life Writing" 262).

unfortunate. It was for example an Evangelical British physician, Thomas Rhodes Armitage, who first introduced Braille, the most effective writing system for the blind to this day, into Britain some time in the vicinity of 1868 (Hylson-Smith 206; Bledsoe 21).

Although the first educational institution for blind children was founded in 1784 in Paris (Bonner 14–6), and the first English school for blind students opened in 1791,[10] historians agree that even if modern legal and social changes regarding the welfare of persons with disabilities had their origin in the eighteenth century, the momentum of the trend grew in the nineteenth century, and has continued up to the present day (Braddock and Parish 28).[11] Spurred by an increasing emphasis on the Christian charitable spirit, Victorian sympathy drew readers towards the actual victims. Britain's most preeminent charity organizations were founded during this period, and the number of them rapidly increased up through the late nineteenth century (Knight 43).

John Locke posed a common question regarding perception (133–9; vol. I, bk. II, ch. 9): if someone blind from birth gains sight, could that person distinguish different shapes by vision alone, without the help of tactile sense? For Locke, the answer was no, but far more strikingly, he goes on to insist that "reference to all Objects of sight" is indispensable to "the understanding of a Man" (152; vol. I, bk. II, ch. 11). The relative importance of our senses in knowledge acquisition has been debated for centuries. Placing Western ocularcentrism within a larger historical and political context, in *The Victorian Eye*, Chris Otter discusses the social meaning of sight:

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[10] The first schools for the blind in America were opened in 1832: Perkins Institute in Boston, the New York Institution for the Blind in New York City, and the Overlook School for the Blind in Philadelphia (Sassani 145; Braddock and Parish 29). I will discuss Perkins Institute at length in Chapter II, Section 1.

[11] For the history of social welfare legislation in England in general, see Handel's research that traces back to the seventeenth century British law of charities (65).

> Explicating historically specific modes of perception . . . has been a fruitful way of
> historicizing, and critiquing, hegemonic modes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century
> experience and subjectivity. Alienation, objectification, coercion, gendered and racialized
> identities, all have been approached through the historical analysis of perception—and
> vision in particular. (24)

How then did those Victorians who did not know the world through sight share their experience with others? Bearing in mind James Olney's argument that autobiography offers greater access to experience than any other form of writing (13), I will look at auto/biographical[12] narratives of blindness, particularly in the first section, to locate how the narrators' non-visual experience underpins their sense of self, and how this constructed authorial subjectivity then reflects both internal and external self-views.

Levinas' Concept of Face

It is precisely at this historical moment, that people were developing new ways of being more aware of, and interested in, the lives of Others. This scrutiny can hardly be called a new cultural phenomenon; all ages and regions are continually adapting their attitudes towards different Others. What is important about the nineteenth century shifts is they came to be embodied in cultural products and declared norms specific to that society. We must consider the meaning of what it then meant to be ethical in the way they lived their lives—and by extension, as inheritors of this ethos, how we ethically live ours. It is a human constant that we to varying degrees live among others. We interact with people, influence each other, accept or deny, mirror

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[12] In this thesis, I use the term auto/biography with a slash to 1) indicate both biographical and autobiographical life writing, 2) to convey my general understanding that the generic conventions of autobiography and biography are compatible and mutually-influencing, and 3) to demonstrate my opinion that the boundaries between these two, and ultimately fact and fiction (as in one's ability to comprehend another's life, as well as one's own) are murky.

or change each other's thoughts, feelings, and acts. What then makes others "other"? According to Burton Blatt's definition, "others" are "People who look too *different*, or behave too *differently*, or who see the world too *differently*, or whose visions about life itself are not easily appreciated" (italics mine; 305).

It can therefore be argued on an ontological level that Otherness begins to emerge when our own identity is defined by differences between "us" and "them," but that our assessment of what constitutes "difference" is subjective and arbitrary at best, or even deliberately biased. Furthermore, as Judith Butler has pointed out, in practice our sights are so confined that we often do not recognize, acknowledge, or even actually "see" others who are different from ourselves. We can in short be effectively blind to our own blindness (27).

This obliviousness accounts in part for why recent scholars have drawn Levinas' theory of ethics into a variety of different debates in the field of disability studies, to the point that it now functions as a thread running through the most fundamental concerns of a discipline that seeks the advancement of humanity in general; that is, a worthy way of life for everyone, no matter how *different* each "way" might be among us.[13] Levinas' approach is drawn upon so frequently because it offers a foundation for understanding—or gives a chance for imagining at least—what it is like to be Other. Although Levinas' ethical philosophy is often critiqued as overly theological—too deeply tinged with Jewish or other forms of mysticism, apparently upsetting to some others—at its core this philosophy is grounded in the world he lives in, and therefore in a world among others. His concern is "consciousness's self-experience in embodied, everyday, temporal existence"—"my place in the sun," as Levinas puts it, or "being-in-the-world" in

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[13] On other critics besides Wehrs and Haney who discuss Levinas' ethics in connection with disability studies, see Wood 21; B. Smith 63; Michalko "Coming Face-to-Face" 102.

Heidegger's terms[14] (Wehrs and Haney 16).[15]

For Levinas, Other is represented most strikingly by the concept of "face," which starts with the actual presence of a person, who phenomenologically brings ethical consciousness into our daily life, in our ordinary activities. As Butler suggests, acknowledgement of our relations to others is "the venue for [our] ethical responsibility" (22); conversely, as Annika Thiem argues more vividly, to cast a blind eye is to abandon responsibilities we owe to others (226). This Otherness belongs to an entirely different sphere. Even if Otherness is regarded as "untouchable" (Tseng 460), Levinas still insists there is an ethical responsibility.

Examples of both denying the existence of others and of accepting an ethical responsibility to them are abundant, but for my purposes, it is most important to recognize that differently grounded ethical viewpoints—legal, medical, educational, economic, and so on—with different criteria for difference nevertheless agree that people with disabilities make up a group profoundly vulnerable to othering (McMahon et al. 68; Hoffman 1499–1501; Bérubé viii). As Nikki Murdick et al. note, the practice of othering a person with disabilities, both institutionally and individually, and consciously or unconsciously, leads to "segregation, isolation, persecution" of that person as a "social outcast" (310).

Levinas' ethics is not a traditional one; that is, neither his approach nor his goal are informed by deontological or utilitarian ethics, but are based on face-to-face responses to a moral call of responsibility (*TI* 195).[16] When he claims ethics as the primary philosophy, he is calling

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[14] Just like his contemporary Levinas, Martin Heidegger conceptualises and explores the implications of "Being-there" ("Dasein"), "there" being the world. Levinas' concept is more thoroughly based on his internal experiences, however, and thus more closely related to the idea of nineteenth-century sympathy. For further discussion of Heidegger's idea of "world," see Heidegger 240 and Steiner 67–8. On the differences between Heidegger and Levinas' concept of Other, see Wehrs and Haney 16–7.

[15] See also Morgan 106 and Arnett 49.

[16] For a further and specific discussion on the nature of Levinas' ethics, see, for instance, Masterson 73 and Jung 17n16, who describes it as not "deontological" but "de-ontologized."

for a focus on the lived conditions of possibility, which often require a response to a primordial, face-to-face relationship with our neighbor that occurs before any rationalization, knowledge, or even conscious thought. In a sense, caring about Others' "material needs" is what we spiritually *need* (italics mine; *NTR* 99).

It cannot be denied that Levinas' philosophy is powerfully shaped by a biographical component. Levinas was born into a Jewish family in Lithuania, in 1906, which moved to the Ukraine as migrant refugees during the First World War. After returning to their homeland, Levinas, at the age of seventeen and as a native speaker of Russian by choice,[17] went to France to attend the University of Strasbourg, and then the University of Freiburg, where he went "to see Husserl and . . . found Heidegger" (Glendinning 146). He married his childhood friend in 1932 and became a French citizen. During the Second World War, he was drafted and served in Paris until he was captured, spending the last five years of the war in prison camps. He still considered himself fortunate, because, unlike most European Jewry, he survived. He then first became director of a Jewish school in Paris, served as professor at several universities, and settled in the philosophy department of the Sorbonne in 1973, where he spent the rest of his academic career until 1979. He died in Paris in 1995 at the age of 89.

Although his works were barely recognized, except by small academic circles, before the end of the 1980s, they have become "a revolutionizing force" in twentieth-century intellectual history within philosophy and religious studies, and in ethical criticism more generally (Wehrs 1). Throughout his long career, whether he focuses on religion and ontology, or on the decolonialism of the Third World, Levinas' core values always reflect his experiences under the

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[17] For the sake of providing their children with a better education, Levinas' parents spoke to them in Russian, but conversed with each other in Yiddish (Kleinberg 19–20). Yet, it is claimed that the first language he learned to read was Hebrew (Hand 10).

Nazi regime. As noted earlier, he was not incarcerated in a concentration camp, but taken to two forced labor camps. It was this imprisonment that saved him from the fate of millions of other European Jews, but on his release he found that all his family, except for his wife and daughter, had been killed (*DF* 165, 236). Although, in his major works Levinas rarely refers explicitly to the direst period of his life, he does discuss it in a few of his writings. "Signature," the last chapter of *Difficult Freedom*, is one example, where Levinas describes his life as a "disparate inventory," a biography that is "dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror" (*DF* 291).

One can never fully know what despair and horror Levinas saw in people's faces. Yet, when he later asserts that "ethics arise in the face of the Other" (82–3), his list of the conditions, emotions, and demands the face represents adheres closely to the experience of the persecuted. Levinas points to "the stranger, the widow, and the orphan" (24), arguing that "they are the victims, the disasters . . . the powerless ones" (27), and therefore it is to them, Levinas keeps reminding us, that we are obligated (201). It is a "deep, bodily felt sense" (Levin, *Philosopher's Gaze* 236) that leads him to name the vulnerable, faceless sufferers. What is implied here is not necessarily the actual faces of living people; just knowing the fact of other people's conditions, we have to face our responsibility.

This responsibility does not require, however, our identification with them. By face, I understand Levinas to mean a sign of absolute alterity, which he argues is the pre-condition and the primary site of encounter for an ethical involvement with Others both individually and collectively. Furthermore, the fact of the other's incomprehensibility necessarily leads to a critical engagement with one's self, because we cannot escape from our responsibility towards Others (*NTR* 168). Levinas argues that individuals only become "a responsible or ethical 'I'" if

they "depose or dethrone" themselves "in favour of the vulnerable other" (DEL 26–7). For Levinas, our individual "place in the sun" is not based on natural rights but something always obtained at the cost of others, and whereas most of us, to varying degrees, either do not acknowledge, or even feel justified in sacrificing others' benefits in favor of our own, for Levinas this is a dilemma always before us, consolidated and embodied in the sight of the suffering of others' faces. Whether passively or actively, then, our approach to the face of another entails "the most basic mode of responsibility," because through the other's face, we are "exposed as a usurper of the place of the other" (DEL 23–24).

I argue that Levinas' idea of face helps us undestand the dynamics by which we see, think about, and imagine how it is to be Other, and in particular, what it must be like to be someone with disabilities. "Imagine," is accurate, because, as Levinas asserts, it is arguably impossible to comprehend how others feel. But the truth of that statement has been a subject for debate within Western epistemological philosophy running back to Descartes: "how can one know what *is*?" (Wehrs and Haney 17). Even if that question cannot be answered completely, by reading Levinasian faces in blind narratives, I hope to offer a clue about how disability becomes an outlet for theories of the sympathetic imagination.

Sympathy

Sympathy and/or empathy have been widely discussed for many years as central concerns in Victorian fiction. Recent studies, however, have tended to shift the focus from considering sympathy as simply one of the human emotions, as in sentimental plots, to engaging with it as the force behind acts of reading and interpretation. Rachel Ablow, for instance, suggests that sympathy should be understood as "a psychic structure through which the subject is produced, consolidated, or redefined." More than a mere feeling, it is "a mode of relating to others and of

defining a self" (2). In a similar but more literary vein, Brigid Lowe argues that because

sympathy is demonstrably an animating principle of novel reading, it demands more critical

attention (9–12).

Other critics use Levinas' theory to analyze how what the nineteenth century called

sympathy is used to engage with otherness in literary works. In *Victorian Lessons in Empathy*

and Difference, Rebecca N. Mitchell examines canonical texts, including artworks, through the

lens of Levinasian ethics to develop a paradigm for exploring nineteenth-century attitudes

towards race, gender, and class. Since my interest lies in critically engaging with Levinas' theory

of alterity to understand more fully the Victorians' sympathetic concerns with otherness, and for

people with disabilities in particular, Mitchell's work aligns rather closely with mine. My

reading of the narratives of blindness upholds her claim: ethical behavior possibly arises out of

our acknowledgment of the unknowability of the other (19–22).

Before proceeding, I will look at how the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used the

term "sympathy." My contention here is that understanding this earlier understanding helps us to

grasp Levinas' ethical standpoint on the importance of the face, because both the Enlightenment

philosophers and Levinas are above all concerned with how we are human, and humane. In

common modern usage, "sympathy" and "empathy" indicate roughly the same thing: congruence

of the observer and the observed. But only "roughly," because in the health professions in

particular, empathy is generally considered to be a "more favorable" attitude to take towards

others. This evaluation surfaced shortly after the term's appearance in English-speaking

countries in the early twentieth century. Rae Greiner explains that empathy began replacing

sympathy because it seemed to offer a "newer, better version" of sympathy ("Thinking" 418).

Sympathy as a concept had come to be seen as incapable of capturing the nuances of moral

thought; it therefore should be superseded by empathy. Emphasizing empathy's "expressive force," David Depew argues that its prominence was the necessary consequence of a previous "deflation/descent" of sympathy from "the sense of universal attunement and resonance in romanticism to the smarmy sense of pity and superiority" that the term now suggests (105).[18] Researchers therfore came to distinguish the terms by claiming that while sympathy is motivated by a self-absorbed interest, empathy involves a deep engagement with and understanding of the experience of the other person (Sinclair et al. 440–3).

 As Greiner's thorough research in "1909" suggests, however, in its pre-twentieth century sense, sympathy refers to something far more complex than a conceited attitude towards others. Rather than entangle myself in an argument over the working definitions of two related terms that is anachronistic in terms of my chosen period, I will take my direction from earlier understandings of sympathy which at the very least we know resonated with writers and readers in the nineteenth century. I will therefore align myself with Adam Smith and David Hume's general position, which articulates an idea of sympathy that contains within it the need for a distance between self and other for people to exercise fellow-feeling through actions directed at reducing others' distress.

Greiner also explains that that the two terms also at one time shared a set of characteristics that have their basis in Enlightenment moral philosophy and nineteenth-century aesthetics, though such associations are obsolete today. The term empathy, a translation of a German "Einfühlung," was first used in an English context in 1912 by the writer Vernon Lee. In *The Beautiful*, after describing "the relation between the spectator and the work of art" as "the most basic notion of an aesthetic experience," Lee argues that "the possibility of empathy" is

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[18] For a few examples, see the comparisons of the two terms in Keats 26–7; Husain 200; Kolm 59–60; and Depew 103–5.

understood as "the intuitive and emotional coincidence between the two sides of the relation, namely the spectator and the work of art" (66–7). But prior to the above discussion, Lee had located the root of any aesthetic judgment she makes in Smithsonian sympathy: "This phenomenon of aesthetic 'Einfühlung' is . . . analogous to that of moral sympathy. Just as when we 'put ourselves in the place' or more vulgarly 'in the skin' of a fellow creature, we are . . . attributing to him the feelings we should have in similar circumstances . . . in looking at the Doric column" ("Recent Aesthetics," qtd. in Sinclair et al. 434). Although for modern readers, aesthetic and emotional responses may seem disconnected, or relate to each other only remotely, Lee's description clearly implies that emotional processes and corporeal sensation interact, both operating in a shared physical environment. Greiner's argument is therefore worth keeping in mind: that the twentieth-century idea of empathy inherits many of its assumptions from Smith and Hume's moral philosophy, which proceeds on the premise that our intellectual, moral, and sentimental operations function reciprocally with bodily reactions.[19] I therefore address the aesthetic aspect of sympathy/empathy in my efforts to trace the terms' historical origin, because I want to emphasize that sympathy/empathy is fundamentally a social, and also moral, question, and therefore the reason I pay attention to the life narratives of forgotten blind authors.

It should be noted here, however, that among the senses, what is under discussion is sight, as indicated by the term "spectator." As much as we emotionally engage with art, Lee's remarks relate to how we look at objects. And since empathy—or rather, its possibility—is a coincidental occurrence, like a chemical reaction, between "two sides of the relation," a spectator and his or her focus of gaze, the resulting sympathetic relation described here is between who sees and what, or whom, is seen. Although Greiner and Lee diverge in their opinions—particularly in how

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[19] For further discussion, see Packham (*Eighteenth-Century Vitalism*) 52–82 and 251–2.

they understand the functions of sympathy in generating approbation and therefore guiding our moral judgement,[20] their fundamental concern, the pursuit of moral theory, is built upon the same foundation, which I will outline in two aspects below.

To begin with, both Hume's and Smith's emphasis on somatic language in relation to "the passions," which are both positive and negative—pleasure and displeasure, attraction and repulsion—grounds our emotional response to the information from our senses as a basis of human communication, and therefore connection and community. Spectatorship is essential to this process. Hume, in his *Treatise* (1738), argues that with the exception of certain animal instincts, our passions and our emotional attachments are evoked by an affinity, real or imagined, with the spectacle:

> We sympathize more with persons contiguous to us, than with persons remote from us:
> With our acquaintance, than with strangers. . . . But notwithstanding this variation of our
> sympathy, we give the same approbation to the same moral qualities in *China* as in
> *England*. They appear equally virtuous, and recommend themselves equally to the esteem
> of a judicious spectator. (871; bk. III, pt. iii, sec. 1)

Hume's focus here is on this link between the spectator and his or her sympathetic object through the imagined identification between two parties, assuming that an ideal disposition of the former is "judicious." Similarly, Smith, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), argues that the passion "arises from any object" and awakens fellow-feeling "in the breast of every attentive spectator" (5; pt. I, sec. i, ch. 1):

> Upon some occasions sympathy may seem to arise merely from the view of a certain
> emotion in another person. The passions . . . may seem to be transfused from one man to

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[20] For a detailed analysis on the differences between Hume and Smith regarding the concept of sympathy, see Sagar 681–705; Martin 107–20; and Sayre-McCord 208–36.

another. . . . Grief and joy, for example, strongly expressed in the look and gestures of

any one, at once affect the spectator with some degree of a like painful or agreeable

emotion. A smiling face is, to every body that sees it, a cheerful object; as a sorrowful

countenance, on the other hand, is a melancholy one. (6; pt. I, sec. i, ch. 1)

A "smiling face" and "melancholy one": Smith's plain, descriptive words suggest what features

of the spectacle our gaze is directed at. As for the desirable mode of commitment to an object,

Smith advances the idea of the "impartial spectator."

This idea leads us to the second attribute that Enlightenment sympathy embodies.

According to Smith, when we are about to extend an act of benevolence to others, we are prone

to be partial, no matter what good intention may lie behind the act, because our intensified

emotions "discolour our views of things":

even when we are endeavouring to place ourselves in the situation of another, and to

regard the objects that interest us in the light in which they will naturally appear to him,

the fury of our own passions constantly calls us back to our own place, where every thing

appears magnified and misrepresented by self-love. (389; sec. III, part iii, ch. 4)

In order to save ourselves from the sins of self-righteousness and hypocrisy that may entice us,

Smith therefore argues that we need to assume the perspective of the impartial spectator. He

begins with acknowledging our limitations: as long as we are content with our own situations, we

can never perceive the suffering of other people, since our senses are incapable of transferring

what others feel. Only by exercising our imaginative capacity can we sympathize, and thus be

permitted to either approve or disapprove of other people. But to be an unbiased sympathizer, we

also need to extend ourselves outside of our own comfort and sanctimony and any close

identification with the objects of attention, as we "endeavor to view them as at a certain distance

from us" (277; sec. III, pt. iii, ch. 1).

Hume also insists on the importance of mental distance (871–3; bk. III, pt. iii, sec. 1, 891; bk. III, pt. iii, sec. 2). We can recognize here another vital difference between empathy and sympathy as the term was used in the eighteenth century. Since we are never free from the influences of events and our own interests and sentiments, we can only view, understand, and then construct judgments subjectively, through an engagement with "the relations of resemblance and contiguity." Hume as a result insists that it is necessary to keep an undisturbed distance between oneself and others in order to let ourselves have "the sympathy in its full perfection" (177; bk. I, pt. iii, sec. 9). Or to put it differently, we must keep ourselves to some degree dispassionate about others' feelings—indifferent, even—to sympathize with someone other than ourselves.

Hume's and Smith's conclusions anticipate the modern theory of ethics articulated by Levinas because they all stress the contrast between the emotional distance of what we would call sympathy and empathy towards their object.[21] While empathy commonly suggests a process of merging into feeling with others, sympathy always maintains a boundary between other and self. Or as Greiner puts it, as a process for "sharing feeling," sympathy denies what empathy foregrounds as its most important feature: "the fusion of self with others" ("Thinking" 418). As Levinas claims, it is necessary to distance ourselves from others when attempting to understand the Other. This responsibility is described with the term "proximity" (*OBBE* 68, 139 ; PP 168): "the proximity of the Other is not simply close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself . . . responsible for him . . . . Proximity does

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[21] Critics have pointed out the connection between eighteenth-century fellow-feeling and Levinas' ethics. See Hutchens 24 for the equivalency of Levinas' responsibility for the stranger and sympathy. Concerning Adam Smith and Levinas, see Llewelyn 88–9 and Blosser 170–1.

not revert to this intentionality; in particular it does not revert to the fact that the other is known

to me" (*EI* 97). Sympathizers with the blind should realize that there is no complete "fusion" or

understanding of others. But unlike the Enlightenment philosophers, who are aspiring towards a

higher, judicious self as their primary and ultimate goal, Levinas' thesis requires us to recognize

others' claim before ourselves.

We can never fathom the depth of the divine existence of others; in Smith's carefully

chosen, even diffident words, we can, at the utmost, only imagine becoming somebody (2; pt. I,

sec. i, ch. 1), "form *some* idea of his sensations," "*even* feel *something* which . . . is *not*

altogether unlike them" but although definitely "weaker in degree, "excites *some degree* of the

same emotion" (italics mine; 3; pt. I, sec. i, ch. 1). In passing, I will note that this interpretive

difference helps to explicate why Levinas' ethics is regarded as "against empathy" in some

supposedly well-reviewed online encyclopedias.[22] As Leora Maltz-Leca explains, Levinas does

not exactly discuss empathy in terms of its dictionary definition, but as a concept per se (319).

Because the orientation of Levinas' argument aligns with a pre-twentieth-century understanding

of sympathy, before the term shed most of its original concepts, I therefore argue that Levinas'

stance is demonstrably "empathetic."

How then can we productively sympathize with Others, and especially the most

vulnerable, whose situations are often the most unimaginable? And if such knowledge is even

possible, how do we *know* the interiority of others: those most intimate and familiar, but also

those most alien to us? Here the struggles to define, and to cross, those boundaries between self

and Other are situated within the Victorians' famous preoccupations with new understandings of,

and hunger for, "knowledge." People in nineteenth-century Britain were captivated by knowing

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[22] Lou Agosta, "Empathy and Sympathy in Ethics" and "A Heideggerian Approach to Empathy." Also, see Amiel-Houser and Mendelson-Maoz 206.

what was previously unknown—scientific discoveries, new technological inventions, foreign countries, medicine and human anatomy, and the lives of the "other" side. Stimulated by this urge and even demand, certain genres of publication proliferated. Some were focused on social reform, such as ethnographic surveys of "low life" conducted by Henry Mayhew and Charles Booth.[23] Others seemed more concerned with satisfying readers' voyeuristic curiosity through published series of fictional confessions,[24] or a general appetite for scandal and vicarious thrills through "true" crime narratives[25] or sensation novels. As demonstrated by William Makepeace Thackeray's candid response to Mayhew's report, reading about another's suffering often made clear a previous ignorance or apathy: "these wonders and terrors have been lying by your door and mine. . . . We had but to go a hundred yards off and *see* for ourselves, but we never did." Mayhew makes Thackeray, and his general readership, recognize that practicing ethical action is not possible if you keep the suffering Other at arm's length: "You are not unkind; not ungenerous. But of such wondrous and complicated misery as this you confess you had no idea" (353).

This relative lack of knowledge, willingness, action in relation to Others' lives is attributed to our want of imagination. Within the long tradition of Western intellectual assumptions, through the agency of the imagination, self-knowledge and truth are inextricably linked to vision. For instance, drawing on Hegelian aesthetics, James Elkins remarks that

> Since the Greeks, thinking and seeing have begun together, at the same moment in

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[23] Henry Mayhew's articles in the *Morning Chronicle* were compiled and published as *London Labour and the London Poor* in 1861-2. And a generation later, influenced by Mayhew's work, Charles Booth conducted the first social survey between 1889 and 1903, published as *Life and Labour of the People of London*. On the development of social investigation in the early nineteenth-century to early twentieth-century, see Janowitz 451–3.

[24] See, for example, George 388–404, for a theoretical framework for this subgenre.

[25] i.e., *The Terrific Register, or, Record of Crimes, Judgments, Providencies and Calamities*, *Cleave's Weekly Police Gazette*, and *Penny Sunday Times and People's Police Gazette*, to name a few popular collections published in the 1820s through the 1840s in London.

imagination . . . . [T]hinking is imagining—and as the word suggests, the imagination is a place inhabited by images. All the principal metaphors for thinking, knowledge, and truth itself have to do with seeing . . . . [A]nything that exists—any being, which means also any thought—must be something that can be luminous or illuminated, so that it can be *seen* in the mind's eye. (224)

I proceed on the assumption that regardless of the time period, acquiring a knowledge of different lives requires some kind of negotiating between self and Otherness, and further, that one of the faculties that must be present in such negotiations is sympathy. But what does that mean, and especially in the Victorian period? What did the Victorians think about the distance that separates oneself and the object of sympathy? I find a distinction drawn by Lauren Wispé aligns most closely with my understanding of habitual Victorian practice: while "empathy" is a way of "knowing," sympathy is a way of "relating" (318). Given this historical context, this dissertation seeks to contribute not only to the study of cultural resonances in nineteenth-century discourse and social practice, but also to assumptions commonly held in disability studies today, which are built upon and shaped by this earlier discourse and practice, suggesting that our current understanding of disability demands additional informed analysis, if we wish to extend it further towards equity.

An Overview of the Argument

Chapter One: Recognizing Blindness

This study is broadly divided into three main parts, with the primary texts ordered chronologically, and each focuses on the use of face as a trope and how it forms a relation to sympathetic imagination. The first chapter, "Recognizing blindness," examines earlier works by

blind authors, each with historical significance at the dawn of disability narratives produced by the disabled. Section One introduces the eighteenth century exasperated poet Thomas Blacklock and his autobiographical poems to suggest what British Enlightenment ideas and assumptions about the relationship between blindness and sympathy look like to the blind. What could not escape Blacklock's sightless eyes was people's counterfeit "performed" sympathy as they directed sneering faces towards his blindness. At the time, it was very uncommon for persons with disabilities to express their opinions, let alone describe their feelings, about their lives, so candidly and passionately.[26] I argue however, that Blacklock transcends his personal experiences and emotions through an act of ethical humanity by capturing tears on people's face through his poetic vision.

Section Two discusses James Wilson's auto/biography of the blind as the first of its kind in a life writing genre, and as a prosopography in the terms that Alison Booth provides. By creating a collective biography of blind people, Wilson presents himself as an advocate for them, rewrites geography and history, and ultimately provides a "face" to the unsung, unwritten blind persons who are commonly reduced to "faceless anonymity" (Jernigan "Blindness"). As suggested above, it is understood that only through the faculty of sympathy can a sighted person ethically imagine a life without vision. I conclude the chapter, however, by pointing out that extending sympathy is not an act restricted to the sighted community. Both of the narratives discussed demonstrate that blind persons are not only the recipients of sympathy, but are also and always themselves capable of feeling for, and with, others.

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[26] Probably the sole exception of this is Harriet Martineau, a deaf and invalid dauntless social critic in the mid-nineteenth century.

Chapter Two: Representing Blindness

Following from the discussion of life writing by the blind, the majority of the second

chapter, "Representing Blindness," is devoted to works representing the blind by two of the most

popular sighted authors of the period: Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins. Both were novelists

and also influential journalistic writers, who often greatly affected the sympathetic responses of

their readers.[27] As part of my analysis of their work that could and often was read as advocacy

for the blind, I will also draw on other Victorian journalistic reports on the environment and

condition of people with visual impairments that supplement, and often challenge, the

professional publications discussed in the previous chapter. Such journalism often provided a far

more limited and subjective perspective, leaning heavily on emerging notions of sympathy very

familiar to us, clearly as part of an appeal to readers.

As Martha Stoddard Holmes observes, Dickens and Collins share a concern with

blindness in general (143), but their styles and engagement with their subjects differ as much as

their biographical interest in and experiences with blind persons. In Section One, I examine how

Dickens' periodical articles and his report on the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts Asylum

for the Blind in *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842) provide intertextual resources

for his creation of a blind character in "The Cricket on the Hearth" (1845). I argue that Dickens'

sentimental scenes of the character's recognizing the faces of her loved ones are genuine,

sympathetic, and false at the same time. Although Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral*

Sentiments identifies the sympathetic imagination as the characteristic that enables us to place

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[27] In an 1858 letter, Dickens wrote to Collins: "Everything that happens. . . shows beyond mistake that you can't shut out the world; that you are in it, to be of it; that you get yourself into a false position the moment you try to sever yourself from it; that you must mingle with it, and make the best of it, and make the best of yourself into the bargain" (Marlow 132). Dickens' social commitment is well known, but Collins also criticizes the patriarchal law system in his novels, as he was well versed in law and also was critical of its consequential social injustice. Lynn Pykett, for instance, argues that Collins' portrayals of marriage law and women's vulnerable social status in *No Name* "press the reader towards a sympathetic response to the woman" (141).

ourselves in the situation of suffering others, fictional representations of physical, and thus visible, afflictions can make sympathy a "tricky business" (Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism* 9). Such sentimental moments in Dickens' novels, for instance, provoked favorable and harsh criticism from his contemporaries.

The second section of the chapter analyses Collins' version of a blind heroine, which presents another kind of intertextual relationship than the one presented by Dickens. Highly conscious of how blindness is represented in fiction, Collins attempts to present a character's "blindness as it really is" (xxxix). One of his literary strategies to achieve this purpose is to present scenes that are too unconventional and too excessively sensual for the prevailing standards of Victorian readers regardless of whether a character is disabled or not—most notably, through his accounts of his character touching her lover's body and experiencing fleshly pleasure from the sensation. Collins also questions our preconceptions about vision by distressing his character through the sight of her betrothed's face, discolored due to the side effect of the treatment he has taken.

This chapter therefore explores how two famous sighted authors respond to and attempt to reshape contemporary efforts at constructing a master narrative of sympathy for blindness, with special emphasis on the emerging cultural assumption that the capacity to feel others' suffering was a mark of moral development (Holmes 29). Further, the chapter investigates these authors' own auto/biographical narratives to evaluate the components of their moral qualities, and the degree to which the sympathetic imagination is a vital element of their narratives.

Chapter Three: Retelling Blindness

The concluding chapter, "Retelling Blindness" places my investigation within the context

of the field of disability life writing. I extend my previously stated argument regarding the "sympathetic imagination" to explore the vice-versa premise. If the act of imagining the lives of others, in this case of blind persons, is a sympathetic act, how do we engage with blind persons' imaginings of the lives of the sighted? Here my example is Francis Browne, a blind poet who conceives and writes a fictional autobiography of a sighted person. In a manner related to my discussion of blind authors in Chapter One, I concentrate on what Browne reveals about the consequences of the notion that visual experience provides the basis for human aesthetic and ethical responses. But I also argue that unlike her predecessors, Browne's use of "face" anticipates Levinas' ethics more straightforwardly, to the point of addressing the dilemma Levinas confronts about our fundamental existence. Having foregrounded these discussions, I then conclude the chapter by reading Browne's novel as an "autofiction," drawing upon the potential that the theory and criticism of this comparatively recently discussed literary genre offers to us. Through this form of self-telling, Browne affirms her individuality, shares her experience, and reconstructs her life, but not in spite of, but *through* her blindness. Browne's novel can therefore be read as powerful revelation and advocacy for and by a person with a disability.

Concluding Remarks

This study draws on a handful of blind narratives by the sighted and blind to address the interplay between blindness, life writing, fiction, and disability discourse during the long nineteenth century in Britain. On a slightly broader scale, however, this study also has affinities with minority studies and identity politics, for which disability auto/biography can provide case studies. Finally, each narrative that I explore in these chapters, though written from different

positions, offers not only a distinctive example of the exercise of the sympathetic imagination, but also an engagement with ideas both clarified and complicated in useful ways by the Levinasian concept of the face.

Paul John Eakin has written that ethics is not a merely one "possible perspective" on life writing, but provides "a practice" that enables us to apprehend "our sense of the direction and meaning of our lives" ("Introduction" 4). Such a practice demands tenacity, perseverance, and, of course, some talents; I would only add that it also requires imagination. The act of looking back in the past and piecing a life together, another's or your own, and the exercise of the imagination more generally, are inseparably linked to each other. Or, as Charles L. Grisword argues, story-telling and imagination are fundamentally one thing (337).

When the life at issue emerges from, or is placed within disability narratives, it especially demands sympathetic imagination, since the subject resides in "literally unimagined territory" for most of us (Holmes viii), regardless of whether we are the writer or the reader of it. By analyzing texts composed by sighted and unsighted authors during a time when knowledge was assumed to be constituted as a visual image in mind, my dissertation shows how life without vision is represented verbally within the context of prevailing ideas about the relationship between knowledge of self and others, and examines how sympathetic imagination links the two sets of assumptions and practices. With regard to the works of blind authors, a non-visual imagination necessarily provides that crucial link between subjectivity and knowledge that informs the extension of sympathy towards others. Ultimately, I argue that these narratives not only represent sightless lives, but reflect on the practices of self-reflection and the recognition of others in sophisticated ways that find their paradigmatic form in a recognizable and distinctive sightless authorial self.

A consequence and a justification for this study is the exposure of the absence or inadequacy of detailed studies of nineteenth-century blindness narratives. Tracing the historical and cultural threads of such narratives can, I believe, make a contribution to the larger analytical engagement with the idea of Otherness. Historicizing such narratives is therefore not only a necessary critical component of this study, but can also help us understand how we, in our time, have inherited, sometimes unconsciously, notions of ethical conduct towards others, disabled and otherwise, with whom we share the same time and space, here and now.

Chapter I: Recognizing Blindness

Section 1 Sympathy, Imagination, and Tears in Thomas Blacklock's Poems

Introduction

Thomas Blacklock, the "Scottish Pindar," deploys a pictorial language to convey his ideas and feelings. In this section I will look at his autobiographical poems, arguing that they are relevant to the critical issues of sympathy in Victorian studies. Sympathy is an essential tenet of blind narratives, providing a conceptual background for intersections between disability studies and life writing.

