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THE SATELLITE SYNDROME:
DISABILITY IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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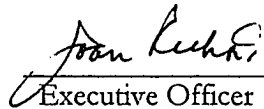
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PREFACE
Confessions of a Satellite

For years, we called what happened to Josh “the accident,” a mindless politeness that functioned as a means of skimming past the enormity of the event and the enormity of its impact on all our lives. The accident was, in fact, a crime. One day, when my father was at work and my older brother and I were at school, an unbalanced neighbor rang our bell and emptied a container of sulfuric acid into the face of my younger brother Josh, the child who had come running to the door. I imagine my mother, only a moment behind him, drying her hands on a towel on her way to the door; she had been washing dishes and never imagined, in our friendly, sixties-enlightened little community, that her four-year-old could be less than perfectly safe answering the door of his own home. In the aftermath of that day, Mom, Dad, and Josh spent three months at a U.S. Army burn unit in Texas. It was touch-and-go for awhile; Josh had third degree burns over more than 40% of his body and in the mid-seventies, treatments options for burn “victims,” even at U.S. Army medical centers, were less sophisticated than they are now. As many as half of the other burned children on the ward died without returning to their homes. But Josh survived—blind and badly scarred, his face and body red and raw, years of reconstructive surgeries ahead, and with our parents teetering on the brink of divorce, but he survived. Calling such an event an “accident” is rather an odd linguistic strategy, reducing the fact of trauma to mere incident, a cut finger, a fall from a tree—one of the ordinary scars or pitfalls of an ordinary childhood.

In later years, as Josh grew into a precocious consciousness of the politics enveloping his appearance and his disability, he became the first to reject the family

euphemism, teaching us all in some subtle way the wrong-ness of our own language in this respect. Today, our parents are so apt to reject their previous linguistic construction that they cannot even *recall* using the word “accident” in this way. And yet, despite all this, despite the right-ness of rejecting an “accidental” interpretation of the facts, I have now come to believe that there was some strange accuracy to the expression. After all, in a way, this *was* an accident, a random act; Josh was not a specific target, but was merely the person who happened to come to the door, and the bizarre logic that marked our home for attack certainly remains inscrutable. There is something about the word accident, ultimately, that erases all notion of intention, that insists on the innocence of the wounded individual. Perhaps, my young parents unwittingly embraced this terminology as a way of proclaiming the groundlessness of the crime. If the act itself was without foundation, then the child . . . and the parents must be blameless.

Or maybe the word “accident” stems from the real impossibility of assigning guilt in this situation: In the end, the person who burned Josh was found unfit to stand trial and was thus never prosecuted and never officially punished for what he did. “Accident” acknowledges, in a way, the ambiguity of the perpetrator’s status according to our code of justice. “Accident” thus becomes an expression of our simultaneous understanding of and dissatisfaction with the fact that this person can’t really have been responsible for what he did. So too, using the word “accident” reconstructs events in a way that removes both crime and criminal. If, after all, what happened is a crime, then Josh is tattooed as “victim,” the subject of a living history that constantly re-inscribes his passivity and his helplessness. According to this version of the story, the criminal would be the hero, the protagonist, the actor who

set everything in motion; the perpetrator thus becomes an almost superhuman being, determining the outcome of his victim's life. Perhaps my parents innocently understood the symbolic powers at work here, the burden of meaning attached to the phrase "crime victim," and made an unconscious decision to eliminate the criminal from my brother's history.

As the years passed, I think using the word "accident" must also have included our latent assessment of the impact this event had had on Josh's life and character. For while his blindness and his facial scarring certainly became essential factors in the way he ran his life and in the ways he interacted with the rest of humanity, those elements of his identity also came to be components of a wholly integrated person. Josh's blindness was and is an essential element of his character, his cognitive experience, and his politics, but it is not *the* essential fact of his life, that which *determines* who he is. And in that sense, perhaps, the family's attachment to the term "accident" persevered longer than it ought to have done; it was our unconscious insistence to the rest of the world that Josh's physical markings were not the exclusive measure of his being, that his appearance and his blindness were not the elemental attributes of his self, that they were, in fact, accidental.

The Satellite Identity

Of course, this tale is likely to be shocking to the reader. Even couched in the most analytical terms, the story of a toddler being deliberately burned with acid creates a visceral reaction. For each parent, it raises the specter of how truly vulnerable his or her child is and speaks to how absolutely impossible it is to provide adequate protection. For the rest of us, this story stirs a great cultural myth; it reminds us of

the random lurking terror against which social discipline is the sole fortress. The man who commits such an act of violence against a child is the demon we have all been taught to fear, to shun, and to keep in check. The traumatized child is a universal symbol of our own innocent selves desecrated by the fiend.

But strangely, for myself, the story no longer has any meaningful emotional value. It does not shock. It does not terrify. It does not depress. It is merely a story, so familiar in structure and content that it has assumed almost the quality of a fairy-tale. In fact, I have lost my ability to gauge its emotional impact and often find myself shocked and affected not by my own telling, but rather by the impact that telling has on others. My blithe reassurances as to my brother's present health and well-being—circumstances having a much greater present importance for me than the fact of his disability—are incomprehensible to those newly initiated into the story. Those who hear this tale for the first time are themselves injured by it; the burned child is so present to their imagination that they often become unable to hear what that child has become, a thoroughly prosperous adult. Or if they are able to process some kind of "update," their reaction is most often fraught with amazement and pity—they cannot fully believe that a child so damaged would ever recover, or could ever turn his scars into a functional part of his identity. "How wonderful!" they exclaim, finding Josh's personal success a remarkable and inspiring event.

Such exclamations are, of course, entirely comprehensible. In the space of a few minutes, the listener is forced to span years of living, of experience, of adjustment—and it simply cannot be done. It is impossible to comprehend, to process this particular life and experience within the time allotted. For the listener (or perhaps, in this case, for the reader), Josh must remain, for some time, the

victimized child—helpless, crippled, inert. But for those of us who own the story, who have lived to recount it again and again, it is understandably irritating to listen to these reactions, to have Josh repeatedly, insistently relegated to a position of helplessness and to hear people expound on the miraculous nature of his recovery. For in fact, years of experience have taught us that the greatest disability Josh faces is the attitude of a society that believes it is miraculous when any person marked by violence or physical difference achieves even an ordinary measure of personal or professional success. And I find it difficult, sometimes impossible, to conceal my impatience in these moments, to stop myself from scolding the listener, to hold off on explaining the political and social bias inherent in the amazement of my audience.

By framing this impatience in political terms, I am, however, being somewhat disingenuous. For my frustration in this situation is necessarily more complex than the preceding explanation allows. In fact, my exasperation with the pitying listener described above stems in part from a rather ordinary case of sibling rivalry—my brother is the “special” one, worthy of attention and praise, while I myself have no part in “his” story. And while the rivalry here is perhaps more involved than the competitive struggles of many other siblings, at its foundation it bespeaks the same concern—to wit, a sibling’s desire to be noticed, counted, and affirmed. In some other respects, however, this particular rivalry is unusual. In the first place, the competition has little to do with parents and family and is much more focused on strangers and outsiders, a public which sees Josh for the first time, or which sees him again and again as a mysterious and peculiar human object. For in truth, my brother is undeniably the center of attention whenever he is outside his own familiar circle; and those who share space with Josh are likely to be rendered nearly invisible by an

overpowering public interest in his unusual appearance. His physical strangeness is so marked that he becomes an automatic focal point, a center of visual “gravity,” as it were, around which all other visible objects must revolve. Where Josh is present, the visible universe orbits around him—all other bodies are secondary, their meaning and importance calculated according to a scale that measures their relationship with this central human subject; they are, in essence, “satellites” to his “primary” body. So, the public gaze actually winds up having a doubly damaging effect: All the while that Josh must endure this necessarily unwelcome attention, such a gaze simultaneously effaces the presence and identity of other human subjects sharing the same space. For the gaze that scopes and contains Josh also disallows any other human image; so long as Josh is the object of this gaze, any person who keeps public company with this extraordinary human icon—girlfriend, guide, teacher, friend, sibling—on some level ceases to exist. And ironically, this same gaze, even while it ignores and erases the human subjectivity of Josh’s apparently “normal” companions, also refuses the humanity of the subject which compels its attention. Rather than celebrating the extraordinary body, the intruding gaze is reductive in the extreme, by its very fixedness erasing the possibility of human interiority; the gaze marginalizes and dehumanizes, forcing Josh into an existence defined exclusively by his remarkable appearance; the gaze judges and disciplines, insisting on its right to evaluate and define human subjectivity, and rejecting the body that fails to meet the unspoken criteria which fix the limits of the human form. In effect, the gaze that refuses to acknowledge the human presence of the “satellite” simultaneously denies the visible humanity of the “primary” body, thus deftly performing a kind of double erasure.

The performance of this double erasure is perhaps most aptly represented in an experience Josh and I often encountered as youngsters. While out and about together, we were regularly approached by curiosity-seekers, inadequately socialized adults who would confront us with the demand: “What happened to him?” The phrasing of this question—its neat presumption of Josh’s inability to speak for himself, and its forceful insistence on my own role as pure interpreter, a being without identity apart from the monstrous object to which she is attached—is elegant in its economy. In one fell swoop, Josh and I are both reduced to non-human status; we become a perambulating freak show fitted up with its own explanatory device. Of course, the fact that I was often acting as Josh’s guide served further to complicate my own sense of self when this question was posed. If, after all, I was not meaningful on my own account but derived my significance from my ability to mediate for my brother, did not my role as guide serve further to validate my being? Was not my prosthetic activity—my role as speaker for and guide of a more significant self—the performance that defined me? In fact, I ultimately came to believe of myself that I was virtually unworthy of interest; and my sense of my own significance became bound almost entirely to my sense of Josh’s significance; so long as I was connected to him, so long as I was a necessary adjunct to his blindness, I was all right; I was visible at least insofar as I was attached to him.

This combination of circumstances—my sense of “the accident” as now virtually void of emotional value, and my vested understanding of myself as appendage or prosthesis—has done much to inform my own rather quirky and sometimes upsetting set of social practices. In the first place, I have unconsciously developed and now consciously cultivate a collection of strategies which work to

center me in any group. I am an unashamed exhibitionist, with an extensive history of baring myself, both physically and psychically, in the most public circumstances. I sunbathe nude. I deliberately expose promising glimpses of flesh at academic cocktail parties, sometimes even while teaching. I am inappropriately intimate, confessing emotional and erotic details of my life to strangers on the subway or to mere acquaintances. I talk too loudly and too much. And I enjoy the shyness of others, touching people publicly and watching them squirm. This prefatory “confession” is, of course, of a piece with my other exhibitionist acts—a moment of intimate exposure against the backdrop of an otherwise objective analytical discourse. Part of all this, certainly, is a plea for the attention that glanced off me as a child, an attempt to fulfill that component of my being which must still feel starved for notice, but this explanation is incomplete in its simplicity. In fact, I have come to believe that while my own satellite psyche may be driven partially by a desire for attention, it is driven as much or more by a profound need to manage the outside world, to hold the encroaching public at bay.

Exhibitionism may seem like a bizarre strategy to effect control of an anonymous public, but it works amazingly well. If one begins by behaving outrageously, one may also begin by anticipating an outraged response. If one incites a riot, the resulting uproar is still a consequence of some deliberate catalytic act. In the midst of my most excessive public performances, even as I am being judged (and often unfavorably) by others, I still have a sense that I am the one with the power, the one who sets the terms, the one who invites or rejects, the one who employs her own spectacular performance to control the direction of the gaze and the opinions of the onlookers. So too, this behavior becomes a means not only of inviting public

notice, but also a way of establishing boundaries; exposing oneself, no matter how intimately, is always an excellent tactic for creating distance. Ultimately, this ingrained exhibitionism, even while it satisfies my infantile desire for attention, also serves another purpose: It reinforces my own failing sense of myself as a *manager* of public attention. It soothes that area of the brain that tells me my very existence is dependent on my skills and powers as a mediator. While I do now and have always wanted to help shield my brother from the brutality of pity-mongers and curiosity-seekers, just as important has been my own sense that I am no one without that mediating role. It is my *job* to manage the gaping crowds; my *job* to manage the spectacle for them, my *job* to manage my charge—to keep him abreast of where we are, what’s ahead, what’s going on. It is my mission in life to carve out this place for myself, to make sure that my value as guide and mediator is noticed and known, to maintain this spot where I cannot be trampled, this spot where my existence seems necessary. If I control the public, I exist; if I fail in my control, I must cease to be.

It should come as no surprise, then, that I am writing this now, that I tell this story again and again. What greater means is there for effecting control, after all, than narrative? Like my corporeal exhibitionism and my other inappropriate intimacies, the repetition of this tale has become a vehicle both for gaining attention and for exercising power. This story has worked as a kind of talisman, or rather, it is a magic spell, opening doors, enthralling audiences, moving cold hearts to pity, destabilizing authority.

But there is also this problem—that the magic words begin to sound like nonsense, that what once was sacred loses all personal meaning and value, that one begins to lose sight of what the story may mean for others. In fact, the story

becomes mere commodity, a form of cash easily traded for a world of goods and services that might otherwise be beyond my reach. I offer forth this very dissertation as a guilty document, its scholarship and theoretical content tainted by its foundation—a cheap bit of melodrama wrought from my brother’s skin and blood. Even in this moment, I am still trading on the capital of Josh’s “accident.”

There is the added difficulty, of course, that the story is not even my own. All the while I turn this tale to account, I am cashing in not only on the pain and suffering of another, but even on his identity. I am not burned; I am not blind; I am not disfigured; ultimately, I have no claim to found my own narrative and identity on my brother’s life. I have no right to claim this all as autobiography, or if I do, I must acknowledge that I am writing the autobiography of someone else. This is the tired problem of paternalism, the colonizing of the exotic subject for the sake of asserting one’s power, authority, and identity. As companion, as guide, as narrator, my own fear of erasure inclines me anxiously to silence my brother. I may resent the intrusive stranger, the one who forces me to speak for Josh, but it sometimes seems that this stranger is the one who makes me real, who lends meaning to the prosthetic appendage, who constructs my importance. My role as satellite compels me to tell someone else’s tale, to re-think myself as an authorized source, an authority permitted to appropriate my brother’s life and identity.

The problems with this performance are manifold: First of all, my own desire to narrate and to assume the mantle of disabled identity is a robbery of my brother. If I tell this story at all, I must, in a sense, be telling it for him. His story becomes my property. As the primary sufferer of the “accident” and as the chief actor in the unfolding of his own life, all this is his to tell. And if his life is to be

commodified, surely it is Josh who ought to reap a profit from the telling. By appropriating his story, I enter again onto the familiar ground of management and control; my act presumes that he cannot speak for himself and I silence him by re-constructing his story as my own, thus re-enacting the erasure performed by the curious stranger. But there is more: My own narrative is also a kind of fraud—my own suffering and my sense of my own insufficiency are inauthentic when compared with the actuality of Josh’s scars. This story then, even while it is being taken from my brother, ceases to contain its own unique value; instead it becomes a reproduction, a mere echo of the truth which can belong exclusively to the individual physically marked by the events of the tale. My expression and understanding of blindness, of disfigurement, and of social insensitivity are secondary and inferior to the actual, authentic experience of my brother. Ironically, this problem of authenticity functions then to alienate me further from the identity I attempt to appropriate. I fear my audience must always be thirsting for the original narrative, that my own tale (and thus my life) partake of the quality of hearsay, a retold story, an altered version, by its very nature illegitimate, incredible, unreliable. By writing this, then, I enact my own “satellite” status, re-inscribing my own inauthenticity and my secondary nature; I am not, then, and cannot be, the hero of my own life. My desire to put myself at the center relies on a narrative performance that centers another, leaving myself again and always in an unstable orbit.

The question of authenticity invites yet another concern, for if my own life and identity are a kind of counterfeit of disability, this is a fraud which must be perpetrated outside the satellite relationship. That is, identity here is dependent not only on the connection between primary and secondary bodies, but also on the

observation of these bodies by an external spectator. The fraud cannot be enacted between my brother and myself, but must instead be imposed on an audience. It is not my brother, but an *outsider* who determines the legitimacy of my claim to tell this tale; it is the objective observer who questions my authenticity; and while it is my desire, above all, to claim the interest and attention of that neutral party, to be accepted by that individual as a reliable negotiator of narrative currency, it is also my objective to stand in my brother's place, to conceal while I mediate, to claim privilege which would otherwise belong to him, to "pass" before this external authority. So, even while I rob my brother and affirm my own "secondary" or "satellite" position, I also undertake a narrative performance that is a kind of "con," attempting to dupe the public into believing in the authentic nature of my inauthentic self.

In fact, my interactions with others in the disability community are often fraught with the unspoken tension that comes from "passing." On a Disability Studies list-serve, I am worried that fellow listmembers will dismiss my contributions if they discover that I am not *really* disabled. I fear that I am excluded from Disability Studies activities because I have no legitimate claim. My efforts to contribute to the development of a Disability Studies program at CUNY's Hunter College are met with skepticism on the part of the two faculty most actively engaged in this process. At a meeting with Simi Linton, I sense her fishing around for the nature of my (presumably hidden) disability; Phyllis Rubinfeld is more direct: She simply asks me (when we first speak, by phone) if I am disabled. Both express similar (and very justifiable) concerns about nondisabled individuals undertaking work that should belong to people with disabilities. My head echoes with the public refrain of the Disability Rights Movement: "Nothing about us without us." Though

I have fruitful sessions with each woman, I leave both meetings with a familiar feeling of inadequacy. Again, I do not measure up. I am not special, not qualified, not the genuine article. Again, I am a mere satellite, effaced by my own performance as mediating body. And, on some level, what Simi and Phyllis see, what they legitimately guard against, is the very thing I represent. In a way, I might just as well be every well-intentioned parent, sibling, spouse, aide, medical professional, teacher, social worker, or priest who ever tried to manage and direct the life of a disabled person. I am less crude, certainly, than the arrogant miss who tries by force to ferry my brother through an intersection he does not want to cross; I have greater analytical powers, I think, than poor, sweating Jerry Lewis who cannot understand why “Jerry’s kids” have turned against him (after he’s done so much for them!). But if I am more gracious, more sophisticated, more politically astute, I am yet a beast of the same stripe, a person who seeks to affirm her own identity by her absolute seizure of the exotic subject, at one moment claiming her “normalcy” in contrast to the spectacle of disfigurement and disability and at the next moment attempting to pass herself off as a legitimate member of the disability community—both performances requiring a kind of control of disabled identity that politically savvy people with disabilities are rightly unwilling to concede to nondisabled fellows. After all, when it comes to disability activism, the legacy of nondisabled paternalism has been positively crippling. It’s infuriating, but Simi and Phyllis are right in their assessment; I am a character to be treated with some mistrust.

At the same time, the feeling that I need to “pass” is also provoking. Disability Studies is, presumably, about the nature of disability as social construction. According to this model, disability is not located in the body, a defect belonging to

the individual and comprising some deviation from a prescribed biological “norm,” but is rather a social defect, a set of barriers or proscriptions erected by a culture that requires the exclusion of certain individuals in order to understand itself as normative. So, on the most material level, Disability Studies invites us to see wheelchair users as being disabled by society’s refusal to provide adequate curb cuts and blind people as disabled by new touch-screen computer technology. In each case, the disability is located in the social arena rather than in the somatic realm. On another level, shifting cultural standards for the way we define abstractions like “beauty” and “intelligence” function to exclude or “disable” different individuals or groups depending on the definition of the moment. If this, then, is the premise upon which Disability Studies is conducted, I cannot help but rail against the exclusive aura of this small community of scholars and activists. What right, after all, does any scholar have to question me about the nature of my disability? Even if we dismiss the bias inherent in the question (i.e., you must meet certain physical standards in order to belong to this group), even if we forgive the implicit insult (i.e., you don’t measure up), does not Disability Studies itself render the nature of the question absurd? If I were disabled, wouldn’t the disability reside outside my body anyway? If our real interest is in social constructions, why do I find that my colleagues are so preoccupied with my body? And though I already know the answer to this question—for good or ill, our corporeal forms mark our social position and experience—though I understand and even accept, on some level, my own partial exclusion from the community of disability interest, I am still frustrated by my own position, partly because I believe that Disability Studies needs to encourage the broadest possible participation into its inquiry. It needs to break down the

boundaries that suggest any radical division between disabled and nondisabled bodies. Ultimately, when my own identity is questioned, those who wish to read me as disabled or nondisabled give weight to these categories and to the idea of the normative; they reinforce the cultural code that disciplines bodies and that lumps “the disabled” into a single massive ghetto.

But there is also this: My life *has* been structured by the experience of disability, by the reaction of others to the damaged sibling unit of which I composed an essential part. I have not been blind, but I have lived with blindness, with the limitations and requirements our culture imposes on blindness. As mediator, as satellite, as prosthesis, I have been brought into play as a functionary to blindness; I have been permanently sensitized to pedestrian obstacles in public and private spaces. Though my brother now lives 3,000 miles away and rarely visits, though I have no other blind friends, I struggle to keep chairs tucked under the table and furniture out of “pathways” in the house. I like to line up my kitchen knives in order by size and I excel at sorting books, files, linens, and spice cabinets; people think my impulse to sort and arrange is neurotic, but perhaps I am urged on by the necessity of my own latent blindness, an experience that shapes my psyche even while it leaves my body untouched. I am willing to concede here that this claim may be extreme—perhaps it would be fair to say that my experience marks me without really making me blind—but should I have to trot this story out every time I express an interest in disability? And is this story really an appropriate *entree*, anyway? Should my claim in my brother’s disability be the seal that enables others to regard my interest in disability as legitimate? Quite apart from the fact that my appropriation of this identity is dubious politically, and despite the fact that I have transformed this

experience into commercially viable public narrative, my own story continues to feel deeply and paradoxically personal. To be questioned or prodded on this subject is a violating experience, a re-enactment of the incessant scenes with the strangers who used to plague us when Josh and I were children. And to tell the story, especially under duress, is also and always a performance of my own erasure, an anxious acknowledgment that I am not the special one, not the primary identity, that I don't really belong, and that I have no real value or contribution apart from my association with this other and more spectacular self.

This may help explain why I am sometimes emotionally violent with my audience.

What Happened at the Dickens Universe

Several years ago, I was privileged to attend the "Dickens Universe," a week-long summer conference hosted by the University of California at Santa Cruz. During the course of the week, graduate students from across the country attend daily lectures and Dickens-oriented social gatherings, lead morning seminars for undergraduate and continuing education students, and participate in afternoon seminars directed by senior faculty. The experience culminates in a more formal weekend conference at which distinguished scholars present papers on Dickens and other Victorian subjects. The Dickens Universe is designed, in large part, to meet the needs of our increasingly professionalized graduate careers—it is intended as a comparatively friendly initiation into public speaking, into beginning to think of our mentors as peers; it is a lovely, friendly way to attend one's first academic conference.

Ultimately, the Dickens Universe is almost like summer camp for graduate students.

And one of the most wonderful things about the camp is that the counselors are our favorite faculty. We get to lunch with our advisors, go for nature hikes with mental giants, party 'til the wee hours with the esteemed professors who grade our papers. There is a deliberate, equalizing effect to these arrangements—ahh, we sigh . . . at last—we are colleagues.

But of course, this is only the beginning of a new relationship, the merest start at an equality that is *probably never fully realized*. Naturally, there is some awkwardness at first. The graduate students, at least, begin without knowing one another, and without a fully defined construct to govern our behavior. For myself, and I suspect, for most of the others, there was a wary, defensive feeling at work, a gnawing away of that hungry, hungry question: Do they like me? In my own experience, this feeling was nowhere more intense than in our daily graduate seminar. As each session progressed, I felt dismissed by the senior faculty member moderating the discussion—it seemed as though she gave short shrift to my comments, as though she were always passing me over for another student she found smarter or more interesting. Then, one day, her attitude appeared to have changed; she gave me more time in class; she lingered over my questions and responses. She seemed focused on me, interested. This made me feel great, respected, approved . . . until I learned, that afternoon, that another faculty member had told this woman the tale of Josh's "accident."

Immediately, her attention and interest seemed suspect, illegitimate, prurient. I read her increased focus and apparent approval as a further dismissive performance. She was interested, I thought, because she looked and listened past myself into another identity, into a history and character more complex and

deserving than my own. That evening, at a festive dinner jointly attended by students and faculty, I told her that I knew she had heard my brother's story. She acknowledged this was so and seemed instantly attentive and sympathetic, but seeing her in this vulnerable moment, I experienced some feeling, some reaction I have yet to understand fully, perhaps rage, perhaps sadness, perhaps insecurity. Perhaps, indeed, I felt erased, since my value, in her eyes, seemed so dependent on this association. In any event, my response felt almost programmed; without forethought, without conscious motive, I announced to her that the story was a fiction, and I watched as this enormity entered her being and slackened her face. The next moment, I told her I had been joking, and that the story was, in fact, true.

It will probably come as no surprise that she seemed never to wish to speak with me again. I had, very deservedly, earned her enmity. And yet, I find it difficult, even now, to make a genuine apology. Surely, her treatment of me was wrong, her interest in me the vulgar interest of a passing motorist gawking at the scene of an accident. Surely, her friendly behavior was motivated by a sense of my "specialness," by a sense of her own importance in relation to myself, of my importance in relation to my brother . . . And yet, this too—this attempted self-justification—is a by-product of satellite experience, a reaction not to a particular moment of subtly tainted sympathy, but rather, a programmed reaction to the world of offensively sympathetic souls who peopled my childhood. It is as though, in my moment of rage, as I psychically violate this comparative innocent, I am able at last to satisfy all the defensive desires of my youth. Now, as a woman, I have finally perfected the cutting retort; I have the power, finally, to face down a curious adult, to protect myself and my brother from an invasively questioning public. But this power,

ironically, comes too late. My brother is a mature and sophisticated adult with an enormous capacity for reason, for language, and for negotiation and compromise; he no longer requires my feeble protection. I am no longer surrounded by an encroaching public, whose curiosity can feel so all-consuming, whose need to gaze and to question can operate as a form of personal attack. Indeed, my brother is no longer a frequent companion; my connection to him and my consequent satellite identity are largely invisible. So too, my opportunity to lash out at the threatening stranger, to save my brother and myself from the continual assault which worked to make both of us who we have become, has long since passed. All that remains of that opportunity is this complex legacy: An occasional misfired insult, a massive psychological structure which enables me constantly to construct and dismantle my sense of self, and a profusion of writing intended ultimately to justify the existence and identity of the satellite.

About Language, Definitions, Terminology

As in any field that concerns itself with identity, there is discussion and disagreement within the Disability Studies community about the use of labels. There is no doubt that, regardless of the terminology used, naming is a political act, and one with serious social consequences. The language we use to identify and categorize, to describe bodies and minds, behavior and appearance, to distinguish sameness or difference, to align ourselves with or against, often has an insidious effect. Our words have a habit of misbehaving, of underpinning cultural constructions that may be exclusive or belittling, of betraying our hidden prejudices.

For this reason, this dissertation deliberately avoids a standard in describing identities. This means that the text which follows sometimes employs the outmoded use of he/him to include both male and female, that it sometimes switches unexpectedly between masculine and feminine pronouns, and that it sometimes uses awkward constructions like s/he. Of more immediate concern, given its theme, this dissertation uses a diverse and shifting lexicon to speak about what (for the moment) we will simply call “disability” (even though the definition of this word is itself hotly contested). While it is currently the one favored by scholars and activists, this word is certainly not embraced uncritically by those who use it, nor is it likely that the term will maintain its current place of favor. For ultimately, there is no way to name, or to assert any lasting and satisfactory definition for the body or the person about whom we seek to write, in large part because “disability” is a social construct, its nature being determined by a culture and technology which are in a constant state of change.

Consequently, this text, while often using the word “disability,” also uses words like “freak,” terms like “lame” or “crippled,” or phrases like “human alterity.” Individuals or characters may be referred to as “the blind” or “the disabled,” reducing the description of the person to a naming of the disability (which, strictly speaking, may not be disabling). In addition, specific incarnations of disability (blindness, for instance) are sometimes used as examples to make certain points about disability more generally, making it seem, perhaps, that the writer believes all forms of disability to be interchangeable. This text also sometimes chooses to consider illness and disease as forms of disability, a choice which may not be acceptable according to the most theoretically rigorous definitions of disability.

Though this language may sometimes seem unclear, insensitive, even shocking, its use is deliberate; it is intended to complicate the reader's experience. Since language is often responsible for invisibly shaping our ideas about disability, it seems important here to render this language as visible as possible, to discourage the complacency into which we all fall. As descriptors shift, as the naming of the disabled subject changes, the reader is invited to experience disability not as a static category, a discreet "other" easily disciplined, tamed by conventional labeling; instead, disability becomes a dynamic identity, fluid, sometimes inclusive, sometimes exclusive, but constantly being re-invented, re-imagined, re-categorized, its uncertain boundaries often melting seamlessly into the realm of the "normal" or the "ordinary."

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As anyone reading this will certainly know, a dissertation doesn’t ever come to closure without the guidance and support of a fairly extensive community, not only the formal readers and advisors, but also friends, family, even strangers who wind up as sometimes only partially-willing sounding boards for one’s ideas and writing. To all those who have served in this capacity for this project—people whom I may have forgotten (or whose names I may never have known), fellow researchers who offered search tips in the recesses of Butler Library, e-colleagues on the DS-Hum listserve who were always ready with information and whose ongoing Disability dialogue has often opened up new avenues in my own thinking, dinner companions who got an earful of Dickens and disability when all they really wanted was for me to pass the salt, my students at Hunter College who allowed me to work through some of these ideas in the classroom, assorted friends who read bits and pieces of this manuscript, who listened and talked about Disability, representation,

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INTRODUCTION

Protective Custody: The Elephant Man Sets the Stage

Early one June morning in 1886, an extraordinary figure, hooded and draped in black, appeared on a crowded railway platform at Liverpool Street Station in London. Returning from Belgium where he had been exhibiting himself, friendless and destitute, this figure was Joseph Carey Merrick, commonly known as the Elephant Man. Though his deformities were concealed by his unusual attire, Merrick's peculiar appearance nevertheless drew the attention and interest of passers-by. One contemporary imagines the scene:

Merrick was in his alarming outdoor garb. He would be harried by an eager mob as he hobbled along the quay. They would run ahead to get a look at him. They would lift the hem of his cloak to peep at his body. He would try to hide in the train ... but never could he be free from that ring of curious eyes or from those whispers of fright and aversion. (Treves 234)

From the gathering crowd in the station, a horde which is sometimes depicted as hostile but which is generally thought to have been at least dangerously eager, Merrick was rescued by the police, who took him into protective custody, commandeering a third-class waiting room for this purpose, and barring its doors against the mass of humanity anxious for a glimpse of the strange figure being sheltered within.

It is a dramatic scene, one which has, in fact, been formally dramatized quite a number of times (by David Lynch, Bernard Pomerance, Thomas Gibbons, William Turner, Roy Faudree, and David Constantine, among others); the scene is generally portrayed as a pivotal moment in Merrick's life. In narrative terms, this gesture, this withdrawal into protective custody while the mob outside presses ravenously against the waiting room doors, signals a shift in Merrick's existence, from a tormented

youth, existing in many respects as a kind of public obscenity, to a more demure and quiescent maturity, during which Merrick is discreetly housed in rooms at the London Hospital and visited by ladies and gentlemen, nobility, even royalty. But while Merrick's later life may have been more peaceful and more refined than his youth, it is not clear that this fleeting moment in the railway station marks any essential change in the nature of the Elephant Man's existence.

In order to understand the potential significance of this scene at Liverpool Street Station, it is useful to know something of the details of Merrick's life. He was born in August 1862 in Leicester, the oldest child of a respectable working-class family. He displayed no manifest abnormalities at his birth nor during his infancy, and the disease which later disfigured him (now thought to have been Proteus Syndrome) developed slowly during the course of his childhood. Merrick seems to have had an unhappy time during his youth. Following the death of his mother when he was only ten years old, Merrick acquired an unsympathetic stepmother who apparently taunted him because he was unable to earn a sufficient living. Though he was employed for some time rolling cigars, "the increasing weight and clumsiness of [Merrick's] deformed right arm made it impossible for him to carry out the finer movement necessary to the craft" and he was forced to give this work up (Howell and Ford 73). A subsequent job selling clothing from door-to-door, given his growing disfigurement, was predictably unsuccessful and at seventeen, unwelcome at his father's home and disabled from any form of employment available to him, Merrick entered the Leicester Union Workhouse. He resided there, with what misery may be imagined, until just before his twenty-second birthday, when, having made

arrangements with local entertainer-manager Sam Torr, Merrick signed himself out of the workhouse and began his life as a professional spectacle.¹

By the time he was twenty-two, Merrick's corporeal transformation had progressed so far that work as an exhibit likely seemed the most reasonable and attractive of his limited alternatives. A hip injury during childhood had early impeded Merrick's ability to walk and the subsequent over-growth of the bones in his legs and feet made getting around even more difficult. Merrick's right arm and hand were also unusually and irregularly enlarged, making it almost impossible for him to use that hand for ordinary purposes. Most significantly, the bones in Merrick's skull were over-grown in an irregular configuration, masking his facial expression, occluding one eye, distorting his lips and palate, and rendering his speech incomprehensible to strangers; this excessive bone growth also meant that Merrick's head was unusually heavy, making it impossible for him to lie down to sleep due to the danger of fracturing or dislocating his neck. This uncontrolled bone growth was accompanied by a similar growth of the nerves and skin so that much of Merrick's body, including his face and head, were covered with warty tumors or large, pendulous flaps of skin. Merrick's ostensible autobiography² offers the following physical description:

¹ Torr had actually formed a consortium for the exhibition of Merrick in various locations and venues.

² "The Autobiography of Joseph Carey Merrick" is a pamphlet produced by Merrick's manager as part of his exhibition paraphernalia. Of questionable authenticity, the pamphlet is likely co-written by Merrick and a professional hawker, perhaps Torr himself. In and of itself, this text offers an interesting opportunity to study the relationship of representation, suggesting the following questions (among others): To whom does Merrick's story belong? To himself? The showman? The public? What is a "true" representation? One that offers bare facts? One that encodes the life, contextualizing it for public consumption?

The measurement round my head is 36 inches, there is a large substance of flesh at the back as large as a breakfast cup, the other part in a manner of speaking is like hills and valleys, all lumped together, while the face is such a sight that no one could describe it. The right hand is almost the size and shape of an Elephant's fore-leg, measuring 12 inches round the wrist and five inches round one of the fingers; the other hand and arm is no larger than that of a girl ten years of age, although it is well proportioned. My feet and legs are covered with thick lumpy skin, also my body like that of an Elephant, and almost the same colour, in fact, no one would believe until they saw it, that such a thing could exist. (223)

The bone and fleshy pendulous mass growing from Merrick's upper lip as well as his roughened skin offered the basis for his being represented to the public as "Half a Man & Half an Elephant" or as the "Elephant Man," an appellation which has now stuck solidly through more than a century.

Merrick's career as a freak was rather short-lived. Despite the success of his "act" (Merrick managed to save £50 in less than two years), stricter enforcement of public "decency" laws in the 1880s made Merrick's life as a freak particularly difficult, as again and again his show was shut down by police and the constant relocations became inconvenient from a physical as well as a financial standpoint. It was during this period of difficulties, sometime in November 1884, while Merrick was being displayed in the Whitechapel Road (a thoroughfare shared by the London Hospital) that the Elephant Man had his first encounter with Frederick Treves, the young surgeon often hailed as Merrick's "rescuer" or "savior." During this early rendezvous (really a series of encounters, as Treves first saw Merrick in his showplace, then at the hospital, then at a professional gathering), Treves interviewed Merrick, conducted a physical examination, had clinical photographs taken, and presented Merrick to his learned colleagues at the London Pathological Society as a puzzling medical case. Soon after this meeting, Merrick was forced to abandon a life

of exhibition in England. But a year on the Continent also met with only limited success. As in England, Merrick's show was routinely closed by European police due to its "indecent" nature. His Continental tour terminated with Merrick being stripped of his savings and abandoned by an unscrupulous manager. The Elephant Man made his own way back to England, winding up at the Liverpool Street Station where this chapter begins.

While holding him in protective custody, the police, discovering that their strange detainee was associated with Treves, called for the doctor, who took charge of Merrick and returned with him to London Hospital. At the hospital, a fund was raised to provide for Merrick's permanent shelter and Treves undertook a course of "treatment" for his new patient which included daily baths and his introduction to "normal" domestic life. It was in this place, in the company of Treves and other gentlefolk, and occupying his time with such genteel hobbies as reading, conversation, and model-building that Merrick passed the few remaining years of his life. On Friday, April 11, 1890, Merrick's lifeless body was discovered by two hospital attendants. There is some debate as to the cause of his death, particularly whether it was accidental or deliberately self-inflicted, but the body was found in apparently peaceful repose, lying supine on Merrick's bed, a position which everyone knew it was impossible for the Elephant Man to assume without risk to his life.

The dramatization of the scene at the railway station and the inclination to see this moment as a demarcating line in Merrick's life seem to be altogether natural impulses. The eager mob is a terrifying animal and its shadow compels the audience's understanding of Merrick's life on stage. When we imagine Merrick as freak, we are haunted by the voices that cry out in terror and disgust. When we think of Merrick's

frail and solitary figure set apart from humanity by the conventions of the exhibition (platform, curtains, lighting, etc.), we are inclined to believe that Treves' assessment of Merrick's figure as "the embodiment of loneliness" is entirely apt (231).

Moreover, it is not only Merrick's loneliness that we deplore. The appetite of the crowd is a fearful thing; its desire to see Merrick, its sense of the Elephant Man as object, as commodity, creates an uneasy equation. For when the body is a commodity, subject to purchase, it also becomes symbolically vulnerable; the human object consumed by staring eyes is feast and sexual object as well as spectacle. As Leslie Fiedler has written:

All freaks are perceived to one degree or another as erotic. Indeed, abnormality arouses in some "normal" beholders a temptation to go beyond looking to *knowing* in the full carnal sense the ultimate other. That desire is itself felt as freaky, however, since it implies not only longing for degradation but a dream of breaching the last taboo against miscegenation. (137)³

The desire of the crowd is indefinite, insatiable, uncontrollable, savage; its appetites are terrifying by their indistinction, their plurality. Bernard Pomerance gives life to this idea in the words of the Conductor who helps to protect Merrick: "They wanted to rip him to pieces. I've never seen anything like it. It was like being Gordon at bleedin' Khartoum" (13, scene v). There is a sense in which to be regarded is to be raped, to be raped is to be killed, to be killed is to be eaten. While we imagine Merrick huddled in the third-class waiting room, this is the subtext at

³ In "Viewing the Elephant Man" (*PMLA*, Oct 1989), William E. Holladay and Stephen Watt comment that Fiedler's supposition is supported by "the great body of film theory that locates one pleasure of the cinema in voyeurism and dominance" as well as being supported by David Lynch's vision in *The Elephant Man* (1980): "In Lynch's film, when the porter brings a crowd of onlookers to the hospital to see Merrick, the camera captures and returns to a man who, while he forces two young women to look at and even kiss Merrick, fondles and licks them in perverse sexual arousal" (876).

hand. The entire history of Merrick's life as exhibit flashes before our eyes, symbolically contained within this tableau. Behind this bent and fragile form stretches a life which is horrifying to contemplate, a long reflection of this particular moment. The audience imagines that life for Merrick is simply a variation on this theme, that he lives as "a hunted being" (Kendal 283), the pathetic quarry of a ravening horde, which is held back for a moment by the apparently benevolent hand of institutional authority. It is no wonder, then, that sources tend to regard Treves as Merrick's rescuer (Larson 336; Simon 403; Constantine 67; etc.), that the move into the comparative tranquillity of London Hospital is interpreted as Merrick's coming "safely into harbour" (Howell and Ford 120).

What I would like to suggest is this: That rather than seeing this scene in the railway station as marking a boundary between Merrick's old life and a new, more desirable one, that we should instead think of this moment as symbolic of Merrick's existence as a whole. For this choreography—the contest between the crowd and the police, the transfer of Merrick from one form of protective custody into another, the sheltered Merrick mute and paralyzed—this dance is an elaborate demonstration of the ongoing significance of Merrick's extraordinary body.⁴

While Merrick may have been turned out of his home and driven out of work, while paying spectators may have swooned and fainted at the site of him, Merrick is far from being treated as worthless. In fact, he embodies an astonishing power and value. The crowd in the station is filled with desire to see him; the police own the necessity of protecting him; Treves understands that this figure is worthy of rescue. And underlying each of these attitudes is the same intuitive act, a tacit

⁴ The term "extraordinary body" is borrowed from Rosemarie Garland Thomson.

acknowledgement that the subject which is centered in this performance has an unusual proprietary value, that the owner, manager, agent, interpreter, or contact person for the Elephant Man has at his disposal an asset which must be jealously guarded, which requires and which is worthy of vigilant protection.

The relationship that begins to unfold itself—this peculiar bond between the disabled figure as valued person-object and a mediating figure whom we call the “satellite”—will be the central subject of this dissertation. Though this term and this relationship will be further elaborated as we proceed, it is useful to observe at this point that Merrick, despite his apparent lack of agency, is centered within the context established here; he is the primary body. Those who orbit around this central figure, showmen and spectators, police and physicians, are also understood by and within the context that centers the Elephant Man; they are satellites to his primary body, revolving around and achieving their significance, their meaning and identity (at least for us) by their relation to the disabled figure at the center.

Many interpreters have noted that certain key elements of Merrick’s life never really changed with his move into the London Hospital. David Lynch and Bernard Pomerance in particular, the two great popularizers of Merrick’s story for twentieth-century audiences, offer interpretations of Merrick’s life which explicitly compare the role of Treves, Merrick’s ostensible rescuer, with that of the generic “showman” who ostensibly exploited Merrick for his value as exhibit.⁵ And there is

⁵ There is a great debate regarding the apparent exploitation of freaks in the exhibition business. One of Merrick’s managers, Tom Norman, “defended himself by pointing out that his freaks were earning more than they could hope to do by any other means available. Besides, so long as they remained under his care they were no longer a burden on relatives or the community. He insisted that their lives as exhibition freaks were both varied and interesting, whereas the only real alternative they had was to be shut away in the dull seclusion of their homes or a workhouse”

some real merit to this comparison. Treves may have established Merrick in comparative luxury, but in many respects he continued to think of and treat Merrick as a freak. Treves actively used Merrick as a medical exhibit, publishing photographs of the Elephant Man's denuded figure and displaying him before gatherings of the doctor's learned colleagues. Leslie Fiedler notes that "it was presumably to protect Merrick against ... exploitation that Treves took him into the London Hospital ... yet he was shown thereafter under the supervision of Dr. Treves at various medical conventions, compelled to expose his nakedness for the sake of science, as he had earlier done for his exhibitor's profit" (171). (The *British Medical Journal* noted: "Mr. Treves *showed* a man who presented an extraordinary appearance, owing to a series of deformities" [qtd. in Graham and Oehlschlaeger 15; emphasis added].) Peter Graham and Fritz Oehlschlaeger observe that visits made to Merrick in his rooms at the London Hospital were "like Treves's first encounter with Merrick, private (inter)views, but with Treves in the role of agent" (50). Moreover, there is this essential bit of information: The meetings which the doctor arranged between Merrick and the genteel curious bought for Treves a degree of social and professional advancement that might not have fallen to his lot had he not enjoyed the position of satellite to Merrick, the cachet of being the Elephant Man's rescuer,

(Howell and Ford 99). Nearly one hundred years later, Ward Hall (one of the last practicing freak show managers) writes to Robert Bogdan with information for Bogdan's book, *Freak Show* (1988), explaining "I exhibited freaks and exploited them for years. Now you are going to exploit them. The difference between authors and the news media, and the freak show operators is that we paid these people." But as Bogdan indicates, Hall's "use of the word *exploit* was playful. He does not think he exploited them. He had a business relationship, complete with contract, with his troupe of human oddities. His livelihood depended on them, as theirs did on him. He had no pretensions of doing good, and the exhibits knew this. Together they shared the amusement world. Hall did not have to profess motives manufactured

protector, friend, and benefactor. It is not Treves alone who bestows a gift; the association between the two men functions as a kind of symbiosis.

Treves was, undoubtedly, a talented and intelligent surgeon. He was a rising star in his profession and a pioneer of antiseptic practice. In 1902, he performed a life-saving appendectomy on Edward, Prince of Wales, just two days before his coronation, an operation that earned the doctor a knighthood and a baronetcy. But we must question whether Sir Frederick would have had the opportunity to perform this surgery were he not already acquainted with royalty through his association with Merrick, who was visited by Alexandra, Princess of Wales. Indeed, the clientele which brought wealth to Treves as a physician were the very same genteel guests who made visits to Merrick (under Treves' charge) while the promising young doctor was yet at the outset of his medical career. It is likely that Merrick was more comfortable in Treves' care than he had been under previous management (rousted by police from exhibition after exhibition). But we may consider that, in the end, Merrick brought as much comfort to his doctor as this doctor ever brought to his patient. For Treves, regardless of any possible conscious complicity in the arrangement, ultimately made use of Merrick's body, trading on its strangeness, its attraction, its almost magical singularity, to establish for himself a presence and authority which served him well into his own old age decades after Merrick's death. On some level, Treves recognized that Merrick had value, that he was a "find," that he lent meaning, substance, credibility to the doctor's existing talents. All this is not to discredit Treves nor to diminish his very real service; rather, it is intended to foreground the place and value of the disabled body, to realize its power and

from higher ideals—curing, protecting, and serving—ideals that made the person

attraction, to begin to understand the commodification of disability not simply as a form of oppression, but to recognize it as a contest; the struggle over who shall own or manage disability, who will represent, protect, conceal or reveal, the movement of the disabled body from one agent to another, the revelation of the body to a discreet audience (often in exchange for some consideration, cash or credit), all this stands as evidence that the disabled body is a contested site, that disability is, strangely, a valued identity.

For Merrick, this contest was a way of life. For a brief period in his youth (and later on his journey back from the Continent), perhaps, Merrick was on his own, but otherwise, going from workhouse to popular exhibition to police custody to residence at the London Hospital, Merrick's existence was characterized by his being in "protective custody." Seemingly devoid of agency, Merrick's body was shuffled from place to place, person to person, institution to institution, always under the management or guardianship of a satellite, an individual or group which appeared (at the time) better able than Merrick himself to "handle" his potential interaction with the public. Ironically, while Merrick was frequently displayed naked, his intercourse with an audience seemed to require some level of shielding; physical contact could not have been more direct, but symbolic contact required an intermediary. Literally naked, the Elephant Man required "dressing" before he was fit for general consumption. Instead of speaking directly, arranging meetings directly, even handling his finances directly, Merrick's appearance seems always to have required mediation. From showman to police to medical doctor, Merrick is not only constantly in a state of protective custody but he is also constantly in a state of

with the physical or mental difference unsure of where he or she stood" (268).

mediation and translation; he is perpetually being interpreted, analyzed, dissected, articulated.

In our own time, a revival of interest in Merrick continues to realize this phenomenon. Dead more than 100 years, Merrick's person continues to exist as a contested site. The remaining fragments of his body have become a much-decried casualty of war (specimens from autopsy were destroyed during the WWII Blitz of London). His skeleton (which remains on display at the London Hospital) has been at the center of a bizarre and notorious custody battle/bidding war/publicity stunt masterminded by popular entertainer Michael Jackson.⁶ Merrick's name directs internet searchers to a bewildering array of on-line information and commentary, raising some 150 "hits." In each of these virtual theaters, the audience as individual may sit and gaze unobserved, without disruption, and establish his own connection or her own interpretation of the identity being mediated. Sites host photos, poems, religious instruction, calls for civic action, freak galleries, historical timelines, diagnoses, moral lessons—each has its own approach, its own medium. At the same time, each site (and each viewer of each site) inhabits the satellite space, laying claim, on some level, to the body, the person, the identity of the Elephant Man. He is a talisman, a host, what one theorist might designate "an armature for fantasy,"⁷ a

⁶ For a more thorough discussion of this incident, see David Yuan's intriguing essay "The Celebrity Freak" in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (1996), Rosemarie Garland Thomson, ed.

⁷ For a description of this theory, espoused by Joshua A. Miele, see Chapter Four, "Tiny Tim, Blind Bertha, and the Resistance of Miss Mowcher: Charles Dickens and the Uses of Disability."

strange kind of *tabula rasa*, open to almost any meaning the spectator might imagine.⁸ One site exhorts the reader to “realise how lucky you are” in comparison to Merrick (“True Beauty”), another candidly admits “simply that I love the strange and bizarre” (Marsden). Internet searches also reveal that the Elephant Man is an object of global scrutiny; in addition to English language sites, one can find Merrick-related information in Spanish, Polish, French, German, Japanese, Portuguese, and Russian. Merrick is also the inspiration for productions in a multitude of genres: Drama (including screenplays), poetry, history, the essay, the novel, music, posters, even quilts. And in addition to the mass of writing and other “creative” production, there is also Elephant Man merchandise, collectibles and memorabilia.

Like the histories that evolve around the lives of Saints, realities and fictions aggregating to create a massive collage of meaning, Merrick’s life is a subject for admiration and debate: He is read as simultaneously pathetic and heroic; photos and fragments of his body are sought after as though they were relics; and even such fundamental details of identity as Merrick’s name and medical status have become subjects of controversy and intricate discussion.⁹ Informing all this attention, albeit

⁸ Bernard Pomerance has his Treves character comment of Merrick that “he makes all of us think he is deeply like ourselves. . . . I conclude that we have polished him like a mirror, and shout hallelujah when he reflects us to the inch” (64, scene xix).

⁹ His name was Joseph Carey Merrick, but thanks to Treves’ influential essay (“The Elephant Man,” 1923), which repeatedly refers to Merrick as John (no one is quite sure why), this “error” has been perpetuated in countless later texts and other media. Merrick is now thought to have had Proteus Syndrome, but earlier speculations as to the nature of his illness (notably Elephantiasis or neurofibromatosis) have also been widely disseminated, creating differences of opinion that are based on nothing more than outdated or unreliable source information. A reminder here that for the purposes of this project, this diagnosis and even the legitimacy of Merrick’s name are relatively inconsequential data. What matters for this argument is that others argue about such things.

often at a deeply unconscious level, is the satellite impulse, the desire for ownership, the will to establish some proprietary relationship over the host body. (It is interesting to note that the word “property” is commonly used to describe the act or exhibit of a showman, a term employed by Howell and Ford, among others [111].) The workhouse authorities relinquish their hold over Merrick and “immediately after his release, Joseph came under the care of [showmen] Mr Torr and Mr Ellis” (Howell and Ford 92). (Note that Howell and Ford identify Merrick by his *first* name, like a child, but refer to Torr and Ellis complete with honorifics). While Merrick was “under the[ir] care,” the claim of Torr and Ellis to display the Elephant Man was repeatedly challenged by the police, who ultimately assert their authority in the matter at Liverpool Street Station. Having engineered a situation that made public exhibition of Merrick an impossibility, the police then take him in charge and pass him into the keeping of the medical authorities. The chain of custody is complete but the cycle of conflict endures. After his death, Merrick’s body continues, quite literally, to be owned by the London Hospital, even while writers, historians, spectators, fans, doctors, and religious missionaries persist in asserting some claim over Merrick’s person. For Merrick, for the disabled, for the Freak (that ultimate model of disabled identity), this attention, this excited maneuvering, this struggle over who will represent, manage, control, own, or profit from disability, is an altogether familiar experience; protective custody, or the constant refusal and rejection of such claims to custody, is a way of life.

That disabled people have had to fight (and still have to fight) to live independently, to lay claim to that agency which others so often challenge, is a given, an unfortunate fact which has given rise to much political action and to a significant

body of social and academic discourse. What has garnered less attention are these questions: What is the attraction of the disabled body that it is so often such a contested site? Who are the people, the individuals and institutions that seem compelled to lay claim to disability? And what is the relationship between these two contestants—the disabled and the satellite, that figure which is disposed to act as agent, manager, caretaker, spokesperson, guide, aide, interpreter, mediator?¹⁰ The study which follows undertakes to examine these questions, to look into the relationship of power between satellite and disabled and to test the boundaries that define these categories.

Beginning with Merrick is a difficult but deliberate strategy, difficult because, by undertaking this subject, the writer inescapably performs as satellite, entering into the struggle, laying her own claim to the body of the Elephant Man, using the Freak to excite readers, to attract their attention and interest, to vest them in this project. (I would like to echo the words of Leslie Fiedler, who points out that “nobody can

¹⁰ This is not to say that these questions have never been addressed at all. Michael Bérubé's *Life As We Know It* (1996) calls upon Foucault for a discussion of the place of nondisabled representation of the disabled (even while the book itself serves in large part as a representation or mediation of Bérubé's young son with Down Syndrome).

There's also the Foucauldian question that has hamstrung the humanities for the past decade: Is it wrong to *speak for* others, to assume that one can *represent* the interests of another in a faithful and transparent way? How can one be an advocate for the mentally retarded while believing that institutions never die and that every act of representation is also an act of usurpation? (112)

Another essay, by Brenda Jo Breuggemann, “Interpreting Women” (forthcoming in *Gender and Disability*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith), considers the position of sign language interpreters, who “by and large have a discomfiting awareness that too much depends on them, that hearing people often only have conversations with them (not with the deaf person they are interpreting for)... But then too, these interpreters often express discomfort over their lack of authority ... how often they are neglected by both of the other parties in the triangular exchange; how easily they are made into

write about Freaks without somehow exploiting them for his own ends,” adding, with becoming diffidence, “not I, certainly” [171].) At the same time, the extraordinary mélange of symbolic and discursive activity already surrounding Merrick’s body establishes a model. Because this body, this identity, this disabled figure, this freak has already garnered so much interest and attention, because he is the central body already orbited by so many satellites, he becomes a paradigm. Using this body, this model, we may begin to see the satellite relationship in operation, the numerous contestants surrounding the disabled, “discovering” its meaning and intention and disseminating this message to a larger universe.

So, one key aspect of this model is that the disabled is the primary or central body; satellite identity lays claim to that primary figure, mediating and interpreting it. And this is, in many respects, a proprietary relationship, one that at least attempts ownership or control. As we will discover, however, the deliberate centering of the disabled, the ceding of that primary space, means that the satellite (whose interpretive activity often seems designed to bolster a dubious sense of self) assumes a secondary position, diminishing the sense of self and the sense of self-worth even by the performance that might otherwise be intended to amplify those very qualities. Seeking attention and importance, the satellite works to establish a bond that throws his identity into relative obscurity. And the fact of the satellite’s dependence on the disabled to establish the interpretive, “helper” identity means that satellite identity is inherently unstable. The disabled begins to function as a kind of mask, the satellite offering forth the mediated figure as an object symbolic of his own person and thus obscuring his own identity. At the same time, the interpretive performance of the

nothing but an almost non-human instrument ...” Harlan Lane’s *The Mask of*

satellite obscures the authenticity, the “true” identity (or, at least, the unmediated identity) of the disabled. The ultimate effect of this relationship is an experience of double erasure. Satellite Treves is virtually invisible in the presence of the astonishing Merrick, the audience having no attention to spare for this mediating figure; on the other hand, Merrick too is obscured by the greater identity which has been fabricated for him—freak, medical specimen, object of charity, victim, hero. He is, without question, the central figure in every venue in which he is mediated and yet, he has no personal presence. Witnesses interact neither with Treves nor with Merrick; they approach this duo, rather, with another motivation, to gorge themselves on spectacle and narrative. Merrick is famous indeed, celebrated both in life and in death. And yet he is also strangely absent from his own celebrity. Merrick is not Merrick, but is, rather an extraordinary human construction, “the Elephant Man,” an identity so overwhelming it overshadows, it consumes all others, primary or secondary, satellite or disabled. And for Joseph Carey Merrick, this formula is played out again and again.

This model is useful for beginning to understand the dynamic of the satellite relationship. For Treves, the satellite role, the position of benefactor, seems to have been essential. As Treves’ contemporary Sir John Bland-Sutton observes: “In many tales he told of the benefactions bestowed on his poor hospital patients, Treves was frequently the intercessor—often the benefactor” (qtd. in Graham and Oehlschlaeger 27). And when he writes about Merrick, Treves, despite his diffidence, presents himself quite clearly as Merrick’s champion. William Holladay and Stephen Watt note that “the doctor is ... perfunctory, in assigning the hero’s

Benevolence (1992) also addresses some of these issues.

role to himself" (872). Treves appears to be rescuing Merrick from a life of exploitation, and yet, this "rescue" ultimately assists Treves in the performance of his identity as benevolent intercessor (as well as in his professional career). Moreover, the doctor's own approach to representing the Elephant Man—lecturing on his deformities, writing about him, overseeing his introduction into society—functions in many respects to reinscribe the Freak identity from which Merrick was ostensibly being liberated, reestablishing Merrick as apparently helpless and subordinate while the doctor enables his own authority and superiority.

