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*Seeing the Eye in the Darkness of Being:
Unfacing the Trickster with Poetry, Science, Literature, and
Memoir*

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Trick the gullible eye--
Lines stick out their tongues, diagonals curve.
Vipers hiss from Druid stones under a white sky.
Advancing shadows dance or die,
trick the gullible eye--
embracing fitful ghosts, longing to tie
circle-line to sense before they swerve,
trick the gullible eye.
Lines stick out their tongues, diagonals curve.

--from "Reading The Eye Chart" (Jurich 66)

There is no normal eye--only what we see or don't see or think that we see. The eye itself is a trickster who trips us up by allowing us "to see"--too much, too little, too inaccurately--or rips us apart by obscuring that sight, either partially or totally. Blindness is certainly devastating to the self-image which an individual has constructed during a lifetime (Carroll 11); it transforms and marginalizes without seeming to provide the means for outsmarting or overcoming. To be unsighted is not only to be disconnected from one's own identity, but also from a space-time reality that needs to be totally reconstructed. Yet, blindness does not necessarily mean the loss of "vision"; rather, it may recognize and advance some exceptional understanding, a deep human awareness that the sighted can never experience. It is also distinctly possible that with training and support, the blind can "trick" their way into a new world. Of course, there are also other types of "blindness"--moral and psychological--that may not only be devastating to the "blind" individual, but also to the entire society.

The old adages need to be deconstructed. "Seeing is believing" is certainly an unbelievable statement. "One picture is worth a thousand words" depends both on the picture and the nature of the commentary. Television and film and computerized images all bring sight into question.*¹ The special effects of "morphing," one image gradually transforming into another (Netzley 153) or bullet-time photography, the

controlling of speed in moving objects (Netzley 142) are merely suggestive of the extensive "special effects" used by contemporary media. Nevertheless, there has always been a "virtual reality"--the world swings when we are drunk with joy, shatters when we are merely drunk, may become surreal when we are on drugs, hallucinatory when we are confined or isolated (the "isolation effect" described by Gregory 132). The world may even turn blank when we are dejected.

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
In word, or sigh, or tear--

....

All this long eve, so balmy and serene,
Have I been gazing on the western sky,

....

And still I gaze--and with how blank an eye!

--from "Dejection: An Ode" (Coleridge 367)

There are other components to this "eye trick" which can be explained by understanding how light travels and how the brain works. For example, each object we see carries its own past and future, and the mechanism of how we see automatically translates into a past vision. "Because of the finite velocity of light, and the delay in nervous messages reaching the brain, we always see the past" (Gregory 15). Not only does the eye draw us backwards in time, but it draws us to "a before" that is considerably dimmer than we imagine, for only about ten percent of light reaching the eye is actually picked up by receptors on the retina (Gregory 19).

Other "tricks of the eye" occur as a result of the stereoscopic phenomena--two eyes which see differently. Minneart discusses the effects of the various degrees of thickness on a window pane on how eyes looking through that pane judge shape and motion. Not only does the view depend on the concavity and convexity of the glass, but also on the way each separate eye operates. Thus, patterns on the ground outside that window change according to how the viewer moves each eye (148-149). This stereoscopic effect is dramatically "shown" when a person standing next to the rippled surface of water tries to fix on a related image of a tree branch. Since the two eyes do not look at the same point of undulating surface, "two images are seen at a continually changing angular distance from each other, and it is impossible to adjust the axis of the eyes on it properly" (149).

Not only does the viewer **not** see what is (or was, accounting for time-lapse), but she/he may experience an after effect that is distorted or, at least, distinctly at variance with the "true object." The after-image, consisting of several small, round disks, recognizes the little jerks made by the eye during its viewing of an object. The further away the object, the larger the after-image; and that image appears reversely dark or light depending on the background against which the image originally appeared. Colored objects create an after-image in a color complementary to the one perceived; an orange object, for example, creates a blue after-image. "It is related that to people who had been gazing for half an hour at orange-yellow flames in a fire, the rising moon seemed blue" (Minnaert 127).

There are other fantastic images created by retinal disturbances, the most spectacular called the "waterfall effect," such that when a rotating record on a turntable stops suddenly, the record appears to rotate backward. That same illusion occurs after a person looks at moving water, then abruptly focuses on a fixed object. At that instant, the object appears to move in the direction opposite to the flow of water (Gregory 104-106).