Blacklock was as consciously engaged as the leading sighted humanitarian philosophers in the debate over sympathy and its epistemological value within the Enlightenment. But unlike his contemporaries, he unavoidably had to occupy the standpoint of an "object" of sympathetic feeling, as well. Through his poetical representations of sight and non-sight, Blacklock displays his sorrow and anger—not only at his condition, but at his sympathizers—through "tears," and critiques society's pervasive "ableism" well before the concept was articulated. By concentrating on the "face" in tears in Blacklock's poetry, tears as a literary manifestation presenting the reader with what Levinas refers to as the face of the other, I will examine closely the ideology of disability and identity in the eighteenth century as perceived by one of the disabled: we cannot ignore a face in tears—or, it is harder to dismiss the beseeching face of others when it is visible. Blacklock's writing influenced the ideas and practice of representing blindness in the following century. By doing this, I hope to contribute to the comparatively small amount of Blacklock scholarship, and also to studies of disability life writing within the Western tradition more generally.

Literature Review

The life and works of Blacklock are being discussed more and more frequently by scholars of eighteenth-century studies in connection with disability studies. Two recent essays are especially helpful. In "'Nae Hottentots': Thomas Blacklock, Robert Burns, and the Scottish Vernacular Revival," David Shuttleton discusses Blacklock's "forgotten" contribution to the Scottish Enlightenment, as well as to the development of the Scottish vernacular poem. And through an extensive analysis of the social attitudes of the period towards disabilities, Catherine Packham's "Disability and Sympathetic Sociability in Enlightenment Scotland" reveals what roles the notions of sympathy played in Blacklock's social life. Other than these sociohistorical readings[28] of Blacklock's life and work, however, little has been written that sets his blindness within the relevant literary context of eighteenth-century sentimental writing. It is only barely sufficient, though accurate, to say that "the culture of sensibility" (Wetmore 149) influences Blacklock's rhetoric and themes, but that, as a member of the literati of the Enlightenment, his poems are largely a product of the age.

Life of Blacklock[29]

Born the son of a tradesman in Dumflies, Scotland in 1721, Blacklock and his works are largely forgotten today, except for passing remarks on his association with Robert Burns, whom he introduced to Scottish men of letters. As David Shuttleton argues, however, despite his

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[28] A similar attempt was made earlier in Frank Miller's "Dr. Blacklock's Manuscripts." As its title shows, Shuttleton's study *Smallpox and the Literary Imagination* provides a fascinating examination of smallpox's influences on Blacklock's poems and his readers' response. As for related studies, Ernest Campbell Mossner devotes a chapter in *Forgotten Hume* to throw light on the benevolent nature of Hume.

[29] Most of what we know of Blacklock's life comes from the editors' preface to his poetry collection. The two sources I found particularly informative were written by Joseph Spence, a professor of poetry at Oxford, and Henry Mackenzie, in 1756 and 1793 respectively. According to Robert Chambers, in his Scottish biographical dictionary, Blacklock's life had been written by at least four other persons who knew the poet: Gilbert Gordon, Dr. Samuel Johnson, Chambers himself, and Dr. Anderson (234). The notes in general need to be more informative about what the sources are.

blindness, Blacklock's contributions helped to shape the eighteenth-century Scottish literary world as eventually "constructed in the Victorian pictorial imagination" ("Nae Hottentots" 25). He lost his sight from smallpox when he was six months old, but began composing poetry orally at the age of twelve years. Seven years later his father died, and the family fell into drastic financial difficulty. But word about this blind poet had spread beyond his hometown, and a generous physician in Edinburgh[30] decided to help the young man attend the university. Blacklock was a successful student. He mastered several languages, published his first poetry collection in 1746, and aimed to be a lecturer on oratory. His friend and patron David Hume reasoned him out of his plan, and compromising, Blacklock decided to become a clergyman, one of the limited but decent career options open to him—or so at least he believed. He completed the training and passed the examination to be licensed as a Presbyterian minister.

Except for few exceptional cases, opportunities to participate in social and political activities hardly offered themselves to people with disabilities, despite their abilities to contribute to communal causes.[31] Unfortunately, Blacklock again encountered the barriers of silencing that most people with disabilities faced. The parishioners in Kirkcudbright where he was assigned in 1765 were repulsed by the idea of a blind clergyman ("Nae Hottentots" 24), and after fighting the lawsuit they brought against him for two years, Blacklock consented to resign the position in return for a small annuity. He then withdrew to Edinburgh, where he boarded and tutored

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[30] Dr. William Stevenson, who is described as "a gentleman of much taste and benevolence" ("Memoir of Dr. Blacklock" 408).

[31] One such exception who engaged in legislative business is Henry Fawcett, who became blind at the age of twenty-five. He rose to become a professor of Political Economy at the University of Cambridge, a Liberal Member of Parliament, and eventually served as a minister during the second Gladstone administration. Another notable case is Elizabeth Margaretta Maria Gilbert, who became blind at the age of three due to scarlet fever. Despite the double burden she carried as a woman with disability, Gilbert founded organizations such as the Association for Promoting the General Welfare of the Blind in 1854, and established workshops for blind handicraft workers. This biographical information of Fawcett and Gilbert is obtained from Winifred Holt's *A Beacon for the Blind* (1914) and Frances Martin's *Elizabeth Gilbert and Her Work for the Blind* (1887), respectively.

students with the assistance of his wife.

Although this relocation to Edinburgh was not necessarily his first choice, he did mingle with the patrons of the Scottish Enlightenment, kept publishing his works, and later became himself a patron of young, native talents (Mossner 36–7). According to Hume's biographer, Ernest Campbell Mossner, Edinburgh during mid-eighteenth century reached its "golden harvest" (243), as Scottish philosophical and literary expression reached its full maturity. The city was the center of much of the intellectual energy and vivacity in Britain at that time, and Blacklock took full advantage of his last and longest residence there. He died in 1791, at the age of 69.

Sentimentalism and Sympathy in the Eighteenth Century

"Sympathy" and the broader term "humanism" were used interchangeably in the eighteenth century (Fiering 195), and both ideas had profound implications for a wide range of disciplines including politics, art and literature, moral philosophy, science, and general theories of human nature and society, and would continue to influence their development during most of nineteenth century. Mary Lenard[32] argues that any discussion of nineteenth-century social reform should begin with eighteenth-century discourse, because the rationale for such reform is largely a "carry-over from the eighteenth-century 'cult of sensibility'" (11),[33] and hence from its sentimentality.[34] Just as our understanding of "sympathy" differs from its eighteenth- and

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[32] The importance of Lenard's suggestion is corroborated by interdisciplinary scholarship on nineteenth-century topics. With Adam Smith as the most notable example, the intellectual landscape of the eighteenth century contributed to the nineteenth-century in systematizing ideas and philosophy, which I will discuss in following chapters.

[33] For examples of such influences of the eighteenth century on the nineteenth century, see Searle for the eighteenth-century philosophers' contribution to the sociopolitical changes in "the spirit of the Schoolroom" (ix) in the Victorian period. On literary influences, Robyn Warhol points out that both the nineteenth century sentimental and comic mode are developed from the rhetoric of eighteenth-century fiction (50).

[34] Jean Hagstrum points out that the early eighteenth-century usages of these terms distinguished between the former as "the production of intellection" and the latter as "the indicator of feeling" (9–10), while she also observes that, among other critics, they quickly came to be used interchangeably. As Blacklock's poems were written around 1770s, and most texts I will discuss in this study were written during the Victorian period, I will follow these critics'

nineteenth-century sense, "sentiment" and the genre of "sentimental" writing should also be understood in terms of their historical context and usage. As Janet Todd relates, in the middle of the eighteenth century, the cultivation of sentiments was becoming an act of virtue—a form of selfless, humanitarian response to others' suffering. Finding support in earlier eighteenth-century philosophers' treatises, most notably those of the Earl of Shaftesbury, feelings were granted a higher position than rationality and reason, and novels that reflect these concerns, typically called sentimental novels, were immensely popular, and widely circulated (121).

However, the understanding and embrace of sentimentality in the eighteenth century differ significantly from modern responses to the term. As a result, the mixed and ambiguous attitudes that have accumulated over time about what "sentimentality" means must stand as a warning that the associations most familiar to us in our academic and daily lives cannot be mechanically applied to the historical texts this study examines. To suggest just how wide the range of opinions might be, Laurence Perrine, a mid-twentieth century literary critic, uses "sentimental" to identify a poetic flaw:

> Sentimentality is indulgence in emotion for its own sake, or expression of more emotion than an occasion warrants. A sentimental person is gushy, stirred to tears by trivial or inappropriate causes. . . . His opposite is the callous or unfeeling person. (217)

Although Perrine adds that the ideal human character lies somewhere between these two extremes, he condemns modern sentimental poems as "'tear-jerking' literature" aimed "primarily at stimulating the emotions directly rather than at communicating experience truly and freshly."[35]

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observations regarding sentimentality and sensibility an interchangeable. For an early discussion of sentimentality and sensibility, see Bernbaum 48. For the later influential studies, see, for example, Van Sant 7 and Brissenden 15.

[35] Hildegard Hoeller also reads William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) as an exemplary novel that demonstrates "realism's proportionate view of the world" as preferable and superior to the "falsifying, excessive vision of the sentimental" (13).

Furthermore, in his account of what is responsible for inferior writing, he identifies

"sentimental" as one of three categories of undistinguished poetry.[36]

In contrast to Perrine, during the eighteenth century, experiencing sentimental feelings for

others' suffering was considered a virtuous and humane act. At the same time that philosophical

debate concerned itself with the fundamental nature of knowledge and sight, more broadly, man

was valued as a beneficial social being whom society expected to employ his feelings actively

and publicly as evidence of his moral integrity. Of course, there were voices raised against the

dominant preference of the age. Anticipating recent gender studies' criticism of sentimentality,[37]

Mary Wollstonecraft in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) observes that "soft phrases,

susceptibility of the heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous

with epithets of weakness," and then goes on to point out that "those beings who are only the

objects of pity . . . will soon become objects of contempt" (76).

This fear of being "objects of contempt" resonates with Blacklock's own fears. The

"Otherness" of disability, and especially when visually registered as a "marked" body or an

"abnormal" behavior, often effeminizes the person with the impairment, and as a result, renders

them passive in the gaze of others.[38] For obvious reasons, this rendering is particularly acute in

the case of blind people. Because they cannot return their spectator's gaze, they must resign

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[36] The other two Perrine mentions are "the rhetorical, and the purely didactic" (217).

[37] This critique is often launched in association with recent gender studies. Feminine qualities are frequently attributed to sentiment, which leads to form our way of reading sentimental novels in opposition to a "masculine" realist aesthetic. Although the issue of sentimentality identified with effeminacy is not a major theme within the scope of this study, it should be noted that the disabled male body is often associated with weakness, "inimical to normative heterosexual versions of manly competence" (Serlin, "The Other Arms Race" 54).

[38] As mentioned in the footnote above, disability and the effeminization of the male body have been discussed extensively. Some of the most influential studies are Cynthia Barounis, "Crippling Heterosexuality, Queering Able-Bodiedness: Murderball, *Brokeback Mountain* and the Contested Masculine Body"; Kerry H. Wynn, "The Normate Hermeneutic and Interpretations of Disability within the Yahwistic Narratives"; and Douglas Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History." For a discussion about the visibility of the disabled body, see David Harley Serlin, "Crippling Masculinity: Queerness and Disability in U.S. Military Culture, 1800-1945" and Kathy Newman, "Wounds and Wounding in the American Civil War: A Visual History."

themselves, often unknowingly, to being an object to be seen. And finally, people's sympathy for the blind as "the object of pity" who cannot even sense the sympathy of the gaze further disenfranchises them.

In conjunction with the era's preoccupation[39] with how and to what extent the human mind constitutes knowledge through perception of the outside world, more weight was placed on somatic senses and their operation, and as demonstrated by many modern critics,[40] sight more than the other senses was at the centre of the debate and related controversies. Within this historical and social context, another characteristic eighteenth-century notion of "spectacle" emerges that comes to inform the understanding of the sentimental gesture of that time. As a social determining factor that shaped the norms for people's behavior and thus guided their intentions, the "spectacularity" of performed self-representation profoundly influenced the concepts and the ethics associated with blindness.

"Subject" of Sympathy and Tears as Universal Language

The eighteenth century's notions of the spectacular encompass the audience for tragedy, giving it a role, as well. A person is not just expected to *have* feelings, but to *display* them outwardly, if only through a fleeting facial expression of emotion—to share them with others, in short, due to the "eighteenth-century fascination with the idea of universal language of feeling, of the body-as-sign" (Jervis 63). When a certain dramatic scene is described as "tragic," this indicates that a person central to action is an object to be seen. Not surprisingly, then, references to "tears," as the supposedly natural, spontaneous, and most visible manifestation of emotions,

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[39] A summary of the issue can be found in Gordon Phillips: "If Enlightenment epistemology did not initiate this inquiry, however, it clearly advanced the discussion. From Descartes to Adam Smith its leading representatives gave to this issue a concentrated and consistent attention" (31).

[40] Martin Jay describes "the totalizing claims of an Enlightenment that had elevated its ocularcentric notion of Reason to a universal truth" (390). Dr. Johnson, for instance, suggested that "the sensibility was not just a mode of feeling but also of perception, "a way of seeing that found in ordinary scenes and events occasion for deep reflection" (qtd. in Jervis 54).

often appear in sentimental writing not just to signal the characters' personal sorrow, but also the tender feelings evoked by the spectacle that the readers imagine, and therefore witness.

As Janet Todd succinctly explains, in popular eighteenth-century texts, scenes of tears as well as of other physical manifestations[41] of lachrymose characters[42] are significant because "tears and blushes became signs of virtuous sympathy and modesty" (121). Such appreciation of tears can be explained by considering their felt connection to social interaction in general. Historians such as John Brewer (118) and Anne Vincent-Buffault (32, 37) pay attention to the eloquence of tears as a natural language that connects people through emotional identification with each other. Referring to Edmund Burke's illustrations of a "sublime spectacle," Monika Fludernik observes that the presentation of a theatrical tragedy "foregrounds the powers of 'the real sympathy'" (2). With regard to Burke's wording, however, both Fludernik and Blacklock recognize that the very idea of "real sympathy" (Burke 76; pt. I, sec. xv) displays an awareness that sympathy can also be a "pretense" or even "to shun,"[43] and it always runs the risk of masking self-righteousness, or being profoundly insincere. Or put another way, the more visible the "evidence" is of one's sympathetic feelings, the greater the possibility that the person for various motives is actually putting on a show. Regardless of how genuine such displayed feelings might be, it is nevertheless clear that sympathetic responses, and their public demonstration as spectacle, were enmeshed to the extent that sympathy was admirable in

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[41] Visible manifestations of emotions could also include a pale complexion, perspiration, a fast-beating heart, and so on.

[42] The examples are abundant, but probably one of the best-known characters is the protagonist of Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), who claims, "I burst into a flood of tears—but I am as weak as a woman; and I beg the world not to smile, but pity me" (21).

[43] The same view can be also found in the criticism of nineteenth-century American novels. In his well-known essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," James Baldwin critiques the excessive and self-righteous sentimentality in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852): "Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty" (1654).

proportion to how observable it might be (Jervis 20). Blacklock's use of the motif of tears, as well as his mockery of facial expressions he "saw" on people's faces, shows that without actual vision, Blacklock seems to capture the spectacularity of people, and by extension, of society.

The "Object" of Sympathy and Blacklock's Tears

In his 1839 treatise, Robert Chambers claims that Blacklock's most acerbic verses, which expressed his resentment against the treatment he received from the "spectacular" society, were burnt by himself as soon as they were written (223). Dependant on his literary patron, Blacklock knew that he was expected to be grateful, and therefore to exercise a "heightened sense of propriety" of expression (Shuttleton, *Smallpox* 77). Nevertheless, some of Blacklock's acrimonious feelings can be found in poems that have survived to this day. In "A Soliloquy," written after he nearly fell into a deep well,[44] he spells out his initial fears, but then expands his meditation into an outburst expressing the chronic state of frustration, anger, and disappointment that has built up in him throughout his life as one of the unfortunates.

In other poems, such as a series of hymns to "the Supreme Being," "Divine Love," and "Benevolence," Blacklock explores the concept of Providence. He does not accuse God of creating his misery, and several statements embedded in the poem beseech God's mercy as a force for spiritual and physical salvation.[45] But the poet does indict his fellow-men—generally common, good citizens claiming to be Christian—for isolating, patronizing, and incapacitating him. A fellow citizen's "supercilious eye / Oft, from the noise and glare of prosp'rous life / On my obscurity diverts its gaze," or among the less advantaged, the "hand of ignorance and

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[44] The attached author's note to the poem reads: "Occasioned by the Author's escape from falling into a deep well, where he must have been irrecoverably lost, if a favourite lap-dog had not, by the sound of its feet upon the board with which the well was covered, warned him of his danger" (141).

[45] It was noted by his contemporaries that Blacklock on more than one occasion hinted that without God's help, he would have chosen to end his life (Society of Ancient Scots 42).

scorn . . . points me out / With idiot grin." Even when people do display actual tears in response to him, Blacklock senses that behind such a solicitous performance, the individual is often "exulting"—a person who "felicitates [in his] own superior lot," whom Blacklock dismisses as producing only "the tear of impotent compassion" (82–98).

We could perhaps wonder if these representations of cruel attitudes of people in Blacklock's poems are simply projections created by his own depressed imagination. While it is impossible to determine definitively the actual state of affairs, his contemporaries' anecdotal notes do document such cruelty. On social occasions held by the literary circle, for instance, guests often requested Blacklock to present his poems. When the blind poet began to recite, pacing the room with excitement, he was often heedless of possible dangers, making him a spectacle that did not primary invoke sympathy. "I went to a companion's," one guest later told an acquaintance, where someone "sent for the blind poet, who is really a strange creature to *look at*" (italics mine; Chambers 223). And at least for some of the others present, the entire scene resembled "the exhibition of a learned pig" (ibid.).

There can hardly be any doubt that such episodes and comments epitomize general public attitudes about the inner capacity of blind people. Because in the eighteenth-century sense, to be sympathetic means to be humane, one would need to see others' suffering and then display a visible and appropriate reaction to the scene calling for sympathy. This assumption led some eighteenth-century critics to question whether the blind, because of their disability, were capable of recognizing others' suffering, or of registering others' demonstrations of sympathy towards those less fortunate. In 1749, Denis Diderot considered the relationship between visual perception and morality in "Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who Can See," and concluded that because

the blind are affected by none of the external demonstrations that awaken pity and ideas

of grief in ourselves, with the sole exception of vocal complaints, I suspect them of

being . . . unfeeling toward their fellow men. What difference is there to a blind person

between a man urinating and a man bleeding to death without speaking? (155–6)

If because of their disability, the blind can neither give nor realize that they are receiving

sympathy, it is impossible for them to participate fully in human interactions, and therefore be

fully part of the human community. As John Jervis observes, since the sense of "community

always seems to involve separation" (74), in the case of Blacklock, the more segregated he feels,

the more keenly he craves acknowledgment of a connection, a communal relationship between

the blind and a larger society on personal and collective levels. This craving certainly is

expressed in his autobiographical poems, but Blacklock also wrote other works that express his

opinions and wishes more directly. For instance, a pseudonymous essay, later expanded into the

Encyclopaedia Britannica entry, "Blind," is shot through with Blacklock's own desire to defend

himself and others from society's expectations and manipulations of blind people, in addition to

addressing "by what culture they may become useful to themselves, and important members of

society" (1187).[46]

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[46] The essay is highly worthwhile to investigate in its own right. As an *Encyclopaedia* entry, the content is supposed to be objective and impersonally accurate, and yet, despite being supposedly anonymous, Blacklock did not choose to erase entirely his authoritative voice as a blind person. Referring to blind people with the generic pronoun "they" or "he" in the first couple of pages, he then begins to include himself as the writer among "them" by switching to the collective "we"—"our power," "our fate." In addition, a footnote informs readers that the article was written by a blind person (1196). In fact, Blacklock even advertises his own poetry collection, and in another footnote, he corrects a French author's mistake regarding the age Blacklock lost his sight (1192nE.). More puzzling perhaps is the section that describes current anatomical efforts at sight restoration and their potential effect on congenital blindness, where Blacklock suggests that "curious readers about the issue may consult" Diderot's essay among others (1192).

Sympathy and "Social Tears"

According to Jaimie Kinsley, eighteenth-century readers were familiar with poems that describe disability. In religious poetry such as hymns, "the most profound expressions of pain" are expressed, often with a depth of feeling (164, 166).[47] It was however uncommon for disabled writers to express their own candid anger about anything in writing.[48] For this reason, and in keeping with presuppositions and preferences of the period, Blacklock conveys his feelings in his poems through tears. And yet, although weeping was of course a sign of sentiment for his contemporaries, it was not necessarily welcome for a disabled, and in particular, a blind poet. Blacklock himself warns of the danger that showing tears might be considered pretentious—almost a form of begging. He also stretches the range of response by incorporating the idea and the practice of shedding tears into his poems to represent various emotions in addition to anger or grief.

As Joseph Spence in his preface analyzes in detail, tears as a bodily embodiment of emotions are a major component of Blacklock's pictorial imagination. More generally, references to vision in his poems often convey his feelings about himself, and by extension, towards others. For instance, in an early poem, "A Pastoral: Inscribed to Euanthe," the speaker describes his intense passion for his first love by describing what seems to be a quintessential, ardent male gaze[49]:

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[47] Kinsley refers to Harriet Chandler, Susanna Harrison, and Anne Bannerman as examples, but she does not include blind poets.

[48] For this type of self-expression, we must wait for the deaf nineteenth-century social theorist Harriet Martineau's scathing, and sometimes merciless, journalistic, theoretical, and autobiographical works.

[49] One of Spence's "jottings" records this Blacklock remark about women: "I have seen French women, German women, English women and Scotch women, but of all, the Scotch are much the prettiest" (*Observations* 1154). Similarly, regarding Blacklock, Hume once told Adam Smith that "Tho born blind, he is not insensible to that Passion, which we foolish People are apt to receive first by the Eyes" (qtd. in Mossner 21). These anecdotes indicate that, as far as female beauty is concerned, Blacklock could be as humanely judgmental and humorously nationalistic as other men, even without the advantage of sight.

> There, from the nymphs retir'd, depress'd me lay, . . .
>
> Even then I saw her, as an angel bright;
>
> I saw! I lov'd! I perish'd at the sight;
>
> I sigh'd, I blush'd, I gaz'd with fix'd surprize,
>
> And all my soul hung raptur'd in my eyes. (69–74)

In this visionary outburst, eyes are not only for seeing, but for figurative weeping, due to adulation and longing and joy. His youthful passion here finds itself on the verge of issuing forth tears for his idol, due to own feelings of admiration, which he represents metaphorically as a product of sight. Similarly, in "On Marriage: An Epigram" he captures the young maiden's purity, modesty, and bashfulness through a reference to her tears on the morning of her wedding day. A "blooming bride" (1), she is "weeping fair" (4).

No matter how much he despises people's sham tears—that is, their professed but false representation of a person's genuine emotions—the act of weeping is a recurrent theme in his poems. Tears accompany cries of despair, fear, and frustration, but also cries of awe, adoration, joy, and above all, sympathy. And through this sympathetic imagination Blacklock demonstrates Levinas' unconditional responsibility towards Others. In this and in many other respects, by dexterously attuning his poems to the mainstream, "sighted" rhetoric of his day through tears, Blacklock can actually extend his range of expression to suggest a wider range of emotions than traditional sentimental writing does. I would suggest that this arises from his awareness of his own position as a blind writer. Given the eighteenth-century notion of expressed emotion as spectacle, Blacklock knows which side he alone is always on—as the spectacle but never really the spectator, unless by extending his sympathetic imagination through metaphor to reach out to other sufferers, he can lay claim to being as a sympathetic "subject."

Take for example, "To Mrs. R------: On the Death of a Promising Infant. An Ode,"

which takes as its subject the deep grief of a mother who has lost her child:

> While, touch'd with all thy tender pain,
>
> The muses breathe a mournful strain . . . .
>
> The muse shall yield thee tear for tear,
>
> And mingle sigh with sigh. (1–6)

The poem begins with a remark on the muses, those divine inspirers who will shed "tear for tear"

in sympathy with the grieving mother, the direct object of sympathy that the poem depicts. The

speaker's concern is therefore not confined to a specific human incident alone, but with a wider

corresponding philanthropic desire—a divine sympathy whose tears arise from a response to the

fragility and impermanence of human life. In fact, the mother to whom this poem is supposedly

addressed does not fully become a realized figure of sympathy until the fifth stanza, and

immediately afterwards, the focus returns to more general reflections on humans' fate, including

a homage to St. Augustine's commentary, "Our whole life is nothing but a race towards death"

(460):

> Such is the fate of human kind;
>
> The fairest form, the brightest mind,
>
> Can no exemption know:
>
> The mighty mandate of the sky,
>
> "That man when born begins to die,"
>
> Extends to all below. (31–6)

The following stanzas continue to ponder the helplessness of human efforts, no matter how

ardent or eloquent the suffering individual might be:

> In vain a mother's pray'rs ascend,
>
> Should nature to her sorrows lend
>
> The native voice of smart;
>
> In vain would plaints their force essay
>
> To hold precarious life one day,
>
> Or fate's dread hand avert. (37–42)

Despite the repetition of "in vain" as a confirmation of the earlier definitive statement "Such is the fate of human kind," this does not mean that the speaker has abandoned all hope, becoming apathetic or desperate. Instead, a mother's distress and tears are alluded to as a way of embodying a focus for sympathy in the face of those universal sorrows shared by all of us, and of imagining an individual experience that would understandably involve an earnest hope and longing for reaching at last the "eternal day" (84)—the desire with which the poem ends.

Blacklock knows that he is marginalized. Admirably, he is able to move beyond his pity for himself to use his blindness to learn to sympathize with other marginalized, in need, or suffering people. Indeed, the theme of child loss, a devastating tragedy falling up vulnerable parents, appears in other Blacklock poems. "Argument," for instance, aligns the sorrow of a father who has lost his beloved son with two other scenes of mourning: the funeral of a Mrs. M, and the languishing death of the physician Dr. J. H. These very different individual circumstances are displayed together to make the "argument" that regardless of how comparatively tragic or apparently unjust, we should accept our fate. Through careful consideration, Blacklock extracts a tragic "spectacle" from each of the three individual incidents that are still presented together, and ultimately represent together a gesture towards admitting that sympathy should be communal.

Blacklock's personal connection to the deceased and his own blindness are foregrounded in the second incident in "Argument." In the face of this scene of death, Blacklock recalls his own experience of coming within a hairbreadth of falling into a deep well that he wrote about in "Soliloquy":

> Where am I?—O eternal power of heaven
>
> Relieve me!—Or amid the silent gloom
>
> Can danger's cry approach no gen'rous ear
>
> Prompt to redress th' unhappy! O my heart! (1–4)

Suddenly hit by the crisis of another's death, he expresses his surprise by using interrogatives. "Where am I?" and "whither shall I turn?" (5) convey the blind man's specific and overwhelming sensation of disorientation, but the pitiless abruptness of fate can be an appeal for sympathy to all. This impartiality of Providence is illustrated in the fourth stanza of "Argument":

> Nor yet these dismal prospects disappear,
>
> When o'er the weeping plain new horrors rise . . .
>
> Rang'd on the brink the weeping matrons stand. . . .
>
> They view'd and mourn'd his fate:
>
> O heaven! they could no more. (73–87)

Here an assertive statement, "they could no more," impresses the reader with an overall fatalism experienced not only by those who "view'd and mourn'd," but sympathetically embraced by the speaking spectator. And yet, once again, readers soon realize that despite such images as the plain and the brink, and despite the repeated references to weeping, whether by matrons, or by the plain, the speaker does not focus on specific details of the deaths, or on any of the three characters. The experience of death, and therefore our extension of sympathy, is communal,

which Blacklock underscores by referring to "mankind" (127) and "human kind" (175), and by expanding the scene of the incidents to "this globe" (42):

> Thou all-enliv'ning flame, intensely bright!
>
> Whose sacred beams illume each wand'ring sphere,
>
> That thro' high heav'n reflects thy trembling light,
>
> Conducting round this globe the varied year;
>
> As thou pursu'st thy way,
>
> Let this revolving day,
>
> Deep-ting'd with conscious gloom, roll flow along:
>
> In fable pomp array'd,
>
> Let night diffuse her shade,
>
> Nor sport the cheerless hind, nor chant the vocal throng. (39–48)

Through this highly visual evocation of light and dark, Blacklock invokes all tragic aspects of human life and nature without any attempt to avoid, alleviate, or forget them. But later on, he returns to the visual imagery, including the embodiment of sorrow in tears, deftly suggesting that witnessing and extending sympathy carry the mourner beyond a specific suffering to a shared awareness of the closeness of death:

> O'er all the mournful scene,
>
> Inconsolable pain,
>
> In ev'ry various form, appear'd express'd:
>
> The tear-drifting eye,
>
> The long, deep, broken sigh,
>
> Dissolv'd each tender soul, and heav'd in ev'ry breast. (163–8)

What is also demonstrated here is acceptance. Though the rhetorical question "What tears could equal such immense distress?" (170) might seem to suggest that there is a gap between feeling and its outward expression, in other places the entire world, including the mourner, the speaker, and all of nature extends a respected sympathy: "There nature mourns, like me, with fond maternal eyes" (110).

After delineating three tearful scenes, the forlorn tone of "Argument" opens up a communal suffering—"our souls those recent sorrows share" (132)—reached through specifically visual imagery representing individual sorrow—"[w]hile grief impels his steps, and tears bedew his eyes" (134). Contrary to the popular idea and common debates of his time about the link between sympathetic emotions and sentimental tears, these excerpts from Blacklock's poems suggests that weeping, especially in the presence of others, can be neither entirely commendable nor worthy of reproach. For the blind poet Blacklock, tears, associated with the faculty he lacks, perform their most valuable function as signs of a natural and universal language.[50] Taking more emphatic steps, the speaker even encourages the mourners to shed tears when needed, instead of repressing them, in the name of an expansive and largely abstract "grief": "Weep on, he [grief] cry'd, let tears no measure know; / Hence from those fields let pleasure wing her way" (135–6).[51]

Blacklock's understanding and invocations of tears are most precisely caught in the term "social tears" (13, 127), which has affinities with Adam Smith's theory of the social functions of the sympathetic subject and sympathetic object. As we can see from Blacklock's declaration,

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[50] Thomas Reid, Blacklock's contemporary and Hume's "earliest and fiercest critic" (Bartholomew and Goheen 138), also theorized language as a profoundly social act by definition in *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764) and *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788). See Mark Blackwell, "Preposterous Hume" for more discussion of Reid's work.

[51] The final stanza of "Argument" ends, however, with consolation, and therefore the end of the need for sympathy as represented through tears, stating that "In heav'n your patron reigns, ye shepherds, weep no more" (127) and "In heav'n your patron reigns, no more, ye shepherds, mourn" (128).

"Whose pains, whose pleasures, and whose souls, are one" (220), when made aware of the specific pains of others, his impulse is not to be specific about the person or the nature of their sorrow, but visually vivid in his representation of pain as common and comprehensive to all humans. His repetition of similar phrases, such as "the sacred sympathy of social hearts" (161) or "social sadness" (168), also directs us towards what Smith calls the "impartial space" that separates us from each other, and for Blacklock, towards the possibility of filling it, or at least of lessening the gap, by extending one's sympathetic imagination. In contrast to Hume and Burke's theory of social sympathy,[52] Blacklock, by foregrounding his own and others' tears, refutes Smith's concept of the "impartial spectator" (47–8; pt. I, ch. V, ch. 5) and denies Hume's claim that there is always an "indifference with which we regard that of other people" (*Treatise* 188; pt. 3, ch. 2). Instead, Blacklock insists in his poetry that while the inherent space between sympathetic spectator and object can be reduced with sympathetic feelings, and can even approach the comprehension of others and their needs through the exercise of the imagination, the concept of altruism or "empathy" in its modern sense, is impossible—much in the same way that blindness, for all its adaptiveness and deployments of visual imagery, still undeniably falls short of literal vision.

Conclusion

Derrida reminds us that not only can our sight be blurred by tears, but that this fact is actually quite fascinating and strange: "What does the body mean to say when it fills our eyes with tears? Why not our ears or mouth?" (*GD* 55). Critiquing the same paradigm of Western ocularcentrism, David Michael Levin announces his own philosophical interest in tearful eyes,

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[52] See, for instance, Lamb 7. Among the number of studies on the topic, Lida Maxwell particularly focuses on the idea of sympathy as the basis of standards of justice and the public good (59–65). Frederick G. Whelan's Introduction in *Political Thought of Hume and His Contemporaries: Enlightenment Project* gives an overview of the diversity of Enlightenment thought (1–23).

but proposes a different interpretation than Derrida. Tears do not blur our sight; on the contrary, they let us see: "With the crying, I began to see, briefly, and with pain. Only with the crying, only then, does vision begin" (*Opening* 172). By examining how and on what occasions Blacklock in his poetry, as a representative of a "sympathetic object," sheds tears, we can begin to see how he affirms his subjectivity by paradoxically dissolving subjectivity itself: since everybody, blind or sighted, with or without health, wealth, or reputation, is born equal before mortal fate, then those looked at and treated as the least fortunate, and therefore as objects of sympathy or contempt, can nevertheless themselves protest, care, and sympathize.

It is undeniable that, with only a few exceptions, blind persons in the eighteenth century were almost always described in literature as incompetent—confined to being recipients of whatever their life was offered. Deprived of his or her primary and necessary sense, the blind person was doomed to be a passive object of sympathy mixed with dread. But as I have tried to suggest, Blacklock's personal expression in his poems and prose provides us with a different "picture." Among the many responses by the sighted that blind people must submit to, Blacklock is most enraged when he detects pretense and hypocrisy—people's donning of what Jervis calls "public garb" (101). As much as he detests indifference, or many people's utter ignorance or avoidance of the pain of others, Blacklock most deplores a fake moral concern employed to offer an imitation of sympathy for public consumption, rather than an actual personal engagement with the object of sympathy.

By in a sense denying the value or the accomplishments of social individuals in the face of sorrow and fate, Blacklock opens up the possibilities for considering what kinds of lives, roles, and legitimacy blind persons can aspire to within that larger field of mourning. Given the difficulties customarily faced by blind people interacting socially with others at that time,

Blacklock's work is historically significant not just as a record of the experience of disability in the pre-nineteenth century, but also because of its discursive importance as a force for opening up the possibilities for the blind and blind narratives without downplaying or denying the very real disadvantages they encounter. Blacklock felt obligated to the vulnerable in the world, just as Levinas maintained later by referring to the various embodiments of "powerless ones" (*TI* 24–7), and pointed out that on the larger scale of human futility before fate, the differences between supposedly abled and disabled individuals, the sighted and the blind, are inconsequential.

Section 2 The Self-/Portraits of Blindness: James Wilson's Auto/biography

Introduction

If we cannot see, how do we form an image of ourselves? Can we still portray ourselves, or others, and without vision, how is this done? This section explores the answers provided by works of the nineteenth-century blind British auto/biographer James Wilson. I argue that Wilson had two initial purposes for writing—first, to advocate for the blind; and second, to locate himself in the chronology of blind authors before and up to his own day. He approaches both tasks by representing the lives of ordinary, obscure people. In other words, Wilson sees, and let us see, those individuals' faces. While they lived uneventful, historically insignificant, ordinary lives, except for their being blind, Wilson argues that their achievements are extraordinary. In my analysis of the nature and style of Wilson's works, I draw upon Alison Booth's work on prosopography, and especially her account of the "rhetorical advantages" (9) provided by collective biographies.