Despite these distancing performances, however, the line between doctor and patient, between exhibit and exhibitor, between self and Other, does not seem as broad and clear as Treves may have wished. Bernard Pomerance's interpretation demonstrates how these seemingly disparate roles converge. In one sequence from *The Elephant Man*, Treves' character dreams that he is being exhibited by Merrick, who lectures as follows:

The most striking feature about him, note, is the terrifyingly normal head. This allowed him to lie down normally, and therefore to dream in the exclusive personal manner without the weight of others' dreams accumulating to break his neck. From the brow projected a normal vision of benevolent enlightenment, what we believe to be a kind of self-mesmerized state. The mouth, deformed by satisfaction at being at the best of existent worlds, was rendered therefore utterly incapable of self-critical speech, thus of the ability to change. The heart showed signs of worry at this unchanging yet untenable state. The back was horribly stiff from being kept against a wall to face the discontent of a world ordered for his convenience. The surgeon's hands were well-developed and strong, capable of the most delicate carvings-up, for others' own good. Due also to the normal head, the right arm was of enormous power; but, so incapable of the distinction between the assertion of authority and the charitable act of giving, that it was often to be found disgustingly beating others—for their own good. The left arm was slighter and fairer, and may be seen in typical position, hand covering the genitals which were treated as a sullen colony in need of restriction, governance, punishment. For their own good.

To this lecture, the audience responds:

Mr. Merrick. You have shown a profound and unknown disorder to us. You have said when he leaves here, it is for his prior life again. I do not think it ought to be permitted. It is a disgrace. It is a pity and a disgrace. It is an indecency in fact. It may be a danger in ways we do not know. Something ought to be done about it. (62-63, scene xviii)

The irony, indeed, the sarcasm of these speeches will be clear to any reader, but it is important to note, too, that these words are a deliberate mimicking of the Treves character's earlier formal description of Merrick (echoing the actual Treves' medical descriptions). Pomerance's point, that there is no explicit "boundary between safety and exploitation" and that Treves is also a victim, "ensnared in the values of Victorian England's privileged class" (Holladay and Watt 869), also suggests that the division between Treves and Merrick is, in a sense, a matter of semantics. (Re-write the terms of the "disease" and one specimen may easily replace another.) One of the great difficulties of the satellite relationship is exactly this, the failure of the boundary between represented and representor, the tendency of the satellite to assume the position of disabled, to so own, to be so vested in the identity of mediator as to become lost in the character being represented, thinking and feeling as the Disabled, relinquishing the sense of separateness and thus simultaneously losing oneself and violating the other.

But Pomerance invites another consideration as well, his bitterly ironic placement of Treves on the viewing platform challenging the doctor's role not only as an individual, but also as a representative of his time and place, an icon of Victorian imperial power. Pomerance's Treves presents his own family as a model of Victorian imperial values: "You'd like my garden too. My dog, my wife, my

daughter, pruned, cropped, pollarded and somewhat stupefied. Very happy examples, all of them. ... I am an awfully good gardener" (66, scene xix). He lectures Merrick, his object of charity, on the importance of discipline and gratitude: "Don't be upset. Rules make us happy because they are for our own good" (26, scene ix). For Pomerance, this relationship between Merrick and Treves—characterized by interdependence, by a struggle for power, by guilt, by the authority of benevolence—is typical of the age. According to Pomerance's vision, in fact, this situation emerges naturally out of the Victorian world perspective, at a time when the will and power of establishment forces (e.g., police, medicine, the church) is most intent on maintaining order, and is especially motivated to normalize the freaky and the foreign. As William Holladay and Stephen Watt note, the "specular domination" of "Victorian sideshow and sex-act performers[, who] were often taken from one or another of England's colonial possessions, ... is not only physical, ... but also ideological, since they are denigrated as socially or racially inferior" (876). Calling on the work of Abdul R. JanMohamed and Sander L. Gilman to support and illuminate their point, go on to Holladay and Watt observe that this "emphasis in Pomerance's play follows that of much recent cultural and historical criticism" (876-77).

Certainly Merrick's figure (especially as it was framed and interpreted within its late Victorian context) is particularly inviting for the cultural critic in our own age. Indeed, we begin with the Elephant Man not only because the symbolic and discursive activity which surrounds this figure offers a paradigm for the satellite theory, but also because Merrick's body is one that is distinctively Victorian. The Victorian era stands as a critical juncture for disabled body and for the way that body gets represented. The emergence of the freak show as a scientific or educational

spectacle and the demise of the freak show (or its transformation/migration into the medical theater) as an “indecent” are elemental aspects of this period. For the Victorians, the anomalous body—foreign, female, disabled—required interpretation and strict placement within a codified structure, mediated by some trusted authority.

The satellite relationship may exist in other forms and in other times, but it is during the Victorian age that it is at its most visible and most interesting. For this period serves as a kind of crucible for the formation of individual identities, a melting, melding, and renewing of the way that humans think about and define the human. This aspect of Victorian culture, experienced as both threat and opportunity, is compelled by a unique configuration of social, cultural, and political events, among them the advent of Darwinian theory, the expansion of empire (and the consequent influx of the exotic), the liberalization of voting rights, and the rise of the speculative marketplace. Within such a cultural environment, the possibilities for personal identity grow more fluid; the individual is suddenly able to redefine his or her place and importance within this shifting set of circumstances (and there is a growing awareness, too, that others share the same option). There thus arises a desire both to reinvent and to stabilize the self, a simultaneous longing both for innovation and for the familiar. Individuals are thus motivated to define themselves within the most radical and the most conservative terms. Such a dynamic, fundamentally unstable, is yet the logical foundation of the fundamentally unstable satellite identity. For these reasons, this exploration of the satellite relationship is located within the Victorian purview. While this theory might fruitfully be applied to other texts and other periods, the complex issues of identity inherent within the framework of Victorian culture offer the most appealing context for this writer.

A Context for Understanding Deviant Bodies

In order to explore more fully the way the satellite relationship operates in the Victorian context, it behooves us, nevertheless, to consider the idea of disability and the nature of the satellite identity in a wider historical and cultural arena. What follows, therefore, is an abbreviated history of what we now define (howsoever inadequately) as “disabled” bodies, tracing the place of disability (and the role of the satellite) from ancient times, and focusing on the rise of Victorian imperial identity and its impact on Victorian ideas of somatic alterity, most especially on the resulting contest for power in relationships between “normal” and “deviant.”

One of the difficulties of writing about disability is that one must begin with some understanding or consensus of what disability *is*, a tricky enough puzzle in our own time—when the *legal* definition of disability is constantly under fire—but one which is infinitely more puzzling if we wish to consider the disability as some kind of constant. In *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995), Lennard Davis argues that disability as we understand it—according to the modern medical model—is a category which is relatively new, emerging only in the late Eighteenth Century. Of course, this does not mean that bodies which we would now consider disabled did not exist prior to the Enlightenment—but it does mean that those bodies were understood in a context radically different from the one we experience today.

An attempt to describe ancient attitudes toward disability¹¹ offers perhaps the greatest challenge to our own cultural construction. For modernity insists that

¹¹ Of course, “disability” is a modern term and thus a modern phenomenon. Technically, there were no “disabled” people in the ancient world, for they were not identified as such and, consequently, were not regarded as a definite category or

weakness is the salient feature of disabled identity, sometimes offering extra protection to an individual portrayed as disadvantaged, and even more often working to exclude or alter that individual since the public perception persistently reads the disabled body as insufficient or inferior, a defective part, potentially contagious, which drains the resources of the community, and which certainly requires cure or correction if possible. Ancient Greeks (and ancient Romans, whose attitudes were shaped by Hellenic culture) understood deviant bodies somewhat differently. The measurement of difference seems to have applied to two crucial considerations: 1) the potential impact of the disability on the responsibilities of citizenship; 2) the extent of the “defect” at birth.

Whether the disability in question was one which was present at birth, or whether it was acquired later in life through illness, accident, or age, the only real criterion for whether Classical culture would have considered it disabling was the extent to which it impeded the responsibilities of citizenship. So, for instance, the advent of deafness in adulthood was not disabling because adults who became deaf were still capable of speech, a fundamental requirement for participation in senatorial debate. Those who lost the ability to speak, however, like those born deaf (and thus unable to participate in oral culture), could not participate in government, thus falling into a category that could not be considered for citizenship. For those born with what we would now describe as disabilities, there were really three possibilities. Most would probably not have been identified or categorized separately at all, since Classical culture placed extraordinary value in corporeal balance and regularity. If a

group. For the purposes of this project, however, the word disability is used to enable a discussion. It should be understood that this term as used herein is intended to designate those persons whom the modern world might label disabled.

child met the established aesthetic standard, no disability was present; minor deviations of form were considered unfortunate, but were viewed as deficiencies rather than separate classifications. Of those babies who deviated substantially from the somatic ideal, many were considered unclean and were destroyed in infancy either through exposure or by being tossed into the sea (since they were thought to be unfit for the honor of burial or cremation). But Classical culture also recognized the birth of children or animals with certain anatomical deviations as sacred events, as omens or messages from the gods. So, blind children were sometimes thought to be endowed with divine “compensatory” powers, like the gift of poetry, music, or second sight. And while the birth of “monstra,” or those with particularly marked physical deviations (e.g., conjoined twins) were often regarded as marking sacred displeasure, the fact that these births were recognized as belonging in some way to the sacred imbued them with a power and importance, a level of authority, which our own culture has abandoned entirely. Though we may deplore the social machinery that often relegated disabled individuals to destruction or which designated them in some way as taboo, we must recognize nonetheless the symbolic power which Classical culture believed to be inherent in the deviant body.

The modern construction which defines disability chiefly in terms of weakness and dependence is more apparently an outgrowth of post-Classical social and cultural movements. The first, and probably the most important of these movements is the advent of Christian doxology and the rise of institutional Christianity. With the spread of the Christian mythos, the disabled subject became popularly recognized as a potential vehicle for miraculous performance. The blind and the lame, the sick and the suffering—even the dead—became potential objects

for the illustration of God's supreme power and mercy. As in the Classical era, these persons must again be understood, in a sense, as objects, but the very nature of this objectification results in a new dynamic of power surrounding the disabled figure which is at once more complex and more unstable than the preceding historical/cultural model. Though Christian scripture most often represents the blind, the lame, and the frenzied as passive recipients of God's grace, their presence, and their presence specifically as damaged vessels, is a required component of the miraculous performance. Christ needs a body upon which to act, a lay figure upon which he may demonstrate the Father's awesome power. Without the presence of the disabled subject, God's omnipotence and God's benevolence are equally invisible, and the crowds of potential worshippers remain unconvinced and unconverted, steeped in sin, alienated from God, and indifferent to potential salvation. Moreover, those who are thus cured become celebrities, their bodies offering sacred evidence of divine intervention. In scriptural terms, then, all persons with disabilities are thus haunted with the prospect of similar intervention and similar celebrity, potential objects of mercy but also potential apostles, direct representatives of Christ himself. In this way, we may begin to understand that the passivity and helplessness which seem essential to the Christian representation of disability occupy rather precarious footing, and again, as with the Classical model, the disabled figure is endowed with a latent power which is shielded from immediate observation.

The model is further complicated by the advent of institutional Christianity. For while the scriptural representation of the disabled subject is shaped primarily by this subject's role as damaged vessel, made whole by an act of divine compassion, the miraculous intervention here described is ordinarily limited to the hands of Christ

himself. The disabled subject may certainly be read as passive, but that passivity also reflects the relative positions of God and man; the human may thus be seen as enduring a logically submissive posture. With the rise of institutional Christianity—the growth of the Church and the priesthood, the founding of religious orders, the rise of the pilgrimage as a standard feature of popular culture—Christians began increasingly to view the sick and the suffering, the blind, the deaf, and the lame, as appropriate objects of institutional compassion. In keeping with the teachings of the Church, ordinary humans were called upon to imitate Christ and this imitation not infrequently took the form of service to persons with disabilities. The scriptural model of mercy thus came to be re-enacted by human performers—priests, monastics, and lay Christians—who, in imitation of Christ, undertook to employ disabled bodies for the acting out of their own charity. And while this charity was not entirely without benefit to its object, this form of patronage also reconstructed and further complicated the already unstable aura of power and passivity surrounding the sacred object of compassion.

The principal difficulty, of course, is that the disabled figure is here represented in an even more extreme condition of passivity than that reflected in Christian scripture. When the Bible portrays the blind, deaf, or lame as objects of divine compassion and intervention, there is a categorical difference between benefactor and beneficiary, between God and human. In these cases, the disability of the human subject is a mere component rather than the defining feature of his or her relative impotence. In fact, scriptural models of disabled persons are meant to represent the overall human condition; the lesson of the text is that we are all fallen creatures, ailing, and very much in need of God's cure. When the Church begins to

institutionalize the doctrine of charity, it also establishes an explicit boundary between one set of humans and another. People with disabilities are re-modeled as the passive recipients of good works performed by other human subjects, rather than as symbolic representatives of the human race as a whole. And those performing these good works thus re-cast themselves in the role of God, coming to understand themselves, in the scheme of human relations, as comparatively gracious and powerful.

It is exactly this gesture, this nascent separation of humanity into two relatively distinct classes, which begins to shape the modern understanding of disability as a separate category. And it is the relationship between disabled and nondisabled which naturally ensues as a consequence that is my principal subject of inquiry. For it is in this Medieval period, wherein we observe the advent of this relationship, that we also first observe the development of the satellite. Typically a nondisabled figure (or one, at least, who perceives him/herself as nondisabled), the satellite creates his/her identity by acting in proximity to disability and the real, imagined, or constructed needs of the disabled subject. In the context thus far established, a satellite might thus be a member of a religious order dedicated to caring for sick or disabled persons, an ordinary lay Christian offering alms to a blind beggar, or any nondisabled Christian who undertakes a deliberate act of charity toward a person perceived as physically defective or deficient. As has been indicated earlier, the performance of these institutional charities may not have been without benefit to their objects, but the cultural function of this interaction is certainly more complex than it might initially seem—first and most obviously because the act of charity, even while it may benefit the disabled subject, necessarily inscribes or

reinscribes roles of social superiority and inferiority, but also because the attempted relegation of the disabled subject to a purely passive and inferior role generates for this very subject a position of unintended power, authority, and consequence that continues to influence the relationship between disabled and nondisabled, upsetting any possible balance of power and continually destabilizing the fixed role that each is ordinarily supposed to assume. For this reason, the satellite almost inevitably occupies a cultural/social position which is simultaneously one of inflated importance (i.e., by the performance of his/her activity of institutional charity, the satellite automatically defines him/herself as superior to the object of charity) and one of relative unimportance (i.e., the satellite constitutes his/her own significance by his/her posture toward the object of charity). So, even while the disabled subject in this model is apparently reduced to a position of absolute passivity, though s/he is acted upon as object, the actual position of this subject is central; without the passive, disabled body upon which to reenact the performance of divine compassion, the satellite occupies no place at all. By the act of charity, the satellite thus unwittingly (and perhaps unwillingly) acknowledges the authenticity of the disabled subject, his/her identity as the primary, the source and origin of the satellite's own power and importance.

As we proceed with this inquiry, we will observe that the instability of this power relationship manifests itself in a bizarre set of offensive and defensive practices on the part of both disabled and satellite, each exercising the possibilities of power and identity enabled by their own unstable relationship and by their individual and collective interactions with and representations to and by the culture at large. So, not only does the satellite persistently work to exercise his/her power/authority

through the attempted reduction and objectification of the disabled, but the disabled, too, will often act to objectify the satellite, reducing the satellite to mere prosthetic. And as with the prostheticization of the satellite, we may frequently observe a failure of physical/psychic/symbolic boundaries between satellite and disabled; as each becomes increasingly vested in the identity of the other, the satellite often imagines or recreates him/herself as the disabled subject, appropriating disabled identity by mimicking illness, physical deficiency, or various forms of incapacity. Likewise the disabled figure may be reimagined (either by him/herself or by others) as a source of contagion, infusing the satellite with features or properties ordinarily represented as belonging to disability. Finally, and perhaps most typically, we may observe that those outside this relationship perform upon the satellite-disabled couple a gesture of “double erasure.” Although society recognizes and accepts the conventional inferiority of the disabled subject, often interpreting this figure as residing entirely outside the category of humanity, the cultural preoccupation with disability nevertheless requires some interactive outlet. Society thus invites the satellite to speak for the disabled, mediating and interpreting disabled identity for the ostensibly nondisabled community. Clearly, this function reflects the unstable flux of power between disabled and satellite—disabled reduced to silent object while satellite is aggrandized by his/her proximity to disabled identity; satellite prostheticized by his/her reduction to mere mouthpiece for disabled—but by engaging these two in a pattern of functional dependency, society also teaches each that s/he is meaningless, invisible, absent without the physical and symbolic presence of the other. Without the satellite, the culture refuses to see or interact with the disabled subject; without

the disabled, the satellite has no identity, and the culture has no interest in seeing or hearing from the satellite except insofar as s/he is attached to disability.

Although the relationship described here does not arrive at its full complexity during the Middle Ages, it is nevertheless important to recognize that this satellite-disabled alliance, even at its inception, is rich with meaning and possibility. And even as the great charitable institutions of the Medieval Church gave rise to this form of satellite identity, these very institutions were also poised on the brink of a cultural shift that would both reinforce and further complicate the connection between disabled and satellite.

With the advent of institutional medicine in the eighteenth century, and with the consequent shift away from religious faith and from the Church (and Christian doctrine) as the mightiest of cultural authorities, social attitudes toward sick and disabled persons and attitudes especially toward the keeping and management of these populations, underwent a radical change. Whereas the institutional Christian model offered forth the disabled body as a potential object of compassion for a faithful public, enabling ordinary people to rehearse their own salvation and their own potentially divine identity by acts of charity, the reinvention of disability according to a medical model taught the public that deviant bodies were the realm of professionals and specialists. Until now, the satellite performing his/her imitation of Christ upon the disabled body was limited to the arena of human intervention—the giving of alms, the mitigation of physical suffering, and the maintenance and shelter of those apparently unable to care for themselves. Now, medical/scientific progress enabled a new and exclusive class of individuals to interact with disability in a way that more closely approached divine intervention; for doctors were now sometimes

able to “cure” disabled persons, performing “miracles” of science, and thus building the stature and status of the medical community into something very like a sacred authority.

The effects of this cultural shift toward a new faith in science and medicine were multifold: For the first time, the idea of “disability” was introduced in its modern sense, as a special category of persons deviating medically from the “normal,” lending added weight to the existing sense of separation between disabled and ostensibly nondisabled subject; the understanding of disability as a medical category and the advent of clinical care thus occasioned the grouping or re-grouping of many disabled persons in hospitals or semi-carceral settings; but perhaps most significantly, medical professionals and public health officials were vested with a special authority for interacting with disabled subjects, which had the effect of further segregating people with disabilities while simultaneously imbuing the role of satellite with an official, clinical character.¹² In many respects, then, even while this shift marks a great change in cultural attitudes and social responsibility, it may also be regarded as further reinforcing existing models for relationships between disabled and nondisabled. As with the institutional Christian model, people with disabilities are once again constructed as an object caste, lay figures or damaged vessels upon whom a new class may act out its superiority. But also, as with the earlier social model, the disabled body is centered by the medical activity. Though the doctor or the medical director may be figured as the hero of the curative drama, his heroic posture becomes impossible, even invisible, without the corpus upon which he acts.

¹² It is understood, of course, that the rise of modern medicine has also contributed enormously to the well-being of persons with disabilities and it is not our purpose to offer a political critique for the sake of indicting modern medicine.

His field of action, his discourse, his very identity are beholden to the presence of deviance; and he requires the continual presence of disability in order to continually reconstruct his own identity as medical authority. So it happens that the mystical power embodied by disability according to both scriptural and institutional Christianity is actually, ironically, reinforced with the advent of institutional medicine; though medicine functions outwardly as a disciplining of the deviant corpus, that corpus is nevertheless the source and origin of virtually all the power and authority which resides in medical discourse. Though the patient may be object or lay figure, effaced or erased by heroic medical activity, the doctor too is reduced, a mere object orbiting the central site/sight, the source of mystical power. The public may honor the medical professional, but it does so only (or primarily) because of its interest in the deviant body at the center.

To a lesser degree also, one may read the disabled as deliberately controlling or managing the experience of medicine. Though the suggestion which follows is problematic in political terms, it is possible to argue that the body at the center of a therapeutic or surgical process is not passive despite its usual immobility, but that it commands the activity of which it is the subject. Medicine, after all, is a service profession and may thus be read as prosthetic to disability—actors in the field of medicine thus being read as useful objects. Of course, the history of medicine, and the history of medical abuses, especially, offers a quick check to such a reading, but it is offered here nevertheless, as a potential counterbalance to the more common understanding of medical omnipotence; the boundaries between master and servant, between normal and deviant, between power and passivity are not always altogether so definite as they may appear.

In fact, the rise of institutional medicine and the attempt to construct more definite boundaries of human classification actually worked to accentuate the scientific and philosophical difficulties attendant upon disciplining and categorization. As men of science tried to establish foundations for human difference, they found themselves continually confronted by the fluid nature of human diversity. And as they found themselves so challenged—so threatened by a massive disorder which suggested the possibility of their own imperfection or abnormality—so their desire for categorical discipline increased, the notion of definite boundaries—between kingdoms, phylums, and species; human and animal; male and female; healthy and sick; normal and deviant—serving as a defense against the chaotic possibilities inherent in the natural variability of anatomy. And the nature of the satellite condition, too, must have aggravated the desire for ordered scientific categories; after all, if there is some question or danger of conflation between disabled and satellite, between patient and doctor, if there be any confusion at all as to positions of inferiority and superiority, there is an absolute corresponding need to construct ever more explicit and impenetrable categorical definitions. It would appear that it is only thus that the terrifying possibility of one's own deviance and passivity may be allayed; the difficulty, of course, is that the construction of such boundaries fails to guarantee the constructor a fixed place in a desirable category. Moreover, the energy devoted to the construction of such scientific legislation serves as no assurance that the creatures so disciplined will readily submit to the order of law. The scientist engaged in the Adamic act of naming and categorizing may harbor the belief that his principles make a positive contribution to the order of creation, but does not the existence of category, as a measure of normalcy, gives rise to the

very possibility of deviance? Does not law, by definition, frame the possibilities for criminal behavior? Thus, as the eighteenth century progresses and medicine becomes increasingly institutionalized, we may begin to see the enormously heightened anxiety and instability constructed around and built into the satellite-disabled relationship.

This was an anxiety, too, with extensive ramifications outside the relatively small communities of people directly engaged in the relationship described. For the institutionalization of medicine meant not only that officially designated persons became responsible for public health, not only that persons meeting newly established criteria for illness or disability were subject to policing by the new institutional order, but also that the public was invited to participate in the judgments and orders dictated by medical authority. As the Age of Reason gave way to the Romantic period, and as Romanticism lost itself in the earnestness of the Victorian age, there arose an explosion of popular interest in public health and sanitation, in natural science, and in the organization of institutional settings. Though disability may seem to impact the lives and identities of relatively few, perhaps only those involved in the satellite-disabled relationship, the construction of medical/scientific categories of normalcy and deviance clearly informed and inspired broader public opinion. For this reason, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century saw the meteoric rise (and the almost equally rapid decline) of the freak show.

Contemporaneous with the rise of the museum, freak shows offered popularized versions of medical and scientific categorization, displaying for the public “natural wonders” intended simultaneously as educational exhibits and as spectacular measures of deviance against which the public might confirm their own seeming

normalcy. Ranging from the inanimate to the animal to the human, these exhibits served as concrete manifestations of the emerging principles of abstract science: I.e., that the natural world is observable and classifiable, and that deviance is an object which can be measured, quantified, and contained. Much as doctors and scientists, contemporary or Victorian, might condemn the appearance of these popular exhibits, and though medical authority is partly responsible for their demise, it was the popularization of the interests and ideas of institutional medicine which initially inspired the furious proliferation of these shows. Moreover, the social machinery involved in the exhibition of human deviance, reflected and reinforced the existing complexities of the satellite-disabled relationship. For human exhibits, many of whom were people with disabilities, may be seen here once again either as lay figures or as powerful actors in their own drama; likewise, onlookers may be read as exploiting the power of the gaze or they may be regarded as sheep, mutely offering up their wealth in recognition of the extraordinary bodies they are invited passively to behold. This apparently paradoxical exchange is, then, a popularized version of the scientific enterprise: The man of science observes the human corpus, defining its deviance through his disciplinary gaze, and by this act enabling his understanding of himself as normal and powerful; at the same time, the body here observed is recognized as being central to the activity and identity of medicine, by its extraordinary nature and power enforcing the attentive gaze of the medical servant. And the sideshow barker, too, participates in the difficult web of the satellite-disabled relationship, clearly objectifying the disabled even while he continues to exist, dependent and invisible, at the periphery of the human exhibit. We find, in fact, that “keeper” may sometimes represent a quasi-medical attendant, that freak

show and medical theater exist as part of the same continuum, and that physician and barker may both be seen as satellites, occupying interchangeable roles in their relation to the disabled.

The significance of the freak show is not limited, however, to its role as a popular venue for emerging medical models; it also served as a forum for understanding another immensely important cultural movement—the rise of Victorian imperial identity. For these popular exhibits often comprised an extraordinary mix of apparently aberrant human forms; people with disabilities were exhibited alongside other types of “freaks”—Amerindians, Aborigines, Hottentots, and a vast range of other “foreign” bodies, often exhibited with dramatic costumes and props to enhance the appearance of their deviance from the normative white European standard. Thus, the freak show, commonly regarded merely as a mechanism for the oppression and exploitation of society’s most vulnerable members, may also be regarded as offering a spectacular insight into the convergence of institutional medicine and the imperial enterprise. For at the same time that medicine began to assume its structure of institutional authority, Europeans were also expanding exploration and colonization of the New World and their ideas about the human form—its size, shape, and color; its “natural” appetites and abilities—were thus mutually informed and constructed within a common matrix, the imperial endeavor taking its cue from medicine’s newly-established categories of human normalcy/deviance, and institutional medicine confirming the accuracy of its categorical notions in light of observations made and human “specimens” gathered by those more immediately engaged in the imperial project. In fact, Victorian institutional structures (medicine and imperialism especially) function in large part to

measure and define the primacy and normalcy of the white, male, European body, conflating all apparent deviations from this standard—disability, foreign-ness, femininity—into a massive categorical “Other,” necessarily understood as defective. So, even while we ponder the difficulties inherent in defining disability, we discover that from its very inception as an apparently definite medical category, “disability” is likely to have been determined by a variety of factors which have little to do with somatic deficiency and much to do with appearance, with culture, and with the construction of a standard European corporeality. The freak show, as the popularized version of science, may thus be seen as demonstrating the combined cultural forces of medical authority and Victorian imperial identity: The “freak” is constructed as mongrel—disabled, disfigured, and disenfranchised—a deviance against which white, male, European-ness may be measured and understood as “normal.”

And while much of this is familiar ground, recent critiques of the Victorian imperial enterprise having become almost commonplace, the convergence of medicine and imperialism into a single, mutually descriptive organism is a critical step in understanding the development of the satellite identity in the Victorian period. For the cultural attitudes which gave rise to Victorian imperial identity, and which continued to shape its sense of the colonial subject or of the “native,” both partake of and continue to inform the satellite identity. Typically, viewing indigenous peoples as both morally and physically inferior, as defective or deficient according to an established set of empirical laws, colonial representatives of imperial culture—missionaries and explorers, soldiers and governors—relied on a medical-scientific framework to justify the imperial exercise; the introduction of civilization and order

into seemingly chaotic foreign arenas is represented as having a sanitizing or curative effect. The savage body—observed, evaluated, and found wanting—thus assumes the place of patient, the normative European body thus assuming the place of doctor, intervening prescriptively and proscriptively to order the life and health of the subject.

Thus we find that the satellite-disabled relationship, discovered in the performance of Christian charity, and again in the *medicalization of disability*, emerges again in an altered form, the body of the colonial subject being interpreted as disabled while the representative of imperial authority assumes the role of satellite. And here too, despite a history of very real political repression and oppression, the relationship of power between satellite and (diseased) colonial body is more fluid, more unstable, than might be immediately apparent. First of all, as in the relationship between doctor and patient, the figure of imperial authority may certainly be regarded as constructing his identity around his curative/disciplinary task; though he exercises power, his very identity is dependent upon the centered presence of the colonial subject. Without the “native,” there is no body upon which to operate, no flexing of imperial muscle, and the governor is reduced to mere emigrant, insignificant to the point of invisibility. At the same time, however, the individual identity even of an apparently puissant imperial governor is erased by his function as representative/representor. For it is the function of the governor to report on the actions and conditions of colonized bodies, his role as mere reporter or representor thus effacing his own potential power/identity; at the same time the governor serves literally as the embodiment of imperial power (the Queen), such a role, by definition effecting the erasure of the individual. The power and identity of

the governor then, exist only at cusp of the colonial drama, the place he occupies—indeed his very existence—defined by the need for mediation between the more significant identities of queen and colonized. Thus, even while the body of the colonial subject is forced into subordination, the governor too, as satellite to the subordinated colonial body, may be seen as a mere marginal participant in the business of Victorian imperial power.

Furthermore, and again as with the patient-doctor relationship, the colonial subject may be seen as a lay figure against which the colonizer constructs his own normative identity. Dark skin, folded lids, or cultural modifications to the colonial body (e.g., piercing, tattooing, tribal scarring, etc.) were thus read as deviations from an anatomical standard clearly established by European science/medicine, and the representative of European imperial power was thus able to assert his biological superiority against this backdrop of perceived deficiency/deformity. Of course, and again as with the medical model, the project of defining biological difference grows ever more difficult with the increasing proximity of the subject(s) being so defined. For the representative of empire, the easy understanding of the colonial subject as Other is complicated by the enforced intimacy of the colonial enterprise; the more closely the colonial subject is scrutinized, the more difficult it becomes to name precisely the difference between its deviance and the normalcy of the imperial body. At what point, exactly, do the size and shape of nose, ears, or eyes fall off the normal scale and into the deviant category? At what point does skin color or hair texture move beyond the range of acceptable “normal” values and into a range that must be recognized as “different”? For those existing at some distance from the colonized body, such questions are moot; geography creates a barrier that enables one culture

to imaginatively re-construct the other in accordance with its own existing social needs. But for those forced to measure their own identities in the immediate presence of the body that would otherwise be imagined as Other, these questions simultaneously become more pressing and more difficult to answer. As in the medical scenario, the imperial satellite's need to colonize, to exercise mastery over the colonial subject, is exacerbated by his intimacy with that subject. For the less he is able to measure difference, the more desperate he becomes to inscribe that difference in absolute and explicit terms. The satellite's need to control the central subject thus reflects the extent to which s/he perceives him/herself as being out of control.

Moreover, this confusion over the boundaries delineating self and other, the anxiety activated by the possibility that the "civilized" self may, in actuality, be "savage," is further aggravated by the "civilizing" mission woven into the mandate of Victorian imperialism. For to the extent that the representative of imperial power is engaged in a corrective or curative task (the task of civilizing)—the missionary enlightening the ignorant savage mind with the Victorian vision of Christianity, the landlord transforming native sloth into a model of agricultural and industrial labor, the governor re-structuring the undisciplined colonial within a social order and legal framework configured by Victorian parliamentary practice—he is re-inventing the colonial corpus, attempting to transform it into a model of Victorian gentility. And to the extent that the "savage" is thus re-imagined or re-constructed as English gentleman, those engaged in this imaginative re-construction consequently envision a threat to the boundaries of their own socio-biological category. After all, if the savage may acquire gentility by learning to speak correctly accented English and by

concealing his nudity with proper Victorian attire, if the savage may sound and look like an English gentleman, then perhaps there *is* no real distinction between savage and civilized. So, we find that the task of civilizing(curing) the savage serves to confound the distinction between these two categories, contributing still further to the satellite's anxiously defensive posture. The satellite is thus overwhelmed by fear of his own erasure, an erasure engineered, ironically, by his own desire for an established normative identity, an ever-fixed mark reliably affirming his/her power, primacy, and particularity.

This implicit confusion of savage and civilized, and the construction of the colonized body as potentially invasive is explicit, too, from the way that the modern "scientific" discussion of disease, infection, and sanitation is woven into Victorian imperial discourse. Colonial space was (and is) regarded as unsanitary; the West Indies was perceived as a hotbed of fever, the East as a portal for plague.¹³ And not only was colonial space seen as riddled with plague and fever (the imperial project thus enabling its self-perception as cleansing, ordering, and curing), but the colonial body itself was also regarded as both diseased and infectious, thus adding to the threatening complexity of a "foreign" corpus already constructed as deviant. So, while imperial power wrote itself as offering social and medical discipline, it necessarily portrayed the body which required such discipline as a threat to its own health and well-being. Not only was colonial space dangerously diseased, but the body and mind of the deviant colonial also presented a socio-medical hazard, the

¹³ Consider the origin of the virulent plague from Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826): "This enemy to the human race had begun in early June to raise its serpent-head on the shores of the Nile; parts of Asia ... were infected. It was in Constantinople ..." (127).

abnormal appearance and behavior of the “savage” serving as evidence of a complex pathological web: An unpredictable, unstable mind existing perennially on the cusp of perverse and violent crime—sodomy, cannibalism, and torture; “native” women, existing outside the boundaries of Victorian convention, inciting otherwise civilized characters into extremes of sexual immorality.¹⁴ The fear so intricately articulated within this pattern is evident as well in the discussion above, wherein we discover the possibility of the savage being transformed into Victorian gentleman: The distinction between the identities of savage and civilized (as between deviant and normal, disabled and satellite) is threatened not only by a blurring of categorical boundaries, but also and more importantly by the morphing of these apparently separate persons. The colonial enterprise re-figures the native, employing sartorial devices to write Englishness onto his body, to make him English; at the same time, the colonized body, becoming English, writes itself into the imperial corpus, thus colonizing the colonizer. Likewise, the sanitary or civilizing mission results in a similar configuration: The imperial representative acts as an enforcer of Victorian cultural and sanitary law, disciplining the mind and body of the colonized with its own deliberate regimen; at the same time, the colonized infects the body and mind of the colonizer, weakening him both spiritually and corporeally, transforming him into a being not unlike the colonized.

And while these representations (and the threat inherent in these representations) function as justification for an ever more rigid imperial discipline, they nonetheless infer the abiding power of the colonial subject, elaborating a

¹⁴ Note the salacious humor of one character from Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915): “I’ve taken my fun where I’ve found it. / I’ve rogued and I’ve

curiously defensive posture for what must otherwise be recognized as an invasive European presence. The colonized body thus repeats and re-figures the medical model represented earlier; once again, the deviant subject erupts out of an established frame or boundary, offering a persistent challenge to institutional power and authority. Such eruptions are largely passive (i.e., perceived as eruptions rather than deliberately performed as such) and often unconscious; they rarely result in the accrual of any substantive political gains for the subject. But the perception or construction of the deviant as ungovernable, uncontrollable, and uncontainable, nevertheless endows this figure with a complex symbolic power.

It becomes necessary at this point to withdraw somewhat from the discussion at hand and to return more explicitly to the idea and subject of disability. For while the colonial subject may readily be interpreted as a disabled figure, though Victorian literature and culture typically describe the foreign as deficient or defective, and despite the difficulty defining disability which persists in our own time, it must be acknowledged that the disabled and the colonized are not absolutely parallel identities. How the perceived power of the colonial subject informs and re-defines the relationship between colonizer and colonized is matter for another undertaking.

Our principal concern here is with the representation of and reaction to disability in cultural and in literary terms. And within the arena of Victorian literature and culture specifically, the representation of disability is shaped to a large extent by the models discussed above, each of which formulates disability as a site of contested power and identity. In a similar manner, the Victorian idea of disability, in its most obvious and available depictions, is characterized as passive, pathetic, and

ranged in my time,” and “The things that I’ve learned from the yellow and black, /

explicitly subordinate; at the same time, this established framework of pathos (which finds its origins in Christian scripture) masks an underlying sense of the disabled as active, even heroic, and rich with latent power. In response to this perceived power, the satellite (i.e., the subject who generates his/her identity within and around the context of disability) undertakes an apparently contradictory performance, working simultaneously to subdue or domesticate the terrifying difference of the disabled body (ostensibly working to bring its unruly form closer to a description of health and normalcy) even as s/he seeks to appropriate and mediate the power belonging to that unruly form; as guide, mediator, spokesman, or keeper, the satellite is automatically endowed with a consequence s/he might otherwise never enjoy.

The role of the satellite in Victorian literature and culture is necessarily more complex, though, than in its earlier incarnations. For as the idea of disability evolves, earlier tropes (e.g., classical monstra or oracles, Christian miraculous object or apostle, etc.) are not discarded, but are rather read through and within the newer models as they emerge, creating a palimpsest which invites the Victorian mind into a continually shifting relationship with the disabled subject.

Overview

Chapter One, “The Miracle Worker, or, Whose Disability Is It, Anyway: Jerry Lewis, Annie Sullivan, Milton’s Daughter’s & The Satellite Syndrome” includes an in-depth examination of the satellite theory proposed by this dissertation. Focusing on three “historical” examples, this chapter looks into the struggles between Jerry Lewis and “his” kids, between Helen Keller and her long-time friend and “Teacher,” Anne

they ‘ave helped me a ‘eap with the white” (131).

Sullivan, and the infamous (if perhaps fictional) satellite relationship between Milton and his daughters (who are often thought to have served as his amanuenses. This chapter looks into the fluid nature of this relationship of power, observing that the contest over who “owns” disabled identity also often leads to a kind of merging or migrating of identities, a questioning who *is* the disabled party.

Chapter Two, “Misappropriations: Hugh Stuart Boyd and the Blindness of Elizabeth Barrett/Browning” continues to delve into the satellite theory, beginning with an exploration of the relationship between the young Elizabeth Barrett and her tutor of Greek, Hugh Stuart Boyd, who was blind. The chapter argues that this relationship played a vital role in shaping Barrett Browning’s ideas about disability as well as her sense of identity and agency. This in turn influenced Barrett Browning’s writing and her representations of her own ailing body. In addition to its biographical concerns, its ongoing discussion of satellite theory, and a segment on the symbolic significance of blindness, this chapter includes readings of five short poems—“Wine of Cyprus,” “The Mourning Mother (of the Dead Blind),” “Hugh Stuart Boyd. His Blindness,” “Hugh Stuart Boyd. His Death,” and “Hugh Stuart Boyd. Legacies”—and a focused analysis of the “novel-poem” *Aurora Leigh*.

An outgrowth of the blindness segment from the second chapter, Chapter Three, “On Blindness,” is written largely in the form of a meditative essay considering the place of blindness in our culture and the relationship between blindness and language, the extent to which blindness is constructed or shaped by symbolic representation. In addition to thinking about definitions of blindness (and disability more generally), in addition to positioning blindness in relation to other incarnations of disability, this chapter also thinks through a series of aphorisms,

sayings, expressions, phrases employing the word blind or blindness. The section headed “Blind Spot,” for instance, discusses the significance of “blind” objects, places, spaces—blind arch, blind alley, blind gut, blind leading the blind—while the section headed “Blind Rage” talks about the place of the angry blind man, about the construction of the blind as fearful, both threatening and impotent. Other sections are entitled “The Hunting Blind,” “O dark, dark, dark . . .,” “The Female Blind,” and “The Eye and the ‘I.’” While this chapter does not include any significant addition to the satellite theory, its discussion contributes to our understanding of disability as an attractive, an almost magnetic identity, one whose elusive power is an essential element of the satellite relationship.

Chapter Four, “Tiny Tim, Blind Bertha, and the Resistance of Miss Mowcher: Charles Dickens and the Uses of Disability” applies the satellite theory within the Dickensian world.¹⁵ As in the “Misappropriations” section, this chapter too considers biographical issues, including as well some additional insight into the relationship between disability and Victorian cultural history. The majority of the chapter, however, offers readings of specific characters (or figures) from Dickens’ opus: A reflection on the significance of Laura Bridgman from *American Notes*, as well as interpretations of Tiny Tim from *A Christmas Carol*, Blind Bertha from *A Cricket on the Hearth*, and Miss Mowcher, the dwarf chiropodist from *David Copperfield*. The chapter argues, ultimately, that for Dickens, disability begins as a device, a (largely sentimental) trope to be employed by the writer for affective purposes, but that the writer finds it increasingly impossible to manage his disabled figures, to keep them under control, within the bounds he has established. Though Dickens is

presented here as a satellite who interacts with and responds to figures who are established as fictions (with the possible exceptions of Laura Bridgman and Jane Hill [who served as the model for Miss Mowcher]), his experience may nevertheless be likened to that of satellites examined in earlier chapters. Although the Dickens presented here is not usually establishing a relationship with a “real” disabled figure, the strange familiarity of the troubles he encounters serves to remind us that one crucial aspect of satellite activity is the reconstructing, reimagining, or fictionalizing of the “real-life” disabled. Thus, this chapter indirectly invites the reader to question whether Jerry Lewis is interacting with actual children or with figments of his imagination. Though each satellite relationship is unique, the experience of one enables us to reflect on another.

Finally, this dissertation concludes with an appendix entitled “Strange Migrations: Eruptions of the Disabled Self in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*,” an abbreviated study of how the satellite theory might be applied to Brontë’s novel.¹⁶ The central observation of this short essay is that disability cannot be contained by the satellite, that disability ultimately migrates, manifesting itself in the person of the satellite. So, even while the madwoman Bertha Mason Rochester remains in concealment, “kept” by her husband and by Grace Poole, she escapes repeatedly, both literally and in the figurative sense, through the bodies and identities of her two keepers. Thus we find Bertha Mason emerging in Jane’s mistaken idea of Grace Poole, in the heroine’s misattribution of the madwoman’s firestarting and her demonic laughter. And more significantly, Bertha Mason’s character becomes visible

¹⁵ A version of this chapter is to appear in a forthcoming issue of *Dickens Studies Annual*.

in the person of her husband, in his masquerade as a gypsy-woman, for instance, and later, at the same moment that the madwoman engineers her ultimate escape (in suicide), Rochester's body is permanently disabled and disfigured, as though his late wife's disability migrates and is transmogrified, re-interpreted in the body of the one-time satellite.

The text which follows is influenced, certainly, by the significance of the satellite relationship within a nineteenth-century context and many of the texts and situations examined in the following chapters are Victorian. Indeed, an expanded version of this study would consider additional Victorian texts—Dinah Craik's *Olive* (1850), Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers* (1857), Wilkie Collins' *Poor Miss Finch* (1872)—which could not be included as part of this project. At the same time, it has not been possible to strictly limit this project to the Victorian purview. The naturally expansive nature of the satellite theory here proposed and the far-reaching nature of the satellite relationship have compelled me to employ texts and examples from a variety of times and places. And though the satellite phenomenon may be most active and visible in the Victorian period and in the Victorian text, it is not a happening that is defined by or limited to any single place or time. Outside of a Victorian framework, particularly exciting applications of the satellite theory might be made to Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* (1911) or to John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937).

¹⁶ A version of this essay is to appear in a forthcoming issue of *Explicator*.

CHAPTER ONE

The Miracle Worker, or, Whose Disability Is It, Anyway?: Jerry Lewis, Annie Sullivan, Milton's Daughters & The Satellite Syndrome

In September of 1981, a decade before the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), disability rights activist (and soon-to-be chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC]) Evan Kemp wrote a groundbreaking op-ed piece for the *New York Times*. In it Kemp argued that fundraising telethons, and the Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon in particular, caused untold harm by their infantilizing and enfeebling representations of people with disabilities. The critique made a number of convincing points, but Kemp's principal concern was that the benefits of such telethons could never outweigh the sweeping damage caused by a "pity" approach to disability. According to Kemp's editorial, the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) telethon "reinforces a stigma against disabled people" and "seems to proclaim that the only socially acceptable status for disabled people is their early childhood." Ultimately, Kemp argues that "[p]laying to pity may raise money, but it also raises walls of fear" between disabled people and the general public. But while the measured intelligence of this argument played an influential role in reshaping attitudes toward disability—indeed, Kemp is generally credited as the driving force behind the passage of the ADA in 1990—there was one important representative of people with disabilities who remained wholly unconvinced of the justice of Kemp's critique.

Long-time MDA chairman, Jerry Lewis, has persisted in his highly successful fund-raising approach, making a showcase of his contempt for the protesters he perceives as mere rabble-rousers. When interviewed upon the subject, Lewis' rage is palpable:

This one kid in Chicago would have passed through this life and never had the opportunity to be acknowledged by anybody, but he found out that by being a dissident he gets picked up in a limo by a television station. What do they want me to do? They want me to not raise \$120 million. I don't give a good goddamn what they call it; I am giving doctors money so that your new baby and my new baby never have to deal with this. I must be doing something right; I've raised one billion three hundred million dollars. These 19 people don't want me to do that. They want me to stop now? Fuck them. (Bennetts 4)

And an article written by Lewis for *Parade*, a popular Sunday supplement, shortly after the passage of the ADA offers even more telling evidence of what might be most kindly described as the entertainer's "outdated" attitude toward disability. Entitled "If I had Muscular Dystrophy," the first-person essay describes what Lewis' life might be like if "when the gifts and the pains were being handed out, [he] was in the wrong line" (Lewis 4). Written in a familiarly maudlin style designed to coax money from the pockets of the well-intentioned, the article employs language and conventions which "infuriated disability rights activists" (Pelka 301). Lewis' description of his wheelchair, for instance, as a "steel imprisonment" outraged one protester who described her own wheelchair as "a tremendous vehicle of liberation" (Bennetts 5). Other language and representations in the article were so spectacularly offensive as to have been calamitous, particularly Lewis' imagined internal struggle over whether to participate in a game of wheelchair basketball. Though his fantasy is "to get on the court with other cripples and play," he doesn't wish to "half-do anything" and so he eschews the game. His explanation? "When I sit back and think a little more rationally, I realize my life *is* half, so I must learn to do things halfway. I just have to learn to try to be good at being half a person" (Lewis 5).

Needless to say, Lewis' article excited some controversy, as has his continued tenure as the very visible national chairman of the MDA. Disability rights activists

excoriated the essay, denouncing Lewis' depiction of disability, demonstrating against the telethon, and demanding Lewis' removal from the MDA. Among the most vocal critics have been Mike Ervin and Cris Matthews, former MDA poster children and founders of "Jerry's Orphans" (an obvious satire of Lewis' description of MDA beneficiaries as "Jerry's Kids"), an organization dedicated to raising awareness for a "no pity" approach to disability. But despite some favorable coverage, most notably in a 1992 *Nation* article advising the MDA to "move its fundraising focus away from [Lewis] and toward the issue of a just society" (Johnson 233), the popular press has generally been slow to criticize the man who has raised more than a billion dollars to provide support and research for those with neuro-muscular diseases. Lewis himself, ever willing to publicize his own generosity, raises a point which is hard to contest: "Why wasn't I a terrible man," he asks, "when we bought them the wheelchairs that are getting them around?" (*Time* 20). Lewis' bitterness may be socially and politically distasteful, but he has indeed raised tremendous sums for the benefit of those whom he has at the same time demeaned and dehumanized. In fact, Disability Studies scholar Joseph Shapiro is careful to note that in Lewis' highly objectionable *Parade* essay, he "also spoke of the need for accessible homes, restaurants, planes, and hotels, making his writing a strange stew of the worst pity stereotypes mixed with a dash of disability rights thinking" (23).

It is exactly this "strange brew," these oddly mixed and unpredictable gestures of charity that make Lewis such a perplexing villain. Undoubtedly, he has done much to set back the cause of disability rights. Even if we choose to discount his acrimonious statements and vicious ploys, like his attempt to get Evan Kemp fired from his position at the EEOC (Pelka 302), the entertainer's endorsement of a

pity-driven fundraising campaign continues to construct a negative image of disabled people for the American public. But Lewis' deft manipulation of this same public and his erratic responses to individual disabled people comprise a dense and difficult personal text. Those who choose to vilify the chairman of the MDA, while undertaking an urgent political task, might not consider how personally necessary it may be for Lewis to maintain his paternalistic role. Leslie Bennetts' "Jerry vs. the Kids" begins to deconstruct some of these motivations, suggesting that Lewis' rampant insecurity and his addiction to his own celebrity may be key factors in much of the entertainer's otherwise inexplicable behavior. According to Bennetts, Lewis' resistance to those who protest against his fundraising approach originates in a deeply rooted anxiety: "I suddenly realize," she writes, "that the message delivered by the protesters is the one he has heard in nightmares all his life: They don't love you. No matter how much you try to do for them, they don't love you" (10). But perhaps Lewis' attachment to a demeaning and outdated representation of disability is not so much an outgrowth of his need for love as it is a fierce battle to manage and stabilize his own sense of identity. His paternalism may thus be regarded as a kind of anchor, his representation of himself as patron and protector functioning as a sure and stable retreat from his own failing celebrity. Jerry Lewis is what I call a "satellite," a presumably nondisabled person who appears to construct his/her personal identity around a central nexus of disability.

At the outset, it is understood that "disability" and "satellite" are identities which are troublesome to manage and define since there is enormous room for play in determining both what disability is or may be and in establishing who or what may constitute a satellite. For instance, the category of "disability," as it is here set forth,

is necessarily defined as a central figure around which the satellite orbits, but this role may be filled by any group or individual the satellite perceives as requiring mediation and the category may thus readily extend into the familiar arenas of race, class, and gender as well as finding use in discussions of celebrity, since the wealthy and the well-known are often (perceived as being) incapacitated by their own fame.¹⁷ At the same time, the category of “satellite” may be defined as including any one of the array of individuals who work or live in orbit around the celebrated body: Family members, health care workers, service professionals, managers and “handlers,” lovers, clerics, aides, translators and interpreters. So, while Jerry Lewis may represent one particular satellite, perhaps even one “type” of satellite, there are many other possible models for the disabled-satellite relationship which may be perceived as more or less politically, socially, and/or psychologically problematic. The key is that the identity and/or importance of the satellite be understood (by him/herself or by others) as residing in his/her connection to the central “disabled” subject.¹⁸

Jerry Lewis makes such a tempting subject for the beginning of this discussion precisely because his reluctance to understand his own satellite identity serves as verification that he actually is a satellite. The full extent of his investment in this identity is confirmed by his absolute failure to recognize any merit at all in the

¹⁷ For delightful pop culture depictions of this satellite-to-celebrity persona particularly, see *The Simpsons* episode 5F19, “When You Dish Upon a Star,” in which Homer becomes a willing slave to stars Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger; or episode 43 of *Third Rock From the Sun*, “Fifteen Minutes of Dick,” in which Sally clobbers Mark Hamill in a local restaurant and consequently enjoys a brief period of celebrity, during the course of which Harry serves her in total abjection.

¹⁸ For the purposes of this dissertation, discussions of disabled and satellite subjects deliberately migrate between the boundaries of the “real” and the “fictional,” although I realize that another study might require a writer to create definitions which would distinguish between these two modes.

arguments proffered by his critics. After all, the fundamental premise of the “no pity” campaign is that people with disabilities can and should act for themselves; should Lewis concede (even to himself) the justice of such a premise, where would that leave the chief spokesman of the MDA? Without a group for whom to speak, without a platform upon which to act out his own celebrity, Lewis would long ago have been relegated to the dustbin of entertainment history, existing in the purgatorial space of the has-been. As it stands, the telethon has become a guaranteed gig; since “Jerry’s kids” are the show’s *raison d’être*, Lewis’ place in the limelight is assured so long as his act, so long as his celebrity, is an adjunct to the “cause.” Indeed, if the cause itself were discontinued, due either to the discovery of a “cure” or to a massive restructuring of the social institutions and attitudes which currently effect disability, Lewis would not only be out of a job, he would be out of a personality. For Lewis, the presence of disability, and his associated characterization of disability as necessarily crippling, suffocating, painful, and humiliating, are necessary components of his own self-assessment. The helpless suffering of others, particularly children and infantilized adults, thus becomes a mirror in which he may measure his own identity and self-worth. In other words, Lewis needs to see disability as debilitating because he needs to see himself as a philanthropist.

This need to play the role of protector and benefactor may well be allied to what Bennetts identifies as Lewis’ insecurity, the entertainer’s ongoing desire for recognition growing out of his enduring need for a love left unsatisfied by his unavailable parents. As Bennetts has observed, Lewis “is, after all, the only child of two vaudevillians who were on the road more than half of every year, who were always stashing their heartbroken son with relatives while they went off for weeks at

a time; these were parents who managed to miss their own son's Bar Mitzvah" (3). And it is this experience of abandonment which Bennetts sees as spurring on Lewis' "need for adulation," a need made manifest not only by the antic behaviors that consistently assure that Lewis will be the center of attention, but also by his own confession: "If I went down Fifth Avenue window-shopping and no one bothered me, it would break my heart" (Bennetts 10). So, Lewis' continued work for the MDA would appear to satisfy his craving for adulation on a number of levels. First and foremost, the telethon and his other year-long MDA fundraising work keeps Lewis in the public eye, when he might otherwise be consigned to three weeks a year on the Vegas strip. At the same time, the comedian has entered a venue wherein he may actually create a heroic image of himself; for once, he appears not exclusively as an object of fun, but rather as a person to be admired, a man who works tirelessly to improve the lives of the less fortunate. And so too, he has worked both publicly and privately to construct a little kingdom for himself with the disabled people served by the MDA as his grateful and adoring subjects. For those hundreds of thousands who are still in the fold, the shepherd is a great man indeed, generous, compassionate, and hard-working. And this interpretation of Lewis as a father-shepherd figure is confirmed or perhaps augmented by the continued use of that troublesome catch-phrase "Jerry's Kids," terminology which allows both Lewis himself and his admirers to regard him as father. Use of this phrase is now widely regarded in the disability community as a slur or epithet, and is probably a liability that the MDA public relations staff could live without, but Lewis has disregarded objections and persists in identifying and relating to his "kids" as such. Despite political censure, however, Lewis' clinging to the use of such disagreeable

terminology probably has little to do with a desire to rob anyone of dignity and maturity and is more likely keyed to his own need to act the part of parent. For Lewis, the actual “kids” may be less important than one might think, since on some level they serve merely as generic vehicles for his autobiographical fiction, his fantasy of himself as father-protector. (Bennetts reports Lewis’ recollecting his one-time threat of a reporter: “If you do anything to hurt my kids, I’ll have you killed, you understand?” [1].) Indeed, this notion begins to provide some explanation for Lewis’ bitterly defensive sallies against his detractors (wherein he reminds the public of where that wheelchair money came from to begin with). And Lewis’ boorish self-congratulations may also be seen as part of the same pattern, a desperate clinging to the disabled body as an object which enables his paternal role, which grants him visibility and legitimacy. In the notorious *Parade* article, for instance, Lewis is quick to cash in on his apparent intimacy with disabled life, taking care to remind the reader that he speaks of experience that belongs to him due to his kinship with “my kids.” “I think it might help,” he writes, “for the reader to understand that none of what I write is fantasy or assumption. I have lived with ‘my kids’ for 41 years now, and I’ve seen it all” (4). Clearly, Lewis depends on that claim of family relationship to authenticate his story; indeed, it seems that the claim of such a relationship serves to justify his writing literally from the position of a disabled person, his deep sense of his own connection (i.e., his *familiarity*) with disability allowing him to “put [him]self in that chair . . . that steel imprisonment that long has been deemed the dystrophic child’s plight” (4), and to reimagine himself *as* the disabled child.

So, it would seem that for Lewis as satellite, disability serves at least a dual function, acting as insurance for his own celebrity while simultaneously enabling a

self-construction as father-shepherd (heroic and perhaps divine?). But a third aspect of Lewis' satellite posture also provides some useful insight into the relationship between disabled and nondisabled, for Lewis' reimagining of himself as disabled child—the ultimate paternalism in that it wholly appropriates both the agency and the identity of the subject so inhabited—illustrates a rather common pattern of satellite behavior, the occupation or colonization of the disabled body.

In Lewis' case, the appropriation manifested in the *Parade* essay may be understood as a logical extension of his career in entertainment. For Lewis' brand of physical comedy has always relied on his identification with an abnormal or freakish other, the oafs, buffoons, and fools he has typically played all standing in for that familiar trope of social rejection, the “retard.” Moreover, Lewis' humor does not rely exclusively on this self-projection into developmental disability; his numerous performances as spastic buck-toothed gimp encompass a range of other physical and cognitive impairments. His *Parade* confession thus reveals a long-term self-image or a self-image which has, at least, been a long time in the making. All the while that Lewis has portrayed himself as father and benefactor, even while he imagines himself, Christ-like, as the savior of a helpless and suffering humanity, his self-representation has unconsciously attested to a sense himself as disabled, an identity which for Lewis necessarily comprises an experience of affliction, humiliation, and suppressed rage. Writing as a youth in a wheelchair, Lewis complains of “the indignity of having to be carried,” of his annoyance at having to be “pushed” in his chair, over the “cruel” and “inhuman” treatment he receives at the hands of “unafflicted children,” of the need to suppress his rage and smile at his tormentors (“the only defense you have for cruelty”) (4); he imagines a dehumanizing medical

experience (“the probing, the sticking, the pinching”), unwanted stares of pity, and a pitched battle against the feeling of inferiority that so often haunts someone who “is dealt a bad hand” (5). For Lewis, the experience of disability and the experience of humiliation are inseparable, as are the experience of being disabled and acting for the disabled. For Lewis, the act of mediation—the performance in which he represents his “kids”—is also a mediation of the self, a re-inscription and re-interpretation of his own *imagined* defect and humiliation.