The scientist frequently creates his own "eye tricks" on order to examine the nature of vision. One such scientist, Stuart Anstis, a perceptual psychologist at the University of California, San Diego, wanted to find out how much visual adaptation would occur if he "traded black for white"--that is, created a negative world. By connecting a set of goggles to a video camera that reversed black and white (as well as converted colors to their complements), he created that negative world, a world which ultimately became a reality he could no longer recognize. "Outdoors sunlight converted to shadow, made a flight of stairs a frightening experience. The risers became confused with the treads" (Grady 58). Little adaptation occurred over the three days that he wore the goggles; and Anstis was surprised that "the brain [had] so much trouble" (Grady 58). Apparently, the brain is programmed to use brightness as it exists, and when assumptions are shattered--light and dark reversed--feature, expression, shape and depth are all subverted. The world becomes illusory (Grady 58). To some greater or lesser extent, Anstis' experience may be applied to the distorted realities encountered by individuals who suffer from some visual impairment.

The world may also be transformed for the viewer by other phenomena unrelated either to scientific experiments or visual abnormalities, but arising from how the eye itself functions. Within the ten layers of retinal tissue are over 150 photo receptor cells and one million neural cells (Cerio 52). "Filling-in" is a well-known device used by the brain at the natural blind spot in each eye where the optic nerve connects to the eye; these retinal surfaces are not responsive to light, so that the brain "covers" these blanks with plausible background (Grady 62). For example, the viewer gazing up at the sky, fills in the blur with a sweep of clouds or blue; or looking at a beach, fills in the blur with sand.

Yet, the brain itself can create a visual phenomenon apart from any object actually

perceived by the viewer. When a person's visual field is damaged, the brain will cover the gaps or "make up" a reality to compensate for the void in the retina. Such a "phantom vision" is known as the Charles Bonnet syndrome (Wason 24). First described in 1760 by the Swiss philosopher, Charles Bonnet, the condition is, nonetheless, still largely unknown to the medical community. The syndrome is characterized by visual hallucinations experienced by individuals with severe vision loss. While no definitive cause for the condition has been established, a reasonable explanation has been set forth: because the loss of sight prevents individuals from receiving the frequent and varied picture their brains have come to expect, the brain compensates for this vacuum by creating its own pictures. Such pictures may consist of fantastic images or old visual memories that have been stored there (rnib ...1). According to V.S. Ramachandran, a renowned neuroscientist, millions of people have this disorder, including individuals with such conditions as glaucoma, cataracts, macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy (87).^{*2} Thus, the brain tricks the eye, and the afflicted viewer becomes a trickster who creates "something out of nothing"!

Those who lose total vision are, of course, and out of necessity, the most supreme tricksters, for they must recreate whole worlds--bring light into darkness by becoming their own gods.^{*3} Nonetheless, however amazing are the daily feats of the blind, however heroic their struggles, they may be subject to social and cultural attitudes that stigmatize and patronize, that prevent them from achieving competence and receiving respect. Erik Weihenmayer in his successful climb to the summit of Mount Everest (in 2001) is certainly a dramatic illustration of how the blind can surmount extraordinary difficulties (See Greenfeld, 52-63). Yet, each blind person has her / his own Everest to climb, must devise all kinds of tricks in that effort.

Darkness as negation of light "has become the symbol of ignorance and error" and has been associated with sin, death and despair (Carroll 32). In Book V11 of *The Republic*, "Allegory of the Cave," the prisoners confined to their underground prison are ignorant because in their shackled positions and dim light, they can only glimpse shadows of the objects behind them, only hear faint murmurs of voices. Liberation is possible under one condition--being released to the light. Only then can the real world become apparent and the individual become capable of "elevation" to a higher intellectual and moral sphere. "Sight" then translates into reason and truth, the beautiful and the good (See the dialogue in Buchanan 546-584).

To see is to have power, and the EYE is that source of power.^{*4} The third eye of the Hindu god, Siva, could destroy the universe with its flame (Trevor-Roper 148). Ra, the Egyptian Sun-god, became possessed of a third eye which he wore in the middle of his forehead. There it became the Uraeus, a protection against enemies (Viaud 14). Another Sun-god, Apollo, epitomized the "light" of reason and later became "the incarnation of the Greek ideal of youthful manhood" (Bulfinch 885). He was also the god of prophecy, music, and healing, as well as the slayer of Python, the monstrous serpent. In Persian mythology, Ahura Mazda, the good creator, is equated with light, while Ahriman, pictured as dark and bestial, is synonymous with evil,

often considered the serpent or devil (Mercatante 28-29). Light and, as it follows, sight translates to virtue and intelligence. Having only partial sight, the one-eyed Cyclops in Greek mythology, is regarded as brutish and slow-witted (Cavendish 886).