One of the most conspicuous and constant themes in Wilson's works is "sympathy," of the kind that Adam Smith valued as underlying his moral and economic theories, and in the sense that critic Rachel Albow describes: sympathy is not just a feeling, but "a mode of relating

to others and of defining a self" (2). As arguably the first blind life writer who wrote about other blind people, Wilson's understanding of sympathy necessarily differs from other Victorians' charitable-minded sympathy. By writing about the blind as a community, he becomes a spokesman for those suffering from vision impairment, including himself, and his principal thesis is that those who wish to extend sympathy need to ask, and know, how the recipient of sympathy feels.

While this concern with sympathetic feeling is his primary motivation, two other factors influence how Wilson portrays his own life, and those of other blind people: history and geography. Grounded in his autobiographical background,[53] both are strongly emphasized in his work. Wilson seeks to dispel the stigma of blindness through a self-referential portrait that is also a gallery of other blind people stretching across time and space. But he establishes a context for his writing, first by displaying a recurring picture of a successfully groping blind man, and second, in a manner similar to Blacklock's, by suggesting that sighted or blind, we are all groping in the world, lost on our way. I conclude this chapter by arguing that Wilson's revision of the common notions of history and geography offers alternative approaches to the nineteenth-century popular perceptions exclusively founded on non-disabled people's norms. Wilson's idea of history goes against the then-popular "Great man" version epitomized by Carlyle, and his idea of geography is more immediate and tactile.

Reception of Wilson's Works

Although *Biography of the Blind* (1821) was republished by National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped and the Friends of Libraries for Physically Handicapped

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[53] Frances Browne, whose works I analyze in chapter III, also pays particular heed to the link between history and geography in *The Star of Attéghéi; The Vision of Schwartz; and Other Poems* (xiv).

Individuals in North America in 1998,[54] Wilson and his writings have largely remained outside

of the purview of scholarship. Some years prior to this republication, Wilson was reintroduced to

modern readers by the then-president of the National Federation of the Blind Kenneth Jernigan in

a speech given at its annual Convention Banquet in 1973. Jernigan frequently cited *Biography* as

one of the rare sources that closes the gap between the "standard histories" and the "history of

our own." The problem is absence:

> We all know what the historical record tells us. . . . [A]ccording to [that] account, we
>
> have no history of our own. . . . It would seem that the blind have moved through time
>
> and the world not only sightless but faceless . . . not so much as rippling the stream of
>
> history. ("Blindness")

Praising Wilson's work as a blind historian of the blind, Jernigan also cites him as an example of

the appalling differences between an ableist society and the disability community in the level of

commitment to acknowledging the stories of the blind. Jernigan argues that the presumed

meaning and value of history, and of geography as the place where history happens, largely

ignore the presence of the blind. Can these standard histories and geographies therefore have the

same relevance for blind persons as they do for the sighted community, or offer the same

guidance for the consequences of actions or decisions by the blind? And if not, how then should

history and geography be understood, represented, and consulted by people who lack the aid of

vision?

The Life of James Wilson

The following offers a brief account of Wilson's life and work drawn from his

autobiography, entitled "Some Particulars of the Life of the Author," which is a revised and

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[54] Hereafter, all quotations are from this edition, which combines *The Autobiography of James Wilson* and *Biography of the Blind*.

extended version of the preface to his volume *Biographies of the Blind*,[55] first published in 1821. Although few authors have returned to their autobiography as frequently as William Wordsworth, who spent at least fifty-two years revising what was published as the *Prelude* after his death, Wilson also kept revisiting his earlier life writing for about the next two decades, after it had been published multiple times in editions of *Biography*.[56]

Wilson was born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1779, the child of a Scottish father and American mother. His father had come there as an immigrant, and his business went well for a few years, but because of the political upheavals of the American Revolution, during which he took the side of Royalists, and also because of his declining health, he decided to go back to his native land with his four-year-old son and his wife, who was pregnant with their second child at that time. On the twelfth day of their voyage from New York to Belfast, the father died of disease, and Wilson remembers that the emotional shock caused by the incident was so unbearable for his mother that she herself died twenty minutes later along with the fetus. As for Wilson himself, he was seized by smallpox, which not only threatened his life, but claimed his sight.[57]

When the vessel finally reached the port of Belfast, the ship's captain kindly consigned this blind boy to the hands of the church-warden, with money to support him for at least five years. Wilson fortunately had a strongly retentive memory, and remarkable spatial orientation. Together, these affinities for time and space aided him in avoiding the fate waiting for the majority of blind persons without a supporting family—beggary, or compelled residence in a

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[55] Hereafter, abbreviated as *Autobiography* and *Biography*, respectively.

[56] The earliest version of Wilson's autobiography was published in 1825, "*The Life of James Wilson, Blind from His Infancy, Author of 'Original Poems.'*"

[57] Precisely speaking, Wilson's sight was not completely gone at that time. When he was seven years old, he had surgery and the sight of his right eye was partially restored to the extent that he could "discern surrounding objects and their various colours" (24). Shortly after this, however, "an ill-natured cow" (ibid.) assaulted him and deprived him of the recovered sight for the rest of his life.

poor house. When old enough, Wilson drifted from place to place, picking up whatever jobs he could find. Because he could easily travel four or five miles a day, he often worked as a personal letter and newspaper carrier.

Although successful at earning his bread by himself, Wilson intensely desired knowledge. He was admitted to the Asylum for the Blind at Belfast at about the age of twenty-one, but that institution only provided vocational training for blind adults. What Wilson gained there was "a partial knowledge of the upholstery business" (48), which supported him financially for a short while. But in any case, the Asylum was soon closed down, ending any access for blind persons to education of any kind. In the year of 1803, however, a group of young men in Belfast established a Reading Society. "Although they were all mechanics," Wilson recalls, they "were also men of taste, and many of them possessed of considerable talent" (49). It was in this Society he finally found his long-waited chance to learn, as one particularly benevolent and motivated member offered to read to Wilson a couple of hours every day, an arrangement that lasted for seven or eight years. They read any publications Wilson could procure, but he particularly gravitated to books of history, written by Plutarch, Charles Rollin, and Edward Hyde, 1st Earl of Clarendon. Wilson also gradually developed a passion for literature, drawn to what Derrida has called "the great tradition of blind writers" (33).

Although his circumstances did not allow Wilson to acquire knowledge as he wished— regular schooling was not available to him—as a self-taught writer, he still managed to entertain people around him as well as himself by composing poems, epigrams, love songs, and so on. By perseverance and luck, he also managed to acquire a great deal of knowledge about notable blind persons of the past. He dedicated his later years to writing and publicizing his *Biography*, which

he revised for new editions four times before 1838, seven years prior to his death. His autobiography was published posthumously as a separate book in 1856.

Although Wilson never gained much of a literary reputation, and like millions of sighted people died in obscurity, his later years were filled with domestic happiness and peaceful contentment. When he was twenty-three years old, he had married a respectable young woman with "unassuming manners, amiable disposition, industrious habits, and assiduous devotion to his interests" ("Life of James Wilson, the Blind Biographer" 586) and raised four surviving children (out of eleven). Near the end of his memoir, he eloquently writes about the joys of parenthood.

Social Background of Wilson's Writing

Compared to most of blind people of his time, Wilson was fortunate. Like most other minority groups, people with disabilities have always faced various forms of discrimination, and most notably for someone like Wilson, the education system was designed solely for non-disabled people's physical skills and visual literacy. As a result, before the twentieth century, due to a lack of social opportunities generally, most people with disabilities arrived at adulthood illiterate, which also accounts largely, though not entirely, for the lack of life writing by the disabled before the twentieth century. Wilson for instance was only able to "read" and "write" through the help of friends who volunteered to serve as his readers and amanuenses. Unlike his physical activities, which were remarkably unrestricted, his intellectual activities were totally dependent on others. There were few blind writers before his time. Although disability scholar Sara Newman convincingly argues that while life writing is a "favourable medium" for representing one's experience in general, but especially so for disabled people, since they are

"not often spoken about by others" ("Disability and Life Writing" 261–2), for Wilson, there were few blind writers before his time, and the challenges facing his own writing were formidable.

As disability studies scholar Heather Tilley explains regarding the first embossed book printed for use by the blind in Britain in 1827, "Accounts by blind individuals . . . are mediated by another's eyes and hand as their blind authors relied, *a la* Milton, upon amanuenses to transcribe their words and participate in nineteenth-century publishing culture" ("Origins and Progress"). Because he lived and wrote before the dramatic development of assistive technology for blind people in the latter half of that century, Wilson was one of last blind authors who wrote his books by dictation, shortly before tactile writing and reading systems were contrived.

Like other blindness narratives written by blind individuals in the nineteenth century, Wilson's texts contain self-representation primarily to advocate for social improvements for the blind and visually impaired. What is distinctive about his works, however, is that instead of carrying out this agenda more straightforwardly in the genres of technical writing, such as guides, articles, manuals, pamphlets, and treatises, the form he chose was life writing. This proved to be an effective tactic, given his particular appeals to sympathy, since the rhetoric in the more technical modes of writing tended to concentrate on ethos and logos, making them a less than ideal platform for conveying emotions.

Both in *Biography* and his autobiography, Wilson declares forthrightly that his affliction should and did stimulate interest and compassion in others. In one of the later editions of *Biography*, he writes that "A history of the blind, by a blind man, excited a good deal of curiosity among the reading portion of the public, and called forth the sympathy of several benevolent individuals in favour of its afflicted author" (xx). In his autobiography, the appeal is equally explicit: "The present Memoir is offered to the reader as a simple, unvarnished tale, and is

calculated to awaken those sentiments of sympathy, which are common both to the peasant and philosopher" (107).

When considering his positions as a biographer and autobiographer together, it becomes clear that Wilson does not simply carry out his objective to write about the lives of blind people, but also insists on understanding and documenting his own life as a blind person *in relation to* the former. This involves not only assertions of his authority as a storyteller about other blind people, but also claims about the nature of art—the meaning of the act of writing at a moment in time and at a specific place. Whether about the lives of others, or something else, the abiding assumption about "writing" was that it was a province inhabited only by sighted persons. Language, style, meaning, and knowledge—all that writing requires—were supposedly only fully accessible to authors who could see.

As we have already seen[58] in Chapter One, especially for blind writers, how you perceive and understand yourself differs greatly from how others see you. In Thomas Blacklock's poems and literary self-portraits, the discord between the sighted subject and the blind object is constantly in play, because it is the dominant state of affairs. But as Blacklock demonstrates by associating in his writing the act of weeping with the state of society—conveyed explicitly in the term "social tears"—the blind can share that prevailing sense that selfhood and moral motivation are social acts intertwined with emotions. Similarly, Wilson negotiates and shortens the distance between the disabled and the community of sighted by showing how for him, the act of writing about the lives of other blind people is an act of sympathy, making him its subject, rather than its

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[58] One of my most fundamental tenets is that language is imbued with ableism, as terms such as "enlightenment" and "insight" suggest. We are too familiar with vision-related idioms and metaphors even to notice them. Examples are abundant; we say "I see" when we "understand." In Japanese, to say someone is "narrow-minded" assumes that person has a "narrow vision." Or, in Hawaiian, "'ike" means "to know, feel, experience, understand, be aware" and "to see." See also, for the set of metaphors related to blindness, Rodas 115–6.

object.

Blindness and Sympathy

Because Adam Smith's theory of economics is founded on assumptions about morality governed by sympathy, it presupposes that human beings are able to exercise their imagination. In *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith acknowledges that we cannot "feel" the pain of others. Neither our senses nor our other faculties can fully inform us about what distress another person might be suffering. Only through our imagination can "we place ourselves in his situation . . . and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them" (2; pt. I, sec. ii, ch. 1). Smith here emphasizes that since establishing such sympathy is the prerequisite for social communication, and since individuals are motivated by the pleasure of "mutual sympathy" and the enjoyments derived from it, our feelings as much as our physical sensations determine how we interact with others in the world. But as Smith also points out, because our senses can never fully perceive others' feelings, and because our existence is, to put it in Christopher Eccleston's words, "encased by flesh in a physical being" (1), our rational ability to think about others' pain is necessarily defined and limited by our bodies. Nonetheless, Smith insists that we can imagine somebody else's agony, even if the result is "weaker in degree."

This functioning relationship between imagination, sympathy, and understanding in our dealings with others was not, however, something that the sighted public believed that the blind could possess. Those specific "others" happen to have been born with some or other form of disability that makes comprehension in both directions impossible. For the sighted community, the experience of the blind cannot be imagined, in part because it must by definition be horrifying. Even when they relate or write down their experiences, in hopes of invoking

sympathy, their lives strike the abled as an unimaginable sphere of suffering. When therefore a nineteenth-century poet refers to the experience of being crippled, deaf, or above all blind as "a calamity, the most terrible in the list of human ills" (Browne, III: 264), he is only confirming what sighted people think they already know, and do not have to imagine.

As for the ethical nature of the blind, as mentioned in the Blacklock section, discussions of the relationship between perception and morality in nineteenth century Britain were often shaped by earlier philosophical arguments in Europe epitomized by Denis Diderot's aforementioned essay. Diderot sees the relationship between visual perception, knowledge, and sympathetic emotions as necessary and inseparable. According to Diderot, because moral action can only be an abstract idea for blind people, their sense of sympathy is feeble, if it exists at all. By nature, Diderot concludes, blind people are "inhumane" (179). Given this conviction, Wilson's writing can therefore be seen as an argument for the humanity of the blind. And what better genres for making this argument than history and biography, the disciplines devoted to the actions and thoughts of humans?

Wilson's Autobiography and the Great Tradition: History

Although Wilson's lifework began with his efforts at narrating his own life, at some point during his journey in pursuit of knowledge, he began to think of biography as a "useful branch of history," and especially when it offered him examples of those "who had laboured under the same calamity with myself, and who had eminently distinguished themselves by their attainments in literature and science." This conclusion eventually crystalized into a publishing endeavour:

> I thought, if these [biographies of the blind] were collected together, and moulded into a
> new form, it might not only become an amusing, but an useful work, so far as it would

show what perseverance and industry could do, in enabling us to overcome difficulties

apparently insurmountable. (61)

Although he addresses here the value of such a volume for the blind, he is also thinking about

sighted readers as well. As many recent disability scholars have noted, the primary goal of most

disability narratives is to consolidate personal narrative and group advocacy. As Sarah Newman

explains, a long "tradition of advocacy for the underserved" is directly related to our current

proliferation of memoirs, which are the "tradition's contemporary manifestations" (*Writing*

Disability 3).

As his introduction goes on, Wilson clearly presents his text to readers as part of that life

writing tradition:

My chief object was to prove the energy of the human mind, under one of the greatest

privations to which we are liable in this life . . . . [W]e shall find, that [blind people] have

been, considering their number, as usefully employed as any class of men, with whose

works we are acquainted. (62)

Like Blacklock, Wilson resists practicing life writing as a self-absorbed endeavour. Instead, he

constantly displays an altruism towards his "fellow-creatures"; in a narrow sense those who

share the same physical challenges as himself, and in a broader sense all those who have a soft,

vulnerable, and temporary flesh and blood.

Wilson however is distinctive, not only because he set out to write about other blind

people—perhaps before any other blind author in western history—but also because of his

narrative of how he was led by a series of life events to the point of becoming a blind biographer.

Although Wilson actually began producing some literary works while an adolescent, as a small

child he had already started before that to re-construct someone else's life. That person was his

deceased father. When Wilson in his introduction describes his own background by relating the story of his parents' life in America, he anticipates that "the reader . . . will be curious to know how I came by the information" (19–20), given that for Wilson, from an early age, his family was lost to him in shadow.

Wilson informs readers that the details of his tragic family history were given to him by his father's friend, who made a transatlantic trip during the same period of time that Wilson and his family did. While in America, the person had saved some legal documents and personal materials belonging to Wilson's father, including "old letters, and a journal which [he] had kept from Scotland till he left America." These materials, however, were at first handled carelessly and inappropriately. The church warden took them "without examination, pronounced them totally useless" (23) and nonchalantly sent them on to Wilson's assigned nurse, along with some other truly insignificant items. Caring as this old nurse was, unfortunately for Wilson, she was not capable of recognizing the importance of his father's belongings, nor of showing them to someone else. She therefore put them to what practical use she could think of; lighting pipes, rolling flax, and so on.

The consequence of this mishandling of documents affected more than Wilson's legal or proprietary benefits. As an orphan in a country he had never seen before, his father's letters and diaries were the only available sources for him to discover his origins and early history. Luckily, some residue of the scattered and destroyed documents was discovered by a friendly neighbor, and in that preserved cache young Wilson found "every particular connected with his [father's] history, during that eventful period" (21). The following anecdote is also well worth quoting, because it suggests why Wilson in later years displays a penchant for reading history, for writing his version of history himself, and ultimately, for accepting that he himself is a "legendary"

figure whom people talk about. At a very early age, "A little playfellow of mine . . . sought my company after school hours, for the purpose of getting me to tell stories to him, (for I was at that time famed over the neighbourhood for my legendary tales) . . . . (21)

Clearly, Wilson is suggesting here that his interest in narrating the lives of others, fictional or otherwise, developed when he was very young. When combined with his totally understandable curiosity about who he himself was, the biographer is therefore already at work. In his mind, he was patching his father's life together out of fragments, combining information from documents found over time with other bits of information. If that is not the primary activity of a biographer or historian, what else can we call it? Or more precisely, because of his blindness, a social historian. Distinguishing its intentions from those of authorized history-making, Raphael Samuel et al. insist that social history is "quite different" from more generic history because it attempts to "touch on, and arguably help to focus, major issues of public debate" (34). As previously mentioned, as a disabled biographer or historian who writes about disabled subjects, Wilson necessarily plays the role of advocate. Furthermore, Raphael et al. also insist upon the importance of the imagination in history-making:

> The large gaps in our records highlight the social historian's obligation to reconstruct the past with imagination . . . . Imagination is needed, not merely to fill the gaps in our sources, but also to provide the framework, the master picture into which the jigsaw fragments of evidence can be fitted. (34)

Despite the fact that certain earlier theorists argued that this is the faculty the blind do not have, in order to reconstruct his family history, and later compose the current "no history" of "sightless" and "faceless" blind people, Wilson had to exercise his imagination constantly. The result was a book that anticipates later social history's concern with the "major issues of public

debate" today—in this case, capabilities and disabilities.

Wilson was not the only blind writer who showed an interest in other blind persons'

known and unknown lives, developed advocacy intentions, and realized these intentions in

writing before the twentieth century, at a time when almost all lives of the blind were

documented by sighted persons in formats ranging from medical and legal reports to full

biographies. For instance, in 1835, Abram V. Courtney in Boston, "himself totally blind,"

published *Anecdotes of the Blind*, accompanied by his memoir. Almost two decades later,

William Artman and Lansing V. Hall, both institutionalised at the School for the Blind in New

York, co-authored *The Beauties and Achievements of the Blind* (1854). But since these authors

all acknowledged their debt to Wilson's *Biography*,[59] it is not too much to claim that Wilson

initiated and strongly influenced the stream of blind writers in the nineteenth century who

extended their sympathetic interest towards others. It is also undeniable that Wilson's

relationship to his subjects, quite a few of whom were his ordinary individual contemporaries,

was more intimate and informed than the attempts of other blind authors. This is because even

with regard to famous historical figures, Wilson presents their lives sympathetically, in the sense

of having some imagined connection with his own. I will discuss this at some length.

It was certainly not due to some new material factor or improved access to agency that

Wilson became one of the first blind biographers. It was still too early for him to enjoy the

benefit of embossed books allowing for independent reading, or of the tactile writing systems

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[59] Sighted authors also relied heavily on Wilson. Wlliam Hanks Levy draws on his *Biography* as a valuable and rare resource to write the biography of a blind person, and Levy does not fail to include Wilson as one of his subjects with a special acknowledgement: "The foregoing extracts are well calculated to give an idea of the difficulties with which the majority of the blind have to contend," and the "chief reason for inserting them in this place is the circumstance that James Wilson was the author of a work entitled 'The Biography of the Blind,' which has proved eminently useful in conveying an idea of the influence exerted on the world's affairs by persons without sight, and also in directing attention to the capabilities and requirements of the blind" (278). Artman and Hall also write that Wilson's "merits as an author, and fine literary attainments, recommended him to the notice of many distinguished contemporary writers" (124).

developed in the middle of the nineteenth century,[60] most notably by Louis Braille and William

Moon. As noted earlier, from the very beginning, Wilson faced numerous obstacles with regard

to reading and writing, and had to rely on others' help. These multiplied when he undertook

writing *Biography*, for as he acknowledges in the Introduction, to collect and compile the various

resources, extensive aid from others was indispensable: "I had often to depend on the good

nature of strangers for such books as were necessary for my purpose, and even for readers and

amanuenses" (62).

I would argue, however, that what distinguishes Wilson most was his ability to extend his

sympathetic feelings when considering the lives of other blind persons, reminding us that at the

time, "sympathy" was understood as closer to "empathy" in a modern sense. Wilson was notable

for "sympathizing" with others—"feel[ing] with" (Smith 170; pt. II, sec. I, ch. 2), or even

identifying with his chosen subjects.

This was also how he understood and approached the concept of history. When recalling

his adolescence, Wilson emphasizes his interest in reading, or more accurately being read,

history and geography. This information is important not only within his narrative of self-

education, but also as permission for us to explore why and how his autobiographical writing

extended to researching and publishing other people's lives. The disciplines of history and

geography are explicitly discussed throughout Wilson's writing, and his works' literary qualities

were shaped and heightened by his opinions about how these disciplines infused his narrative.

To begin with, the values he associated with these studies ran parallel to one other. In his

autobiography, he records his early absorption in history books, and emphasizes the importance

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[60] The first book in Moon type was published in 1847 (Farrell 103), whereas in France Braille's system was adopted as official means of blind students in 1854 (99).

of geographical knowledge. Both subjects attracted him as epistemologies, but also in relation to personal, everyday living. Regarding their educational value, Wilson writes that

> It has been remarked by an elegant writer, that geography is the eye of history, the latter recording the time, and the former the place, in which any remarkable event has happened. To be acquainted with the names, situations, and boundaries of places, together with the transactions of other years, forms now an essential part of a good education. (57)

Insofar as they provided the basis for "a good education," as undoubtedly was the case for Wilson, it should be noted that he is referring to history with a capital H, and geography with a capital G. Here for instance is his description of what he means by "History":

> an epitome of the history of England, from the Norman conquest till the peace in 1783, including invasions, conspiracies, insurrections, and revolutions . . . the year of [Kings' and Queens'] accession, the length of their reigns . . . and the names and characters of all the great statesmen, heroes, philosophers, and poets. (57–8)

The buried presence of the term "heroes" in this inventory indicates that he devoted himself to the official, non-blind history available to him at the time. He directed his attention to these books to the extent that he could recite them; such demonstrations of his highly retentive memory earned Wilson the title of "a Living Book" and "a Walking Encyclopaedia" (58). But this knowledge was not derived from professional or academic training, because neither was available to him, and therefore, he had no real applied use for what he knew. He acquired information about these subjects through years and years of effort, essentially memorizing what had been written by authorities on the topics, without contributing to the discipline, because he could not. Wilson himself knew this better than anyone else, modestly brushing off accolades

from people about his "accomplishments" by insisting that his historical knowledge is nothing but "a source of consolation" that helps him divert his mind from the endless darkness.

Similarly, the idea that geography is "the eye of history" assumes that the perspective taken is that of the European colonial dream. Knowing who that "elegant writer" Wilson quotes as making this claim is not ultimately important, because as early as the sixteenth century, multiple cartographers were saying this about their work. As Svetlana Alpers explains, two European cartographers, Willem Janszoon Blaeu in the Netherlands and Abraham Ortelius in the Flemish region, explained that the purpose of creating a world atlas was to enlarge our view to the yet unexplored places—"to make distant, unseeable things visible" (90)—but also to incorporate a view of the past into topographical knowledge, believing that "providing a visual compendium for the discipline of history" is "geography's role" (Schmidt 84).

Begun when Wilson was fifteen years old, his first course of reading not surprisingly consisted of the books "most convenient" for him to get, and these were popular travel narratives such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*. As literary historians have noted, since the "wake of the Grand Tour" in the eighteenth century, "travel books came close second in popularity to the novel" (Shattock 154), which were also associated with and generated for the colonial background.[61] Wilson admits that such reading "formed my taste, was swallowed with avidity, and inspired me with a degree of enthusiasm which awakes even at the present day" (13). Institutionalized in the Royal Society, the Geographical Society, and other organizations devoted to travel as discovery and acquisition, this understanding gave the impetus to European travelers to push hastily towards the frontiers of the yet unknown places. But the notion of geography that proved vital for Wilson was not the geography with a capital G that provided the

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[61] See, also, Murray 15.

means and the goals for travelers certain of their European superiority, as represented by "the

stock travel tropes" (Edwards and Graulund 32). Instead, geography had to serve as a blind

guide, in the sense of directing someone who is blind, and this immediately changes the

dominant pre-existing cultural topography described in terms of national and local, superior and

inferior, and visual and tactile. Despite blind people's disqualification from admission into the

domain and principles of Geography, which continues even today, Wilson's assumed blind

guides experience traveling as not just for "acquisition and conquest," or motivated by a "desire

to discover something new that can be logged, described and explained" (32). The result in his

auto/biography is a critique of such a view, which is hardly irrelevant when dealing today with

the past wounds of colonization and ethical dilemmas of globalization. The implicit relationship

between the superior (the United States and Northern Europe) and the inferior (the rest of the

world) literally mapped out by the then-dominant European view of Geography can be profitably

juxtaposed with the inability of the blind to conceive of national status, relative size, and

proximity to enemies in graphic terms.[62] But Caroline Anne Anderson asks whether, in addition

to enhancing physical accessibility in society in general, "can we make geography itself

accessible?" (89) since the profound lack of aids other than visual in the discipline is only one of

the barriers which function as "[f]orms of spatial and social exclusion" (87) of the blind.

To a certain extent, Wilson's representation of blind men contributes to making

geography "accessible" to those who must rely on faculties other than vision to orient

themselves. Standing in stark contrast to the distanced, almost Godlike perspective aspired to in

big G Geography, in Wilson's texts, blind men orient themselves in space through a steady,

slow, and patient process that eventually improves their ordinary daily lives. By narrating the

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[62] For further discussion, see also Imrie 397–403.

stories of blind individuals who live in specific places, Wilson is therefore expanding the boundaries of the idea of geography. Levinas' face-to-face interaction calls for ethical responsiveness to Others, and his intention in part lies in the criticism of the imperial past and its continuing negative legacy (*On Escape* 50), More modestly, Wilson was not thinking of the larger historical or political context, but arguing that blind people should be permitted to navigate their own streets.

Partly because he was blind, Wilson was certainly delighted by and proud of his close acquaintance with the disciplines of history and geography. As he learns them, however, Wilson is forced to innovate, moving away from the capital letter versions to reconstruct history and geography simply as how he understands them, with history potentially the account of the personal, unrecognised lives of blind subjects, and geography potentially the account of what their tactile sense and memory can absorb. Or to put it differently, although "to the blind a large field is laid open" (57), to navigate and become familiar with this location, the blind person must also design the maps and recall the history. Whether intentionally or not, then, the concepts of history and geography that Wilson developed also function in part as a counter to the "hegemony of the vision," in Phil Macnaghten and John Urry's term (109), that is defined and sustained by a sighted point of view of the world.

In the following section, close readings of Wilson's auto/biographical writings reveal how he personally understands time and space, and also demonstrate how sympathy determines his approach to writing about other blind figures living within the common matrix in their own ways.

Blindness and Mobility

Wilson's collective biography is distinctive in how he represents obscure, often previously unknown blind people. First, he links them together as a community; second, he includes himself within this community; and third, he foregrounds the common daily routines of the blind—the touching, groping, and moving around. Jonathan Hsy, one of the few recent scholars who have written about Wilson, notes how he juxtaposes his heart-breaking experiences as a learner and writer with those of John Gower, "the first historically verifiable blind English poet," even though Gower, like Milton, lost his sight later in life (2). Hsy focuses on how Wilson aligns his own persona with his exemplary predecessor to motivate his composition, and to place himself in the "great tradition" of blind writers (Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind* 33). This strategy ultimately creates a "showcase" for all people without sight:

> Wilson's collection mobilizes the historical figure of blind Gower (and many others) to showcase the living blind person's capacity to communicate, create, and advocate on his own behalf—and, by extension, the text calls into being a much broader, socially engaged Blind community. (Hsy 2)

Hsy to the contrary, though, Wilson's collection raises questions about evaluation: who are the "greatest" or most exemplary blind figures in the "tradition"? After reading through all of the entries, readers might for instance find it surprising that Gower's life and literary achievements are related in one of the smallest biographies—no more than one and a half pages. Among the more than fifty blind subjects in *Biography*, then, whom does Wilson identify himself with most closely, and why? Merely comparing the number of pages allocated to each figure does not provide a dependable guide to the author's interest and compassion for his subject. In certain cases, Wilson simply might not have been able to collect enough information to create a

substantial entry, and of course, his own peculiarly inconvenient circumstances as a researcher—his blindness, but also his lack of access to archives, since he was not part of any academic institution or governmental service—meant that gathering together dependable historical documents and previous commentaries must have been a challenging task.

Another obstacle to determining which entries are of greatest exemplary importance for their author is the style Wilson often chooses for exposition. In the case of Gower, for instance, the language is flat, and the narrative matter-of-fact, offering no hints for determining Wilson's interest, enthusiasm, and sympathy for his subject. In other cases, a chapter introduction does supply some commentary by Wilson, but overall, his personal links to his subjects as literary models, authorial ideals, or even alter egos, remains hazy. I would argue that this is because above all, Wilson wants his readers to consider *Biography*, a collection of multiple stories of blind people, as one integrated text. As a result, although Wilson may recognize that certain individuals, as writers, might have a special relevance for himself—Hsy points to Gower because he has the literary fame Wilson desires, and Wilson himself readily acknowledges the influence of Homer and Milton, the most famous of all blind poets, on his own writing and life—he strongly asserts the importance of obscure, or even unnamed blind people most notable for their physical abilities.

In this way, Wilson accepts but revises the most familiar approach to biography that Carlyle called hero worship, by stressing the arbitrariness of the designation. He therefore anticipates William H. Mallock's assertions about defining "greatness": "there are as many degrees of greatness as there are of temperature; and it is as difficult to draw a line between ordinary men and men whose greatness is of a very low degree, as it is to draw a line between coldness, coolness, and low degrees of heat . . . " (117). By emphasizing unexpected qualities of

his blind subjects, Wilson therefore questions an ad hoc value system which not only assumes sightedness, but also the ordinariness or low degree of achievement possible for the blind because of their disability. While including the lives of famous blind figures who are treated as exceptional, Wilson seeks to call attention to the distinct achievements of unknown "ordinary, as well as famous, " blind individuals[63]—a striking feature of his project, anticipating oral history enterprises and ethnographic methods.

In his entries, Wilson does feature those qualities customarily attributed to the blind—the fondness for music (201), surprising powers of recollection (200), the exceedingly acute sense of touch (212), and so on. But anecdotes about the surprising degree of blind men's[64] mobility and bodily dexterity appear throughout the text. In his account of Thomas Wilson (no relation), "the blind bell ringer of Dumfries," Wilson marvels at his exceptional physicality in "tripp[ing] up stairs with as much agility and confidence as if he had possessed the clearest vision" three times a day "without . . . a single omission" for "more than half a century" (431), as well as his easy execution of light housekeeping chores for which "he neither had, nor required an assistant" (429). In fact, Wilson draws on another stereotype to emphasize his subject's competence: Thomas keeps "as clean a house, as the most particular spinster in the town" (431). Such examples of the physical competence of blind persons are abundant and various in *Biography*, but perhaps because of his own early life, what seems most important for Wilson are examples of blind people moving substantial distances, from place to place, of their own free will.

More recent scholarship on social mobility underscores the rationale for Wilson's assessment. John Urry calls this particular kind of mobility "corporeal travel" to distinguish it

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[63] In his preface to the republication of Wilson's *Biography*, Kenneth Jernigan also acknowledges this point (ix–xv).
[64] Wilson's, and generally other nineteenth-century male writers', prioritization of the male as an active agent is worth noting here. There are only three females out of fifty-four blind persons who "have distinguished themselves," and therefore have their lives preserved in the collection.

from "object travels" and "imaginative and virtual travels" (50). Urry argues that these different

forms of travel are not only "constitutive of the structures of social life," but further, that it is

through the ability to perform all three that "social life and cultural identity are recursively

formed and reformed" (50). Grounded in the same sociological approach that Urry takes, over

the past few decades, a substantial amount of recent research on disabilities has focused on the

associations between the body and the social environment as contributing factors to

independence and identity. One major concern has been the effect of mobility on the individual's

quality of life (Gustafson 20; Patla and Shumway-Cook 7; Manikandan 5). Until the "arrival of

mass motoring and mass mobility" in the 1830s (Cahill 33), for most people, sighted or

otherwise, the ability to move independently was a decisive factor in determining their

education, occupation, and income—in short, the overall quality of their lives. During the mid-

nineteenth century, railways and other forms of mass transportation profoundly changed the

landscape, the structure of society, and general demographics, simply because a much larger

percentage of the population could go somewhere else (Frawley 119–20). Those who could not

navigate these changes, however—the senile, homeless children, the sick, and the disabled—

were increasingly confined in institutions that reinforced or even insured their immobility

(Weber 16). Michel Foucault's accounts of the prison-like environments and disciplinary

restrictions place on immobile people are well-known, and have been hugely influential.

Blind persons, as well as people with other disabilities, often had a recognized place

within communities. But when we ask to what extent they were accepted by their sighted peers,

or more importantly, how much support and assistance they could expect for leading a mobile

and self-determined life, the answers are often disturbing. As Michael Oliver and Colin Barnes

point out, even when the disabled participated in the public life of their community, it was not

uncommon, until the seventeenth century, that such people "were subjected to controlling measures such as the pillar and the stocks and even ridicule" (27–8). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, even in the middle of the eighteenth century, Thomas Blacklock commented on his own sense of injury resulting from such controlling or dismissive measures. Another blind person who unleashed a furious pen to expose the sense of superiority and arrogance of the sighted over the blind was John Bird, a surgeon who lost his sight in the middle of his life, and who also edited Wilson's autobiography.[65] In the Introduction, Bird describes the disappointment and bitter sorrow he felt due to the deprivations he experienced after becoming blind. For him, these feelings were accompanied by guilt, since he could recall his own previous identity as one of those ignorant, "unsuffering sighted" (xlvii), Bird denounces the "five-sensed views, mode of thought, shape of phrase, and course of action" (xiv) as the cause of sighted persons' inability to engage emotionally with the blind and their suffering, or to consider it even possible that the blind could make decisions about their own lives.