Given this possibility, that Lewis’ passionate attachment to Muscular Dystrophy as a cause stems, at least in part, from a sense of his own impairment and from an unconscious desire to repair his imagined handicap, we may also begin to rethink some aspects of Lewis’ role as satellite. For now it becomes possible to see the comedian’s mediations as part of a complex array of motivations: By acting the part of satellite, he may reinforce his own celebrity; enact his own self-importance; play the part of father, hero, God; give play to his own feelings of suffering and defect; and repair his consequent sense of loss. But so, too, the disabled child who sits beside him, or who sits in his lap—even while it represents himself, even while it serves as a lay object upon which to make the benevolent performance—serves to manufacture the performer’s sense of his own normalcy. The child may thus be read as a kind of talisman and Lewis’ charitable work as a kind of fetish, both functioning to protect him from the looming possibility that he himself might be the crippled retard he has so often portrayed on film. So long as the child is there in his lap, her physiological difference measured and medically certified, he may keep his own sense of defect at bay, his ability to see himself as whole, normal, and healthy thus stabilized by her presence.

The political difficulty inherent in this scenario is thus more complex than many activists have considered. Most obviously and most inescapably, the social and psychological damage effected by this particular satellite is legion; Lewis' insistent reading of disability as tragic works to create and confirm the very tragedy he would seem to deplore. But on another level, we must wonder if attempts to force Lewis from his role as MDA chairman can have any effect other than to provoke a further fortification of his existing position. *Lewis appears to have an absolute need to understand himself according to the context of the disabled child; and insofar as this need, this identity, is threatened by those proposing an alternative representation of disability, Lewis will shield himself from those alternative representations and will continue to dig in, his role as protector and benefactor made more necessary by the possibility that his "kids" might not really need a father after all.*

This is not to suggest that the political action taken thus far has been pointless or ill-advised, but is intended rather to point to the metastatic nature of the satellite's investment in disabled identity and causes. And in exploring such an investment, I may here have taken some undue liberties with the Jerry Lewis as person. For that which is written here is not and cannot be a fair and thorough analysis of an individual psyche; it is intended rather as an examination of Lewis as character, that highly peculiar and highly visible symbolic presence standing athwart the public representation of MD and mediating, whether intentionally or not, its very meaning and affect.

Indeed, the fact that Lewis as person may in some sense be erased or rewritten in this analytic process points to yet another difficulty of satellite identity. For even while the satellite proposes to understand and/or make him/herself within

the context of disability, this construction proves enormously unstable. The sense of the self as heroic or benevolent, even as normal, is constantly elided by the central premise of the satellite activity—that disability is the primary body in question, containing the importance and the authenticity that legitimate the being and presence of the satellite. For this reason, the satellite gesture is one which oscillates among a series of interactive practices, unable to settle either its own sense of identity or its perception and representation of disability: Since the satellite owes its existence as such to his/her relationship with disability, one of the principal features of satellite existence is the assertion of that relationship, even to the extent of insisting on a relationship of authority over disability or a place as mediator/spokesman for the disabled subject. In practice, these seemingly related gestures function antithetically; the desire for relationship, even kinship, simultaneously inspiring the satellite's sense of self *as* disabled (and therefore justified in speaking for disability) and his/her sense of distance from disability (by acting in authority over the subject, thus asserting its distance and inferiority). At the same time, by predicating relationship or kinship, even similitude, the satellite begins to enter into disabled identity, this performance frequently (as in the instance of Jerry Lewis) manifesting itself as the satellite's sense of himself as disabled or by the satellite's explicit representation of himself as disabled. But since the satellite experience is grounded not only in the assertion of relationship, but also in the assertion of difference, the satellite's idea of himself as disabled is one that must be rejected even while it is being enacted, the imaginative appropriation of the disabled body being perceived on some level as an uncontrolled or hostile movement emanating from the disabled—a gesture of invasion or contamination. The disabled self is thus interpreted and mediated as one which is

simultaneously primary and secondary, superior and inferior, threatening and helpless. And the instability which abounds within this relationship begins to illuminate the satellite's tendency to assert his apparent position of authority over the disabled, the sense of powerlessness which necessarily intrudes itself upon the acting out of satellite authority motivating the satellite's recurrent urge to assert a control which becomes ever more elusive.

Furthermore, the anxiety provoked by the satellite's psychic and symbolic inhabitation of the disabled corpus results not only from the dread of invasion or contamination, but also, and perhaps more prominently, from a fear of masking or erasure. For the satellite role, by definition one of mediation, implies not only that the satellite is by nature secondary, but also that the satellite is, in essence, invisible, his role as mediator or spokesperson implicitly constructing him as transparency, a channel or conduit for disabled identity. Thus, the satellite's experience of confounding himself with the disabled gives rise to a sense of loss that encompasses both the loss of able-bodied identity and the more frightening possibility that individual identity itself has ceased to exist. For a moment, at least, satellite and disabled are conflated and the desire of the one to represent the other presents itself as a double erasure, the two bodies locked in a contest for primacy which conceals the potential individuality, even the visibility, of either one. When Jerry Lewis imagines himself as a disabled child, his imagined loss is manifold: He is no longer father and benefactor, no longer normal; indeed, he is no longer himself, but an invisible medium, a mere transcription of disabled identity. And when we read Lewis as satellite, playing fast and loose with possible psychic motivations, when we acknowledge that he is a symbol and not a man, this too is an erasure, a tacit

agreement that the satellite exists only as metonymized object, its association with disability, its role as part or prosthetic, defining its entirety.

The Miracle Worker

The shift from a discussion of Jerry Lewis to a discussion of Anne Sullivan may strike some as a movement from the ridiculous to the sublime, the former figure suggesting the aroma of vaudeville—sweat and schmaltz, perhaps—while the latter is delicately wreathed in the incense of the saint. After all, Anne Sullivan, teacher and companion to that most legendary of disabled figures, Helen Keller, has been praised as Keller’s savior and is widely regarded not only as having worked a miracle in teaching Keller language, but also as having sacrificed her entire adult life to the needs of her world-famous student. Despite the more pristine hue of Sullivan’s provenance, however, Lewis and Sullivan share in the same symbolic tradition; like Lewis, Sullivan’s figure is one that cannot be evaluated apart from its relationship to disability. Indeed, according to Sullivan’s biographer, “As long as Annie Sullivan lived [...], a question remained as to how much of what was called Helen Keller was in reality Annie Sullivan” (Henney, Introduction 13).

The essential facts of Helen Keller’s life have been popularized by William Gibson’s ubiquitous teleplay *The Miracle Worker*. Though not the first to use this expression to describe Keller’s teacher—that dubious honor probably belongs to Samuel Clemens—Gibson’s influential drama is certainly the vehicle which has made the label stick. And it is through the medium of his play that the Keller mythos is sustained in American popular culture. Gibson’s rendition of Keller’s story may be summarized as follows: a beast-like wild child, blind and deaf, soulless, violent, and

dangerous, is wrestled into submission and finally into articulation through the powerful discipline of teacher Anne Sullivan. But while most of us gain our familiarity with Keller's life through *The Miracle Worker*, a text which has undergone many incarnations, from Broadway play to feature film through numerous television interpretations, few realize that the drama was never designed as a play about Keller, a common misconception which has been an endless source of frustration to Gibson, who complains of the public "myopia" which prevents our seeing "the Miss Sullivan in the background" (Preface, *Monday*, vii). Gibson reports having "been asked a hundred times how I came to be so interested in [Helen Keller]," to which queries he diplomatically replies that he "was never interested in her, the play is about her teacher, and for that reason is not named *The Miracle Worker*" (vii-viii). For Gibson, the important figure is not the deaf-blind child released from an imagined captivity within her own body, but is rather the teacher, "herself half-blinded in childhood," and an extraordinarily inventive "spitfire" who "wrestled" with "a lost child" (viii-ix). Indeed, the disciplinary flavor of the text, evident from the many scenes of physical struggle as well as from Gibson's characterization of Sullivan as having "wrestled" with her charge, may readily be seen as stemming from Gibson's posture of defense in regard to Sullivan; the play is dedicated to her literally as well as metaphorically, and in a second Gibson play, *Monday after the Miracle* (1983), also about Sullivan, Gibson begins his "Author's Note" with a reference to one of the many occasions when Sullivan was eclipsed by her more famous protégé. According to Gibson, "Annie accepted this overshadowing with a sufficiency of grace, although once—when she was awarded an honorary degree and the reporters flocked around Helen—she said, 'Even at my coronation Helen is queen'" (vii). The idea of a

contest between these two women, a struggle for visibility, for personal dominance, for identity, is ultimately at the heart of both of Gibson's "Helen Keller" plays. But while *Monday After the Miracle*, by far the lesser known of the two, makes this struggle explicit, even pitting the two women against one another in a battle for the affections of Sullivan's husband, John Macy, the contest constructed within *The Miracle Worker* is both more subtle and, due to the extreme popularity of the play, more influential.

The script of *The Miracle Worker* centers on a series of violent confrontations between teacher and student: A physical struggle over Sullivan's initial gift to Keller (a doll) resulting in a bloodied mouth and a lost tooth for Sullivan (Keller escapes unharmed); Keller's locking Sullivan in her room and hiding the key; an epic battle between Keller and Sullivan in the dining room during which Sullivan successfully forces Keller to eat with a spoon and to fold a napkin; Sullivan's quasi-kidnapping of Keller and her imprisonment in the estate guest house (disguised to be unrecognizable to Keller); Sullivan's penetrating Keller's unwilling hand with the manual alphabet; all culminating in the famous final scene of Keller's illumination wherein Sullivan delivers Keller into a knowledge of language by dragging her to a pump and forcing her to refill a pitcher while spelling "W-A-T-E-R" into her hand. The violence of the drama is such that when the play was produced on Broadway, Patty Duke (who played Keller) suffered physical injury as a direct result of her performance: Duke "developed blood blisters from the spoons that Annie kept shoving into her hand to teach her table manners, and suffered from painful bruises on the back of her legs from slamming them into a chair" (Herrmann 322-23). So too, the depiction required Duke and Anne Bancroft (who played the part of Sullivan) to slap each other's faces a number of times during each performance, an

element of the on-stage fights which Duke reports “always had to be done for real, and was always horrible” (qtd. in Herrmann 323; Duke 72-73). Arthur Penn’s 1962 film adaptation unwittingly reinforces the violence of the Broadway production by featuring the same actors in the same roles. It thus happened that the 15-year-old Duke—enormous, ungainly, and fully pubescent—was called upon to represent a six-year-old Keller, a bit of trivia that may seem insignificant if one has no previous knowledge of Keller’s age at the time Sullivan entered her life, but an item of glaring importance if one considers the implicit message. First of all, the idea that Keller (as represented by Duke on film) might have advanced well into adolescence with the limited skills she is portrayed as having creates the illusion of a far more backward child than even Gibson had originally intended. For it must be remembered that a six-year-old who fails to make herself understood is a far more sympathetic human subject than a 15-year-old in the same position. And by the same token, the awkwardness and lack of physical control which constitute essential elements of Gibson’s characterization of Keller are made more menacing and alienating by Duke’s enlarged frame than if they had been represented by a smaller, younger child. One interaction, in particular, points up the feeling of threat that comes with Duke’s performance. This early scene depicts the young Keller sitting astride a supine and struggling girl servant (Martha) as Keller uses scissors to forcibly remove the other girl’s small braids. Despite this relatively superficial damage, however, the weirdly ominous music which introduces the scene coupled with Keller’s great size and her obvious lack of physical control contribute to the viewer’s sense of a much greater physical menace, the initial attack of Martha and Keller’s subsequent struggle with

her mother for possession of the scissors suggesting that the heedless deaf-blind child is in imminent danger of cutting or stabbing one of her companions.

In addition, it is important to observe the extraordinary discrepancy between Gibson's portrayal of Keller and Keller's portrayal of herself. A comparison of Gibson's text with Keller's *The Story of My Life*—Gibson's primary source for *The Miracle Worker*—reveals the playwright's consistent rejection of information that would create a more human portrait of Keller in favor of material that presents her as feral, violent, and dangerous. Most conspicuously, Gibson eschews any representation of Keller's adult life as a student at Radcliffe, or as a celebrated humanitarian and political activist, material which dominates Keller's own account of her life. Apart from the famous scene of transformation at the pump and a brief episode at the end of the play (typically omitted in film and video renditions) in which Keller is introduced to other blind children at the Perkins Institution, *The Miracle Worker* never even presents Keller as capable of human communication. Instead, by its insistence on Keller's dangerous ferocity, the play emphatically requires that Sullivan use force to control and teach her student. So, even while Gibson's *Miracle Worker* has popularized the story of Keller's "liberation," it has also worked to popularize a representation of deaf-blindness as both brutal and menacing.

The Miracle Worker's portrayal of a Keller entirely without communicative abilities and, as Gibson infers, entirely cut off from "the human family" has given rise to the popular notion that Keller was without language or expression prior to Sullivan's arrival (*Monday*, ix), a supposition which is largely erroneous. Keller herself, while acknowledging the inadequacy of her early skills, nevertheless writes

explicitly about using a system of “sign language” prior to being taught the manual alphabet (*Story* 29), a language which included signs for the various individuals who lived at the Keller home as well as for favorite foods. Keller’s mother, too, “succeeded in making [her] understand a good deal,” her playmate Martha Washington “always understood” Keller’s sign for egg-hunting, and according to *The Story of My Life*, the six-year-old Keller also enjoyed company and would frequently help her mother with household tasks like folding laundry (27-28), all of which testify to the child’s ability to understand and communicate, howsoever imperfectly, with those around her. John Macy writes that “nothing could be more false than the notion that before Annie Sullivan went to her, [Keller] had no mind, that she is a sort of artificial construction made up of what her teacher had given her” (qtd. in Herrmann 46). And Keller’s sense of the success of her youthful communications is confirmed, too, by Sullivan, who frequently writes of Keller’s use of “signs and pantomime,” measuring her student’s progress in part by Keller’s substitution of manual spelling for her pre-existing sign language (257). “At the time I became her teacher,” writes Sullivan, Keller “had made for herself upward of sixty signs, all of which were imitative and were readily understood by those who knew her” (331). Indeed, Sullivan reports that in the very first encounter between herself and Keller, the two make effective use of signs to communicate (Sullivan 245). The gap between Gibson’s representation of Keller’s early communication skills and the abilities she actually possessed may be attributed in part to poetic license, the exaggeration of Keller’s disconnectedness serving to add drama to that moment the playwright identifies as “miracle” (*Miracle Worker* 123, act 3). But the principal explanation for the existence of such a gap seems to be the dramatization of Sullivan’s work; in order

to fully appreciate the teacher's efforts as miraculous, to endow her with undivided credit for bringing language to her student, it becomes necessary to read Keller as fully imprisoned. It is Sullivan's intercession which makes Keller free, and the audience is thus invited to read the teacher as occupying the place of Christ: She makes the blind see and the dumb speak (Matthew 15:30-31 et passim). At the same time, this aggrandizement of Sullivan's considerable talents entails the necessary embrutalization of Keller. Until Sullivan performs the miracle, acting out salvation on her helpless charge, penetrating the resistant membrane of deaf-blindness, the child may scarcely be regarded as human.¹⁹ Ultimately, Gibson's idealization of the Teacher character, his play's insistence on "Annie" as a source of the miraculous, requires his construction of Keller as a passive (or even unwilling) recipient of Teacher's beneficence. Rather than regarding the child of *The Miracle Worker* as a participant in her own education, we are invited to see her as existing outside the family of man, a fierce and brutal creature, dangerous, and requiring a salvation which is necessarily external.

Keller's self-portrait stands in stark relief to Gibson's depiction of a blank and embruted child. Though Keller writes of an increasing frustration over her limited ability to communicate, her description of life-before-Teacher is largely one of contentment and cheerful ease. She writes sentimentally of the remembered joys of the family garden, of games with her playmates, of working in the kitchen, and of conspiring with other children to steal sweets from the larder. One particularly telling description clearly spells out the divide between Gibson's script and Keller's

¹⁹ Gibson also writes of Teacher as a metaphor for artist, struggling to mold unruly human material into a desired form. This too, contributes to the play's objectification of Keller.

own; for Keller's remembrance of the episode in which she cut Martha Washington's hair diverges widely from the fear-inspiring scenario fabricated by Gibson and director Arthur Penn.

Martha Washington had as great a love for mischief as I. Two little children were seated on the veranda steps one hot July afternoon. One was black as ebony, with little bunches of fuzzy hair tied with shoestrings sticking out all over her head like corkscrews. The other was white, with long golden curls. One child was six years old, the other two or three years older. The younger child was blind—that was I—and the other was Martha Washington. We were busy cutting out paper dolls; but we soon wearied of this amusement, and after cutting up our shoestrings and clipping all the leaves off the honeysuckle that were within reach, I turned my attention to Martha's corkscrews. She objected at first, but finally submitted. Thinking that turn and turn about is fair play, she seized the scissors and cut off one of my curls, and would have cut them all off but for my mother's timely interference. (*Story* 29)

In this decidedly more benevolent version, it becomes clear that Martha is not a victim of Keller's antagonism, but is, rather, a playmate; and we find, too, that the game of hair cutting was at least partially reciprocal. Importantly, Keller's mother here does not interrupt Keller's assault on another child, but rather intervenes to prevent Keller's companion from cutting her own daughter's "golden curls." And it is crucial to note, too, that the childlike self here depicted by Keller is "two or three years" *younger* than the beleaguered servant girl a giant Keller is portrayed as assaulting in Arthur Penn's film production. Rather than coinciding with Gibson's depiction of a violent and dangerous young savage, Keller's self-representation here portrays instead an entirely human child with an apparently normal "love for mischief." Indeed, the famed centerpiece of Gibson's drama, the grand battle between Keller and Sullivan which takes place in the locked dining room, is conspicuously absent from Keller's own account of her early life. So, that which is popularly supposed to have been a crucial step in Keller's progress toward human

understanding and communication—that is, her learning proper table manners—seems to have had far less significance for this icon of disabled identity than it has had for her interpreters and their audience. For Keller, apparently, Sullivan’s early episodes of disciplinary fervor seem to have left little impression; she rarely writes of Teacher as filling a controlling or punitive role, even in the biography, *Teacher* (1955), written twenty years after Sullivan’s death. Indeed, when Keller does make mention of her teacher’s physical violence, she attributes this behavior to Sullivan’s infamous moodiness, rather than including it within the schema of Sullivan’s planned pedagogy.

But while Gibson’s characterization of the embattled relationship between Sullivan and Keller may not accord entirely with Keller’s autobiographical account, his focus on discipline and on the physical management of young Keller is clearly present in Anne Sullivan’s reports and letters, documents which initially inspired Gibson to write *The Miracle Worker*. It seems, in fact, that Sullivan’s faith in discipline may have been greater even than Gibson’s representation reflects. After all, the “miracle” of his drama is clearly identified as Keller’s dawning moment of comprehension and consciousness at the pump, at which point he specifically inserts the direction, “now the miracle happens” (123, act three); but for Sullivan, Keller’s breakthrough into the acquisition of language seems both less sudden and less miraculous than the child’s hard-won *obedience*. Of the former moment, Sullivan does indeed write movingly, but she identifies Keller’s new understanding “*that everything has a name, and that the manual alphabet is the key to everything she wants to know*” as the “*second great step*” in Keller’s education (256; latter emphasis added). Sullivan writes of the first, which had come approximately three weeks earlier:

My heart is singing for joy this morning. A miracle has happened! The light of understanding has shone upon my little pupil's mind, and behold, all things are changed!

The wild little creature of two weeks ago has been transformed into a gentle child. She is sitting by me as I write, her face serene and happy, crocheting a long red chain of Scotch wool. She learned the stitch this week, and is very proud of the achievement. [...] She lets me kiss her now, and when she is in a particularly gentle mood, she will sit in my lap for a minute or two; but she does not return my caresses. The great step—the step that counts—has been taken. The little savage has learned her first lesson in obedience, and finds the yoke easy. It now remains my pleasant task to direct and mould the beautiful intelligence that is beginning to stir in the child-soul. (Sullivan 252)

For Sullivan then, the “step that counts” does not necessarily have to do with linguistic achievement, but is marked instead by her student's new domesticity, Keller's futile but contented replication of a new crochet stitch standing as an emblem of the child's submissive obedience (along with her new willingness to be kissed and caressed, like a docile pet). This tableau bears out Sullivan's initial instinct: “The more I think,” she had written, “the more certain I am that obedience is the gateway through which knowledge, yes, and love, too, enter the mind of the child” (249).

It would seem, then, that Gibson's representation of Sullivan's techniques is not entirely inaccurate. That Sullivan was, to some extent, a disciplinarian seems evident; the meaning and impact of this disciplinary approach, however, are exceedingly difficult to measure. It seems possible, for instance, that the violence of Gibson's play and his depiction of Sullivan as being “a little rough” work to support a vision of Sullivan's “no pity” approach to disability (Gibson 39, 62; act 1, act 2). The idea of pity as a trap is a recurrent theme in the play; introduced as the segue into the great dining-room battle scene, it is at the heart of an exchange between Sullivan and Keller's father, he asking “Have you no pity in you, girl?” and she

responding, outraged, “*Pity!* For this *tyrant?* The whole house turns on her whims, who’s to teach her the sun doesn’t rise and set for her? Of course I have no *pity*” (62, act 2). Later, a frustrated Sullivan remonstrates with Keller’s mother on the same theme: “Mrs. Keller, Helen’s worst handicap isn’t blindness or deafness. It’s your love. And pity. I’d burn them both out of the dictionary if it was up to me” (74, act 2). And while *The Miracle Worker* does take some liberties, it seems clear that Sullivan’s initial assessment of Keller accords with Gibson’s representation. “She has tyrannized over everybody,” Sullivan writes to friend Sophia Hopkins, “her mother, her father, the servants, the little darkies who play with her, and nobody has ever seriously disputed her will [...] until I came” (249). Addressed to Keller, Sullivan’s soliloquy at the close of Gibson’s second act also reinforces this idea “I won’t let you be,” she says to the unconscious Keller. “No pity, I won’t have it” (107). And Keller too, confirms Sullivan’s impatience with pity and connects her teacher’s attitudes with a conscious political agenda, commenting that “Teacher was among those who first perceived the harmful nature of the chief stumbling block to the sightless—pity” (*Teacher* 169). But while this assessment of Sullivan’s politics and approach to disability may resonate with Evan Kemp’s influential op-ed article, soothing potential anxieties over the extreme physical chastisement of a young deaf-blind child, the representation of Sullivan as a political trailblazer does little to resolve the conflicts that underlie both the representations of this discipline and the possible motives that inform these representations.

So, while it is certainly possible to read the recurring physical chastisement of the young Keller character in Gibson’s play as symbolically liberatory, pity having served as a technology of imprisonment, it is equally possible to read the violent

discipline depicted in the play as a necessary response to the terrifying indeterminacy of the disabled figure—deaf, blind, mute—and yet somehow, horribly, her human form still reflecting a definite human identity. On some level, then, the audience is relieved and gratified to see this disturbing figure punished for its myriad failures—its refusal to behave according to “normal” human customs, its refusal to participate in human discourse, but above all, in the face of these other refusals, its refusal to abandon its resemblance to the human form which we must all share.²⁰ The conflicting messages of the drama—that the disabled body requires discipline above all else and that pity is a destructive force (when pity is actually an alternative form of discipline)—are made to share an apparently seamless connection; and audiences are thus permitted guiltless enjoyment of the violent spectacle. It is, after all, for the child’s own good that she is so brutalized. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that despite her enduring respect for Teacher, and despite the tremendous popular success of *The Miracle Worker*, Keller’s response to Gibson’s play was “less than glowing” (Herrmann 324). Indeed, it seems that the participation of Sullivan biographer Nella Braddy in the production of the play became the source of a permanent rift between herself and Keller, Keller’s revocation of Braddy’s role as her own literary executrix was apparently a consequence of Braddy’s involvement with the play (Herrmann 324-25).

²⁰ Similar chastisements of disabled figures and human figures no-longer-human abound. Of course, Foucault has written frequently on this subject, as has Julia Kristeva. Popular examples from horror serve as particularly compelling illustrations: The suggestively human forms of Frankenstein’s “creature” and Dracula are each subject to loathing and discipline; the human figure embedded in the alien monster of Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979) suggests a terrifying *telos* for his companions and is immediately euthanized.

But while the question of discipline is centered by the text and performances of Gibson's play, the difficulty of figuring its potential meanings and motives is not limited to the theatrical arena. While the audience of *The Miracle Worker* may participate in the cathartic battle with the Keller character—at once rejoicing in the violent punishment visited upon the non-conforming corpus and at the increasing familiarity of the deaf-blind as it is disciplined into approved human conduct—the possible meanings of disciplinary behavior multiply when we stop to consider Sullivan-the-satellite as the source of that discipline. For even while Sullivan may be revered as a pioneer of disability advocacy, her professed lack of pity for Keller defining both a pedagogical and a political platform, her disciplinary performance may also be regarded in a less glowing light: As a seizure of power, as the assertion of the teacher's will over the student's needs and desires, as an occupation or colonization of the disabled body.

In the most obvious terms, Sullivan's work with Keller, and her status as disciplinarian, especially, participate in the same set of motivations that inspires Gibson's rapt audiences. It seems likely that the teacher's faith in discipline was informed, at least in part, by a desire to punish the deviant form and by a desire to train its deviance into the course of normalcy. It seems equally likely that Sullivan was also partly motivated by a paternalistic desire to tame or domesticate the wildness of Keller's disabled corpus, as evidenced by the teacher's delight in Keller's obedient reproduction of a crochet stitch. But Sullivan was also deeply sensitive and intelligent, an innovative, even an inspired teacher. She despised the false discipline of contemporary schools for the deaf, where she saw children cut off from real life and real communication; Sullivan disapproved of the "modern" trend in deaf schools

that required students to use spoken English and restricted the use of sign, thus frequently preventing deaf students from acquiring linguistic fluency. Her method for teaching young Keller was radically different from the approved pedagogical techniques of the time, departing from them especially in two respects: Sullivan's presumption of Keller's intelligence and ability, and her rejection of typical classroom constraints like set lessons and meeting times. Instead, Sullivan writes,

I shall talk into her hand as we talk into the baby's ears. I shall assume that she has the normal child's capacity of assimilation and imitation. I shall use complete sentences in talking to her, and fill out the meaning with gestures and her descriptive signs when necessity requires it; but I shall not try to keep her mind fixed on any one thing. I shall do all I can to interest and stimulate it, and wait for results. (Sullivan 258)

Though she may have engaged in some paternalistic behaviors, and though she endorsed "obedience" as a necessary first step for education, Sullivan's other pedagogical methods and her life-long dedication to Keller hardly suggest the unconscious rage and fear that seem to lie beneath Jerry Lewis' panicked attachment to the MDA.

Indeed, to the extent that Sullivan may be said to have disciplined Keller, that discipline comprised a far more complex and subtle set of behaviors than are evident in Gibson's play. For while the period of Sullivan's training Keller into physical obedience was remarkably brief, the teacher's ongoing relationship with her student was marked by more indirect forms of control. Sullivan's protection of Keller, for instance, from her own early fame serves a dual function: It enables Keller's education to progress "normally," without the interference of ambitions external to herself, but at the same time, Sullivan's stern insistence that "My beautiful Helen shall not be transformed into a prodigy if I can help it" marks the child as the teacher's personal property (266), a jealously-guarded prize which must be sheltered

from the claims of outsiders. And indeed, this relationship of possession was to continue throughout Sullivan's life.²¹ Sullivan seems to have been instrumental in preventing Keller's marriage to Peter Fagan, friend and assistant to Sullivan's husband John Macy, and a fellow socialist. Though Keller later wrote of her courtship with Fagan as "a little island of joy surrounded by dark waters" (*Midstream*), her reaction to interrogations when confronted about the clandestine relationship was to deny everything absolutely. An anonymous informant reported to the *New York Times*, however, that such "denials were necessary in order to soothe [Sullivan's] feelings" (Lash 443). Attempts to remove Keller from Sullivan's apparent domination were fruitless, as, for instance, when Keller's mother and the director of the Cambridge school (where Keller was preparing for the Harvard entrance examinations) wished to remove Sullivan from her position, and Sullivan confessed

²¹ It is also important to note that Keller's later companion-interpreter, Polly Thomson, was also accused of managing and controlling Keller to an extent that "was 'bordering on madness.'"

For years it had been Polly who dressed Helen, a long and tedious job because Polly was such a perfectionist about Helen's public image. Lately, Polly had become even more fanatical about Helen's appearance. Because she insisted that Helen look her best, even with her closest friends, it was now a burden for them to have company. Spur-of-the-moment visitors, whom Helen might have enjoyed seeing, were told that Polly and Helen could not see them. As a result, Helen was even more isolated. Not that this was entirely Polly's fault. Even though she had never seen her own face in a mirror, Helen was as concerned about her appearance as any teenage girl. She once told Nella, 'I want all the handicapped to look nice so that they won't repel people and maybe this picture will encourage them.'

What deeply disturbed members of their intimate circle, however, was that even though Nella, Katherine Cornell, Nancy Hamilton, and Lenore Smith all knew the manual finger language, Polly would not let them spell to Helen when anyone else was present. Still a prisoner in her old age, Helen was cut off from contact with anyone but her senile, possessive companion. (Herrmann 312)

to Keller that she was contemplating suicide. Although Sullivan's service to Keller was no doubt invaluable, it seeming impossibly cruel to have wanted to separate the two, Sullivan also appears to have done what she could to reinforce Keller's sense that Teacher was indispensable. In fact, Keller learned to regard the world as replete with potential threats to their connection, expressing gratitude for the "powerful temperament" which allowed "Teacher to protect me against interference and the zeal of strangers who wished to run my affairs." According to Keller, Teacher had learned from "bitter experience" that "many people who offered to help us wanted in reality to use me for their own purposes" (*Teacher* 80).

Without rejecting the plausibility of Teacher's apparent anxieties, it is essential to understand that Sullivan's encouragement of Keller's worries in this respect worked to create a climate of fear which in turn reinforced Keller's sense that her companion provided necessary protection. Though such maneuvers may not fall within the conventional parameters of paternalistic behavior, though Sullivan's protection and mediation may, indeed, have been necessary to Keller's security, there is no doubt but that the construction or amplification of any existing threat also functioned to reinforce the security of Sullivan's position as satellite. The question, ultimately, is: What made Sullivan feel that such a position was desirable?

For many, Keller included, the roles which Sullivan filled—teacher, companion, interpreter—put her in an unenviable position. The *New York Sun* review of Keller's *Story of My Life* observed that "the wonderful feat of drawing Helen Keller out of her hopeless darkness was only accomplished by sacrificing for it another woman's whole life" (qtd. in Herrmann 306). Certainly Sullivan made sacrifices. Physical sacrifices: Permanently injuring her already weak eyesight by

long hours of reading to Keller, likely shortening her life by years through physical exertions (like touring) made for Keller's sake. Emotional sacrifices: The dissolution of Sullivan's marriage may be attributed to her peculiar intimacy with Keller, Sullivan's husband John Macy remarking, infamously, that Keller was "more an institution than a woman" and that Sullivan was made "to serve as chairman of the board, vice president, secretary, treasurer, janitor, matron, and office boy" (qtd. in Herrmann 187); even at Sullivan's own wedding, "she was largely ignored [... while] all eyes were focused on her protégée" (Herrmann 145). So, too, Sullivan's behind-the-scenes role meant foregoing credit for much of her work. Though Sullivan saw Keller through three years of preparatory school and four years of college, it was Keller alone whose academic work was acknowledged. Though she oversaw all Keller's literary work, until her death in 1936, Sullivan was unable to pursue her own literary career since, as she acknowledged, she had "been compelled to pour [herself] into the spirit of another and to find satisfaction in the music of an instrument not my own" (qtd. in Lash 297). And Keller infers that Sullivan's political energies or ambitions were far more expansive than the scope of her service to Keller permitted, commenting that "If Teacher had been left free to choose her destiny, she would never have limited herself to the cause of the blind" (*Teacher* 168).²² In a sense, Gibson got it right: Sullivan lived in the "background" and was subject constantly to Keller's "overshadowing" her.

²² Nella Braddy writes: "Left to herself, Mrs. Macy would never have chosen this field as the object of her life's work. She would have elected larger issues. There is something terrifying about the sweep of her energies, terrifying in the thought of what she might have done with them if she had not submerged them in Helen" (qtd. in Hermann 238).

Perhaps most significantly, however, is that Sullivan was symbolically reduced to “Teacher,” that designation serving in place of her name for the duration of her relationship with Keller. From the moment that Sullivan was able to communicate with Keller using the manual alphabet until the end of Keller’s life (more than thirty years after Sullivan’s death), Keller always thought of Sullivan as “Teacher,” addressing her as such and identifying her by that name in her writing and public appearances. Her biography of Sullivan is entitled *Teacher*, and subsequent writings, following Keller’s lead, have typically used the same designation. Thus, Sullivan’s relationship to Keller may be read as effecting a symbolic masking or erasure. In a sense, Sullivan as Sullivan ceases to exist, her potential identity replaced by her role of service. Anne Sullivan is invisible unless illuminated by her connection to Keller as “Teacher”; Sullivan is not herself, but mere component, prosthetic to Keller’s consuming need.

The trouble with this interpretation is that it actively demonstrates its own fallacy. The argument here functions to construct a symbolic relationship which is exactly the opposite of the one it describes: Though the discussion above may suggest otherwise, here it is *Keller* who is erased, the outline of her identity made visible only through the medium of Sullivan. And it is precisely this dynamic, this shifting, which is our concern. For it is this oscillation that defines the relationship between satellite and disabled—the melding of subject and object, the near impossibility of determining a primary identity, and, ultimately, the double erasure already identified in our discussion of Jerry Lewis. It is not possible to write or speak only of Anne Sullivan or only of Helen Keller; each woman creates the other’s celebrity, even her visibility. Each one serves both to frame and to shadow the

other; Sullivan exists as medium, translator, interpreter, herself an automaton or prosthetic giving voice to Keller, and so living in Keller's shadow, masked or obscured by Keller's fame; at the same time, Keller is masked or obscured by Sullivan's speaking on her behalf; it is Sullivan who is at the fore, Sullivan who performs, Sullivan who is active, and Sullivan who is the work-*er* of miracles, putting her "powerful temperament" forth as both shield and mediating entity. Sullivan embodies Keller's agency and identity, until, as Nella Braddy has observed, we are confronted with a question "as to how much of what was called Helen Keller was in reality Annie Sullivan." For Samuel Clemens, as for many of their other friends and associates, it was not possible to see the two women as individuals; Clemens regarded Sullivan as Keller's "other half," writing to Keller that "it took the pair of you to make a complete and perfect whole" (qtd. in Lash 450). Keller herself writes with some indignation of this tendency to conflation, her statements reflecting the resentment of Teacher, who "had heard it openly asserted that she imposed her opinions upon my youthful mind" and who felt "she had been fettered by the tyranny of society, as she regarded it, which declared I was an automaton, a mouthpiece that echoed her thoughts and sentiments" (*Teacher* 104-105). Once again, however, the argument turns back upon itself; Keller's resentment here is, literally, an echo of Sullivan's displeasure—Teacher had heard it asserted, Teacher regarded society's opinion as tyrannical—and Keller's unique protest, her assertion of individuality, is thus swallowed up by her own point of reference.

Though each woman may have existed as an individual, each a point of origin for her own thoughts, feelings, and ideas, there is no doubt but that the two shared a discourse from which neither could have been excluded. Even while

Sullivan acted as interpreter—reading Keller printed books, describing the visible world, and translating the conversation of others—she was also interlocutor, Keller’s friend, teacher, and companion, with ideas and opinions that were expressed explicitly, but that were also, and more often, implicit in the mediating performance. Sullivan notes one instance when, while walking with Keller, she saw a man being taken into police custody: “The agitation which I felt evidently produced a perceptible physical change,” she writes, “for Helen asked, excitedly, ‘What do you see?’” (Sullivan 295).²³ The anecdote merely amplifies what we already know, that for Sullivan, as for every other translator, the act of translation is far from transparent; in fact, translation is necessarily interpretive, producing a new version of the primary text which is imbued with and transformed by the translator’s own voice, expression, and opinion.²⁴ If Sullivan is a medium, passing the expressions of Keller outward to those who could not otherwise converse with her and passing back to Keller the utterances of others, we must recognize that this passing back and forth must inevitably be colored by Sullivan as mediating entity, the line between conversation, instruction, and translation frequently blurring to the point of

²³ On another occasion, Sullivan writes of Keller:

She observes the slightest emphasis placed upon a word in conversation, and she discovers meaning in every change of position, and in the varied play of the muscles of the hand. She responds quickly to the gentle pressure of affection, the pat of approval, the jerk of impatience, the firm motion of command, and to the many other variations of the almost infinite language of the feelings; and she has become so expert in interpreting this unconscious language of the emotions that she is often able to divine our very thoughts. (Sullivan 294)

²⁴ William Sayers, in his translation of Henri-Jacques Stiker’s *History of Disability* (1999), includes a brief but interesting discussion on the potential contest between author and translator, noting especially the Italian maxim, “traddutore tradditore” (the translator is a traitor).

indeterminacy. In May 1887, when she had been working with Keller only two months, Sullivan writes of assisting her student with language difficulties: “I supply a word here and there, sometimes a sentence, and suggest something which she has omitted or forgotten” (263). Though this was a thoroughly appropriate form of assistance for her juvenile student, and while it seems highly doubtful that Sullivan would ever have attempted such direct interference with the adult Keller, this technique is yet richly suggestive, the idea seeming almost to haunt the later relationship. On her deathbed, Sullivan is reported to have commented that “As the years go on [Helen’s] speeches won’t be so brilliant [...] but my guiding hand won’t be there to take out what should be taken out” (qtd. in Herrmann 257). For Sullivan, herself constantly edited and obscured by a press more interested in her protégée, the temptation to edit Keller, and to express herself through Keller must have been nearly overwhelming. For Keller, whose entire world of ideas was shaped and informed by this single “Teacher,” whose youth and young adulthood were mediated to the “outer” world by this same figure, how would it be possible for her to express, or even to *have* any thought exclusively, without it also reflecting the ideas and attitudes of Sullivan? But if Sullivan occupied Keller, feeding her ideas, even language itself, in a sense authoring the text which was Keller, Keller also occupied Sullivan, literally, kept her occupied, day after day, year after year, until Sullivan was no longer herself without the Keller counterpart which lent substance and meaning to the structure of her being.

And the mutual occupation apparent in their shared discourse is evident too from Keller’s childhood “memories.” For the young Keller’s first autobiographical effort, *The Story of My Life*, written when she was twenty-two, and which offers

(among other things) a first-hand account of her childhood and early encounters with Sullivan, is steeped in remembrances which it turns out Keller did not actually have. Most remarkably, Keller writes of the dramatic moment by the well-pump when she is supposed to have first acquired the idea of language.

As the cool stream gushed over one hand [Miss Sullivan] spelled into the other the word *water*, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a mist consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. (36)

But after Sullivan's death, Keller confessed that she actually had no personal recollection of this moment she had once described in such detail. "Like the rest of us," writes biographer Dorothy Herrmann, Keller "had no idea how she learned language" (46). The "memory" thus related in the passage quoted above must, in fact, have been Sullivan's, she having been the only other person present at the moment of Keller's great breakthrough. In fact, many of the early "memories" which Keller recounts in *The Story of My Life* were stories told to her by Sullivan, thus suggesting the possibility that this text is not an autobiography, but is rather a biography written in the first person, Keller thus serving as the symbolic mouthpiece for Sullivan's stories-about-Keller. And so we observe that the difficulty of recognizing Sullivan and Keller as distinct individuals is not limited to external witnesses of the alliance, but extends itself even into the relationship between the two women: Keller often had difficulty distinguishing her original writing from writing which had been read to her (and she was more than once accused of plagiarism); it seems she also had some difficulty distinguishing her own memories from those of others. The difficulty of Keller's developing unique memories was problematized, too, by the fact that her entire conscious experience was shared with

Sullivan, from whom she was rarely parted for more than an hour or two. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the memories and the life Keller relates in *The Story of My Life* do in some way belong to Sullivan; without a life apart from Keller, Sullivan's experiences were also Keller's, and it may be imagined that deciding who gets to tell the story would entail a painful choice and a real sense of loss for the satellite, who, in this case, may be read as having been excluded from her own life-story. On some level, then, Keller and Sullivan shared memory as they shared discourse; the divide between their separate perspectives already obscured by the act of interpretation, their individual remembrances must have undergone further mutual influence as they continually discussed their lives and experiences with and through one another.

Keller's apparent absorption of Sullivan's life—the long hours of work, the threat to Sullivan's physical health, the difficulty of sustaining other relationships, the near-impossibility of privacy, or even of individuality—must, then, at least in some respects, have been detrimental to Sullivan's well-being. Some have explained her willingness to make sacrifices by indicating that she took satisfaction in the extent of her control over Keller, pointing to Sullivan's jealousy of Keller's mother and later of Polly Thompson, both Sullivan substitutes (alternate satellites). One detractor wrote of Keller's "thralldom" (qtd. in Herrmann 123); another complained of Sullivan's "boasting" that "she has complete power over Helen" (Lash 221). Others have suggested that Sullivan was a publicity hound or that she used Keller to acquire a social status that would never otherwise have been available to her: "Among educators of the blind and the deaf, it was said that Annie Sullivan was 'a born schemer'" (Herrmann 118). Perhaps most galling, educator Edward Rider wrote that "Miss Sullivan owes her notoriety and prominent position to the greatness of Helen

Keller. Helen is not a product of Miss S.'s ingenuity or training, but on the other hand it seems to me that Miss S. has been raised by Helen's great natural abilities" (qtd. in Herrmann 118). But these explanations, while offering some insight into Sullivan's motivations, are limited in their perspective. They construct a Sullivan who was either demon or saint, just as parallel constructions insist on Keller as either angel or monster, genius or idiot. Indeed, the existence of such explanations offers evidence of the discomfort many feel in the apparent intertextuality of the relationship. The desire for separation and for explicit boundaries is so strong that the critical enterprise requires lines, even when these must be inscribed into a fluid geography. The satellite may be an opportunist, but she is not necessarily a parasite, seizing upon and feeding off the body of the disabled; the disabled may exercise power over the satellite as human prosthetic, but this relationship of power cannot accurately be described as absolute.

In fact, it often happens, as in the case of Anne Sullivan, that the satellite is herself disabled, her disability thus contributing further to a blurring of categorical identity. The skills which enabled Sullivan to teach Keller—her knowledge of the manual alphabet, of braille and raised print, the imagination which allowed Sullivan to perceive Keller's intelligence when many argued that she was "an idiot" (Lash 347)—were acquired during her years as a student at the Perkins Institution, a school for blind girls and the permanent home of the deaf-blind Laura Bridgman (taught by Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe and immortalized in Charles Dickens' *American Notes*).²⁵ An acute case of trachoma had severely impaired Sullivan's vision in childhood and a

²⁵ For more on Laura Bridgman, see Chapter Four, "Tiny Tim, Blind Bertha, and the Resistance of Miss Mowcher: Charles Dickens and the Uses of Disability."

series of surgeries in her teens had only partially restored her sight; it must be understood, then, that Sullivan's knowledge of braille and other technologies for the blind were acquired for her own benefit and not necessarily for the sake of teaching another. Throughout her life, Sullivan suffered pain and headaches from the overuse of her limited vision as well as "recurrent attacks of granular conjunctivitis and other eye disorders." Eventually, her eyesight "deteriorated to the point where flickering candles, unshaded lamps, even the expanse of a white tablecloth caused excruciating pain. She could read only by wearing double-lensed telescopic glasses that weighed heavily on her face" (Herrmann 231). Toward the end of her life, the pain was so profound that she needed to have one eye removed. And she experienced even more severe headaches and extreme nausea as, unable to give up her addiction to reading printed matter, she relapsed into complete and permanent blindness. For Sullivan, this relapse was more disabling than the reader might imagine. Considering that she had worked her entire adult life for blind causes and with blind people, and given her expertise in blind mobility and non-print media, it may seem strange that Sullivan was so tormented by her increasing blindness, but so it was. Keller writes discreetly that Teacher "was depressed because her little sight was failing" and of the "futile rebellion against her blindness" (*Teacher* 203, 219),²⁶ but Sullivan's own words describe a more morbid state of mind. Regarding her growing blindness, Sullivan wrote: "I feel old and helpless. ...Perhaps, if I ever make up my mind to have the cataract removed, and the operation is a success, I may feel different. At present, I

²⁶ Keller also writes that Teacher "was one of the sensitive spirits that feel shamed by blindness. It humiliates them like a stupid blunder or a deformed limb. They do not count on the compassionate understanding of others, and they shrink from the comments of those who watch their struggle against misfortune. Blindness is a blow to their freedom and dignity" (*Teacher* 159).

only long to die out of my difficulties, but even this is not permitted” (qtd. in Lash 610).

The troubled relationship Sullivan appears to have had with her own blindness suggests a number of possibilities for reading her connection to Keller, the most intriguing of which revolve around the contradictory themes of recuperating blindness, that is, either recuperating *from* it, or “curing” it (and thus morphing into sightedness), or, alternatively, recuperation by re-claiming blindness (i.e., Sullivan’s seizing Keller’s blindness in lieu of her own lost sightlessness). The latter possibility, while challenging expectation, enriches our reading of Sullivan’s possessive qualities. Though we are unaccustomed to regarding disability as a desirable quality, we ought to entertain the possibility that Sullivan felt attached to her own youthful blindness, that it felt familiar and friendly as an integral element of her childhood. Blindness was the backdrop against which Sullivan experienced an unusual intimacy with her younger brother, James, who died before his sister’s sight was restored; it was her blindness, perhaps, which permitted a relaxation of regulations in the Tewksbury almshouse where they lived, enabling the brother and sister to sleep together despite an otherwise strict segregation of male and female residents. And it was likely her blindness which ultimately liberated Sullivan from the almshouse and allowed her an education, she having thrown herself (blindly, as it were) into a group of visiting inspectors with the rash and pathetic plea that she wanted to go to school. Sullivan was soon after sent to Perkins; the other almshouse children weren’t so lucky. Given this perspective, it becomes possible to regard Sullivan’s interest in Keller as a kind of nostalgic gesture, a reclamation of the purity which is supposed to belong both to childhood and to blindness. (Another possible explanation for Sullivan’s apparent

attachment may be that she thus reclaimed a kind of mystical power frequently associated with blindness; see chapters two and three, following.) And, indeed, Sullivan's apparent possessiveness seems to stem, at least in part, from a desire to preserve Keller's imagined innocence. In one instance, the eight-year-old Keller expressed a desire for a "talking glove" (Sullivan 291); a device developed by Alexander Graham Bell, the glove had the letters of the alphabet printed on it and could thus be used as a means of communication with those unfamiliar with the manual alphabet. But Sullivan vetoed this idea, commenting:

"I shrink from this easy mode of communication. I cannot bring myself to the mental state, where I can feel contented to allow irresponsible and unreasoning persons to have easy access to my darling's pure and loving little heart. I am sure that while I stay with her, she will never have occasion to feel the solitude of her life, and when I go, the glove, I doubt not, will add greatly to her enjoyment. But until then, I am determined to keep my beautiful treasure pure and unspotted from the world." (qtd. in Lash 106)

And though Sullivan's resistance to Keller's learning speech may be regarded as pioneering (in that it refused to privilege speech as the most acceptable form of communication for the Deaf), her reasons for discouraging Keller's efforts in this arena may be regarded as suspect. In one instance, Sullivan reported that she found the newly-popular stress "upon teaching the deaf child to articulate" a process which could be "detrimental to the pupil's intellectual development" (Sullivan 330), but elsewhere, she is reported as saying "I do not want [Helen] to speak, the voices of deaf children are not agreeable to me" (qtd. in Lash 114). In all this, as in Sullivan's other possessive behaviors, and in her work as a fundraiser and political activist for the blind, it becomes possible to see a pattern which may be interpreted as embracing blindness and a blind community, Sullivan's work through and with

Keller enabling her the peculiar privilege of identifying as blind despite her technically sighted status.

But as has already been observed, Sullivan's approach to her own blindness, especially in later life, was far from accepting. And it is with this attitude in mind that we may begin to examine Sullivan's relationship with Keller as recuperative in the sense first specified, that is, as a curative project, a mediation (or transformation) of blindness into sightedness. So, it is possible, even while allowing some part of Sullivan to claim the positivity of blindness, to read much of Teacher's work as rejecting, rewriting, masking, containing, or disciplining blindness. The proposal, then, is that Sullivan, as often occurs with the satellite figure, was at once attracted to and repulsed by disability, that she both loved and feared it, and that her work and her attitudes reflect the fluidity of this shifting relationship. In a sense, Sullivan's work with Keller is an assertion of her own sightedness, her own normalcy; by juxtaposing her own, comparatively "normal" body against the explicit difference of Keller's deaf-blindness, Sullivan is able to claim her place among the sighted, when under other circumstances, her categorical status might well have been disputed. Were it not for her connection to Keller, her work as a mediator for someone *truly* blind, Sullivan's peers would almost certainly have identified *her* as the disabled one. (This effort, the recouping of normalcy through mediating contact, is one which may frequently be observed in the satellite-disabled relationship.)

And indeed, while Sullivan's occupation invited others to regard her as sighted, that same performance also created a domain in which she could, in a sense, *generate* sightedness, as though blindness were a disease of weakness to be cured by dedication, hard work, and self-respect. Having herself undergone numerous risky

operations, as well as an education fraught with pain and peril, Sullivan's "redemption" from blindness must have seemed, on some level, like a reward for her massive effort. If you try hard enough, the message would seem to be, you can accomplish anything. And Teacher's injunction, after all, was that a "handicap" should be regarded merely "as an opportunity for courage" (qtd. in Keller, *Teacher* 219). By working with Keller, by refusing to entertain pity, by indoctrinating Keller into her own work ethic, Sullivan thus continued to act out her own redemption, figuratively forestalling her own blindness even while these efforts literally compromised her eyesight. And at the same time, Sullivan acted out her faith that disability, and blindness in particular, were not obstacles to normal living and communication; again and again, Sullivan would insist both on her own ordinary nature and on Keller's, unwilling to have either of them placed in a special category. In a sense, then, Sullivan's instruction was calculated to erase Keller's difference, to bring her into the world of the sighted and the hearing. The message again: I worked hard and suffered and didn't feel sorry for myself and look how I've been able to transform myself; if you also work hard and refuse the pity of others, we can redeem you from disability as well. So long as Sullivan could remain convinced that physical experience may be transformed by one's own human agency, the threat of disability could be kept at bay. The work of her entire life, first on herself and then with Keller, may thus be explained, in part, as a kind of ritual, her labor a sacramental process to prevent blindness from metastasizing into an overwhelming contingency.

Sullivan's antagonism toward blindness may also be witnessed in the episodes of discipline already discussed above. The violently punitive behavior which William Gibson attributes to Sullivan seems also to have existed, in some form, in the reality



Courtesy AFB

These two photos depict Anne Sullivan (with Keller) in 1893, near the beginning of her career and in 1920, about a year before Keller relinquished her full-time work with Keller to Polly Thomson. At the time of the first photo, Sullivan had been working with Keller approximately five years.

The respective positioning of Keller and Sullivan in the two photos is characteristic of others taken throughout their time together; typically, the two are photographed with Sullivan standing above a seated Keller or with the two seated, but with Sullivan shown above and behind Keller. In either case, Keller is most frequently depicted with her head held next to or clearly resting upon Sullivan's ample, motherly bosom. The symbolic posture of the two—Sullivan literally superior, Keller subordinate—offers a distinct contrast to the reality of their respective physical stature; rare photos of the two standing side-by-side show that Keller stood literally head-and-shoulders above her diminutive Teacher.

The contrast between Sullivan's appearance in the early photo and in the later one may serve to illustrate some troubling aspects of the satellite relationship: Both photos evidence the intense and explicitly physical connection between the two, and both bespeak the symbolic domination of the Teacher, but so, too, the dark and haggard expression of Sullivan in the later photo, her conspicuous blindness, and the distinct downward tilt of her head (especially in contrast with Keller's serene and contented air) suggest depletion, a human creature figuratively consumed by the voracious needs of her disabled partner.

that Sullivan shared with Keller, as evidenced by Keller's fiercely defensive biography. Though Keller is careful to minimize explicit descriptions of Teacher's "erratic" behavior (95), she does relate one episode when Sullivan's impatience resulted in a physical rebuke: Having worked, at Teacher's insistence, to create a life-like fern out of clay, Keller's repeated failures finally drove Sullivan into a fit of temper.

[O]ne morning her anger flared up and she slapped my cheek with the cold wet clay. However, there was an indescribable dearness about Teacher which caused her to repent easily of her cross behavior and call herself the worst names she could think of. She came to me soon after the tempest and said, "Do forgive me Helen! I can never imagine you as deaf-blind—I love you too much for that. But I should remember that you are a human being, and I shouldn't be so ambitious as not to let you relax now and then." (68)

Though Keller focuses on Sullivan's apology, her observation that Teacher would generally "repent easily of her cross behavior" demonstrates a familiarity with Teacher's apologies that implies an equal familiarity with her "cross behavior." Indeed, the biography's steady stream of apologetic references and sanitized anecdotes—"her temper was far from serene" (59), "'You ungrateful little wretch,' Teacher pounded into her hand" (60), "she would not have another word for me" (65), "It was a lifelong struggle for her to be kind to dull people" (119)—work to imply a darker and more forceful set of behaviors than Keller is willing to reveal openly. And these partially-obscured violences may be read in turn as Sullivan's castigation of her own blindness, of her own unruly corpus, the body of the Keller-child serving as a lay figure and the act of retribution upon this symbolic form enabling the near-blind teacher simultaneously to punish and to prevent the return of her own incipient blindness. Such a reading may be affirmed, too, by the event described above. For in this scene, we witness not only the punishment of the child,

but also the self-inflicted punishment, Sullivan's calling "herself the worst names she could think of"; this gesture as well as Sullivan's refusal to acknowledge Keller's disability—"I can never imagine you as deaf-blind"—thus testify to the obscuring of boundaries between herself and her student.

This, ultimately, is the duality inherent in the satellite performance: Even while the satellite's proximity to the disabled functions to exaggerate difference and to establish explicit categorical boundaries (e.g., next to Helen Keller, Anne Sullivan is defined as "sighted"), this performance also functions, inevitably, to erase boundaries and to meld bodies and identities. It is for this reason that discipline is often so crucial a component of the satellite-disabled relationship. Detailed instruction and the enforcement of restraint not only require that the deviant body conform to an established standard, as Michel Foucault might observe, but these tools also function to isolate one individual from another, thus erecting an artificial barrier between the somatic identities in danger of merging. Though Foucault writes of discipline primarily as a feature of institutional power—an architecture which "organizes an analytical space" (143), which partitions and encloses, and which controls activity by means of disciplinary strategies like the time-table—the functions of the disciplinary apparatus multiply when wielded by the satellite upon the disabled body. For Sullivan, the indoctrination of the "savage" young Keller into "obedience" means not only that her charge is re-made as one of Foucault's "docile bodies," not only that she is domesticated and rendered teachable, but also that disability itself may be disciplined; disability may thus be re-organized and made intelligible, mediated, even "cured," but perhaps more importantly, the disciplining of the disabled body means that it is separated, partitioned, and enclosed. As

Foucault observes, “the disciplinary space is always, basically, cellular” (143). And so, the satellite’s disciplinary performance becomes a means of both regulating disability (and therefore diminishing the immediate threat of its deviance) and of separating or distancing the disabled body from its own (thereby establishing or re-establishing partitions which are constantly endangered by the fluid aspect of the satellite-disabled dynamic). For Sullivan as satellite, Keller’s body is both opportunity and hazard, a vehicle upon which she may act out her own fantasy of able-bodiedness, a lump of clay which she may shape into her own idealized self, a mystical (even a divine) being for whom she may prophesy and yet, at the same time, the Keller object is a separate individual with a mind and a will that challenges Sullivan’s performance, that overwhelms and overshadows, that erupts and consumes until Sullivan is relegated to the position of satellite, a secondary body revolving around the first, her agency subordinated to the “gravity” of the primary and ever on the cusp of being absorbed into that mass.

The Uses of Milton’s Daughters

As we proceed with a discussion of Milton’s daughters as potential satellite figures, it may be useful to observe that our analysis thus far has moved easily between biography and drama, between the ostensibly “real” and the apparently fictionalized, without ever asserting an absolute distinction between the two. Here, in the brief study of Milton’s daughters which follows, our ability to establish precise boundaries between the historical and the fictional once again presents a challenge; for the representation of Milton’s daughters as satellites is effected as much, or more, by a super-historical apparatus—interpretations of feminist scholarship, the rehashing of

biographical data by eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century intellectuals, references in fiction and popular art—as it is by authentic biographical information. Just as the definition of Anne Sullivan as satellite grows within a matrix of the factual and the fictional, so too does the construction of Milton's daughters emerge out of a similarly complex framework.