Evidently poor vision and, worse, absence of vision, is regarded as mental and moral failure. Loss of vision is also accounted as a punishment for sin. Oedipus is the most dramatic example of such a loss and most tragic, because the blindness is self-inflicted. Nonetheless, the hero's self-blinding realizes his "inner-light"--that is, his assuming moral responsibility and suffering for his own failures. Because seeing is the means to enticement, the eye has been particularly linked to sexual transgression. As Wallace Stevens tells us, "The point of vision and desire are the same" ("An Ordinary Evening ..." 332). Though Tiresias came upon Athene only by accident at a place where she happened to be bathing, because Tiresias saw the goddess naked, he was deprived of vision (Guirand 108). The men of Sodom for insisting on having sexual relations with the two guests in Lot's house--these actually angels--were punished with blindness (Genesis: 19). Does Samson, the redeemer of Israel, have his eyes gouged out by the Philistines for having consorted with Philistine women--the woman in Timrath, his first wife, the prostitute in Gaza, and later Delilah, probably a Philistine or, at least, one of their sympathizers? (See Judges: 13). May one conjecture that God himself, disappointed in "the redeemer of Israel," conspired in effecting such a punishment?

"The eyes of the Lord are everywhere / surveying evil and good men alike"--so we learn from Proverbs (15: 3). The eye then may be the source of punishment, just as it is the eye that is punished for sin or moral failure. While justice is symbolically blindfolded, God's justice results from his having carefully scrutinized the actions of human beings. The Jewish custom of covering mirrors during mourning or *shive* *⁵ may derive from the fear that God will strike down the remaining family member, just as he has recently struck down the loving relative. The idea is also that God will be affronted by the image of the grief-stricken should she / he look into a mirror; for such self-regard suggests vanity and frivolity during a time when the grief-stricken should be "dark" to all things of the flesh. Such self-engagement is also an affront to the dead who look down from God's kingdom. *⁶

In *The New Testament*, the eye is also perceived as a moral agent. God's all-seeing eye is replaced by the eye of his believers.

Your eye is the lamp of your body;
when it is not sound, your body is
full of darkness. There be careful
lest the light in you be darkness

(Luke I I :34 as quoted in Shackleford 50).

The relationship between darkness and moral depravity is apparent in John: 9 when

Jesus' disciples question him about the blind man he intends to cure. "Rabbi [they ask], who sinned, this man or his parents? Why was he born blind?" After Jesus restores the man's eyesight, not only does the man find functional vision, but also spiritual truth. The "sound" eye opens him up to receive faith.

Yet, the blind may sometimes be considered to have a greater "light" than the sighted. In Mark 10: 46-52, the blind Bartimaeus was cured by Jesus for expressing his trust in Jesus as Messiah. Certainly, Homer and Milton are thought to be more profound for bringing creative "light" out of darkness, for being able to realize greater insights through that darkness. So that he might attain wisdom and prophecy from Mimir's fountain, the Norse god Wotan (Odin) agreed to sacrifice one of his eyes (Tonnelat 257). How wise the myth-maker to recognize that truth must have these two sources: the light and the dark, the visible and the invisible. The defective eyes of the artist may also give him a special truth, an unusual perspective. In *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), for instance, "the narrative is left as a faint and barely visible framework" (Trevor-Roper 31), for James Joyce invents and employs words more for their music than for their connections with a material reality. Without his severe eye problems, iritis and later, glaucoma, it is questionable whether Joyce would have constructed such a literary universe. James Whistler's magical "nocturne" paintings--exquisite as Chopin piano renditions--may, in fact, as Trevor-Roper suggests, be attributed to the painter's "defective colour discrimination" (76). Surprising then that visual artists, rather than having perfect vision, often have irregular eyesight, this very irregularity the source of their mystery and power.

The eye and vision as concepts related to mythology, social attitudes and moral questions have figured prominently in literary works. In the play *Equus* (1996), an adolescent boy, Alan Strang blinds his "gods," six horses under his care at a local stable. One of these horses, Nugget, is actually an extension of himself. Guilty and ashamed for being sexually aroused by Jill, a girl who works with him at the stable, and determined that their intended "act" not be observed, Alan is compelled to destroy the would-be witnesses. In effect, Alan means to blind himself to what he perceives to be his own ungod-faring behavior. While Martin Dysart, the boy's psychiatrist, cannot deny the brutality of the mutilation, he, nonetheless, sees a beauty and passion in the boy's emotional "darkness," in the boy's rapturous involvement in a mythical state of being. Dysart prefers the resplendence of a numinous world to the vapid regularity of contemporary life which has lost spirituality and replaced deep emotions with comfortable expectations.