Bird goes on to declare that even if blind persons were not institutionalized, and therefore eliminated from human life, the doors between the community, the body, and fellow feeling were generally shut tight in their faces. Once put out of "the range and reach" (xii) of others, and with no way of closing the gap, the blind were not considered as being even present, let alone treated as individuals who can participate physically, intellectually, and emotionally in the social world. Such ostracism, if prolonged, contributes to an intellectual stagnation that almost inevitably leads to the blind man's moral and physical decay.

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[65] Some obituaries of Bird erroneously referred to him as the author of the book, i.e., a biographer of James Wilson. (e.g., *Our Monthly Church Messenger to the Deaf* 96; and *Journal of the American Medical Association* 730). Considering that Bird is identified as a surgeon, one of the "authoritative" professions, this mistake may point to the issue of authority and authenticity in minority, including disability, life writing.

Drawing upon his own experiences as a person who became blind, Bird describes the powerful and dismal cause-and-effect relationship between vision and sympathy, or the lack thereof, in society. The social and categorical incarceration of visually impaired people not only blocks any future possibilities of public engagement, but also affects their existing human relationships. For blind people, to a high degree, social and intellectual inertness results from physical inertness, almost as if they were different facets of a single problem. Bird's correlation of physical competence and social engagement finds support in a large number of recent studies. For instance, Andrea Rosso et al. argue that because social engagement through real-life activity is crucially important to our "sense of value and identity" (618), it is not surprising that "low mobility was associated with lower level of social engagement of all forms" (620–21).

As an early advocate through life narrative of blind rights, Wilson not only anticipated Bird's conclusions and the results of much later research about mobility, but also incorporated into *Biography* earlier observations on the topic, including Blacklock's commentary in his *Encyclopaedia* entry on "Blind".[66] Blacklock himself cites Valentin Haüy, a founder of "the first well-known school for the blind," L'Institution Royale des Jeunes Aveugles (the Royal Institution for Blind Youth) in Paris in 1784 (Oller et al. 109).[67] The key conclusion Blacklock draws from Haüy and translates for English readers is that "Parents and relations ought never to be too ready in offering their assistance to the blind":

> Let a blind boy be permitted to walk through the neighbourhood without a guide, not only
>
> though he should run some hazard, but even though he should suffer some pain. . . . [I]t is
>
> better that he should lose a little blood, or even break a bone, than be perpetually

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[66] The article was originally entitled "To the Blind" in *Encyclopædia*.

[67] According to Oller et al., the school's significance is also marked by it having Louis Braille as one of its pupils, who was fifteen years old at that time. Two years after Haüy's death, Braille fully developed his writing system (110).

confined to the same place, debilitated in his frame, and depressed in his mind. (308)

Though not visually impaired himself, Haüy's warnings about perpetual confinement's relation

to bodily debility and depression echo through Bird's accounts of the agonizing captive state of

blindness, and accentuate in turn the mobility and freedom Wilson enjoyed.

Haüy's and Blacklock's recommendation to "accustom [blind children] to an early

excursion of their own active powers" even "at a risk of their personal safety" (308) further

supported by Wilson's account of his own life. He describes at length the physical hazards he

navigated on a daily basis during those times when he travelled to and from unfamiliar places

dispatching letters or selling hardware. Because "the want of sight made it difficult for him to

steer his course aright" (308), he would often "wander out of his direct way," and "the greater

part of the day may be spent before he can rectify his mistake" (44). But he was also frequently

exposed to life-threatening danger, such as falling into a canal (46), a river (47), or an old well

(47), escaping from all of these by the skin of his teeth.

Wilson narrates these experiences in the wide world to demonstrate the ability of the blind

to accomplish such travels, and reinforces his own experience by devoting much of his

Biography to documenting that the blind can be physically mobile, and even highly versatile.

Anecdotes confirming the surprising degree of blind men's mobility repeatedly appear, joining

those more common features customarily attributed to the blind to create a composite portrait of

capacity. By doing so, Wilson supports Blacklock's theoretical remarks with many documented

examples, with a cumulative effect of challenging readers' facile assumptions about blind men

and their mobility.

Since such mobility is only possible through route repetition and meticulous memorizing,

the practice itself becomes an example of how the blind develop an understanding of geography

that can be thought of as its own epistemology, with corresponding implications for ideas of history. His consistent representation of the blind guide, the individual whose history has resulted in a profound knowledge of place despite a lack of sight, also challenges those flawed assumptions about undetected and unelaborated abilities of the blind.

Story of a "Blind Guide"

Alison Booth writes, "A collective biography requires an additional rhetorical frame besides that of any biography" (9). What then is the rhetorical frame governing Wilson's auto/biography? Mobility could certainly be a candidate. The blind men in Wilson's *Biography* move far and wide, and not just within their immediate neighborhood to but different cities and towns, across a stretch of moorland, and "over a craggy mountain" (314), on foot or on horseback, and not just to travel, but to participate a horse race (332), or to drives such vehicles as a stage wagon (342) and a four-wheeled chaise (335). But all of these ultimately point to a more abstract quality—independence. A man called Strong, for instance, is "accustomed to go about the city with no other guide than a stick, and to frequent several places in the country . . . without ever losing his way, or meeting with any accident" (177). Another man, Henry Hatsfield goes into woods "as far as six miles from home," cuts down trees, then carries them back with his neighbor's wagon and horses, all "without any individual to assist him" (449).

In these examples of outstanding mobility and self-determination, Wilson recognizes affinities between other blind persons and himself, however different their backgrounds and circumstances. The regular, daily, necessary actions of the blind—touching, groping, and moving around—become signs of self-possession, decisiveness, and bravery, all practiced constantly, ultimately qualifying the person, through acquired experience and confidence, to serve as a "blind guide." In fact, in places they know well, the blind can guide the sighted. This assertion of

course directly challenges the famous Biblical metaphor of "the blind leading the blind." In both Matthew and Luke, a blind man is presented in a parable as by definition an unreliable guide who can only lead you down the wrong path, and perhaps join you in falling into a pit.[68] Although this is a moral analogy—without the right guidance we all are liable to deviate from the correct path—the meaning still depends on associating blindness with ignorance, pride, and foolhardiness that will harm both the guide and the follower. Knowing the familiarity and force of this teaching, Wilson's stories of a "blind guide" who actually helps the sighted can be read as an undaunted reversal of the letter of the Christian moral lesson, but not the spirit, since the blind person is not "blind" as a guide, while sighted people who do not know the path are in fact "blind."

Though set in different times and places, Wilson's stories about blind guides share a common narrative sequence. Each blind individual, on more than one occasion, agrees to guide a stranger, or sometimes the stranger's friends. The guide gets the weary travelers to a requested destination safely, without it ever being known that he is "as blind as a stone" (103). When the sighted people learn the truth they are predictably taken by surprise. And to underscore the achievement, even after being led to place, they "could scarcely find out when they had occasion to call [the place] again, even in day-light" (330, 430, 433, 442).

The reactions of the surprised and appalled people are the punchline to the stories of a blind guide. In another, a sighted gentleman on horseback pulls up before the rippling current of a river. By chance, another passer-by on horseback arrives, and plunges into the river without any hesitation. The gentleman "immediately and closely followed his step" until both reach the

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[68] These two often-quoted statements on blindness in the Bible are "The blind leading the blind" (*New International Version*, Matthew 15.13–4), and "Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?" (Luke 6.39 – 40).

opposite bank. The grateful gentleman telling the story caught up to the other rider, and

> accosted him with thanks for the benefit of his guidance; but, what was my astonishment,
>
> when, bursting into a hearty laugh, he observed, that my confidence would have been
>
> less, had I known that I had been following a blind guide. (313)

In another version of the punchline, upon learning that the guide was blind, one of the sighted

travelers "exclaimed with astonishment": "Had I known that . . . I would not have ventured with

you for a hundred pounds." Confidently responding to him, the blind man remarks "And I, sir . . .

would not have lost my way for a thousand" (347).

Though casual, and even comical, these stories do not make the sighted travelers the

subject of scorn or derision. As shown by the episodes already mentioned, after recovering from

the shock, the lost travelers feel grateful, amused, and impressed. One anecdote ends by telling

us that one of such travelers found the "circumstances as the most extraordinary he had ever met

with," but expressed his gratitude by rewarding the guide "with two guineas, and a plentiful

entertainment the next day" (347). This is an essential part of Wilson's strategy, since the humor

is derived not from the consequences of the disability, but from the surprise of the sighted

persons when their expectations or stereotypes are turned upside down. Or as Wilson puts it, in

his biographies, "many laughable stories are told of the astonishment of persons" (432). Rather

than exposing and denouncing the ignorance or cruelty of his sighted peers, or issuing a sharp,

even irate protest, as Blacklock and Bird do, Wilson's playful tone in his series of blind guide

stories emphasizes that through their amazement, admiration, and amusement at their own

mistaken notions, the sighted travelers—and Wilson's readers—learn something valuable about

the competence and possibilities of blind people.

Blind Drawing Other Blinds

While Wilson shares with other blind authors the common objective to debunk "the most persistent and destructive myth concerning the blind," their "relative inactivity and immobility" (Jernigan, "Preface" xi-xii), what he shares with some of his other subjects is their everyday, unanticipated challenges, and their repeated triumph over them. This common experience extends to serving as a blind guide. In his own version, sometime in the past, Wilson was accosted on a street in Belfast by a soldier who lost his way to his lodging. The soldier had no idea the person he was asking for help was blind, and like the other guides, Wilson agreed to lead him. The rest of the story follows the pattern of the other blind guide narratives. After finding himself safely returned to the accommodation where his wife anxiously awaited, the soldier tells the landlady that "I couldn't find my way back . . . if it hadn't been for this decent man, that shewed me the house." "And more shame for you," she replies, "for you have your eyesight, and yet you must be guided to your lodging by a blind man." On hearing this, the soldier and his wife were astonished, and began heartily to bless themselves (33). All of these narratives present the blind subjects as resilient men who are well-connected and confident in the world. Through these stories, Wilson has turned the biblical blind guide into a hero, and even a savior.

Recent critics and biographers have often remarked on the hazy boundaries lying between the authors and readers of life writing texts. Feeling is often given credit for creating the haze. While the medium, scope, or motivation for life writing texts may vary widely, depending on the biographer-subject pairing, it is a critical commonplace that the writer often expresses or confesses some form of emotional attachment to, or identification with, the chosen biographical subject.[69] For Wilson, I would argue, what blurs the boundary between his subjects and himself

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[69] For further discussion, see Hibbard 21–3; Garrison 68; and Jordanova 162.

is a fellow feeling of achievement in the face of prejudice, and firm convictions about what the

blind can or cannot do. Wilson and his subjects, through their recorded relations of their stories,

begin to answer Derrida's question, "What happens when one writes without seeing?" (*Memoirs*

3) Or, more precisely, "How would the memoirs of the blind be written?" (ibid. 33)[70] That answer

is in fact contained in Derrida's earlier riddle-like statement: "A drawing of the *blind* is a

drawing *of* the blind" (2). By the mid-nineteenth century, it was becoming increasingly common

for the blind object—"A drawing of the *blind*"—to also be the one doing the representing—"a

drawing *of* the blind." In Wilson's case, the blind being drawn could be another person, or

himself.

Conclusion

The desire and capacity to think about, feel for *and* with, and even vicariously experience

the lives of others are the core components of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of

sympathy. In this section, I have shown that Wilson's auto/biographical writing stands out

because he extends and complicates productively the notion of sympathy. How Wilson

represents himself and others invites us to consider what sympathy meant, and more importantly,

could potentially mean not only for this blind auto/biographer, but also for the dominant majority

of the sighted. Wilson's sympathy entails more than imagining other possible lives. Even if some

of his life narratives are reduced to something resembling hagiographic legend due to the scarcity

of resources about his biographical subjects, it is undeniable that he is attempting to reach out to

the supposedly unreachable minds and lives of the disabled by linking himself through his shared

blindness, regardless of how different their individual circumstances are—their gender,

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[70] Derrida's ongoing commitment to the conception of vision and art is pointed out by critics. Besides *Memoirs of the Blind*, where he enunciates his starting point of discussion, Derrida has pursued the theme in *The Truth in Painting* (Kelly 97).

nationality, class, vocation, and the age and reason they lost their sight.

Moreover, by establishing a blind guide paradigm and setting himself within it, Wilson demonstrates his understanding of geography with a lower case—not an elevated or imperial perspective on the world, but hard-earned intimate familiarity with the lands he actually treads on. History with a lower case, one not informed primarily by conventional hero worship, also emerges from his writing. Instead of confining himself to retelling the tales of well-known literary figures, Wilson identifies himself intimately with unfamiliar or obscure blind individuals, celebrating their achievements of mobility and competence. His hybrid text, a blend of autobiography and biography held together by the fact of blindness, demonstrates his fellow feelings for other blind persons, and therefore not only the capacity of the blind to extend sympathy, but also to participate in the world as fully human.

Wilson's narratives present what Rachel Hollander discusses regarding the notion of sympathy in the nineteenth-century literary context: "Victorian sympathy is based on the value of understanding others. Even if complete comprehension of another person's mind is seen as unattainable, it still functions as an ideal, and moral behavior depends upon the attempt to minimize difference and emphasize commonality" (3). Wilson certainly addresses such ethical issues in their own right, but enacts, more closely, Levinas' ethics of alterity. Wilson's intention is not necessarily to "minimize difference and emphasize commonality" between the blind persons, including himself, and those who have vision. On the contrary, as Levinas espouses the multiplicity of otherness (*TI* 40–2), recognizing that self and Others are only related across an "unbridgeable distance" (Peperzak 137), Wilson always recognizes the differences in his auto/biography, even while saying how common it is that the blind guides were doubted. By presenting blindness as a collective *experience*, Wilson acknowledges and avows the face of

"faceless" blind persons. His narrative thus appeals to the consciousness of the period, and therefore to the possibility that all citizens, unsighted as well as sighted, can exercise the sympathetic imagination, and perform social and ethical acts.

Chapter II: Representing Blindness

Section 1 Vision, Epiphany, and Dickens' Creative Process

Introduction

To establish by contrast what makes blind writers' treatment of blind subjects distinctive, this chapter looks at two sighted writers who address blindness, Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins. Dickens' Christmas novella, "The Cricket on the Hearth," and a chapter in *American Notes* both tell a story about a blind girl—one fictional, the other real. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Dickens frequently selects a setting or presents a character designed to remind his readers of the proximity of the world's "other" side, and of those who live there, as opposed to the one in which we are cosily settled. He has a genuine commitment to serve as an advocate for the disadvantaged—children, the poor, people with disabilities. At the point early in his career when Dickens became a social reformer, he satisfied Levinas' requirement that we take responsibility for others. Collins also accords with Levinas when he cautions us not to assume too much about what we can know about others. In *Poor Miss Finch*, Collins actually wonders if a blind character would be as pleased with healing her eyes as we assume she would.

As an advocate for the disadvantaged, Dickens sometimes shows a famous, at times peculiar, and at others even obsessive interest in the relationship between the interior and exterior of humans, and especially when their status deviates from the norm. These entwined aspects of Dickens' creative practice are prominent in his representation of the life of Laura Bridgman, a deaf-blind girl whom Dickens met during his first trip to America, and more

prominent in his fictional creation Bertha Plummer. In fact, these aspects become crystalized in epiphanic moments in each story.

The first part of this section deals with Dickens' positioning himself as a sympathetic observer in his account of visiting Laura Bridgman in *American Notes*. Although Dickens devotes a significant number of pages to sharing his keen observations on this then-famous historical figure, the chapter is extensively drawn from Samuel Gridley Howe's annual report as the Director of the Perkins Institute—so much so, that Dickens remarks that he wished he could present Howe's "very beautiful and touching narrative . . . entire" (*AN* 32). Since he did not however do this, Dickens in fact made "the biographer's choice" (Atkinson 5) in representing his subject's life. As Wilson Snipes remarks, the biographer in general is "a Virgilian figure" (235), whose selection of material from the many substantial sources of the subjects' life in turn reflects the biographer's viewpoints and life. With Snipes' remark in mind, this section begins by examining where Dickens locates the pinnacle of Bridgman's life before his visit to explore his particular understanding of the meaning of epiphany, originally the visual manifestation of a divinity, and the effect it has on his representation of the blind.

The second part of this section extends discussion of this distinctive notion of epiphany into Dickens' choices when creating a fictional blind girl in "The Cricket on the Hearth."[71] Dickens' authorial identity was carefully constructed to communicate what he saw and knew, but also to meet his readers' expectations. Since *Cricket* is a highly melodramatic story, written after his meeting with Bridgman, I will also argue that Dickens' understanding of and attitudes towards disabilities, and in particular a life without vision, are at their clearest in the narrative

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[71] Hereafter, abbreviated as *Cricket*.

epiphanies—which in *Cricket*, take the form of the blind girl's claim that she "sees" her devoted father's true figure for the first time in her life.

While both narratives are presented by a sighted author, whose eyes never cease observing every small change in the blind girls' facial expressions, I will conclude by assessing the importance of life writers' ability to capture such epiphanic moments, a skill that is inseparable from their capability and willingness to "feel with" others. I call the result a "sympathetic epiphany," and for Dickens, such moments are central to his representations of disability, and blindness in particular.

Dickens as a Sympathetic Observer: Bridgman and Journalism

Dickens started his career as newspaper journalist, and as a fiction writer, he also frequently displayed his skills at responding to matters of public interest and concern in a timely manner. In November of 1849, for instance, when already a famous novelist, he attended, "along with thirty thousand other spectators" the execution of the notorious Mannings, and the following day, he informed the public about the details of the affair through a letter to the *Times* ("To the Editor of *The Times*."), which according to Dickens' contemporary, American editor Alfred Trumble, "created a tremendous sensation, and started a whole flood of literature, condemnatory and demanding the abolishment of public hangings" (111).

As this *Times* letter demonstrates, Dickens was not only a prompt dispatcher of up-to-date news, but also willing to leverage public opinion about the "other" sides of Victorian life through his narratives. He was not of course alone in this—William Thomas Stead, editor of *The Pall Mall Gazette*; William Howard Russell, the *Times'* reporter and arguably the first modern war correspondent; and Henry Mayhew, whose articles in the *Morning Chronicle* about urban life \eventually became *London Labour and London Poor*, were all famous for their revelatory social

writing. As "very much a man of his times" (Johnson 33), Dickens would therefore have felt it perfectly natural, and even necessary, to pay a visit to the famous blind-deaf girl during his American excursion in 1842, and to provide a meticulous report about her, complete with the conclusions he had drawn.

Blindness and Deafness—Representations of Laura Bridgman and Helen Keller

The "original deaf-blind girl," as Elisabeth Gitter describes her in a 2001 biography, Laura Dewey Bridgman was born in 1829, about a half-century before Helen Keller. Because of the similarity of their combined disabilities,[72] Samuel Gridley Howe, the founder and director of the Perkins Institute of the Blind, arranged for Keller to meet Bridgman a year before the older woman's death, and they have frequently been discussed together over the years.[73] Besides being deaf, blind, and mute due to an illness at an early stage of life,[74] they shared other qualities. Through years of painstaking effort and patience, both Bridgman and Keller mastered one of then-competing writing and reading systems for the blind,[75] and thus successfully kept journals and wrote poems.

But biographical accounts agree that when Anne Sullivan brought an eight-year old Keller to meet the fifty-nine year-old Bridgman, the older woman's name had faded from public notice, even though at one point she was arguably the most famous woman in the world, with the exception of Queen Victoria (Tabak 163). Why then, despite all the similarities, did one remain

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[72] Unlike Keller, Bridgman also suffered from olfactory or gustatory dysfunction (Lamson 2).

[73] As John Albert Macy points out that "[t]he names of Laura Bridgman and Helen Keller will always be linked together" (297), and critics, biographers, and historians habitually refer to Bridgman in reference to Keller. See, for example, Nielsen 3–6 and Herrmann 14–26.

[74] Bridgman was two years old when she had scarlet fever (Lamson 2), and Keller was nineteen months old when she developed an illness diagnosed as "brain fever" (Kemp 31).

[75] In "The War of the Dots," Director of Research and Education of the American Foundation for the Blind Robert B. Irwin expressed his frustration: "The difficulty created by these competing systems cannot be understated . . . . There is nothing more absurd, I think, than to have five or six different prints for the blind . . . ." According to Irwin, Dr. Olin H. Burritt, the Principal of Overbrook School for the Blind, shared his lament: "The conflict was acrimonious in the extreme. The bitterness can hardly be imagined" (26).

in the public memory, while the other "unprecedented" one largely disappeared? Gitter

significantly suggests that because Keller's appearance and manners were more agreeable to the

sighted public than Bridgman's, she was better able to hold its attention (*IG* 229, 262). As part of

promotional campaigns for the Perkins Institute of the Blind, Bridgman was also exhibited

publicly, thereby bringing out the more sensational aspects of her disabilities in a manner that

might have suggested the common display of various human oddities in freak shows. It is even

possible that Bridgman's fame actually had to prepare the way for the public's full acceptance of

the possibility of an educated, intelligent, deaf-blind woman. But arguably, their self-

representations might have had the biggest influence. During her lifetime, Keller authored more

than ten books, beginning with the huge best seller, *The Story of My Life*. Bridgman wrote about

her life too, but only fragments of her manuscripts were published (*IG* 299 n1). Her narrative is

embedded in and submitted to someone's authoritative voice, as a case study to be examined,

assessed, and corrected.[76]

As a result, she was known primarily as a disabled person constantly being observed,

examined, and described by others, and most famously, by Samuel Howe, in "the Ninth Annual

Report of the Trustees of the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind," and

by Charles Dickens.

Dickens, Howe, Tone, and Language

Although advocacy for the blind took various published forms, Victorian journalistic

reports on the environment and condition of people with visual impairments tended to sharply

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[76] In "Writings of Laura Bridgman" (1887), a psychologist Edmund Clark Sanford expected "errors of three kinds" in her writing due to her "simple ignorance, inexperience, or misinformation" and so on (8). He not only meticulously corrects such errors, but also points out that "Laura . . . might have developed into that insensibility to suffering in others which is said to be common among untrained deaf-mutes" (11) and that "the intellectual nature of those in Laura's unfortunate condition is in danger of starving into idiocy, so their moral nature is in danger of degenerating into complete lack of self-control" (13). I should point out that his presumptions echo the period's assumptions and practices about disabilities, going back to Diderot's.

distinguish themselves from professional publications, taking a far more limited and subjective point of view, and displaying those notions of sympathy already familiar to us as part of an appeal to the readers' interest. In the case of Bridgman, however, Howe's supposed clinical report actually presents Bridgman through melodramatic tropes and the conventions of the Gothic novel, including isolation, imprisonment, darkness—and a heroic rescuer from all of the above. In the strikingly sentimental narrative Dickens includes in *American Notes*, the journalist and fiction writer follows the doctor's example. Bridgman appears as "a fair young creature" (*AN* 31) of "delicate frame," who extended a "poor white hand . . . beckoning to some good man for help, that an Immortal soul might be awakened" (*AN* 32).

Mary Swift Lamson, who taught Bridgman for three years at the institution, prophetically wrote that "It would have been easy to write a sensational narrative of so unique a person as Laura Bridgman, and to cluster splendid panegyrics around a few salient points of her character" (iv), and many years later, G. Thomas Couser pointed out the biographical "vulnerability" of certain subjects, and disabled subjects in particular, to having their stories told to serve ends other than their own" (*Vulnerable Subjects* x), The Bridgman Dickens saw had in fact already been presented with flourishes, and molded by her supervisors into a brave heroine who overcame huge misfortunes to become the "gentle, tender, guileless, grateful-hearted being" who would arouse the public's unambiguous sympathy (*AN* 32). Supplied to this hungry audience*,* many such portraits rapidly appeared in magazines, newspapers, poems, pamphlets, and published sermons—some by known writers such as Francis Lieber and Julia R. Ahagnos, others

unsigned.[77] Dickens differs, not in the common appeal to sentiment but in his decision to cast his light on a less significant episode, and to develop the episode in his fiction sometime later.

Besides his personal observation, Dickens acknowledged that for his portrait he drew on Howe's report—a 17-page document with a 20-page Appendix A devoted to giving an account of Bridgman. Dickens foregrounded two episodes that he presents as moments of revealed truth coming to this deaf blind subject—epiphanies, in short. First, let us consider what moments could be epiphanic for someone who cannot see, and who therefore is presumably unable to grasp the full meaning of the world. As already noted, until the middle of eighteenth century, few systematic attempts to educate children with visual disability were made (Winzer, *History* 25), but even fewer efforts at education were directed at children with a hearing disability (Winzer, "Disability" 80; M. Edwards 36), suggesting that sudden discoveries in knowledge for the disabled will be related to language. For this reason, the most celebrated moment in disability history is the famous well-house scene in Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life*, when "suddenly," and irreversibly, "the mystery of language was revealed" (35). Although Keller does not use the term, this is obviously an example of a sudden revelation that changes everything—an epiphany, and one whose familiarity and singularity has made it the exemplary instance of disabled consciousness. In an analysis of a deaf performer/director Terry Galloway's work, Michael Davidson, for instance, refers to Keller's "epiphanic discovery . . . of language" (22).[78]

However, Bridgman's coming to full consciousness, and the events identified as key moments in the process, suggest that the disabled can have different kinds of epiphanies.

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[77] Those publications include an 1857 article in *Baker's Pictorial Manual Alphabet*; "The Poetry of the Deaf" in *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* in 1884; and three 1842 articles in *Mother's Monthly Journal.* See also "Laura Bridgman Scrapbooks" and "Laura Bridgman Collection" at Perkins School for the Blind.

[78] Other examples that define Keller's discovery of language and its meaning as an epiphany include Phillips 159; Diefendorf 190; Yingling 34; Halsted 380; Bowker, et al. 229; Covington, 131; Donald 245–6; and Schaller 337.

Similarly and expectedly, the revelatory moment in Bridgman's life is also linked to her

apprehension of language. But she did not distinguish the moment in her journal, and as Gitter

points out, rather than Keller's explosion into comprehension, Bridgman's "eureka!" (*IG* 83)

seems to unfold for her over time, unmarked by a single word, like Keller's "water," or a single

vivid incident (96–7). In fact, the epiphany seems to have been her teacher's, since Howe is the

one who records the dawning of comprehension. Howe uses a fishing analogy—with Bridgman

as a fish. After two months' clueless fumbling of trying to teach her, a "line" dropped for her

"under water" "did touch her hand, and she did grasp it; and we pulled herself up" ("Laura"

383). In attempting to convey the change, Howe continues the animal analogies: "Her

countenance lighted up with human expression; it was no longer a dog or parrot,—it was an

immortal spirit, eagerly seizing upon a new link of union with other spirits!" The real drama here

is therefore not her coming to consciousness, but Howe's epiphany that she had: he "could

almost fix upon the moment when this truth dawned upon her mind." The success here is

therefore not Bridgman finally figuring out the desires and habits of the sighted and hearing

world, but Howe developing a teaching method that lifts his student from the status of an animal

to that of a still extremely limited human being. The "eureka" is the sighted teacher's (Showalter

40; Mahoney 123).[79]

Epiphany and Disability Studies

The condition of an epiphany, or the criteria for recognizing a certain event as epiphanic,

are indefinite. The ubiquity of this literary device associated with revelation or enlightenment has

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[79] Gitter asks whether Bridgman's language acquisition was as truly epiphanic as Howe claimed. As Bridgman "had learned to speak a few words, and knew some of the letters of the alphabet" at the age of two (Lamson 2), Howe's declaration that she retained no memory of language from her early days may be worth an examination (Gitter, *IG* 96–7). G. Stanley Hall also claims that Bridgman had "already learned a larger stock of words than most children of that age" before she lost her sight (152).

led to controversies over the definition of "epiphany," with some scholars even contradicting their own theoretical conclusions in their practical criticism. In response to this confusion, critic Sharon Kim, admonishing herself, tartly describes such scholarship as a "mania for epiphany hunting" (7).

This confusion about epiphany is not surprising because: 1) its ephemeral nature, and its often mystical or overwhelming impact, resists clear, consistent definition; and 2) as the term has passed from the pre-Romantic and Victorian period up through the modern and postmodern periods, it has itself gone through three dominant modes: an original, explicitly theological epiphany; a transitional epiphany of mixed secular and religious meaning; and a contemporary purely aesthetic epiphany.[80] For my purposes, the Victorian transitional period offers a number of options for thinking about such experiences, since it was during this time that the dynamics between perception and event, and between "theophany" and "epiphany" shifted.

Whereas the experience originally was exclusively one of perceiving explicit signs of God—"theophany"—in modern usage it still refers to a profound or transforming realization, but not necessarily a religious one, leaving far more room for interpretation. An immediate certain perception of the divine therefore gives way to a powerful but confusing experience, more like a riddle without a single clear answer.

With its origins stretching back well before Christianity in the West, the idea of a revelation of previously unknown truth as a life-shattering or transforming moment is part of our culturally ubiquitous narrative experience. Critics across the disciplines have discussed the impact of epiphany on subjectivity, fictional or otherwise (Rainof 150; Tucker 1211). More

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[80] As pointed out by many critics, James Joyce is a principal figure who "transvalues" (Harty 345) the term to delineate a more secular revelation. For more discussion of Joyce's role in extending the definition of epiphany, see, for example, Pope, quoted in Bloom, 36, and Mahaffey 190.

recently, however, critics have also called attention to the ideological implications of valorizing this experience. Robert McRuer for instance refers to "heteronormative epiphanies" (12), and in general, commentators have become more skeptical of epiphany as a term describing a transformative process that we all, disabled or nondisabled, would presumably experience.[81] Disability narratives, and illness narratives, are arguably the most significant example of why this notion of epiphany is untrue.[82] To take one of the best known commentaries on the subject, Arthur Frank declares that "the core of *any* illness narrative is an epiphany" (emphasis mine; 41), because such a narrative records the complete alteration of our "fundamental meaning structures" for understanding our connection to the world, others, and ourselves: "Why did the fate fall upon me, why was I born or become this way?"

Frank is most interested in how and why the ill or disabled narrator, the one who has experienced the epiphany, tries to describe such self-revealing moments to those who have not ("The Rhetoric of Self-Change" 42). For such a narrator, this moment is often at least a partial answer or response to the constant "why me?" question, and therefore the beginnings of rejecting the pre-existing narratives the "normal" world expects the disabled person to follow. As Frank recognizes, and G. Thomas Couser discusses at length, "we are all vulnerable subjects": living in blessed indifference, but always in danger of that inevitable moment when illness, accident, or aging results in an epiphany that ends our confidence and belief in our well-being ("Body Language" 3). While Frank stresses the value of disability/illness narratives as aids for those who must ask "Why me?" Couser emphasizes their potential value in forcing abled individuals to ask

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[81] For more discussion on dis/ability and epiphany, see Wiggins 77; Wetherbee, 51–2; and Denzin, 71.

[82] Critics note that illness and disability narratives are closely aligned; Margrit Shildrick argues that illness and disability are both always the obverse of normalcy, a "normal" standard of the human body (17). (See also, Kate Elizabeth Birdsall's discussion of "the memoir of abjection" [226]). Jessica Kerley, for instance, argues that illness narratives "usually include an 'epiphany' of sorts" (32) but one often strongly informed by an initial sense of losing control, which anticipates the struggle that writers will experience when they begin to perceive their bodies from a new perspective (Couser, *Signifying Bodies* 160–74).

the question "Why not me?," and to adjust their attitudes and sympathies towards the disabled accordingly.

How and why did Dickens, one of the most successful nineteenth century authors in appealing to a mass readership, represent the epiphanic moment as mediated through not only his own experience, but also often that of a mediating figure in the narrative? To clarify the dynamics of Dickens' positioning as an observer in relation to his blind and deaf subject, Laura Bridgman, I will assume that what makes someone else's sensations, experience, or even epiphany something for readers or an audience to sympathize with is contingent on the nature of the direct or indirect recipient. The direct recipient would be the final recipient—the one who is consciously addressed, and who registers the action or experience as something complete. The indirect recipient could be the incident's firsthand observer, or even those who heard or read about it later on. Dickens, for instance, was twice from Bridgman's overpowering experience. He reads an account by another indirect observer—in this case, the teacher Howe, whose report Dickens read before seeing the living girl with his own eyes.

I do not mean to suggest that Dickens was not impressed with his direct experience. On the contrary, records of his visit confirm that the thirty-year-old author was thoroughly captivated by Bridgman. Howe's daughter later recalled that "Dickens passed hours here, and carried away impressions which he never lost" (Elliot and Hall 26). One of Bridgman's teachers there for the famous novelist's visit, Eliza Rogers, wrote in her journal that "Mr. Dickens . . . did not deign to notice anything or anybody except Laura . . ." (105). As for Dickens himself, he wrote in 1842 to Howe after leaving Boston that he had never been "more truly and deeply affected" in his life than he was by seeing Bridgman (Dickens; qtd. in Gitter, *IG* 123).

But since Dickens spends more space in *American Notes* retelling Howe's observations than recording his own, my interest here is the choices Dickens made as a biographer. Although influenced by various motivations and circumstances—whether the subject is already famous, for instance—biographers deliberately select and justify to themselves which materials to include when writing their account. In the case of Bridgman, who was frequently and extensively written about, making such selections can become difficult, since the biographer can never give it "entire." In the case of Dickens, however, he tells the reader that he is assembling his account from the "disjointed fragments of her history" (*AN* 32), which calls attention to the importance of his own choices, narrative process, intentions, and personal interest.

So for example, Dickens in *American Notes* touches only briefly upon the aforementioned rather indefinite eureka moment of Bridgman's first language acquisition, and passes over Howe's laborious attempts before it happens. Instead, Dickens focuses on a more significant moment, a scene of parent-child recognition. Bridgman was taken to the institution at the age of seven, and reunited with her mother only after a year-and-a-half separation. When her mother entered the room, Bridgman, "all unconscious of her presence," was devoted to entertaining herself. After becoming aware that someone was there, Bridgman customarily "began feeling of her hands, examining her dress" to determine if she knew the person. Deciding that this was not the case during this visit, the blind girl "turned away as from a stranger." Her mother, nearly shattered with distress, then handed Bridgman a few items brought from home. As Bridgman studied them, "a vague idea seems to flit across [her] mind, that this could not be a stranger," and taking up her mother's hands once again, Bridgman "turned . . . pale, then red" (*AN* 38). Howe's account led Dickens to conclude that "never were contending emotions more strongly painted upon the human face" than at that moment, and when the truth "flashed upon

the child," with "an expression of exceeding joy she eagerly nestled to the bosom of her parent"
(38–9). The fading, abstract memory of her mother had remained somewhere in the back of her
mind, and the sudden recognition of the person in front of her is for Bridgman an epiphany.

As Elizabeth Gitter points out, there was already a long tradition of heartrending parent-
child recognition scenarios in biblical stories, myths, and popular fictions ("Laura" 76), and
Dickens was clearly extending the tradition. But in *American Notes*, his description of Bridgman
depends significantly on Howe's 1841 Annual Report. Gitter proceeds to suggest that Dickens'
textual borrowing also informs his later thematization and idealization of a suffering heroine—
Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*,[83] to be more precise.