Briefly, the conventional tale of Milton's daughters is that these young women were forced to serve as their blind and despotic father's amanuenses, readers, and literary servants, often without interest in or knowledge or understanding of the literary tasks they were made to undertake. In recent years, this idea has been most widely disseminated by that cornerstone of feminist scholarship *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), in which Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar write of Milton as a self-defined "prophet or priestly bard and therefore a guardian of the sacred mysteries of patriarchy" who "calls upon subservient female muses for the assistance that is his due (and in real life upon slavish daughters for the same sort of assistance)" (210). Though some Milton scholars, notably John T. Shawcross, have worked to combat the "snide story" of Milton's tyranny over his daughters (18-19), twentieth-century scholars have generally taken a dim view of this relationship. One mid-century dictionary of literary biography, for instance, refers to these "growing girls" as "unhappy creatures [who] were treated without affection or understanding," offering as evidence of such treatment that they "were taught just enough to enable them [...] to read to their father in languages they did not understand." The same text refers to "his daughters' long hours of reading to him in Latin and Greek and Syriac," calls Milton "a completely self-centered man," comments that it "is hard to see how anyone loved [him], except perhaps in his boyhood," and fully justifies the daughters

in any misbehavior attributed them: “Being human, they rebelled against him and hated him” (Kunitz and Haycraft 356-57). In essence, we learn that Milton used his daughters as prostheses, as extensions of his own body, without will or intellect of their own.

This bitter assessment of the relationship between father and daughters has some basis in reliable early sources. All three girls (Milton’s only children who lived to adulthood) left his home about 1670 (four years before his death), never to return; a servant of the Milton household quoted the middle daughter, Mary, as having said of her father “that a wedding was no news, but that ‘if she could hear of his death, that were something’”; the three were also excluded from their father’s will. The youngest daughter, Deborah Clarke, reported that “their father used often to say in their hearing: ‘One tongue was enough for a woman’” (Birch 76; qtd. in Johnson 199), a possible rationalization for Milton’s limiting his daughters’ education to their native language. The same daughter confirms reports by Thomas Ellwood and by Milton’s nephew Edward Philips (both of whom sometimes served as secretaries to the poet during his years of blindness) that she and her sisters “used to read to their father in eight languages [...] though they understood what they read in no other language but English” (Birch 76; qtd. in Johnson 199). Another contemporary source adds unwittingly to our modern sense of the daughters’ servitude (or slavery, as Gilbert and Gubar would have it) when he comments on the father’s habits of composition, explaining that Milton would write as much as forty lines of poetry in his head, and then, when he was ready to dictate “at what hour soever, he rung for his daughter to secure what came” (Birch lvi).

But while it is possible to develop a harsh interpretation of these early accounts, the reports and representations which have proliferated down through the centuries tend to offer very diverse readings of these facts. Edward Philips apparently regarded his cousins' literary exercises as "a trial of patience almost beyond endurance" (41; qtd. in Johnson 144-45). In contrast, John Toland's 1698 biography draws a portrait of a wise and indulgent father who, by his enforced reading exercises, made his daughters "very serviceable to himself, and, in so doing, to the rest of the World" but who released his children "when he understood their Murmurs" and "sent them out to learn other things more becoming their sex and condition" (72). In 1779, Samuel Johnson's more critical biography of Milton expressed impatience with "the scene of misery which this mode of intellectual labour sets before our eyes," commenting that "it is hard to determine whether the daughters or the father are more to be lamented" in this situation (145).

Among the Victorians, prints and paintings of Milton's daughters reading to their father or taking dictation from him became enormously popular and the story of their intellectual servitude became an icon of tranquil domesticity and a model for useful daughterly obedience. Dorothea, the heroine of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871), calls upon this model when she asks her aging and weak-eyed fiancé "early in the time of courtship" if she could "not learn to read Latin and Greek aloud to you, as Milton's daughters did to their father, without understanding what they read?" (ch 7; 87-88). William Michael Rossetti pens an account which forgives Milton's daughters for falling out with their "rigid and unattaching" father, focusing on how "serviceable" the girls were despite the fact that their literary duties "must have been irksome and grievous in the extreme to even the most dutiful children" (72-73). In



These two pictures illustrate precisely the satellite role that Milton's daughters are often thought to have occupied, their posture and activity attesting to an ideal combination of obedience and adoration. Though it is unclear to what extent the girls actually served as their father's amanuenses, an influential narrative has been constructed around their supposed roles as literary assistants, a narrative which was powerfully reinforced during the nineteenth century as images like the ones here were widely distributed.

The print entitled "Milton Composing *Paradise Lost*" (based on a painting by T. Stothard) appears as the frontispiece of the 1816 John Sharpe edition of *Paradise Lost*, and depicts the daughters, one seated, the other kneeling at her father's feet. One girl scribbles industriously in an open book, apparently taking dictation. The other holds a closed book in her lap while she gazes up adoringly at her father as he, in turn, gazes up toward a shaft of light which breaks through a darkened cloud. The message is clear: The blind poet is illumined by the holy spirit; the girls are illumined by their father. In the image entitled "Milton Dictating to His Daughters" (based on a painting by G. Romney), which appears as the frontispiece of the 1835 John Macrone edition of Milton's *Poetical Works*, both girls are pictured with open books, one apparently poised to read aloud, while the other records her father's words. The girls are bathed, symbolically, in a ray of light, a means of separating their seeing selves from the blind father (whose head remains in shadow), but suggesting as well a supernatural approval of their labor: The light shines upon their work.

Heads bent in submission or raised in awe, the girls in both these prints are depicted as willing assistants, informing a generation of Victorian daughters of the type of role in which they might seek fulfillment. These are just such images as George Eliot would likely have had in mind when, around 1870, she created Dorothea Brooke (*Middlemarch*), a young woman who imagines the satisfaction that might come from assisting an older man with failing eyesight: "I should be all the happier," she tells her uncle, "the more room there was for me to help him" (64; ch. 4, bk. 1).

1894, Leslie Stephen's DNB entry for John Milton develops an account which is less forgiving of the daughters, offering information on their possibly having cheated their father by secretly selling his books and pocketing the proceeds, and recounting also their supposed bitterness over Milton's third marriage, and their battle over their father's estate. Amid all this, Stephen repeats the assessment of David Masson's "standard" life of Milton (1859-94), an exhaustive multi-volume biography: If Milton's daughters failed to understand the foreign tongues they read to their father, writes Stephen, "this probably represents the result more than the intention" (483).

The range of interpretive possibilities represented here might seem typical of the critical enterprise; after all, as each generation succeeds to an existing text—whether that text be *Paradise Lost* or Milton's life—it is customary for scholars to offer new insights and new interpretations. But the re-interpretation of this relationship specifically, and the marked tendency of biographers to align their opinions on the side of either Milton or his children, speaks directly to the difficulty of defining the satellite relationship. For while Milton's daughters may sometimes have acted as his readers and amanuenses, any evidence that they may have found these tasks pleasant or otherwise, that their literary work was agreeable or burdensome, lies entirely within the domain of Milton's interpreters and biographers. Resentful or not, none of the girls seems to have shaped her identity around her service to the blind Milton, and there is every indication that the three were content to abandon their literary services and to leave their father's home. The daughters, at least, do not appear to have held any exalted estimation of their father's importance or any sense of his having had special significance as a blind poet. It does not appear that they deliberately subordinated themselves to their father's blindness or that they

worked to own or control it. Likewise, they do not seem to have believed that any exceptional power or status accrued to them as a result of what many might deem their prostheticization. In other words, if these young women may be defined as satellites, that identity seems to have been manufactured for them by a critical audience that attributes extraordinary meaning to their connection with the blind Milton.

Despite the fact that this identity seems to be largely a product of scholarly manufacture, however, the construction of Milton's daughters as satellites still reflects many of the issues evidenced in the satellite relationships discussed above. Most crucially, this more clearly fictionalized relationship re-enacts the apparent contest for power between disabled and satellite. Though both Milton and his children appear to have been rather assertive types, Milton scholarship is inclined to interpret one party as helpless and victimized, and the other as aggressive and dominant. Thus, we find accounts like Gilbert and Gubar's or Kunitz and Haycraft's portraying the daughters as slave-like creatures, dominated by a hateful and oppressive father; or, assessments like Leslie Stephen's depicting the daughters as thieves and dullards, the unfortunate progeny of a miraculously talented father. Regardless of the perspective, these critical estimations rely on a pattern which is already very familiar: Either the disabled subject is demonized while the satellite is applauded or the satellite is reduced and virtually erased while the disabled subject is aggrandized. Once again, we find disabled and satellite bounded by categorical imperative, the interpretive audience urging the poet and his children into established tropes of cultural identity.

That scholars would perceive Milton as belonging to a distinct tradition of blind poets and seers hardly requires explication; indeed, Milton self-consciously locates *himself* within that tradition. And the fact that the poet is also sometimes regarded as tyrant or monster merely reflects another aspect of the same metaphoric continuum; after all, blindness is infused with a particular set of symbolic meanings and is typically represented according to established cultural models (e.g., the blind beggar, the blind prophet, etc.). For this reason, as with other critical texts performing similar critical maneuvers, Gilbert and Gubar's portrayal of Milton as "godlike" and simultaneously dependent or "reduced" may be regarded as itself belonging to a long-established interpretive tradition.

[T]he image of the Miltonic father *being ministered to* hints that his powers are not quite absolute, that in fact he has been reduced to a state of dependence upon his female descendents. Blinded, needing tea and sympathy as well as secretarial help, the godlike bard loses at least some of his divinity and is humanized, even (to coin a term) Samsonized. (215)

Milton is here excised from his chosen fraternity of the inspired blind (e.g., Homer and the Delphic Oracle) and is restricted instead to a cadre of the symbolically castrated (e.g., Samson and Rochester). But the fact that the poet is here defined by an interpretive framework that strictly confines his potential for power is less important than the fact that the daughters-as-satellites become the chosen vehicles of this restriction. Gilbert and Gubar do offer a liberatory feminist reading of Milton's (literal and symbolic) daughters, one that embraces the potential for female power within apparently oppressive patriarchal texts. But this reading, like others which suggest an extraordinary meaning within the daughters' literary performances, ultimately functions to reduce and confine the daughters just as it does the father.

Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation of Milton's daughters as "slavish" amanuenses actually locates them within the troubled symbolic space of the satellite.

At the most elementary level, this reduction and confinement result from a critical approach that insists on the daughters having been "used" by their father, a misogynist and "domestic tyrant" whose "concept of a woman [was] at best a serviceable second" (Drabble 654; Gilbert and Gubar 214). When Milton's nephew writes of "the irksomeness" of the daughters' work as readers, when he describes their having been "condemned to the performance of reading and exactly pronouncing" a multitude of unfamiliar languages (41; Johnson 144-45), or when Rossetti suggests that "flesh and blood failed under such an ordeal" (72-73), the reader is necessarily confronted with the notion of coercion, a sense that the domineering and "completely self-centered" Milton kept his miserably passive daughters, these "unhappy creatures" (Kunitz and Haycraft 357), under rigid control. And while there is some evidence to indicate that this interpretation could be accurate, that evidence is by no means unequivocal. Given the very real possibilities that Milton's daughters may have enjoyed their status as more-than-ordinarily-educated women, or that they disliked both their father and the task of reading to him but easily managed to escape his limited control, the fact that so much scholarship sees the daughters as small-scale martyrs may be seen as a reading which continues to keep the girls in their place. Whether Milton dominated his daughters is a point that may be contested; that the work of many Milton scholars has effected the ongoing confinement of these young women is a question that might be more difficult to dispute.

Other evidence, too, indicates that the critical apparatus that encapsulates Milton also promotes the construction of the daughters as satellites. The fact that they are rarely identified by name is one prominent indication of this status. Referring to them simply as Milton's daughters, or by their relative positions (i.e., eldest, youngest, etc.), Milton scholars tend to bundle each daughter together with the others, thus obscuring her individuality and reducing each to an abstract object defined exclusively by her position of service to the disabled. In addition to their failure to name the daughters individually, abbreviated literary biographies frequently suggest (as do Gilbert and Gubar) that all *three* girls served as readers and scribes, when in fact, only the two *younger* ever performed these services. Indeed, critics have sometimes even confused which daughters were reserved for literary tasks; William Michael Rossetti, most notably, reports that "The two *elder* [daughters] are recorded to have been very serviceable to their father's studies, [...] and they read Milton the various authors in [foreign] tongues without at all knowing the meaning of what they articulated" (72-73; emphasis added). It seems, then, that "Milton's daughters" are not perceived in the particular, but register instead as mere satellites, the girls who read to and wrote for the Blind Bard.

And while the three are not invariably portrayed as interchangeable or entirely without individual identity, the typical exception to this rule actually serves to reinforce the idea that satellite identity resists particularization. For descriptions of Mary and Deborah, the younger daughters, are almost always limited to a generic reference to their labor as readers, while the eldest daughter, Anne, the only one who did not provide literary assistance, is most often singled out for special mention, the apparent reason for her having been excused from literary service being that she was

herself disabled. Described variously as having had a “bodily infirmity” (Philips 41; qtd. in Johnson 144), a “weakness of [...] constitution, and difficulty of speech” (Birch lxxv), as being “deformed” (Stephen 471), or even as perhaps having been “spastic” and “retarded” (Shawcross 12), Anne Milton is recognized as an individual by the combined circumstances of her supposed corporeal irregularity and her exclusion from literary service, findings which most scholars regard as necessarily interconnected. If, indeed, Anne was “retarded” and “had a defect of speech” (Stephen 483), it is possible that impairment prevented her partaking of her sisters’ work, but Edward Philips casts real doubt on this assessment of the eldest daughter’s abilities, expressing disbelief that “her bodily infirmity and difficult utterance of speech” was the “principal cause of excusing her” (41; qtd. in Johnson 144),²⁷ an observation which seems to have been overlooked by subsequent biographers (with the exception of Samuel Johnson). If, then, it is fair to suppose that Anne may have been excused for reasons other than her “infirmity,” so too it becomes reasonable to question the motives of an interpretive community which seems determined to link Anne’s role as a non-reader with her possible status as a disabled subject, the persistent correlation between these items suggesting that interpreters are inclined to keep disabled figures in one category while stowing helper or satellite figures in another. Though it seems clear that Anne did not read to or take dictation from her father and though it also seems evident that she had some manifest impairment, the continual reference to the daughter’s “infirmity” as precluding the possibility of her serving the blind poet further illuminates conventional cultural requirements for

²⁷ The fact that Anne later married lends weight to the idea that any possible impairment must have been minimal; with no substantial dowry, Anne’s appearance

both disabled and satellite identities. In its apparent desire to establish fixed, definite, and impermeable categorical boundaries between satellite and disabled, this critical history hints at the impossibility of one disabled subject working to aid another. Furthermore, while the individual identities of the two nondisabled sisters are obscured by their being represented as satellites, the individuality of the oldest sister is also masked, her “infirmity” standing out as her only noteworthy feature. And even this aspect of her identity is refused particularity as critics and scholars engineer a diverse and shifting set of disabilities which are then used constitute her entire person.

Ultimately, Milton’s daughters are a troublesome lot. They cater to the poet’s blindness and yet they appear not to define and value themselves by this labor; at one moment they are surreptitiously selling their father’s books, at the next, we find them depicted in rapt and obedient attention as their father dictates *Paradise Lost* to their ready hands; in one century, they are regarded as prodigies of learning and in the next we learn that they are “naughty and stupid” (Eliot 88; ch. 7, bk. 1), perhaps even “retarded.” While satellite figures are necessarily haunted by instability and oscillation, the instability which attends Milton’s girls fails to accord with the paradigm we have thus far established. Unlike Jerry Lewis or Anne Sullivan who define themselves by their acts of service to the disabled (regardless of whether those services are desired) and who work persistently both to connect themselves to and to dissociate themselves from disability, Anne, Mary, and Deborah seem not to have shared at all in these psychic entanglements. Others may define them by their relationship with Milton, and by their relationship with Milton’s blindness

and abilities must have been considered acceptable by a husband who would require

specifically, but the literary histories and biographies, the popular graphic representations, and the critical writings which construct them as satellites can have no impact on how they regard themselves. In the end, Anne, Mary, and Deborah may not have been satellites, but “Milton’s daughters” most assuredly were and are. And it is this distinction which enables us to recognize their most significant satellite performance—that is, in the cultural texts which have defined them in this role. For it is not in their part as amanuenses, but rather in their service as critical or interpretive tools that Milton’s daughters may be regarded as satellites. It is as we bear witness to their symbolic performance as readers or scribes that the mediating function of the satellite is fulfilled. Milton’s daughters were not his intercessors, stepping in both to prevent and to facilitate his communication with the world around him. (As Philips, Ellwood, and others have noted, there were plenty of educated young men who could and did serve as Milton’s amanuenses and many “were ambitious of obliging him that way for their own Improvement” [Toland 72].) Rather, they fill a place as symbolic objects which allow critical access to the otherwise forbidding aspect of the poet’s blindness. Milton’s daughters become instruments, then, of the interpretive enterprise, symbolic mediators which allow us to get at Milton’s blindness, which enable our own connection with the blind poet. Their symbolic presence allows the audience to reimagine its place in relation to blindness, and the variety of critical and popular representations of this relationship allows us to reside within and to justify ourselves in a variety of possible satellite attitudes, from furious to adoring, from obedient to antagonistic. It is not so much that Milton needed his daughters to serve his blindness nor so much that they

her to satisfy all conventional matrimonial responsibilities.

desired to sacrifice themselves to his blind brilliance; rather, it is we, the Miltonic audience, who require their mediating presence.

CHAPTER TWO
**Misappropriations: Hugh Stuart Boyd and
 the Blindness of Elizabeth Barrett/Browning**

In the spring of 1826, shortly after the publication of Elizabeth Barrett Barrett's first major poem, *An Essay on Mind*, a scholarly neighbor, Hugh Stuart Boyd, wrote to the young poet to express his admiration and, since they were near neighbors, to suggest the possibility of a visit. A gentleman of independent means, Boyd was a poet-scholar with a prodigious memory but, considered from our present distance, there is little about him that seems extraordinary. It took almost a year to effect the meeting proposed by Boyd in his first letter, but when he and Barrett finally began visiting, the acquaintance seems to have ripened rapidly into friendship. Thus was to begin one of the most important, and one of the most troubling, relationships of Barrett Browning's life. The forty-five-year-old Boyd and the twenty-year-old Barrett shared an immense love of Classical poetry and the two met frequently to read together, and to discuss literature, politics, and philosophy. Though these meetings seem to have been a real pleasure for the otherwise intellectually-starved Boyd, he was nevertheless careful to maintain proprieties, warning against any intimacy in the relationship. Barrett, however, was frustrated by Boyd's business-like attitude and longed for something more than a purely intellectual friendship. It seems, in fact, that Barrett came to fall in love with the older, married Boyd.

We find ample evidence for such a supposition in the deeply intimate diary Barrett kept from June 1831 to April 1832. Barrett writes obsessively of her friend/neighbor/tutor, scarcely a day going by without some reference to him and some conjecture as to his feelings for her. ("Oh I would give anything if I could *know*—not think, not guess—but *know*, what the feeling is there, with respect to me"

[*Diary* 130]]. Again and again, Barrett worries over Boyd's most minute words and actions, constantly seeking a clue about his true feelings for her. Of parting from Boyd one evening, Barrett writes: "I saw Mr. Boyd for a few minutes before I went away,—& then the good bye came. An effort was necessary to steady my voice & say it,—but the tears would crowd into my eyes in spite of every effort. He did not seem to care . . . *much* about parting with me" (203). But Barrett's most urgent anxieties are reserved for the other educated young women who also sometimes read Greek with Boyd: "The society of that Miss Hurd is as much valued as mine—as much! *at least, as much!* And yet is it probable or possible that her friendship is like my friendship?" (75); and: "He seems to like Miss Bordman very much. So do I; but I hope he will not learn to like her society better than mine. I hope— — —" (124; 127, 140, 153, *passim*).

But, what then do we do with this evidence of Barrett's youthful infatuation? We may propose, certainly, that her obsession with Boyd was fueled by the absence of her brother, Edward, the only real intellectual companion she had had at home. Or we may compare Barrett's connection to Boyd with her passionate attachment to her authoritarian father. But beside these other interpretations of Barrett's "improper" affections lies another, darker and more difficult possibility—that the young Barrett's ardor for Boyd, and her enduring sense of connection to him, was due in large part to the fact that he was blind.

So, Boyd was blind . . . and here I must stop myself—I must interrupt the narrative to re-examine my motives and to begin to contemplate the response of the reader. For this announcement—the observation of Boyd's blindness—has been deliberately delayed, partly because we do not wish to construct Boyd's blindness as

the primary fact of his identity, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the delay is calculated to extort some e/affect from the reader. By concealing Boyd's blindness (by making his blindness invisible), the writer desires to elicit some reaction; the reader is perhaps lured into a supposition of Boyd's normalcy (i.e., his sightedness), is surprised, perhaps shocked, to discover (to *see* uncovered) that Boyd is blind—and to find that the identity of this obscure poet/scholar requires re-assessment and re-interpretation as a disabled subject.

Here we encounter an enormous difficulty, for in this re-assessment, this re-interpretation, this re-construction of the (now blind) Boyd, we find that the previously constructed Boyd has ceased to exist; the poet, the scholar—husband, father, tutor, intellectual, gentleman of means, (bore, perhaps?)—all these are withdrawn and we are left only with the anxious presence of Boyd's blindness, the presence which is absence, and absence measured not by *his* loss, but rather by our own sense of vacancy in a place where we may previously have experienced a sense of knowing, of security. Our faith in the illusion of Boyd as previously written (i.e., normal, sighted),²⁸ is shattered . . . and our trust in the writer—the provider or withholder of information—is shaken. For the act of having withheld this information (i.e., the fact of Boyd's blindness) reveals the writer's desire to control or manipulate the reader. But our sense of loss, of absence, in the face of Boyd's (sudden) blindness, is not simply an effect of narrative delay. For while writers are, of course, always engaged in the task of constructing the people about whom they write, in the case of the blind subject, it is very often the *blindness itself* which disturbs

²⁸ For an in-depth discussion of the development of scientific ideas of "normal" and "average" humanity and how these ideas gave rise to modern definitions of disability, see Lennard Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* (Verso, 1995).

our equanimity, which interrupts the narrative and prevents the construction of an effective illusion (i.e., a subject whom we believe we can know—human, like ourselves). For just as in this narrative (where it is not only the reader who is controlled and manipulated by the delayed revelation of Boyd's blindness, but the blind subject also who is himself controlled, manipulated, constructed by the belated introduction of his blindness), blindness must constantly be written and re-written, erased, discovered, recovered, contained, or made explosive in its implications. And this flurry of discursive activity surrounding blindness—this attempted containment or re-construction of the blind figure—reflects an ongoing social gesture, a web of institutionalized language which seeks to define and contain the presence of absence which we call blindness, an absence which, strangely, excepts the blind and acts exclusively upon the presumed knowing that belongs to sighted culture. The discourses which shape the sighted experience of blindness give expression to a kind of historical hysteria which attempts to contain blindness, which defines the parameters of blindness within explicit tropes, which reminds us that blindness must be constantly, vigilantly policed—explained, excused, justified . . . defined and re-defined.

And this policing of blindness is very clearly at work among Barrett Browning biographers. Though some, certainly, offer a comparatively balanced representation of Boyd and his relationship with Barrett Browning, establishing Boyd's blindness within a complex framework of identity (see especially Daniel Karlin, *The Courtship of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett*, 1985; Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 1989; and Margaret Forster, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 1988), many biographers (dare we say *most*?) caricature Boyd, often stressing negative

attributes. Isabel Clarke calls Boyd's work "dull" and bigoted (15); Dorothy Hewlett characterizes Boyd as "captious" and "old-fashioned" and notes especially his tendency to "carp and criticize" (65); Hewlett also portrays Boyd (later in life) as "living alone [...in] a state of valetudinarianism: he never went out or left his chair" (188). Here, the biographer effectively immobilizes the subject; separating him from the rest of humanity, she reduces him to something less than human, an object—dark and powerless. Rosalie Mander calls Boyd an "unimaginative" scholar and "a dry stick, [...] an emotional outlet, harmless enough, for one [Barrett] always in love with someone or something" (8, 6). Here we find Boyd castrated, or perhaps more accurately, shriveled and shrunken—"a dry stick"—made sexually ineffective, impotent. Ironically, both Barrett's father and her aunt "Bummy" seem to have regarded Boyd as a potential sexual threat. Barrett's father discouraged her visits to Boyd, and even delayed their initial meeting for approximately a year. Elizabeth Barrett reported: "My father has represented to me that, whatever gratification and improvement I might receive from a personal intercourse with you, yet, as a *female* and a *young female*, I could not pay such a first visit as the one you propose to me without overstepping the established observances of society" (qtd. in Forster 41). But even after Barrett and Boyd had established their visiting on a fairly regular basis, Bummy, upon learning that the two had been left for some time alone in the same room, gave voice to her violent disapprobation: "I was goose enough to tell Bummy about Miss Boyd's secession from Mr. Boyd's room, on my last visit to him: & she was severe enough to call his conduct 'ungentlemanly & disgusting.' I was lighted up into a passion of course!!" (*Diary* 140). Through this odd wavering between sexual and non-sexual, we can begin to sense the profound instability inherent in the

sighted culture's representation of blindness. As Jacques Derrida observes of

Samson:

Samson loses every phallic attribute or substitute, his hair and then his eyes, after Delilah's ruse had deceived his vigilance, thereby giving him over to a sort of sacrifice, a physical sacrifice. He is not only a figure of castration, a castration figure, but, a bit like all the blind, like all one-eyed men or cyclopes, a sort of phalloid image, an unveiled sex from head to toe, vaguely obscene and disturbing. (104-106)²⁹

Others project what power Boyd may have had into the hands of Barrett's father, transforming Boyd's authority into a tool of patriarchal power: "Her father obtained an introduction for [Barrett] to the well-known Greek scholar, Hugh Stuart Boyd" (Ingram 21). (Remember, it was Boyd who first wrote to Elizabeth Barrett to suggest a meeting; Edward Moulton-Barrett was largely responsible for the year-long delay before his daughter and Boyd met.) Osbert Burdett also attributes Boyd's entrance into Barrett's life to paternal management, in this case using language that encourages us to think of Boyd as object/property: "All this [critical notice] encouraged Barrett's father to *give* her a tutor of *her own* in the person of H.S. Boyd, the blind scholar" (10; emphasis added). In addition to constructing Boyd as property (like one of the slaves on Edward Moulton-Barrett's Jamaica plantation?)—*and* in addition to Burdett's shortening of Boyd's name, a kind of nominal circumcision—the passage quoted immediately above is noteworthy for its rendering up of Boyd's blindness. A seeming afterthought ("H.S. Boyd, the blind scholar"), this representation affirms the critical importance of Boyd's blindness, a fact of identity essential perhaps to Boyd, but more essential in this case to the biographer

²⁹ For more on the sexualizing or desexualizing of the blind figure, see Chapter Three, "On Blindness."

and to the (presumably sighted) reader, the consumer of biographical representation/construction.

And though Burdett's seemingly off-hand reference to Boyd's blindness may seem a small thing, when we observe how frequently such references recur, we begin to sense that blindness is, for the biographer/reader, both a looming presence(absence) and a condition of identity so inextricably a part of the blind subject as to be nearly invisible. (The blindness of the blind subject becomes, in a sense, like the representation of whiteness in white people, a biological fact without further symbolic significance, even while the representation of blindness—unlike whiteness—is, outwardly, a feature which *requires* symbolic representation; in other words, it's not important, but it has to be mentioned). Blindness here is a sign which does not signify, a verbal moment *requiring* reiteration but not interpretation. So, many biographers seem to enact a kind of repetition compulsion surrounding this fact, constantly raising the specter of Boyd's blindness, but almost always in an incidental way, reminding us of his blindness as though it were unimportant. Thus, even the most sensitive and even-handed of biographers seem simply to throw blindness in with other elements that seem to characterize Boyd: "the classical scholar Hugh Stuart Boyd, who was many years older than [Barrett], married, and blind" (Karin 30); "Boyd was a classical scholar, blind, married, with a grown daughter, already in his mid-forties" (Mermin 43); "middle-aged, blind, married and pedantic" (Berridge 27). Those less attuned to the possible political importance of blindness(disability?) signify Boyd's blindness using more highly charged or value laden tropes. John Ingram, expecting perhaps that his readers will be surprised (or perhaps finding himself surprised), hastens to reassure us of Boyd's competence:

“Mr. Boyd, *although blind*, was a profound student of Hellenic literature, and an accomplished author” (19; emphasis added). And in a similar vein to Rosalie Mander’s “dry stick” characterization, Ingram is also careful to reduce the potentially threatening otherness of Boyd’s blindness by employing soothing tropes typically associated with disability, referring to “the *patient kindness* and *profound learning* of the *blind* scholar” (21; emphasis added). This, despite the fact that most biographers portray Boyd as strict, stiff, and reserved. Helen Cooper, like Elizabeth Berridge, refers to Boyd’s blindness as a seemingly neutral element, but lumps it in with other qualities which are clearly undesirable: “Hugh Boyd, a blind, rather pedantic, and second-rate Greek scholar” (13).

Then too, some biographers seem to have an even more compulsive need to write Boyd’s blindness into his identity. Again and again they remind the reader, in a seemingly incidental manner, of the fact of Boyd’s blindness. Dorothy Hewlett, for instance, offers an apparently objective statement when she refers to the “blind classical scholar, Hugh Stuart Boyd” (37), but just five pages later, she seems to think that the reader needs to be reminded of Boyd’s blindness: “In Malvern there lived a *blind* classical scholar, Hugh Stuart Boyd” (42; emphasis added). And two pages later, Hewlett again mentions “the mere accident of [Boyd’s] blindness” (44). Again, two pages later, she informs the reader that Barrett’s letters to Boyd were “written in a clear hand for the easier reading aloud to one blind” (46), as though Boyd’s blindness were a form of contagion that would also make the person reading to him partly blind. On page fifty-three, Hewlett again reminds her readers that Barrett’s correspondent was “a blind man” and on the following page, she seems to echo the same kind of placid troping of disability undertaken by John Ingram; here, Hewlett

speaks of Boyd's translations as having been made "in learned darkness" (54). And while we find similar patterns of reference in a number of biographies, one other in particular stands out. Julia Markus' *Dared & Done* makes a scant four references to Boyd, but in each case (again, as though by compulsion) Markus reminds the reader of Boyd's blindness: "the *blind* Greek scholar" (13; emphasis added); "the *blind* and reclusive Mr. Boyd" (50; emphasis added); "the *blind* man had actually intuited" (56; emphasis added); "the *blind* Boyd" (72; emphasis added). Here we see an almost hysterical verbal performance, the apparently compulsive repetition and re-inscription of Boyd's blindness, the fact that, while written, will still not signify, the absence that keeps starting up and surprising us, that requires constant articulation, constant re-assertion and re-insertion, the sign which resurrects itself because it is denied significance in its initial moment of inscription (which is also its burial, since the moment of naming is both birth and death, both the beginning and the permanent restriction of meaning).

But, while blindness may not be permitted to signify itself, to have meaning apart from that assigned by sighted context (blindness is the absence of sight, the antithesis of sightedness; it bears meaning only in relation to sightedness, never on its own), blindness is permitted to signify, to have meaning, on a mythic or symbolic level. And insofar as Barrett Browning's biographers are able to make meaning out of Boyd's blindness (since, as demonstrated, much of the representation of Boyd's blindness is *non*-representation, a compulsive and meaningless repetition that he *is* blind, as though this blindness were a Promethean disablement, a punitive moment constantly enforced by its own re-enactment), they articulate an existing set of tropes that lend meaning to absence. So, for instance, Osbert Burdett writes of the

“Homeric touch” of Boyd’s blindness (12), since one of the ways that sighted culture makes blindness meaningful is through the construction of the blind poet, the aural/oral bard; at the same time, the body of the blind poet, marked by disability, offers visible evidence of interference by the gods, and thus of its/his (her?) sacred/taboo status.

We see a related trope at work in the passage from *Dared & Done* in which Markus refers to Boyd’s having figured out that Barrett and Browning were soon to be married: “The blind man had actually intuited what she was up to” (56). Interestingly, Boyd’s prescience here—on the subject of Barrett’s engagement—is deemed remarkable by a number of Barrett Browning biographers. Isabel Clarke also notes that “Even Mr. Boyd in his blindness discerned that changes were contemplated” (144). And Osbert Burdett, too, gratuitously re-inscribing Boyd’s blindness (“could *not* see with his *sightless* eyes” [emphasis added]), also notes Boyd’s (sacredly inspired?) insight: “Another *diviner* of the state of Barrett’s heart, though he could not see with his sightless eyes the flush of health that proclaimed it, was Mr. Boyd” (200; emphasis added). Here, in each case, the language employed forces the relationship between *blindness* and *insight*. Each biographer has chosen to recall Boyd’s blindness at this point, thus creating a familiarly ironic space, a moment wherein sighted culture redeems its anxieties about the significance of blindness; here we are reminded that the blind have special gifts, access to a kind of extra-sensory or supernatural seeing. And rather than ascribing Boyd’s insight on the subject of Barrett’s proposed marriage to the ordinary sensitivity of a dear friend, rather than suggesting that Boyd may have guessed at the special relationship between Barrett and Browning from any earthly means—Barrett’s letters, language, temper, tone of

voice, reluctance to speak, nervousness, etc.—each biographer connects Boyd’s intuition with his blindness.

This trope of blind giftedness has its origins in ancient Greece where

the difference of the blind—their otherness—was assumed to be radical, was attributed to some transcendent cause or mystery beyond the reach of human knowledge or of social control. Greek literature presents blindness as a terrible calamity, often a punishment for transgression involving sexuality or the gods. (Paulson 5)

But though regarded as calamitous and punitive, it is important to remember that the ancient Greek troping of blindness often involved the bestowal of sacred “compensatory faculties.” So, like Tiresias, the blind can see(hear) the future—“Athena blinded [Tiresias] as punishment for having observed her in her bath, and then compensated him by sharpening his hearing so that he could foretell events” (Paulson 6)—but

Far from remedying the exclusion of the blind, compensatory faculties such as prophecy or poetic inspiration confirm their separation—their links to the gods rather than to the profane doings of men. (Paulson 7)

Following the Classical model, then, we find that the blind are troped by a kind of double otherness: First, blindness is regarded as a sacred (and therefore deserved) punishment (so the blind figure is automatically branded as criminal); then, the sacred compensation further removes the blind figure from the realm of the human.

As Eleftheria Bernidaki-Aldous has observed:

Polluted and sacred, [the blind] inspire disgust, compassion and the noblest humanity. Blindness is punishment for breaking the limits of human knowledge, yet it is the means to insight, truth—vision of the metaphysical light. Blind seers and poets enjoy[ed? *sic*?] the highest religious, social and political powers. (xiii)

Certainly, then, we find a part of this trope at least in the apparent giftedness of Boyd as represented by Barrett Browning biographers. But so too do we find the

presence of the punished blind. Recall, for instance, the emasculating connotations of Mander's "dry stick" characterization or Hewlett's portrayal of Boyd as immobilized (and therefore imprisoned).³⁰ In fact, the punishment for (the crime of) blindness can be extreme: "In ancient Greece and Rome, an infant born blind would be abandoned to die rather than integrated into society" (Paulson 7). And though the culture in which we live no longer *quite* approves such visible methods, the sentiment that some individuals (especially the disabled) are "better off dead" is one that has remained very much with us.³¹ One Barrett Browning biographer, for instance even suggests that Boyd's death "could not but be felt as a merciful end to many years of patient suffering" (250), a seemingly compassionate statement that carries with it an almost euthanistic desire, the sort of subtly politicized pressure that has so often haunted disabled subjects and which has fueled heated debate within Disability Studies.³² Since representations of Boyd seem then to include both the

³⁰ See also the discussion of the common expression "wheelchair-bound" in Simi Linton's *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York University Press, 1998).

³¹ This subject is perhaps best articulated by the contrary discourses of philosopher Peter Singer and the activist group "Not Dead Yet." For an overview, see Harriet McBryde Johnson's excellent essay, "Unspeakable Conversations," in the *New York Times Magazine* (16 Feb 2003).

³² While it is not the purpose of this dissertation to recount the dubious history of eugenics, including various nineteenth and twentieth-century strategies for racial "purification," this history certainly bears mentioning in this context. Although it may seem that our culture grows increasingly freer and more "humane" (with the advent of safe and inexpensive abortions for women and with the growing movement to legalize physician-assisted suicide), it must be remembered that those who are eliminated by these processes are often the disabled (or would-be disabled) and "infirm." Disability rights advocates, while typically supporting reproductive rights and right-to-die movements, have also been careful to point out the potential abuses built into these potential liberties. For more on this subject, see the following: On eugenics in Britain, Donald A. MacKenzie's *Statistics in Britain, 1865-1930* (Edinburgh University Press, 1981); on the relationship between "normalcy," statistics, and eugenics, Lennard Davis' chapter on "Constructing Normalcy" in his

elements of sacred insight and sacred punishment, it would appear that the Classical trope of the blind as both punished and sacredly powerful persists today. Indeed, Barrett herself, in representing Boyd's insight into her relationship with Browning, is careful to show that Boyd's intuition occurs in a prison-like environment:

he, /as>like/ a prisoner in a dungeon, sounds every stone of the walls round him, & discerns a hollowness, detects a wooden beam . . . patiently pricks out the mortar with a pin—all this, in his rayless, companionless Dark—poor Mr. Boyd! (*Letters* 13: 264)

But it is interesting to note that Barrett here tropes Boyd's blindness in a manner which is immensely more complex than her later biographers. For while Barrett does employ traditional symbolic language to describe Boyd's blindness ("rayless . . . Dark"), and while she follows through with the extended metaphor of prison and punishment ("prisoner in a dungeon," "stone . . . walls," "companionless"), and with a burst of pity ("Poor Mr. Boyd!") which points to an interpretation of the blind man as pathetic, she seems to ascribe Boyd's insight to a kind of scientific process of detection which differs substantially from the sort of mysterious and sacred gift established by the Classical trope.

These two features of Barrett's description—her representation of Boyd as discovering information methodically/scientifically and her easy encapsulation of Boyd within the exclamatory moment of pity—belong actually to two diverse modes of representing blindness. Of these two, pity certainly seems to be the older and, in many ways, the more familiar. William Paulson, who discusses both models in the

Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body (Verso, 1995); and for a good overview of these subjects and their application to contemporary reproductive politics, Ruth Hubbard's "Abortion and Disability: Who Should and Who Should Not Inhabit the World?" in *The Disability Studies Reader*, Lennard J. Davis, ed. (Routledge, 1997).

introductory framework of his (insightful?) *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France* (1987), suggests that the troping of blindness as pathetic grows out of a Christian tradition in which “rather than a malediction or chastisement, blindness becomes a negative moment [...] necessary as a contrast and a precondition to display the power of redemption and grace” (8). In other words, according to Paulson’s interpretation of the Christian model, the blind are regarded as damaged vessels who exist (or whose blindness exists) for the sake of illustrating Christ’s healing powers. According to this trope, the blind (man?) is a lay figure, mute and powerless, an *object* of mercy, grace, and compassion, acted upon by divine power. Thus, with the rise of institutionalized Christianity, the blind come to occupy an established space as necessary objects of pity. Christian individuals and organizations are able to demonstrate their charity by acting out their compassion upon the blind: “Beginning in the third century, hospices were opened for the infirm, lame, and blind. Outside such institutions, the blind often became the objects of charity, the association of blindness with begging being strengthened by the Christian practice of giving alms” (Paulson 8). Thus, each Christian acts out his own redemption by reenacting a human/mortal version of Christ’s compassion. But such compassion, while beneficial in some respects for blind people, necessarily exacts a heavy toll. While the blind receive help, of sorts, from Christian charity, the troping of blindness in this manner necessarily insists on the static quality of blind life. Unless the blind person is made to see (thus becoming miraculous evidence of God’s grace), s/he must remain in a condition of need (even beggary) in order to serve as an effective tool of Christian redemption.

What Paulson fails to recognize sufficiently in this trope is the potential power of the blind figure. Here, too, as in the ancient Greek model, the blind figure (even as his/her blindness is colonized by Christian compassion) retains some element of its sacred status; for not only are the blind set aside as vessels which will ultimately manifest and bear witness to divinity, but they are also represented as participating in divine insight:

Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent; but he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; rise, he is calling you." And throwing off his mantle he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man said to him, "master, let me receive my sight." And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he received his sight ... (Mark 10:46-52)

Here, it seems, the blind man recognizes the messianic identity of Jesus through some sort of extra-sensory or supernatural "seeing," thus suggesting that the blind (according to the Christian trope) are somehow connected with divinity and with sacred knowledge. So too, this blind figure actively demonstrates his faith in Jesus' healing power, urgently crying out, almost insisting upon his attendance, despite the attempts of the sighted multitude to silence his demands. This representation of blindness, while still constructing an identity which requires correction (i.e., sight), compassion ("have mercy"), and public assistance ("a blind beggar"), nevertheless permits the blind figure an enormous power; though other instances of blind healing in the gospels (and these others have more strongly influenced the Christian trope of blindness) often have the blind figure being "brought to" and "healed by" Christ, the passage quoted above figures the blind man as the active force in the claiming of his

sight (“‘What do you want me to do for you?’ And the blind man said to him, ‘Master, let me receive my sight.’” And Jesus’ response: “Your faith has made you well.”) But though Paulson’s discussion of blindness and Christianity may (be a little short-sighted?) not sufficiently recognize the element of supernatural insight (perhaps even overlooking the blind man’s profane political muscle), his articulation of the Christian troping of blindness offers us a valuable method for beginning to understand Barrett’s pity.

In truth, Barrett’s pity for Boyd is a troublesome thing; it rises up against us, confusing other possible constructions of Boyd, seeming by its exclamatory nature to prevent identity. (Before any expression comes from Boyd, any self-proclamation, there is Barrett’s exclamation—“Poor Mr. Boyd!”—establishing the parameters of his identity.) And this pity—firmly rooted as we find it in Barrett’s letters of the mid-1840s—confounds us too for another reason, for it seems, in many ways, to contradict Barrett’s own earlier constructions of Boyd as a powerful, intelligent, sexualized man. Though Barrett’s very first description of Boyd certainly participates to a degree in the cult of blindness pitied, we do find pity here balanced in some measure by the young Barrett’s interest in other aspects of Boyd’s appearance and character.

My eccentric friend is a rather young looking man than otherwise, moderately tall, and slightly formed. His features are good—his face very pale with an expression of placidity and mildness His voice is very harmonious and gentle and low—and seems to have naturally a melancholy cadence and tone!—which is affecting when you look at his quenched and deadened eyes—totally and hopelessly blind. I did not see him smile once. (qtd. in Berridge 21)

In the diary, we find that Barrett rarely mentions Boyd’s blindness, and that when she *does* mention it, it is with an expression of pity for herself rather than for

Boyd: "Mr. Boyd cant write, & nobody else will. Mr. Boyd cant write? I wish he would try to write with a pencil. Shall I ask him? How I should like to receive from him an undictated letter!—" (*Diary* 71). Here, Boyd's blindness is regarded not as a disability, some defect or failure within himself, some impoverishment, but rather as an obstacle to what Barrett seems to imagine would be a more transparent (unmediated) expression of Boyd's feelings for herself. Letters from Barrett to Boyd also seem rarely to refer to the fact of his blindness, unless as a part of some practical issue: Who is reading to him now? Is there no one to write for him? (*Letters* 3: 137; 5: 117; 6: 75, etc.). So, we find Barrett's pity for Boyd (and for Boyd's blindness) present primarily in her letters to Robert Browning and, notably, in those letters written in 1846, after Barrett and Browning had already declared their love for one another. Suddenly, it seems, Barrett divorces Boyd from his previous identity as a slightly disapproving friend and mentor, recasting him in a reduced mold, a mere fragment of the self she had formerly acknowledged, and that fragment infantilized and pitifully blind:

Quite blind he is [...] so nervous, that he has really made himself infirm [...] A very peculiar life he has led ever since he lost his sight, which he did when he was quite a young man—and a very peculiar person he is in all possible ways. [...] he talks like a man of slow mind, which he is, ... & with a child's way of looking at things, such as would make you smile—oh, he talks in the most wonderfully childish way! Poor Mr. Boyd. He cares for me perhaps more than he cares for anyone else [...] Poor Mr. Boyd. (*Letters* 13: 71)

And,

So, there, I stood at last, at the door of poor Mr. Boyd's dark little room, & saw him sitting ... as if he had not moved these seven years...these seven heavy, changeful years. Seeing him, my heart was too full to speak at first, but I stooped & kissed his poor bent-down forehead, which he never lifts up [...] (*Letters* 13: 96)

And,

But I told you what Mr. Boyd is—dear, poor Mr. Boyd! Talking such pure childishness sometimes, in such pure Attic—[...] Good, dear Mr. Boyd! (*Letters* 13: 283-84)

In all this, certainly, we find the Christian trope of blindness re-inscribed, a model which Barrett, with her devoted spirituality, would have found easy and familiar. But it is most important to see here that by force of this model (which, as mentioned above, circumscribes the blind subject within a boundary that denies agency), Barrett thus reconstitutes Boyd as an object, a decidedly non-sexual being (“a child’s way of looking at things,” “wonderfully childish,” “such pure childishness”), Barrett thus neutralizes Boyd, rendering him impotent, and by her verbal prophylaxis preventing him from possibly rising up (erecting his “poor *bent-down* forehead, which *he never lifts up*” [emphasis added]) and interfering with the promise of her new sexual/romantic object, Robert Browning.

Let us not forget, however, that other and larger portion of the passage in which Barrett describes Boyd’s discovery of her engagement to Browning. For in addition to painting Boyd’s blindness as pathetic (and, through her use of the prison motif, as criminal), Barrett also portrays Boyd as a kind of detective or scientist, methodically testing his physical/symbolic environment to determine the true measure of each element. Like any good scientist, Boyd “sounds” and “pricks,” measures and classifies, and arrives finally at the truth. Barrett’s portrayal of Boyd in this manner is illuminating for it suggests that aspect of Enlightenment/Victorian culture which constructed(constructs) our modern notions of blindness. Here again, William Paulson is helpful, establishing the symbolic representation of blindness belonging to modern times. In modernity, blindness is, according to Paulson,

“desacralized.” Science and medicine are able to investigate blindness, to find its causes and its cures. Gone, apparently, is the blind person’s association with God/gods, to mystery and the supernatural; gone is the need to eject the polluted blind from the body politic; gone is the need for pity. Instead, modern science/medicine methodically observes blindness using tools and techniques that (like Boyd) measure and classify—technology that discovers, names, and cures.

With the *Enlightenment*, with surgical cures and philosophical speculation, the difference of the blind is no longer situated in a distant and untouchable beyond; it becomes natural, accessible to science and subject to rational remedies. [...] In literature and especially on the popular stage, a new blind figure appeared: the blind person cured or curable, no longer grotesque or comic or pathetic, but innocent and sensitive, the object not of horror but of sympathetic fascination for the seeing. In the place of the old myths of exclusion, malediction, and compensation, new myths of blindness appear, based on the supposed inexperience and innocence of the blind, on the emotional experience of seeing for the first time. (Paulson 9-13)

According to this model, blindness is identified as defect, and science becomes the divine authority which erases absence(blindness). Of course, this “new” representation of blindness, despite its apparent modernity, is, in effect, a re-enactment of earlier tropes (all of which, it must again be noted, measure blindness only according to sighted experience and culture). Once again, the blind figure in this model is spectacle, the object of extraordinary attentions and machinations, the damaged vessel which is acted upon/perfected by medical intervention. Here, of course, science occupies the space previously reserved for divinity, and the “oculist,” as Paulson is quick to observe, “becomes a ‘priest’” (13).

And while the advent of a scientific or medical model of blindness(disability) would seem to displace Classical tropes of punishment and blind “seeing” as well as the Christian trope of pathos, these more ancient forms of symbolic representation

do continue to exist or resurface even in the midst of the most insistent modernity. While historical models of blindness do seem to *originate* in a particular place and time, pre-existing models never seem to be entirely transformed or abandoned (though they may go out of fashion). Thus a blind “seer” is portrayed on the *X-Files*; prospective parents discover that their fetus will be born blind, and like the modern incarnation of ancient Roman citizenry, choose to terminate the pregnancy; blind citizens of the United States are automatically granted substantial Social Security benefits regardless of their social standing, level of education, or ability to find remunerative employment; and *Star Trek*’s Jordi Laforge is portrayed as having had his blindness first prosthetically enhanced and then surgically “corrected” (with genetically engineered implants—which functional replacement eyes, interestingly, are blue, in contrast with Lt. Laforge’s otherwise African identity, thus suggesting that surgery and biotechnology here effect the correction of more than one “defect”: Both blindness and color are eliminated and thus is the body made perfect). In all this we see the blind continually reconstructed according to a variety of historically located (but now co-existing) tropes: The blind insight of Classical culture, the abjection of the ancient Roman model wherein the disabled body is figured as waste, the long-standing Christian representation of the blind as pathetic and helpless (requiring the material assistance of the more fortunate/blessed), and the scientific/medical model of blind defectiveness and correctibility.

Regardless, however, of the historical model, the troping of blindness within sighted culture seems consistently to rely on two factors: On the one hand, blindness is figured as a condition of extraordinary insight and knowledge (e.g., “blind justice”); on the other (provided one has two hands), blindness is seen as a

condition of utter blankness and unknowing (e.g., “the blind leading the blind”³³).

Between these two, sighted culture’s understanding of blindness shifts and oscillates, constantly undermining that fixedness of identity for which the social order ordinarily strives. Blindness, then, as an identity represented by sighted culture, is necessarily and inherently unstable, a condition of un-being on which is written a history of divine intervention/punishment and a physical/sensory lack, need, or absence always anticipating fulfillment or wholeness. Thus is the blind figure represented—full of (supernatural) potential.

With the advent of a modern “medical model” of blindness, this instability begins to have a more pervasive impact on the culture as a whole. For once the “curing” of blindness becomes the responsibility of human intervention and resource, the sacred or taboo nature of the blind subject is diminished; blindness itself, it is true, continues to be interpreted as loss or absence, a terrifying blankness, but as the blind subject is increasingly regarded as “curable” (i.e., potentially sighted), the divide between sighted subject and blind subject is lessened and the importance of blindness as a principle of identity is removed from its sacred elevation. Thus, blind people are no longer typically regarded as prophets, oracles, and psychics, but the sighted culture seizes instead on a kind of medical mythology: That blind people are gifted with a heightening of the other senses—they can smell better, hear more, have more sensitive fingertips, etc. This belief works in some measure to solace the anxiety of the sighted—that feared blindness is “not so bad,” that blind people, ultimately, are “just like” sighted. But at the same time, this modern “desacralizing” of blindness also further reduces the barrier between blindness and sightedness

³³ See Luke 6:39.

making it ever more abjectly terrifying as it is more easily confused with “normalcy,” creating a social climate wherein blindness must be rejected, cast out. So, the desire to move blind people over into sightedness (or at least into lives similar to those led by the sighted) is in no way diminished by this reconstruction of the blind as potentially sighted subjects. If anything, we are more urgent than ever in our vision of blindness as a defect that must be “corrected” or eliminated.

It seems worthwhile, too, to consider here the advent of new nineteenth-century (and late-eighteenth-century) optical technology.³⁴ For the development of this technology worked to further confound the division between blind and sighted, since, within this time frame, new tools for seeing began to teach the sighted that biological vision was *always* subjective, always limited, and therefore might be considered “naturally” incomplete or deficient. And while the more “scientific” of these optical instruments (e.g., the telescope, the microscope) might somehow be considered authoritative or “objective” (Christ and Jordan xxii), regardless of the

³⁴ Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan, in *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination* (University of California Press, 1995), describe the following new optical devices:

The thaumatrope, in which a card having on its opposite faces different designs is whirled rapidly to combine the designs in a single picture; the phanakistoscope, in which a disk with figures on it representing the different stages of motion is whirled rapidly to create the impression of actual motion; the zoetrope and the stroboscope, later developments of the phenakistoscope; the kaleidoscope; the diorama; and the stereoscope, which combines pictures taken from two points of view to create a single image with the illusion of solidity of depth; [...] the camera lucida, which projects the image of an object on a plane surface; the graphic telescope, which adds magnification to the operation of the camera lucida; the photographic camera; the binocular telescope; the binocular microscope; the stereopticon, a nineteenth-century precursor to the slide projector; and the kinetoscope, an early motion picture projector. (xix)

See also, Stephen E. Palmer, *Vision: Photons to Phenomenology* (MIT Press, 1999) for additional discussion of “vision science.”

precision and magnifying powers of the new technology, by comparison, the unaided eye must now have begun to be considered in a much more equivocal way. Seeing might still have been considered believing, but *unassisted* seeing must suddenly have been thought of as a much more subjective experience. As Jonathan Crary observes in *Techniques of the Observer* (1990), these developments “show a new subjective model of the observer emerging in the . . . nineteenth century” (Christ and Jordan xxii), thus marking a substantial change in the way sighted culture thought about the idea and activity of seeing. And so, that ancient warning against the authenticity of things seen,³⁵ must also have reverberated with new meaning; now, optical illusion (the masquerade of Satan?) was everywhere and all (sighted) people had to learn to doubt their eyes. Science, so far from delivering technology which would offer conclusive evidence as to the “truth” of sight, instead uncovered a (hitherto) invisible world of anxiety, de-centering human sight, and forcing the sighted into a position wherein it has become necessary to doubt what s/he sees. Sight, previously the arbiter of doubt, now became a doubtful means of verifying authenticity. Though optical technology does reveal a new world to the sighted, it also necessarily demands that the sighted recognize their own blindness. This line between blind and sighted is even further obscured by the advent of commonplace prosthetics like spectacles and contact lenses, creating a new population of “legally blind” but practically sighted individuals. Since, in many ways, we are no longer able to classify accurately the

³⁵ You can’t judge a book by its cover: Remember Satan in *Paradise Lost* who “casts to change his proper shape” (book III, 634), thus with his “Hypocrisie, the onely evil that walks / Invisible, except to God alone” (683-84), fooling Uriel, “though Regent of the Sun, and held / The sharpest sighted Spirit of all in Heav’n” (690-91).

difference between the blind and the sighted,³⁶ the security of clear division (disciplinary boundary) separating blind from “normal,” has been eliminated, thus making the presence(absence) of blindness even more imminently threatening, and consequently adding to the urgency that it be “corrected” or eliminated.

So, bearing in mind then these three ideas—one, that modernity reads blindness as defect requiring cure; two, that the presence of blindness necessarily generates instability; and three, that science/technology/medicine are applied to blindness in order to effect its cure/erasure—let us return for a moment to Barrett’s representation of Boyd in the prison of his blindness. For here, as we have the defective blind and the application of scientific method/technique, so, too, do we have a terrifying disruption of permissible identity. For in the cell which Barrett prepares for her former mentor, we find that the roles of scientist and blind victim are reversed. The pitiable imprisoned blind, unrescued and unaided by the *external* application of science, is rather here portrayed as himself using scientific/deductive technique to discover truth. Here, the blind figure uses science to create his own access to information, rather than relying on the mediation of some outside source—God/gods, charity, doctor/scientist, teacher. Rather than relying on the gift of science externally bestowed for his passive enlightenment, Boyd is here represented as the actor/agent of his own knowledge. And, importantly, Boyd, in his blindness, is not fooled by *appearances*—the seemingly exclusive devotion of Barrett to her father, the total concealment of a romantic relationship between herself and Browning—but relies instead on non-visual (and therefore non-subjective?) analysis to determine the truth of the engagement. So, just when all-seeing science with its

³⁶ For additional discussion on the definition of blindness and the difficult

specialized optical instrumentation would seem definitively to prove that “seeing *is* believing,” at that moment, science proves to us that seeing is subjective and illusory, and the figure of (the blind) Boyd works to illustrate that “truth” is perhaps more available to those less likely to be fooled by their own subjective vision. Though Barrett relies on the pathetic trope—“Poor Mr. Boyd”—she nevertheless constructs a figure inherently powerful and intelligent, a blind person neither disabled nor externally empowered. And, just as importantly, her choice of language hedges that powerful human figure within the stone walls of a prison cell.

It is in this juxtaposition of imprisoned power that we may begin to investigate blindness in a new way—understanding that the construction of blindness as absence, ignorance, inability, poverty, and helplessness is a necessary means of circumscribing blind power for appropriation or colonization by the sighted. Of course, in order to begin this investigation, it is necessary that we must first effect our own particular erasure of the blind subject: For in this model, as in others discussed above, the blind subject will once again be denied his/her subjectivity, will be forced into darkness and absence so that darkness and absence can be mediated by the satellite—the (sighted) guide, teacher, nun, benefactor, interpreter, parent, sibling, doctor, etc. Were it necessary (or possible?) to excuse such a conscious effacement of the blind subject, we would perhaps argue that it appears impossible for blind and sighted to share any meaningful understanding of blindness, except insofar as meaning may reside not in blindness or in sightedness, but rather in the struggle between the two, a struggle which works both to create opportunity for the blind and to discipline blindness according to an institutionalized

dinstinction between “blind” and “sighted,” see Chapter Three, “On Blindness.”

model. So, we find that the mixed attempt at benevolence is at once an attempt to empower blindness *and* to regulate it—thus is blindness colonized. But blind people, as they (meekly) accept proffered assistance, as they participate in their own institutionalization and colonization, also effectively write over the colonizer, objectifying the sighted and seizing his/her body as prosthesis.