In *La Symphonie Pastorale* (1919) by Andre Gide, the blind girl, Gertrude, is also regarded as privileged, as more alive to nature and to spiritual truths for "being in the dark." While deluded about his own moral values, the Pastor, her guardian, ironically makes this claim about people who are sighted, presumably excluding himself from the general defect he attributes to those with functional vision.. To Gertrude he says, "I have told you ... that it is those who have eyes who cannot see" (47). Only later does Gertrude recognize that the Pastor himself is even more flawed than the other "sighted" he names. After her vision is restored, Gertrude--now a

young woman--recognizes the Pastor's sexual infatuation for her and the role she has played in causing unhappiness to the Pastor's wife and entire family. Choosing to take on the Pastor's guilt and suffering for her loss of Jacques, the Pastor's son who had loved her, Gertrude wills herself to die. There is trickery in the thematic contraries: the Pastor in his self-righteousness is blind, while Gertrude, without eyes to see, has the spiritual vision which the Pastor lacks. Though using his eyes to justify his own motives and satisfy his pride, the Pastor had tricked himself into sanctioning his own lust. In contrast, Gertrude, existing outside a material world, saw only through her soul; she was tricked because she wanted and needed to hold on to the idea of a selfless purity. Once her eyes awakened to physical realities, she could not compromise the spiritual truths which she regarded as essential to her own being.

Yet the blind are not always depicted as morally superior, as spiritually pure. In "The Country of the Blind" (1922) by H.G. Wells, both the blind and the sighted are viewed as defective for different reasons. Nunez, the sighted mountaineer from Bogotç, is arrogant, power-hungry, a person of little compassion. Nonetheless, the blind inhabitants who live in the Ecuadorean Andes, the place where Nunez accidentally lands, are not sympathetically realized. Like Plato's "cave men," they are fixed in their established illusions, unwilling to accept that any world exists other than their own. They refuse to believe or even contemplate Nunez's descriptions of the landscape, ridicule his claim to vision and knowledge. Both the blind and Nunez are equally capable of vicious and destructive behavior. Even after Nunez becomes the docile servant and responsible citizen, the blind do not accept him as one of their own. When he announces his intention to marry Medina-Sarote, his master's daughter--and she also desires their marriage--the elders express a deep reservation. Finally, they insist that before the marriage can be transacted, Nunez must first be cured of his "peculiarities" by having his eyes removed. Only with these "queer things" excised, will he be considered a suitable husband. Even the wise and gentle Medina-Sarote agrees with the elders.

On the day before the operation is to be performed, Nunez surveys the meadows for the last time and then remembers the towns and villages of Bogota. Such beauty that he sees and remembers--how can he sacrifice his eyes? Instead, he chances an escape by climbing the dangerous precipice surrounding the valley, all the while realizing that in the effort, he will find only death. Nonetheless, even during his last breaths, he is at peace observing the orange lichen, the blue-purple shadows, the luminous darkness that becomes his dying.

When Nunez had first come into the valley and noted how all the inhabitants were visually impaired, he had planned to trick the people, in some way to enslave them. "In the Country of the the Blind, the One-eyed Man is King," so Nunez had repeated to himself many times; the maxim served as catechism to his own vanity. Had the blind tricked him into death, or does he trick himself?

In two stories the blind trick the sighted into acknowledging their own voids, their

intense needs for a vital and intimate connection with another; and the sighted are opened to a new dimension of being which proves to be both painful and satisfying. The stories, "The Blind Man" (1922) by D.H. Lawrence and "Cathedral" (1983) by Raymond Carver, picture the blind male characters as capable and independent, as having deep intuitive awareness and the capacity to tap the hidden passions of others constricted by their own fears and inadequacies. Maurice Pervin in "The Blind Man" and Robert in "The Cathedral" convey the unconscious need others have to cover their eyes in order to enter a different level of being, to find who and where they are. Darkness is the place of humility, release; the way to kinship and mystical celebration.

The perils of seeing is one of the themes in *Molly Sweeney* (1996), a play by Brian Friel. Molly, blind since ten months old, does not seem to miss a world she has never known. Confidant, independent, an excellent swimmer, she is employed as a massage therapist at a local health club where she has many friends. Then at the age of thirty-nine, she marries Frank who persuades her to undergo an operation to restore her eyesight. The eye surgeon, Dr. Rice, agrees; he hopes that Molly will become the means of restoring the international reputation he had once enjoyed. Though Molly knows that she is being "used" by these two men for their own distinct purposes, that with returned eyesight she will undoubtedly be exiled from the life she has known, she agrees to try the world of sight. (The reality is that it will be a partial or imperfect vision.)*⁷

Once in that sighted world, she is at first entranced, then increasingly alarmed. Too much movement, too many challenging sensations. "Even the sudden sparrows in the garden ... aggressive dangerous" (Friel 42). Because she cannot register so much color, light and shape, her head implodes, her hands shake and she is overcome with panic. Unable to bear such a vehement world, she retreats further and further into the comfort of darkness, even while she continues to experience the sight she can never use.

Exiled from the blind world, threatened by the sighted one, she tries to compose another universe that she can tolerate "beyond disappointment and without expectation" (Friel 50). At last Molly is brought to a psychiatric hospital; there she hears remembered sounds and no longer cares if what she sees is imagined or real. In such a condition, it is not possible for Molly to become the trickster--that is, to defy or outwit or transcend an existence that has ceased to make sense or hold any promise. Transformation is impossible without selfhood, and Molly has lost a stable identity. Beset by a universe that is neither tactile nor visual, neither dark nor light, she is in no position to negotiate "worlds"; for she has no world left. Rather, she topples from all possible realities, fragments into undecipherable shards, and virtually disappears.