Like Howe's Bridgman, his Little Nell goes through the stages of "isolation and
enclosure, personal transformation and spiritual rescue" (ibid.).[84] Although not blind, or
possessing any other physical disabilities, Little Nell certainly resembles the Bridgman that
Howe and Dickens described to the world. Facing the toils of life at a young age with a highly-
disadvantaged status, like Bridgman, Little Nell (female and poor) is nevertheless a "cheerful
victim and source of spiritual inspiration to others" (ibid.).

As much as this comparison helps us to read their story as "a kind of allegory" (*OCS* 79)
for an undefeated yet still vulnerable heroine, one may legitimately wonder just how helpful and
informative making such connections really is. Gitter concedes that no evidence confirms a
direct effect of Bridgman on Dickens' creation of Little Nell ("Laura" 76), and making such
connections always runs the danger of reducing literary analysis to a fact-finding game[85] that

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[83] Dickens later donated 250 copies of the embossed version of *The Old Curiosity Shop* to Howe's school (*Letters* XII, 113). Lillian Nayder argues that this choice by Dickens suggests that he was aware of the "unique needs" of the "specific, disabled audience" ("Blindness, Prick Writing"), though Howe demonstrated his preference, either for "Christmas Carol" or *Oliver Twist* (Gitter "Laura" 78, 79n3).

[84] The comparison between Bridgman and Little Nell is also made by Mary Klages (121).

[85] See Trace for the tendencies and problems of the "new scientific scrutiny" of literature (27), especially 19–46.

often offers simplistic analysis. And especially because of the huge popularity of Dickens' work,

critics and readers have debated the "origins" of his memorable characters as well as of various

places and events since the days of his first publications.[86] But Doris Alexander, while

acknowledging the risk of devaluing a text by focusing on trivia, suggests that a "hunt" for

originals can have important connotative value when thought of not as a "finale"—the source has

been found—but as the "beginning" (2). I therefore argue that Dickens' meeting with Bridgman

served as an important catalyst not just for his journalistic output but also for his fictional

writing. His account of her life anticipates some of the plot patterns in his novels and stories; he

draws her experience of an epiphany into his creations; and most importantly for my purposes,

he takes inspiration from her story when representing characters with disabilities, including

blindness, which given his leverage over public opinion, I consider to be a prerequisite for

understanding the characteristic, and often highly biased, ways that disabilities were represented

in the nineteenth century. With these considerations in mind, I will now trace Bridgman's

presence in specific texts written after his encounter with her in which Dickens represents blind

characters. Sometimes Dickens is too sentimental, but other times he shifts common

assumptions.

Christmas Stories

As Amberyl Malkovich has pointed out, "[physically] imperfect Victorian children" are

often depicted by other nineteenth-century authors[87] as a means of exposing the "potential

impact of reality upon culture and society and the way one may challenge such conventions for

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[86] Alexander comments on this tendency of origin hunting, as "Dickens lovers have always felt impelled to hunt down real persons who might have sat for his characters" (1). For a detailed analysis of characters Dickens based on real people, see Paroissien 82–4. Browning's *The World of Charles Dickens*, and Tony Lynch's *Dickens England* also investigate the places Dickens drew upon for his fictional world.

[87] As well as Dickens, authors such as Charles Kingsley, Dinah Craik, George MacDonald, Christina Rossetti, E. Nesbit, and Hesba Stretton fit within the same category. Jacqueline Banerjee further points out that the image of angelic and vulnerable child goes back to the ancient Greek (Banerjee).

the betterment of everyone" (2). But as an eloquent reformer, both in fictional and nonfictional

genres, and as arguably the most renowned and influential of reforming novelists, Dickens

created characters and narratives whose relevance to pressing social issues survives to this day.

Bureaucracy, dysfunctional education and prison systems, economic inequality, the general

neglect of human rights—all of these issues are famously present in his fiction. To familiarize

himself with the condition of the disfranchised, and to gather materials to help with representing

such conditions in his work, Dickens sought out and engaged with people on that side of society,

including those who were disabled in one way or another. However good his intentions may have

been, or however strongly his sense of justice might have motivated him, his depictions of the

lives of deaf, blind, or intellectually challenged people have not, however been free from

criticism.[88] Joseph A. Flaherty's analysis of Tiny Tim is highly representative of the problems

Dickens often poses from the standpoint of disability rights advocacy. Pointing to Tiny Tim's

"hope" of being seen by people as a sign of God's unconditional love on Christmas Day as

arguably "the most memorable literary image of physical disability" for readers in the twentieth-

century, Flaherty insists that when placed under a critical lens, how Dickens presents this

innocent "crippled" child is "objectionable," because Tiny Tim becomes the embodiment of a

passive and accepting attitude towards fate, life, and others' commiseration (400).[89]

     When considering Dickens' representations of blindness, however, the key text is "The

Cricket on the Hearth." The third of Dickens' five Christmas stories, it was a great commercial

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[88] Dickens' many other notable characters who fall into this category include Mrs. Clennam in *Little Dorrit*; Phil Squod, Grandfather Smallweed, and Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*; Paul Dombey and Mrs. Skewton in *Dombey and Son*; Silas Wegg in *Our Mutual Friend*; Daniel Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop*; Miss Mowcher in *David Copperfield*; Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby*; and Sophy in "Doctor Marigold." With regard to the last example, Jeniffer Esmail points out that among the many disabled characters who appear in Victorian novels, a deaf and mute heroine as the main character only appears in the works of Dickens and Wilkie Collins (Madonna Blyth in *Hide and Seek*) (991–2).

[89] For a similar point of view, see Shakespeare1–20. For a more general discussion on Dickens and his depiction of disability, see also, Kriegel 16–23 and Wainapel 629–32.

success, even if the critical reception was not as enthusiastic as the public's (Morley 17; Guida 148; Watt and Lonsdale 208). Except for the fourth story, "The Battle of Life" (1846), these extremely popular annual narratives all feature "[T]he Man Who Needs to be Corrected" (Wiley xxv) as their protagonist. In each story, through a series of extraordinary events, this figure realizes his errors. The significant moments, which take the form of personal epiphanies, occur as the result of a dream or vision, in which embodied supernatural creatures lead the main character through the process of reassessing moral value. Regardless of whether these creatures are ghosts or spirits, though, the resulting Dickensian "vision" is always highly personal and subjective, invariably connecting the main character to mental scenery and events drawn from memory. For instance, the decisive and profoundly affecting moments in "A Christmas Carol" occur when Scrooge literally sees himself at different stages of his life, which ultimately prove more shocking than the first sight of Marley's ghost. Such domesticating of fairy-tale elements became Dickens' principal narrative strategy in the Christmas stories.

Dickens began writing *Cricket* on 17 October, 1845, three years after arriving back in London after his first American trip when he met Laura Bridgman. As its subtitle, "a fairy tale of home," suggests, the tone is primarily humorous, and even farcical. With marriage and family happiness its core concerns, *Cricket* proved to be highly appropriate Christmas fireside reading for the Victorian home. Dot Peerybingle, a cheerful, domestically-centered ideal woman in the nineteenth century, finds she has to keep something from her husband for the benefit of her friend, who is forced to marry a callous toy-factory owner. Because of her necessary secrecy, her marital fidelity becomes suspected, but matters are eventually resolved, and the story ends with her bond with her husband being even stronger than before. As Gitter points out, the plot is all about "seeing, watching, and spying" ("The Blind Daughter" 678), as suspicion, accusations, and

distress threaten the Peerybingles's sound, happy household. Not surprisingly, though, it is the story of their blind neighbor Bertha Plummer that most closely resonates with the life of Laura Bridgman, and especially with those "images of surveillance and watching, imprisonment, inarticulateness, and loneliness" which Gitter associates with that life. Both young women, Bertha and Bridgman, are objects of constant observation, their faces being constantly read without their being able to read the faces of others. Nor can they see their own faces, and therefore how they appear to others. So Bertha asks May, who is betrothed to Tackleton, during a desperate attempt at restraining her emotions, "Look into my face . . . . Read it with your beautiful eyes, and tell me if the truth is written on it" (*CH* 201). This scene can be read as a moment of confession, repentance, and submission to the privilege of sight, as Bertha kept hiding her romantic attachments to Tackleton and now faces his fiancé. As literary critics point out, women with "different" bodies are described as unfit for the marriage plot (Kent 109–10, O'Toole), so Bertha is excluded from the traditional arena of women.

Another common characteristic, traceable from Dickens' adaptation of Howe's report, is the representation of both women's lives being determined physically and temporally by a darkness- light binary. As much as Laura's, Bertha's life is represented as a profound shadow, or even a form of living death, until the moment of "enlightenment," which ushers in self-knowledge and truth. Howe constantly describes Bridgman before her epiphany about language as being essentially a corpse. On her tenth day at the institution, he records her as "in darkness & stillness like that of a tomb" (qtd. in Gitter, *IG* 90),[90] and in the Seventh Annual Report, he writes that Bridgman's mind "dwells in darkness and stillness, as profound as that of a closed

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[90] Howe to Margaret Teague, October 21, 1837, *Perkins School Archives* (PSA). Some other descriptions that draw on a similar image can be found in Howe's *Seventh Annual Report*, such as Bridgeman's mind "dwells in darkness and stillness, as profound as that of a closed tomb at midnight" (8), and "darkness shrouds" Bridgeman's "thoughts and feelings" (9).

tomb at midnight" (8), and that "darkness shrouds" her "thoughts and feelings" (9). Dickens'

Bertha, if not virtually dead, claims that she is "lonely in the dark" (*CH* 189), and constantly

feels weary of her "dark life" (202). Not surprisingly, then, Howe and Dickens both associate

Bridgman's later ability to interact socially with light. Howe claims that his early teaching was

motivated by "some distant promise" that language might "gleam upon the darkened mind" (*AN*

44), and Dickens describes Bridgman's face, when he finally met her, as "radiant with

intelligence and pleasure" (32).[91] Similarly, when a hollow expectation gives poor blind Bertha

some hope, her "darkened face" became "bright," and "adorned with light" (*CH* 188).

Envisioning a perfect world, she turns up her "radiant face" (185).

The joys accessible through sight are in fact an almost obsessive topic in *Cricket*. Here

for instance is the narrator describing Dot's happy family (my emphasis):

> It was *pleasant to see* Dot, with her little figure, and her baby in her arms. . . . It was
>
> *pleasant to see* him . . . endeavouring to adapt his rude support to her slight need. . . . It
>
> was *pleasant to observe* how Tilly Slowboy . . . took special cognizance . . . of this
>
> grouping. . . . Nor was it less *agreeable to observe* how John the Carrier. . . checked his
>
> hand when on the point of touching the infant. . . (164)

Sight can also arouse sympathy or sentimental appreciation. Regarding Bertha's father's despair,

the narrator remarks that "It was *touching to see* him sitting idle on his working-stool" (204).

When Bertha's personal confidence in the suspected Dot is confirmed, her "delight and pride in

the reply and her renewed embrace of Dot, were *charming to behold*" (224). And when

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[91] It is thus striking to note how Dickens, in the same *American Notes*, describes his concerns for American slavery with the same rhetoric. Here for example are his remarks upon gazing at the slaves' faces:

> All men who know that there are laws against instructing slaves, of which the pains and penalties greatly exceed in their amount the fines imposed on those who maim and torture them, must be prepared to find their faces very low in the scale of intellectual expression. But the darkness—not of skin, but mind—which meets the stranger's eye at every turn, the brutalizing and blotting out of all fairer characters traced by Nature's hand, immeasurably outdo his worst belief. (*AN* 136)

everything turns out all right in the end, the narrator assures the reader that "You never will *derive so much delight from seeing* a glorious little woman in the arms of a third party. . . . It was the most complete, unmitigated, soul-fraught little piece of earnestness that ever you *beheld* in all your days" (emphasis all mine; 229).

These repeated linkings of sight and sympathy or joy echo Dickens' own first impressions upon visiting Howe's school: "It was a source of *inexpressible pleasure to me to observe* the almost imperceptible, but not less certain effect, wrought by this institution among the small community of Boston" (*AN* 27). Furthermore, since Dickens was not present to observe the dramatic moments in Bridgman's life, he selects passages from Howe's account that provide exactly the same kinds of assurance. "In her intellectual character it is *pleasing to observe* an insatiable thirst for knowledge," Howe writes, while "In her moral character, it is *beautiful to behold* her continual gladness, her keen enjoyment of existence, her expansive love . . . " (40). The emotional focus is entirely on a position occupied by the speaker, and therefore, by the reader. Bridgman hugs and kisses her friends "with an earnestness and warmth that is *touching to behold*" (40), and when she fails initially to recognize her mother, "The distress of the mother was now *painful to behold*" (38).

But the affinities between the accounts in Howe, in *American Notes*, and in *Cricket* do not cease here. Besides Bridgman's and Bertha's shared fate of living without vision, they also experience and respond to epiphanies in ways that Dickens detects and transfers from Howe's report.

Bertha's "Double Epiphany"

Through two consecutive epiphanies, Dickens bestows on his fictional blind girl a panacea for all her difficulties. Caleb Plummer, an old, poverty-stricken toy-maker, and his

daughter Bertha, who lost her vision in her early childhood, live in a house that is also a toy factory. The owner is a cold-hearted, Scrooge-like man who treats the father and daughter with contemptuous disdain. Urged by paternal affection and sympathy to shield his daughter from their miserable life, Caleb draws on Bertha's earliest recollections to compose outright fabrications. For example, he tells her that his shabby coat made from "the sack-cloth covering of some old box" is actually "bright blue," and a "beautiful new great-coat" (*CH* 211). Bertha is delighted:

> "I see you, father," she said, clasping her hands, "as plainly, as if I had the eyes I never
> want when you are with me. A blue coat— . . . Yes, yes! Bright blue!" exclaimed the
> girl, turning up her radiant face; "the colour I can just remember in the blessed sky! You
> told me it was blue before! A bright blue coat—" (185)

Bertha continually asks her father to "Look round the room" and "Tell me about it" (216). Out of the fragmentary and untrue descriptions of particular things, events, and persons he offers her, she assembles an impression of the whole world in her mind. This world has links to her early sighted past. The "blue coat," for example, conveys enough for her imagine "the blessed blue sky" once again. Imagination is what allows her to connect the words she hears with the vivid memories of vision she retains. And given the fact that no language or narrative can convey the full figure and meaning of the world, as Gayatri Spivak argues in her writing on language (399), Bertha is therefore an extreme case of what we all, including Dickens, must constantly do— interpret, then fill in the gaps of what remains missing.

I would argue, in fact, that in the Victorian period, an epiphany is the almost mystical and sudden awareness of such fullness. Unlike the literary emplotment of epiphany in modern and postmodern novels, whose practice of finding the extraordinary in the most ordinary moments of

daily life "retains wide currency" (McRuer 16), nineteenth-century epiphanies maintain strong connections with the pre- and Romantic sense of divine or sublime revelation, often represented in the form of a "vision" or "dreams." According to Martin Bidney, it was visions and dreams that provide the phenomenologist with fully elaborated and intense paradigms for epiphanic study, and within literature, they were "strikingly abundant in the nineteenth century." In fact, "An explicitly labeled 'dream' or 'vision' is very frequently the key to the epiphany pattern of any given writer" (15)—Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, or Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for instance. As already mentioned, such highly visual manifestations are characteristic of Dickens' epiphanies, with the most famous example the all-time favorite holiday tale, "A Christmas Carol," in which the protagonist's transforming vision is presided over by super-natural entities, who contribute to extending what is essentially a testimonial conversion into a more universal moral allegory.[92]

Because Bertha is blind, however, the machinery of epiphany employed in *Cricket* becomes more singular and complicated when she experiences what is arguably the most touching moment of revelation in the story. This is because while *Cricket* does follow the patterns its Christmas story predecessors have set, involving a structure shaped by "fairy-tale techniques" (Stone 11), on another level the themes of deceit, of hidden truth, and of isolation permeate all the plots and subplots, making the ultimate happy resolution a more challenging, and therefore more satisfying, result of the particular epiphanic revelations of truth.

The crucial moment comes when Caleb finally has to confess his well-meaning but massive deceptions to Bertha:

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[92] Patricia Caldwell defines conversion narrative as "a testimony of personal religious experience," which usually is demonstrated "to the entire congregation of a gathered church before admission as evidence of the applicant's visible sainthood" (1).

"Your road in life was rough, my poor one. . . . I meant to smooth it for you. I have

altered objects, changed the characters of people, invented many things that never have

been, to make you happier. I have had concealments from you, put deceptions on you, . . .

and surrounded you with fancies" (*CH* 222).

Severely cast down by the harsh truth, Bertha faces her father with a sorrowful expression.

Nothing could be more cruel than that the eyes she believed in and depended upon are her worst

and most constant betrayer. This painful epiphany is however followed in an instant by one of a

different character. As Caleb sits speechless after revealing the truth, his blind daughter asks

about the "anonymous" gifts she had received. When she learns that they were not from her

friend, or from the landlord, who was only generous in Caleb's version of the world, the truth,

presented as analogous to sight, hits her: "The Blind Girl spread her hands before her face

again. But in quite another manner now." After asking Dot to describe what Caleb looks like,

Bertha exclaims, "It is my sight restored. It is my sight! . . . I have been blind, and now my eyes

are open. I never knew him!" (223)

Bertha's necessary trust in her father, and therefore her gullibility and ignorance, are then

associated with what she therefore "never knew":

The Blind Girl never knew that ceilings were discoloured, walls blotched and bare of

plaster here and there, high crevices unstopped and widening every day, beams

mouldering and tending downward. The Blind Girl never knew that iron was rusting,

wood rotting, paper peeling off; the size, and shape, and true proportion of the dwelling,

withering away. The Blind Girl never knew that ugly shapes of delf and earthenware

were on the board; that sorrow and faintheartedness were in the house; that Caleb's

scanty hairs were turning greyer and more grey, before her sightless face. The Blind Girl

never knew they had a master, cold, exacting, and uninterested—never knew that

Tackleton was Tackleton in short . . . . (182–3)

Heather Tilley argues that the reiterated emphasis of Bertha's exclusion from knowledge here heightens the pathos ("Sentiment and Vision"). As she notes, however, readers of *Cricket* immediately realize that the sighted characters are also prone to deception and misassumptions, only in their case led by what they mistakenly think they see. Dot, her husband, and the toy-factory owner all misinterpret appearances, and what saves them from a tragedy and leads the story to a gleeful climax are the crickets, treated as the Spirits of the Fireside and the Hearth, who have no language but a powerful stare.

As the similarities between Dickens' representations of Laura Bridgman and Bertha suggest, however, a different understanding of relation between seeing and knowing operates when it comes to the blind. In both accounts, he displays great sympathy for those deprived of the ability to register the external, concrete visible world without mediating help, and even more sympathy for those who are deceived and then come to realize it, as in Bertha's first epiphany, which leads her to reproach her father: "What and whom do *I* know! I who have no leader! I so miserably blind" (*CH* 222). She suffered the pain of truth, because, as Thomas Gray once wrote, "where ignorance is bliss, / 'Tis folly to be wise" (99–100). But her second epiphany, generated from her own thoughts, rather than from an encounter with the world, awakens her to what her father's deception, only possible because she is blind, actually made possible—her happy and contented previous life.

Her latter revelation revises positively the former. Only by registering her father's deceptions, and experiencing the agony, if only briefly, of realizing that she has lived almost her entire life with a false sense of the physical and the moral world, can she then extend her

unbounded sympathy to him for having given her a far better life than she would have had if she had actually "seen" her circumstances, and "seen" the cruelty of others to her father and herself. Because she is blind, an epiphany can follow and reverse an epiphany, granting her both a knowledge of her past grim reality, but also a heightened sense of the extent of her father's protective love for her, and the sacrifices he made to sustain the illusion. His imaginative understanding of blindness therefore allows Dickens to present an even more extreme version of the plot turn common to all of his Christmas stories—the move from suffering, tragedy, and even potential despair to a happy, loving, social and domestic festival.[93]

Conclusion

Part of a tradition stretching back to Aristotle's description of tragedy, novels in the modern sense may have a climax that is also a moment of revelation. "The Cricket on the Hearth," one of the less familiar of Dickens' canonical works draws upon his experience of disabled subjects, and the blind and deaf Laura Bridgman in particular, to construct an epiphany. It may provoke some good sympathy in readers, but some drawbacks have to be admitted. The epiphany may just comfort sighted persons by rewarding their sympathy, their pity, and their belief that the entire life experience of the blind is best managed by charitable and sympathetic sighted caretakers—which when they think about it, the blind themselves gratefully accept. Dickens' handling of the blind girl obviously can be criticized. Written from a sighted author's point of view, it condescends from the position of a more fortunate person to the emotions and experiences of the blind. In *American Notes* and *Cricket*, his imaginative sympathy for his blind subjects is powerful and positive, but also confident that he knows what is truly admirable or

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[93] In a sense, all Dickens' Christmas stories, except "The Battle of Life," are about blindness and the moment when sight is restored through the recognition of truth. John Foster's comment that "the spirit" of the Christmas Stories is Dickens' "secret delight" in giving old nursery tales "a higher form" in part arises from seeing the revelation as also a literary transcendence (146).

moving about the person's circumstances, without thinking much about whether a blind figure would actually agree.

I argue that despite all the condescension and problems with Dickens' creation of Bertha, she delineates a representational shift, brought about perhaps by meeting Laura Bridgman, in Dickens, which first confirms that he himself is now asking the "Why not me?" question, as I discussed earlier, but second draws the sympathetic reader, perhaps for the first time, into asking the same question. As many critics and biographers have pointed out, Dickens was genuinely curious about blindness (Holmes 143; Kaplan 138), and more generally his writing was highly sympathetic to the plight of the underprivileged under any circumstances or conditions. Dickens' own autobiographical writings[94] suggest that his own unfortunate upbringing made the question of why he himself had not been destroyed by adversity a constant in his life. At least one person who witnessed his meeting with Laura Bridgman—Mary Swift, her teacher—observed that Dickens "could hardly believe the evidence of his senses, and *was much more surprised than people usually are*" (italics mine; Elliot 105). Clearly, Bridgman was not simply an interesting oddity for Dickens, and his close attention at the time, his detailed published account of Bridgman, and his representation of a blind woman in his fiction all seem impelled by an imaginative sympathy that consciously or unconsciously led him to turn away from his constant "why me" questioning, and towards "why not me?" that nevertheless seems to have led him away from "feeling for," to exploring what "feeling with" Bridgman and his fictional creations might entail. Perhaps, then, what makes Dickens conceive of Bertha's second epiphany is his

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[94] John Forster published Dickens' own account of his amazed still fearful awareness that given his unfortunate experience in childhood, he barely managed not to be on the "other" side of fortune by a slim margin: "I know I do not exaggerate . . . the scantiness of my resources and the difficulties of my life. . . . I know that I worked, from morning to night, with common men and boys, a shabby child. . . . I know that I have lounged about the streets, insufficiently and unsatisfactorily fed. I know that, but for the mercy of God, I might easily have been, for any care that was taken of me, a little robber or a little vagabond" (58).

desire as a person grateful for and troubled by his sight to create a liberating enclosure for his fictional blind girl by granting her a sympathy, a concern, and a charitable understanding for others that he somehow sensed must be part of Bridgman's own way of being in the world. Dickens grants that a blind person is not just an object of sympathy, but can provide knowledge and sympathy of her own to others.

As a novelist who flourished in a golden age of life writing,[95] even in his fiction Dickens was profoundly aware of the fact that he was representing other lives as well as his own. In the preface to the 1857 edition of *Little Dorrit*, for instance, he refers to himself as "becoming Little Dorrit's biographer" (xvii). Whether a represented subject is fictional or factual, writers always draw on fragments of their own life or the experience of others to form the story. Some life events are undeniably significant, others seem of no importance, slipping easily into oblivion. At least in his accounts of the blind, however, Dickens seems to have recognized and represented how what might seem to be trifling moments hold such value and meaning that they amount to an epiphany. Because he hoped that the ability to recognize such moments in others could be possessed by both the blind and the sighted, and itself be considered a "sympathetic epiphany," he gets closer to Levinas' caution that we not assume too much about other people, and especially meets Levinas' urging that we take responsibility for Others.

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[95] For instance, Harriet Martineau wrote that she felt that "it was one of the duties of my life to write my autobiography" (qtd. in Peltason 356). The frenziness towards recording one's life was culminated as *the Dictionary of National Biography*, compiled by Leslie Stephen. First published in 1882, the book had been republished for the next 15 years.

Section 2 "'Blind me Again, My Eyes are of No Use to Me": The Sense of Self and Blindness in *Poor Miss Finch*

Introduction

When Wilkie Collins, one of the most successful authors identified with the prominent trend of sensation fiction in mid-nineteenth century Britain, published his eleventh novel, *Poor Miss Finch: A Domestic Story* (1872), the reception was mixed. The book has also attracted less critical attention than his more famous works, such as *Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. But Collins' presentation of the title character, a blind heroine, is a highly informative source of information about the Victorians' interest in the role of vision, or lack of it, in life. Further, in the same way as the previous discussed texts, Collins places a blind speaker or character in relation to the nineteenth century's exercise of the "sympathetic imagination," but in his case, with an especially strong interest in what Levinas calls the "face," and how it defines, manipulates, or distorts one's sense of self, and in particular, a blind self. Compared to Dickens—his "mentor, colleague, and comrade" (Lonoff 43)—Collins in this light is more "ethical" in the sense Levinas describes with his idea of face, because *Poor Miss Finch* challenges the convention of the time, and to some degree succeeds in breaking down the stereotypical image of blind people and their roles in society that abled readers assumed.

While many nineteenth-century writers, including Dickens, seem determined to develop and extend a "sympathetic imagination," Collins was more interested in integrating this concern with some of the debates during the period regarding new scientific developments. As Victorian notions of sense, perception, and worldview were being profoundly affected, threatened, and altered by the new forms of knowledge being communicated to often perplexed readers and audiences, so too were common ideas about the interplay between sense perception and human

consciousness. Collins was one of the more self-disciplined researchers into the non-material components of the mind, and how they affected the functions of the human body.

As Collins' dedication to the novel, which I discuss in detail later, makes clear, he is intending to go a step further than Dickens and other writers of the period in representing, through a sighted person's point of view, the life and thoughts of a person who does not have visual access to the world.[96] Even more ambitiously, *Poor Miss Finch* attempts to explain and evaluate, and thereby redefine, the conditions of happiness, and their relationship to vision.

Drawing on Donna Haraway's theory of the cyborg, I will demonstrate how Collins' heroine raises questions about blurred boundaries between self and other, and between the body and the world as bodily sensation perceives it, with the result that the "happy" ending of the story almost satirically foregrounds the ethical challenges of the dis/abled body. As part of Collins' strategy, the "prosthesis" serves as a key concept both materially and figuratively throughout the story, as the heroine's "prosthetic" eye arouses a somatic disturbance, a sense of disorientation, and unfamiliar "otherness" in oneself. Collins' interest in the possibility of having one's body parts replaced also inevitably leads to two hypothetical, yet increasingly plausible questions. What other parts, and how much of the human body can be replaced? And will we continue to feel and be ourselves throughout and after the transformation?

Collins' views anticipate and resonate with our complicated modern understandings of the body. In a way that resembles how a scientist conducts an experiment, Collins alters the physical conditions of his heroine to understand the dynamics between corporeal existence and one's sense of self as a consciousness. By doing so, Collins not only grants us access to the ongoing dialogue about normative views of the body of his time, but also offers us a story that

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[96] Many critics, however, respond more favorably to Dickens' stories about disabilities. Holmes for instance argues that Collins lacks the "thought of his readers' moral improvement" that Dickens had abundantly (90).

anticipates our current anxieties about the body, thanks to our modern sensibility and ideals of wholeness—body as self, and body as other.

Collins' Biography and its Influences on his Works

Considering his early circumstances, it was no surprise that Collins grew up learning how to see things, and how to express what he saw. As the son of a Royal Academy painter—a professional at using his bodily eyes to reproduce and question the world—Collins and his younger brother were surrounded by visual artists, and at some point, both quite enthusiastically took up a paintbrush.[97] Although the profession he ultimately chose was different, Collins' literary career began by representing the painter's life. *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.* was published and received favorably when Collins was twenty-four years old. As Catherine Peters points out, because he was so familiar with how the world could be represented visually, in his writing, "metaphors of painting came natural to him," and he presented his observations "in painterly terms" (*The King* 23). If the artistic environment heightened his sensitivity to the visual aspects of experience, his own eyesight taught him a great deal about what the suspension of that sense could be like. Near-sighted from childhood, in later years he suffered from "gout in the eye," which occasionally forced him wear an eye bandage, sometimes for weeks (Robinson 249). His correspondence with friends, including Dickens, provides a long history of his ocular affliction, and his novels contain unmistakable autobiographical references to own visual dis/ability.

Undoubtedly because of his personal experience, Collins took to investigating and attempting to educate himself about what he suffered. After all, he developed the gout before the

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[97] Collins' brother was accepted at the Royal Academy Schools as a student, and one of his paintings was exhibited at the Royal Academy Exhibition in 1849.

age of thirty (Peters, *The King* 128), and must have sought possible treatments.[98] His surviving letters and reconstructed library confirm that Collins read about congenital blindness and its restoration,[99] as well as various other types of human affliction that did not directly affect him, such as deafness and skin disorders. Collins incorporated some of this information into his novels to generate plot, or to add a "sensational" spin to a narrative. As Hilary Newman points out, for his novel *Hide and Seek* (1854), he acknowledges his obligation to John Kitto's *The Lost Senses* for providing him with "tangible and reliable material to work from" in creating a deaf-mute character, "Madonna." Another, though less prominent, deaf character appears in *The Guilty River* (1886), and two physically deformed female characters are featured in *The Moonstone*. As for *The Law and the Lady* (1875), here Collins combines disability and assistive technology in a legless man who is described as "the new Centaur, half man, half chair . . . the fantastic creature" (182).

The New Criticism famously all but prohibited reading too much of an author's life into the work, as the "biographical fallacy" was blamed for inevitably flattening or simplifying critical responses to the text. Since novelists choose to exercise freely their imaginations, we should as well. In the case of Collins' representations of blindness, however, it would be reductive to leave his personal experience out of the equation, since he seems to have relied on it so strongly himself. The number and variety of examples of visual impairment in Collins' fiction far exceed representations of any other sensory impediment, or any bodily affliction. In *After Dark* (1856), Collins' first collection of short stories, William Kerby is a portrait-painter who is afraid of losing his sight because of a developing eye-problem. A "forced cessation from work,"

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[98] See Baker and Clarke (eds.) 506. Also, Porter and Rousseau note that Collins consulted with a German doctor, as Miss Finch does (174).
[99] Most of what we know of Collins' private library comes from William Baker's *Wilkie Collins' Library*, and Baker and William M. Clarke's *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*.

his wife concludes, with a mixture of relief and worry, "will save him from the dreadful affliction of loss of sight" (9). Leonard Franklin in *The Dead Secret* (1857) also becomes blind, asking his wife to "lend" her eyes to him, as poor Miss Finch will do. Upon learning about his affliction, one of the characters responds in the way assume Collins would: "this comes home to me—my sympathies are painfully acute—I feel this blind story in every nerve of my body . . . !" (74). Collins both identifies and sympathizes with his suffering characters—their frustrations about having to suspend their work, due to troubles with their eyes (Peters 380) as well as the agony of ocular pain and discomfort. And he incorporates his own knowledge of and experiences of visual disability into his characters, plots, and dialogue

Collins' early novel, *Basil* (1852) is especially intriguing as an example of how he understands the connections between bodily perception and the mind, and in particular, how perception is transmitted to, and affects the operations of that inner faculty known as the imagination. The most "sensational" action in *Basil*, when the title character deforms irreparably his treacherous friend's face, is affecting enough, but the following scene actually surpasses this gory act of violence, in terms of the "sensation" aroused in the readers. In his turmoil of guilt, shame, disbelief and despair, Basil falls, if only psychologically, into the nightmarish state of being blindfolded. "When the blind are operated on for the restoration of sight," Basil remarks, the hand that opens the world of vision for them immediately closes it for a time: "A bandage is passed over the eyes, lest in the first tenderness of the recovered sense, it should be fatally affected by the sudden transition from darkness to light" (172).

Probably extracted from one of the medical reports Collins read, he uses these details to put Basil virtually into the body of a blind person, by having him comment on the differences between various forms of darkness:

between the awful blank of total privation of vision, and the temporary blank of vision

merely veiled, there lies the widest difference. In the moment of their restoration, the

blind have had one glimpse of light, flashing on them in an overpowering gleam of

brightness, which the thickest, closest veiling cannot extinguish. The new darkness is not

like the void darkness of old . . . . (172)

In this clinical and metaphorical account of the process of sight restoration, Collins suggests that

the newly gained sight is for a time more perplexing and distressing than the familiar blindness,

in part because it only brings a "new darkness" to the patient. While the imagination is clearly at

play here and elsewhere, as a sighted person whom we know had many bouts of temporary

blindness, Collins offers up such charged and minute details in this account that it is probably not

too extreme to suggest that a substantial portion is drawn from personal experience. I will

suggest, then, that reading his work in conjunction with his biography is most legitimate when he

employs the references as metaphors, or aids to comprehending how blind people might

experience their affliction, and also the external world, as is the case in *Basil*. So for example the

image of the blindfold—something that Collins basically wore—calls attention to our reliance on

appearances and representations, and our pain when deprived, even for a short time, from either

one.

The Context of Poor Miss Finch and Sensation Novel

In 1813, Lord Byron wrote to Annabella Milbanke during their courtship:

The great object of life is sensation—to feel that we exist, even though in pain. It is this

"craving void" which drives us to gaming—to battle, to travel—to intemperate, but

keenly felt pursuits of every description, whose principal attraction is the agitation

inseparable from their accomplishment. (*LJ* III, 399–401)

This well-known letter memorably refers to the poet's source of dynamic power and vitality: sensation. Developing out of the field of medicine, the term's association with the mind steadily grew over the century, and in 1860s sensation fiction came to refer to a different kind of craving. Generally understood to have been initiated by Collins' own *The Woman in White* (1860), followed by Ellen Price Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), the sensation novel created a furor among middle-class, and especially female readers. With plots heightened by "the apparatus of ruined heiresses, impossible wills, damning letters, skeletons in cupboards, misappropriated legacies" and other formerly Gothic props (Terry 74), sensation novels were loved and also hated with equal intensity.[100] The following humorous passage from *Punch* suggests what effects attracted or repulsed readers: "Harrowing the Mind, Making the Flesh Creep, Causing the Hair to Stand on End, Giving Shocks to the Nervous System, Destroying Conventional Moralities, and generally Unfitting the Public for the Prosaic Avocations of Life" ("Sensation Times").[101] In an essay that same year, Henry L. Mansel offered a more serious, but similar assessment: sensation fiction "preaches to the nerves instead of the judgment" (482). *Punch* and Mansel also agree that sensation fictions links anatomical terms—"flesh," "hair," "nervous system," and "nerves"—with rational and ethical terms—"mind," "conventional moralities," and "judgment."