Though our culture is accustomed to reading blind people as objects (of disgust, veneration, pity, charity, etc.), we are not often exposed to the objectification necessarily attendant upon the prostheticization of the sighted. We do find this pattern, however, in any number of blind-sighted relationships. Georgina Kleege, for instance, in her disarmingly frank “Blind Rage: An Open Letter to Helen Keller,” offers up a fascinatingly complex picture of the relationship between a blind person and her readers.

I got a call from one of my readers, and she tells me she's leaving, moving out of town to get married. I say, “That's wonderful,” but inside I'm thinking, “Now what am I going to do?” Not that she's my only reader, of course. I have other readers and I can hire a new one. And it's not that I'm fussy either. I can listen to any reader, any kind of voice—I can tolerate the computer's voice after all. But I really like her voice. I like the way she phrases things. It somehow coincides with my own voice, or the voice in my head when I'm reading. Listening to her is effortless. I never have to blot out a vocal tick or a funny accent. I'll find another reader, but I'll never find a better fit.

[...] another one of my readers shows up. This is actually a good thing. He can read me my e-mail. This reader is hired by my department. He's an ADA accommodation. He's good enough, though. [...] He tells me he's having trouble with the book I gave him to tape. The style makes it hard to read, he says.

“Don't worry about it,” I say. I want to say, “You don't have to like it. All you have to do is read it into the tape recorder” [...]

I get him to read me my e-mail. I stop him mid-sentence and tell him to delete. He does it, but I sense it annoys him. It's as if he thinks I should hear the whole message since he's reading it aloud. Or else he finds the whole thing beneath him. [...] His attitude gets to me. He acts like he's doing me a favor. (Kleege 54-55)

We can clearly see from the language in this passage the uneasy quality of these relationships, the struggle for power and identity, and the resistance to control/objectification. Kleege's choice of words here ("one of *my* readers," "Not that she's my only reader," "I *have* other readers," "I can *hire* a new one," "He's an ADA accommodation") seem to inscribe the reader primarily as (human) commodity; her references to having to "to blot out a vocal tick or a funny accent" describe both her lack of control over the reader and her effort to reconfigure (or erase) a unique human voice pattern; or, she may appropriate the reader's voice as her own: "coincides with my own voice." And as she seeks to impose her will on the reader, so the clash of wills between blind and sighted becomes clear ("It's as if he thinks I should hear the whole message since he's reading it aloud. [...] He acts like he's doing me a favor"), the blind person asserting her primacy in the blind-reader relationship (as well as the employer-employee relationship: "you work for me—you do what I say—you accept your prostheticization"), and the sighted person asserting his primacy as able-bodied interpreter/mediator, gallant offerer of sight to the pitiable blind ("I think we both know who's better equipped to be in charge here, don't we? But don't worry, I'll graciously defer to your petulant demands").

We find similar discursive ripples emanating from Hugh Stuart Boyd (though his comments are necessarily mediated by Barrett), who seems often to have remarked upon his own readers as prosthetic objects: "Mr. Boyd observed to me—'I was thinking in the other room how fortunate it is [...] that I am able to bear your voice. For if your voice had been in that particular key which I cannot bear, I never cd. have associated with you'" (*Diary* 172); "He said today that it was one of the

unpleasant circumstances attending his blindness, that he was forced to have recourse to the services of those whom he did not like! ‘Now when Miss Mushet is kind enough to offer to read anything for me, I cannot help taking advantage of her doing so: and I don’t like Miss Mushet’” (*Diary* 253). So, in the synthetic/symbiotic relationship between blind and sighted, we find a struggle for power and identity that functions in a constant fluid operation of construction (sighted person constructs blind as lacking, a necessary object of compassion/assistance; blind person constructs sighted as human automaton/functional ocular prosthetic), appropriation (sighted person appropriates mystical power and spectacular nature of blindness; blind person appropriates visual ability/mobility/access belonging to the sighted), erasure (blind person is made invisible by his/her blindness/disability, a non-person; sighted person is made invisible by his/her proximity to the spectacle of the blind subject), and re-construction (sighted person must work to re-gain his power/status as non-prosthetic human; blind person must reclaim his/her blindness and the power that belongs to his/her status as blind). The “meaning” of blindness then (according to this dissertation), resides not in the oscillation between power and helplessness written into sighted tropes of blindness, but rather in the oscillation between power and helplessness, between visibility and invisibility, between knowing and not knowing, between human existence and objecthood that exist in the relationship between blind and sighted.

So, for instance, we may read the relationship between the blind individual and the ocular surgeon according to the existing trope of medicalized blindness: Here, the blind figure is the focus, the spectacle, the central object of sighted attention. The blind “patient” is a lay figure to be examined, acted upon, “cured” by

the doctor/priest. According to this model, the blind figure is essentially eliminated—his/her presence is absence, blank, deficit because the figure here can be neither real nor human, but is so laden with extraordinary significance that his/her particularity is effaced by the troping of his/her blindness. But if we take this erasure even further, if we accept the non-existence of the blind figure and look instead to the framing of blindness, we find that the figure who exists at the margins of this trope, who shapes it (and is, in turn, shaped by it), is the doctor. Thus, by re-focusing our attention onto this satellite, this purveyor of blindness (for though the doctor claims to be the curer/eliminator of blindness, without the actuality of blindness upon which s/he can act, his/her curative identity ceases to exist), we may begin to read blindness as a source of power. And thus is blindness appropriated as a commodity of the sighted.

We find exactly this appropriating maneuver in Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind* (1993), a visual and literary exhibition(text) organized by Derrida at the invitation(instigation) of curators of the Department of Graphic Arts at the Louvre. Though his choice of visual art and his commentary do offer tremendous insight into the representation of blindness (and the representation of self), Derrida nevertheless re-enacts (albeit on a much more sophisticated level than usual) familiar tropes of blindness which both objectify the blind and appropriate the power and authenticity belonging to the blind figure. Returning for a moment to the discussion of Samson, we find that though Derrida offers a complex interpretation of the sexuality of the blind figure, his searching and intelligent analysis nonetheless winds up reconstructing the blind figure as a kind of monstrous obscenity—all polymorphous perversity, no human identity.

He is stretched toward the invisible and threatening place of his desire in an energetic, determined, but uncontrollable movement, being sheer potential, potentially violent, at once groping and sure, between erection and fall, all the more carnal, *even animal*, in that sight does not protect him, most notably, from shameless gestures. More naked than others, a blind man virtually becomes his own sex, he becomes indistinguishable from it because he does not see it, and not seeing himself exposed to the other's gaze, it is as if he had lost even his sense of modesty. The blind man has no shame [...] (106; emphasis added)

Importantly, blindness here is represented in an absolutely sight-centric manner.

Here, the blind is exposed because "*sight* does not protect him." He is naked because he cannot *see* his nakedness. He is obscene because he is bereft of that prophylactic *vision* which would enable him to know his own "shameless gestures."

His modesty is disabled because he cannot *see* the *gaze* of the *sighted*. Though this portrayal does offer a tantalizingly erotic interpretation of blindness, still, it insists not only on the *primacy* of sight, but even more, on the *exclusivity* of sight—that sightedness is the only *human* condition, that blindness is naturally and necessarily "animal." And in another passage, near the beginning of the text, we find Derrida re-inscribing that familiar model of blind helplessness and unknowing: "A blind man explores by feeling out an area that he must recognize without yet cognizing it—and what he apprehends, what he has apprehensions about, in truth, is the precipice, the fall" (4). This is, no doubt, a compelling image, beautifully drawn. Here, the blind makes a linear exploration of space, "feeling out an area" as he progresses forward toward the invisible unknown, but he can never make any space secure by (visually) circumscribing it. The recognition of the blind man recognizes without cognition, moving ever forward toward some unseen "precipice, the fall." But this anticipated fall, this urgent, nauseating anxiety, in actuality reflects the apprehensions not of the blind, but rather of the sighted. Instead of describing blindness, Derrida here (as in

much of the book) describes the blind *moment*, the sighted experience of un-seeing—that moment when the visual world drops away, sight is deprived, and the sighted person imagines him/herself surrounded by inescapable calamity, unknowingly groping his/her sightless way forward toward inevitable, invisible death. Here, Derrida himself is blind (to the alternative cognition belonging to blindness); rather than drawing for us “a blind man,” Derrida instead draws *himself* as blind—the sighted philosopher groping forward with eyes closed. In fact, the blind moment (blind spot) which Derrida here describes must, of necessity, belong exclusively to the sighted. For the blind do not experience blind moments or blind spots, temporary, terrifying erasures of vision. Rather, blindness must necessarily be experienced contextually, as an integral element of all other things experienced by the blind person; in this situation, blindness cannot be understood as the absence or loss it must seem to the sighted—for the blind person, things unseen do not form the basis of some fantastic looming gap, but are instead absorbed within an alternative cognitive experience (alternative, that is, to *sighted* cognition). What happens here, then, in Derrida’s description of the blind man, is that he re-constructs the blind as *himself*, thus appropriating/colonizing the blind body, a performance we find repeated (strategically?) throughout the text. (In fact, the text itself, insofar as it is dependent on visual illustration, demonstrates perfectly the act of appropriating/colonizing blindness; the book is itself a *spectacle* of blindness, an *exhibition* of blindness represented *visually*, thus making blindness accessible *only to the sighted*!) Derrida writes, for instance, about the experience of writing without looking (“By accident, and sometimes on the brink of accident, I find myself writing without seeing” [3]) and about the fleeting moment of blindness as one begins to draw (“it is

as if, just as I was about to draw, I no longer *saw* the thing” [36]), but perhaps most strikingly, Derrida offers the reader an autobiographical fragment describing his own (“authentic”) blindness:

I have been suffering for thirteen days from facial paralysis caused by a virus, from what is called *a frigore* (disfiguration, the facial nerve inflamed, the left side of the face stiffened, the left eye transfixed and horrible to behold in a mirror—a real sight for sore eyes—the eyelid no longer closing normally: a loss of the “wink” or “blink,” therefore, this moment of blindness that ensures sight its breath).
(32)

And this fragment is then carefully positioned next to a passage which describes a tradition of identification among blind writers:

As for Borges, among the blind ancestors whom he identifies or claims in the gallery of Western literature, it is clearly Milton who is his rival; it is with Milton that he would like to identify himself.
[...] Borges begins with Homer; he then ends with Joyce—and still just as modestly, with the self-portrait of the author as a blind man
[...] (33-35)

So, Derrida seems subtly (surreptitiously) to find a place for his own performance of blindness in among this celebrated “gallery” of the blind. Though speaking of Borges when he writes about this “singular genealogy, [this] singular illustration, [this] illustration of oneself among all these illustrious blind men who keep each other in memory,” Derrida seems nevertheless to be hinting at his own place in this lineage. Thus, it would seem, by making himself a satellite to blindness, and by ultimately appropriating blindness, he claims his own greatness—his (temporary, partial) blindness marks him as worthy to occupy a place among the (blind) luminaries of Western literature.

So, while blindness may be read as criminal, abject, helpless, we also find in the (almost) invisible frame created by the troping of blindness, a variety of satellite

figures ordinarily annulled by the nature of our usual focus on blindness. Thus, the doctor, addicted to the blindness that will bear witness to his/her curative powers; thus the Christian (sinner) who re-inscribes the pious trope of blind poverty so that s/he may have an object on which to display his/her charity; thus the Christian (saint) who courts the blindness of prophecy, of martyrdom, and of Pauline distinction; thus the poet who clings to the blind inspiration of Homer/Milton/Borges; thus Annie Sullivan, elevated to iconic status by her “miraculous” teaching of Helen Keller. All these satellite figures, existing at the cusp of blindness, both shape the sighted culture’s perception of blindness and themselves enjoy the site of power created by their constructions.

The difficulty, of course, with the satellite to blindness is that this position is (if possible) even more unstable than that occupied by the blind. For while tropes of blindness teach us that blind identity oscillates unendingly between a condition of grace/power/knowledge and helpless/hopeless objectification, these representations of blindness must be understood in some way as masking/interpreting an otherwise unspeakable condition. (Remember that language, as discussed earlier, is invested in sightedness and cannot therefore describe blindness in its own terms.) The condition of the satellite figure, conversely, is one that seems on some level to be self-constructed. First, the satellite may recognize some (imagined) condition of need within the blind subject; so, the satellite enters (as a helper) into the arena of blindness (appropriates blindness?), thus discovering that s/he occupies a position of power as a mediator to blindness; next, the satellite recognizes that the position of power is simultaneously one not only of power, but also of invisibility and objectification (the sighted mediator is effaced both by public attention focused on

the primary/blind figure as well as by the condition of unparticularized prosthesis to the blind subject); finding that his/her power is augmented by a greater condition of need on the part of the blind subject, the satellite works to create greater dependency on the part of the individual s/he guides/serves, but the more invested the satellite is in his/her role as satellite, the less satisfying is the power gained; for the condition of invisibility/objectification is also simultaneously heightened. Thus, the satellite subject, requiring the dependency of the blind, is him/herself dependent on blindness for power/identity. And it is this satellite condition, this struggle for power and identity, this struggle against dependency and invisibility, this contest for ownership of blindness/disability which (arguably) governs the relationship between Elizabeth Barrett Barrett/Browning and Hugh Stuart Boyd.

We find hints of this contest in the very earliest phases of Boyd's and Barrett's acquaintance. Margaret Forster, for instance, indicates that Barrett actively resisted meeting Boyd, being "only too willing to hide behind her father's disapproval" (41), suggesting further that this resistance may have been due in part to Barrett's own carefully constructed invalid status, an identity which permitted her considerable power and independence.³⁷ For "frustrated and intelligent" Victorian women, the "escape into illness," as Elizabeth Berridge puts it (18), must certainly have been tempting since it would serve as virtually the only means of controlling

³⁷ Clinton Machann ("The Function of Illness and Disability in Three Victorian Autobiographies," *A/B: Auto/Biography Studies*, Spring 1991) makes similar observations of three other Victorian figures—Charles Darwin, Francis Galton, and Herbert Spencer—suggesting that for these "quite neurotic, hypochondriacal men [...] illness functions, ironically, as a *stabilizing* factor" (30), in each case enabling the writer to withdraw socially in order to effect written control of his public identity. Ultimately, Machann notes, each man's sense of a "unified self [...] is] achieved largely through the agency of disease and disability" (31).

and ordering one's own life. For Barrett, such an "escape" meant that rather than having to join in social intercourse that she disliked and which was *de rigueur* for her peers, she was instead allowed to spend a great deal of time independently, reading and writing alone in her room; she was forced neither to ride nor to visit; and she was permitted to keep her own (late) hours. By embracing her physical weakness and the nervousness and anxiety associated with it, Barrett was able, in effect, to shield herself from the social code that governed other single women like herself. Though her illness was far from enabling her the freedoms enjoyed by her brothers, in some limited way, by urging the claims of ill-health, Barrett was able to construct a territory for herself in which she had more power and control than would otherwise have been her due. So, it would seem that even predating any contact with Boyd, Barrett already recognized that there was something to be gained from disability. It thus becomes possible to read Barrett's initial reluctance to meet with Boyd as a kind of competitive anxiety, a fear that Boyd's blindness might somehow rival or invalidate her own specialized status. And though this reading may seem initially to stretch the limits of credibility, Barrett's correspondence gives us excellent reason to believe both that she had a kind of pride in the exceptional nature of her constitution and that she jealously guarded her body and her health (her disabled identity) against incursions by outsiders. By refusing to let others manage her illness or to give her medical advice and by asserting the privilege of self-description, Barrett seems to use her illness as a means of protecting herself against construction and definition by outsiders.

In fact, as Barrett grew into maturity, we often find her drawing attention to her own pain and illness, seeming almost to luxuriate in the importance of her own

“in/valid” body. The proud self-construction of invalid status appears especially obvious in two letters she writes to Boyd from Torquay where she had gone to escape the dangerous cold of London. Here, Barrett lightheartedly stresses the seriousness of her illness:

I am pretty well just now—Quite, however, confined to bed—except when lifted from it to the sofa baby-wise while they make it,—& even then apt to faint. Bad symptoms too do not leave me,—& I am obliged to be blistered every few days—but I am free from any attack just now[. . . The physicians] agree exactly—both hoping that with care I shall pass the winter, & [...] both hoping that I may be able to go about again with some comfort & independence, although I never can be fit again for anything like exertion. (*Letters* 4: 227)

And when, following the accidental drowning of her beloved brother Edward, Barrett insisted on returning to her father in London, she portrays herself as a kind of invalid-queen, centering herself and magnifying her stature by once again bringing her illness (and its props) to the fore:

The carriage, a patent carriage with a bed in it, & set upon some hundreds of springs, is, I believe on its road down to me—and immediately upon its arrival, we begin our journey. Whether we shall ever complete it, remains uncertain—*more* so than other uncertainties. My physician appears a good deal alarmed, calls it an undertaking full of hazard, & myself the “Empress Catherine” for insisting upon attempting it. (*Letters* 5: 117)

Here, the invalid coach becomes a kind of throne and, by insisting on her own way, Barrett emerges victorious even over medical authority, claiming control over her own (diseased?) body, and re-writing herself (by means of her disabled condition) as “Empress.” Furthermore, by emphasizing the personal danger to herself, Barrett also bears witness both to her own bravery (heroic nature) and to the almost epic quality of her journey. And in writing so to Boyd especially, it seems almost that Barrett pits her own physical limitations against his, as though the two were entered

into a kind of contest of “dueling disabilities.” This becomes apparent in a follow-up letter of Barrett’s in which she responds to Boyd’s invitation for her to visit with him when she got back to London. For according to the etiquette belonging to “normal” (i.e., nondisabled) society, it would have been Boyd’s obligation to call on Barrett upon her return. So, if we choose to interpret his asking *her* to visit *him* instead as a kind of exercise of disabled privilege (“You come see me since I *can’t* go to you”), then her response (“How kind it was in you [...] to ask me to visit you at Hampstead! I felt myself smiling, while I read that part of your letter [...] But [...] if you cd. imagine me such as I am!—! You wd. Not think I cd. visit you!” [*Letters* 5:117]) might also be read as insisting on her own (and superior) privilege, a reinforcement of her own disabled status and of the power that belongs to it.

And we find further evidence of this contest in Barrett’s refusing to let Boyd offer her medical advice. Here again, Barrett seems to exert her own authority against Boyd’s when she commands that he desist from proffering any advice about her health, writing that she does not wish to be “annoyed with any more medical speculations & consultations. Pray,” she enjoins, “do not suggest any. I am not in a state to admit of experiments.” Then, following a definitive medico-historical account of her illness, wherein she calls upon the authority of at least four physicians to back her claims, Barrett demands that Boyd “not write a word about it any more, either to me or to others. I am sure,” she adds, “you would not willingly disturb me. Nelly Bordman is good & dear, but I cant let her prescribe anything for me except her own affection” (*Letters* 5: 138-39). In all this—Barrett’s seeming luxuriance in her own illness and her explicit desire to exclude Boyd from any part in the management of her care—we may see a desire on Barrett’s part for exclusive

possession of her own disability. Ironically, however, Barrett's effort at self-management and self-construction does not necessarily seem to have translated into a philosophy of universal self-determination. For she seems to have been almost as anxious to impose medical advice *on* Boyd as she was resistant to receive it *from* him. In the following letter from Barrett to Boyd, for instance, we may certainly observe the presence of maternal concern, but so too do we find the positive, rational, coercive authority of the medical professional:

I understand from all my enquiries of you, that you are still inclined to what I call the *iniquity* of getting out of bed in the night, & sitting in your chair. That you are easier in the chair & prefer the posture altogether, I understand also,—and yet it is so clear to me that you must ultimately suffer from this habit, that I cannot help entreating you to consider the subject under some particular aspects of it. I might beg you for love of me, to grant my request & remain in bed—I might say that it would be kind of you to relieve the anxiety of such of your friends as cannot bear to think of your sitting up all the night through—but I would rather lay before you the exact reasons which make me anxious.

In the first place, then, ... there is the *exposure*. The body is more sensitive to cold during the night, and the atmosphere is more inclined toward chilling: and therefore (supposing your pains to be rheumatic) you exchange for momentary ease, many of the possibilities of progress & essential improvement. This is one reason—but I think still more of the next.

In the second place, then, according to the constitution of our bodies, *rest* is necessary to their well-being: and by rest, I do not mean sleep,—but the repose which is produced by *posture & stillness*. Anatomists tell us that the horizontal posture relieves the spinal process from its burden,—& that it is *necessary*, in order to the due relaxation of the muscles & nerves & of the frame in general. In any other position than horizontal, there are pressures throughout the frame, which if they are perpetual, are likely to produce disease. You see I speak generally. I might say that you have always had the habit of stooping rather too much,—and that therefore, in your case, the general observation acquires a new emphasis,—& the fact grows clearer & clearer, that you will be sure to suffer hereafter from your present disinclination to the horizontal posture. You will suffer in your digestion ... in your chest, ... or wherever you are the weakest in body. The weakest part will feel the fatigue first. Is not this reasonable? And is it not natural that I shd. shrink and fear before

the pain of seeing you incur new diseases? Forgive me for speaking. You will grant that it is natural for me to fear!—and fear sometimes gives courage, ... which is natural too!—and, so, I speak.

When I speak of the horizontal posture, of course I do not mean it quite literally. If the posture gives you pain, it should be modified to the degree necessary to escaping the pain—But I think that it shd. be sufficiently horizontal, to give rest to the body by opposing a new posture to a posture of sitting up in the chair. The legs should be laid up—and the head (above all) laid back—Also, if you should consent to a little propping by pillows, ... why should you not allow Jane to make for you a loose flannel bedgown reaching to the hips, or a little below, ... lined with very thick wadding or, as I should prefer, with *fur*? *Coloured flannel lined with fur & made very loosely*, would last long,—& you would find it as warm as the blankets, ... or warmer. (*Letters* 11: 84-85)

And while Barrett's advice here may be altogether to the benefit of her friend, there is nevertheless within her letter, an absolute and quite literal "putting down" of Boyd. Rather than permitting him to sit *erect* in the darkness which might under other circumstances be considered his natural element, Barrett here insists on Boyd's *horizontal* posture—limp and inactive. She reduces him to the confining space of his bed, suffocating him with pillows and blankets, or, if not, with specially-made adult-sized swaddling clothes—"a loose flannel bedgown reaching to the hips, or a little below, ... lined with very thick wadding or, as I should prefer, with *fur*[,] *Coloured flannel lined with fur & made very loosely*." And importantly, the design of the (feminizing? infantilizing) "gown" just conceals Boyd's ever-threatening sexuality, the (probable) penis covered by "fur," but ever on the brink of emergence (i.e., the gown should "reach[...] to the hips, or a little below").

So, it seems that Barrett's approach to disability enjoys a somewhat reflexive quality: She first claims for her own the power and authority that belong to her own in/valid status, but she then uses the same measure of authority ("believe me, with *my* experience, *I* know what's good for *you*") to attempt control of the disability of

another. For herself, physical weakness is exercised as power, but for others the presence of disability would seem to require her intercession. And this reflexive gesture, so evident in these letters from the 1840s, is present even at the inception of Barrett's relationship with Boyd. For having at first resisted meeting Boyd, exempting herself from what might ordinarily have been considered a duty (visiting the blind) by suggesting that her own disability was too serious to allow her to go into society, when Barrett did finally decide that she wished to visit Boyd, she urged his blindness as an important consideration, telling her father that since Boyd "was suffering under such a permanent disability it was beholden upon her to go to him" (Forster 42). And this reflexive action, first claiming the power and independence consequent on her own illness, then further empowering herself by pointing to the helplessness belonging to Boyd's disability, ultimately becomes a quite familiar gesture. For Barrett then, the unstable quality of disabled identity appears to have been a boon, enabling her to assert control over herself as well as Boyd.

But as may be apparent from the tortured nature of the diary passages quoted earlier, Boyd seems not to have been as easily controlled as Barrett may have wished. Though Barbara Dennis, like other Barrett Browning biographers, reads the young Barrett as "embracing the role of helpmeet to her blind master—a living amalgamation of Dorothea Brooke and Milton's daughters" (81-82), and though Barrett herself writes that she is ready, even anxious to do anything in Boyd's service—"If he knew how much it gratifies me to assist him in any way (I wish ... I cd. do so in *every* way) all his '*drudgeries*' wd. ... devolve upon me"—this passionate, sacrificial desire to serve Boyd's blindness ought not to be read too uncritically (*Diary* 98). For as we have already seen, Barrett's wish to assist Boyd was heavily dosed

with jealousy; though she wanted to be his helper, Barrett also wanted to be Boyd's *only* helper—the only reader and writer, the only guide, the only assistant, the only mediator between Boyd and the sighted world. At one point, after a “rival” reader had given Boyd a book, Barrett's annoyance is palpable: “I wish she had not done so,” Barrett remarks. “I had intended to do it & besides—” Here, Barrett pauses to restrain her jealous mood, commenting, “I am of an intolerably exclusive disposition; & yet I wish some other people were like me—” (*Diary* 202). Such an obsessive sacrificial desire is perhaps more indicative of controlling than of helpful impulse. So, while Barrett's interest in and affection for Boyd may have been motivated by any number of factors—love, sexual desire, friendship, intellectual compatibility—howsoever these may have balanced themselves, they seem certainly to have been attended by Barrett's compulsive desire to manage and mediate Boyd's blindness, to re-make his blindness as her personal property. But as Barrett enacts this imperial impulse, colonizing Boyd's blindness and thus expanding the territory of her own (self-constructed) disability, so too does she attach herself to Boyd not as governor, but as mediator, as prosthetic—a (mere) satellite to Boyd's blindness rather than the controller or manager of it. This understanding then, the realization that Barrett's power and status are continually eaten away by her effort to control Boyd's blindness, offers us a new perspective into the agony of the young poet's diary. For as she felt herself ever more ready (and *able*) to sacrifice herself to (or to control) Boyd's blindness, so, in her position of (would-be) satellite, her identity becomes ever more dependent both on Boyd's blindness (which would never be helpless enough to offer her a satisfying feeling of control over it) and on Boyd's whims (e.g., whether he wished to see her or not on any given day). And as she necessarily

forfeited (in part) her own disabled status in order to demonstrate her ability to assist(control) Boyd, Barrett seems thus to have felt more and more empty and lost. So far from being in a position of power, authority, and independence, as satellite to Boyd('s blindness), Barrett seems to have relinquished what little control she had enjoyed. And this loss of control, and the resulting desire both to reclaim herself, and somehow, ultimately, to control (Boyd's) blindness appears to have etched itself deeply into Barrett's construction of herself. For not only does Barrett—more than ten years after the desperate complaints of the diary—reign like an “Empress” over her own in/valid status, but so too, it seems, does her writing make repeated attempts on Boyd's identity, at first seeming to claim the authority which had belonged to the scholar as Barrett's Greek tutor, and ultimately seizing on blindness as an identity/experience shared by, mediated by, owned by the sighted satellite (i.e., herself).

We first find Barrett encroaching on what had been Boyd's particular scholarly turf at the beginning of 1842, shortly after her return from Torquay and about eight years after her last intimate contact with the scholar. Having been asked to “contribute to the Athenaeum some prose papers,” Barrett was quick to interpret such an invitation as “a few translations of *excerpta*, with a prose analysis & synthesis of the original author's genius,” proposing as raw material for these prose papers “some of the early Christian Greek poets” (*Letters* 5: 201). Though the *Athenaeum* acceded to Barrett's proposed topic, the editor, Charles Wentworth Dilke, seems not to have been thrilled, “begging [her] to keep away from *theology*—[...] & suggesting a subsequent reviewal of English poetical literature” (*Letters* 5: 209-210). Barrett's decision here, to write about the works of Greek Christians, particularly Gregory

Nazianzen (a.k.a., Gregory the Theologian), may seem rather peculiar, especially considering the lukewarm response from the *Athenaeum*. For in addition to this, Barrett had just finished a piece for the same publication that served, in part, to abuse the merits of the very theologians she now purposed to “review”; she writes to Boyd, notably, of “an infamous prefatory note which says all sorts of harm of Gregory’s poetry,” adding, “You will be very angry with it & me” (*Letters* 5: 201). But perhaps most disquieting is the fact that this topic, this area of expertise, had always *belonged*, peculiarly, almost exclusively, to Boyd, and that Gregory’s writing (and the writing of other Greek Fathers) had served as a mainstay of Barrett’s studies with Boyd. So, it would seem, here the student lays claim to the territory of her teacher. While we may certainly attribute Barrett’s choice of topic for her *Athenaeum* essays to a genuine interest in her subject, or even to a desire to impress her former tutor, there remains something in the decision which seems a challenge to Boyd. Throughout the process of developing these pieces, Barrett calls frequently on Boyd as a resource, asking for his thoughts, his advice, even his books:

Give me your advice, my dear friend! I think of Synesius for one. Suppose you send me a list of the names which occur to you! *Will* you advise me? Will you write directly? Will you make allowance for my teasing you? Will you lend me your *little* Synesius—and Clarke’s book? I mean the one commenced by Dr. Clarke & continued by his son. Above all things, however, I want the *advice*. (*Letters* 5: 202)

Here, we might readily conclude that Barrett subordinates herself entirely, that her choice of subject becomes a means of acting out her deference to Boyd. But it seems especially important to comment on that last reference to “Clarke’s Book [...] the one commenced by Dr. Clarke & continued by his son,” for we may observe an interesting parallel between this and Barrett’s seeming continuance of Boyd’s work.

The difficulty, of course, is that the continuing of existing work by a younger generation necessarily implies the death (or at least the creative death) of the older generation. In a sense, by “continuing” Boyd’s work, Barrett undertakes to replace him, cutting off his creative energy, even, in a sense, performing his intellectual execution. And, in fact, Barrett’s letters during this period are exceptional for their apparent resistance to Boyd. They are full of little wounding moments as when, for instance, Barrett suggests to Boyd that the *Athenaeum*, then in the midst of publishing her own essays (on Boyd’s area of scholarly expertise), would likely “reject *your* paper altogether” (emphasis added). During this period, Barrett seems constantly to have been disagreeing with Boyd;

In the midst of my true thankfulness for the emendations you sent me, I ventured to reject one or two of them. You are probably right, & I wrong—but still [...] (*Letters* 5: 201)

or apologizing to him for some lapse or omission. For, in addition to Barrett’s refusing to give what Boyd considered adequate attention to certain of the Greek Fathers about whom she wrote, when the demands of the *Athenaeum*’s publication schedule began to overwhelm her, Barrett even excused herself for failing to respond to Boyd’s letters, stressing the “*busy upon busy*” quality of her active scholar’s life (*Letters* 5: 230; Barrett’s emphasis), an observation which might well have pained the older scholar, whose expertise was clearly not so much in demand, and whose former student now apparently exceeded him in fame and importance. Barrett’s succeeding to Boyd’s position can be seen also, and in an even more pointed manner, when we consider her seeming erasure of Boyd’s work; for in one instance, at least, Barrett apologizes to Boyd for re-translating a poem already translated by him:

[M]y modesty shd. have certainly bid me 'avaunt' from it.
 Nevertheless it is so fine—[...] that I took courage & dismissed my
 scruples, & have produced a version which [...] probably is much
 rougher & *rather* closer!—winning in faith what it loses in elegance!
 (*Letters* 5: 209)

It seems especially strange that Barrett would undertake such a task when we consider that she had earlier recognized Boyd's sensitivity about this very kind of competition, noting in her diary, upon once being encouraged by Boyd to produce her own translation of a Greek poem he was then translating, "(I know him,) the very act of seeming to compete with him, 'tho suggested by himself, wd. diminish his regard for me" (241). And while this later translation might not necessarily be considered an aggressive or hostile act, and might instead be interpreted as Barrett's *adding* her voice and knowledge to the scholarly arena, it is crucial to remember that by re-translating this poem (especially, as Barrett acknowledges, without consulting Boyd's translation), Barrett is not *adding to*, but is rather, *replacing*. Instead of creating a palimpsest, Barrett here effects total erasure of her mentor's work. For in all this, it is important to recognize that, despite Barrett's requests for Boyd's assistance, it was *she* who was to earn all the credit and prestige belonging to the *Athenaeum's* publication of *her* work; while Boyd might serve as a valuable sounding board, or even (on some level) as a kind of contributor or collaborator, upon publication, Barrett's name and reputation would effectively conceal any part that Boyd might have played in the development of these essays. As with Victorian laws of coverture, whereby the wife loses legal agency and identity in being "covered" by her husband's superior public claims, so too Boyd's work—indeed, his very identity—is here concealed by Barrett's decision to write on "his" subject.

And it becomes particularly tempting to read Barrett's project for the *Athenaeum* as an act of control or misappropriation when we examine this episode in light of Barrett/Browning's later writing. For in some of this writing, and most especially in the six poems discussed below, Barrett carefully approaches the topic of blindness; and in each case, that blindness (often specifically identified as Boyd's) is, on some level, appropriated by or made subordinate to sightedness. So too, in each case, the figure of the (consistently female) sighted satellite—the guide, protector, interpreter, reader, mediator—is valorized, rewarded, or empowered in her role.

Two of these poems were likely written soon after Barrett finished her *Athenaeum* articles, since they were both published in her *Poems* of 1844. The first of these, "Wine of Cyprus," was addressed to Boyd ostensibly in thanks for his gift(s) to her of sweet Cyprus wine, but the body of the poem is actually much more a celebration of what Barrett calls "the wine that's meant for souls" ("Wine of Cyprus" line 96), that is, the Greek literature that she had read with Boyd as a young woman, or, as one critic puts it: "The wine reminds the poet of the draughts from the perennial fountain of classic literature of which she and the donor had drunk deep together long ago" (Royds 64). Indeed, the poem is rich with classical reference, "full of allusion to the gods and goddesses of Classical antiquity" (Radley 64); Bacchus, Ida, Juno, Titan, Naiads, Anacreon, Chian, Rhea, Paphia, Hymettus—all have made their appearance before one has finished reading through a third of the poem. Of course, as "Wine of Cyprus" is intended, in large part, as a remembrance "of those long mornings" when Barrett and Boyd read Greek together—"when, betwixt the folio's turnings, / Solemn flowed the rhythmic Greek" (65; 67-68)—Barrett recounts names of specific writers they had studied: Aeschylus, Sophocles,

Euripides, Bion, Pindar, Plato, Chrysostom, Basil, Synesius, Nazianzen. And of particular interest given the focus of this essay, to each of these names, Barrett assigns a possessive pronoun. So, in the eleventh and twelfth stanzas of the poem, Barrett uses “our” to identify writers from Aeschylus through Pindar, signifying an equality of relationship between herself and Boyd in reference to certain texts; Plato, it seems, Barrett would claim as her own: “*my* Plato, the divine one” (97; emphasis added); Boyd, however, despite Barrett’s recent writing for the *Athenaeum*, retained symbolic possession of “*your* noble Christian bishops, / Who mouthed grandly the last Greek” (101-102; emphasis added), Barrett stressing the proprietary nature of the relationship in the lines which follow:

Yet, *your* Chrysostom, you praised him
 As a liberal mouth of gold;
 As *your* Basil, you upraised him
 To the height of speakers old (105-108; emphasis added)

And: “we both praised *your* Synesius” (113; emphasis added). But while ownership of these texts does seem to have been an issue for Barrett, this battle over scholarly turf (if such passive gestures may be held to constitute battle) seems certainly to have been secondary to Barrett’s subtle attempts to own Boyd’s blindness. And though “Wine of Cyprus” has certainly won its share of critical praise, for us, the key interest of the poem lies primarily in its allusions to blindness and ultimately, in its insistence that Barrett somehow shares or participates in Boyd’s blindness.

Our first hint of blindness in the poem comes in the second stanza in which Barrett, comparing her own fly-like sips of the Cyprus wine with the “amplifier” drinking the wine deserves (9), suggests that the drink would be more fit for the Bacchanalian appetites of old. Specifically, Barrett looks for “some deep-mouthed Greek exemplar” (11):

Cyclops' mouth might plunge aright in,
While his one eye overleered (13-14)

Here, while the Cyclops is not entirely blind, the distinctive “one eye” hints at a kind of half-blindness, a quality from which Barrett seems to distance herself. We may also witness here the deep uneasiness with which she approaches the devouring quality of the Cyclops’ (blind) character—“mouth might plunge”—and with which she represents his monstrous leering appetite. Barrett’s unease is reflected too in a later reference. Recalling their readings about Prometheus, Barrett writes:

And Prometheus, bound in passion
By brute force to the blind stone,
Showed us looks of invocation
Turned to ocean and the sun. (141-44)

Though Prometheus is not himself blind, Barrett here endows the Promethean site of punishment with the characteristic of blindness, and she so endows it as to share with the reader her (unconscious?) idea that blindness brings with it a powerful unexpectedness. For the “blind stone” which Barrett here introduces forms a remarkable prosodic stumbling block. In a “resolute verse, with the strong emphasis of its trochaic beat sustained throughout” (Porter and Clarke viii), the “blind stone” stands out. In order to make the poem scan in this spot, it would be necessary to accent the “the” in line 142, an unnatural stress for two reasons: One, according to the grammatical value of the line, it would ordinarily be necessary to accent the meaningful and dynamic adjective (“blind”) rather than the vacant and immaterial article (“the”); two, even were we willing to overlook the apparent grammatical necessity of emphasizing “blind,” an accent on “the” would require that we pronounce the article with a long “ee” sound, a pronunciation which is ordinarily disallowed unless “the” is followed by a noun beginning with a vowel sound (e.g.,

“the blind man” vs. “the unsighted man”). All this might seem rather myopic but for one thing: These unsettling “blind” references give weight to the poem’s urgent movement, foreshadowing or anticipating its climactic Oedipal scene.

And proud Oedipus fate-scorning
 While the cloud came on to break—
 While the cloud came on slow, slower,
 Till he stood discrowned, resigned!
 But the reader’s voice dropped lower
 When the poet called him BLIND. (147-52)

So, at the moment that Barrett first introduces an actual blind individual, we find that her reference to blindness involves a number of curious features: First, though Barrett does appear intermittently as a subject throughout this poem, her strong presence as an actor (reader) in this stanza is especially important; secondly, the blind subject here (Oedipus) is represented in his most helpless and forlorn condition, the looming “cloud” of his anticipated blindness settling upon him with “slow” inevitability, while the former king stands inert and powerless, expressly “discrowned”; thirdly, Boyd is conspicuously absent from this scene, his presence suggested only by “the reader’s voice” and by her apparent shyness “when the poet called him BLIND”; finally, Barrett’s exclusive presence here, the framing out of Boyd’s existence and identity only by her “reader’s voice,” and her reluctance to say the (typographically emphatic) word “BLIND” all work to stress Barrett’s role as mediator, not only between Boyd’s blindness and the printed text, but also and more importantly between the blind Boyd and the blind Oedipus. Here, the reader (i.e., Barrett) would seem to suggest some necessary impasse between the two blind subjects—either their experience of community (community of experience?) would be impossible without her sighted *mediation* or it requires her sighted *regulation*. Regardless of the intent, it becomes clear here that the sighted (mediating) Barrett

centers herself between (in the middle of?) Boyd's and Oedipus' blindness—whether as mediator, policing presence, or obstacle—and that the blind men themselves are thus somehow exiled from the scene and experience of their own blindness.

But even while Barrett engages in this (subtly) appropriating gesture, so too does she assert a much more overt claim on Boyd's blindness. For while full of deference and extraordinary self-subordination while she was a youth reading with Boyd, in "Wine of Cyprus" Barrett finally comes to acknowledge her belief that Boyd's blindness had served as a means of equalizing them.

Ah my gossip! You were older,
 And more learned, and a man!
 Yet that shadow, the enfolder
 Of your quiet eyelids, ran
 Both our spirits to one level (153-57)

Ultimately, Barrett suggests, Boyd's blindness is equivalent to her own youth and female-ness.³⁸ And from this we might also be permitted to infer the reverse—that Barrett's youth and gender may be understood as a variety of blindness, and that Barrett might thus be permitted to construct herself (*see herself?*) as blind.

The second piece from Barrett's 1844 *Poems*, "The Mourning Mother (of the Dead Blind)," is substantially different from "Cyprus Wine" in both form and content. In this poem, Barrett divides her address into two parts. In the first, the "mourning mother" is sounded on her sorrow while the speaker assists in the remembrance of the mother's relationship with the child while he was alive; in the second, the mother is reminded of the promise of "Heaven" wherein the now

³⁸ For an extended discussion of the "persistent intertwining of disability with femaleness in Western discourse" (Thomson 20), see Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1997), especially, the section in the second chapter, "Feminist Theory, the Body, and the Disabled Figure," 19-41.

sighted (perfected) child will meet again with his doting parent. The poem is smooth and rhythmic, the quiet urgency of its iambic beat providing an appropriate backdrop for its rather melodramatic narrative, but it is easy to understand why modern audiences have tended to ignore it, as its simplicity and sentimentality are no longer considered alluring poetic qualities. But while the “Mourning Mother” may not deserve to be singled out for its extraordinary poetic merit, its treatment of blindness may serve to illustrate further Barrett’s apparent inclination to control or appropriate blind identity.

It is interesting to note, for instance, at the outset, that the very title of the poem works to stress the importance not of the blind subject, but rather of the satellite, the sighted mediator to blindness. Here, the sighted mother assumes absolute symbolic primacy over her blind child, her condition of activity (“mourning”) and her established social identity (“mother”) showing up the contrast between herself and her child, whose blindness is carefully constructed as passive and ineffectual—“dead.” But it is also important to note here that the poem’s title, in addition to rendering the child immobile in death, also fails to represent his gender, failing even to identify him as “child” (i.e., *human*). For the reader, the child’s entire identity is folded into the metonymic naming of his blindness. Here, as in “Wine of Cyprus,” where Boyd’s presence is constructed by the “reader’s voice,” the presence of a (gender-neutral) “child” is implicit only because the title identifies a “mother” and instructs us that the metonymized “blind” is “of” that mother. Were it not for the symbolic presence of the mother, the uncontextualized “dead blind” would lose all human meaning and identity. Thus is the “dead blind” removed from every possible avenue of activity or particularity.

And this representation of active mother and inert child is further emphasized by the typography of the title. For in most editions, including the first edition of 1844, the title of the poem consists of two lines, the uppermost line, of course, reading “THE MOURNING MOTHER” (in the first edition, “THE MOURNFUL MOTHER”), and the lower line reading “(OF THE DEAD BLIND).” So, even in their physical, typographical relation to one another, the “mother” is symbolically superior to (literally on top of) an implied child, a child who is altogether refused symbolic identity apart from his existence as “dead blind.” Here, the very identity of “child” is first subordinated to the physical/typographical superiority of the mother, and is then consumed by the metonymic naming of his blindness. Moreover, other typographical features—notably the larger type size of the “mother” line compared with the smaller type of the “dead blind” line, and the confinement “(OF THE DEAD BLIND)” within delimiting parenthetical boundaries—suggest that the de-sexed, de-humanized, executed “blind” requires yet additional containment or circumcision.

It is useful to remember, however, that while the child may not exist without reference to the mother, the mother herself is only deemed significant, worthy of representation, in relation to her child, and then, only in relation to her child’s disability and death. Thus, we observe once again the double erasure involved in the satellite experience: The mother’s (mediating) role conceals or covers the (disabled) child’s, her actions and identity interpreting and constructing the child’s identity for the reader, but at the same time, since the “mother” is defined here only by her motherhood (i.e., her relationship to her child) and by the specialness of that child (i.e., “dead” and “blind”), her entire identity is thus defined and bounded by the

child, by his blindness, and by his death. The child has no identity without the mother and the mother has no identity without the child; the blind subject is invisible without sighted representation and the identity of the sighted satellite is obscured by the presence (or absence) of the blind subject.

Ironically, it is the threatened erasure of the satellite that may often work to lend urgency to the appropriating, mediating task of the guide, a role we may readily see played out in “The Mourning Mother.” For in the first part of the poem, as the speaker questions the myriad reasons for the mother’s grief, we can observe the formation of a list that details the mother’s greatest loss, that is, the blind child’s *dependence*:

That he, left dark by nature,
 Can never more be led
 By thee, maternal creature,
 Along smooth paths instead?
 That thou canst no more show him
 The sunshine by the heat;
 The river’s silver flowing,
 By murmurs at his feet?
 The foliage, by its coolness;
 The roses by their smell;
 And all creation’s fulness,
 [...]
 And weepest thou to feel not
 His clinging hand on thine— (5-26)

So, we find, the mother’s mourning, though sometimes regretting “sweet counsel” with her child (4), seems more likely to focus not on the particularity of the absent child—his conversation, character, or intelligence—but rather on his disability, those aspects of his identity which belong to blindness: “his meek blind eyes” or his “low soft words, made softer / By speaking in the dark” (18; 31-32). It seems, in fact, that the mother, rather than mourning the absent child, is here lamenting the loss of her own satellite role; the speaker recognizes that the mother’s grief is connected not so

much to the death of her son as to the death of her own identity as guide, interpreter, teacher, and mediator. The first part of the poem bears out this sense of loss, carefully describing exactly why the mother is bereaved: Because her “dead blind” child “Can never more *be led*” (emphasis added), because the mother can “no more *show him*” (emphasis added), and because she can no longer feel “His *clinging* hand” (emphasis added). So, we find, it is not so much a child who is missing as a child’s *dependence*, not so much the son who is gone as the *life-defining* experience of being a *guide* to that son. Here, the mother is seen as mourning not her child, but rather her child’s *blindness*, that quality over which she had exercised power and control, that experience which she had guided, that absence which she had filled, that “special” identity which she had (in a sense) owned.

The second part of the poem, too, allows the mother to appropriate the experience of blindness, though in a wholly different way. Here, the speaker reminds the mother that to the child “when living, / Thou wast both sun and moon” (34-35), thus suggesting that as the child’s all-in-all, the mother had occupied almost the place of God and had been “seen” certainly as an essential force of nature. The speaker reminds the mother further that having occupied such a position in relation to blindness, she may certainly look forward to the promise of heaven. Thus is the satellite role confirmed in its power and authority; while the “blind” lives, the power and importance of the guide is literally astronomical, and the promised reward for such guidance further confirms the satellite’s strength and power—she is guaranteed a spot in heaven. But the second part of the poem, in addition to confirming the power and importance of the satellite role, also permits the “mourning mother” to own blindness in a new way. For now, it is suggested, the roles of mother and son

are reversed. The child in heaven has become perfect and sighted—"Out of the dark he trod, / Departing from before thee / At once to light and GOD!—" (47-49)—while the mother is "left below (75), herself now in a condition of comparative blindness. At this point, the speaker observes to the mother that "thou art now the darkest" (74), calling her, pointedly, "the sole blind" (76). Moreover, the child is now vested with that special power accorded to sight—he is able to serve as guide to his mother; the role reversal is confirmed in the closing lines of the poem, wherein the (now blind) mother is instructed that when she again meets her (now sighted) son, *he* will be the one to lead *her*:

And *he* shall lead thy feet in,
As once thou leddest *his*. (80-81)

So, in the first part of the poem, then, we find that the mother's identity is bound up with her role as guide or satellite to her dead child's blindness. While the mother may certainly grieve for her lost child, it begins to seem that she grieves even more for (her?) lost blindness. Here, her management or control of blindness may be seen as a form of appropriation and the death of her child and the loss of his blindness may be regarded, importantly, as a loss of self. Correspondingly, in the second part of the poem, we find that the speaker consoles the mother not only with the promised restoration of the child, but also, significantly, by the immediate restoration of that blind identity which had perhaps constituted her chief loss. Here, the reminder that the mother is now "darkest" and "the sole blind," the reminder that she has entered more completely into the blind identity which she had once served (appropriated) as a satellite, works to soothe the mother's sense of loss. And, significantly, it is because of blindness (because of her one-time service as guide and because of her present blind condition), that the mother will be granted special

treatment “Where Heaven’s pearl-gate is” (79). In the first part of the poem then, the mother “owns” the child’s blindness; in the second part, she has entered entirely into blind identity—she has “become” blind.

And while “The Mourning Mother” is a “fictional” poem rather than an explicitly autobiographical one, it is certainly possible to see within the roles of guiding mother and blind child shades of Elizabeth Barrett and Hugh Stuart Boyd. If, as we have proposed, Barrett felt threatened by and jealous of the power and authenticity associated with Boyd’s blindness, and if she harbored some desire to master, control, or own that blindness, then this poem may realize exactly that power for which Barrett had apparently longed; the valorization of the satellite figure in “The Mourning Mother” may be read as a kind of seizure of power, a self-vindication. Here, the sighted female is permitted absolute authority over the blind male subject, a kind of authority which Barrett, especially as a young woman, had found it impossible to exert successfully. Here, the satellite truly controls and mediates blindness, finally appropriating the blind identity and assuming it as her own. The power in the poem, which manifests itself entirely within the satellite figure, may be regarded as Barrett’s symbolically effecting control over or appropriating Boyd’s blindness, a literal/figurative enactment of that control which had escaped her in life. Moreover, the narrative of “The Mourning Mother” not only enables the satellite to own and control blindness, but also places the sighted figure in the position of “mother.” If we consider the possibility that sighted and blind may here represent Barrett and Boyd, we may thus discover that the poem recreates the relationship between these two in a way that not only grants power to sightedness (and femininity), but which also wrests from the blind figure the

possibility of adulthood and independent, mature identity. It would be hyperbolic, perhaps, to assert any absolute correlation here between Barrett and the “mourning mother” and between Boyd and the “dead blind,” but there seems little doubt that the poem is haunted by an echo or shadow of the real-life relationship between the sighted Barrett and the blind Boyd; and the construction of the power relations within the poem, especially, offer a very tempting kind of insight into Barrett’s uneasy relationship with blindness.

We are again confronted with this uneasiness in three sonnets which first appeared in the 1850 edition of Barrett’s *Poems*. These three pieces treat blindness and its surrounding power structure in a much more delicate and equivocal way than “The Mourning Mother” and they are also much more explicitly autobiographical, since they were written as a memorial to Boyd following his death in 1848. The three poems, entitled “Hugh Stuart Boyd. His Blindness,” “Hugh Stuart Boyd. His Death,” and “Hugh Stuart Boyd. Legacies,” are quite different in tone and style from the two discussed above; they are richer, more complex, less cloying. This is due in part to a dramatic difference in their prosodic character; whereas “Wine of Cyprus” and “The Mourning Mother” both partake of a strong, an almost anxious rhythmic quality, the regularity of their meter and rhyme schemes creating an urgent, insistent pulse that leads the reader toward some climactic moment (e.g., the blindness of Oedipus or the heavenly reunion of mother and child), the “Hugh Stuart Boyd” poems are much more given to poetic effects which halt or interrupt the smooth flow of words: e.g., slant rhymes, sight rhymes, and enjambment; so too, their otherwise iambic structure is interlaced with metrical hiccoughs and hesitations. These attributes as well as an air of personal reminiscence and depression slow the

poems, endowing them with a somber and pensive quality somewhat reminiscent of Shelley or Coleridge.

But despite their richer poetic texture and the greater complexity of their content, these elegiac sonnets nevertheless focus on that aspect of Boyd's person which Barrett (now Barrett Browning) seems always to have found so compelling—his blindness. In the first sonnet, for instance, the subtitle "His Blindness" establishes the focus of the poem. Here, Barrett Browning suggests that "viewed from one level" (line 13), Boyd's blindness may be thought to enjoy a vision even more expansive than that which is ordinarily attributed to sightedness, implying also that blindness and sightedness may share experience which equalizes the two. In the sonnet subtitled "His Death, 1848," Barrett Browning again concentrates not only on Boyd's death, but also on his *blindness*, here proposing that his death was a direct result of Boyd's angel's impatience with Boyd's (imperfect? suffering?) blind condition:

I think thine angel's patience first was done,
And that he spake out with celestial tears,
"Is it enough, dear God? Then lighten so
This soul that smiles in darkness!" (7-10)

And in the poem subtitled "Legacies," Barrett Browning once again (and quite literally) centers her sonnet around the "darkness of [Boyd's] eyes" (7). Though these poems are certainly richer and more complex than those discussed above, we may nonetheless observe that in each poem, Barrett Browning has, on some level, reduced Boyd's humanity to a single central fact—his blindness—and by this means, she inscribes an identity for him, in death, that insists on a specialized and somewhat enfeebled status, in each sonnet creating for herself and her reader an environment wherein the satellite serves an essential interpretive role, wherein the blind figure is

covered or made powerless, or wherein the satellite appropriates and assumes the mantle of blind identity.

It is perhaps in the third sonnet, “Hugh Stuart Boyd. Legacies,” that we most clearly witness the attempt to own or control blindness. For while it may be argued that Barrett Browning’s poems about Boyd, insofar as they focus mostly or exclusively on blindness, may already enact a form of control, in this sonnet particularly, we find the speaker (apparently Barrett Browning) first asserting her role as satellite and then portraying *herself* as blind. In terms of its essential narrative, the poem concentrates on three gifts left by “the Dying” (1)—two books and a chiming clock. These three objects connect the mourner to her dead “teacher” because “The books were those I used to read from” and because the chiming of the clock anticipates the time of the general resurrection “which ends these parting-days!” and therefore, presumably, re-unites the living with the dead (6; 5; 14). But amidst this learned and pious mourning, we discover subtle effects which may seem to efface Boyd’s identity even as the satellite assumes a position of power and importance. Firstly, though this may count for little, especially in light of the sonnet’s title, there is no mention of Boyd’s name within the body of the poem, and, as we have already observed, the very first reference to Boyd identifies him as “the Dying,” a designation which would seem to mark him, like the “dead blind” of “The Mourning Mother,” as a passive, ineffectual non-entity. More significantly, the speaker constructs her own role in relation to “the Dying”:

The books were those *I* used to read from, thus
Assisting *my* dear teacher’s soul to unlock
The darkness of his eyes (5-7; emphasis added)

Here, we find the reader, like the “mourning mother,” in a position of primacy. She is the active, “assisting” force, the interpretive presence, the sole mediator to the (helpless) blind. Correspondingly, we here find (the anonymous) Boyd in a position of passive receptivity; though he is identified as “teacher,” the poem never shows or remembers Boyd in an active manner, imparting knowledge or information to his (implied) student; rather, Boyd is represented as being imprisoned by his blindness, the “darkness of his eyes” requiring the active, rescuing ability of the sighted speaker/reader “to unlock” the dark prison-space of blindness. And the extraordinary importance and activity of the reader (within the poem) is emphasized by the lines which follow. Though Boyd remains a passive figure, remembered, it would seem, only by his blindness, the reader’s “young voice” is still memorable, even audible: “murmurous / Sad echoes of my young voice, years ago / Intoning from these leaves the Grecian phrase, / Return” (8-11). The poem thus asserts the passive, imprisoned nature of the dead blind and stresses the active and vibrant role of the sighted. Boyd is constructed as essentially powerless while the speaker, even in her mournful state, may be regarded as comparatively powerful, even heroic.

But even while Barrett Browning would seem to urge the passive helplessness of the blind subject, she seems also to find something inexplicably compelling in the condition of blindness. For, as earlier in “Wine of Cyprus,” she had inferred that her own youth and female-ness might somehow correspond to Boyd’s blindness, and as in “The Mourning Mother,” the sighted satellite is ultimately permitted to “become” blind, so here in “Hugh Stuart Boyd. Legacies,” the satellite is also found to enter into a condition of blindness. Specifically, as the speaker attempts to read from the books left to her by “the Dying,” she is both

blinded by tears and choked (i.e., made mute) by her sorrow. These books, the poem informs us, “mock” the speaker’s eyes, which are “Blinded in turn by tears” (7; 8), and the “Sad echoes of [her] young voice [...] / [...] / Return and choke [her] utterance” (9-11). So, even while Barrett Browning may be seen to dominate Boyd in her role as satellite, forcing the blind figure into a role of passivity and helplessness while asserting the power and activity of the reader, we may also witness this apparently ironic self-disabling gesture: Even while Barrett Browning insists upon the power of the satellite, she portrays herself as both blind and mute. And while this deliberate self-disablement may certainly be read as an expression of the poet’s feelings of helplessness and loss in the face of Boyd’s death, we may also wish to observe that by assuming the condition of blindness, Barrett Browning also re-creates herself as a possible *substitute* blind, a figure who, in a sense, takes *over* Boyd’s blindness, writing over his (anonymous, passive) identity, thus controlling him and his blindness entirely. Such a reading, while it may belie the direct intent of the poem, is especially tempting when we consider that Barrett Browning constructs her blindness in immediate juxtaposition with (in direct opposition to?) Boyd’s; for the poem refers first to the “darkness of his eyes” and in the very next line presents Barrett Browning as “Blinded *in turn*” (7; 8; emphasis added). In any event, and regardless of possible intent, Barrett Browning’s “blindness” here may certainly be interpreted as echoing, competing with, or appropriating Boyd’s.