In *Blindness* (1995), a speculative novel by Jose Saramago, the visual affliction seems to be some trick of the gods or god to test the humanity of his human creation, both the victims of the scourge and those fortunate who are spared, if only

temporarily. The truism that follows from the relationship of blind and sighted is that the sighted will become "blind," as the blind (or some of them) will become "sighted." This strange malady of white blindness occurs in an unknown city at an undisclosed time close to the present. The question that is raised is how those suddenly stuck blind will survive with what ingenuity, with what decency? Since their blindness is contagious, how will they be treated by the sighted who fear that they too will contract the disease?

Only one person among those afflicted by the disease remains unaffected and retains her vision; she chooses to act blind, so as to protect her blinded husband, formerly an ophthalmologist. Subsequently, the ophthalmologist's wife becomes the protector of all the blind in their ward and also the witness to the many horrors committed on the blind and, later, by the blind. "If only you could see what I am obliged to see, you would want to be blind," (223) she tells her husband.

During the weeks they have been quarantined in the abandoned mental hospital, she has observed unspeakable brutality, revolting physical conditions, as well as the pain, grief and despair of those struggling in darkness. There are few decencies. The blind suffer from every kind of deprivation--food, hygiene and medical attention, all physical and emotional comforts, and any hope of changing conditions which daily grow worse. Incredibly, their plight becomes even more wretched when a criminal gang joins the blind population, their guide one of the "born blind" who directs their nefarious activities.

After a fire devastates their building, six of the blind band together and escape into the city which they find totally deserted. For, as the six discover, the whole population has succumbed to the plague of blindness; and having ravaged the food supplies in the city, departed in search of other sources. The six live by foraging for their food till eventually, and without explanation, their sight returns. Strangely, at this very time, the ophthalmologist's wife finds her sight suddenly masked by that same silky froth that the others had experienced. She is fortunate, however, in having many sighted people nearby who will care for her and in conditions that are reasonable and humane. The gods may play malicious tricks, but are sometimes merciful in how they employ them.

Those who experience macular degeneration may often feel victims of some malevolent god, especially if they suffer from the "wet" form of the disease, this form properly named "sub retinal neo-vascularization." This particular form occurs rapidly and without warning when new blood cells which have grown abnormally leak inside or under the retina and disturb the cones. Others are afflicted with a more fortunate type of macular degeneration, the "dry" form or "atrophic macular degeneration," which occurs in eighty percent of those who have the disease. In this form, cells in the retinal pigment deteriorate, but the deterioration occurs slowly and eye loss may never become severe (Wason 22-23).^{*8}

The macula, which occupies two percent of the retina, is the yellow spot surrounding

the fovea, the pit-like depression in the retina which contains only cones, cells responsible for fine detail and color vision. (Rod cells transmit only light.) Thus, visual acuity is strongest in the fovea and the surrounding macula (Begbie 31). When the macula is injured, as it is in the "wet" form, central vision proceeds to evaporate. Objects in the target of vision become fuzzy and gray, even while peripheral light enters the eye. [See photographic comparison below from the National Eye Institute, 1998.]



On one Saturday morning in mid-April, 1981, I looked out of the window to consider what kind of day this would be--what to wear to the play we were scheduled to attend that afternoon. I happened to glance at the house across the street and looked again in wonder. The windows seemed to be curving out of the surrounding wooden frame--like swans' necks, like pregnant abdomens. Nor were these sloping forms maintained in their initial shapes; rather they had the inconstancy of a slow roller coaster. Later, when I walked to the market, I saw a sign on the glass advertising CHICKEN LEGS. The letters were actually kicking! "Over-work, too little sleep," I thought. Yet, I was distinctly alarmed, and all plans to attend the play were set aside.

I had my own drama that afternoon at Boston Eye and Ear Infirmary. Having been refused an emergency visit by my ophthalmologist of fifteen years (quite shamelessly, he told me that he wouldn't leave his golf game), I checked into the infirmary's emergency room where I saw--or didn't quite see--a resident. For reasons of carelessness, ignorance, or incompetence, that resident could see nothing wrong with the retina. Although I later discovered that what I reported to him were the typical symptoms associated with the "wet" form of macular degeneration, he pronounced me normal. "Probably a case of stress increased by an over-active imagination," he said with a bland smile.