Since "sensation" was supposedly a topic of great concern to students of human physiology, Mansel's interchangeable attack on sensation fiction as "preach[ing] to the nerves" or "electrifying the nerves" of readers (488–9) is probably more literal he intended. As the later nineteenth-century French experimental psychologist Alfred Binet observed, "the study of mind

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[100] For examples of dismissive criticism, see the unsigned review "*Poor Miss Finch*" (*Spectator*, 2 March 1872), 276; and John Ruskin (qtd. in Page 21).
[101] *Punch* 44 (1863), 193.

has entered of late years upon a new phase" (104), which among other things, sought to quantify or measure the impact of sensation on thought. Sensation fiction can therefore be regarded as a popular response to this "new science" devoted to exploring the relations between perception and the interiority of the mind. Part of the anxiety raised by these novels was caused by a concern that overly intense or even aberrant sensations aroused by these novels could in Lyn Pykett's words "challenge Victorian social mores" (13). Scientific and critical thinking was placing marriage, family, gender roles, liberty, and implied racial superiority as an empire under scrutiny, while other social institutions were energetically defending, and even becoming more passionate about their value. The sensation novel plots of Collins and others appealed to readers afraid of and fascinated by the "otherness" threatening or lurking within the values listed above, promising to "expose dark aspects of Victorian life to the scrutiny of its readership" (Stojanovic 75).

Seeking to profit from the genre's popularity, authors including Collins sought out and added more stimulative "ingredients" in their plots, including disabled characters.[102] And yet, although Kylee-Anne Hingston points out the genre's deep debt to "different, deformed, or diseased bodies" (117), many contemporary critics did not hesitate to condemn Collins' frequent use of disabled characters. Some judged the "different" bodies and minds in Collins' works to be aesthetic failures or inert attempts to make up for his mediocrity, and therefore telling evidence of how incompetent he was as a serious writer. The choice of a blind heroine in *Poor Miss Finch* was no exception; it was censured as "manifest and grotesque machinery" (Lang 96), reducing the novel as a whole to a mere slipshod piece of work—"a sensation novel for Sunday reading" (qtd. in Page 191).

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[102] For other common elements in sensational novels, see Philip V. Allingham, "The Victorian Sensation Novel, 1860-1880" and P. Edwards 703–4.

Collins and Poor Miss Finch

While criticized for his sensational and sentimental techniques, just as Dickens was, Collins is if anything more sympathetic when representing blind characters. Both writers successfully responded to their readers' hunger for sensational stimuli—crimes, romances, and scandals--but their own thirsts for knowledge also energized their writing. In the case of *Poor Miss Finch*, it cannot be denied that the plot concerning the heroine Lucilla Finch's eyesight becomes more implausible as it becomes more sensational. And yet, as in Collins' other sensational works, his interest in the nature of nineteenth century society—in this case, regarding the status of the blind—adds a further source of interest.

As already discussed, one of the sturdiest intellectual assumptions of the time was that self-knowledge and truth are inextricably intertwined with vision through the agency of the imagination. Following the steps of the British Empiricists such as Locke, who believed that our ideas were derived from sensual experience (bk. II, ch. xix, 1, ch. xxi, 5), for the most part, nineteenth-century theorists understood thinking and memory as largely the production of images in one's mind (Anger 483).[103] The obvious question arising from this premise is how to account for someone who cannot see, and therefore presumably can have no visual memories. The debate therefore concerned whether thinking informed by visual concepts could be innate, or had to be acquired through physiology.

Although *Poor Miss Finch* can be read as a fictional exploration of this issue, in the dedication to the novel, Collins offers a far more specific and apparently straightforward purpose:

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[103] See Freeberg 195–6 for how English common law during the eighteenth and nineteenth century was informed by this Lockean view of human nature. For a summary of Locke's discussion on the relationship between knowledge, memory, and sensory perception, see Karah 260–1.

More than one charming blind girl, in fiction and in the drama, has preceded "Poor Miss

Finch." But, so far as I know, blindness in these cases has been always exhibited, more or

less exclusively, from the ideal and the sentimental point of view. The attempt here made

is to appeal to an interest of another kind, by exhibiting blindness as it really is.

("Dedication" xxxix)

Although intentions and results do not always coincide, Collins indicates that rather than serving

as a "narrative prosthesis" (Mitchell and Snyder) designed to stimulate the readers' nerves, this

novel will offer readers knowledge about the actual lived experience of blindness. The various

plot twists and the story's ironic ending complicate such a reading, while at the same time

meeting the expectations of sensation fiction readers, but blindness is indisputably the principal

subject in this novel.

The Plot

Originally published in serial form in *Cassell's Magazine* from October 1871 to March

1872, when the experiences of physical pain and visual impairment had been part of Collins'

own life for two decades, *Poor Miss Finch* achieved only moderate commercial success, and is

less well-known to modern readers. Judged as having the "most implausible plot in English

fiction" (Bedell 19), and of not standing up "to assessment by the criteria of realism" (Peters

327), the plot is nevertheless heavily engaged in the medical theory and practices of the day, and

also delved deep into Molyneux's problem, which was articulated in a philosophical dialogue

between William Molyneux and John Locke:

Suppose a Man born blind, and now adult, and taught by his touch to distinguish between

a Cube, and a Sphere of the same metal, and nighly of the same bigness, so as to tell,

when he felt one and t'other, which is the Cube, which the Sphere. Suppose then the

> Cube and Sphere placed on a Table, and the Blind Man to be made to see. Quære,
>
> Whether by his sight, before he touched them, he could now distinguish, and tell, which
>
> is the Globe, which the Cube. (bk. II, ch. ix, 8)

The prevailing assumptions of Rationalism are jolted by this question, and as John W. Davis has argued (1960), Molyneux's problem served as one of the primary spurs to the development of a new idea of the literary imagination in the eighteenth century (392).[104] Carrying on in this tradition, Collins adds a Victorian perspective to the question by integrating "new" medical knowledge into the discussion.

The story begins on the day that the narrator, Madame Pratolungo, arrives in Dimchurch to enter into the service of the Finch family as a companion for their nineteen-year-old daughter, Lucilla. Blinded by cataracts at a year old, Lucilla enjoys financial independence under the roof of her father and stepmother. Madame Pratolungo's preconceived ideas about blindness, and particularly its sympathetic appeal—"Young–lonely–blind . . . I should love her" (*PMF* 4)—are soon challenged by Lucilla's unconventional words and deeds. Although blind, Lucilla moves confidently around at will, in sharp contrast to her sighted stepmother, who is "anchored immovably in her nursery" (332). Lucilla also fearlessly disregards the norms and conventions of the day. Martha Stoddard Holmes argues that *Poor Miss Finch* is "the century's most radical novel about blindness and sexuality" (7). When for instance Lucilla falls in love with the young gentleman Oscar Dubourg, she openly expresses her passion and sensual desire, which according to Madame Pratolungo was at least partially due to her blindness. "[S]trong in her blind insensibility to all shafts of ridicule shot from the eye," Lucialla "cared nothing for the presence

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[104] See Nicolson 83–5 and MacLean 106–8.

of a third person" (175).[105] The lives of Lucilla and the other characters fall into an almost farcical confusion, however, when Oscar begins to suffer epileptic fits. Already engaged to Lucilla, he discreetly decides to take silver nitrate to treat his symptoms, which permanently turns his skin dark. Meanwhile, Oscar's twin brother Nugent returns from America, and suggests that Lucilla should consult a German eye surgeon currently in London, to see if an operation could restore her sight. Nugent predictably develops a secret attachment to Lucilla, and his desire becomes entangled with Oscar's desperate attempt to hide his changed complexion from Lucilla. But why? Because, as we are reminded repeatedly from early in the novel, she has an utterly groundless fear of dark color—which of course, she cannot see. What follows is a series of contrivances, treachery, and lies, all involving the restoration of Lucilla's sight. The novel supposedly ends happily, with Lucilla losing her sight once more, and uniting with her correct, though blue, suitor.

Otherness in Hero and Heroine

The fundamental premise of *Poor Miss Finch* is that the blind heroine has a visceral hatred for a specific quality of a thing's or a person's appearance, which she eventually overcomes, but not before Oscar's twin brother attempts to carry out a replacement plot. Her irrational abhorrence of a dark color apparently results from conventional metaphorical values. Lucilla explains at one point that "I associate light . . . with all that is beautiful and heavenly— and dark with all that is vile and horrible and devilish" (*PMF* 221). Without this embrace of visual stereotypes, the whole plot would be different; in fact, there would not be one. Of course, the idea that certain physiognomies are inherently ugly and abominable is an essential premise in

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[105] Dickens made a similar observation in *American Notes* on a blind person's sensitivity towards another's gaze when he visited the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind in Boston. He writes that it is "strange" to watch the faces of the blind, which is "unconscious of the eyes upon them," and therefore "free . . . from all concealment of what is passing in their thoughts" (31).

such notable nineteenth century texts such as *Frankenstein* and *Hunchback of Notre Dame*. In *Poor Miss Finch*, however, the selection of a blind heroine as the person who hates a color she cannot perceive means that someone who is herself considered to be other due to her disability is the character most vehement about the otherness of others. The result borders on the ridiculous— while the blind heroine is repulsed and utterly dismissive of a color she cannot see, the male characters seem to be utterly infatuated with a women whose blindness would conventionally render her an object of pity or disgust.

In his other works, Collins renders "otherness" visible through stereotypically "different" bodies that Victorian audiences would immediate recognize and respond to as other. Working on his readers' nerves arouses their instinctive abhorrence, their moralistic repugnance, and yet their curiosity and lively interest in the strange or sensational. The Indians in *The Moonstone* (1868), for instance, embody the increasing threats to British imperial policy, and are therefore fascinating and terrifying. (Nayder "Collins and Empire" 150). And the plot of the play *Black and While* (1869), co-authored with Charles Fechter, revolves around a character's racial difference and slave origins.[106]

In *Poor Miss Finch*, skin color once more functions as a prominent "marker of identity," although the color itself results from different causes (149). Two men have the same dark and discolored skin as the hero Oscar for the same reason: taking silver nitrate, a medicine believed to help end fits.[107] But in addition to these medical accidents, other people of foreign origin with naturally dark complexions appear in the story, and blind Lucilla responds with all of the racist

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[106] Some of Collins' other works, such as *Armadale* (1866), "Miss or Mrs?" (1873), and *The Guilt River* (1886) have mixed-race characters in minor roles as well.

[107] Just as Collins investigated cases of sight restoration to depict Lucilla's, he researched the causes and symptoms of skin disorders and discolorations for his portrayal of Oscar. In *The Life of Wilkie Collins*, Nuel Pharr Davis suggests that Collins might have got the idea from Dickens' skin disorder and silver nitrate treatment in 1861 (225).

presumptions of the contemporary political and cultural scene.[108] For instance, the Hindoo" who converted to Christianity that Lucilla learns about becomes in her imagination "a kind of monster in human form," and her fear and hatred of "brown demons" leads her to believe she "had long, lean, black-eyed beings all round me" (*PMF* 118).

Important distinctions still exist. For instance, Oscar could never be mistaken for a "Hindoo," because he is "dark blue"—a rather "arbitrary" color in Samuel Gladden's opinion, but not in terms of distinguishing the novel's hero from persons of color (473). Nevertheless, the effects and consequences of Oscar's metamorphosis at times resemble those found in Collins' other novels that adopt the pattern of "a racial transformation" (Nayder "Collins and Empire" 150). For instance, Madame Pratolungo cannot help harboring an aversion to any man with discolored skin: "The man's face, instead of exhibiting any of the usual shades of complexion, was hideously distinguished by a superhuman—I had almost said a devilish—colouring of livid blackish blue!" Reading her reaction in her expression, this man apologizes for not "warning you of my disfigurement" in advance, and also seeks to ensure that she will not mistake him for being a savage, uncivilized, and pagan person of a different race by telling her that "There are hundreds of people discolored as I am, in the various parts of *the civilized world*" (italics mine; 105).

Because they place Lucilla's blindness at a center of the novel, only a few recent Collins discuss Oscar's "disability" in the same terms. What Oscar experiences is what disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls "a personal misfortune or bodily flaw" (5). In an attempt to account for this traditional, or "medical," definition of disability, Michael Oliver writes about the "social model" of disability (22), which calls attention to, and attempts to counter the dominant medical view of the body as "a machine to be fixed in order to conform to normative values"

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[108] For more discussion on Collins' interests in social conceptions of race, see Stojanovic 150 and Durgan 769.

(Paley 2002). Oscar is at first a healthy, wealthy white man. His epileptic seizures due to a head injury, however, relegate him to the status of abnormal, other, or "disabled." Wanting "to be fixed" before his marriage, Oscar decides to take the silver nitrate, even though he is informed about the side effect. When his skin color does change into dark blue, however, those around him begin regarding him only in terms of his physical appearance. Lucilla's little sister-in-law "affectionately" calls him "blue man" (*PMF* 129), as does some stranger (382). A foulmouthed German eye surgeon, out of malice, calls him an "English blue devil" (362). Even the sympathetic narrator Madame Pratolungo, who closely follows the sequence of events, begins thinking of him as "my blue man" (105).

The impact of such reductive "labelling" has been frequently discussed by scholars in relation to discrimination against specific disabilities (Mutua 296; Taylor xiv; Scott 117; Murugami; Johnstone). In his novel, Collins offers a several examples of such stereotyping. The "blue" Oscar for instance joins his fiancé Lucilla in the ranks of the "outsiders" (Becker 9). Lucilla herself is already referred to as "poor Miss Finch" (13) by the village people, who while "compassionate," are themselves labelled as "simple" by the author. Complicating the situation further, of course, is Lucilla's unaccountable fear for dark colors, which causes a blind woman to react vehemently to an imagined idea of difference, and which also allows the twin brother Nugent to turn Oscar's "disfigurement" to his evil advantage by replacing Oscar as Lucilla's fated mate. As Catherine Peters has noted, the idea of doubles—physical, psychological, or any other kind[109]—greatly intrigued Collins. In *The Woman in White*, for instance, a large part of plot pivots on an "ominous likeness" (61; ch. 11) between Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie, and

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[109] Peters also analyses *Armadale*, in which two strangers with no physical likeness but the same name are linked in "a near-fatal relationship" (xviii).

early in his career, he wrote "The Twin Sisters: A True Story" (1851), which of readers of *Poor Miss Finch* will find in certain ways familiar.[110]

Lucilla's Blindness as Otherness

The concept of replacement is also intimately involved with Lucilla's fate, and crucial if readers are to understand her suffering. Her distress is however manifested differently than Oscar's, indicating that Collins draws a distinction between a somatic function that is "dis-abled" in the heroine, and the condition that afflicts the hero's body. While Oscar's "otherness" is bestowed upon him by other people due to changes in his appearance, Lucilla's understanding of her self is affected by her awareness of her lack of vision. Furthermore, since the idea of "replacement" with regard to her sight in the story is linked to a prosthesis, Collins is in some ways anticipating a modern, technical concept of the relationship between self and body. While the history of prostheses in a surgical sense[111] can be traced back as far as ancient Egypt,[112] the word itself, originally from Greek, appears in English around 1553 as a rhetorical term, referring to something "attached to," "setting forth," or "adding a syllable to the beginning of a word" (Wills 215). Although the sixteenth century French battlefield surgeon Ambroise Peré is credited with preparing the first prosthesis in Europe, the first surgical use of the term is attributed to 1704, defined as "the replacement of defective or absent parts of the body by artificial substitutes."[113] Marquard Smith and Joanne Morra note that up to the present day, "prosthesis" has a dual meaning—"addition" and "replacement" (2). Modern medicine devoted to sight

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[110] Stojanovic also points out that the idea of "literary doubles" and "substitution" is also central, though in this case enacted through the means of photography, in the plot of Collins' final novel *Blind Love* (85).

[111] The definition of prosthesis in modern medical literature differs greatly from one study to another. Some define prosthesis exclusively by the number of walking steps the user can take (Holden and Fernie, 1987), whereas others look at the length of time it can be used (Steinberg et al. 742–5; Beekman and Axtell 1510–3; Chan and Tan 811).

[112] Documented evidence of ancient Egyptian practices is scarce; see Conroy 93 for more discussion.

[113] "Prosthesis." *Oxford English Dictionary*.

restoration has developed such additions as the bionic eye, also known as a "visual prosthesis" (Schiller et al. 1529; Lesisa and Tehovnik 51).

Since controlling restored vision is not intuitive, but requires practice,[114] the distress of "crossmodal" transfer (Gregory and Wallace) is an inevitable consequence of such surgery. The use of a prosthesis therefore extends beyond clinical and pathophysiological matters to a cluster of related psychological, biological, and phenomenological concerns about the relationship between body and self. Celia Lury, for example, examines the epistemological relationship between self-knowledge and "prosthetic" visual technologies:

> The prosthesis . . . is what makes this self-extension possible. In adopting/adapting a prosthesis, the person creates (or is created by) a self-identity that is no longer defined by the edict "I think, therefore I am"; rather, he or she is constituted in the relation "I can, therefore I am." (3)

Reflecting his own bodily experience as a someone with a prosthesis, Mark Wigley takes Lury's argument a step further. Wigley writes that such devices do not just expand or redefine, but can actually "blur" one's identity: "The prosthesis reconstructs the body, transforming its limits, at once extending and convoluting its borders" (8). A dependence on "foreign elements" a mediator between self and world, can make that border fluid. A prosthesis's very materiality and utility therefore paradoxically calls attention to how subjective and elusive the idea of the self actually is, requiring a different understanding of its relationship to the body and to the body's extension (Jain 32). As Merleau-Ponty's famous analogy demonstrates, the idea of "extending" one's body is possible only if it is assumed to have a distinct border, either physical or perceptual:

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[114] See Sacks 126–7.

The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight. In the exploration of things . . . the blind man is rather aware of it through the position of objects than of the position of objects through it. (168)

The prosthesis therefore makes all of us aware that the body and bodily consciousness are both variable, drawn anew constantly, depending on our cognition and our emotions.[115]

Donna Haraway raises the issue most plainly: "Why should our bodies end at the skin?" (178) Further, she challenges dualist notions that divide the world into the organic and the otherwise, then place human subjectivity, complete with how we feel, think, and see, in the realm of the organic, which then operates or experiences the external environment. With the increasing interposition of the inorganic, whether a prosthesis, or some other form of technology, between the supposed organic and inorganic, however, the line between the self and the world blurs. Haraway's highly influential early writing about the cyborg has become increasingly relevant as the concept and the reality of assistive technology have become ubiquitous and therefore a universal fact and quandary of life.[116]

As Tobin Siebers notes, Haraway's work is especially relevant for certain groups. "Our cyborgs are people with disabilities," he claims, because the nature and the extent of their reliance on prosthetics and assistive technologies moves beyond indulgence in such "mundane elements" as the iPhone, in Steven Mentor's term, to the realm of necessity. Siebers points out that Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* does not exclude people with disabilities, and he speculates

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[115] The persistence of sensation in a removed limb was first documented by Ambroise Pare in 1551. The term "phantom limb," which is now in universal usage, appeared first in Silas Weir Mitchell's 1871 paper, "Phantom Limbs." See more, Warton et al. 652–9.

[116] For the all-pervasive phenomena of "cyborgization," see Reeve 92.

that "Perhaps paraplegics and other severely-handicapped people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization with other communication devices" (178).[117] Some scholars and disability activists advocate strongly for the advantages offered by what Lucy Suchman calls "human-machine configurations,"[118] and no one seriously argues that prostheses have not improved the quality of many people's lives, by extending their physical capabilities, and by smoothing out the daily difficulties caused by illness, impairment, injury, or old age. Haraway's interest in the sociocultural implications of prosthetics has only recently been followed up by discussions of prostheses' psychological impacts on their users (Seltzer 99; Sobchack 208–9).

Much of the scholarship devoted to Haraway's cyborgization has demonstrated a rather a careful attitude towards raising questions about its premises. Siebers, however, has strong reservations about easily applying Haraway's concepts to the disabled, claiming in fact that she "forgets what disability is," because she puts too much trust in "power and ability" of the cyborg: "The cyborg is always more than human—and never risks to be seen as subhuman. To put it simply, the cyborg is not disabled" (178).[119] At the troubled center of this debate lies our society's general hope and expectation that assistive technology will provide the solution for all physical and psychological needs or difficulties. But as Alexa Schriempf points out, such assumptions can only see disabilities, and therefore the people who have them, as "problems" that simply require mechanical solutions (289).

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[117] Also, see Goodley and Lawthom 102.

[118] For an overview of pro-cyborg perspective, see Kafer 105. For examples of this position, see Garland-Thomson, *"Re-Shaping"* 114 and C. Gray 1–16.

[119] For a similar viewpoint on the ableist perspectives that govern the cyborg theory, see, for example, Ellcessor 1763; Reeve 93; Mitchell and Snider 28–9; Betcher 37–8; and Apelmo 97.

Prosthesis: The Value of Eyesight

   I have made this rather long excursion into discussions of prostheses and cyborgs because they can help us recognize how Collins' understanding of disability and its representation anticipates how subsequent writers and theorists will identify and problematize ideas of replacement and accommodation. In the Dedication to the novel, Collins promises to show readers a blind woman as she really is. Perhaps more accurately, it could be said that Collins draws on his prior research on blindness and sight restoration to create a character whose opinions are virtually inconceivable for a sighted readership. To take only one especially striking instance, Lucilla remarks that if she had to choose, she would "infinitely" prefer arms of "an enormous and unheard-of length" to sight, regardless of whether it would allow her to see her lover's face, declaring "You people who can see attach such an absurd importance to your eyes!" (*PMF* 220).

   Given a statement like this one, in the case of Lucilla, what importance, value, or meaning can we bestow upon the fully functioning body as the normative "implicit standard" for understanding her (Goodley and Runswick-Cole 5)? And even more unsettling, to what degree can we even comprehend how "absurd" our own assumptions might actually be? Throughout the story, Collins joins Lucilla in presenting sight itself as a prosthesis—as if the eyes, with or without their function, are independent from other parts of the body, and therefore detachable and exchangeable devices. One example can stand for many. When Madame Pratolungo arrives at the Finch House, an old nurse at the house informs her that Lucilla "took me out, and used my eyes to see with . . . and they have not satisfied her. She is going to try your eyes, now" (*PMF* 17).

As the story develops, sight increasingly becomes evaluated in terms of "gain" or "loss." For those around her, sight is considered to be the sole determinant of Lucilla's potential happiness. But Lucilla herself has a highly versatile sense of touch, described as if she had eyes "in the tips of her fingers" (142), and she does not consider herself "deficient" in any sense of the term. When however the doctor manages to restore her sight, she immediately confronts a series of Molyneux's problems.[120] The doctor literally asks her to tell him "which object is square" and "which is round" (301), and Lucilla not only realizes that she cannot, but that her previous cognitive, spatial, and imaginative abilities have disappeared. With her perceptive structure dizzied and confused, she realizes that she has become immobile and disabled, and she cries out, "put the bandage on, and blind me again. My eyes are of no use to me!" (300).

Confirming the accuracy and even prophetic nature of this scene, recent research has noted that in cases of sight restoration after long-term blindness, after an initial euphoric phase, patients generally tend to be overwhelmed by the extreme difficulties in adapting to a new sense. In Oliver Sacks' famous essay "To See and Not See," for instance, like Lucilla, a man is granted eyesight after forty-five years of blindness. But when after a time he loses it once more, his response is not sorrow, but a profound sense of relief from the inner and outer torment unpredictably unleashed by sight. Sacks describes this result as a return to self: "at last, Vigil is allowed not to see, allowed to escape from the glaring, confusing world of sight and space, and to return to his own true being" (Sacks 152). And like Sacks' subject, after the successful sight restoration operation, Lucilla laments that she had "made a new creature" (*PMF* 329) of herself, one whose loss of her sure sense of location has robbed her of "own true being."

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[120] The apparent debt of the novel's plot to Molyneux's problem has been discussed in detail by Anger, and by Kennedy, 459–82. See also Catherine Peters's Introduction to *Poor Miss Finch* (vii–xxiii).

As the German eye doctor explains, replacement or substitution is the key concept here, and one that even he recognizes is a matter of profit and loss rather than total gain. He tells Lucilla that losing her sense of touch is "a sort of swop-bargain between Nature and you . . . . I take away your eyes—I give you your fine touch. I give you your eyes—I take away your fine touch" (404). As for the readers, at the end of the story they must wrestle with their own unexamined assumptions when Lucilla not only regains her contentment and happiness by losing her sight again, as if indeed she had recovered from an unwise "swop bargain," but explicitly justifies this conclusion:

> "You *will* persist in thinking that my happiness depends on my sight. I look back with horror at what I suffered when I had my sight. . . . Try to understand me, and you won't talk of my loss – you will talk of my gain."
>
> "Your gain? … What have you gained?"
>
> "Happiness." (418)

The denouement of the novel therefore insists upon what Collins had apparently perversely declared in the Dedication: that "the conditions of human happiness are independent of bodily affliction" and that "it is even possible for bodily affliction itself to take its place among the ingredients of happiness" (xl).[121] Collins' treatment of eyesight therefore deeply unsettles a pervasive hierarchically-ordered sighted-blind structure governing common assumptions about the necessary conditions of happiness; in fact, his heroine actually uses happiness as the standard to evaluate critically such ocularcentrism. Sight is certainly central to all of the main characters' fates, but through Lucilla, Oscar, and Nugent, Collins also calls into question prevailing opinions

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[121] Collins actually explicitly stated his disruptive purpose for writing *Poor Miss Finch* in an 1871 letter: "The object of the story is to show the modifying effect of the circumstances on the calamities that afflict human life" (Baker and Clarke 347). As Hilary Newman points out, Collins reiterates the same opinion in another letter written a year later. See, Baker et al., vol. II, 314–5.

about the nature and value of "abled" or "disabled." Just as Levinas wants us to remember the irreducibility of Others, Collins ethically grants that Lucilla may have an opinion about eyesight different than what sighted people assume. She acts on that opinion, and pursues her happiness as a subject, not as an object.

Collins and the Modern Sense of Body

In *Poor Miss Finch*, Collins anticipates and explores what will become a common subject for fiction: the fear that new possibilities and conceptions of the body, particularly in its interactions with prostheses, will lead to disturbing alterations of our sense of self—of who we are.[122] This fear is not only examined through the experience of Lucilla, but through the other characters as well. As already noted, the legitimate potential spouse of the heroine is in danger of being superceded by a duplicate who now resembles the Oscar that Lucilla imagines more than Oscar does himself, and even Madame Pratolungo declares that she "hardly knew" her father "again" after he goes to "the length of renewing his youth, in respect of his teeth, his hair, his complexion, and his figure (this last involving the purchase of a pair of stays)" to remarry much a younger woman. In the eyes of his daughter, prostheses have made him seem "so outrageously and unnaturally young" (*PMF* 104).

It is in the treatment of eyesight as prosthesis, however, that Collins so presciently anticipates some of our current preoccupations. I have already referred to Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" as powerful evidence for the "leaky distinctions" (152) regarding selfhood and being that result from intimate relations between organic body and machines, which then offer a critique of essentialist presuppositions about identity. More recently, in "Situated

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[122] Such works include Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and H. G. Wells' early science romances. For further discussion on the concept of human body in nineteenth century Gothic novels, see Daly 1–29.

Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,"

Haraway has explicitly discussed developments in technologies of visualisation. The cybernetic

metaphor here provides the means for evaluating issues of limited sight and objective/subjective

knowledge:

> The "eyes" made available in modern technological sciences shatter any idea of passive
>
> vision; these prosthetic devices show us that all eyes, including our own organic ones, are
>
> active perceptual systems, building in translations and specific *way*s of seeing, that is,
>
> ways of life. (190)

The concept of double- or multi-dimensional vision Haraway proposes here, a consequence of

considering sight as potentially independent from intention or control, sharpens her interrogation

of objective knowledge, and, by extension, informs her suggested possibility of a different

method/system for viewing the world. This in turn can also help us read Collins. Is there a way

for Lucilla to assume "ways of seeing" that do not take "sense of feeling" from her in exchange

(*PMF* 362)? One fairly obvious approach would be to dispense with considering sight the pre-

eminent faculty. And in fact, if we trace the etymology of "feeling" back to its Icelandic meaning

of "to grope," and thinking of the body as primarily moving forward "gropingly into the

world . . . touching things in order to be touched back" (Mazis 30), we can recognize why that

for Lucilla, "ways of seeing" must be amenable to the groping, touching, and feeling which have

always offered her "delightful sensation" (*PMF* 418).

Deprived of her own way of feeling, Lucilla understandably fears that an imposed

understanding of sight will block her from feeling herself as she was before. "The restoration of

my sight," she realizes, "has made a new being of me" (362), and this is not a positive or

welcome development. Madame Pratolungo, the person who is closest to Lucilla, comes to

recognize the same thing: "From the moment when she was positively informed that the operation had succeeded, our once-patient Lucilla developed into a new being" (234). Her previous surety that "I can, therefore I am" (Lury 3) has been unsettled, and remains so until she "regains" her blindness. It would be hard to imagine a more telling reassessment of the personal and cultural value of sight.

Conclusion

This section has read *Poor Miss Finch* as anticipating the modern idea of the body as a set of independent and replaceable parts, and the resulting anxiety about what this prosthesis-centered conception might do to any notion of personal integrity or identity. Through the focus of the novel on prosetheses and the medical discoloration of Oscar's skin, the novel also anticipates and explores some of the underlying causes of modern anxiety about alteration, alienation, and the "self-othering"[123] of the body. In this regard, Collins exposes challenges in a universal human ethics about body. Collins' subversion of this notion of the body is an early recognition and critique of ableist assumptions—that is, that the standard for evaluating a human life is degree to which all of a person's parts "work properly," and that therefore disabilities carry with them an "assumption of biological inferiority" (Groch 202). Crucially, Collins represents Lucilla as a blind person who refuses to recognize herself as inferior.

By giving, then taking away sight from the heroine, Collins actually observes how her sense of self-esteem and trust in others—her "happiness"—do not conform to the nineteenth-century medical and social assumptions about the pre-eminent value of normalcy. Collins also calls into question the validity of considering vision the most important sense in terms of knowledge and identity. In his representation of blindness, Collins grapples with what Levinas

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[123] For further discussion on the dynamic process of self-othering and the relation between sensorimotor subjectivity and sensorimotor intersubjectivity, see, Thompson 243–66.

exhorts as "first philosophy" (*TI* 47–8); that is, our ethical response—our responsibility—for Others means demanding that we are all responsible for recognizing collective alterity and how it creates the disabled identity. Just as Levinas does not want us to assume we comprehend other people—their needs and feelings, their beliefs and perspectives—Collins ethically tries to imagine what the blind person would want beyond what Collins himself might assume. What if Lucilla prefers her excellent sense of touch to sight, when seeking to discover her lover's face?

Ultimately, it is Collins' treatment of the synthesis and separation of sight and insight, and the clashes between ideas of normalcy and sense of self, all explored through his blind heroine's abilities, inner feelings, attitudes, agony at being disoriented, and eventual liberation from sight, that makes *Poor Miss Finch* such an interesting study of ambivalence about the relationship between functioning minds and bodies, which in many moments seems ahead of its time.

Chapter III: Retelling Blindness

Blindness and Otherness in Frances Browne's *My Share of the World*

Introduction

By reading the nineteenth-century blind writer Frances Browne's *My Share of the World: An Autobiography* (1861), this final chapter examines how representations of blindness in the novel explore the relationship between the sense of self and other, and in Browne's case, how the narrative offers an antithesis to alterity. The so-called "ethical turn" in literary studies over the past few decades testifies to our natural fascination with knowing and evaluating the lives of others, and many critics have drawn upon Levinas' ethics of alterity to theorize the dynamics of narration as an encounter between reader and text (Hollander 7). Rebecca N. Mitchell, for instance, claims that sympathy in Victorian realistic novels can be read in terms of Levinasian ethics, which help to elucidate how the plots foreground the other's incomprehensibility and the claim to ethical attention (xi). Two key notions, the face and the world, anchor Levinas' work. They are interrelated, as the former forms, informs, and transforms the latter. I will argue that together, these notions provide the foundations for Browne's fictional narrative.

As I address throughout this thesis, Levinas declares the concept of face as central to his ethical philosophy: "The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of other in me, we here name face" (*TI* 50–1). "Face" for Levinas is the sign for an encounter with the living presence of another person, which entails a moral responsibility of each individual for the other within a necessarily social context. But for Levinas, face-to-face encounters are also always potentially sites of violence—if not literal, an often unadmitted exploitation and privilege—creating a dangerous binary between visuality and ethics. Consequently, "vision's other" (Tilley, "Frances Browne" 147), blindness, is also a bedrock concept within his philosophy. What if a person cannot "see," literally or figuratively, the suffering faces of others?

Would the person's act correspond with the Levinasian model of the ethical encounter, or not? For when Levinas speaks of face's incomprehensibility, he actually critiques vision (and touch, or any capacity of ours for that matter), making them just a means of facilitating the ethical encounter: the face is "neither seen nor touched—for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content" (*TI* 194).

With this Levinasian question in mind, the first section examines the relationship between "sympathy" and vision in a novel by a blind author which unexpectedly presents the face of a sighted other. By encircling her protagonist's life with images of the face, and by showing how much he does not see, Browne exposes the ableist assumptions that prioritize vision and the social norms that depend upon it. Having made this argument, the second section considers the autobiographical components in Browne by reading her novel in another way. I argue that *My Share of the World* can be read as one of the precursors of autofiction, yet also an example of what critic Ellen S. Burt suggests about life writing: that autobiography as a medium can go beyond the representation of the subject to address the encounter with the absolutely other (89). Drawing here on another key Levinas concept, the idea of a "place in the sun," I describe how Browne forges links between the self and the world, within which one shares and occupies space, through writing that bridges the distances between them, enabling sympathy with others. I conclude by exploring the implications of Browne's fictional work within the life writing genre, eventually providing a synopsis of a possible mode of autofiction informed and shaped by a sympathetic imagination.

The Concept of "Face" and Self in relation to Others: Browne's Brief Biography

Born in the small village of Stranorlar, Ireland, in 1816, Browne was one of the most popular writers of her time. Despite losing her sight due to smallpox when she was eighteen

months old, in her prime Browne was well-known throughout Britain and North America. As she recollects, her quest for knowledge was nothing but laborious. Formal education was unavailable for her, just as for James Wilson; education only came as the fruit of a tireless effort and determination (*SA* ix-x). Browne's poems were published for the first time when she was 24 years old. Her first collected poems, *The Star of Attéghéi; The Vision of Schwartz; and Other Poems*, was published in 1844, and she energetically produced still more poems, children's stories, novels, and reviews, becoming celebrated as "the blind poetess of Ulster" (McLean, *Other East* 136 ; Blair 134). As suggested by the title poem "The Star of Attéghéi," which dramatizes the ongoing forced migration of Circassians and Turkic Caucasians, Browne's works called attention to socially, culturally, or politically disadvantaged people drawn from a personal to a national scale, always attempting "to give voice to the unheard" (McLean 153).

In 1847, as one of the nineteenth-century Irish immigrants who departed their home for somewhere more promising, Browne left her village—where manual labor was a predominant way of living—for Edinburgh with her sister, and then went to London in 1852. She lived and continued writing in the city until her last day on earth. She died at the age of 63. In the course of her life away from her home, Browne sent her earnings to her family, though her own life, as a woman immigrant writer with a disability, was not necessarily in easy circumstances.[124] And now the name of Browne is almost forgotten, appearing only in the *Dictionary of National Biography* "Forgotten Persons" volume before receiving an entry in the second edition (159–60).[125] What scholarship there is on Browne tends not to be extensive or through, and takes the

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[124] It appeared that Browne was never affluent and lived frugally. She filed for bankruptcy in 1879 (McLean, "Arms and the Circassian" 298, 315n11).