And on some level, “Hugh Stuart Boyd. His Blindness” may be seen as enacting a similar gesture, though in an even more subtle manner. In this sonnet, Barrett Browning first informs the reader of Boyd’s blindness, advising us that “God would not let the spheric lights accost / This God-loved man” and that the

“beckoning” and “golden” scenes of nature were invisible to him (1-2; 3). “Yet,” we are next advised, “such things were to him not wholly lost” (5), as he was able “To catch fair visions rendered full enough / [...] / Still seeing, to sounds of softly-turned book leaves” (7-9). So, Barrett Browning here celebrates the power of language to re-create visible nature for the blind, ancient writing enabling Boyd to “see” landscape described in text. In fact, the power of language to synthesize the visible world is here conceived as nearly absolute, visual experience being so successfully rendered by Greek poets that

Sensuous and Unsensuous seemed one thing,
Viewed from one level,—earth’s reaper’s at the sheaves
Scarce plainer that Heaven’s angels on the wing. (12-14)

This “seeing” then clearly entails a more comprehensive vision than that ordinarily attributed to physical sight. The blind here, by reading, is able to see the real and the concrete (“earth’s reapers”) as well as the ordinarily invisible world of spirit (“Heaven’s angels on the wing”). So, in some way, the blindness that Barrett Browning here describes may be compared to the supernaturally powerful blind giftedness of ancient Greece. As Tiresias can “hear” the future, so Boyd can “see” heavenly spirits; but there is one essential difference between the extraordinary insight belonging to Classical representations of blindness and the blind seeing described in this sonnet: Boyd’s seeing here is not part of any divinely bestowed “compensatory faculty,” but is rather a “natural” occurrence attendant upon his reading. Blind vision may be expansive, Barrett Browning would seem to suggest, but this expansive vision is no divine gift; it is grounded in a profane technology, the written text. And, crucially, visions of angels and the spirit world are not necessarily reserved for those whose bodies have been punished/made sacred(taboo) by (the)

(g)God(s). Within the universe of the poem, the blind, though empowered by poetic vision, must share this vision with the sighted.

Here then, we find that the vision which has traditionally been set aside as belonging to the sacred/supernatural—the mystic, the prophet, the poet, the seer (often represented as blind)—becomes the property of sighted and blind alike. The extraordinary seeing that Barrett Browning here describes does not, *cannot* belong exclusively to the blind. Supernatural “seeing,” customarily the domain of the blind, now belongs to the sighted as well. Blind and sighted share equally in the vision enabled by poetry. And because this more expansive seeing belongs to all who read, blind and sighted may then be seen as participating in the same visual universe. So, according to this poetic vision, the blind see *no less* than the sighted, but so too, blind seeing is in no way *privileged*. On one level, certainly, such implied equality may be read as an expression of inclusion and as a recognition of the validity of blind identity. On another, however, the homogenization of blindness and sightedness inferred by Barrett Browning’s “Sensuous and Unsensuous seemed one thing” may be somewhat troubling. For by creating a visual world wherein both blind and sighted have equal access to visions of “Heaven’s angels,” the speaker here seems to invade and lay claim to a space and experience that belongs by tradition to blindness. Moreover, we find that the blind here is circumscribed once again by a sighted mediator, “the sounds of softly-turned book-leaves” necessarily inferring the quiet but essential presence of a reader, a sighted satellite, who makes Boyd’s “seeing” possible (9). Though the presence of the reader is minimal here when compared to the poems discussed above, still, the fact that a mediator is required is significant. Ultimately, and though in the most subtle and equivocal manner, we find once again

that Barrett Browning's sighted speaker has encroached upon the terrifyingly attractive territory of blindness.

In contrast, the sonnet subtitled "His Death, 1848" is not so much a remembrance of Boyd as a coming to terms with his exit. And as such, the speaker's presence within the poem, and especially her self-representation as reader or assistant, is virtually non-existent. Instead, we find a generous eulogy: "Steadfast friend, / Who never didst my heart or life misknow, / Nor either's faults too keenly apprehend,—" (10-12). But while we may not find the speaker here introducing herself in an heroic role and though we do not find her explicitly writing over or appropriating Boyd's blindness, the principle of sighted control over blindness is yet present. For here, it seems, Boyd is represented not only according to the familiar trope of pathetic Christian blindness—"sightless eyes raised vainly to the sun" (2); "patient soul" (3); "This soul that smiles in darkness!" (10); "faithful" (14)—but so too does the sonnet insist on the elemental connection between blindness and death, suggesting, in fact, that death is an appropriate, even a blessed condition for the blind, even though the blind himself may be quite satisfied with his continued earthly existence. For in justifying Boyd's death to herself, Barrett Browning does not call upon any gloomy image of Boyd as she had last seen him, sitting in his "dark little room [...] as if he had not moved these seven years [...] with] his poor bent-down forehead, which he never lifts up" (*Letters* 13: 96). Instead, the speaker persists in representing Boyd as quiet but cheerful, informing the reader that Boyd had learned "to keep [his] patient soul in tune / To visible nature's elemental cheers!" (3-4). Boyd is represented as content with life; unbothered by his blindness, Boyd "smiles

in darkness.” Most importantly, Boyd is *not tired* of life and his death is clearly not (at least for himself) a longed-for “release.”

God has not caught thee to new Hemispheres
Because thou wast weary of this one;— (5-6)

But while it seems as though Boyd might wish to remain and enjoy another few years of life on earth despite his blindness, that blindness becomes the poet’s justification for Boyd’s inevitable death. Though Boyd himself is “patient” and smiling, the speaker seems to recognize blindness itself, no matter how cheerfully endured, as a punishment or curse which is only lifted by God in death. Though Boyd himself does not seem to long for the “perfection” of sightedness that must come with death, heaven itself is represented as impatient with Boyd’s blindness, anxious to see him die into “perfection” and light:

I think thine angel’s patience first was done,
And that he spake out with celestial tears,
“Is it enough, dear God? Then lighten so
This soul that smiles in darkness!” (7-10)

For Barrett Browning, this angelic impatience with Boyd’s blindness, with his “imperfection,” seems a natural and acceptable justification for his death. “How can I wonder,” she asks, “when I see thee go / To join the Dead found faithful to the end?” (13-14). So, we find that Boyd, despite his contentedness, is seen as having died into a better existence; and this heavenly existence is regarded as superior not so much for those reasons ordinarily advanced by Christian theology—closeness to God, a leaving behind of sorrow and all mental anguish, the cessation of physical pain, re-unification with loved ones who have “passed on” earlier, the enjoyment of perfect peace and divine glory—but rather because in it Boyd is blessed with light/sight.

For the sighted speaker of the poem, then, Boyd's otherwise lamentable death is made bearable because he will now be sighted (though Boyd is not represented as in any way longing for vision or suffering because of his blindness). Here, the sighted speaker places a greater value on her friend's being able to see than she does on his life. In the end, regardless of all apparent contentment on the part of Boyd, his blindness is portrayed as being such an extraordinary defect that he is actually *better off dead*. And while such a sentiment may seem to accord with one of the more simplified tropes of blindness discussed above (specifically, a medical model of blindness invites us to wish for a "cure" at any cost), there may be something in this apparently pious sonnet which also suggests the faintest fragrance of malevolence. For though Barrett Browning may genuinely and religiously rejoice in the saint-like death she describes in this poem, the speaker's insistence on the meek helplessness of Boyd's blindness (e.g., "sightless eyes raised vainly") and her ultimate contentedness with his death and consequent static passivity, may be read as a kind of relief. If, as we have suggested earlier, Boyd's blindness exists in a condition of instability (i.e., apparent weakness and surprising strength/power), and if (as we also suggested earlier), his blindness had become a contested site (of unstable power) between Boyd and Barrett, what better way to enjoy a final victory in this contest than to fix Boyd and his blindness within the inescapable confines of death and text. Here, Boyd may be safely represented as pitiable in his blindness and yet, the poet may leave her subject, in death (and heavenly perfection), as un-blind—ordinary. Boyd's power and authenticity, insofar as he may still enjoy these conditions, is thus permanently mediated by the poet to the outer world. In death and in print, Barrett Browning is finally able to manage Boyd; he becomes the truly

passive blind, subject to the unconditional, unfringed control of the sighted satellite.

But of all Barrett Browning's poetry, it is perhaps in *Aurora Leigh* (1857) that we find the most impressive example of the sighted satellite empowered and valorized. Though it is not our purpose here to provide any exhaustive reading of Barrett Browning's "principal poetic achievement" (McSweeney xiii), it does seem useful to provide a brief review of the poem's essential narrative so that we may better understand two key elements of Barrett Browning's *magnum opus*—the representation of blindness, and the role of the sighted satellite. *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's partly autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, has often been described as a novel-poem. In nine books, Barrett Browning's first-person narrator, the poet Aurora Leigh, tells the story of her life from her childhood in Italy through the death of her parents, her coming to England, her birth as a poet, her refusal to marry her wealthy philanthropist cousin Romney Leigh, the death of her guardian, her growth as a poet (in Italy and France), her rescue of Romney's one-time fiancée (Marian) from a life of poverty and ill-repute, and her ultimate acceptance of Romney's suit (after he has lost his money, acknowledged her superior calling/work as a poet, and been blinded). But while the poem is deeply absorbed in its narrative exercise, deftly recounting the sequence of Aurora's activities and the major episodes in her life, the principal concern of *Aurora Leigh* is certainly the development of Aurora's artistic spirit and the struggle of a woman poet for external acknowledgement and social legitimacy. In essence, and despite the rather dramatic narrative elements of the poem, *Aurora Leigh* is Barrett Browning's *apologia*, her evidence that a poet, and a woman poet especially, makes an essential social

contribution. *Aurora Leigh* becomes an argument then, that the woman poet deserves a place within the literary, spiritual, and political canons which have typically been reserved exclusively for men.

Given this concern—the struggle of the woman artist to claim her rightful place in the male social order—Aurora’s resistance to her cousin Romney may be read in allegorical terms. And the narrative may thus be seen, in a sense, as beginning in Book Two when Aurora symbolically crowns herself with an ivy wreath, thus proclaiming her identity as a poet and anticipating the honors she is sure she will come to deserve. At this juncture, it is crucial to note that the young poet, in choosing the material for her crown, rejects both laurel (traditionally used to honor male poets) and myrtle “which means chiefly love” (II.38-40). So, Aurora’s birth as a poet involves a necessary repudiation of both masculine identity and masculine interference. She will not enter into an existing male poetic tradition (signified by laurel), nor will she give herself over to the traditional female ambitions of love and marriage (symbolized by myrtle). But Aurora’s birth as a poet is marked not only by her self-crowning, but also by man’s symbolic *rejection* of her chosen identity; for in the very moment that Aurora places the ivy wreath upon her brow, she turns and finds that she is the object of her cousin Romney’s gaze, a gaze which seeks to correct Aurora’s vision of herself and which works actively to restrict her to a traditional feminine role. At this critical juncture in the formation of Aurora’s identity, Romney’s voice is heard disparaging her poetic ambitions:

The chances are that, being a woman, young
And pure, with such a pair of large, calm eyes,
You write as well...and ill...upon the whole,
As other women. If as well, what then?
If even a little better...still, what then?

[...]
 You play beside a death-bed like a child,
 Yet measure to yourself a prophet's place
 To teach the living. None of these things,
 Can women understand. (II.144-83)

Ultimately, Romney urges Aurora to embrace a more subordinate position—that of wife. According to Romney, Aurora's true calling (like that of any woman) is marriage, and consequently, subjection to a socially active and important husband. "If your sex is weak for art," he claims, "it is strong for life and duty" (II.372-75). Thus being the case, Romney argues, Aurora should become his wife: "Place your fecund heart / In mine" (II.375-76). So we see that Aurora's nascent poetic spirit is shaped in part by Romney's dismissive words; and this early confrontation prepares her for the rejection she will continue to encounter as a woman artist.

And as on some level the poem may be seen as beginning with Aurora's claiming her identity as a poet and with Romney symbolically rejecting that claim as meaningful (or even *possible*), so too we may see the poem as closing in Book Eight when Romney is finally forced to acknowledge the legitimacy of Aurora's calling. "Poet," he says, "doubt yourself, / But never doubt that you're a poet to me" (VIII.590-91). And, he adds:

[...] You have shown me truths,
 O June-day friend, that help me now at night
 When June is over! Truths not yours, indeed,
 But set within my reach by means of you,
 Presented by your voice and verse the way
 To take them clearest. Verily *I was wrong* (608-613, bk. 8; emphasis added)

Framing the narrative in this way, we may observe then, that the central feature of the poem may be regarded as the symbolic contest between Aurora (the woman who wants to shape her own identity and make her own place within the social order),

and Romney (the disapproving voice of conventional masculine power). Thus contemporary critics have frequently commented on the importance of Aurora's competition with Romney. Alison Case, for instance, sums up Romney's role as "represent[ing] the whole weight of male social authority, discouraging women from writing by assuring them that anything they do will inevitably be second rate"(24). Dorothy Mermin sees Romney in a similar light, commenting that "[m]uch of the plot consists of thwarting Romney's grim determination to be a rescuing knight" (187). And Victorian critics, though approaching this struggle from a somewhat different perspective, certainly observed its importance in the text. The *Dublin University Magazine*, for instance, in its 1857 review of the poem, commented: "Aurora Leigh makes an effort to stand, not on a pedestal beside man, but actually to occupy his place" (qtd. in Cooper 150). According to Sandra Gilbert, "That Aurora has successfully become a 'head' of the family [...] is made clearest by her blinded cousin's revelation that he has at last really read and recognized her work" (206). So it would seem that for Aurora Leigh, the framing of personal identity occurs only within the context of another's submissive abjection. Just as Romney begins by understanding himself only as heroic rescuer, dominating (howsoever benevolently) over countless grateful (but unparticularized) subordinates, so too, Aurora understands her own success in similar terms; she is not truly crowned as a poet/prophet until Romney recognizes not her *equality*, but her *superiority*. For Aurora, identity is achieved, ironically, through Romney's words: "Verily I was wrong."

Even while Aurora's determined independence and self-fashioning may invite us to read her as a feminist icon, it is also crucial to observe that her ability to

construct herself as poet and prophet becomes possible in large part because Romney is there to serve as a foil. Aurora strengthens herself in the face of Romney's disparagement; she acquires subjectivity by refusing to be the object of his subordinating gaze and voice; and she ultimately defines herself by a self-centering gesture (autobiography), through which gesture, simultaneously, Romney is marginalized, demeaned, and symbolically castrated. As Dorothy Mermin puts it, "The price of female triumph [...] is male abasement" (214). Even Barrett Browning, in a letter to a friend, justifies Romney's degradation as being "necessary," explaining: "He had to be blinded, observe, to be made to see [...] I am sorry" (Kenyon, *Letters* 2: 242). For most critics, these singular narrative elements—the punishment of Romney and the heroic elevation of Aurora—are essential to the feminist plot; Romney must be abased in order to acknowledge Aurora's place in the center, a narrative convention that we might associate with what Nancy Miller identifies as "a poetics of women's fiction" (341). According to Miller, one element that characterizes such fiction is a "repressed content" of "egotistic desires" which assert themselves "not [as] erotic impulses, but [as] an impulse to power." In fact, Miller proposes that women's fiction may be seen to act out "a fantasy of power that would revise the social grammar in which women are never defined as subjects" (348). In *Aurora Leigh*, we may clearly witness the workings of such a fantasy. Indeed, Sandra Gilbert goes so far as to suggest that Aurora's victory over Romney is part of the poem's overall feminist political scheme which Gilbert interprets as a shift from *patria* to *matria*. And the subjection of Romney might well be read exclusively as a feminist act, an assertion of woman's power over the otherwise controlling male. The fact that Aurora seeks something *more* than equality, that she

seeks power and authority not only over herself but also over Romney, might point quite simply to the victory of woman (or to her “implausible” “fantasy of power” [Miller 349, 348]) within a masculinist social order that typically excludes women from roles of significance.

But while such a revision of the traditional hierarchical order (i.e., woman on top vs. man on top) may certainly be understood in feminist terms, there is that in the tumultuous relationship between Romney and Aurora, and especially in the woman poet’s struggle for power and recognition here, which seems somehow reminiscent of Elizabeth Barrett’s troubled relationship with Hugh Stuart Boyd. *Aurora Leigh*, even while it may serve as a feminist manifesto, presents us with a heroine who constructs herself as patronizing not only masculine identity, but who also acts out another, and more problematic fantasy of power in relation to blindness. So, while we may interpret *Aurora Leigh* as a vehicle for Barrett Browning to work through her own struggles for power, control, and recognition, and while in such struggles for power and autonomy, we might be first inclined to think of Barrett Browning’s peculiar relationship with her domineering father, or the unvoiced competition which must have existed between herself and her brother Edward as well as between herself and her adored husband, it also seems worthwhile to read the ultimate assertion of Aurora’s power in light of her relationship with Hugh Stuart Boyd. For while it does not seem that Boyd ever exerted himself to control Barrett (as Romney seeks to control Aurora), nor does it appear that he ever dominated over her or disparaged her as a poet (apart, perhaps, from his wish that she would stick more to Classical forms and subjects in her work), we have already observed that *Barrett’s* approach to *Boyd* was not quite so liberal and tolerant. Certainly, we see in

her relationship with Boyd a decided, if perhaps unconscious, effort to assert her own identity by subjugating or subordinating his. As we have already noted, Barrett suffered bitterly from Boyd's apparent indifference to her romantically; she repeatedly complained that he would not rely on her satellite services—reading, guiding, editing, etc.—as absolutely and exclusively as she wished; and Barrett's representations of blindness in her poetry would seem to indicate that she placed great significance on the role of satellite or mediator. Recalling these features of Barrett's relationship to Boyd and observing some pattern in her references to the blind and to blindness, it would seem strange indeed if the symbolic blinding of Romney at the end of *Aurora Leigh* did *not* make us think of Boyd.

Though it would be fruitless, of course, to suggest any simplistic equivalency between Aurora Leigh and Elizabeth Barrett Browning—nor would we propose that Romney Leigh and Hugh Stuart Boyd are meant to be the same person—there are yet a number of elements here which work to remind us of Barrett's relationship with Boyd. Firstly, the very existence of a *blind* Romney already suggests that Barrett Browning may have been thinking of Boyd at least on some level. And when we foreground *Aurora Leigh* against the passionate expressions of dissatisfaction from Barrett's early diary, it may be especially tempting to read the blind Romney as the pliable and unresisting version of the actual but refractory Boyd. For while the young Barrett suffered over Boyd's refusal to requite her feelings, while she saw Boyd, in a way, as stubbornly resisting her, the blind Romney we find at the end of *Aurora Leigh* is almost sickeningly acquiescent; both his estimation of himself and his hope for Aurora's love are diminished to the most abject proportions. "The man here," he tells her, "once so arrogant / And restless, so ambitious, for his part, / [...]"

/ Is now contented" (IX. 585-86; 590). Romney assures Aurora, "I am quiet now," adding:

As tender surely for the suffering world,
But quiet—sitting at the wall to learn,
Content henceforth to do the thing I can:
For, though as powerless, said I, as a stone,
A stone can still give shelter to a worm,
And it is worth while being a stone for that (IX.594-600)

And it is from this perspective—that of a "stone" good enough only for the shelter of a worm—that Romney at this point refuses to listen to Aurora's declaration of love, insisting that it must be simply "woman's pity" (609). The role reversal here is remarkable; Romney's loss of power is mirrored by Aurora's gain. In fact, it is essential to note that Aurora, by confessing her love to Romney (before he has proclaimed *his* love for *her*), assumes the role of power and authority in their (new) relationship. Not only might such a declaration be considered "masculine" in its forwardness, but Aurora here also takes on exactly the role that Romney had abandoned; he is now disabled (i.e., stripped of his masculinity?) and she steps into the mantle of his former power, assuming exactly that position of authority in relation to *him* which *he* had once filled in relation to *her*. If we so choose, then, it is certainly possible to read Romney's blinding as an opportunity for Aurora's power, and thus, possibly, as Barrett Browning's "fantasy of power" over a blind and submissive lover.

So too, it seems worthwhile to note that Marian, the woman whom Romney twice wishes to "rescue" by marriage (first to raise her out of poverty and finally to regenerate her soiled reputation), and who is ultimately "saved" by Aurora, "Was born upon the ledge of Malvern Hill" (III.831). Though this detail is seemingly inconsequential, it is curious that Barrett Browning would connect this victimized

subject (Marian) with Malvern, a locale which Barrett Browning must have associated with Boyd. For it was in Malvern that Boyd lived when Barrett first met him and it was in Boyd's Malvern home that Barrett so agonized over the ambiguous relationship between the two; it was in Malvern that Barrett strove to position herself as "rescuer" (guide, interpreter, lover ... satellite) in relation to Boyd. So, in a sense, we may witness Barrett's early unfulfilled desire to "do good" (i.e., to occupy a heroic position of power in relation to a feminized "victim"), successfully re-enacted in *Aurora Leigh* as Aurora rescues Malvern-native Marian (and her child) from a life of poverty and disrepute. Here, at last, the satellite is satellite no longer; the aide or helper (Aurora) occupies a clearly *central* position and the unsatisfying periphery is inhabited by an appropriately grateful Marian as the woman poet (Aurora/Barrett Browning?) assumes her long-awaited place as heroine at the center of the text. While her life and identity are yet formed by her activity of service, Aurora's role as helper here (unlike Barrett's role as Boyd's reader) is both central and stable. Marian, despite her "salvation," remains conveniently at the margin of the narrative.

If, indeed, we see anything of Barrett Browning's fantasy of power projected here, references to blindness found throughout the text may well add weight to such an interpretation. For the representations of and references to blindness that we encounter as we read may be seen as preparing us to understand the ultimate blindness of Romney as equivalent to infantilized helplessness. Throughout the course of the poem, the reader sometimes encounters minor blind characters or references to blindness. In Book Four, for instance, the mob which appears for the anticipated wedding of Romney and Marian is described: "Lame, blind, and worse—sick, sorrowful, and worse, / The humours of the peccant social wound / All

pressed out” (IV.543-45). Describing her own exhausted helplessness in the face of the heartless Lady Waldemar’s conversational onslaught, Aurora tells how she sometimes “put in ‘yes’ or ‘no’,” comparing her unthinking responses with “The blind man [who] walks wherever the dog pulls” (V.1027-28). And when she first sees Marian in Paris, Aurora contemplates what it would mean to write to Romney before she has discovered the complete truth of Marian’s history and current mode of life. “Can I write to *him*,” she ponders, “a half truth? Can I keep my own soul blind / To the other half...the worse?” (VI.336-38). Such references are, for the most part, unremarkable, utilizing familiar tropes of blindness as it has been associated with poverty and corruption, with helplessness and dependence, and with ignorance. But the frequent appearance of blindness, even in these entirely conventional forms, yet alerts the reader to an underlying theme or concern. While such references do not assist us in anticipating the *revelation* of Romney’s blindness, still they prepare us psychically for that moment. By the time Aurora discovers that her cousin has lost his sight, the text (*her* text) has prepared us, on some level, to experience Romney’s blindness as Aurora’s final coup. With all the negative representations of and references to blindness which precede this disclosure, the reader has been tutored to understand Romney’s blindness as an absolute representation of his deficit—his powerlessness. As Dorothy Mermin observes:

By the time the traditionally gendered rescue plot is consummated, [...Romney] is not only helpless, dispossessed, a failure in everything he tried to do—whereas all [*Aurora*’s] efforts have succeeded—but blind. (190)

And the positioning here of Mermin’s final “blind” reinforces for us a very familiar locus of meaning surrounding that word. As with other Barrett Browning

biographers who name Boyd's blindness, Mermin lends additional emphasis to blindness, establishing for it a place and meaning of extremity by placing it last on her list of Romney's defects; by separating this "blind" from the rest of the text with an interjection and a long dash, Mermin makes a typographical demonstration of the difference, otherness, and absence with which blindness is vested. Clearly, the point made here is that Romney's blindness manifests an extraordinary degree of failure. On one level, of course, Romney's loss of sight ought to be read in Oedipal terms—the punitive blindness is a symbolic castration, destroying both power and masculinity. Certainly, this is the reading that feels most comfortable and most familiar. The blind man is feminized, desexualized, dehumanized—an icon of difference. And a blind Romney, humbly subjecting himself in all things to a thoroughly vindicated Aurora offers the sympathetic reader an easy and satisfying sense of closure. Romney's blindness swallows up his contemptuous "None of these things, / Can women understand" and gives way symbolically to his contrite apology: "Verily I was wrong."

But though we may wish to read Romney's blindness in the familiar terms of symbolic castration, Aurora's reaction upon realizing that Romney is blind somewhat complicates this interpretation. For even while Romney may regard himself as "powerless" (IX.598), even while readers and critics may feel assured that the Romney of Book Nine is "helpless, dispossessed, a failure," there is yet something in Romney's abasement here, and something in his blindness particularly, which Aurora seems to find almost fetishistically appealing. For while we may find some indication, prior to this moment, that Aurora regrets having declined Romney's proposal in Book Two, it is not until Romney makes an unmistakable reference to

his own blindness that Aurora's desire for her cousin is brought to the fore. It would seem as though Aurora's realization that Romney is blind and her realization that she desires him dawn simultaneously. Until the moment that Romney discloses his blindness, he and Aurora seem to be engaged in rational, if somewhat melancholy, conversation, but when Romney mentions "Those stars above us which I cannot see ..." (IX.504), Aurora ceases to participate in the dialogue. She is stunned, stuck on the idea of his blindness: "'You cannot'..." (505). Romney continues to talk in meaningful phrases, but Aurora, again unheeding, returns to the subject of Romney's blindness: "'Not see the stars?'" (509). As Romney continues to wax philosophical about his blind existence, trying to share with Aurora how his blindness has come to pass and what he has learned from it, Aurora repeatedly indicates that she is simply stupefied by this revelation; twice more she interrupts Romney's discourse to question him about his condition: "'Blind, Romney?'" she asks; and "'No hope?'" (561; 574). Her next interjection (having ascertained after all this that Romney is definitely, *definitely* blind) is to declare to the blind Romney that she loves him and that she wishes now that his (hitherto insulting) offer of marriage still stood: "'O Romney, O my love, / [...] If now you'd stoop so low to take my love / And use it roughly, without stint or spare, / As men use common things [...] / [...] / The joy would set me like a star, in heaven'" (672; 674-76; 679). So, we find that Aurora's confession of love for Romney seems to be tied directly to *his* confession that he is blind. In fact, Aurora goes on to describe the physical presence of Romney's blindness with a kind of rapture: "'O calm, grand eyes, extinguished in a storm / Blown out like lights o'er melancholy seas'" (699-700). And, as though this fetishistic focus were not sufficiently adoring, Aurora even goes on to re-create these

“calm, grand eyes” as a form of idol, cryptically comparing Romney’s blindness to the God of Moses in Sinai: ““O my dark, / My Cloud—to go before me every day”” (701-702). Ultimately, it seems as though Aurora desires Romney only because he *is* blind, thus his objection to Aurora’s “pity” (609).

It is also important to observe the precise terms of Aurora’s “love.” For Aurora here implores Romney not to love her in return, but rather to “use” her love “As men *use* common things” (emphasis added). Aurora, then, does not ask for an exchange of vows, nor does she ask for Romney’s affection; instead, she wants to serve Romney—to be *useful*. Romney’s attractiveness to Aurora, then, seems to be decided in large part by her ability to do things for him, to act in his behalf—essentially, to serve as his satellite. And in Aurora’s text, Romney too seems to stress this feature of the anticipated relationship. Most notably, Romney addresses Aurora as “my compensation” and “my dear sight,” adding:

My morning-star, my morning—rise and shine,
And touch my hills with radiance not their own.
Shine out for two, Aurora, and fulfil
My falling-short that must be! Work for two,
As I, though thus restrained, for two shall love! (IX.907-912)

Here we clearly witness Romney’s plea that Aurora serve as his intermediary. Within the conventions of fictional autobiography, Barrett Browning has Aurora have Romney voice his urgent *need* for someone who will act for him. Anticipating his own “falling-short,” Romney begs Aurora to be his eyes (“my dear sight”), to represent him (“Shine out for two”), and to undertake the work that would have belonged to him (“work for two”). The blind figure here willingly accepts the boundaries delineated by conventional tropes of blindness and willingly sacrifices his power and ability to Aurora, who will mediate for him. Such a figure effectively re-

defines the role of the satellite. As with Aurora's assisting Marian, the role of helper or mediator is here defined by its *centrality*. Aurora, although she serves as Romney's prosthesis—"my compensation," "my dear sight"—is not mechanized or reduced in power and importance by her role. Rather, the absolute abasement of Romney, the construction of blindness here as a condition of absolute loss and helplessness, allows us to figure the satellite as the central and stable nexus of power and identity. In this relationship, the identity of the blind man will be entirely shaped by the satellite, rather than the satellite's finding her identity in her relationship with the blind. For Aurora, ownership of Romney's blindness will mean that she has really, finally arrived. Or, as Sandra Gilbert acknowledges, "Aurora has successfully become a 'head' of the family."

But even as we witness Aurora rising up from the ashes of Romney's blindness, we observe yet another peculiarity in the relationship between the two. For in the poems examined earlier, we often found the satellite figure asserting herself and attempting to assume control over a blindness that was somehow indistinctly powerful, imbued with an unquantifiable meaning, importance, and instability. In fact, the mediating structure by which we have seen the satellite act is, in effect, a framework to contain and define a kind of power which would be otherwise removed entirely from the experience of sightedness. In "Wine of Cyprus," in "The Mourning Mother (of the dead blind)," and in the three "Hugh Stuart Boyd" poems, Barrett/Browning works with blind figures who begin and end in blindness, who are, in a sense, blind "through-and-through"; the satellite figures in these poems are dealing then with a blindness that proceeds from an invisible and unknowable source, a blindness which is endowed with a kind of mythic, mystical

lack of origination which adds greatly to its apparent condition of indefinite power. But in *Aurora Leigh*, for the first time, blindness is associated with a (series of) definite condition(s). And not only do we know *how* and *why* Romney is blinded (i.e., from complications following a blow he received during the fire that destroyed his home, and to punish his *hubris* in thinking he could be greater than other men), but we also make his acquaintance while he is still sighted. Throughout most of *Aurora Leigh*, the reader is able to observe a sighted Romney doing and saying decidedly ordinary, even asinine things. As a foolish sighted man, necessarily “mulcted in his natural sight” (Kenyon, *Letters*, ii. 246), the figure of Romney blinded works essentially to demystify blindness. For Aurora, perhaps, Romney is someone special—for the reader, he is not.

Even while Barrett Browning (*Aurora Leigh*?) works to demystify and regulate Romney’s blindness, however, *Aurora Leigh*/*Aurora Leigh* yet demonstrates that blindness cannot easily be reduced or controlled. Even while Romney is abased in his blindness, pliantly submitting himself to the wisdom and authority of Aurora’s “vision,” the reader still finds that Aurora is anxious not only to serve as guide and mediator, not only (through love and, presumably, marriage) to possess Romney and Romney’s blindness, but also herself to occupy the position of the blind. We see one instance of this in Aurora’s being called, literally, to supplant Romney’s eyes, thus occupying his body and, on some level, his blindness. The satellite, then, in her position of mediation, actually melds with and becomes the blind figure. So, we find Aurora here literally colonizing blindness, moving into Romney’s body and assuming control over it. And in a somewhat different vein, though performing a similarly appropriating maneuver, Aurora follows her confession of love with a weeping that

both blinds her and leaves her unable to distinguish her own body from that of her blind lover.

Could I see his face,
I wept so? Did I drop against his breast,
Or did his arms constrain me? Were my cheeks
Hot, overflowed, with my tears or his?
And which of our two large explosive hearts
So shook me? That I know not. (714-19)

And even while Aurora conflates the bodies and experience of herself and Romney, she makes careful note here of her inability to see, the apparent answer to the otherwise rhetorical “Could I see his face” being apparently...no. So, after working effectively, even methodically, to wrest from blindness its peculiar power, Aurora’s colonization of the blind cannot be considered complete until she herself is blind, until she can speak with the voice and authority that she apparently once saw as belonging to Hugh Stuart Boyd.

And here we recall once more the appropriating gestures of Elizabeth Barrett/Browning: Barrett’s early yearning after Boyd, her apparent desire to own or control his blindness; the place of importance Barrett gave to her own disability, her early poetry emphasizing the significance of the satellite role; her texts continually (if discretely) pursuing a logic that would contain, control, and colonize blindness. Recalling all this, we make our own apology for re-enacting the very appropriating gesture we have been so eager to discover in Barrett Browning’s life and texts. For this essay is itself, in many respects, another “misappropriation” of Hugh Stuart Boyd’s blindness, a seizing of his blind identity for literary and theoretical purposes, for the purposes of power and of text. Like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I too have sought to colonize Boyd’s blindness, to use his blindness for my own purposes. And by this act, by using Boyd and his blindness as “material,” I too have absented him

from *my* text; I too have sought control over the authority and authenticity that belongs to blindness; and I too have worked to erase or conceal any part of Boyd not connected to the blindness I once insisted was a mere fragment of his identity.

Blind alley
 Blind arch
 Blind as a bat
 Blind chance
 Blind corner
 Blind date
 Blind drunk
 Blind faith
 Blind gut
 Blind justice
 Blind luck
 Blind man's b(l)uff
 Blind rage
 Blind rivets
 Blind-sided
 Blind spot
 Blind stitch
 Blind thrust
 Blind trust
 Blinded by the light
 Can't pull the wool over *his* eyes
 Deaf, dumb, and blind
 Double-blind study
 How can you be so blind?
 In the Country of the Blind, the one-eyed man is king
 Love is blind
 Robbed blind
 Second sight
 Struck blind
 The blind leading the blind
 Three blind mice
 Turn a blind eye
 Venetian blind
 What're you, *blind*?
 You'll put an eye out

CHAPTER THREE On Blindness

This chapter arises in part out of a talk I gave at the City University of New York Graduate Center in December 1999. Following that talk—a reading from an earlier version of Chapter Three—a number of colleagues expressed concern at my apparently equating blindness with “disability,” arguing that blindness has a distinctive history and set of meanings which do not necessarily apply to other

manifestations of disability. And while it certainly seems that such an equation is possible, even necessary to the theoretical purposes of this project, this concern is legitimate; blindness does have its own peculiar and idiosyncratic history, symbolic and otherwise. And though it is not my purpose here to offer a detailed account of that history,³⁹ what follows is a response to my peers, a dedicated consideration of what blindness is and what it means. There will be little here on the satellite *per se*, but it is hoped that this foray into the symbolic framework constructed around the blind will provide some insight into the relationship of power considered elsewhere in this thesis. Finally, this chapter argues that the important thing about blindness, in literary and cultural terms, is this: That blindness is ultimately about language and, for this reason, it exists as a reflection of the culture that describes it, rather than as a representation of the condition and identity it ostensibly names. Just as Disability is an able-ist construct, so, too, the construction of blindness is founded in seeing and visibility.

It is essential to remember that the blind are typically acculturated into the same symbolic order as the sighted; thus the language of sighted culture—which depends heavily on sight-connoting signs to describe non-visual experience (you *see*?!) and tropes of blindness/sightedness which are laden with moral value (e.g., to follow blindly; the eyes are the windows of the soul; can't pull the wool over *his* eyes)—is a language shared by blind and sighted alike. For this reason, though a blind person may exist in a culture of perception and cognition which differs radically from that of a sighted person, the fact that blind and sighted share the same language means that, on some level, the blind are necessarily members of and

³⁹ An overview of this history is provided as part of Chapter Two.

participants in sighted culture and experience. A blind person may not experience his/her own blindness as loss or absence on a personal level (since perception and the integration of knowledge may occupy a space that does not require sight), but may still be subject to the powerful affect of symbolic blindness (i.e., blindness coded, signed blindness, blindness in language, blindness represented in language).

Toward a Definition of Blindness

Blindness has its own history, its own set of metaphors, its own literature, and its own significance. Indeed, the phrases listed above attest to the place that blindness occupies in the cultural imagination. The blind man participates in a unique literary history, playing the part of inspiration incarnate: Tiresias, Homer, Milton, Joyce, Borges. Our sense of blindness, our relationship to it, is structured around a universe of blind heroes and villains, poets and seers—Oedipus, the Oracle at Delphi, Samson, Lear, Helen Keller, Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder—in a way that can scarcely be compared to any other manifestation of disability. Blindness is our metaphor for fairness, for ignorance, for trust, for love, for vulnerability, for insensibility. The wealth of meaning which has been fabricated around the idea of blindness, our cultural reliance on blindness as metaphor, thus metonymizes the blind man, recreating him as a figure of speech, the component of a joke, a poem; or, the same gesture enables all of us, blind or sighted, to recreate ourselves as metaphorically blind.

Such a suggestion, that the sighted sometimes see themselves as blind, or that they might participate figuratively in the experience of blindness, may seem a bit far-fetched. There is, after all, a fundamental physiological difference between the

sighted and the blind. In a way that is real and true and measurable, the sighted are different from the blind: They can *see*; they have functioning eyes. The blind are without eyesight, divided from the sighted by a curtain of blank blackness that is theirs alone. No matter how compassionate we may be, no matter how forward-thinking, no matter how much without prejudice, nothing can change this basic fact of difference, centered in the body, not constructed in language, or by culture or imagination.

But perhaps this sense of division is a little short-sighted; there is that common saying, after all, that sarcastic jab at the distracted and the dunder-headed: “What’re you, *blind*?” The question is posed as a challenge, a taunt, a reprimand. Intended as a put down for sighted folk who stumble into or who stumble past, it is a comic commentary on sighted lapses of vision. But it is a testament, also, a witness to the fact that such lapses are commonplace. We search the house for glasses that sit atop our head, can’t find the phone number that is right in front of us, lose the remote control, that book I was reading, the pen I had right *here* ... How many times have there been when the object was in front of our eyes, but some mist of invisibility made it disappear from our sight? What’re you, *blind*? Well, if we’re forced to respond to the rhetorical question, it might be harder to answer than one might think. For blindness, even real, true, measurable, body-centered blindness, the kind they write about in medical textbooks (as opposed to dissertations in English), is not the dark blank that so many imagine,⁴⁰ but is rather a continuum, or a variety, with such myriad gradations and such a jumbled diversity of seeing and not-seeing

⁴⁰ See below, Borges’ comments on blindness and darkness.

that it becomes virtually impossible to put a finger on one point and to declare, “There! *This* person is sighted, and *that* one is blind.”

The stumbling, bumbling, absent-minded blindness of the conventionally sighted, for instance, is not merely a comic interlude in our lives, a symptom of fatigue or distraction (though sometimes it is those things as well). The sighted have an infinite number of ways and reasons for not seeing. Among the most common of these are neurological errata or caesura: Dyslexias trick our eyes into transposed forms of seeing, causing us to read and to write figures as mirror images, causing fragments of words to disappear, or creating a dance on the page that makes it impossible to absorb or translate written code; synesthesias often write those same figures in indelible colors—synesthetic seers might always see “5” in blue, for instance, which means that a black “5” on a blue background becomes invisible to their eyes; brain tumors, lesions, or other disruptive factors can cause vision to go in and out—now you see it, now you don’t. Oliver Sacks’ well-known essay, “The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat,” narrates the case of a sighted man with “a profound visual agnosia,” able to “see” perfectly, but unable to *recognize* any familiar objects, even the faces of those dearest to him or parts of his own body, unless they are represented in abstract form (17). (Another Sacks’ essay, “To See and Not See,” might seem more immediately *a propos* of the discussion here—it describes the “case” of a blind man whose physiological ability to see is surgically restored after many years of blindness, but who has a nearly impossible time figuring out how to “see” after having learned the world as a blind person.)

But the sighted also have other ways of not seeing: Colorblindness appears in many varieties, sometimes limiting the spectrum of vision in minor ways—certain

shades of blue or violet, for instance, may slip off our palette—or, more rarely, the sense of color may be translated entirely into shades of black and white, a monochrome universe;⁴¹ another common form of colorblindness causes sighted persons to transpose colors, seeing red for green, for example, and vice versa; pregnant women sometimes experience a fuzziness or mistiness of vision in the third trimester, as the extra fluid in their bodies alters the shape of the eye. There is also the state known as “inattentional blindness,” which, in the simplest terms, means that we do not see what we are not paying attention to, even if it is right before our eyes.⁴² And these are some of the more esoteric forms of sighted blindness. The most prevalent varieties, the near-sightedness or far-sightedness that comes naturally with age, the commonest astigmatisms of the glasses-wearing public, these count not at all. If one’s vision is correctable to a reasonable approximation of perfect (20-20),⁴³ one isn’t ordinarily considered blind at all, even though the same deficiency at another time or in another place (without the ready availability of prosthetic or surgical intervention) might be seriously disabling.

⁴¹ Although they absolutely fall into the category of “sighted,” those who are achromatopes (what we might think of as “totally colorblind”) are typically highly photosensitive and might require an array of assistive devices to aid their vision. Oliver Sacks’ *Island of the Colorblind* (Vintage, 1996) is an indispensable reference for those interested in reading more on the topic.

⁴² See Arien Mack and Irvin Rock, *Inattentional Blindness* (MIT Press, 2000).

⁴³ One of the few instances of dis/ability in which ordinary people may reasonably measure their own condition against an “ideal” rather than a “normal” or “average” gauge. Since vision is so readily correctible with prosthetics (spectacles or contact lenses), or now by surgery, the masses have lost contact with the otherwise extraordinarily common experience of vision impairment.

In fact, what we usually think of as blindness, “true” blindness, the total absence of light perception or visual sensation, accounts for only about ten percent of those designated as “legally blind” (Kleege, *Sight Unseen*, 14).⁴⁴ And for most of those who do become blind, the experience only very rarely partakes of that Pauline thunderbolt which is so integral to our sense of blindness, its dramatic onset; few indeed are “struck blind” by an angry God. Blindness is rarely sudden and it rarely happens all at once. Rather, sighted people usually enter into blindness slowly—in a process of becoming. Loss of vision is gradual, taking place over the course of years, even decades. Cataracts, glaucoma, Macular Degeneration (MD), Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP)—all these compromise the eye. They fade, mist, and alter. At the old Lighthouse for the Blind in Manhattan, there was a display in the front lobby that offered photographic approximations of what it might be like to experience one eye disease or another; some photos were blackened except for binocular circles in the center, eliminating all peripheral vision; other pictures had darkened centers, or appeared out of focus, or had white patches. This reality, this continuum of seeing and not seeing, this diversity of blindnesses, obscures the imagined boundary between blind and sighted, confounding our abstract sense of blindness as an absolute. James Knipfel, for instance, describes his own experience of RP. Though “legally blind,”

I could still read fine, and still navigate the streets fairly well in bright daylight, [but] I was losing my depth perception, and my field of vision had shrunk so that I had to swing my head from side to side as I walked, to keep an eye out for things in my path. I could see

⁴⁴ The total number of blind persons in the United States is approximately one million, less than one-half of one percent of the total population. Of these, only about 25 percent are adults of working age.

people walking toward me, but even in the best light I would trip over things close to the ground, like curbs or tree roots. (130)

The range of blind experience, like the range of visual experience, is infinitely diverse. And most importantly, these sets of experiences are not divided from one another, each belonging to a separate group. Without recourse to metaphor, we are permitted to speak of blind sightedness and of sighted blindness, a medley of seeing and not seeing, indefinite, undisciplined, indivisible.

But language is also an important element in our autobiographical endeavors. Even if we weigh and measure the level and quality of our vision, the decision to be blind or to be sighted can reside outside the realm of the material. Stephen Kuusisto, for instance, existing, like Knipfel, at the cusp of seeing and not seeing, describes the relationship between volition and identity; when the definition is unclear, when categorical characteristics are indefinite, the choice of identity—blind or sighted—can become a matter of will. And, as a youth, the writer is certain of his decision: “Who would choose to be blind?” Deliberately enacting himself as sighted, going through the motions of sightedness, Kuusisto speaks of running unguided or of riding a bicycle alone.⁴⁵ “I would conquer space,” he writes, “by hurtling through it.”

I wore telescopic glasses, suffered from crushing headaches, but still chose to ride a bicycle—with nothing more than adrenaline for assurance.

How do you ride a bicycle when you can't see? You hold your head like a stiff flower and tilt toward the light. You think not at all about your chances—the sheer physicality of gutters and pavements. One submits to Holy Rule and spins ahead.

Picture this: A darkness rises. Is it a tree or a shadow? A shadow or a truck? The thrill of the high wire is the greatest wonder of the brain. There is, at the center of our skulls, a terrible glittering,

⁴⁵ Blind bicyclists usually ride tandem.

a requiem light. I lower my face to the cold handlebars and decide it's a shadow, a hole in the sunlight, and pedal straight through. (8)

Georgina Kleege, wearied by the minutia involved in categorizing the varieties of seeing and not seeing, elects to be blind. Following a discussion of the term “legally blind” (a person “whose visual acuity is 20/200 or less, or whose visual field is 20 degrees or less, in the better eye, with corrective lenses”) and a description of her own idiosyncratic blindness, Kleege comes to the point: “I crave the simplicity of a single, unmodified adjective. Blind. Perhaps I could speak in relative terms, say I am blinder than some, less blind than others” (*Sight Unseen*, 10-14). Sometimes the sighted are blind and the blind can see; sometimes blindness or sightedness is an experience or identity that resides exclusively in the structures of language: Description, definition, declaration.

The Blind as Dis/Abled

But while it may be difficult to decide, sometimes, who may be counted (or whether to count oneself), among the blind or the sighted, there remains yet another issue, that of political identity. For blindness also partakes of and participates in the meaning and concerns of a larger community, that which falls under the umbrella term “disability.” To the extent that blindness as a quality or a feature is feared or shunned, to the extent that it marks the body as special or as *trif*,⁴⁶ to the extent that the blind figure—whether real or fictional—is defined by and reduced to his

⁴⁶ Dorothy Herrmann notes that “in the Talmud, the blind were referred to as the living dead. A Talmudic command urged that upon meeting a blind person, one must quickly murmur the same benediction as was said on the death of a relative” (17). Henri-Jacques Stiker notes that Jewish law enumerates blindness as among those “impairments that preclude the offering of sacrifices” (24).

blindness alone, metonymized (i.e., the blind), to the extent that his particular and individual identity is obscured or effaced by generic formula (i.e., the blind man), blindness is automatically and necessarily linked to other forms of disability. To the extent, certainly, that the satellite regards blindness as an opportunity for benevolence, to the extent that the blind is a lay figure mediated by another, helplessness becomes the defining feature of this identity, thus constructing the blind figure as one which necessarily belongs to the larger social and cultural rubric called “disability.”

The trouble here is that it is at least as difficult to establish workable parameters for the category “disabled” as it is to figure out who is “blind.” In fact (as with blindness), defining disability is a notoriously slippery proposition. After all, what is it that defines the so-called “able bodied”? How is the definition of disability to exclude those who are supposed to fall into this category? And what language can one possibly use that will include each member of a group as diverse as the one called “disabled”? Simi Linton’s *Claiming Disability* (1998) offers the following:

A glance through a few dictionaries will reveal definitions of disability that include incapacity, a disadvantage, deficiency, especially a physical or mental impairment that restricts normal achievement; something that hinders or incapacitates, something that incapacitates or disqualifies. Legal definitions include legal incapacity or disqualification. ... Disability [is also] a medically derived term that assigns predominantly medical significance and meaning to certain types of human variation. (11)

Adding further to the evidence that disability means different things to different people, Henri-Jacques Stiker points out that the meaning of disability may shift dramatically from place to place and from age to age. In ancient Jewish culture, for instance, the perceived “impurity” of the subject is what determines his or her membership in the ranks of the disabled, the blind and lame, lepers, amputees, even

those with flattened noses being precluded from the offering of sacrifices (24-25). In the Classical world, congenital “deformity” was the rule of measure, even if it had no impact on the individual’s functional performance. So, infants manifesting “malformations that are benign in our eyes, such as clubfoot, webbed hands, fused fingers, [or] supernumerary digits” were often subject to death by exposure (39). Roman law based its definitions on the individual’s ability to participate in legal/political life. Thus, those “capable of speech were persons at law” regardless of any other factor (Winzer 88).⁴⁷ Rosemarie Garland Thomson complicates matters further by pointing to “parallels [that] exist between the social meanings attributed to female bodies and those assigned to disabled bodies.” Looking over a tradition that dates back to Aristotle,⁴⁸ and calling on examples from Freud, Thorstein Veblen, and Jane Flax,⁴⁹ Thomson observes:

Both the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority. Indeed, the discursive equation of femaleness with disability is common, sometimes to denigrate women and sometimes to defend them. (19)

⁴⁷ This is actually somewhat of an oversimplification. Those considered insane, for instance, were not deemed full citizens. The point here is that those with physical disabilities, including the deaf, could be full participants in Roman political life.

⁴⁸ Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals*, for instance, describes woman as a “deviation” or a kind of “monstrosity” (book 4).

⁴⁹ Thomson would have done well to include Anthony Trollope in her series of examples. Trollope’s *Is He Popenjoy?* (1874-75) includes an entertaining “parody of the women’s rights movement of the day” (Grover 152). Officially named the “Rights of Women Institute,” the organization is otherwise known, by both its proponents and its detractors, as the “Disabilities.”

In our own time, definitions of disability are hotly contested. Current (U.S.) legal definitions of disability all connect in one way or another with the definition established in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA).

Disability.—The term “disability” means, with respect to an individual— (A) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual; (B) a record of such an impairment; or (C) being regarded as having such an impairment.

And the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation notes that

Disability has been used to mean everything from a minor impairment that has no or little impact on activity to a condition that requires one to rely on others for assistance in life’s most basic functions. There is no OK accepted definition of disability. Asking a question such as Are you disabled? could elicit many responses, depending on the particular individual’s definition of disability. To some, it may mean using a wheelchair. To others, the inability to do a specific task or activity. Or, it may imply a health condition. National surveys and programs serving people with disability use specific stated definitions or terms, but each program or survey uses definitions addressing its specific purposes. The concept measured by a given survey or administrative data system may be limitation of activity, limitation in function, need personal assistance, chronic condition, or others.

Such a multiplicity of definitions, and definitions with such broad outlines of inclusion, means that there is extraordinary fluidity to the categories “disabled” and “nondisabled.” (Simi Linton notes: “I am not willing or interested in erasing the line between disabled and nondisabled people, as long as disabled people are discriminated against, and as long as naming the category serves to call attention to that treatment” [13].) The Deaf,⁵⁰ for instance, though traditionally numbered among the disabled, and protected, certainly, as disabled, by current U.S. legislation,

⁵⁰ The designation “Deaf” (with a capital “D”) includes those with “early and profound deafness,” an experience which shapes an individual’s entire cognitive

nevertheless reject this label, identifying themselves, instead, as a “linguistic minority” and a distinct political interest group (Lane 155). People with HIV, on the other hand, even those who are entirely asymptomatic, are defined as having a disability. Even HIV-negative persons who are merely rumored to be HIV-positive, or who have some association with HIV, fall under the protection of the ADA.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice,

Persons who are discriminated against because they are regarded as being HIV-positive are also protected. For example, a person who was fired on the basis of a rumor that he had AIDS, even if he did not, would be protected by the law. Moreover, the ADA protects persons who are discriminated against because they have a known association or relationship with an individual who is HIV-positive. For example, the ADA would protect an HIV-negative woman who was denied a job because her roommate had AIDS.

Disability, then, legally-speaking, is literally a matter of semantics. In fact, the term disability is one which is currently used, both in this dissertation and in a larger social arena, to encompass a range of people and conditions so expansive as to be almost infinite. As Michael Bérubé observes,

the definition of disability, like the definition of illness, is inevitably a matter of social debate and social construction ... humans have defined normal in as many ways as there are human cultures. In the wake of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, “claiming disability” will involve taking up a contested place in an intricate socio-legal apparatus ... (viii)

Or, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson puts it, disability is not so much about “the attribution of corporeal deviance” as it is about “the ways that bodies interact with the socially engineered environment and conform to social expectations” (6-7).

Disability writers and theorists have deliberately employed the word disability as a means of generating union and inclusion, to help bring together an enormously

development and (in the best circumstances) leads to full participation in Deaf

diverse political community. For disability theorists and disability rights advocates, an expanded definition functions to create a power base from which to effect possible political change. For these purposes, it may suffice to identify as disabled to become a part of the community. Simi Linton writes that when disability is intended as a “social/political category, people with a variety of conditions are identified as *people with disabilities* or *disabled people*, a group bound by common social and political experience” (12). By this definition, the community of disabled persons might include individuals with “canonical” physical disabilities like blindness or paraplegia, with cognitive disabilities like Down Syndrome, with newly emerging and “invisible” physical disabilities like Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, with learning disabilities like dyslexia or ADHD, or with disfigurements which might not be acknowledged as “disability” according to some definitions. This disserteration, too, while deliberately steering clear of any explicit call to political action, relies on the idea that “disabled” identifies and includes a set of people and circumstances with uncertain boundaries. And, given the nature of the relationship between the words “blind” and “disabled,” the fluid boundaries of each, and the shared significances, these terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

Blind Spot

Visible: From the scenic Zion-Mt. Carmel Highway in Utah’s Zion National Park, the 400-foot-high “Great Arch,” a geologic feature identified as a “blind arch” because it does not include a pass-through, but is simply an arch shape recessed into a cliff wall. (The term—blind arch—originates in architecture, where it is used to

culture and heritage (Lane 155).

describe a decorative arch applied to a wall.) To stand gazing at Zion's massive blind arch, however, is not merely an exercise in tourism, but is a rather more significant—or signifying—act. The gaze of the sightseer at work on the blind arch functions not merely as a passive aesthetic experience, but as an active force in the cultural construction of blindness. For the arch itself is not merely a geological feature, but through our classification and designation, through our naming of it, becomes a kind of rhetorical architecture, a cultural object, coded according to a scheme and set of meanings established not by nature, but by humanity. The significance of the blind arch—its value as sign—is bound to its position as an object to be observed, engaging the spectator in the process of establishing the extraordinary cultural significance of blindness.

First of all, the “blindness” of the arch is a characteristic which is difficult to attribute. It is not that the arch itself cannot see; after all, there are no “seeing” arches. Rather, a blind arch is one that does not afford a “view.” *It blinds us*, inhibits the vision of the onlooker, restricting the eye and forstalling the imagination. A blind arch is a passage without an outlet, a dead end for the eye. It frustrates the viewer with its potentiality, framing a vista occupied only by a stone face. The naming of this style of partial arch betokens a particular set of cultural attitudes about blindness—like the “blind gut,” a type of digestive system so-named because of its single opening, the blind arch is an entrance without an exit, a structure which betokens impassibility, which invites us to think of blindness as obstruction, as a dead-end, as a superficial or “faux” state. The blind arch is merely an applique of a “real” arch; it suggests, it resembles, but ultimately it is an impostor; it imposes on our sensibilities. If the blind arch is really a false arch, does that then mean that the

blind man is really a false man, incomplete and obstructed, suggestive only of the genuine article?

And can we go anywhere from here? Or is all this leading us down a blind alley, a place where we can't see, from which there is no escape? The idea of the blind alley inspires fear, sets our adrenaline going. It is always dark in a blind alley, always night. The blind alley isn't a cozy place, like a *cul-de-sac*; it is indefensible, a place where one might be blind-sided. One enters a blind alley with trepidation, with all senses heightened. Like the blind arch and the blind gut, the alley is blind because it has no egress. Again, it is a dead end. Again, blind and dead, hand-in-hand. Blindness, then, in one sense, is about a failure of aperture; it is about being closed up, closed down, endogenous, self-referential, self-consuming. These blind spots are fearful places. (The blind spot is a fearful place; what's there, just past the corner of our eye, in that spot where we're most vulnerable, just that designated area where we can't see? This is the spot from which we will be blind-sided.) Like the body of the blind man (blind/folded), folded in upon itself, the blind spot is a vacancy, an omission, but it is also a trap, a moment or a space which calls to mind the uncanny or the supernatural. Reminiscent of the magician's box or of the venus fly-trap (both blind guts, each of its own sort), these "blind" spaces are to be entered only by the intrepid; they are places where one may disappear or be digested.

This is a bit of a muddle, not a blind alley perhaps, but a dim and murky spot, a moment for the writer to grope about and find her way through, feeling her way along, unsure of the ground, hesitant. But this is not true blindness, which often carries with it a sure and active mobility. Real blind people, the ones who make their way in the world, are applied scientists and mathematicians, constantly plotting

trajectories, forming hypotheses, mapping their ground, assessing the environment. They can zip from point-to-point with a self-conscious self-assurance that the sighted will never possess. Masterful. Given the opportunity, always get directions from a blind person. For the mobile blind know their space in a way that is literally alien to the sighted. By comparison, sighted persons are tourists in their own communities, unsure of landmarks, stopping to check street signs, never knowing exactly how many blocks from here to there, how many steps up or down, how many buildings to the corner, how many yards to the subway entrance. Sighted people are disabled by their eyes, by their seeing,⁵¹ relying always on that crutch which is (almost) always available. And like tourists, the sighted meander unsure of their route, scattered, stopping constantly to check their progress against that map which is the visible world. Talking once with a blind man, a potential employer, I was told this rather amazing story: As he waited for a moment at a street corner near Grand Central Terminal, a (presumably) sighted person inquired of him if he was “lost” or if he was waiting for someone. Stunned by the two choices offered, my interviewer stood mute, not knowing how to reply. Another blind friend tells the tale of an encounter with a cop in a New York City subway station: The officer approached him to remark that the cane he carried ought to be adorned with a red tip at the business end. This friend also was left speechless. What does one say in reply to such a comment? (“I’m Jewish, too, you know, in addition to being blind. Would it be more convenient for you if I sported a Star of David on my coat, as

⁵¹ H.G. Wells touches on this idea in “The Country of the Blind,” the inhabitants of which regard the experience of seeing as a form of madness and the anatomical presence of fully-developed eyes as a disease. See also below.

well?”) This is the way: The sighted almost inevitably assume their abilities are superior to those of the blind in any environment, but the truth is that the sighted rely too much on their vision. They waltz through life depending unconsciously on this sensory accident, not on a set of managed skills. The sighted don't know their way around and they don't pay attention. Where the blind are methodical, the sighted are random walkers, untrustworthy and undisciplined, a hazard to themselves and others.