Certainly, I had stress and continuing stress as the distortions persisted and increased. Even while the macula degeneration affected only one eye, my right--and for this I will always be grateful--that eye had always been the "seeing" one. My left eye, more severely myopic, was dominated by the right and largely depended on it; thus, the left undamaged eye was subject to the intrusions originating in the right retina. Reality continually blurred and faded in ways I could never anticipate and, at the same time, zig-zagged, fizzled, staggered, hip-hopped. I was simultaneously living and making up a Walt Disney stage- set and had no control over design, movement, animation, color, or special effects. Most remarkable were faces-- features regularly kaleidoscopic, the noses especially unreliable.

Find that frisky trickster nose,
dodging codger, cadging no-good
Focus on him.... Gogol's nonsense
blanks your vision. Grab him now
before Picasso steals the stern
riding it to mere reflection.

(Jurich from "Sniffing though Lenses" 2)

Beginning in autumn 1981 and continuing until spring 1987, I became a specimen for ophthalmologists and retinal specialists, most of whom appeared to be as difficult and deranged as my vision. Often, they greeted me with courteous anger; their remarks consisted of a series of puzzling accusations suffused with derogatory slurs. In physical presence, in statement, and in method of examination, they were intimidating and nothing else---dark tricksters" who refused to return my light.*⁹ After all the diagnostic tests, measurements, blinding lights, fluorescein angiography,*¹⁰ nothing was offered, either as explanation for what I was experiencing or prognosis for what I might encounter in the future. Photocoagulation*¹¹ was never mentioned as an option, nor was any other means suggested that might alleviate the hemorrhaging in the eye--the reason, as I later discovered, for my irregular world. One retinal specialist, impatient with my queries, was curt and no-nonsense. "Look, face it," he said on the phone--and facing anyone had been impossible for several months now--" in five years, you'll be completely blind."

The Eye of Day--daisy, cat's eye, cunning jewel.
Fish eyes glisten from ice chips
through window glass;
bulging stares like boxing gloves assault
in sightless irony. Scorpions are sightless.
How can they see? No-Eyes."
October the Scorpion, poor creature
who plodding on enchanted leaves--
purple, scarlet, golden--stays himself
blind to where he's been.

October, my birth month, glorious and sad.

(Jurich from "Comparative Anatomy: The Myopic Animus")

All ophthalmologists I considered equivalent to the character, Dr. Judah Rosenthal, the ophthalmologist played by Martin Landau in Woody Allen's movie, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989). Rosenthal is a man who justifies the murder of his wife as the necessary course to protect his reputation and quite frankly admits, "God is a luxury I cannot afford." Imagine how this murderer and adulterer, this smug and self-infatuated hypocrite, must treat his patients? I was determined to seek revenge on all these medical authorities by finding my vision elsewhere.

The holistic, alternative medicine, "new age" route began in 1983 with a visit to a psychoneurologist at Massachusetts General Hospital. When I explained to him that I wanted to explore some methods for healing myself of macular degeneration, he happily remarked that he had never heard of the disease (and, apparently, never intended to find out). Nonetheless, he suggested that I might design my own program for visualization and some kind of biofeedback. I decided that it would be foolish to pay him for the privilege of fumbling toward my own methods of recovery. (And was recovery even a possibility?) Here was a doctor who would provide no assistance and would, at the same time, benefit from a disease I might or might not be able to treat. I needed to go elsewhere.

At a woman's fitness center (which I joined to replace visual loss with an active kinesthetic sense), I met a physical therapist who suggested I consult a homeopath who had been "most valuable" in treating her four-year old. The homeopath lived on the third floor in a walk-up flat in Cambridge which patients were cautioned to enter in bare feet. On the walls of the apartment were glass-framed designs of sand, slashed into geometric forms by pieces of rope. For forty-five dollars I received a hocus-pocus diagnosis aided by the movements of a swinging crystal ball.

... ..

Underneath the table
a snaking light glistened,
a flame quivering from a sting
indecisive, searching
for poles of psychic energy.
Sideways the crystal dancing,
quavering on the fulcrum--
-Sulfate," he said. "The answer."
And I longing for deception
accept the vial for truth.
-Never touch the capsule,
slip it on your tongue," he paused,

reaching for my hand,
reaching for the check.

(Jurich from "Alternative Medicine" 2)

Several optometrists, one in Fairfield, Connecticut, who charged one-hundred dollars, prescribed exercises, such as the "stork position," which meant balancing on one leg at a time with the other leg decoratively draped inside the balanced thigh. Others assigned rituals of moving beads, tapping balls suspended from the ceiling, walking various widths of balance beams, and fitting pens into their holders with my head averted. A celebrated faith healer in Brookline, Massachusetts, offered the "magic" of hands; he spun me around on a rotating stool, I growing increasingly nauseous--not from the motion, but from the smell of his hair tonic and the heavy garlic on his breath. Certainly, this experience convinced me that while my vision had dwindled, my olfactory sense remained extraordinarily keen.