[125] Browne is probably most remembered as the author of the children's story, *Granny's Wonderful Chair, and its Tales of Fairy Times* (1856). For its publication history and reception, see Manlove 21.

form of a "bio-critical exercise" (Tilley, "Frances Browne" 151–2; McLean, "Arms and the Circassian" 298–9; Brown 184).

The Contemporary Reception of Browne

In 1842, Marguerite Gardiner, Countess of Blessington, the editor of the journal *The Keepsake*, wrote regarding Frances Browne's poem: "It is impossible for the Editor to permit these beautiful verses to pass from under her hand, without adding a word or two, which must give them yet additional interest" (111). She was referring to Browne's visual impairment—a very typical comment that Browne, or any other visually impaired writer for that matter, would commonly have attached to their work. Brown was almost always identified as an authoress without a visual faculty. In her case, this information would have been especially surprising, since her works are often very visually detailed accounts of a wide range of historical, geographical, and contemporary settings, most of which she never could have visited. A critical assessment of Browne's writing[126] appears in John Kitto's *The Lost Senses: Deafness and Blindness* (1845). Deaf himself, Kitto focuses on the special relation that blind people form with language, and in the section devoted to Browne's poetical works, Kitto's critical eyes are primarily on the "inaccuracy" of her use of language. His comment is worth quoting, since he not only addresses how a blind person ideally should be thought of by the sighted, but also whether or not the disability should affect an assessment of her skill as a writer:

> In any case, Miss Browne's effusions would be received with sympathy and respect; but no degree of sympathy and indulgence would induce people *to read* and take interest in that which is not in itself pleasing, or which does not meet the requirements of cultivated taste . . . (II: 302)

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[126] Another notable and substantial review was "The Art and Writings of Miss Browne," published in 1844.

As noted in my Introduction, as early as the eighteenth-century, the term "sympathy" contained within it what in the modern usage we would call "empathy." "Sympathy" therefore could refer to shared feeling, rather than being confined to the more condescending emotions often identified as pity or benevolence. But in this case, by linking "indulgence" with "sympathy," Kitto seems to be suggesting that a blind woman would deserve to be pitied by "people" as someone disabled or different, although this would not entail extending the same tolerance to her writing if it did not please, or meet cultivated standards. How, then, should readers respond to the "poor" blind heroine reproduced in Browne's novel *My Share of the World*? Especially when the novel is subtitled "An Autobiography"? What complicates matters here is that Browne, writing from the "other" side (Tilley, "Frances Browne" 148) within an ocularcentric society, offers a blind heroine, but presented from the point of view of a sighted male narrator, the fictional autobiographical subject. As a result, although the novel possesses a simple dichotomous framework that moves between sighted and blind, male and female, and dominant and subservient, the identity of the writer, and the presented identity of the speaker, add a further twist to every sentence, which reorients the reader to the content of the story.

Plot in relation to Face

Before the days of visual or aural virtual communication technology, interactions with others took place through written correspondence, telegraph, or face-to-face. Lacking visual experience other than what can be imagined from the accounts of sighted writers and companions, the blind author's discerning and delineating her world-making process is novel and interesting in itself. But through Frederick's narrative, Browne addresses the question of what the human face signifies to us, whether sighted or blind, from a young age. Most of us would agree with Frederick that the "starting point of one's memory" is one's "true beginning of life"

(I: 1). Given the blindness of his creator, however, it is striking that his first memory is a scene with several human faces:

> The absorbed look of every face in that room, whether speakers or listeners, may have engraved the scene on my recollection—where it stands distinct and unattached, in the fashion of first remembered things. (I: 2)

One could argue that the mode and purpose of this "autobiography" is already captured in this moment, in which Frederick objectifies the memory of his childhood self, examining it as if it were a picture—or an engraving. Though too young to understand the situation, or to recognize later any of the faces, from this earliest of points onward, his memories are filled with human faces—and not always of the welcoming, positive kind, as he later concludes when he understands that the people in the room were agitatedly discussing wills and settlements after one of their relatives' demise. In fact, what lies behind his vivid memories of faces is only "a blank, broken by half memories of falls, frights, and great surprises" (I: 2).

As it turns out, although he eventually achieved a high social status, living in an affluent milieu, Frederick has lived a secluded, solitary life. The son of an abandoned, poor mother, at fourteen he is sent to live with relatives, and become an apprentice to a portrait artist—arguably the profession most focused upon and surrounded by faces. On his path towards manhood, he changes his careers frequently, looking for his right place in the world. Although he meets many different types of people over the years, except for his mother, Frederick only attaches to and eventually truly connects with two individuals: his first love, Lucy Rose, and Constantine de Lavance. Frederick meets Lucy when he is sixteen years old, and his account is filled with romantic imagery, poetic expressions, and a vivid account of her appearance: "her straw hat had fallen off, and a flow of curls like mingled gold and jet fell round the loveliest face that ever

came between me and sunshine" (I: 102). Addressing us directly, Frederick stresses the overwhelmingly visual nature of the experience. "Reader, perhaps you are not a believer in love at first *sight*," he remarks, "but I *know* that there was then opened in my life a spring which never closed again, though it turned to bitter waters" (italics mine; I: 103–4). The scene's visual impact is presented as a revelation. He *knows* that his life was profoundly affected by this sight, and that its memory, regardless of what later happened, remains vivid.

At a later date, Frederick encounters Lavance, who proves to be as significant as Lucy is for his life, and whose first appearance is equally memorable. Frederick's meetings with Lucy and Lavance stand in sharp contrast. He learns something about Lucy's background in advance, and their introduction follows the formal convention of the day (I: 102–3). Lavance on the contrary enters Frederic's life as a total stranger. A man with a somewhat foreign bearing, except that he is somehow related to Lucy's deceased French mother, Lavance's origins and past and present circumstances are unknown to Frederick until later. Their first encounter is casual and almost accidental, although the circumstances seem evasive and even suspicious. When Frederick chances one day to look outside, there is Lavance, "slowly pacing along with an eye to the doors and windows." Although other people on the street come and go, Frederick recalls that "his appearance caught and kept my attention" (I: 59) as he is "like nobody I had ever seen":

> a foreign-looking gentleman, as I mentally styled him, in spite of his travel-soiled and careless dress. . . . In size he was neither large nor little, but his figure seemed particularly erect, slender, and finely moulded; his features too were fine, almost classical; he did not seem to have a beard, but his hair, which was longer than most men's and hung straight without wave or curl, had an intense blackness, matching the clear brown of his complexion. Who could he be, and whom did he want in our street? (I: 59)

Frederick's unmistakably approving manner in describing Lavance—"fine," "classical," and "clear"—is worth quoting at length, because it contrasts sharply with his first impression of George Fenton, who becomes Lucy's husband. Despite their family connection, and no real "fault" with George (I: 81), Frederick cannot be as unconditionally open with him as he is with Lavance. Confused himself, Frederick speculates that his antipathy "was the antagonism of character which is generally most felt on first acquaintance" (I: 82)—a conclusion that only highlights even more the attachments he develops for Lucy and Lavance at first sight.

The interesting stranger turns out to be an unexpected and long-lost guest of Frederick's master. Despite the lack of a formal introduction, the two converse over the dinner, gleaning each other's name from their host. Although Lavance speaks to Frederick "as if he had been seven years acquainted" (I: 64), when they meet again sometime later, it is once again abruptly, and as if they were strangers:

> I had seen the man before: in spite of the gipsy dress and foreign tongue his face was known to my memory, and when he smiled I knew it was Lavance. At me he never looked but once . . . it was like a perfect stranger, and I would have spoken, but it struck me that he might not wish to be known in that trim. (I: 118)

Like Lucy, Lavance becomes a crucial component of Frederick's life. Readers learn this from Frederick many years afterwards, when he is writing his "autobiography," and looking back at the important events of his past. Visual memory of these personal relationships directs his whole sense of his life and actions in ways that I argue epitomize Levinas' understanding of otherness, as an inseparable form of visual engagement, or lack of engagement, with the face. Frederick presents his life as a series of attempts, struggles, and small successes to read the faces of others. The two most significant others in his life exert the resistant powers of the face upon him—they

will not yield to being comprehended, and leave his world without becoming fixed through interpretation.

To Frederick's concealed grief, Lucy distances herself by marrying her cousin: "Lucy Fenton was George's wife, and never could or would be more to me" (III: 228). Lavance also departs, leaving England due to a sudden, undisclosed "summons," despite Frederick's desperate pleas: "why will you leave me? There is nobody in the world cares for you as much as I do . . . give them up and stay at home, or let me go with you" (III: 43). Having lost these romantic and fraternal connections, Frederick devotes himself to his career and other responsibilities, eventually achieving a reasonably decent social state, given his disadvantaged background. But Lucy's eyesight starts to decline, further aggravated by the emotional distress caused by the domestic and social expectations imposed upon her by George and his extended family. With a certain amount of money now at his disposal, Frederick begins considering having Lucy's eyes looked at by an eye specialist in London; he also tries by every means possible to gather information about Lavance. But George dismisses Frederick's offer of help, insisting that "Lucy has had her share as well as the rest of us; we must all submit to the dispensations of Providence" (III: 178), and the search for Lavance proves to be fruitless.

At the climax of Frederick's narrative, Lucy and Lavance both depart permanently from his world, in a manner that exemplifies Levinasian concepts of otherness. Serving as secretary of the Board of Trade, Frederick one day hears "a sound of angry contention" coming from his patron's office. Rushing into the room, he encounters "a man with his back to me," who "dashed out the two candles and darted to the side window." Grasping the man's intention to escape through a window under cover of darkness, Frederick grabs him by the shoulder. "I could not see his face, nor he mine, I thought," but after a brief struggle, the man "wrenched himself from me

with a dexterous twist, saying, in the most familiar voice, "Good night, Frederick" (III: 242). But before Frederick can understand, much less react to the greeting, the man loses his balance and falls through the window pane, as the pistol in his breast pocket goes off. A revelation occurs instantly after that fatal moment; under "the flickering gas light" of the street, Frederick sees "the fixed but still beautiful and fearless face of my long-lost friend, Lavance!" (III: 243).

Still in shock and disbelief that Lavance is gone forever, Frederick visits Lucy. Shortly before this, a lawyer brings him important news about the recent death of his distant relative, who has bequeathed a massive fortune. Frederick is astonished to find his name listed as the third heir in order of succession to "inherit his entire property without condition or control" (III: 254). The first two are predictably Lavance and Lucy: "These three were to succeed each other according to the order in which they were named. Whichever of them survived the testator was sole legatee, with unlimited rights over his estates, real and personal" (ibid.). Carrying this news to Lucy, Frederick hopes that such financial security will relieve her sufferings to some extent, perhaps even cure her eyesight, and certainly gain her a stronger place in her household. But tragedy awaits him. She too has left his world: suffering from deteriorating vision and the sense of being a "useless burden" to her family, Lucy chooses to end her life just before Frederick arrives.

In keeping with Levinas' argument about the impossibility of knowing others, during their last visit, Frederick had not recognized the signs of impending suicide present in her speech and behavior. Despite her distressed circumstances, she had seemed to him serene: "I thought she looked years older, but that must have been fancy, for her face was composed, and even cheerful, as if some great settlement had come to her mind." "Had a hope of better days dawned upon her?" he asked himself, perhaps because her husband had done "penance" and received

"absolution." But he "could not guess" (III: 219). When Frederick raises the idea that she could consult "some able oculist" in London, telling her that "Whether successful or not, it will make me imagine myself of some use in the world for the rest of my days" (III: 221), with a "calmness and decision" that "startled" Frederick, she replies that her situation "will never be improved in this world" (III: 220). When it came time for the two men to leave—Frederick for his residence and George for a business trip in London, Lucy runs to George and throws her arms around his neck, saying "a good and loving husband you have been to me, and I wish I had been a more useful wife to you, but I did my best" (III: 227). This moment struck Frederick forcefully: "It was not usual for Lucy to make such demonstrations, and I knew she was above shamming. How was it then? . . . I—how did that parting tell on me?" (ibid.) The question is answered at her funeral, where Frederick cannot help seeing in her the face he first loved in life:

> How wonderfully like my mother she looked when I saw her for the last time! Does the soul leave its truest impress on the countenance when parting, and thus make manifest resemblances never seen till then? (III: 268–9).

Lucy's blindness is arguably the most predictable content in a novel written by a blind author, and it functions as a metaphor for the social and domestic subordination and confinement of women within the patriarchal and class system of Victorian England. But while blindness here serves as a trope for the oppressions of a vision-centric society, it is the "I" narrator Frederick's vision, or lack of it, that can be read most profitably as an equivocal trope that illustrates Levinas' ethics based on a face-to-face relationship with others.

Let us turn to another, more complicated example. Letice Lamont, a celebrated authoress whose works are "so much talked about," is disabled. When she walks into the party, "leaning on the arm" of a maid (III: 35), the attendees rise from their seats to welcome her, except for a

female novelist whose family history apparently leads her to hold a grudge against this successful artist. In a following conversation with Frederick, this novelist makes a venomous remark: "These accidents are always unlucky, but Miss Lamont can afford it . . . nature has endowed her with the two noblest gifts which can be bestowed on mortal—genius and beauty" (III: 36).

The language here, and especially the claim that Miss Lamont "can afford" accidents, and her resulting disabled body, arises out of the common belief that such misfortunes are somehow deserved or compensatory. A brilliant and attractive woman *should* have to suffer. In this case, the clearly resentful and envious novelist sees her own health as compensation for her lack of success, and therefore has no sympathy for Miss Lamont's physical challenges, which become equated with the novelist's own frustrated ambitions. The binary thinking and the other here are pervasive and total—if Miss Lamont is brilliant, successful, and beautiful but disabled, the other novelist is dull, unsuccessful, and plain—but able-bodied. This small, inconsequential scene has little or no influence on the plot or the actions of the main characters. Rather, it underscores the degree to which disability can call forth so intense an othering on the part of the abled, that the afflicted person's very real gifts and abilities are an affront, and treated with contempt. Presumably, a disabled person should be miserable in all aspects of life, for the sake of consistency.

If only to point out the absurdity or cruelty of such a position, Frederick mentions later, without any satisfaction, that Miss Lamont meets with an untimely death and completely leaves the stage of his life. And in fact, his own reaction to Miss Lamont offers an entirely different response, but one closely tied to Levinas' ethics. What attracts Frederick's gaze when Miss Lamont enters the room is her face—and more precisely, although she is larger and "some years

older," her facial resemblance to his first love: "I could not take my eyes from the lady, she was so much like Lucy . . . there was the same clear brown complexion, the same classical features, soft eyes and darkly shining hair" (III: 35) Although he tells himself that "she could never stand in the place of Lucy," the virtually identical description of her face suggests that she most certainly does. But as he continues to watch her, he draws an important distinction: "Oh, but Miss Lamont was like her when speaking; but when silent, a shadow of melancholy rested on the face which I had never seen on Lucy's" (III: 37). Here is the flip side of Levinas' ethics. While the envious novelist sees Miss Lamont's face as a sign of her profound otherness, and hates her, Frederick, aware of biographical information about her, is captivated by the face, but also sees it as profoundly other, and therefore a stimulus for his intense sympathy, similar to his infatuation with the disabled Lucy. Her disabled body, accompanied by her radiant face, strikes the same note of engagement, but one achieved through an extension of pity or sympathy that insists on her difference from Frederick. In fact, his obsession with others' faces as a confirmation of otherness does not even require them to be animate. At one point he muses that "life has nothing like the last look of those dead faces we are giving to the clay" claiming that while one may conceivably still "read the resurrection" in them, they are inevitably and eternally incomprehensible, as "they are sealed with the everlasting secret of the grave, and with its safety" (III: 269).

Conclusion of Part I

For Frederick, visual perception, and particularly of human faces, dominates his memory, weaving moments and persons together as an important component of his identity. But at the same time, the face for Frederick is an indefinite and interminable sign that demands interpretation, but is highly vulnerable to misinterpretation. As per Levinas' ethics of face, for

Frederick, the face is always "present" but "in its refusal to be contained": it cannot be "comprehend[ed]" or "encompassed" (*TI* 194). So for example, as a result of misreading, Frederick cannot perceive the "shadow of melancholy" that must have been resting on Lucy's face during their last interview (III: 37), even though he could recognize it on the face of Miss Lamont. Furthermore, he essentially puts his best friend to death, despite what Levinas calls the principal order of face, "thou shall not kill," because on that fatal evening he "couldn't see [Lavance's] face, though he mine."

Browne's novel can therefore be read through a Levinas lens as a critique of the performance of ableism as exhibited through the sighted narrator's intellectual hubris, indolence, and naivete. To put it in Heidi James-Dunbar's words about life writing in general, the "ungraspability" of otherness causes Frederick as the life-writer "to falter." And yet, while the novel calls into question the soundness of ableist indulgence in sight, by combining the structure and conventions of life writing with Adam Smith's "fellow-feeling," Browne explores the dilemma, the ironies, and the complexities of even a sighted person's sympathizing with others. Drawing on her own experience of the sighted world's mistakes about her, Browne herself does not falter. She exposes the sighted characters' limited in/sight.

Autofiction and the Concept of "World"

Though blind, Browne is clearly fascinated with the importance of faces. She knows that they seem to confirm the expectations set up by sight, and therefore, faces seem to tell a story about the world. For Frederick, the past and the present are linked by his visual impressions of the faces of others. For instance, his first sight of Lucy impresses him so profoundly that later in life, when he imagines that moment, "the years flow backward to that summer morning, and my

world is new once again" (I: 104). Faces also stimulate thought; Lavance's "dark face woke up a world of wonder and surmise" (I: 160).

In this section I will draw on Levinas' idea of one's share of the world to explore how Browne links notions of identity and otherness through the face, specifically in relation to her own blindness. According to Levinas, the face of the other introduces us to the world, and we are not "free to ignore" it (*TI* 219). Both the face and the larger world are ultimately incomprehensible, but necessary, and certainly fascinating—to Browne, and by extension, to her created character Frederick. His series of blunders in the novel, most related to misinterpretations of the face, all offer access to how the sympathetic imagination plays a key role in closing the distance between known and unknown, between the subjectivities of self and others, and between the writing self and written self. Because for various reasons, this imagination sometimes fails to carry out this task, ethics are an important part of this process. But in this novel, there is also the impact of the author's own blindness, for while the world holds a place for such subjects, as has been already discussed, the primacy of the face for someone who cannot see the faces of others, or know when her own is being seen, becomes itself a challenge for the sympathetic imagination of both self and others. I argue that Browne's novel uses Frederick's story to explore the implications of what Levinas describes as otherness, and further, that the specific concerns Browne raises are so tied to issues of sight that the novel is best understood as a precursor of "autofiction" in a modified sense.

If this argument is correct, the immediate questions are why Browne chose to share parts of her life story in a novel narrated by a male, sighted character, and what implications reading her novel as an autofiction might have for our understanding of writing about a disabled life through a fictional form. I would suggest that within a partially fictional setting and set of

circumstances, Browne inserts important aspects of her life history, her thoughts, and her understanding of her place in the world, and that this allows her to explore her experiences with the forces of understanding, compromise, and compassion in ways that more traditional forms of autobiography, and especially those of the blind, would not allow her to do.

I will begin with a brief overview of the history of the concept of autofiction, followed by a discussion of why there seem to have been very little critical work that explores potential links between this genre and disability narratives. I will conclude by arguing that by presenting aspects of her life through an especially unconventional narrative voice for a blind writer, Browne sets an interesting precedent for thinking about innovative approaches to the writing and studying of life narratives in relation to Disability Studies.

Definitions of Autofiction

Although critics generally agree that the French writer Serge Doubrovsky[127] first used the term "autofiction" in 1977 (Boyle 18; Jones 99),[128] its meaning and value for the field of life writing have been expanded, narrowed, combined, and contested. At a conference specifically on autofiction in 2009, Catherine Cusset expressed her surprise at how freely critics and creative writers have defined, interpreted, and applied the term, depending on their methods of textual analysis, narrative theories, or value bases.[129] Complicating the matter further has been the family of related terms that get used, often used interchangeably in the same text, such as faction, biofiction, biografiction, autobiographical novel, surfiction, creative nonfiction, new journalism,

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[127] In his novel *Fils*, Doubrovsky defines autofiction as fiction "of strictly real events and facts" that gives the "language of an adventure to the adventure of language in freedom, without wisdom and outside the syntax of the novel syntax, traditional or new" (qtd. in and trans. Hansen, 48).

[128] Some critics disagree. Stéphanie Panichelli-Batalla, for instance, argues that the first definition of autofiction as "fictionalization of the self" was offered by French theorist Gérard Genette, in *Palimpsestes: Literature in the Second Degree,* originally published in 1982 (29).

[129] For a summary of the argument, see Ferreira-Meyers' "Autofiction" 103–16, and "Autobiography and Autofiction" 203–18.

and factual fiction (Schmitt 123).

Behind this tangle of terminology and definitions lies the old question that outlines the essential concern: what are the similarities and differences between fiction and fact? For now, suffice it to say that in what gets called autofiction, these two elements have been conflated, both producing and reproducing fictional and auto/biographical narratives, and further, that such texts do not necessarily represent a new or original approach for creating narrative identities other than one's own. The value of the term, therefore, is not its novelty, but its usefulness for focusing attention on aspects of fictional life narratives that stand in counterpoint to traditional literary history.

Originating in, but now extending well beyond French literature,[130] what is referred to as autofiction has undeniably found an audience, especially among contemporary readers familiar with postmodernism and poststructuralism, and much of the scholarly discussion focuses on to what degree autofiction moves beyond traditional auto/biography and its practices to offer a new model of life writing. Over the last twenty-five years in particular, critics have increasingly discussed the murky terrain between auto/biography and its various subsets, how we perceive and interact with narratives of our own and others' lives, and how we read and create narratives that draw on memory and recollection—in short, how and why we draw distinctions between factual and non-factual elements in auto/biography (Damlé and Rye 14). Of special interest is the relationship between the author and the narrator, implied or otherwise. What do authors of autofiction achieve, self-consciously or not, that cannot be attained through a more traditional auto/biography?

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[130] For a summary of autofiction's literary development in France, see *The Cambridge Companion to French Literature* 237.

Literature Review: Autofiction and Otherness

Some scholars have discussed the possibilities of the genre of autofiction as a means of disrupting the regulating ideologies underlying the normative identity politics that marginalize female, non-white, and different bodies. Some commentators themselves speak from the margins, and see autofiction as a medium for expressing their own ethical convictions and experiences. For example, Karen Ferreira-Meyers argues that certain Anglophone and Francophone African texts grant their women authors their "autofictional visibility" ("In Between" 134). And the noted writer Edmund White locates his work within the genre of "gay autofiction," arguing this form grants the author "both the prestige of confession . . . and the total freedom of imaginative invention" (8).

As a form for communicating marginal experience, autofiction can be thought of as one of the many potential filters for the ever-increasing volume of writing about disability, illness, injury, suffering, and healing, both of body and mind. Leigh Gilmore has famously interrogated the widespread notion that the primary function of trauma narratives is to free people, the authors and the readers, from traumatic experiences (3), and as a writer committed to recovery through writing, Belinda Hilton incorporates her struggles into a story as a quest for self-knowledge, "a process of reading my self-worth" (58). Medical professionals provide support for the therapeutic benefits of writing about one's suffering and pain for the entire human community. Arthur W. Frank writes that as the person who tells the tale of "a fragile human body and a witness to what endures" (*Wounded Storyteller* xi–ii), "the wounded storyteller" shares "the common bond of suffering" that "joins bodies in their shared vulnerability" (xix). These writers all agree that narratives of pain or disability, whether somatic or psychic, are highly significant to an increasingly prominent literary model of cure. Authors of such narratives frequently insist on

the importance of expressing one's experience as an invalid, and therefore someone considered "invalid," through writing, not only as means of gaining distance from the experienced pain or suffering, but also of identifying and countering the by-products of such suffering, such as discrimination, stigma, and self-denial.

Critical writing regarding autofiction as a possible choice for placing disability in a wider context, however, is relatively rare. Part of the difficulty here is the degree to which illness and disability narratives are conflated or distinguished. Unlike illnesses, which presumably have their own life course, and can be imagined as ending, as Catherine Ruth McGowan points out, disability is generally considered to be a "self-evident condition of bodily inadequacy" and "private misfortune" (44). Despite common features in the experience of writers living with illness and with disabilities,[131] there seems to be greater hesitation in discussing the lives and narratives of the latter. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder point out that "critical parallels" between the social discourse of disability and that of other minority group rights "have been slow in coming" (2); more bluntly and vividly, Michael Bérubé declares that Disability Studies all together is "rendered the sideshow of a sideshow" (viii).[132] Those critics who have delved into the disparities in discussions of the social dynamics of other marginal identities and disability agree that in both cases, the root of the problem lies in the tenacity of preconceived notions about disabilities (Garland-Thomson, "Re-Shaping" 6; Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 29). Addressing the continuous normalization process[133] implicit within American myths of the relationship between the "normative" body and independence, Lennard J. Davis criticizes "the race-class-gender triad"

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[131] The division recognized between mental illness and intellectual or developmental disabilities has been a subject of interest in interdisciplinary fields. See, for example, Scheyett et al. 13–23.

[132] In addition to those cited, see also Mollow 269 and Couser "Disability, Life Narrative" 602.

[133] On the relationship between normalization and disability, Henri-Jacques Stiker notes that the process has been the subject of critique for more than past four decades (8–11).

as often internally divisive, and exclusive in relation to how disability fits into it. Davis argues that supposed alliances within the realm of identity politics function only nominally, as "the different identity groups clash on tactics and agendas," offering "a fantasy of cohesion without actually creating one." But even though the "one thing these groups have in common is the wish to have the full rights of any citizen" (Davis, "Identity Politics" 535), those who endorse more democratic form of politics for the underrepresented, such as feminist scholars, have nevertheless only slowly and unevenly moved towards including disabled people, and particularly women with disabilities, in progressing towards better understanding and, possibly, constructive change (Jung 265).[134]

As I have briefly mentioned in the introduction, in her candid first-hand account, Martha Stoddard Holmes discusses the undeniable differences between common public perceptions of underrepresented groups, including the disabled. In a class on the social construction of disability, what struck Holmes especially was the low degree of confidence her students showed in expressing their opinions, which contrasted sharply with their willingness to discuss other possibly controversial subjects such as ethnicity and gender. According to Holmes, her students "expressed discomfort: a mix of detachment, guilt, irritation, and anxiety" (vii–viii). Christopher J. Johnstone aptly points out the root of the problem. Because of what we could call ableist nepotism, "Disabled people" are "often viewed as the disability itself" (Johnstone). If therefore the very idea of disability diminishes the value of people with disabilities or, reduces them to objects of pity, how can writers and critics break through the strong chains of assumptions binding the normative audience? Just as Holmes in her class confronts the students with uncomfortable truths, writers and readers need to identify, interrogate, and reveal the cultural

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[134] The same concerns are the subject of other scholars including Garland-Thomson, "Feminist Theory" 279–94; Wendell 17–9, 31–44, 91, to cite a few.

environment that necessitates the field of critical disability studies. And autofiction, I would

argue, is and has been a potential tool.

How I Use the Term Autofiction

Of course, the cultural and critical difficulties involved with engaging with disability have

not prevented disabled and abled people from writing about disability, and as Chapter One noted,

well before the twentieth century, and despite considerable obstacles, disabled individuals were

recording and publishing accounts of their lives in their own voices.[135] It is however often the

case that such writers, professional or otherwise, find they must foreground their physical or

mental impairment, which powerfully determines how they are perceived as authors, and how

their narratives are understood. Adapting their voices and narratives to meet the existing

assumptions of readers, and therefore to the commercial priorities of publishers, often can mean

conforming to widespread stereotypes about the disabled. In "Conflicting Paradigms," G.

Thomas Couser discusses what he calls "hegemonic scripts" (79) and culturally "preferred

rhetorics" that have often been imposed on disability life writers as the unfortunate consequence

of the prevailing normative system. For this reason, as Couser and other critics point out,

disability narratives are often forced into such modes as the "pity-me narrative," the "I-had-it-

better-before-I-became-disabled narrative" (Yergeau), or more crudely, narratives that could be

called "inspiration porn."[136]

I will argue that an expanded notion of autofiction, developed partly in response to how

Browne writes *My Share of the World*, offers some promising pathways for representing

disability. I say expanded, because earlier formulations of the genre in some cases pose as many

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[135] Newman, "Disability and Life Writing" 261–75.

[136] According to Eleana Vaja, the term was first used by Stella Young in her TED talk, "I Am Not Your Inspiration, Thank You," in 2014 (Vaja 187).

obstacles as existing cultural assumptions. For example, although Doubrovsky declares that autobiographical writing is "a privilege reserved for the important people of this world," supposedly done "in a refined style," and that autofiction is therefore something different, his autofiction retains those formal qualities of presenting the supposed author, narrator, and protagonist as a single person that Philippe Lejeune famously called the "autobiographical pact."[137] Or if we think of autofiction as a fictional narrative composed "of strictly real events and facts" (Doubrovsky; qtd. in Blejmar 27), the implied binary suggests that the reading experience will primarily be a matter of keeping track of what is real and what is not.

For my reading of Browne's novel as autofiction, I begin with John Eakin's observation that the supposed core of the autobiographical narrative, the self, is "necessarily a fictive structure" (*Fictions of Autobiography* 3). As a result, the factual and the fictional do not alternate, nor are they discrete pieces of information that through critical reading can be separated into two piles. Given this understanding, I find the French critic Philippe Gasparini's definition more useful:

> Autobiographical and literary text that features numerous oral qualities, formal innovation, narrative complexity, fragmentation, separation from the self, disparateness and auto-commentary, which tends to problematize the relationship between writing and experience. (qtd. and trans, in McDonough 14)

Such a definition resonates usefully with Eakin's understanding of autobiography as "an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation," which mediates and complicates the "relationship between writing and experience" that Gasparini's definition places at the heart of autofiction.

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[137] See Lejeune 3–30.

And if read as an autofiction of disability, Browne's "novel" is certainly complicated in what I believe are interesting and productive ways.

Browne's Share of the World

My Share of the World deviates radically from the original definition of autofiction. Far more than the author's and the narrator's names differ—Browne is a blind woman writer, while Frederick is a young, able-bodied man who has followed a number of occupations. And yet, when it comes to their ways of living in the world, there are many coincidences that blend together in the creation of the bildungsroman narrative. To begin with, both the I-narrator and his creator are of Irish heritage and background. Both are of rather humble birth, but in time achieve a somewhat more successful social life in England. Despite a lack of formal schooling (I: 11; *SA* xvi–vi), both come to nurture love and develop an appreciation of literature*,* as they were raised listening to fairy tales and other imaginative stories, including adventure and travel tales such as *Robinson Crusoe* (I: 11; *SA* xi). And as *My Share of the World* embodies, both eventually became writers.

As a narrative by and about blind persons, however, the far more important parallels are those between their understandings of the world, the self, and relations with others, and how they express them. As I have already suggested, my intention in outlining them here is not to connect the factual dots between Browne's life and the fictional narrative she created, or vice versa; nor am I trying to draw conclusions about the nature of writing one's life from what they hold in common. Rather, I am interested in how Browne draws writing and living together in her novel in ways that exceed the commonly-recognized limits of auto/biographical expression, and by exceeding them, creates a space for representing in a complicated and nuanced way her lived experience as a blind person in the contemporary world.

Lucy and Other Female Characters' World

To take only one of the most obvious themes inextricably related to the status of blindness, the issue of entitlement or exclusion permeates the novel. The male protagonist Frederick is searching for his "place," in both a materialistic and a philosophical sense—his fair share of social interaction, of tangible wealth, of reputation, but also his more fundamental sense of self and personal meaning, which in Levinasian terms he seeks through an appeal to the faces of others. Yet a question remains unposed. Frederick clearly assumes he is entitled to his share, however insignificant it might be, and sets out to claim it. Why does he believe this? Why does he unreflectively assume his right to his slice of pie, and at whose cost will it be? At any period or time, even when a social pyramid or hierarchy is subject to assessment and critique, an underlying premise is that there is an already existing social structure *within* which individuals or groups are divided, most commonly into hierarchical layers stretching from the bottom to the top. What is less commonly acknowledged, however, is that there are always people who in some sense are positioned permanently *outside* of the frame. They are not acknowledged as really having a place.

Though writing almost a century before Levinas, and two years after Herbert Spencer began writing on what became known as Social Darwinism after reading *On the Origin of the Species*, Browne presents a vivid account of this inconvenient, easily forgotten mode of systemic oppression through total exclusion. Echoing Levinas' profound concerns about being made to submit one's position to others, who do not take on responsibility for fairness, Browne explores this exclusion from identity through social position by means of her portraits of female characters. Pushed to the margins of society by circumstance, many of the women in the novel are ultimately denied a place within the decent community. Female characters in the novel are

pushed to the edge of society and refused a place within it. More often than not, exclusion due to gender is linked for these characters to other factors, such as class, nationality, age, and dis/ability, but the exclusion that doubles the burden on these characters is their exclusion from even seeking their own position in relation to the world. Neither literally nor figuratively can they secure a place.

Frederick's story therefore also tells Browne's, but through contrast, from his interactions with the female characters associated with his hopes, struggles, and aspirations. Abandoned by her husband for a more comfortable life in America, Frederick's mother for instance is relegated to the role of a non-paying lodger of her husband's family. Her advice to Frederick confirms her sense of exclusion and dependence: "If you marry, be a good man to your wife, for women have a poor turn in this world" (I: 131). Lucy is for Frederick the most significant character who through convention, then disability, is denied a place in the world. The deterioration of her sight leads not only to a decline in her physical abilities, and a steady decrease in what she is permitted to do—most notably, a prohibition against reading and writing imposed on her by her husband George and her doctor. Her detachment from even an assigned role is followed by a lapse into "temporary insanity" (III: 268), which then becomes the official explanation for her suicide. I hardly need to mention that the doctor is male. Browne's interest in how signs of a women attempting to claim intellectual freedom and independence are pre-empted on medical grounds anticipates the work of such renowned later feminist writers as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath.

Well before this final tragedy, however, Lucy had been not only been deliberately displaced, but replaced. As her sight weakens, George's mother and two unmarried sisters devoted "their entire energies to the surveillance of Lucy's ménage" (III: 182). With everyone in

the household focused on Lucy's inability to fulfill her assigned role, when she accidentally knocks the tea set onto the floor while serving her party guests, George predictably loses his temper and asks the maid to "put things to rights and make the tea" (III: 210) in place of his incapable wife. Miss Gathers, a "plain, coarse, uneducated" (III: 186) "hard-faced little woman" (III: 169) assumes the "office at once by transferring herself to Lucy's seat" (III: 211). What is especially striking in this scene is the emphasis Frederick, and therefore Browne, places on the powers of sight and hearing of the ambitious and therefore aptly named Miss Gathers. With a "pair of eyes as sharp as needles, with no expression in them but that of keen sight" and "ears acute enough to hear the grass growing," fortified by a nature that is "devoid of feeling, scruple, or attachment" (III: 184) she is in Frederick's mind the exact opposite of his beloved Lucy, and she steadily expands her place in the Fenton household as Lucy loses hers. As for the name "Lucy," which comes from the Latin word "lux," meaning "light," some might say that it is ironic because she is the one who eventually loses her sight. From a young age, she was a bright woman who had a lot of "light" to offer. Even after her cold-hearted family dims her, she remains the light of Frederick's life. As a blind and, in the Fenton's eyes, incapable person, Lucy becomes increasingly objectified; ultimately, the only action she can take is to stop being a person at all. To underscore this point, Browne has the conventionally capable Miss Gathers literally assume Lucy's place. "In the second year of his widowed state" George takes Miss Gathers as his wife (III: 284).