So, when the writer stops short, in the muddle referenced above, thinking to offer some bit about “the blind leading the blind,”⁵² the pause is necessarily amplified; for in the shadow-echo, in the reverberation of those blind-leading-blind men, there is a range of expressions which authorizes us to think of the blind as lost and ignorant. When we speak (or, more likely, when we hear others speak) of the blind leading the blind, we are supposed to shake our heads in disapproval and disbelief. This scripture-turned-cliché constructs an image that symbolically encapsulates the entire meaning of the word “ineffectual.” When the blind lead the blind, we believe without thinking, they really are headed into a blind alley, a ditch, a dead end. When the blind lead the blind, no one ever gets anywhere. This is, so often, the way language shapes our experience of the world. Even if we know that the blind can be excellent guides of themselves and others, our language bespeaks our unconscious belief that blindness is automatically agnostic, unknowing.

Whether we speak of a blind trust or of trusting blindly, the symbolic foundation is the same. The former expression describes a financial arrangement “in

⁵² See Matthew 15:14: “they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.”

which the beneficiaries do not have knowledge of the trust's specific assets, and in which a ... third party has complete management discretion" ("blind trust"); the latter speaks of the fool whose personal faith has no foundation in reality. But both phrases rely on the common understanding that not seeing equals not knowing. So, too, the double-blind study: In this case, scientists or research physicians offer treatments where neither they nor their subjects know if the treatment is "real." A third party is responsible for managing the study and only this party has access to information about which medications or treatments are administered to whom. Both doctors and study participants, then, have information concealed from them; and since, for the purposes of the research, both parties are cut off from vital information, they are regarded as "blind."

But the language which describes the double-blind study not only relies on the idea that not seeing is not knowing, it also partakes of another and equally fundamental notion about blindness. That is, that our eyes deceive us and that seeing is itself a prejudicial experience. Justice is blind for a reason, after all.⁵³ Rather than trusting her duplicitous vision, she balances evidence without regard for regarding. Behind her blindfold, she is undistracted by adornment, uninfluenced by display. Blindness, then, in this instance, is about being fair (and to be fair, of course, is also to be beautiful). For those who are interested in studying and weighing facts, in pursuing knowledge for its own sake, for scientists (and philosophers, perhaps), there is no animal more unscrupulous than the one who

⁵³ Remember from Arlo Guthrie's "Alice's Restaurant," "another typical case of American blind Justice": The reactionary Officer Obie has built his entire case on a set of highly detailed and annotated photographs, which the (literally) blind judge dismisses out of hand before ordering a perfectly reasonable punishment.

doctors his research, who cheats, who peeps out from beneath his blindfold and alters data to fit the desired progress or direction of research. A little different, perhaps, but still to the same point, there is a passage in Dickens' *Christmas Carol* wherein a party guest cheats at blind-man's buff: "I no more believe," the narrator tells us, that "Topper was really blind than I believe he had eyes in his boots." And this compromise of fair-play so that Topper might pursue "that plump sister in the lace tucker" (III. 63). So much for love being blind. Seeing then, is seen as an active force, not merely a sense, but an approach which shapes, creates, constructs, determines. Unlike the passive blind, full of the latent powers of judgment and discretion, those cheaters who peek and pry, who need their vision to make make their own path, those who must see where they're going the whole time, who refuse to allow themselves to be led (by the sighted, by the evidence, by the data), they may be inventors, they may be artists, but they can never occupy the grand positions of trust that require a blind indifference to everything except the facts.

What does it really mean, then, when the blind lead the blind? Though the expression itself may be about ineffectuality, about ignorance, about lostness, if the blind are the only ones to be trusted, if only the blind may embody the ideal of Justice, then perhaps the blind are really more fit to lead themselves (and others) than are the sighted. In fact, the question of who will lead the blind marks the site of a terrible historical struggle, a nearly invisible struggle, to be sure, but one which does surface from time-to-time.⁵⁴ One instance of such a contest occurs in 1824, at the

⁵⁴ This project, dedicated as it is to an exploration of the relationships of power between disabled figures and their satellite counterparts, necessarily touches upon a number of these occasions. See, for instance: The material on and from James Knipfel later in this chapter; the contest for power around the person of Helen

Paris Institute for the Young Blind. There, the young Louis Braille, a student at the Institute, proposed a code with six raised dots that would enable the transliteration of printed writing, numerals, punctuation, and musical notation for the blind.

Though the code proved far easier (and quicker) than the raised-print system then in use, the directors rejected its use. And though their objections were that the switch between systems would not be economically viable, the directors may have had another, more unconscious motivation. As Georgina Kleege observes, “what seemed particularly threatening about Braille’s code was that he produced it himself.”

When the blind learned to write at all, they used a stencil to make Roman letters. But they could not read what they wrote. Braille’s code was easy to write, requiring only a couple of simple tools. It would allow blind children to send messages to each other and to read them without sighted intervention. To give blind children a method of communication that their sighted custodians would not be able to oversee meant trouble. Who knew what messages those blind children might write—“Teacher is a big meany,” or worse, “We have nothing to lose but our chains”? It was not until 1847 that Braille’s code was authorized for use in the institute. During the twenty-three-year interim, students secretly used and trained each other in the forbidden code even though discovery meant punishment, even expulsion. (224-25)

When the blind actually lead the blind, then, perhaps what really happens is an empowerment that may be terrifying to the sighted. In part, because the potential erasure of blind need signals the potential erasure of the sighted from the blind scene, the demise of sighted benevolence; in part because those blind, once unshackled, embody a force which has always been perceived as dark and unpredictable. The blind man is like those 1950s depictions of the atom, our friend so long as he/it remains in our control, a stupendously destructive threat if

Keller detailed in Chapter One; the struggle between Elizabeth Barrett/Browning and Hugh Stuart Boyd described in the preceeding chapter; and the discussion of Laura Bridgman in Chapter Four.

uncontrolled. Perhaps, this, then, this is where the blind and where these blind expressions have been leading us all, all along.

Blind Rage

Technically, this means being so angry that one cannot see. The rage is the starting point; it induces blindness, prevents us from seeing, from using our best judgement, *from thinking rationally, from weighing circumstances with a cool and level head* (ironically, since Justice is also blind). The blindness is a by-product of the rage, almost an afterthought, not even a punishment (as it is for those who masturbate), but a lapse or a failure that can easily be prevented, a weakness against which we are cautioned.

The blindness is an excuse, too, an explanation for the things we do and say when we are enraged. If the meaning behind the expression is right, we cannot be held responsible for our conduct when we are in a blind rage. Our feelings obscure our present consciousness—we cannot see and cannot understand; indeed, we are scarcely aware of our actions. Here, blindness presents itself in part as helpless, dependent; it is a tantrum-ing child; the blind creature inside is acknowledged to be without judgement or reason, a humbled and disabled echo of our mature and sensible selves. Again, it is not a blind man enraged, but the rage that personifies blindness; it is an eruption that must be understood and excused—“Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.” The blind, even in metaphor, aren’t responsible to and for themselves, but must evidently be managed by the able-bodied.

But there is something more: The specter of the blind man who haunts the phrase, *Blind Rage*. For while the expression implies that blindness is an unfortunate result of rage, there is—like a light seen in ghostly after-image when we shut our eyes—an enraged blind who exists apart from the meaning described above, a wraith who tempts us to believe that the blindness came first, that the rage is the by-product, a lashing out of the sightless creature, robbed of his vision. There is a sense, one which Ernesto Sábato owns as a “conviction . . . that the blind rule the world, by way of nightmares and fits of delirium, hallucinations, plagues and witches, soothsayers and birds, serpents, and, in general, all the monsters of darkness and caverns” (qtd. in Derrida 89n). Polyphemus, monstrous in ancestry, in form, and in appetite is one such spirit. Blinded in his orphan eye, the giant sends a barrage into the sea after his attacker, the heroic Ulysses: “The blind thing in his doubled fury broke / a hilltop in his hands and heaved it after us” (book IX). Furious, the cyclops rages blindly and this blindness, too, embraces a more whole-scale deficit; powerless to right himself, robbed of his eyesight and of the carefully-tended flock which had provided his daily occupation and his daily food, Polyphemus is depicted as the embodiment of loss, as the absolute dupe or mark. Though the monster’s rage, when closely parsed, is perfectly comprehensible, the epic audience is enticed into thinking Polyphemus is both greedy and stupid, a fool, laughable; he is easily deceived by a fake ID, roaring out to his fellow cyclopes “Nohbdy, Nohbdy’s tricked me, Nohbdy’s wronged me,” and yet this fool is still fear-inspiring, a giant who hurls hilltops, boulders, and potent curses after Ulysses’ fleeing crew. The cyclops is an archetype: Drunk and gluttonous, his gaping mouth dribbling “streams of liquor and bits of men,” his violence is a blind force, random; the men he kills and eats are

selected less carefully than the ordinary person chooses m&m candies; without looking, he clutches the two who are nearest at hand and he consumes them entire, “innards, flesh, and marrow bones”; like an animal, the cyclops is both without discernment and without civilization. He fails to separate food from offal; and he fails to set aside a portion of his meat as an offering to the gods. Even with his solitary eye intact, the cyclops behaves blindly, without order or discipline. His appetite and his rage are both without boundaries. Nobody knows who will be the next meal (or maybe, Nobody knows). The colossal objects he tosses after Ulysses and his men may hit or miss—it is the terrifying potential of the blind throw—one can never be sure if the target is safe.

This thinking about blind rage actually occurs partly in response to a slippery bit of 9/11 minutia. The infamous Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, “convicted mastermind” of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing (“American Muslim Council”), is one of these strangely resonant figures; frequently referred to simply as “the blind sheik” (a google search on 9/5/02 turned up almost two thousand items which used this phrasing to identify Rahman), the Egyptian cleric is a cornerstone of our symbolic reconstruction of the 9/11 attack. Our loss is shaped by a sense of randomness, by our concerted desire to believe we are the innocent victims of extremist violence. The attack seems senseless (blind), the attackers seem like uncanny incarnations of blindfolded children playing high-stakes party games: Blind man’s b(l)uff, pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, piñata. Groping, flailing, armed with heavy sticks and sharp pins, the blinded child is replete with intent, hunting urgently for his object, but his aim is uncertain. The other partygoers flee squealing from his fumbling hands—the aim may be unsure, but the potential for harm is absolute.

Among the signs and symbols which have helped to lend meaning to the trauma of 9/11, amidst the language that constructed a narrative around the inexplicable, is the blind sheik; malicious, virulent, living in darkness, Rahman's figure carries the potent force of the blind oracle, foretelling a tragic end ("you, godless ones, you will come to a bad end, like Oedipus!"). It is not his immediate threat which is fearsome, but rather his seemingly supernatural hate, his special blind-man curse, his blind but malevolent lashing out. Like Satan himself, the Prince of Darkness, the blind sheik's wrath is perceived as inscrutable. His rage seems aimless, pointless, else why would we (innocent) Americans fall in its path? How neat a figure to embody our understanding of the Islamic zealot—like Polyphemus in his blind rage, Rahman hurls missiles against our precious selves. Sometimes there is a near miss and it is merely a heavy sea which threatens to overwhelm our bark; sometimes, out of blind luck, perhaps, there is a hit and the appetite of the cannibal blind is sated. The body parts mixed in with the rubble of the fallen towers are like the tid-bits that rain from the cyclops' mouth, remnants of a gruesome meal, the human crumbs that fall from the mouth of the blind ogre.

Indeed, the appetites of the blind are always suspect; unseeing, they will eat anything: Bats (technically low-vision animals, but proverbially blind) are usually fruit-eaters, but they live a notorious alternative symbolic life as blood-suckers, vampire alter-egos; the near-blind Gollum from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* also has a cannibalesque appetite, relishing young goblins or tender hobbits, but willing to feast on all sorts of disgusting odds and ends, from bat-wings to raw fish (ch. V); the red-eyed witch from Grimm's "Hansel & Gretel" lives in a house made of bread and sugar, yet she chooses to dine on human flesh, preferably in the form of plump little

boys and girls.⁵⁵ Altogether, the blind are unfortunate dinner companions; existing in the realm of the monstrous and apart from the cleansing effects of light and reflection, solitary in their darkness (bats, like the Cyclops, in their caves; Gollum, in his subterranean murk; the Grimms' witch hermit-like in her deep-forest dwelling), the blind are not social creatures, but are turned ever inward on themselves; they have no exterior reference to check their ghoulish tastes.

But the blind appetite seems also to be informed by a pre-existing, an underlying rage. Even our jokes about blind people—like the old saw about the blind man who wreaks devastation in a china shop, or an antique shop, or any shop full of delicate valuables, by twirling his guide dog around his head on a leash (“just looking around” he says to the stunned proprietor)—bespeak our fear that the blind are a fundamentally destructive force. Sighted culture envisions the blind as comically terrifying drivers (recall Richard Pryor’s *Bustin’ Loose* [1981] and Al Pacino’s *Scent of a Woman* [1992]). Stephen Kuusisto, in his *Planet of the Blind* (1999), describes a Blue Cross/Blue Shield advertisement using Mr. Magoo: “In the advertisement Mr. Magoo is driving down a hill in an antiquated car. He’s blissfully unaware that he’s crossing the railway tracks. He mutters about ‘potholes’ as he drives across, just ahead of an oncoming train” (23). Even the mildest, the most tender and delicate of blind flowers—that unassuming pacifist, Helen Keller—is infamously destructive until childhood teacher Annie Sullivan takes her in hand: The blind child bites, kicks, flails, rages (and eats, by-the-way, like a pig), until she is disciplined, forcibly

⁵⁵ Like bats and like Tolkein’s Gollum, the Grimms’ witch is technically a low-vision creature, but her inability to check Hansel’s fattening-up process visually (relying instead on her sense of touch) would certainly qualify her as blind by any modern legal definition.

indoctrinated into the expectations of the sighted world. Sighted people may have blind rages, but for the blind, it seems that rage may be a way of life, a furious resentment, a bitterness against the world of light and seeing.

Samson: Even the heroic blind are bitter and dangerous creatures. Betrayed (again and again, talk about blind!) by his girlfriend Delilah, Samson is finally captured by the Philistines who “put out his eyes” before binding and imprisoning him (Judges 16:21). Like Polyphemus, Samson seems rather a dupe; every time he turns around his trust has been betrayed, first by his wife (who tells his secret to her countrymen), then again, a tripartite betrayal, when his father-in-law “gives” that same wife to Samson’s best friend (Samson presumably having abandoned her), and finally by the harlot Delilah, who wheedles out of Samson the secret of his strength, then sheers his hair and turns him over to the Philistines. There is nothing laughable about Samson’s rage, though; unlike the cyclops, this strong man takes no shots in the dark, but always makes sure of his mark. Samson’s fury means certain destruction for his enemies. His vengeance comes in the form of fire and famine, and in the pulling down of great buildings to crush everyone inside, even though it means his own death as well—a suicide mission. Samson is determined, zealous, intent, and purposeful. And this we must remember: Despite all the ill-treatment he suffers, Samson’s revenge is focused. Without thought for the woman who betrayed him, for his lost freedom, for his hard labor, or for his having become an object of amusement and ridicule, Samson calls on his Lord, “remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes” (16:28). Of all Samson’s sufferings, it is his blindness, the memory of his absent eyes, that ushers forth his rage.

It is hard to tell, sometimes, with these infuriated and violent blind, which came first, the blindness or the blind rage. So it is with the monstrous cyclops, whose appetite for manflesh precedes the puncturing of his great eye; so it is with that belligerent biblical hero, Samson; and so it seems to be with Saul prior to his visitation from the Lord. Filled with what he supposed was righteous zeal, the sighted Saul is party, in one way or another, to all sorts of violent activity, “breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). Ironically, it is his temporary blinding, on the road to Damascus, which works momentarily to quell his fury. As a blind man, Saul is patient, docile, willing to be led. But the reader knows the truth: That angry passion which so disturbed the Saul who came before will continue to characterize the man when his sight has been restored. The rage is always there, latent, just under the surface. When the scales fall from his eyes, so too does this momentary and superficial calm. He will be as angry in his Christian mission as he ever was in defense of his Jewish practice. In truth, his blindness is an uncannily quiet moment, a lull in the storm of his life, the eye, as it were, of his personal hurricane. This is one of our perennial concerns when it comes to the blind. We suspect that the rage is always there; whether or not it is visible, the blind seem always to be nursing their anger. Even when it is dormant, that rage is lurking, ready to manifest itself, like Samson’s vengeance, when the sighted have been lured into a false sense of security.

It is worthwhile, too, to consider the anger actually felt by actual blind people. This bad mad blind about which we have been speaking does, after all, have an uneasy relationship with reality. Indeed, the sighted anxiety to assume the satellite position, to offer help to the blind, is partly informed by twin desires—to placate and

to control. And both of these sometimes presume on the pre-existence of a violent predisposition: Keep that unruly figure happy, keep him disciplined, keep him from hurting himself, or others, or the property around him. Walk only in the crosswalk, only when the light is green; stick to the rules; let me guide you; let me lead you. Though all of this may be reasonable, even necessary, the disciplinary precautions continue to carry residual significance. The blind man, undisciplined, is a manifest danger.

This point arose in a Disability-themed class I taught at Hunter College. I recall counseling a student who, having offered help to a blind stranger he saw about to cross the street, was dismayed (and a little resentful) when the man roughly rebuffed his offer. Comparing the problems of racist and able-ist paternalism, I was able to offer this particular student a context for the blind stranger's impatient response, but for most, there is an intense discomfort that circumscribes this act of assistance. Blind people do sometimes need help, but knowing when and how to offer that help is a delicate matter. In fact, even when aid is desired, offering/accepting assistance graciously is a challenge. The wrath of the blind, even towards this seemingly charitable act, exists in a real and palpable way, and sometimes very close to the surface. Jim Knipfel, a writer who has been slowly losing his sight since childhood (and whose anger arguably lives closer to the surface than it does in most others), gives voice to this wrath in a discussion with his mobility trainer. The "cane lady" begins:

"Say you're walking down the street, and someone decides to help you, whether you want help or not. Whether or not you've asked, this person's going to help you. This will happen to you at some point. There are people like that in the world. Whether they're drunk or stoned or whatever, they decide that this is their mission for

the day. So someone comes up behind you and grabs your arm without you expecting it. What do you do?"

"Whack 'em with the cane?"

"No, you don't do that."

"'Cause it'll just go *flubbity-flubbity*?"

"No. You don't hit people. Here's what you do." She demonstrated a very quick, very easy two-part self-defense technique to remove an undesired guiding hand from my arm.

"That's how you let the person know you don't need help. It's all in the element of surprise."

"The element of surprise, yes. *Then* I whack them with the cane, right?" (203-204)

Though we are clearly meant to laugh here, Knipfel's persistently violent attitude is at least as much a part of the life he describes as is his humor. Indeed, it seems impossible to disentangle the two modes. In another section, for instance, he recalls purchasing his first cane and writes of his disappointment that he "couldn't very well beat any of [his] assailants to death with it," and of his true desire: "I wanted something deadly ... [a stick] with style and class and menace" (166). Elsewhere, as Knipfel begins what he calls "Blind Man Training," he seizes with delight on the idea of a friend for a brilliant "pencil-vending" technique: "You know what you do? You take one of those pencils, see, and jab it into people's eyes when they stop, and say 'Ha! Now you can go sell pencils, too!'" (179). This is not the rage of the blinded Polyphemus, perhaps, or of Samson, or of "the Blind Sheik," but even as hyperbole, Knipfel's dark humor reveals a cooler and more earnest kind of anger. His penchant for violence is significant; even if its expression is limited to the rhetorical, the real-life rage described by Knipfel is embodied in more symbolic blind characters.

The autobiographical writing of Georgina Kleege is more measured, but is still telling. In a piece actually entitled "Blind Rage," an open letter to Helen Keller, Georgina Kleege pours out her annoyance at a world that fails to accommodate, at

all the inconveniences that go along with being blind, and that go along with being a blind scholar particularly. But Kleege is annoyed, too, with the unreasonable, the inimitable patience exhibited by Keller:

I mean for God's sake Helen, when you read the page proofs of your books, it meant someone had to spell the text letter by letter into your hand. Tell me that didn't make you grind your teeth and tear your hair. But you never let it show, Helen. I scan your writing for even a sign of ire or irritation. The most you ever express is the occasional nervous unease. But then you follow up with flowery praise for all the wonderful, kind people who did so much to help you, utterly effacing both the difficulty and your effort. Because you did this, you left a legacy behind for the rest of us—the likes of me. "Why can't you be more like Helen Keller, especially since you're really nowhere near as bad off as she was?" You set an impossible standard. You with your cheerfulness, your stiff upper lip, your valiant smile in the face of adversity. So those who came after you feel a moral imperative to fight back the tears, to minimize the trouble, to avoid asking for help. (57)

Kleege's complaint here is fair enough. Even with the accommodations afforded by late twentieth and early twenty-first century culture and technology, even with the passage of the ADA, with readers paid with public monies, free mail for the blind, public transportation, and computers, a blind person still needs to contend with a maddening array of inconveniences. To believe on some level that one must live up to the example of the perfect and placid Keller, a sainted sister whose seeming serenity will always be out of reach, against whom one's own attitudes and abilities will always be unfavorably contrasted—it is just too much. The point that Kleege makes is simply this: Blind people are not made of stone.

And yet ... there is a symbolic relationship here. Blind people are not made of stone, but stones, like bats, are proverbially blind. Stone blind, blind as a stone. Derrida notes that "the eyes of a sculpture are always closed, 'walled up' ... or turned inward, more dead than alive, scared stiff, more dead than the eyes of masks" (44).

Or, as *Jane Eyre*'s Rochester has it, the blind man is "a sightless block" (vol. III, ch. 11, 459). The blind are not made of stone ... or are they? Is this, finally, the end of the blind rage, the ultimate determination, a way to make the blind less terrifying, to eliminate their proclivity to tear down buildings, or to hurl hilltops after us, or to destroy merchandise in china shops, or to hit us with their canes? The stone-eyed sculpture, the sightless block, are human figures, blind, but neutralized, their rage sealed up, like their vision, in a vault, inert, harmless.

The closing frame of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Part II* (1974) depicts a stone-faced, stony-eyed Michael Corleone, bitter, angry, and alone. The shot is artfully managed so that Pacino's eyes are totally obscured, reflecting no light at all; beneath his lids, the audience sees only a black darkness, a suggestion, perhaps, that there is some larger truth to the accusation of the young Don's wife: "Michael, you are so blind." Admirers of the early Godfather pictures (or of the novel) may recall that the one symbol typically used in association with Mario Puzo's story is the framework of a marionette; intended, presumably, to represent the near-omnipotence of the Godfather, the implication is, of course, that he is a kind of puppeteer, almost a god, a being who pulls strings and sets the lives of others in motion. How ironic, then, this parting shot; the god-father may be omnipotent, but he is not omniscient; despite his seemingly perceptive nature, his vision is limited. His power is like an angry thunderbolt, a blind rage that works to destroy the innocent and the guilty, enemies and family alike, shedding blood indiscriminately; his bloody hands reach, by proxy, into the womb, to murder his own unborn son, another small self, also living in darkness. Perhaps, too, Coppola's final still shot suggests a solution, a form of imprisonment for the Don's violence. Like the victims

of the Gorgons, the Godfather undergoes a graphic transformation, his blind rage sealed in stone, his eyes, darkened, dead and unseeing, his very being morphed into sculpture, contained, powerless.

The Hunting Blind

Outside a sporting goods store in Corpus Christi, Texas is a series of small steel towers, each suggestive of a garden obelisk. From ten to perhaps fifteen feet tall, the structures have about them a powerful elegance—each is a miniature *Tour Eiffel*. These are hunting blinds. Set discreetly in the woods, they are supposed to blend with the surroundings, enabling a hunter placed on a platform atop the framework to wait unseen for his chosen prey. A hunting blind is a curious thing, blind, it would seem, because it is invisible, or because it endows the hunter with invisibility. It is part of his camouflage, a device with almost magical powers, a dream-coat. Echoes of fairy-tales and comic-book super-heros: Don this costume and climb into this gadget and you will be granted power over the beasts. You will see them, but they will not see you.

The blind offers the hunter an advantage, actually assigning blindness to the animal being hunted, allowing the creature to be blind-sided. The hunting blind is merely a mechanism, an appliance for imposing blindness onto other beings, but still it names a terrifying and intoxicating power; to be unseen, to blind the other, is to own the power of life and death. But this power remains equivocal; the haven, the place of power, the hidden position, invisible, easily becomes a trap; without an exit, the sanctuary becomes a vault, a tomb, a blind alley. The tools employed by the hunter point, ultimately, to his own vulnerability, to his underlying nakedness. The

blind (blindness) marks an unseen, a mystical line between his power and his liability, his handicap. There is a certain violence, a fear of the unexpected and the brutal, that goes along with blind territory. The hunter, in his blind, lies in wait for his (blinded) prey; he makes himself like a brute, masking his humanity. The concealment, the invisibility, the blindness—all one—are integral to the scheme of death.

This is why, in a sense, blindness inscribes a landscape of fear. The expression, “blind-sided,” means to be attacked from an unexpected quarter, from the place which one cannot see, where one is not looking, does not look, cannot look; but it serves to remind: Do not approach an animal on its blind side, from behind, or on the side with the missing or the damaged eye. The blind side is dangerous; it looks out on a dark and mystic region from whence, we all know, danger approaches without warning. It is death, again, which always comes from this unseen place.

The idea of blindness is indefinite. Blindness does not describe a blind person, the physical condition of not seeing, but embraces a world of moral and mental obscurity and obfuscation. It is about concealment. It delineates an emotional state, a capacity for knowing, understanding, empathizing. Blindness is the precondition for objectivity. It is irrational, and inspirational. Even the word, “blind,” refuses definite boundaries; our language tells of blind arches, blind alleys, blind guts ... of hunting blinds, all expressions which invite us to question the locus of blindness, the site to which it may securely be attributed. Blindness, then, is not a fixed thing; it floats, it shifts, it fluctuates, it moves from place to place and from person to person unchecked, unnoticed, without warning, like a virus.

Blindness itself is a contagion (as Jose Saramago makes explicit in his novel, *Blindness* [1999], which tells the story of an epidemic of blindness). It is interesting to note the following physiological phenomenon: When one eye is diseased, the other frequently experiences complications, often itself descending into blindness, as part of what is called a “sympathetic reaction.” Medicine and law often function as sympathetic disciplines. That blindness leads to blindness is encapsulated in the most perfect and primal way by the code of Hammurabi: “An eye for an eye.” (Do we hear echoes here of the visionary Ghandi, “An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind,” or of Lear, his intuitive blindness soon to be made physically manifest, “Nothing shall come from nothing”?) Like the living dead, the fictional blind (or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, the written blind, the significant, the signifying blind) exhibit an uncanny hunger for the unaffected, a desire, a will, or a hidden agenda to infect the sighted with their own deficit. Recall, for instance, as part of Jim Knipfel’s edgy humor, the notion that blind pencil vendors might use their sharpened wares to poke out the eyes of the sighted, thus increasing their own ranks (179).

Tiresias is a reluctant prophet, but his second sight, the seeing behind his failed eyes, regards Oedipus blind. “You are but a poor wretch,” he shouts at the king, who has been throwing Tiresias’ blindness in his face, “flinging taunts that in a little while everyone shall fling at you.” Driven to the point of revelation, Tiresias, near gloating, tells Oedipus that “one day a mother’s curse and a father’s curse alike shall drive you from this land in dreadful haste with darkness upon those eyes” (356-57). It is as though he already beholds the hideous scene of the king’s self-inflicted mutilation:

When that unhappiest woman [Jocasta, Oedipus' mother and wife] lay stretched upon the ground [having committed suicide by hanging], we saw another dreadful sight. [Oedipus] dragged the golden brooches from her dress and lifting them struck them upon his eyeballs, crying out, "You have looked enough upon those you ought never to have looked upon, failed long enough to know those you should have known; henceforth you shall be dark." He struck his eyes, not once, but many times, lifting his hands and speaking such or like words. The blood poured down and not with a few slow drops, but all at once over his beard in a dark shower as it were hail. [377-78]

The blind Tiresias is not responsible, of course, for all this gore, but his anticipation of the king's blindness follows an established rhetorical pattern: Prophecy or curse, it is awfully hard to tell the difference, and either way, the blind seer urges Oedipus in the direction of his own blind destiny.

John Varley has a somewhat different vision; his spin is much more positive, more celebratory of blindness both as a potential reality and as a condition of metaphorical significance, but the spreading, the infectious nature of blindness remains a constant. In a story that ought to be much more widely known, "The Persistence of Vision" (1978), Varley tells of a utopian community called "Keller," inhabited almost exclusively by deaf-blind occupants (the exception being that the children of the residents are often both sighted and hearing). The narrator of the story is hearing and sighted, a visitor who describes with admiring wonder the magnificent harmony, efficiency, and love which the Kellerites seem to share. Above all, he is taken with the apparently perfect nature of their communication with one another, their language enabling a seamless and transparent communal understanding. The only trouble with this language is that it cannot be completely shared by those who can see and hear. Thus, the narrative culminates with the sighted and hearing characters, including the narrator, voluntarily relinquishing their

extraneous senses so that they may enter more thoroughly into the transformative language discovered by Keller's deaf-blind founders. There is no urging, nothing vindictive or violent about the change, and yet, that same familiar pattern remains: Where the sighted come into intimate contact with the blind, there is the real and constant hazard that blindness will migrate into this new territory, contaminate the clear eyes of the seeing, reduce (or elevate) the sighted to blindness.

H.G. Wells' story "The Country of the Blind" (1904) speaks directly to this anxiety. Inviting an ironic re-reading of the Classical motto "In regione caecorum rex est luscus" ("In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king"), Wells' tale describes the experience of Nunez, an explorer who encounters a community of blind people in a sheltered valley high up in the Andes, entirely cut off from the outer world. Initially, Nunez believes that he will be able to assume power over a group he imagines to be weak and helpless, but the inhabitants of this little utopia surprise the narrator with their astonishing capability. Far from being able to take charge of the blind (he keeps repeating the motto like a mantra: "In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king"), Nunez finds that he is merely a "clumsy and useless stranger" (452). Moreover, his descriptions of the visible world earn for him a reputation of "general idiocy and inferiority" (458). The blind men of Wells' little world are eager, threatening, invasive in their approach to the sighted Nunez; he attempts to elude them, but their blindness and their cooperative approach make them virtually inescapable:

Far away he saw a number of men carrying spades and sticks come out of the street of houses, and advance in a spreading line along several paths towards him. They advanced slowly, speaking frequently to one another, and ever and again the whole cordon would halt and sniff the air and listen. ... They were moving in upon him quickly, groping, yet moving rapidly. It was like playing blind

man's buff, with everyone blindfolded except one. "Get hold of him!" cried one. He found himself in the arc of a loose curve of pursuers. . . . "You don't understand," he cried in a voice that was meant to be great and resolute, and which broke. "You are blind, and I can see. Leave me alone!" . . . He began to run, not knowing clearly where to run. He ran from the nearest blind man, because it was a horror to hit him. He stopped, and then made a dash to escape from their closing ranks. He made for where a gap was wide, and the men on either side, with a quick perception of the approach of his paces, rushed in on one another. (455-56)

When Nunez falls in love with one of the maidens in the community, there is only one way to become eligible as her mate: He must be "cured," made "sane" by means of "a simple and easy surgical operation," the removal of "those queer things that are called the eyes, and which . . . are diseased, in the case of [Nunez], in such a way as to affect the brain" (461-62). On the level of metaphor, Wells' story seems intended to reflect on the isolation of the visionary in any society,⁵⁶ but the expression of this reflection also speaks to a primal fear of the blind, a recurring anxiety that they will bring the sighted into their dark seclusion, that they will seize us, consume us, imprison us in a fearful and isolating darkness, if not death, then a terrifying shadow, an anticipation of that dreaded end.

"O dark, dark, dark . . ."

That blindness holds its victims in thrall, that it extinguishes their light, their capabilities, their possibilities; that blindness is darkness, imprisonment, death; these

⁵⁶ Of course, this tale also invites a number of other interesting interpretations: Consider Michael Sherborne's observation that "'The Country of the Blind' powerfully dramatizes the tyranny of the majority over the individual, but equally it shows the gifted individual tempted by conceit and by fantasies of power" (xxvii-xxviii); another possibility is to read the story in biographical terms, as evidence of Wells' chronic fear that marriage, sex, women exist as potentially castrating temptations.

are inescapable associations. Not, of course, that these notions are necessarily true, but their existence, the way they pervade our culture and our discourse, describes our primary belief, the starting point of our vision of blindness. Shakespeare's sonnet 27, for instance, alludes to the "darkness which the blind do see" (8). Blind men, we are taught to believe, live in darkness, in a pit, a prison, a tomb, set apart from light and from the seeing world. As the blind Milton has the blinded Samson lament:

Scarce half I seem to live, dead more than half.⁵⁷
 O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
 Irrecoverably dark, total Eclipse
 Without all hope of day!
 O first created Beam, and thou great Word,
 Let there be light, and light was over all;
 Why am I thus bereav'd thy prime decree?
 The Sun to me is dark
 And silent as the Moon, when she deserts the night
 Hid in her vacant interlunar cave.
 Since light is so necessary to life,
 And almost life it self, if it be true
 That light is in the Soul,
 She all in every part; why was the sight
 To such a tender ball as th' eye confin'd?
 So obvious and so easie to be quench't,
 And not as feeling through all parts diffus'd,
 That she might look at will through every pore?
 Then had I not been thus exil'd from light;
 As in the land of darkness yet in light,
 To live a life half dead, a living death,

⁵⁷ Compare, also, these words from Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

Thus with the Year
 Seasons return, but not to me returns
 Day, or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn,
 Or sight of vernal bloom, or Summers Rose,
 Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;
 But cloud in stead, and *ever-during dark*
 Surrounds me, from the chearful wayes of men
 Cut off, and for the Book of knowledge fair
 Presented with a Universal blanc
 Of Nature's works to me expung'd and ras'd,
 And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out. (III. 40-50; emphasis added)

And buried; but O yet more miserable!
 My self, my sepulcher, a moving Grave,
 Buried ... (*Samson Agonistes*, ll. 79-103)

And Milton's representations of blindness as a "a land of darkness" and "a living death" are time-honored, a convention that reaches back into antiquity and that continues to inform contemporary approaches to blindness.

So, in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the audience is told that the blind seer Tiresias "works in his own night" (25), and so, too, is the audience witness to the outburst of the newly-blinded Oedipus,

O cloud of night,
 Never to be turned away: night coming on,
 I can not tell how: night like a shroud! (69)

Denis Diderot begins his "Letter on the Blind" with the supposition that a blind man cannot be threatened with imprisonment because he already lives in "a black dungeon" and that he welcomes death because it releases him "from a dark cell" (14-15). In the nineteenth century, the Victorians (and their non-British contemporaries) with great readiness assume the mantle of this metaphor, this interment of the blind in a dark cell, a tomb. Baudelaire writes of the "horrible" blind, who "ford across an endless black abyss" (9); Thomas Hardy describes the suffering of a blinded bird, "Eternal dark thy lot" (10). And, as we have already seen in Chapter Two, Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes privately of her (blind) tutor:

he, /as>like/ a prisoner in a dungeon, sounds every stone of the
 walls round him, & discerns a hollowness, detects a wooden beam ...
 patiently pricks out the mortar with a pin—all this, in his rayless,
 companionless Dark—poor Mr. Boyd! (Kelley 13: 264)

The heroine of Wilkie Collins' *Poor Miss Finch* has a "blind horror of dark shades of colour, whether seen in men, women, or things," and she declares that she "associate[s] life and beauty with light colours, and death and crime with dark

colours” (ch. 13; 74). And though she seems otherwise content in her blindness, Miss Finch lashes out at those who would keep her blind once sight is within her reach: “‘It is like death,’” she cries, “‘to be sitting here blind, and to know that a man is within a few hours’ reach of me who can give me my sight!’” (ch. 32; 210). In his *American Notes*, Charles Dickens repeatedly portrays that deaf-blind phenomenon, Laura Bridgman, as being trapped, imprisoned, or entombed:

There she was before me; built up, as it were, in a marble cell, impervious to any ray of light, or particle of sound; with her poor white hand peeping through a chink in the wall, beckoning to some good man for help, that an Immortal soul might be awakened. (81)⁵⁸

In our own time, even the most sophisticated thinkers rely on the notion that blindness and darkness are inextricably intertwined, that the blind are somehow encapsulated within their own blindness, impermeable to light and to the seeing world. Jacques Derrida, for instance, speaks of “the great filiation of the night that buries Homer and Joyce, Milton and Borges” and asks how “the memoirs of the blind [would] be written,” without “the day, ... the rhythm of the days and nights without day or light, the dates and calendars that scan memories and memoirs?” (33). Even for Borges, blind himself, and himself hyperconscious of the fact that darkness does not necessarily accompany the blind experience, the pressing weight of the centuries of metaphor are overwhelming. Even while Borges instructs us that he does “not see black” and complains that his blind sleep is disturbed by “the greenish or bluish mist, vaguely luminous, which is the world of the blind,” even as he tells us that he “wanted to lie down in darkness” and that the “world of the blind is not the night that people imagine” (474), the poet cannot abandon the language that has

⁵⁸ For more on Dickens and Bridgman, see Chapter Four.

always constructed our sense of blindness. In this same lecture in which he speaks of his own blindness as “luminous,” Borges continues to rely on the darkness that has been prepared for him, referring to his “darkened eyes” and to his blindness as “that slow nightfall” (476, 474).

Like the weight of air, the inescapable pressure of the atmosphere that is so ever-present to our bodies and our experience of life as to exist continually beneath our consciousness, the language that constructs blindness is so diffuse, and has so widely infiltrated our figures of speech, that it, too, is inescapable. Without ever knowing a blind man, without ever being touched by his groping fingers, without ever seeing that blind-man spectacle, or chucking a piece of change into the blind beggar’s rattling cup, we all experience blindness, all *know* blindness as part of this pre-instruction, as an integral part of a language that teems with blindness and with visibility. That ubiquitous blind “man” for instance, castrated in the eye, is yet generically masculine, a given embraced by Diderot (among others), who presumes that the Blind are necessarily men: “It is extremely likely that women would be held in common if there were a whole race of blind people or else that their laws against adultery would be extremely harsh. For wives would find it so easy to deceive their husbands by making prearranged signals to their lovers” (15). And in Spanish, the blind are not only gendered male, but are also necessarily “ciegitos,” living a life always in the diminutive. Blindness and sex ... and sexlessness. Blindness and deception. Blindness and darkness. Blindness and visionary powers. All these go hand-in-hand, woven into the fabric of our language.

The Female Blind

I am re-reading Elizabeth Kata's 1961 novel, *A Touch of Blue*, and I am troubled by yet another blind thing, a rumor, perhaps, an image, an idea that is indistinct, that is un-get-at-able ... something about sex and the blind girl.

In Kata's book, Selina, an innocent blind girl, lives with her violent, prostitute mother, Rose-ann, and with her grandfather, Ole Pa, both drunks, and both abusive. Selina spends her dark days doing all the scut-work in the family's one-room apartment—cooking, cleaning, laundry—as well as sorting and stringing beads for a pittance which is paid directly to her mother. She never attends school—indeed, she never leaves the cell-like room—she doesn't know braille, has never had mobility training or occupational therapy; she has no friends, no company, no connection to the outside world apart from the demeaned and demeaning relationship with Rose-ann and Ole Pa (both of whom work as restroom attendants). The first-person narrative tracks Selina's slow escape from her prison of blindness, poverty, and racial prejudice. During a series of trips to the nearby park, the white narrator is befriended by and falls in love with an educated middle-class Black man, Gordon Ralfe, who effects her release from the abusive Rose-ann as well as from the life of prostitution being planned for the hapless blind girl.

In many ways, *A Touch of Blue*, which is typically assigned as reading during the middle school years, employs the narrative format of the fairy tale. Like Cinderella, like Rapunzel, like Sleeping Beauty, Selina is imprisoned and abused by a jealous, unnatural mother-figure, while the father-figure who enables the abuse malingers impotently in the background. It is ultimately the role of the Prince—tall, dark, and handsome—to overcome the spell which imprisons the fair maiden and to

rescue her from a life of drudgery and despair. The fairy-tale theme of the book is emphasized early on when Gordon recites for the “golden-haired” Selina “Be Ready with Bells and Drums,” a poem dedicated to the virtue of “the pure-hearted girl.” And Selina, like the fairy-tale maidens, is, indeed, pure of heart. Comely and fair, the teen-aged blind girl is well-spoken, polite, and diffident, despite her constant immersion in the slangy, foul-mouthed yatterings of Rose-ann and Ole Pa. The radio, it appears, has taught her how to speak clearly and correctly, in addition to educating her in a wide variety of useful and interesting facts. Moreover, though her mother and grandfather are sickened by everything having to do with religion, Selina is a faithful, if rather unorthodox, Christian, another gift of broadcasting. Having lived such a sheltered and insular life, Selina is a true innocent, quite literally not knowing anything about normal relations and relationships between human beings. She is without expectations and without animosity; she casts no blame and has no pride. Beautiful, young, selfless, loving, and blind, Selina is a blank slate, the perfect woman.

But the blind girl is also a richly sexual character. Having been raped at an early age by one of her mother’s clients, Selina feels—in all her innocence—that she is wise in the ways of the world. When Gordon laughs at her inexperience, the blind girl is quick to tell him, “I am no baby, Gordon. . . . I’ve been—laid. I’ve been done over.” And Selina is puzzled when Gordon is silent, worrying that perhaps he feels she has been “showing off” (53). Moreover, while Selina shudders to think back on the night she was raped, she is yet urgent and explicit in her desire for Gordon. She risks everything to try to meet him in the park, going out for the first time on her own, getting caught in crowds and carried across the street, getting pushed and

pulled, knocked down and nearly trampled, all in her desire to be with Gordon, with her “darling.” With him again, Selina sets the tone for their day together, “my day of love” she calls it, despite Gordon’s hesitation in reciprocating her affection (79). Though Gordon has used only a single word of endearment with her, the blind girl seizes on that one sign as sure proof of his love: “I can’t believe you love me,” she says, “that I love you.” When Gordon asks her to come to his apartment, her reply is an emphatic “Yes. Yes, yes” (80). In his apartment, Selina is anything but demure in expressing her feelings, anything but coy in acting on her desire. “I have to be kissed,” she tells Gordon,

“Think about me. Think about me, Gordon. Let us have one little moment to be happy in,” I begged. I really begged like a beggar. I wanted so much for Gordon to kiss me. Not a stormy kiss. Not a friendly laughing kiss on my nose or my cheek. I wanted a kiss of love on my mouth that seemed to be burning, on fire. My mouth was on fire, I’d never known such a crazy feeling.

“Please,” I said, and I didn’t know my own voice. My voice sounded hot, like my lips.

“No,” said Gordon, and he moved to stand up. I reached out my hand and caught at him. Gordon loosened my hands and moved away. I followed him and we stood together in the room.

“Please...” I put my hands against him, against his chest and I felt the thumping of Gordon’s heart. It throbbed and thumped, I pressed my hand against it and tried to stop it. I didn’t really want it to stop but I knew it was hurting him and I couldn’t bear that he get hurt.

“Your heart is hurting you,” I said, and again I didn’t know my own voice.

“Yes,” said Gordon and his voice I didn’t know. I felt suddenly that he was a stranger to me and I moved quickly away.

“Selina,” Gordon called my name and caught me in his arms. He seemed to know I’d felt him to be a stranger and he held me against him. His hands moved down my arms—over my shoulders—they touched my breasts and burnt through my blouse. His hands were on fire. Everywhere his hands touched me I turned to fire, and when he said my name again, he didn’t finish the word for his mouth was on mine and the air-cooled room became a blazing fire.

Now I knew what it was to love.

“This is love,” I said.

“Yes,” said Gordon and his mouth came down on my willing mouth. My tongue moved over the smoothness of his teeth. I loved the smoothness of his teeth and the feel of his tongue in my mouth. I loved Gordon and kissing, just kissing and being kissed was not enough. Gordon knew it was not enough. He carried me through the burning air and we lay together on his bed.

“You are going to make love with me,” I cried out softly. I’d never been so mad. Mad and happy. (118-19)

This is innocence, this total availability, this ardent, this unequivocal passion, this total submission, this grateful giving over to physicality, to pleasure, to the man, to the act of sex. And it is, ultimately, Selina’s blindness which enables this kind of whole-hearted sexuality. Without vision to enable her racial prejudice, the blind girl is the very willing partner of a Black man she would certainly refuse if she could see. Without the experience of the world she would have had as a sighted person, Selina has no real sense of the rules of courtship, no fear of being the first to voice her affection, no hesitation in going to a man’s apartment, no idea of the impropriety of her begging to be kissed. Despite her essential virginity, the blind girl appears to have no bashfulness and she expresses no hesitation as kissing leads to groping and groping leads on toward coitus.

Indeed, there is something about Selina, something about her blindness, a sensuality that provokes the sighted world, that brands her indelibly as a sexual attraction. Her mother, recognizing Selina’s powers, repeatedly addresses her as “slut”: ““Oh you *slut*’ Rose-ann sloshed me but good with her wet cleaning cloth. ‘Oh you *slut*!’ she yelled” (94). (It is no accident that Kata pointedly has the mother and grandfather address Selina as “Sleena”—sounds like “sleaze.”) Mrs. Favaloro from across the hall sees Selina waiting at the door, hoping for some help getting to the park; the respectable Italian matron scolds, “I see you. Sporco! Dirty one! You think perhaps I am a man, a marito. Blind, oscuro, blind prostituta. I am no man. I

know you. You do good to hide” (68). At least one of Rose-ann’s clients sees the appeal, locking the mother out in the hall while he rapes the daughter. And Rose-ann’s friend Sadie is also keen to the possibilities of Selina’s blindness; the two aging prostitutes plan a new venture, thinking to pimp the blind girl out while they retire on the proceeds. “I’m *telling* you,” says Rose-ann,

“Me and Sadie, we got plans. Sadie’s smart. Sadie says you can be a pay-off. Sadie says you will be a curiosity, a gas-like-wow!” (100)

Part of the provocation comes, of course, from the innocence. The insularity of the blind girl’s life, her inexperience, means that all her thoughts and feelings are at the surface, unobscured by a civilized education. Selina doesn’t know enough to shield herself, to be demure; she doesn’t know that love is a game, that she is supposed to hide her feelings, that her body is a treasure to be yielded slowly and with great caution. Like a child, the blind girl knows no discretion; she reveals everything ... all at once.

But there is more to this, to the fantasy of blind-girl sex. Sadie is right: Selina is a “curiosity,” a fetish-seeker’s dream-come-true. And it is this single fact, this fetish for the blind girl, which is the un-get-at-able thing that makes me look to Kata’s book. For there is an aura, a whisper of rumor and innuendo which exists apocryphally around the blind, a sensuality, an awareness of, a sensitivity to the sexual which is so heavily veiled as to be virtually invisible. Though there are hints as to sexual roles historically filled by the blind (and especially by blind women)—Dorothy Herrmann, for instance writes of “early societies [which] sanctioned the selling of blind children into slavery or prostitution, and [of] the Orient, [where] blind women were routinely forced to become prostitutes” (11)—there is little information available on this subject. A routine search of popular and scholarly

works on prostitution (covering roughly twenty-five texts) finds no reference to blindness at all. Boolean searches using various keyword combinations—including: Blind, blindness, girl, girls, porn, porno, pornography, prostitution, sex, xxx—turned up neither information nor sex sites on the internet. (The sole site which it appeared would yield some fruit for this study terminated with the message that the user ought to be ashamed.) Conversations with friends, colleagues, and acquaintances often left my interlocutors feeling rather uncomfortable; not only did most decline knowledge of any special aura of sexuality about the blind, but most, too, seemed put off by the idea of blind sex entirely.⁵⁹ Still, heavily veiled though it may be, there is yet some lingering association between blindness and sex, a gossamer that emerges as, for instance, Kata's portrait of Selina.

We may catch another (partially obscured) glimpse of this association through blind-related humor. There are the endless Helen Keller jokes, but especially, say, the one about the plunger left in the toilet. There is the old joke about the nun and the blind man, she consenting reluctantly to speak to him while she takes a bath, only to realize, too late, that the blind man who has been admitted to see her really can see her; he has come to install Venetian blinds. And, of course, what would a blind man say as he passed a fish store but, "Hello, ladies!" while politely tipping his hat? Alike demeaning to women and humiliating to the blind, the sexual nature of this humor is not exactly subtle, and yet it requires explication. For its charge is equivocal, in some ways suggesting the allure, in other ways a fear of blind sexuality.

⁵⁹ One of the difficulties surrounding standard representations and ideas of disability, blindness included, is that they are de-sexed. Stereotypes generally insist that people

In the case of the first joke, we find Helen Keller once again an object of injured innocence; the joke admits us into the fraternity of sexual violence, echoing Selina's night with her mother's john; it stands as a testament to the strange sexual charge which envelops the idea of Keller. Dorothy Herrmann notes that "men would always be more fascinated by [Keller] than women—perhaps because the tactile world in which she lived was, for many males, intimately linked with their own eroticism" (183). The plunger joke offers a darker window into this eroticism: Keller is a desirable object and we would like her to be penetrated, yet we are ashamed or afraid of the wish and imagine the phallus as an alternate object; sex with Keller is violent, punishing, associated with toilets, waste, and dirt. The joke with the nun (a genre ubiquitous in its own right) points not only to the vulnerability of the (presumably sexually innocent) woman, but also to the ever-present threat of the blind man: You can never be sure he is what he seems, never be sure that he's really blind; you must always be on guard that he is not admitted under false pretences; the blind man is a trickster figure, at once blind and sighted, amorous and impotent. The fish store joke is a measure of his hidden desire, for this story is not only about the not-seeing which is not-knowing, but also about this more shielded aspect of blindness: The blind is always alive to sexual possibility, sniffing out opportunities that make the sighted shudder. While we laugh, our stomach is supposed to turn—he would even fuck a woman who smelled like *that*, whose sex was ripe to the point of decay. The blind man may be stupid, he may be desperate, but he is, above all, on the prowl, alive to his own sexual desires.

with disabilities are not sexual beings with needs and desires like the nondisabled.

A moment to explain the presence of the blind man here, who has groped his way into this section devoted to the female blind (What is he doing here? Is he lost, or is he waiting for someone?): The blind man, even with his desperate fish-store level of sexual desire, is not really a man. Rosemarie Garland Thomson is most direct in her equation of femaleness with any form of disability, calling first on Aristotle to illustrate her point:

Aristotle... places a certain human figure, the “generic type,” at the center of his system. On the outer margin is the “monstrosity,” the physical consequence of Nature’s having “strayed” onto a path of deviance, the first stop of which is the female body. Aristotle thus conjoins the “monstrosity”—whom we would today term “congenitally disabled”—and the female outside the definitive norm. In Book Two [of *Generation of Animals*], Aristotle affirms this connection of disabled and female bodies by stating that “the female is as it were a deformed male” or—as it appears in other translations—“a mutilated male.” (20)

Moreover, blindness in particular, as we are informed again and again, is really a form of castration. “Freud’s well-known establishment of a substitutive relation between the eye and the penis” encourages a multiple reading of the Oedipal punishment (Gezari 83). When Oedipus mutilates himself, gouging out the eyes that have seen simultaneously too much and too little, he is at the same time engaging in a form of symbolic castration. Derrida observes that to

illustrate the overwhelming “truth” of this Freudian axiom ... one has all the material for a simple and striking demonstration in the story of Samson. Samson loses every phallic attribute or substitute, his hair and then his eyes ... thereby giving him over to a sort of sacrifice, a physical sacrifice. He is ... a figure of castration, a castration-figure ... (105-106)

And the blinding of *Jane Eyre*’s Rochester is, of course, typically interpreted as “a symbolic castration” (Chase 467). So, by all the powers of Aristotle and Freud,

Derrida and Richard Chase, it is agreed that the blind man's blindness un-mans him, feminizes him, enabling his uncanny access to harem tents and nun's bath-rooms.

Of course, there is a difference. Blind men are not blind women are not blind girls, despite the insinuations of philosophers, critics, scholars, theorists. All this only points to the fineness of the line, the difficulty of the boundary between blind and sighted, disabled and nondisabled, male and female. The subtleties involved—blind within sighted, female inside male (and vice versa), sexuality cloaked in innocence—reflect the difficulty of anatomizing the connections between sex and the blind girl.

So far as it *is* possible to examine such connections, as insubstantial as they are, it seems that the inferred sensuality of the blind figure is constructed in large part by what the sighted world sees as a blind lack of self-consciousness. To quote more fully from the Derrida passage we saw in Chapter Two:

[Samson] is not only a figure of castration, a castration figure, but, a bit like all the blind, like all one-eyed men or cyclopes, a sort of phalloid image, an unveiled sex from head to toe, vaguely obscene and disturbing. ... He is stretched toward the invisible and threatening place of his desire in an energetic, determined, but uncontrollable movement, being sheer potential, potentially violent, at once groping and sure, between erection and fall, all the more carnal, even animal, in that sight does not protect him, most notably, from shameless gestures. More naked than others, a blind man virtually becomes his own sex, he becomes indistinguishable from it because he does not see it, and not seeing himself exposed to the other's gaze, it is as if he lost even his sense of modesty. The blind man has no shame, Luther said in short. (106)

And as it is with Samson, and with Derrida's blind "man," so it is with Selina and with the blind girl more generally; she is "vaguely obscene and disturbing ... more naked than others." Though the blind girl may be pure of heart, the clear visibility of

her churning passion is yet an essential aspect of her character, as if she has “lost even [her] sense of modesty,” as though the blind girl “has no shame.”

Kata gives us one instance, but blind girls in other stories also share this attribute. Without the modesty that seems to belong exclusively to the sighted, the blind maiden is altogether too ready to love. Dickens offers an example in *Cricket on the Hearth*, in which “Blind Bertha” falls in love with her villainous employer even though he clearly despises her.⁶⁰ Wilkie Collins presents another in *Poor Miss Finch*. Having met a strange and mysterious man only one time, and having produced only embarrassment on his part, the blind Lucilla nevertheless falls instantly and irrevocably in love. Her companion explains:

The minds of the blind are, by cruel necessity, forced inward on themselves. They live apart from us—ah, how hopelessly far apart!—in their own dark sphere, of which we know nothing. What relief could come to Lucilla from the world outside? None! It was part of her desolate liberty to be free to dwell unremittingly on the ideal creature of her own dream. Within the narrow limit of the one impression that it had been possible for her to derive of this man—the impression of the beauty of his voice—her fancy was left to work unrestrained in the changeless darkness of her life. What a picture! I shudder as I draw it. Oh, yes, it is easy, I know, to look at it the other way—to laugh at the folly of a girl, who first excites her imagination about a total stranger; and then, when she hears him speak, falls in love with his voice! But add that the girl is blind; that the girl lives habitually in the world of her own imagination; that the girl has nobody at home who can exercise a wholesome influence over her. Is there nothing pitiable in such a state of things as this? (33, ch. 6)

A modern narrative, Thomas Harris’ *Red Dragon* (1981), offers an additional illustration. The blind girl in this tale, Reba McClane, initiates sex with the protagonist of the book (who, unbeknownst to her, is a savage murderer). After fellating him, the blind girl goes on to engage with the killer in the only voluntary act

⁶⁰ For more on this, see Chapter Four.

of intercourse he has ever experienced. Entirely unconscious of how close she is to being maimed and killed herself, the blind girl here is all beneficence, giving generously of herself, and blind to the possible consequences of her ready availability. This, certainly, is part of the allure. Existing without that primary symbolic mechanism of self-assessment—sight—the blind girl is dreadfully prone to love without permission, to declare her love without reciprocity, and to offer her fortune (such as it may be, corporeal or otherwise) without the guarantee of marriage.

To say she is all sex is perhaps overstating the case, but it seems fair to suggest that the blind girl is more open, more available, less demure than her sighted counterpart. This is, of course, about blind shamelessness but it is also about the myth of blind super-powers: Hearing, taste, touch are all supposed to be enhanced, a “gift” to make up for appalling loss. For in addition to being without true self-consciousness, the blind girl is also all about *feeling*, about what Dorothy Herrmann might term “tactility.” Without the ability to see, the blind are thought to possess extraordinary “compensatory faculties.” Thus the history of blind poets and singers, prophets and visionaries. Thus the rumors of blind virgin carpet-weavers, as elusive to document as is the blind girl sex fetish. It is in the air, essential to our sense of the blind, that they must be exceptionally good with their hands, with their noses, with their ears, and so it must follow, with their legs and feet, with their lips and mouths, whole blind bodies dedicated to capturing and giving sensation, to make up for the one sense which is absent.