Worst were my visits, over a two year period, with a visual therapist trained in London who told me, "You don't see because you don't want to." While the regimens she set forth were mostly benign and derived from the Bates method, *¹² others were distinctly harmful, as, for example, "sunning." Standing under a 60 watt lamp, I looked up into the light, as I swayed back and forth any number of times during three or four sessions each day. Could my cataracts have developed as a consequence of this so-called "healing" procedure?

What eventually restored usable vision was, in fact, a cataract removal from the left eye in 1987. While the right eye seemed to be irretrievably lost, the retina now covered by scar tissue, I gained 20/30 vision in a left eye that, before surgery, had measured 20/400. Six weeks after the surgery, I saw my first face in almost seven years, the lovely middle-aged face of a woman wheeling a cart in the Star Supermarket. I ran toward her, hoping to share my happiness. All the while she fled, shoving her cart in front of her as a protective shield from my embrace.

During these years of medical hopping and melancholia, I became an accomplished trickster (or trickSTAR as my gender warrants *¹³

Darkness--the time to wake,
the time to dream a waking dream,
a "dream-time" of another face,
light rising out of flesh in
absence--say, "possibility."

(Jurich "The Dark")

I taught classes without ever seeing my students' faces; I graded papers under an accumulated 1000 watts of light, themes even more incoherent for the difficulty of deciphering letters. I rode elevators to floors without numbers and counted change I

could not see. At home I sorted socks, all gray, and many of my meals turned out to be equally indistinguishable.

Everyday was full of tricks. As Henry Grunwald relates in his book *Twilight*, "One of the difficulties about macular degeneration is that those around you can never be sure of what you see, and you yourself are not sure either" (69). Objects shift, and the world is full of pranks. I once saw a three-quarter moon coiled inside of thirteen other moons just like itself, and all hinged onto a most beautifully sinuous tail. Grunwald wryly admits, "I have been known to bite into a lemon assuming it a shrimp, or try to slice a bone as if it were meat" (73). As for my own experience, if I lost an object, I lost it forever--buttons, earrings, pencils, coins, pieces of food. I also lost images on T.V. and cinema screens, lost my own image in the mirror. I became ageless! About his vision and his world, Grunwald uses this analogy: "I have sometimes reminded onlookers of a deep-sea diver laboriously reaching for scarcely visible objects."

Describing the condition of macular degeneration to others seemed futile, nor did they want to know much about it. Some acquaintances and colleagues seemed to assume that I was counterfeiting a mysterious condition. If other individuals accepted the fact that I had visual limitations, they were remarkably "untuned" to what I felt. Whenever a friend or relative expressed such insensitivity, I tricked myself into a self-preserving, superior silence. To such remarks as "Look out!" "Watch where you are going!" or even "Don't you see ..." I recoiled with dignity. One day when I walked into a tree stump on the Boston Common, my brother angrily grasped my arm. "You'd think you were blind!" he scolded. I imagine Blindness to be a trickster as well as a eunuch who, out of revenge for his own loss, cuts out our light, and with this light gone, so goes our passion and our creative vitality. Or think of Blindness as a rapist, Hades who swoops down on Persephone and carries her off to the dark regions where nothing grows.

Yet, paradoxically, the world of macular degeneration was for me, then, and is, even now, a stunning illumination--loss and grief with devastating awareness. Like Odin, I have lost one eye in exchange for wisdom; this I have gained by drinking from the well of bitterness. The person who loses vision, loses dignity, loses direction, career, ultimately loses trust in others. For those normal "others"--that is, the sighted--the individual with an impairment becomes the "dark trickster"; and even though it is these "others" who create this darkness. In contemporary society, while the blind are not treated as horrifically as they are in Saramago's novel, they are, nonetheless, forced to remain utterly vulnerable and are often pitied, feared, despised. Even though "The Country of the Blind" is intended as an allegory, in the story, Wells represents popular attitudes toward the blind--the unsighted are ignorant and vicious, unable to abide a sighted man and unwilling to contemplate realities they can never experience.

Of course, blindness does not guarantee spiritual purity or moral superiority, as it does in Gide's *Symphonie Pastorale*. Nor does being sightless grant an individual a

deep mystical sense and the remarkable ability to release another from fear and inhibition--as both Lawrence and Carver reveal in their fictions. Certainly, it does not follow, as in *Molly Sweeney*, by Friel, that the blind are so fortunate in their affliction that they should remain that way. In Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, while Alan Strang is emotionally blind, it becomes evident that such blindness should not remain uncured--even at the cost of Alan's losing a connection with deep and passionate forces. As Shaffer intimates, through Dysart, Alan's psychiatrist, here are certain mystical forces in ourselves we can never fully know, magical elements that are deeply satisfying; yet, it is better not to pursue these forces, or we may destroy ourselves and others in the attempt to live a mythical life in a world not accomodated to such an existence. However sad, the loss of myth is necessary to our survival in a technological society which carries its own forms of sadness.