Milly Wilton, a sister of Frederick's former colleague, provides another example. She and her brother are orphans and raised by their aunt. Although they have an identical childhood, and although she is three years older and her brother readily acknowledges her superiority to him with admiration (I: 287), their respective genders make their journeys through life very

different—or more accurately, he has one, while she does not. While a relative offers the brother a place as "a teaching pupil," Milly has no other option than to stay "at home to be useful" (I: 284). Though they do nothing to change her circumstances, her relatives and acquaintances ceaselessly pity her "for her having to work and for not being married." This continual reminder of her total lack of position ultimately succeeds "in waking up the girl to a sense of those great misfortunes, and thus did her full share of the mischief" (III: 49). Driven to desperation, Milly ends up the mistress of an affluent gentleman, and Frederick astutely observes that "It was the rag of rank which fluttered in the poor girl's eyes, and dazzled those of her family, till they lent themselves to her downfall, and their own" (III: 160). Nor does this end represent a rise or fall in status, but rather one of a series of transfers to other dislocated realms of life. The stereotypic fate of the "fallen woman" awaits Milly. A kept object living in clandestine obscurity until her lover/benefactor/jailor abandons her for a more suitable spouse, she lives somewhere under an assumed name. When Frederick sees her one day by chance, she, grabbed by a sense of shame, "hides her face at the sight" of him, so he catches only a glimpse of "the frightened look" (III 159). When Frederick volunteers to help to her, Milly predictably wishes "to go to Australia, or anywhere out of the world" (III: 277), since that would correspond with her state as someone with no place to occupy in society. Although by pure luck Milly does not die, like Frederick's mother or Lucy, but lives a frugal but decent life with a poor yet honest man, the fact that to sustain itself, the patriarchal and hierarchical structure of the social world must deprive some people of any place or role is yet again presented before Frederick as he seeks to find his own.

Frederick's World, Browne's World

Browne therefore leads Frederick through a series of encounters with women deprived of status within the social world—a forsaken mother, a seduced and abandoned mistress, and blind

wife eventually replaced by a physically more robust woman, and even Miss Lamont's barely mentioned, almost nonsensical exit from life. But portraying a blind heroine, or for that matter, a succession of rejected or ignored women, is only one possible conduit that Browne employs for introducing autobiographical content into her novel, and despite some of the obvious similarities in their lives, it is not the most significant one. In fact, her decision not to use one of these women as the first person narrator is an implicit refusal to assume the role of a victim, or an object of pity, or an outcast or social exile. By using Frederick instead, Browne situates the "I" in someone with some freedom of action in the world, and therefore unites reader, character, and creator in a community of fellow-feeling, and therefore responsibility, that arises from the ability to acknowledge others. Even more importantly, however, by presenting what options Frederick can explore, and how he succeeds and fails in navigating the social world that has a place for him, Browne suggests that a shadowy yet highly perceptive figure, one who does not have such options, can therefore perceive Frederick's own "blindness" as a sighted, situated person in the world, and convey that to equally unconsciously blind readers.

The key literary concept here is narrative distance. By adopting Frederick's point of view, Browne distances herself from the fates of the unfortunate female characters, but because she is not herself a sighted man with social prospects, there is also an implied distance between Frederick's representation of the world, and her own experience as a blind female author. Or put another way, by avoiding being identified with the female victims or the speaking I voice, Browne can write autobiographically without producing a pity-me narrative—producing instead a pity-them, or even a pity-him narrative that creates a position from which she can extend sympathy and pity not only to those granted no place in the world, but also to the sighted males with social roles for their "blind" and unthinking status.

Establishing such a position through narrative distance has been noticed and discussed critically, most notably in relation to reader response theory. Generally conceived of as "the degree of separation" between narrator and story, and between the narrative and the readers, as commonly understood, the main purpose for increasing or diminishing such distance is "to win their audience's sympathy" (Ruppersburg 17).[138] Regarded as the champion of the social novel (James 548),[139] Dickens is frequently pointed to as especially adroit at manipulating narrative distance to invoke sympathetic responses. So for example, while his caricatured figures grant readers a distance from which to pass judgment on social injustices, his melodramatic plots often powerfully produce reader interest and sympathy that allow his social commentary to reach an audience not necessarily concerned about such suffering.

Browne also uses direct address to create sympathy and allow for judgment at the same time. Commonly associated with Charlotte Bronte's practice in *Jane Eyre*, the "Dear Reader" conceit appears frequently in *My Share of the World*. "Reader, perhaps you are not . . . " (I: 103), says Frederick to us, or "Reader, you are aware that when . . . (III: 276), or ultimately, "should any accident prevent our meeting again, accept, good reader, who hast accompanied me thus far, my thanks for the patience with which you have perused this record" of his life (III: 288). In addressing the readers through Frederick, however, Browne can both create the feeling of intimacy associated with direct address while at the same time present a created character very different from herself—sighted, male, oblivious, and therefore socially but not physiologically blind—to her readers for evaluation.

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[138] Even extreme distancing can paradoxically cause readers to become more engaged. In the case of such realist novelists as George Eliot and Thackeray, even omniscient narration can be the means, for as Rae Greiner explains, furnishing readers with "privileged knowledge" from on high can "encourag[e] sympathy by minimizing" the felt distance between readers and the characters (Greiner "Sympathy Time" 291).

[139] Also, see Diniejko "Charles Dickens as Social Commentator and Critic"; and John Kucich "Dickens" 383–4.

A blind female writer therefore uses the autobiographical narrative of a male sighted protagonist to grant readers access not only to her experience as other, but to their own experience as those who other, and even to the experience of being the objects of pity or sympathy as a result of their status as "blind" individuals. For Browne here, the act of writing becomes a fundamental and expansive human act. Through Frederick, she undeniably invokes sympathy for her fellow sufferers, whether due to gender, disability, or a lack of economic status, but also extends sympathy to those who would consider themselves geographically, temporally, politically, ideologically, socially, and even physically different from her.[140] By having Frederick describe the consequences of his "failures" to see the actual nature of things, Browne raises the question of why sighted people presume they are more perceptive than blind people. Sighted Frederick does not see that his beloved is headed towards suicide, nor does he see that the man he kills in a scuffle in the dark is his beloved friend. In this way, an author who does not have visual access to the world acquaints her readers with the over-credulous trust we place in vision, which registers among the blind as arrogance and ignorance about our actual limitations.

But Browne does not condemn Frederick, or create him only to punish and humiliate him for his sighted failings. Instead, by displaying his obliviousness, Browne demonstrates that everyone is limited by selfhood, and their own conditions of being, and that therefore everyone is worthy of being an object of sympathy. As the novel tracks Frederick's struggles, it also records his development as a sympathetic human being. Further, Browne does not just depict Frederick's

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140 Quite a few of Browne's poems, such as "The Emigrant's Request," "The Parting Gifts," and "Songs of Our Land," express her sympathy towards other marginal groups of people she learned about through reading. As an unsigned article in *The Dublin Review* points out, Browne particularly sympathizes with exiles, who had to "abandon the home of their fathers, and seek a foreign clime, where they may earn the daily bread which is refused them at home" (*The Dublin Review* 553). More recently, critic Thomas McLean notes that Browne's "The Star of Attéghéi" relates the tragedy of "an oppressed nation and culture with affinities to Ireland itself," concluding that her work "deserves to be read" along with her contemporary Irish and European poets' advocacy ("Arms and the Circassian" 314).

clouded moral vision, but by extending her sympathy to her creation, she comes to identify with him as a figure whose experience exceeds her own. Unlike Thomas Blacklock, whose exasperation and frustration with his treatment as a blind person eventually erupts into scathing words of denunciation, Browne suggests that limited as we all demonstrably are, we must employ the sympathetic imagination to draw upon multiple senses, diverse experiences, and benevolent influences, some of which may be fictional. Sight in itself does not grant superior understanding, and her novel demonstrates this truth, while at the same time compassionately understanding why this assumption is so common, and self-damaging.

Browne can almost surreptitiously inject this revelation into her narrative because on another plane, she adheres so closely to the conventions of the male protagonist autobiographical fiction. Overcrowded with characters and caricatures, and expansive in its engagement with social concerns, the novel is markedly Dickensian in nature, as critics have noted.[141] The narrating protagonist's unprivileged upbringing also leads readers to anticipate the success story of a self-made man who ultimately claims his share of the world. Browne certainly provides such a narrative, following Frederick's material and social advancement, his successes and failures, and most importantly, his development as a person through this process. Often these components are at odds with each other. Living under the roof of his extended family, whose hard luck had made its members resemble "the true mammon-worshipper" (I: 7), Frederick in later years still remembers "a light" in his childhood "which after fortunes could not bring": "I loved my mother, and my mother loved me, as if there were none but ourselves in the wide world" (I: 10). On losing his mother, he not surprisingly considers himself "alone in the world" (I: 167).

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[141] See, for instance, Murphy 103, DeVoto 198–9, and Tilley, "Frances Browne" 153.

And yet, although deprived of his mother, and starting on the bottom rung of the ladder in society, like David Copperfield, he is male, heterosexual, white, and able-bodied, and therefore possesses the potential to climb upward simply because of what he is. Leaving his relatives' place to take an apprenticeship at the age of fifteen was how he made his "entrance to the world" (I: 34), and like male narrators, he credits his ability "get up in the world" almost entirely to his own efforts (I: 58). "I would not go to be a poor dependent on the family," he recalls, as "Even the Roses should see that I was able to make my own way into the world" (I: 187). This determination arises from that valuing of self-reliance that Marx identified as the social imperative of the independent being. Only someone who stands alone, on his own two feet, can claim independence. One is dependent if others provide the "maintenance of life," of if others are acknowledged as the "*source* of life" (Marx 144).

The disparity between what Frederick hopes and thinks himself to be, and what he is, parallels the general experience of people as a self among other selves. Though his narrative suggests that he does not always see it, readers recognize how dependent—if not financially, then certainly emotionally and ethically—Frederick actually is. His relations with others condition and define what it means to stand on his own feet. Most notably, when he meets Lucy for the first time, he recognizes her as his source of life, meaning, and happiness.[142] But Frederick's memories at the time of writing more commonly arouse feelings of self-mockery, pathos, sorrow, and nihilism, in part because he has come to realize that the events that granted him his independence were often the ones that depended most on the actions of outside forces and others.

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[142] One may associate the analogy with the biblical accounts of water; see Jn 7.2, 14, 37–9; Zec 14.8; and Am 8.11–13 (*New International Version)*.

We can recall that what Frederick calls the "true beginning of life" (I: 1) was his memory of a room full of human faces ignoring him, absorbed in themselves and their business; the settlement of property following someone's death. This sense of being ignored or irrelevant proves to be grimly false, since what was occurring in the room would come to affect his entire life—materially and emotionally. The fortune under scrutiny, which Frederick will ultimately inherit after the deaths of Lucy and the appropriately named Lavance, was built upon the slave trade, accounting for Frederick's references to his benefactor, his great uncle, as "the old sinner" (III: 254). Although Frederick fully enjoys its benefits, he cannot ever shake off the idea of where it came from, and the guilt and anguish hangs like a millstone around his neck. Even heavier, however, is the guilt he feels at how he became the one to inherit it. Though without conscious or malicious intent, the lawyer who administers the will reduces Frederick's greatest love and greatest friend to the status of obstacles. After the first death, because "the first-named heir has been removed by the lamentable occurrence," the lawyer observes that "there is one less between yourself and the property" (255). The mature Frederick is haunted by the fact that whatever success or affluence he enjoys at the time of writing was not the result of his own efforts, but of the sacrifice and suffering of others: "I have cursed that money through my helpless nights for the way by which it came to me, and risen and paid my taxes with it" (III: 275). Twenty-five years afterwards, Frederick still falls prey to his past. Although he cannot detect any reason or justification for the course of events, behavior, and coincidences that ultimately granted him his financial and social status, he still feels victimized by who he is in the eyes of world—someone who prospered by taking another's place. For this reason, he detaches himself from all connection with the outer world and other people, but he cannot free himself from the fetters of the past: two deaths and their consequences.

This overwhelming sense of guilt situates Frederick within the realm of Levinas' claim about the priority of one's responsibility to oneself and others. For Levinas, to live is to kill—or, if not necessarily committing the act, to connive or benefit from the deaths of others. One cannot have life without the taking of others, either in a primitive sense or in a more modern systemic sense. "My being-in-the-world or my 'place in the sun,' my home," Levinas writes, "have they not been the usurpation of places belonging to others already oppressed by me or starved, expelled, to a Third World: rejecting, excluding, exiling, despoiling, killing?" (*AT* 23**).**

As a result of two unrelated but concurrent deaths, Frederick becomes sole heir to a fortune, and at the novel's end he grimly presents himself as an affluent, yet solitary old man who concludes he has "done nothing, except write this story" (III: 288): "It is five-and-twenty-years since the death of my best friend, my first love, made me a man of wealth and importance. Of these years, I have no story to tell . . . " (III: 287). During these years, people have gathered around him, hoping to make his acquaintance. The belles, socialites, literati, and diplomats have flattered him, often hoping to exploit him. But he has always been alone, and is ultimately left to himself, and his memoir.

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live" (185), Joan Didion writes. A life without anything to recall is not a life. Both Frederick and Browne write about their lives in relation to others. In one case, a fictional character through writing meditates on the lives of others, looking for something to justify his own. In the other, more interesting case, an author denied an "ordinary" place in the world projects the dynamics of such personal exclusion into a narrative that allows for a detailed evaluation of the consequences for those supposedly enjoying a fully engaged and acknowledged life of such often unconscious ignoring of others.

When at the end of the story Frederick begins to carry out his decision to write his auto/biography, both he and the reader agree that the action is a weary, last-ditch attempt to fill the void he feels in his well-positioned life. At this point, Frederick anticipates Levinas, admitting that there is nothing in particular about his life worth recording, "other than relating it to other individuals' life" (III: 288), because he realizes in retrospect that his interaction with those others was responsible for "the more important and interesting events of my life" (ibid.). The Levinasian guilt in the face of the other makes an appearance here as well. Although committed to telling about his experience with those "other individuals" whom he cared for, Frederick realizes that he does not know the "whole story" and "what I know I cannot justify" (III: 247). Finally, Frederick announces that his ultimate goal through writing is greater understanding, and perhaps redemption. His attempt at writing his autobiography, primarily through telling the stories of others, will force him to "collect materials for better ones" (III: 288), in hopes that he will take up a pen again at an uncertain time in the future.

His self-assessment at the time of writing therefore paradoxically foregrounds his personal incompetence as a story teller. He has finally come to understand that knowing and representing others' lives should be his priority, but at the cost of also realizing that because of his lack of awareness at the time, he does not have the knowledge or resources to do so. Frederick's narrative therefore is necessarily the product of an individual whose conventional success and embeddedness in the social world has left him unable to understand the lives of others, or for that matter, anything. This awareness extends to his choice of genre. Despite his performance of the role of the protagonist and the narrator of the text—the conventional definition of autobiography—he knows, and makes sure to let the reader know, that he has come to the conclusion that he has actually been a witness or onlooker, registering, often mistakenly, the

transitory appearance of the world, while playing a minor or supporting role even within his own life. His deeply felt personal failure in life therefore mirrors a failure inherent to the genre of autobiography itself, because it forces people to evaluate their lives in terms of how big a share they can claim of their lives, and the world.

If we now consider this text as an autofiction, we can see how such a reading further foregrounds the critique of autobiography from the claimed position of the blind woman author. If by writing his story Frederick attempts and fails to use autobiography as a tool for exploring, understanding, and expressing himself, partly because of his life, and partly because of his chosen genre, the narrative that Browne produces successfully conveys a sense of her positionality and understanding of the limits of abled self-knowledge, gained precisely because of who she is, as someone set outside these social and literary conventions by her gender, but above all by her specific disability. Despite large differences between her own experience and that of her fictional spokesperson, as Browne writes through a fictional platform about someone who writes about himself through a supposedly factual one, a metanarrative takes shape out of the resonances between Frederick's self-representation and Browne's other poems and personal writing.

Prolific a writer as she was, Browne significantly never wrote an autobiography, but in various places, and above all in a substantial letter to the editor of a journal to which she regularly contributed, she did compose autobiographical accounts of her life. One striking parallel to her fictional creation is her sense of the relationship between the past and the moment of writing. After recalling her earlier period of life—up to the point when she is a grown woman and professional writer living in a city far from her Irish home—Browne then remarks "I have little more to tell," because "the story of my life" means nothing but the "story of my mind's

progress." All the threads of her personal life—the ups and downs, the joys and sorrows, the profound or trite moments—have been compressed, flattened, and woven into a series of vignettes representing fond memories of her childhood, long ago in a place far away. Unlike her creation Frederick, however, who realizes only later that others were and should have been his primary concern, as a blind writer, Browne was acutely aware of her enforced distance from society and her interactions with a very few others as both her sad fate and her great blessing. As a result, she recognizes her later life in the social world as still one of "solitude," but happily writes that "I have few memories, to disturb my grateful recollection of those who have cheered me onward in my chosen but solitary path" ("Preface" to *AI* xx).

Her poems often display this mixture of memory, loneliness, mobility, and loss. Take for example this poem of departure, which emphasizes her ties to the past and to place while simultaneously announcing their disappearance:

I go as one that comes no more, yet go without regret;

The summers other memories store 'twere summer to forget;

I go without one parting word, one grasp of parting hand,

As to the wide air goes the bird—yet fare thee well, my land!" (21–7)

The sense of remoteness from home, and even a sense of exile, is of course famously shared by many Irish people then and now.[143] But here there is also the sense of separateness while in Ireland—no one mourns her departure or wishes her well, although she bids farewell to the land. Presumably as a blind person, she therefore recognizes her lack of acknowledged connection to others in her home, and embraces the freedom she likens to flight at least partly because her lack of connection leaves her no other option. The poem therefore provides support for reading her

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[143] See, for example, Joy150, Lilly 803, and Schmuhl 13.

novel as a containing a double framework for discussing the same experience. While Frederick only later recognizes fully his actual detachment, due to his illusion of having a place in the world, the blind author knows from her earliest days that she is in exile from others, and shapes her life accordingly. It is in this sense that the novel is not autobiographical in terms of its author, but autofictional in terms of the ways that it raises through character the concerns of its creator.

Levinas, Ethics, Place, and Dickens

In "Reality and Its Shadow," Levinas discusses a fiction writer's ethical potential of seeing through an other's point of view, taking up Dickens. Starting from the premise that "an exterior vision" is "the true vision of the novelist," Levinas asserts that the "poetry of Dickens," his skill as a writer, "only appeared in an exterior vision set up as a method," and furthermore, that this is the virtue of art, because it recognizes and celebrates that the life of the other can only be known from without:

> Even the psychologist sees his inner life on the outside, not necessarily through the eyes of another, but as one participates in a rhythm or a dream, all the power of the contemporary novel, its art-music, is perhaps due to this way of seeing inwardness from the outside. (10–1)

Though certainly an artist, the circumstances through which Browne as a blind writer "sees" and writes are not of the ordinary sort, and knowing that she cannot see could for some readers add a melodramatic interest to her work, I would argue, however, that while Browne through Frederick produces a narrative with an exterior vision corresponding to Victorian preoccupations with otherness, her own particular experience of the tensions between blindness, sight, and insight grants her the capacity to recognize often unacknowledged shared limitations of individuals in

any social situation, whether affluent or impoverished, foreign or domestic, male or female, and blind and sighted.

Because Browne's works always appeared with an attached note informing readers of her blindness, contemporary discussions always began and ended by situating her as "vision's other." When she decided to write a book with a blind heroine, she was therefore fully aware of the reaction it would provoke—sympathy, curiosity, or both. As we have seen, anticipating such reactions, Browne decided to explore the complex connections between self and other—self in opposition to other, and self as other—by adopting the familiar conventions of fictional autobiographies, complete with the abled but ambitious male protagonist, most familiar from Charles Dickens, but also by forcing the reader to recognize the disparities between herself and her creation, and between her creation's lived experience and his later recollection.

Though the plot, the setting, and the point of view are all ones that Browne herself could never assume or experience in the Victorian social world, she nevertheless represents her own subjectivity within the story by having her sighted protagonist slowly come to recognize the structural prejudice, exclusion, and privilege that she has always known. Furthermore, by assuming this "other" identity while always necessarily retaining her own position, she confirms, *without writing an account of her own life*, Ellen S. Burt's remark I cited above, that autobiography is a "medium" that can surpass the representation of particular person's self, and record encounters with the "absolutely other" (89). Self-telling through the creation of the first-person life of another, Browne affirms her individuality, shares her experience, reconstructs her life among others, and not despite, but because of her blindness. Browne's novel is therefore the autofiction of a blind author that compellingly represents the blindness of the sighted in the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

Though motivated by different concerns, two highly popular nineteenth-century writers, Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, both represented and evaluated the repressive social constructions that conditioned the lives of blind women. The first question is why such women had to be represented by male, sighted writers, instead of narrating their experiences themselves. The second question is why the accounts of the experience of blind women are not only almost always mediated, but also so scarce. Even for James Wilson, as I noted earlier, the blind editor and biographer of A Biography of the Blind, entered just a handful of females into his collective biography. I would suggest that the huge discrepancies and inequalities between the male-dominated, ableist society and the fortunes of blind women, as well as in the degree to which they are noticed and represented, arise from a toxic mixture of assumptions about women and the blind that make self-assuredness literally impossible to imagine.[144]

Feminist criticism and theory have done extensive work on patriarchal structures in Victorian literature—my contention is that partly because of unexamined preconceptions about disabilities and their representation (Mitchell and Snyder 2; Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 29), the re-enforcing prejudice and dismissiveness faced by blind women has not been fully acknowledged, in part because the possibilities for analysis offered by life writing have not been fully explored. As part of my effort to account for the apparent absence of self-representation by blind women in the nineteenth century, in this chapter I have examined carefully Browne's *My*

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[144] The publishing institutions often required the omission or special labeling of the sparsely represented others. As "professional" Victorian female authors in general were held back by social and cultural norms (Peterson 4–10), many of them were made to choose to publish their works under pseudonyms. It is well known that the Brontë sisters originally published their works under the male pseudonyms, or Mary Anne Evans as George Eliot. Conversely, authors who were marked by other "different" body categories—race, ethnicity, and disability—were expected to reveal their identities in accordance with those marks. As James Wilson and Abram V. Courtney claim their blindness and authorship on a title page, James Olney points out the same conventions in slave narratives (50). Examples include Solomon Bayley ("Formerly a Slave . . . Written by Himself") Mary Prince ("a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself").

Share of the World: An Autobiography as neither a novel, nor an autobiography, but an example of female disability autofiction that on multiple levels functions as an agent for counter-normativity.

Though the rise of modern urban society brought with it the increasing presence of the social welfare state, women with disabilities still faced greater hardships than disabled men. And according to the United Nations Article 6, more than a century later, women with disabilities still face greater barriers to full recognition as beings with rights, and find themselves more excluded from social opportunities than men are (Fina 175–6).[145] In her remarkable blind autofiction, Browne demonstrates why *My Share of the World* is not necessarily her share of the world—as a woman, and as someone who is blind—to an abled audience whose own blindness can perhaps be dispelled somewhat by reading.

Conclusion

My thesis has discussed some examples of the literary representation of blindness in the long nineteenth century, foregrounding the contributions Disability Studies can make to having a clearer understanding of how historically and generically people's sympathy towards Others has been presented, transmitted, and *re*-presented. I have argued that to examine such matters inevitably leads to dealing with the ethical values embedded in fiction and life writing, and in particular, narratives dealing with the blind. It was a commonplace of pre-twentieth century Western ethical philosophy that self-knowledge and truth are inextricably linked to vision through the agency of the imagination. Through the lens of Levinas' ethics, I have noted in a number of texts how the extension of sympathy is intimately linked to the notion of the face of

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[145] See, also, General Assembly resolution, *Further Actions and Initiatives to Implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (16 November 2000).

others, regardless of whether the author is abled or disabled, seeing or blind.

Nineteenth-century people with disabilities confronted multiple hurdles to achieving full acknowledgment as fellow-beings. Reading and writing, and a wide range of physical, intellectual, and social activities were either considered irrelevant to the blind, or were actively denied them, in keeping with widespread abled perceptions of disability. The lack of assistive technology, and the scarcity of supportive environments, including educational institutions, meant that nearly all disabled individuals confronted major difficulties in expressing themselves in their own voice.[146] As Iain Hutchinson points out, their stories were predominantly written by "experts and professionals"—who were "always" men—as they assumed themselves authorities (93). Despite these impediments, some—though not many—people with differently-functioning bodies before the twentieth century managed to record and publish their life stories.

In the first chapter, I investigated how two blind auto/biographers shared their hopes and their own extensions of sympathy through their life stories. In eighteenth-century Scotland, Thomas Blacklock managed to convey in candid language his anger and exasperation in response to the slights of the seeing world, partially by deploying the familiar qualities of the spectacular and of tears. His conviction that displaying tears in the presence of others was not necessary a sign of tenderness, melancholy, passion, or sympathy, but could in fact originate from self-righteousness, pretentiousness, egotism, and hypocrisy, brings the supposedly sentimental and the charitable before readers as qualities not always appreciated by the blind. And yet, though he expresses his disappointment and chagrin at other people's unctuousness, and denounces the frequent performativity of tears, he does not hesitate to speak of his own tears, shed for others. That he himself cannot even see people's weeping faces does not keep Blacklock

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[146] See Newman, "Disability and Life Writing" 275, and Mitchel and Snyder 65–6.

from retaining his faith in the possibility of extending sympathetic feeling to others in distress, and that sometimes tears are an effective sign of that act—even the tears of a blind man like himself.

Without Blacklock's aggravated and aggrieved tone, James Wilson expresses sympathy for others, sighted and blind, in his life-long writing project. Wilson's blind auto/biography recognizes and reinforces what is present in Blacklock's autobiographical poems. But while acknowledging the undeniable positioning of the blind in a binary that casts them solely as *objects* of sympathy, through his biographies and the story of his own life, Wilson repeatedly documents how blind persons actively extend sympathy to others, and perhaps more genuinely because of their positioning than those in more advantageous circumstances.

In doing so, Wilson makes a contribution to the history of disability life writing. Drawing on the tradition of prosopography, or collective biography, Wilson displays the capability, resilience, agency, and freedom of visually impaired people by re-telling his and other blind persons' experiences en masse within a reinforcing genre. Though exhibited independently, each story is also a component of an unanticipated tradition of "the blind leading the blind"—sometimes figuratively, sometimes literally—with the second group of the blind being the sighted. Wilson upends the Biblically-sanctioned and deeply ingrained understanding of sightlessness as incapacity that survives to this day, instead drawing lively portraits of accomplished and productive people out of an anonymous, faceless history of the blind.

In Chapter Two, I shifted the perspective to consider how blindness is represented by sighted authors, as a means of setting attitudes about that specific disability within humanist thought. Though considering their personal experiences of blindness, I chose Dickens and Collins primarily because of their huge popularity, and therefore their shaping influence on how

contemporary readers and later generations understood and practiced an ethics of responding to blindness, and to writing about the blind. In broader terms, Dickens and Collins also exerted a substantial shaping force on the continuing public discourses of normalcy and otherness.

Dickens for example not only introduces to English society the most famous American blind girl of his day through a highly stereotypic and sentimental portrait of the exemplary sympathetic object, but takes inspiration from her shining face, despite perpetual darkness, in an imagined life-changing epiphanic moment that he borrows, reimagines, and incorporates into his later fiction. In so doing, Dickens extends his famously widespread sympathy for the lives of those too obscure or damaged to be noticed, yet also notices, imagines, and records the sense of self possessed by one living, and one fictional blind woman.

Following his precursors, including Dickens, Collins in turn composes a fictional representation of blindness that incorporates his personal experiences and investigations. He questions and disturbs the familiar dynamic between the sighted observer and a blind human object in need of sympathy by creating a heroine who supposedly embodies "blindness as it really is" (*PMF* xxxix). At least for sighted readers, however, the result is a version of blindness that is virtually unthinkable. Instead of feeling the presumed desire to see the faces of those in their lives, or for that matter, anything else, Collins has his heroine unhesitatingly choose not to retain her restored sight, confident that she has far better ways of knowing her lover or the world than by seeing them. Blindness therefore becomes the means for gaining mobility and independence, in terms of her relationships with others, and her own remarkably stable identity. Collins' novel is also ahead of its time in terms of the close attention it pays to the blurring of the boundaries between self and other arising from the possibility of prostheses and the assumed status of the cyborg. The ancient and supposedly instinctive desire to see one's lover's face

becomes the motivation for others, though not necessarily the blind character, to pursue technological reconfigurations of the self through the manufacturing of sight. While neither Dickens or Collins ultimately transcends the limitations of the sighted in understanding the blind, whose status as pitiable survives all their narrative fortunes, these two sighted authors nevertheless to the extent of their ability extend a respectful sympathy, and suggest at least the possibility of shifting the general understanding of the blind from passive and woeful to individuals with some possession of self-worth and autonomy.

In the last chapter I return to a text written by a blind author. Browne's representation of sympathy is strikingly complex, disrupting the boundaries between fact and fiction, self and other. She produces a first-person narrative from the perspective of a sighted male, who reflects on his own understanding of self and others, including two blind women, one of them the novel's heroine. Since readers know that the novel taking the form of an autobiography is written by a blind woman, they would presumably assume that whatever actual autobiographical details appearing in the text would be associated with the blind characters. Browne's choice of narrator, and how she deploys him, undercuts such easy identifications. Even as the narrator casts his eyes upon the blind character's delicate, vulnerable face with deep sympathy, readers come increasingly to recognize that Browne's sympathy is primarily extended towards the sighted narrator. By taking the voice of a sighted person, Browne as a blind author can explore those of the abled world's unconscious confidence that because they see more, they will necessarily be more perceptive than those who cannot see. But in the most distinctly Levinasian face-to-face encounters in the novel, the sighted narrator fails to "see" the truth about his two closest loves, and therefore cannot prevent them from dying. Demonstrating the fallacy that physical sight is necesary for superior insight, he has undermined the sighted person's claims to clearest

knowledge. But Browne does not make the protagonist a wretched villain. She "feels with" him, understanding that all human beings are blind to some extent, and therefore deserving of our sympathy.

Although the frame of Browne's text faithfully emulates the conventions of the nineteenth-century auto/biography, what we have here is a double-narrative effect, in which two different voices from two different perspectives tell one story of blindness. The male narrator's "blindness" of knowledge about others and himself is acutely depicted by means of Browne's invisible presence as the author. Browne not only pre-emptively utilizes the fiction-fact dichotomy to create two "versions" of her story[147]—her interpretation of the world--but also creates an autofiction that implicitly refutes the cultural presupposition that because a blind person's experiences, knowledge, and insight are far more limited than a sighted person's, so too is their capacity for sympathy, real or imagined. By showing how the male narrator wants and expects his "share of the world," but does not ultimately find it, Browne through her powerful, sympathetically imaginative writing, claims a place for herself in the world.

What is also novel about Browne's work is its movement beyond the conventions of earlier, and many later disability narratives. Drawing upon the inherent autofictionality of auto/biographical writing, and her own resources in creating a narrative that weaves together memory, conjecture, fiction, and imaginative sympathy, she shares her personal experience with abled ideology, but also a sense of compassion for the limiting consequences of such an ideology for the sighted.

In addition, I would like to briefly summarize here some of the potential benefits of autofiction for life writing, and for of disability auto/biography in particular. Autofiction, or

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[147] For a discussion of fictionalized auto/biography as a format for telling one's "version of events," see Maftei 1.

biofiction for that matter,[148] is a bold addition to the genre, an attempt to acknowledge and deploy the blurred distinction between fact and fiction with the same degree of freedom often exercised with the fluid boundaries between auto/biography and the novel.[149] My own sense of autofiction's relation to the process of self-actualization comes closest to Jana Evans Braziel's idea of "alterbiography." Braziel proposes "alternative terrains" for autobiography proper: "beginning with critical race, minority, migratory, postcolonial, and feminist critiques of the autobiographical genre, I define 'alterbiography' as alternative, destabilizing antiforms of life writing . . . texts that alter traditional conceptualizations of its constitutive elements—*bios*, *graphe*—creatively and relationally refiguring both elements" (8).

I would add the critiques offered by disability studies, and the disabled themselves. Browne provides us with an example of how blind autofiction, which is necessarily alterfiction, can allow a writer to evade confining her voice, her presence in the narrative, or her other characters within a culturally imposed understanding of the blind person's or writer's limited capacity. Autofiction offers a space in any narrative design for marginal or weaker groups to construct their own sense of self, untied to their disabled or discounted identity imposed by other persons' misperceptions. The fluctuation afforded by the blurring between fact and fiction, self-representation and the representation of others, accords with Dervila Cooke's assertion that "all versions of reality" contained within a storyteller's life not only have validity, but tell us something true about the storyteller (68).

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[148] As explained in the Introduction, this thesis focuses on autofiction as a fictional offshoot of life writing because memory plays a more significant role in it than in biofiction, or one of the other fact-fiction hybrid genres. To mention a few biofictions in relation to the texts analyzed in this dissertation, Lillian Nayder's novel (in progress), *Tangible Typography* recreates the relationship between Letitia Austin, Dickens' younger sister, and his blind sister-in-law, Harriet Dickens. Kimberly Elkins's *What Is Visible* retells the story of Laura Bridgman from her perspective.
[149] Among the many critics who address the issue, Couser points out that we read memoirs differently than we do novels, because of the readers' expectation that a "willing suspension of disbelief" will be required for a fictional work (*Memoir* 17). Julie Rak also provides an insightful argument on narrative strategies and non-fiction with regard to film (18–9).

Though I am sure there are other examples, to this point I have not found another example of Browne's specific form of autofiction—a person essentially blind from birth producing a very substantial narrative told from the perspective and in the voice of a sighted character. In my future research,[150] I hope to explore this specific mode further, because I am struck by Browne's ability through form to push readers of whatever ability to be more ethical by being more imaginatively sympathetic with a whole range of people—male or female, young or elderly, sighted Frederick or blind Browne—without ever forgetting the positionality and relative privilege of specific individuals. People, blind or sighted, have limitations and triumphs that all can recognize in themselves, and in each other.

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[150] There are other arenas I want to consider in my future research: first, I want to expand the idea of blind authors to include authors who were sighted, but lost their sight in the middle of their life, in order to investigate the experience of losing what they had—something we all take for granted—and their sense of deprivation, and crisis, or epiphany in life. Secondly, I would also expand the range of my scope towards narratives of other disabilities in general: other sensory impairments, or physical, intellectual, mental impairments, and also illness.

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