As someone who lived in the mythical universe of scarce vision and now has limited vision, I have come to know others' blindnesses, discovered more elemental connections--sky and earth, animals and all matter of plant and rock, as well as other "spheres" that can only be articulated through breath and music. To some extent, and here like the character, Molly Sweeney, I resented the strangeness and difficulty of recovered sight. Even "good" new vision is still foreign, still not one's "own." With clearer vision, I am, like Alan Strang, separated from my mythologies, a defrocked priestess, a fallen heroine. I had--and still have--to be normalized to everyday routines, many of which seem tainted, suspect, irrational, unsatisfying. As former priestess and heroine of my own story, I still retain the position of "dark trickSTAR"; *¹²--female trickster--and I see you all in a light you can never find.

If eyes play tricks, you can trick your eyes.
Things fall apart when the center fails--
unless you make the corolla rise
from eyes resolved to create what lasts.

(Jurich from "Macula 3")

Notes

Notes

¹ Observe some of the photographs in Fielding's book, *The Technique of Special Effects Cinematography*. For example, Fielding illustrates how "in-the-camera matte shots" alter real images by purposely obscuring parts of the image and later fitting into these spaces the desired objects, people, or landscapes (93-94). Many other effects are revealed, such as time lapse shots, "glass shots" and aerial-image printing.

² For a fascinating discussion of how eye and brain affect human perception in those with both

normal and abnormal vision, as well as case histories which describe the types of hallucinations patients experience, see Chapter Five of Ramachandran's book, entitled "The Secret Life of James Thurber" (85-112).

³ The enormity of the task in finding self and social relevance in and through a "disappeared reality" is lucidly presented by Reverend Thomas A. Carroll in his book on blindness. The extent of what the blind must accomplish with such sensory loss becomes inescapably evident in charts, such as Chart F entitled "'The Deprivations of the Congenitally Blind Compared with the Losses of the Adventitiously Blind" (278- 280).

⁴ Though Argus Panoptus (*argus* meaning "vigilant," "keen-eyed") with his many eyes--allegedly 100--was able to defeat Echidna, a fierce dragon, the god was finally overcome by Hermes who lulled Argus to sleep and then killed him (Jobes 122-123). Yet, this is a rare instance of "light"-- an astounding reservoir of brightness--being defeated. Only Hermes the trickster empowered by Zeus, the sky god and another trickster, could accomplish such a remarkable feat.

⁵ *Shiva* refers to the seven days set aside for the expression of grief for the death of a loved one. It is the week of mourning during which various customs are practiced and prohibitions are observed.

⁶ Lamm discusses other possible reasons for the covering of mirrors during ~ observance on 103-104.

⁷ The tragic result of returned vision to a man identified as S. B. who blind from 10 months old, had his sight restored at 52 years, is well documented by Gregory (194- 197). His experiences closely parallel that of the fictional character, Molly Sweeney. Trevor-Roper names S. B. as Simon Bradford and summarizes his case on p. 162.

⁸ While macular diseases are generally considered to afflict the diabetic and the older population, several types are distinctly genetic and appear in childhood. Two such diseases are Best's disease which produces an abnormal accumulation of biochemicals in the macula and Stargardt's disease thought to result from a missing enzyme ("Macular Degeneration" 9-10). Macular degeneration may also result from causes, such as solar burns, trauma to the eye, and degenerative myopia (Barnert and Faye 78).

⁹ See Chapters 1-3 in *Twilight* where Henry Grunwald discusses his early awareness of the disease, as well as his more successful encounters with doctors.

¹⁰ A fluorescein angiogram is a procedure during which the patient is injected with a fluorescent dye that highlights the circulatory system of the retina; a series of X-ray pictures reveals the passage of the dye through retinal arteries, veins, and capillaries in order that the physician may diagnose the particular disorder in the eye.

¹¹ The Bates method relies on improving vision by relieving both physical and psychological stress that may inhibit how the eye functions. Techniques for encouraging relaxation, the reliance on memory, and the use of imagination are among those described as relieving tension and restoring vision. Such practices as "palming"--covering one's eyes to encourage a "healing" blackness--and "shifting and swing"--methods to alleviate fixation and intense concentration--are detailed, and the beneficial effects are described.

¹² In my book *Scheherazade's Sisters: Trickster Heroines and Their Stories in World Literature* (Greenwood, 1998), I call the female trickster by the name of trickstar. The trickstar is different from her male counterpart in revealing an unusual verbal facility and psychological awareness. Most significantly, she has the ability to outwit oppressors and other misguided members

of the patriarchy with remarkable impunity; so charmed are they by her gracious presence and humorous discourse, that they become more rational, more humane, and even come to reward her for achieving such transformation! She brings truth and harmony into an otherwise cruel, hypocritical, and corrupt society.

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