This is also an essential element of the sex fantasy: The blind girl will do anything because, seeing no evil, she is innocent, because she doesn’t know any

better, because she has no shame; but the blind girl will also feel more and deliver more erotically because she is so “sensitive,” because she must understand and express herself through what senses she has remaining. So it is that the fantasies of the sighted conflate ordinary blind skills, like the ability to work well with one’s hands, with specifically erotic talents; it is the reason that Indonesian blind masseurs meet to take action “to restore their tarnished image, which has been associated with prostitution,” an activity, it seems, that “has been widely carried out under the guise of blind masseurs’ businesses” (“Masseurs”). How seamless is this transition, between blindness and touch, between touch and sex.

And one more thing: Power, of course, the ultimate aphrodisiac. For the blind girl is, finally, framed by, defined by her blind-girl helplessness, eroticized by the imagined power of her sighted partner. Because the blind girl cannot see, any man must be good enough for her. First, because she is defective, deficient; she must accept what is offered and be grateful for it. Like the blind man in front of the fish store (“Hello, Ladies!”), it behooves the blind girl to greet every sexual opportunity with cheerful politeness. But also, the blind girl is helpless in her choice because she cannot see: Is her partner ugly, deformed, defective (or, like Selina’s Gordon Ralphe, Black)?⁶¹ She will never know unless someone tells her. As the opening lines of a song entitled “Blind Girls Best” go: “i like the blind girls best / they don’t care about my appearance.”

This is the primary attraction of the blind girl from *Red Dragon*. The serial-killing Francis Dolarhyde, protagonist of the story, spends his childhood with a

⁶¹ In the Peter Bogdanovich movie, *Mask* (1985), there is a blind girlfriend for the lead character, a boy with elephantitis.

minimally corrected cleft lip/cleft palate and his sense of himself as hideously deformed has been reinforced by the series of homes he finds as a boy. (He grows up, for instance, self-identifying as “Cunt Face.”) The gruesome ritual murders he undertakes are motivated in part by the need to transform himself from a helpless and ugly figure to a beautiful and powerful one. So, when he first encounters Reba, he is surprised and pleased by a new sense of freedom, the feeling of relaxed self-consciousness that comes from the blind girl’s inability to see him, to be repulsed by his looks: “He was free to look at her. His gaze could move over her as freely as the air. She had no way to parry eyes” (292). Dolarhyde’s initial attraction to Reba is similar, then, to his attraction to corpses. (The serial killer is also a necrophiliac.) His pleasure comes from his sense of power, to borrow a phrase from Charles Dickens (describing the pleasures of the Paris Morgue), from “*looking at something that could not return a look*” (“Uncommercial Traveller” 278). So, too, the killer’s growing attraction to the blind girl lies in his further sense of power over her, his sense of self-restraint when he thinks of biting off her fingers combined with his sense of how vulnerable those fingers are, how easily, how unconsciously she puts them within range of his powerful jaw. Acting on this sense of power, to exercise or to exorcise his violent desire, Dolarhyde brings the blind girl on a strangely symbolic date, to feel a sedated tiger undergoing dental work at the local zoo. Sweating and quivering, Dolarhyde looks on while his date manipulates the sleeping tiger’s powerful body, aroused by the blind girl’s proximity to danger, by her apparent unconsciousness of how that danger surrounds her on all sides. And even though this blind girl is a little more savvy than most, although she is keenly aware of Dolarhyde’s skittishness about his appearance, although she is alive to his

predilection for the mingling of sex and danger or sex and violence—(“She was perfectly aware that it had excited him to see her with the tiger” [331]), although she is a being apart from those innocents described above—even then, even then, what power does she have? She is excruciatingly vulnerable. Knowing her weakness, her fear of fire and of locked doors, the killer ultimately uses Reba’s blindness to make his escape. He preys not only on the blind girl, but on the weakness of our presumptions about blindness. This is what we know about the blind girl, this is the feeling of power that excites us: Locked in a room, she could never get out without help. If you hide her clothes, she will never find them. Force is made simple; rape never found an easier target.⁶² Selina, locked in her cage, cannot escape the violent ministrations of her invisible tormentor. Given the blind girl’s blindness, you might compromise her in a thousand ways, taking advantage of her sightlessness to violate every aspect of her being.

when she tells me to turn off the tv
and come to dinner
i just put it on mute and watch the game
to see the winner

⁶² Two recently reported stories of child sex abuse illustrate the connection here between blind helplessness and sexual power. In the first instance, a 12-year-old blind altar boy was molested by a priest whose help had been sought following the death of the boy’s father (McLaughlin). The second case is perfectly summed up by the *New York Post* headline that reported it: “Blind-Boy Sex Stunner: Woman School Aide Busted in Rape of Kid, 11, at L.I. House” (Miller and Connor). Though these are boys rather than girls, the fact that they are children, in addition to being blind, invites us to regard them as occupying a feminine position. And, certainly, their having been sexually abused compromises the symbolic foundation of their masculinity. Moreover, each child is molested by a trusted adult authority figure, in each case a helper figure, or “satellite,” a person formally designated to assist the blind. Putting aside the rage and disgust proper to ourselves as audience, it is essential to realize that it is the perceived helplessness of these “victims,” as children, as blind children, their highly structured positions, defined by their subordination to the figures who abused them, that undoubtedly provided the sexual charge for the attacker in each case, and that defines the excitement of our own outraged response.

when we're going out i get to
 pick out all her clothes
 it's ok if they don't match cause
 she'll never ever know

I'm sorry to say she's on a
 losing streak
 cause i always win
 when we play hide and seek

and if i break any of her stuff
 I'll scream oh my god
 and blame it all on her
 seeing eye dog

i get to read her diary
 and all her mail
 and anything else that doesn't
 come in braille
 and on april fools day when i move
 all the furniture around
 she just laughs it off when she trips
 and falls on the ground (Blind Girls Best)

This, ultimately, is the attraction, the fantasy, the reason for the singer's refrain:

"that's whyyyyyy i like them better / that's whyyyyyy I'll never let her / go o o o o o
 o o o o o." The blind girl is held captive, trapped by her own blindness. She is
 totally exposed, totally pliable, totally forgiving; unshielded, unconscious, she is the
 ideal female object, a walking, (and in some cases a talking) opportunity for
 domination.

The Eye and the "I"

There is one more tale, one more blind reference, which insists on a place here, that
 is, the veiled, whitened, cataracted, dead, blind, "vulture eye," the "Evil Eye" which
 motivates the murder described in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," a story
 with both an eye and an "I" at its center.

I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever. (121)

Daniel Hoffman has written persuasively of Poe's exquisitely short story, explicating much of the eye's significance: The "Eye becomes the all-seeing surveillance of the child by the father, even by The Father" (228); "the evil in that Evil Eye is ... a *mingling of the stern reproaches of conscience with the reminder of [the] subjection to time, age, death*" (229); "In its aspect of getting rid of the Evil Eye, this murder is a more intense and violent form of blinding" (231); and this blinding by suffocation, and the amputations of head, arms, and legs that follow the murder, are read by Hoffman as "symbolic castrations" (232), the final and most conclusive act of domination by the young madman over his victim, an "old man" who appears to occupy the position of the father. Ultimately, Hoffman suggests, this attempt at controlling the old man, this attack on "his elder's sexual power" (232), is a futile and maddening loop, for the "eye" and the "I" belong to one another. And the potential escape from surveillance necessarily concludes with the narrator's "Imp ..., his own conscience," decrying him to the Authorities. Thus the narrative "I" is "never free from the gaze of the old man's clear blue eye" (232). Hoffman's reading offers some exciting inroads into Poe's text, laying elemental groundwork for thinking about the story, but he does not peer as closely as I would like into the "vulture eye" itself, scrutinizing its opacity, regarding its appearance, diagnosing it. His analysis of the text constructs a platform from which to regard important symbolic imagery, but Hoffman still retreats from that most obsessive, most aggressive of tactics, giving Poe's old man a much-needed poke in the eye.

That eye is begging to be touched, to be poked at, to be prodded; it needs to be examined, assessed, dissected, anatomized, labeled, not simply for what it might *mean*, but also, and more primarily, for what it *is*. For the economy of Poe's narrative is such that the reader cannot be sure if that eye is blind or all-seeing, the eye of God or the Devil, the eye of the self or the eye of the Other. Is the Evil Eye, as Hoffman reads it, a "clear blue," its vision impeccable, omniscient, surveying the guilt, the misdeeds of the narrative "I"? Is the film over the eye a clear protective cover, making the eye untouchable, impenetrable? Is it a mask that shields the power of the eye, that conceals, that disguises? Or is it a barrier through which light cannot pass, creating a blank in the space of the eye? Is the eye blind, cut off from seeing, and from the seeing-which-is-knowing, which is wisdom, knowledge, power—cut off, in that realm of Freudian metaphor, from the seeing which is sexual potency and potentiality—true paternity? Is the old man, living, already blind, castrated, impotent? Or is he all-powerful, possessor of a fearsome, magic, all-seeing eye? The eye is, truly, at the center of the tale, and yet it is an unknown. Like Gothic space, uncanny, the eye is a secret chamber, the pupil an aperture darkened or obscured, a secret entrance, perhaps a false entrance, into the unknown and unknowable, into seeing or blindness, the vision of the other. And uncanny, too, that the eye is unique, not alone, perhaps, in the old man's head (though for all we know this eye may be the only one), but cyclopean in its nature, if not alone, then an eye at least that is set aside, that is unlike its partner, fraternal rather than identical. The exceptional quality of the old man's "vulture" eye implies a double-ness, a setting apart of one eye from the other, a two-facedness, perhaps, like the Roman god, Janus, "guardian of gates and doors" (Levey 426).

In fact, the old man's seemingly solitary eye exists at the center of a vortex of mythological suggestion; the vulture eye, the Evil Eye, the eye with the film over it, the inescapable, unreadable eye, the eye which is both blind and all-seeing, invites thoughts of other eyes, blind and seeing, singular and multiple. There are the one-eyed cyclopes, and amongst them Polyphemus, blinded, catastrophically, "in one of the most terrifying descriptions of an eye gouged out" (Derrida 88). Hoffman discovers an echo of the god of Norse mythology, one-eyed Odin, "one-eyed because he sold his other *for knowledge*" (229). Recall the hundred eyes of Argus, always open, always seeing, always awake, always alive to the likelihood of sin, of infidelity. Or the multitude of eyes that look out from the serpentine hair of the unseeable Medusa, the eyes which cannot be met, which must be shunned, the seeing of which must bring about a certain, sudden, stony death.

What universe is this that Poe describes, a lonely house, laden with riches and guarded by a strangely familiar God—a blind God, perhaps—a benevolent old man whose inscrutable eye inspires fear and murder, whose dismembered corpse, concealed from sight, yet betrays itself and its horrifying death by a resurrection within the living? This is blindness, inescapable as the "I" itself, unpredictable, unknowable, unquantifiable. Inseparable from seeing, inseparable from "eye" or "I," this is blindness, constructed by and entangled with language, the code that shapes all our knowing and every form of vision, blind or sighted.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tiny Tim, Blind Bertha, and the Resistance of Miss Mowcher: Charles Dickens and the Uses of Disability

The works of Charles Dickens offer further fruitful ground for examining the satellite syndrome, in part because his writing is so generously populated with the psychically and anatomically deviant, but also because Dickens serves as an excellent example of how the satellite appropriates disability, attempting to turn it to his own needs and ends, and of the ways in which the disabled challenges and treads upon satellite identity, even when the disabled exists as fiction. Focusing on only four texts—*American Notes* (1842), *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845), and *David Copperfield* (1849)—from his imposing canon, we illustrate in this chapter the progression of Dickens' relationship with Disability; we argue here that the writer (as satellite) begins with a rather simplistic approach to disability, seizing upon it and attempting to bend it to his purposes as a writer (using disability as a tool of affect/sentimentality); as the satellite Dickens engages with Disability, however—even as a fiction—and as the disabled—even as a fiction—begins to assert an unexpected agency, this relationship necessarily grows more complex, and the struggle for power and identity, the dance between satellite and disabled, is once again manifest.

Of the texts that are here addressed, *American Notes* dedicates almost an entire chapter to describing the person and accomplishments of Laura Bridgman, the once-famous deaf-blind girl educated by Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe at Boston's Perkins Institution. *A Christmas Carol* includes Dickens' probably most famous (or infamous) disabled character, the pathetic "Tiny Tim," in whose representation we may readily recognize the antecedent of the contemporary "poster-child." Another

Christmas book character, “Blind Bertha,” though not so well known as the similarly alliterative Tiny Tim, actually has a larger and more active role in Dicken’s *Cricket on the Hearth* than Tiny Tim has in the *Carol*. And while these figures must certainly be regarded as significant, both in terms of Dickens’ development and in terms of a greater literary and social history, the absolute abundance of disabled figures in *David Copperfield* attests to Dickens’ increasing embroilment with disability.

David Copperfield includes representations of at least a dozen disabled and disfigured subjects. Most significant among these are Mr. Dick, the “mad” companion of David’s aunt Betsey (and a figure sometimes thought to be an alias of Dickens himself), and Miss Mowcher, the dwarf chiropodist who offers David an important lesson on the subject of bias against the disabled. Among the other disabled figures represented are David’s childhood schoolmaster, the voiceless Mr. Creakle and his peg-legged companion Mr. Tungay, the mutually demented Mrs. Steerforth and Rosa Dartle, the asthmatic Mr. Omer, and the rheumatic Mr. Barkis. Despite the apparently “minor” status of some of these characters, however, and despite the indefinite nature of some of their disabilities, the sheer profusion of disability in this text serves as a measure of Dickens’ fascination with or hyper-consciousness of the disabled body.

Dickens and Disability—An Overview

It is hardly possible, of course, that such a fascination should have escaped the observations of Dickens scholars entirely. And while we do not have any single text dedicated exclusively to the subject of disability in Dickens, there has been some significant scholarship approaching this topic. Among these texts, Michael

Hollington's *Dickens and the Grotesque* (1984) necessarily concerns itself with the occurrence of human extremes in Dickens' writing. Hollington employs Bakhtinian thought to generate insightful readings of Dickens' disabled characters, locating them within a broader tradition of Continental Romanticism, but this work does not share the perspective which more explicitly informs the work of most Disability Studies scholarship. Among those who more closely approach the concept of disability in its own right are writers like Nicholas Ranson, whose 1986 essay on disability in *David Copperfield* argues that characters such as the physically disabled Tiny Tim and the psychologically disabled Miss Flite of *Bleak House* (1852-53) are essential to the fabric and social purpose of Dickens' writing. According to Ranson, Dickens insists that "there must be a place for the physically handicapped and the 'special' child," so that "where this is accepted, the Miss Mowchers and the Mr. Dicks can take an active, socially beneficial role in the life of their society" (15). In a similar vein, but working on a more substantial scale, Mary Klages' *Woeful Afflictions* (1999) examines the significance of representations of disability in the literature and culture of Victorian America and proposes specifically that Dickens "frequently presents disabled characters to debate the relation between economic and domestic values" (56). Focusing particularly on deafness and blindness, Klages closely investigates "sentimental" models of disability in nineteenth-century America, models which, she argues, transformed disabled bodies into "posters," which constructed these bodies as "'signs' or signifiers of particular cultural values" (3), and which functioned, ultimately, to create a sense of the disabled subject as human and simultaneously to create a long-term image of the disabled body which has largely limited its power and political significance to an inferior "domestic" arena. According to Klages, who

naturally dedicates most of her study to American figures and American texts, Dickens' influence on this framing of disability in the American experience was nevertheless significant, and she offers illuminating readings of Laura Bridgman's role in *American Notes*, of Tiny Tim, of Blind Bertha, and of *Barnaby Rudge's* (1841) blind villain, Stagg, to illustrate her point. Elisabeth Gitter's examinations and analyses of the function of disability in Dickens' work have also made a substantial contribution to the field. Several essays—"Laura Bridgman and Little Nell" (1991), "Charles Dickens and Samuel Gridley Howe" (1991), and "Deaf-Mutes and Heroines in the Victorian Era" (1992)—offer glimpses into early research for Gitter's recently released biography of Laura Bridgman, *Buried Alive* (2001). And a more recent essay (1999), on Blind Bertha of "Cricket on the Hearth," investigates the place and value of the "blind girl" in the Victorian marriage market.

Feminist scholars such as Helena Michie, Martha Stoddard-Holmes, and Hilary Schor have also found it useful to examine the role of disability in Dickens texts. For Michie, Dickens' use of pain, scarring, and disfigurement appears to function as a tool whereby female identity, which Dickens narratives frequently threaten with erasure or invisibility, may be "articulated" and made manifest. Informed, in part, by Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985), Michie's essay on Esther Summerson of *Bleak House* and Jenny Wren of *Our Mutual Friend* explores Dickens' use of pain and illness as narrative tools, and suggests that Esther and Jenny are able to become actors in the construction of their own identities only through their experience of their own corporeality, an experience made available to them by a sense of their own physical deviance or "difference" from "normal" Victorian femininity. Martha Stoddard-Holmes' investigation of Dickens' use of the disabled

female body traces a somewhat different trajectory, her manuscript “‘Fits and Misfits’: Disability and the Dickens Woman,” introduces readings of four of Dickens’ most important disabled female characters: The diminutive Marchioness of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841); Jenny Wren; deaf Sophy Marigold of Dickens’ 1865 Christmas book “Doctor Marigold’s Prescriptions,” and Phoebe, the permanently supine almost-heroine who provides the moral backbone of the following year’s Christmas tale, “Mugby Junction.” Stoddard-Holmes’ essay proposes that Dickens’ representations of disabled woman move increasingly away from the human possibilities of marriage and reproduction, and increasingly toward roles which posit the “disabled body as the emblem of moral health,” thus removing these bodies from the worldly spheres of sexuality and the domestic marketplace. Ultimately, argues Stoddard-Holmes, “Dickens reaffirms the disabled woman as a *hortus conclusus*, a model of womanly feeling whose moral value depends on her removal from the world that bustles by, marries and betrays, and bears and buries children.”

Disability and the Victorian Consciousness

And while many, certainly, have recognized Dickens’ intense interest in the human form and its apparently infinite possibility for cognitive and biological alterity, and while this interest may certainly be regarded as belonging peculiarly to Dickens’ own writing and perception, his fascination with the extreme possibilities of the human mind and body must also be recognized as stemming from a broader cultural consciousness. For just as there is no other Victorian writer whose work manifests

such a keen awareness of the disabled body,⁶³ so there is no other historical period which demonstrates such an abiding interest in and concern about the potential normalcy or deviance of the human subject. As we have already observed elsewhere, Lennard Davis' *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995) proposes that the concepts of "normalcy" and "disability" are indeed constructions which arise out of and are confirmed by the emerging cultural conditions of the nineteenth century. Davis argues that these concepts are "a part of the social process of disabling [which] arrived with industrialization and with the set of practices and discourses that are linked to late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of nationality, race, gender, criminality, sexual orientation, and so on." Specifically, he observes that the

word "normal" as "constituting, conforming to, not deviating or differing from, the common type or standard, regular, usual" only enters the English language around 1840. (Previously, the word had meant "perpendicular"; the carpenter's square, called a "norm," provided the root meaning.) Likewise, the word "norm," in the modern sense, has only been in use since around 1855, and "normality" and "normalcy" appeared in 1849 and 1857 respectively. If the lexicographical information is relevant, it is possible to date the coming into consciousness in English of an idea of "the norm" over the period 1840-1860. (24)

And Davis notes, too, that these modern ideas of the "norm" and the "normal" are in large part an outgrowth of the emergent field of statistics, a study linked to the type of categorical or disciplinary structures described by Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Indeed, Foucault observes that the institutional structures and discourses which come to prescribe the modern meaning of terms like "madness" and "health" are themselves products of eighteenth-century history and culture,

⁶³ Such a statement is, perhaps, unfair to Dinah Maria Mulock Craik (1826-1887), who frequently includes important disabled characters in her fiction. Among her works are *Olive* (1850), which features a hunch-backed heroine and her blind mother,

these meanings arising out of an emergent clinical discourse grounded—like the study of statistics—in new “scientific” methods of seeing and describing. According to Foucault, it is at this time that the medical “gaze” becomes focused into the investigative “glance,” like a “finger pointing, denouncing,” and that combined with an associated “index finger palpating the depths” this new focus indicates a re-ordering of clinical discourse “in accordance with pathological anatomy” (*Birth*, 121-22).

Indeed, Henri-Jacques Stiker’s recently translated *History of Disability* (1997) clearly locates the advent of a new medical power, “nearly totalitarian [in its] ambition” (104), at the close of the eighteenth century. Following in the tradition of Foucault, Stiker acknowledges that this emerging power was responsible not only for bringing “the insane and developmentally retarded . . . entirely under the control of the medical establishment,” but that it was also instrumental in structuring the “well organized and specialized” asylum. And it was out of this institutionalizing process, Stiker suggests, that the nineteenth-century model of a “medicalized” body (and thus a “medical model” of disability) was destined to grow. By the close of the nineteenth century, he writes, this structure of “social control through a kind of moral oversight” was already fully in place (105).

In Britain, the advent of this medicalized body, and of a categorical approach to anatomy and pathology, is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the work of two Scottish physicians, the brothers William and John Hunter. The elder, William Hunter (1718-83), was a well-known physician and obstetrician, a celebrated teacher of surgery and anatomy, and the founder of his own London anatomy school. The

“The Little Lame Prince” (1875), and *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1897), which details the

younger brother, John Hunter (1728-93), “worked in the anatomy school of his elder brother [...and under] William’s direction ... learnt human anatomy and showed great aptitude in the dissection and preparation of specimens.” He also won acclaim as a “leading teacher of surgery” (Royal College, “John Hunter”). But while both seem to have won deservedly grand reputations as physicians and teachers, what is perhaps most remarkable about these two is their almost unbelievable devotion to collecting and cataloging. Both men generated immense collections related to their work in medicine, surgery, and anatomy. The elder brother’s collection was initially comprised of “anatomical and pathological specimens,” divided into nine categories, but this collection eventually grew more eclectic, coming to include “coins, books, manuscripts and ethnography” as well as other “curiosities” (Hunterian, “William Hunter”; Royal College, “William Hunter”). The younger brother’s collection included “specimens” that showed “his successful ligation of the femoral artery for popliteal aneurysm,” his “experiments on collateral circulation,” and his “researches on subjects such as bone growth, transplantation, and freemartins” (Royal College, “Hunterian Museum”). In addition, John Hunter, like many other surgeons of his time, was profoundly interested in anatomical anomaly and, according to one source, “often borrowed himself into debt so that he could add to his collection” (Drimmer 224). Perhaps his most famous acquisition was the cadaver of Charles Byrne (1761-1783), the “Irish Giant,” which body came to him when the deceased could no longer object, the living Byrne having expressed a strong dislike to being dissected and displayed as a part of Hunter’s collection. But while Byrne himself declined to be purchased by Hunter before death for the purposes of *post mortem* examination

life of the narrator, who is lame.

and exhibition, the surgeon did not scruple to make his purchase after Byrne's decease. Despite the Irish Giant's precautions—including the preparation of a lead coffin and plans to have his body dropped, weighted, into the Irish Sea (Wood 48; Drimmer 225)—Hunter was able to buy Byrne's remains for the sum of £500. A cautious Hunter initially kept the skeleton concealed—such a purchase, after all, being hardly lawful—but within two years he had “put Byrne's bones on display” (Wood 48).

So substantial and diverse were the collections of the brothers Hunter that each ultimately gave rise to its own museum. At his death, William Hunter bequeathed both his collection and collateral funds to the University of Glasgow, which bequest formed the basis of The Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, opened in 1807, Scotland's first public museum. John Hunter's collection, purchased by the government in 1799, “formed the nucleus of one of the greatest museums of comparative anatomy, pathology, osteology and natural history in the world,” The Hunterian Museum of London, finished and occupied in 1785 and formally opened in 1813 (Royal College, “About”). Both collections continued to grow under their Victorian curators, and at Hunter's death, the collection comprised some 13,682 items (Wood 10). But “by the end of the 19th century the museum contained nearly 65,000 specimens” (Royal College, “History”).

Among those “specimens” added to John Hunter's collection during the nineteenth century were the remains of Caroline Crachimi, “the Sicilian Fairy,” once known as “Britain's most famous dwarf” (Wood 8). Crachimi's skeleton, and wax casts (or “moulages”) of her face, foot, hand, and arm, today remain in the configuration of their original 1824 display, placed beside the towering skeleton of

the very publicly thwarted Charles Byrne. But this study in contrasts, while dramatic in the extreme (Crachimi's diminutive skeleton measures 1'10½", Byrne's stands at 7'9"), is actually calculated for scientific effect. For unlike many other exhibits established prior to or during this period, which "were either mere taxonomies or else forms of entertainment[, ...] Hunter's idea was to categorize specimens so that they would speak for themselves, and explain the way he thought nature worked" (Wood 10). According to Richard Altick, it was this "thematic emphasis which anticipated a basic principal of modern educational museology" (28).

Indeed, it is the departure from "mere" taxonomy, this specifically scientific technique of categorization, this new disciplining of the anatomical "curiosity," which both characterizes the emerging Victorian approach to science and medicine, and which informs the Victorian approach to human alterity. While the cabinets and curio collections of eighteenth-century "museums" frequently oppressed and bewildered spectators by their chaotic variety, the orderly arrangement of the Hunterian, with its deliberate juxtaposition of extremes, was intended for instruction rather than to satisfy the idle curiosity of genteel visitors. And the instruction thus imparted, though apparently designed for practical purposes, ultimately serves to construct and re-inforce an important cultural message: For within the tableaux initially prepared for the nineteenth-century spectator are embedded the conceptual framework that effectively redefines the term "museum." The ordered spectacle offered a scientifically authorized context that helped the Victorian public locate and understand its corporeal identity and its place within the newly delineated categories

of living creatures, to perceive its “normal” self, existing stable and centered, in the midst of possible anatomical extremes.⁶⁴

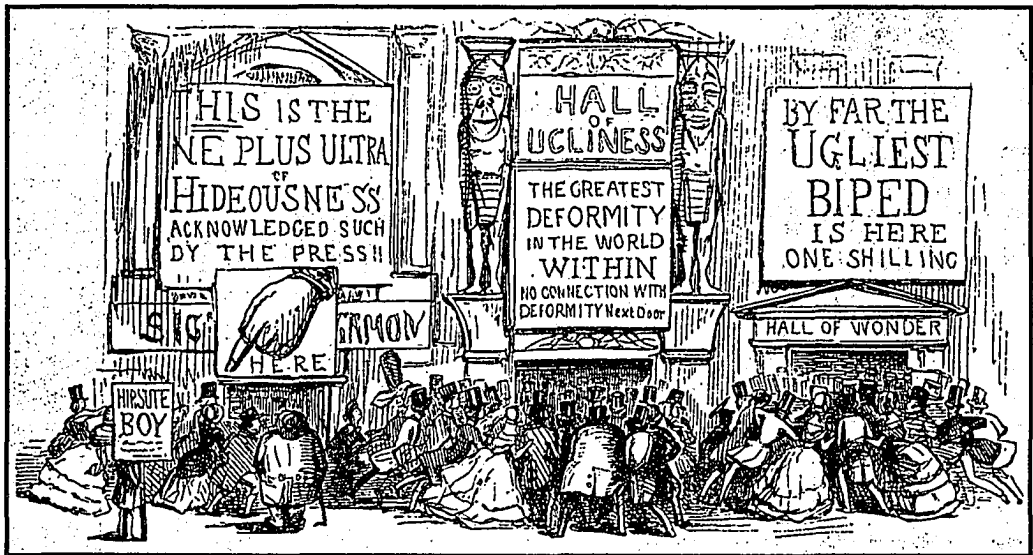
But while displays such as those at the Hunterian helped to redefine the concept of the museum for the nineteenth century, and functioned at the same time as sites which worked to determine the cultural standards by which Victorians came to understand terms like “normal,” the element of entertainment, essential to the appeal of earlier museum collections, still remained. Indeed, with the advent of the public museum (collections of the eighteenth century and earlier were typically reserved for private viewing), it becomes more and more difficult to dissect the motives of entertainment and education. In fact, the popularity of educational entertainments in the nineteenth century and the gradual mutation of Victorian exhibition culture created an environment that sometimes makes it difficult to determine any clear boundary between freak show and museum. Mid-century “decency” laws which shut down many old-fashioned freak shows (including, as we have seen, the exhibition of Joseph Carey Merrick, “the Elephant Man”) may suggest that human “oddities” were ceasing to be considered appropriate objects of amusement, but any “apprehension that the new zeal for popular education was robbing such marvels of their livelihood” would certainly have been unfounded (Altick 253). An 1847 *Punch* illustration lends weight to this observation: Entitled “Deformito-mania,” the drawing depicts the outside of Piccadilly’s Egyptian Hall as

⁶⁴ Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies* (Columbia, 1997) makes a similar point, suggesting that spectators at American freak shows of the nineteenth century learned to frame their normative identities by gazing at the bodies of those who were clearly marked as other. “Freak shows,” Thomson writes, “acted out a relationship in which exoticized disabled people and people of color functioned as physical opposites of the idealized American” (64-65).

throng of ladies and gentlemen attempt to force their way through the crowded doorways of the popular museum, marked above by enormous signs which proclaim, "THIS IS THE NE PLUS ULTRA OF HIDEOUSNESS ACKNOWLEDGED SUCH BY THE PRESS," "BY FAR THE UGLIEST BIPED IS HERE," and "HALL OF UGLINESS—THE GREATEST DEFORMITY IN THE WORLD WITHIN." So, the desire to behold anatomical anomalies seems to have remained unabated, and was perhaps even further galvanized by a growing attitude of "scientific" skepticism, an increasing desire to test the authenticity of the subjects so exhibited. As Altick observes: "Although doubters may have been more numerous than before, the March of Intellect had not progressed so far as to deprive countless Londoners and country visitors of their credulity and their appetite for human wonders, whether natural or contrived—armless artists, hydrocephalic children, fat or pig-faced ladies, spotted men and women, and so on" (253).

In fact, London's modern museums very often offered exactly the same types of human exhibits as the increasingly forbidden freak shows, but with an associated architecture and rhetoric which reinvented the purpose and meaning of the object on display. Despite the biting satire of lampoons like the one in *Punch*, however, and despite an ongoing critique of human exhibits, the image of the gawking crowd, once parodied by Jonathan Swift (among others),⁶⁵ was slowly being altered and the activity of Victorian spectators was increasingly legitimized and made respectable by the introduction of educational documentation.

⁶⁵ Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) includes a detailed description of Gulliver's public exhibition by his Brobdingnagian master; according to Gulliver, audiences were so anxious to see this spectacle that "People were ready to break down the doors to come in" (77; ch. 2, bk. 2), and it was necessary to place barriers between himself and the viewers, to prohibit the crowds from handling him.



This cartoon, “Deformito-mania,” which first appeared in the 4 September 1847 issue of *Punch*, points to the seemingly limitless appetite of the Victorian public for displays of human anomalies. Though the press of the crowd as it is depicted in this drawing demonstrates the immense popularity of human exhibits during this period, the mid-nineteenth century is also characterized by a significant shift in the way the public approached such exhibits. Increasingly, “freak shows” or sideshows which merely offered onlookers an opportunity to gape at some spectacular human figure, were regarded with disfavor; many such shows were shut down by police enforcing new public “decency” laws. With the emergence and popularization of “scientific” discourse, however, many of these displays were transformed into “educational” exhibits by the addition of authenticating scientific or medical documentation, by offering the display within the context of some “scientific” inquiry, or by juxtaposing figures that seemed opposite, thus establishing a categorical framework for interpreting the deviant form.

In 1825, for instance, a medical report published in the *Times* offered an assessment of one popular exhibit, “the Living Skeleton,” saying that his condition could be attributed to “marcores, occasioned by an early obliteration of many of the lacteal vessels and mesenteric glands, or a preternatural deficiency of these vessels and glands, with a consequent early sympathy of the stomach” (qtd. in Altick 261).

When Chang and Eng, the famous “Siamese Twins” went on display in the Egyptian Hall in 1829, this sight, too, was granted what Altick describes as “the cachet of scientific merit,” including a reading before the Royal Society of a paper written by the twins’ “medical attendant” (261). While in London, the two were also, apparently, subject to a multitude of clinical examinations, like the one in which “Each of the youths was fed different foods for twenty-four hours and their body wastes examined” (Drimmer 12). P.T. Barnum’s infamous “What-Is-It?” exhibit of 1846 also profited from its apparent participation in this new discourse. Attempting to locate this “freak of nature” within the context of modern scientific and nature studies, the flyer announcing the show posed a series of questions and offered some hypotheses of its own, as well as a thorough and methodical description of the creature being exhibited:

Is it an Animal? Is it Human? Is it an Extraordinary Freak of Nature? or is it a legitimate member of Nature’s Works? Or is it the long-sought for Link between Man and the Ourang Outang, which Naturalists have for years decided does exist, but which has hitherto been undiscovered? The Exhibitors of this indescribable Person or Animal do not pretend to assert what it is. They have named it the WILD MAN OF THE PRAIRIES; or, “WHAT IS IT?” because this is the universal exclamation of all who have seen it. Its features, hands, and the upper portion of the body are to all appearances human; the lower part of its body, the hind legs, and haunches are decidedly animal! It is entirely covered, except the face and hands, with long flowing hair of various shades. It is larger than an ordinary sized man, but not quite so tall. “WHAT IS IT?” is decidedly the most extraordinary being that ever astonished the world. It has the

intelligence appertaining to humanity, and can do anything it sees done, or anything which man or animal can do, except speak, read, or write. (qtd. in Altick 265)

The nature of this description, with its careful mixture of scientific and sensational rhetoric, stands as an exemplary specimen of the emerging discourse on human alterity. Words like “indescribable” and “extraordinary” come to occupy a dual function: At the same time that they invite the wonder of the crowd, they also teach the spectator the *interactive possibilities of the display; rather than standing in* passive awe of the “freak,” viewers are instead prepared to examine the exhibit in all its parts, to describe or articulate the liminal creature and to come to some conclusion as to what “WHAT-IS-IT?” might be. The spectator is made ready to contextualize the creature, to find a suitable category for that which falls outside the range of the “normal” or the “ordinary.” And in the same spirit, in 1852, parents and educators were urged to bring their children and students to see the bearded Madame Fortuna so that these youths might “satisfy their curiosity on the subject of this most Wonderful Phenomenon of Nature” (qtd. in Altick 257). Once again, the human exhibit is intended to excite wonder even as it instructs.

The minutely scrutinized case of Julia Pastrana offers a similar insight into the reinvention of the freak as an object of scientific education. Frequently billed as “the ugliest woman in the world” or the “baboon lady,” and widely exhibited to the public both before and after her death, Pastrana was also the subject of specialized medical scrutiny. An 1857 article in the British medical journal *Lancet* describes her disturbing combination of masculine and feminine features, remarking on the indefinite status of her racial category, and commenting as well on her dentition, menstruation, and general physique (qtd. in Thomson 73-74). After her death, too,

Pastrana continued to excite the interest of those ostensibly attracted to scientific exhibits: An 1862 edition of the *Illustrated London News* announces that her preserved body “has been most critically examined by many of the first scientific gentlemen in London, and pronounced by them to be the most wonderful and marvellously-successful example of embalming ever recorded” (qtd. in Altick 267). For Rosemarie Garland Thomson, it is exactly this kind of display which finally defines the modern concept of human alterity; “transmuted into diagrams and microphotographs in scientific texts,” she observes, the annotation which describes Pastrana’s body ultimately suggests “the totalizing discourse that now medicalizes all extraordinary bodies” (78). Thus it was that “as the nineteenth century progressed, the ever-worrisome freak was cast less in the language of the marvelous and explained more and more in the ascending scientific discourse of pathology” (74).⁶⁶

Dickens as Satellite

It is in this atmosphere of combined wonder and scientific speculation, in the midst of this voracious Victorian appetite for “curiosities”—steeped, as it were in this environment which so eagerly tested and questioned the defining attributes of the human—that we necessarily discover Dickens’ own explorations of the normal and the deviant. Indeed, one apocryphal story even has it that Dickens is actually the party responsible for christening Barnum’s notorious “WHAT-IS-IT?” (Drimmer 293). And while this particular tale may lack credibility, it seems certain that Dickens would have been familiar with the human exhibits of his day, that like his

⁶⁶ Thomson notes here that others, including Robert Bogdan, Kathryn Park, and Lorraine Daston, have also linked “the demise of the freak show to the medicalization of disability” (74, n. 47).

contemporaries, he too was engaged in the process of inspection and questioning that served to describe Barnum's exhibit. Most importantly, it seems certain that he, like others, was engaged not only in the exteriority of defining and categorizing the subject of the exhibit, but was motivated too by a greater and more immediate query, that is, "Who or what am *I* in relation to this other creature?" And it is in this query, the question that always and necessarily haunts the satellite experience, that we may begin to anatomize Dickens' developing relationship with the disabled subject.

Interestingly enough, one of Dickens' earliest documented encounters with disability, his introduction to the deaf-blind Laura Bridgman at Boston's Perkins Institution in 1842, actually resembles, in some respects, a visit to a freak show or museum. Described in *American Notes*, a narrative that sometimes seems scarcely more than an encyclopedic recounting and assessment of America's nascent public institutions—prisons, schools, and almshouses—Dickens' visit to Perkins, and his experience of Bridgman specifically, seem partly scientific and partly sentimental. His desire to see this innovative school for blind children is certainly of a piece with his greater interest in social and educational reform, but as with his inspection of other American institutions, Dickens demonstrates an emotional reaction to Perkins' occupants that appears at least as strong as his interest in system and management. At the same time that he praises the school for its approach, particularly recognizing the advantage of treating students as individuals and clearly pleased at their apparent attentiveness during lessons, he simultaneously regards the children—and Bridgman especially—as objects to be studied. "It is strange," he writes, "to watch the faces of the blind, and see how free they are from all concealment of what is passing in their thoughts." So too, he writes not that he *met* Bridgman, but that he "*looked upon*

her,” minutely describing her physical appearance, her knitting, her dress, even picking up and examining her doll and turning “over the leaves of her Diary” (90), all while she “was seated in a little enclosure, made by school-desks and forms, writing her daily journal” and apparently “unconscious” of his presence or his investigative gaze (81-82, 91; emphasis added).

As with the human exhibits on display at the London shows and museums, Bridgman is here represented as a creature apart, partitioned off by her “little enclosure,” and fully available for visual examination and analysis. And while this visit by one of Britain’s foremost celebrities may be considered a rather special circumstance (Mary Klages’ *Woeful Afflictions* [1999] observes that the school’s director was ordinarily rather leery of exposing Bridgman to unwarranted public attention [121]), it is nevertheless important to note that Perkins students were regularly subject to “public exhibition” (115). And in this process of exhibition and examination, we may begin recognize a possible re-definition blindness just as earlier we observed the shifting significance of that icon once understood as “freak.” As Mary Klages observes, blindness here is still used “to arouse feelings in sighted observers, and to strengthen their capacities for empathy.” But, she adds “While the old significance of blindness as necessarily associated with suffering and dependence does not disappear completely from the observers’ frames of reference,” there is yet “a new overlay, insisting that the prevailing meaning of blindness will be one of competence and pride in skills learned” (115). But while the meaning and purpose of blindness may change, even as the blind subject is reinterpreted, reinvented, cast with “a new overlay,” the observer’s insight into blindness, and into disability more generally, is still constrained by the focus of the gaze.

Though a modified conception of the “freak,” of blindness, of disability are all culturally and historically significant, it is essential to remember that these altered views are neither stable nor linear, but are marked instead by a fundamental reflexivity; the disabled subject does not exist in a “little enclosure,” solitary, and by itself filled with a ripe significance; rather the nature and meaning of that subject is determined by the observer, by his or her education, anxieties, and existing sense of self. For scholar and disability rights activist Joshua Miele, this reflexivity manifests itself in the theory that disabled people serve as an “armature for fantasy,” the notion that the nondisabled gaze upon the disabled, disfigured, or deformed, and use that form as the slender framework of their own especial sculpture, a fantastic shape constructed upon the “armature” of the disabled body, but fleshed out by cultural influence and the observer’s imagination.⁶⁷ Here again, the construction of disability is more about the observer than the subject being observed. And thus, that earlier query persists: “Who or what am *I* in relation to this other creature?”

In the case of Charles Dickens, gazing furtively at an “unconscious” Bridgman, the answer to this question would seem to be “I am the narrator, the interpreter, and the maker of meaning.” Indeed, the very act of regarding Bridgman may be seen as a gesture of creative fantasy. As Elisabeth Gitter observes, “unable to return the spectator’s gaze, the unseeing object of scrutiny becomes an occasion for fantasy”; and quoting film critic Laura Mulvey, Gitter suggests that this object of scrutiny thus becomes “a bearer of meaning, not a maker of meaning” (“Laura Bridgman” 77). So, Dickens’ role in relation to Bridgman is to tell her story, not only to himself, but also to others; he becomes the mediator or relay who represents

⁶⁷ Recall Jacques Derrida’s fantasy of himself as blind. See Chapter Two.

her to the world at large. In fact, it is through Dickens' account that Helen Keller's mother is first introduced to the possibility of education for her own deaf-blind child. Moreover, as Author, Dickens will be the one who shapes the dramatic saga of Bridgman's life, her "imprisonment" in a world of silence and darkness, her "rescue" by the heroic Samuel Gridley Howe, the brilliantly orchestrated process of her education, her illuminating entrance into intellectual awareness, and the inspiring success of her efforts at linguistic communication. Dickens' text works to shape Bridgman's persona and character, transforming "the story of [her] education into a narrative of moral and spiritual rescue" even while his writing functions as a testimonial to his own kind-hearted benevolence (Gitter, "Laura Bridgman" 75). As both Gitter and Klages have observed, Dickens recognizes Bridgman as potential heroine and on the strength of this potentiality, he constructs a figure both pathetic and inspiring, not unlike Little Nell of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841). Indeed, as an "armature for fantasy," Bridgman's spare figure provides the framework for a complex succession of constructions. As Gitter puts it, "the living Laura is transformed, estheticized, and fetishized" (77). In addition to her life as Little Nell, Bridgman "as spiritualized heroine was also a popular subject for articles and poems in Christian tracts and women's magazines" (Gitter, "Deaf-Mutes" 186). And so too, she was the "sentimental heroine, completely isolated from human connection and thus in grave need of rescue" (Klages 123). Thus it is that *American Notes* portrays Bridgman as being trapped alone in her deaf-blindness, an experience repeatedly likened to imprisonment or entombment:

There she was before me; built up, as it were, in a marble cell, impervious to any ray of light, or particle of sound; with her poor white hand peeping through a chink in the wall, beckoning to some good man for help, that an Immortal soul might be awakened. (81)

and,

“The darkness and the silence of the tomb were around her” (83)

and again,

““It has been ascertained beyond the possibility of a doubt, that she cannot see any ray of light, cannot hear the least sound, and never exercises her sense of smell, if she have any. Thus her mind dwells in darkness and stillness, as profound as that of a closed tomb at midnight.”” (86)

The narrative that Dickens thus develops lends special meaning not only to deafness and blindness but also to his own role. Here, as earlier, we may recognize the mediating gesture of the satellite. This deliberate narrative imprisonment or entombment enables Dickens to offer the reader an exotic commodity, special access to the deaf-blind girl, otherwise restricted to her other-worldly space and shielded from public scrutiny within her “little enclosure.” And thus Dickens as narrator constructs himself as satellite, spokesman for, and purveyor of the deaf-blind child.

The satellite relationship here is similar in some ways to those discussed earlier. Once again, we find that the centering of the disabled figure serves to create a frame by which the satellite may construct his own identity, the meaning and importance of his own role; once again, we find the disabled subject objectified by the mediating gesture, boxed in or closed off by the insistence that she requires interpretation; and once again, in Dickens’ repeated juxtapositions of himself or other nondisabled persons with Bridgman or other inmates of the Perkins school (80, 81, 94), we find the satellite measuring and defining his own sense of normalcy against the radical alterity of the disabled.

But while Dickens’ narrative may reflect some characteristics of satellite relationships described elsewhere in this text, it is peculiar in this respect: The

contest for power and identity, for individuation, and for the right of self-definition or self-determination, all typically central to the satellite relationship, are necessarily absent in this case. In fact, while Dickens-as-narrator may seize upon the exoticized corpus of the deaf-blind girl, retailing her story and persona to his own reading public, this gesture of appropriation is actually constrained by its belatedness; Dickens cannot wholly embrace a satellite role in relation to Bridgman because, “long before [he] looked upon her, the help had come” (81). Dickens’ place as mediator and narrator had already been fully anticipated by Bridgman’s “great benefactor and friend” (90), Samuel Gridley Howe, “that one man,” writes Dickens, “who has made her what she is” (82).⁶⁸

In fact, by the time Dickens encounters her, Bridgman is already surrounded by a multitude of satellites—parents, teachers, and companions—all of whom serve as obstacles to the authenticity of Dickens’ own satellite experience. Encompassed as though by Laputan “flappers” (Swift 132ff),⁶⁹ the celebrated object of Dickens’ attention is circumscribed not only by the unique attention, affection, and ability of her “master” (94), Howe, but also by the proximity of her other teachers, especially one “fair instructress,” a “favourite mistress with the poor pupil” (82), and by the companionship of Bridgman’s young friends and playfellows, with all of whom she is

⁶⁸ Echoes of this construction may be found in later Dickens’ works including the 1865 Christmas story, “Doctor Marigold” in which the adoptive father of a deaf girl is told, “you ... raised her up from misery and degradation, and brought her into communication with her kind” (454).

⁶⁹ The Flappers of Laputa, as described by Swift in *Gulliver’s Travels*, are servants whose task it is to rouse the attention of their masters by gently flapping a rattle-like object before the eyes, ears, and mouth. Without such “external Taction upon the Organs” (132), the ruling class are incapable of noticing anything outside themselves; they are thus also prevented from interacting among themselves without the

apparently able to share unmediated discourse. Dickens observes, particularly, that the “affection that exists between [Howe and Bridgman ...] is as far removed from all ordinary care and regard, as the circumstances in which it has had its growth, are apart from the common occurrences of life” (94), that Bridgman “showed much innocent playfulness in her intercourse with her teacher” and a great readiness to obey her commands, even embracing her “laughingly and affectionately” while doing so (91). So too, Dickens’ text reports the “clinging” affection of Bridgman for her mother (89) as well as Bridgman’s devotion to her school friends and the ready ability of these youngsters to communicate with “a swift telegraphing upon the tiny fingers” (87). Indeed, it would seem that Dickens recognized the superior claims even of comparative strangers like the friend who accompanied the writer on his visit, a “gentleman who had been in her company ... but very seldom” but whom Bridgman was able to recognize and name “immediately”; even Dickens’ wife, Catherine, was greeted by Bridgman with “evident pleasure” and interest in contrast to the cold rejection encountered by Dickens himself: “My hand,” he writes, “she rejected at once, as she does that of any man who is a stranger to her” (91). Though Dickens may assume the position of mediator, it seems clear from this that his would-be role as satellite is compromised. In fact, Dickens is only re-mediating, retailing a persona and experience already mediated and interpreted by a multitude of intercessors whose presence precludes the possibility of genuine contact. By the time Dickens reaches her, Bridgman is already in the museum, an artifact, a construction, researched, categorized, and explicated.

mediation of the serving class. These Flappers may thus be seen as one potential incarnation of the satellite figure.

Indeed, that “little enclosure” so effectively encapsulates the deaf-blind child that it not only shuts out Dickens but also prevents the actuality of any free communication with others, forestalling the possibility of an alternative mediator or interlocutor. The architecture produced around Bridgman, both physical and rhetorical, grows into an ironic replication of the tomb or prison from which her would-be liberator has supposedly set her free. Though Howe did apparently teach Bridgman how to use the manual alphabet, this education by no means served as a channel for unlicensed communication. Howe continued to keep Bridgman carefully guarded and controlled, writing once that he did “not wish ... her to be seen except by very few” (qtd. in Klages 121). And while Bridgman seems to have been free to converse with her teachers and with other Perkins students, her discourse was nevertheless managed and controlled by school authorities, who taught her to keep a diary written in print, for instance, that the sighted would be able to read but which was, of course, useless as a reference for herself. Above all, these authorities insisted that Bridgman restrict her desire to vocalize, the spoken voice of this deaf child sounding to her hearing teachers, as it did to Dickens, like “an uncouth noise” which failed to coincide with their vision of the demure and silent girl they wished to create.⁷⁰ Dickens is witness to the quelling of one such outburst during his 1842 visit, noting both that the noise “was rather painful to hear” and that upon Bridgman’s “teacher touching her lips, she immediately desisted” (91). Indeed, Gitter notes that Bridgman’s “education at the Perkins Institute included not only

⁷⁰ For more on the construction of Bridgman as “silent heroine,” see Elisabeth Gitter’s “Deaf-Mutes and Heroines in the Victorian Era” (*Victorian Literature and Culture*, 1992).

training in finger-spelling, reading, and writing, but also the systematic repression of these intolerable sounds" ("Deaf-Mutes" 188). And Gitter continues:

As a child, Laura sometimes acquiesced to her own silencing; her teacher, Mary Swift Lamson, reports, for example, that after half an hour's talking-to, Laura "promised to *try* to remember to be quiet, and during the rest of the day she did remember very well. In the latter part of the day she made a noise in a whisper, and said, 'That was with my tongue, I made your smooth noise'" (Lamson 135). Ultimately, however, she rebelled against silence, protesting that "'God gave me much voice,'" and in 1845 Howe agreed that at set times she could go into a closet, shut the door, and then "indulge" herself "in a surfeit of sounds" (27). ("Deaf-Mutes" 188)

Thus we find the deaf-blind girl liberated from her "marble cell," her "tomb," her "darkness" and "stillness" to this logical end, that in order to speak freely, she must shut herself in a closet. Laura Bridgman's liberation certainly partakes of an interesting quality. While she is, in a sense, offered an almost miraculous opportunity for communication, the discourse by which she was surrounded and in which she was permitted to participate may be described as highly structured, at the very least.

Quite apart from the ramifications for Bridgman more particularly, such a framework also makes it impossible for Dickens to re-interpret or to add new meaning to this disabled subject/object.⁷¹ Indeed the writer is so circumstanced that it appears he is required to replicate that text which already exists to define and explain the exhibit. For Dickens not only employs the most hackneyed clichés to describe Bridgman's disability—the frail victim entombed or imprisoned by deaf-

⁷¹ Throughout most of this dissertation, I have made it a point to identify both satellite and disabled as "subject," reasoning that the very contest which defines the relationship between the two attests to the agency of each. In this case, though Bridgman may indeed be recognized as "subject" in most contexts, she is so objectified by the apparatus that Dickens experiences, that he cannot realistically undersatnd her as "subject."

blindness, the saintly miss existing as an inspiration to the nondisabled, the pathetic child for whom all must weep with pity, the “amazingly” normal child whose apparent human abilities are necessarily astonishing—but he is reduced as well to the literal repetition of Howe. For the overwhelming majority of the writing about Bridgman which Dickens includes in *American Notes* is actually taken verbatim from text originally written by Howe and circulated in the annual reports of the Perkins Institution. Indeed, as Gitter observes, “in composing his Boston chapter, Dickens simply pasted the pages from Howe’s text that he wished to use into his manuscript, adding instructions to the printer” (“Laura Bridgman” 76). The very punctuation of the text, with its surfeit of quotation marks, represents a kind of rhetorical prison, a set of textual boundaries which delimit both the writer’s and the reader’s contact with the disabled subject. For Dickens, the encounter with Bridgman is, in a sense, crippling; rather than being able to imagine and interpret himself in relation to the alterity embodied by Bridgman, he finds instead that he is already defined, that his own place, like hers, is prefabricated. Both are trapped by an abundance of quotation marks and by the prevailing use of tight little metaphors which form a sort of barricade, preventing Dickens and Bridgman both from any authentic experience or interpretation of one another.

Sadly, it is just this sort of depiction of disability which has earned for Dickens a rather unfavorable reputation with Disability Studies scholars and disability rights activists. The novelist is perceived as perpetuating the most damaging stereotypes—that people with disabilities are pathetic, helpless, pitiable, or monstrous. Indeed, as is evident from Dickens’ treatment of Bridgman, there is some justice to the claims of those scholars and activists who perceive Dickens as

unable to break free from existing conventions to reimagine the disabled as fully human, as having agency, or as a site of potential positivity. But while we may certainly recognize the problematic nature of Dickens' representation of Bridgman, the writer's reputation as a champion of ableist values probably comes more from his depiction of *A Christmas Carol's* Tim Cratchit than from any other single source.

Widely acknowledged as Dickens' "most familiar" disabled character and as the *Carol's* "most famous icon" (Ranson 12; Jaffe 339), "Tiny Tim" has, from the beginning, excited exactly the kind of pitying attention that scholars and activists have worked so hard to challenge. In 1844, for instance, Thackeray's review of the *Carol* commented on the inspirational nature of the Tiny Tim character and suggested that the "little creature will be a bond of union between" Dickens and his reading public (Collins 150). Dickens scholar Ruth Glancy traces the enduring legacy of Tiny Tim:

In the early 1900s the Queen of Norway sent presents annually to crippled children in homes and hospitals in London, inscribed 'With Tiny Tim's Love'. A home for crippled children was established at Alton with funds raised through sales of the book, and all over London there were Tiny Tim cots, again paid for out of charitable fund-raising. (xiii)

Even the comparatively hard-hearted politics of the late twentieth century has difficulty reading past the opacity of this pathetic icon; unable to resist the image of the pitiable handicapped child, a 1993 article in a reputable scholarly journal concludes with this plea: "Perhaps we should be ... moved to act in response to the plight of this character, as we can see him so clearly in the faces of the children of poverty today. In any event, we would do well to heed the words of a somber Bob Cratchit: 'I am sure that we shall none of us forget poor Tiny Tim, shall we?'" (Callahan 217). The assessment of Dickens scholars almost uniformly identifies Tim

as the object of Scrooge's most important "lesson in empathy" (Klages 62), and as "the emblem of an inexhaustible fund of sympathetic capital" (Jaffe 339). Indeed, even the name "Tiny Tim," with its deliberate capitalization, its insistence on the subject's diminutive status, and its satisfying alliterative ring, functions to mark the character as product rather than person.⁷² And it is this cultural iconography which thus informs and enables the interpretations of those more immediately concerned with disability. Joseph Shapiro, for instance, in his landmark book on disability rights activism, *No Pity* (1993), uses "Tiny Tim" as a kind of poster child, a symbol of what's wrong with charity and benevolence, the traditional approaches to disability. In a chapter entitled "Tiny Tims, Supercrises, and the End of Pity," Shapiro observes that "Portrayals in literature and popular culture ... shape our images of disability. Often a disabled character is depicted as helpless and childish, like Tiny Tim in Charles Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol'" (30). But Shapiro's specific discussion of Tiny Tim is actually remarkably brief. Rather than offering a detailed reading of the character, Shapiro instead employs "Tiny Tim" as a kind of shorthand, anticipating the reader's ability to understand and interpret the use of this catch-phrase in his chapter title, or in his reference to "society's deeply held thinking of tin cups and Tiny Tims—the idea that disabled people are childlike, dependent, and in need of charity or pity" (14). According to such interpretations, it would seem that there is little choice but to regard both Dickens and his crippled Cratchit as destructive forces, their short-sighted kind-heartedness ultimately offering untold harm to the lives of disabled people everywhere.

⁷² Dickens' autograph manuscript of *A Christmas Carol*, housed at New York's Pierpont Morgan Library, clearly capitalizes the initial letters of Tim's appellative,

But while it is true that Dickens' portrayal of Tim Cratchit participates in some rather loathsome sentimental conventions, this character also embodies a surprising, if rather subtle message. For if the *American Notes* account of Laura Bridgman depicts the absolute enclosure and encapsulation of the disabled as object, then the *Carol* begins to offer a hint that the disabled may make a bid for agency and subjectivity and may challenge the limits of mediation even while confined within a fully-mediated environment. Despite Tiny Tim's banalities—his “little crutch, and ... his limbs supported by an iron frame,” his ““God bless us every one!”” his “plaintive little voice,” and his being characterized by his bereaved father as ““patient and mild”” and ““a little, little child”” (Dickens, *Christmas Books* 52, 55, 57, 81)—there is yet another Tim, lurking beneath the tedious little cripple, a Tim whose identity might seem to contest the cloying goodness of his own outward manifestation. This subtle shadow of the Tiny Tim with whom all are so familiar has an “active little crutch” (53).

Though Tim is sometimes depicted as being physically moved and managed by his father, carried “upon his shoulder” or tucked by Cratchit senior into “a tiny corner at the table” (52, 53), that “active little crutch” yet tells its own story. Tim is not necessarily the passive form or lay figure that we typically imagine; rather he is capable of free movement and boisterous fun with his siblings. Though his “Hurrah!” may be feeble, the young Cratchit is nevertheless a full participant in the Christmas festivities, “beat[ing] on the table with the handle of his knife” when the stuffing emerges from the goose in all its glory (54). Moreover, Tim reveals his critical acumen when he demonstrates his unwillingness to pay homage to the

thus employing “Tiny” as part of the boy's established identity. See facsimile issued

villainous Scrooge. Though the amiable Bob Cratchit is urgent in his appeal, offering forth a toast to his disagreeable employer as “the Founder of the Feast,” and remonstrating with his wife when she questions the fitness of such a salute, Tim’s behavior discloses that he has a mind of his own: “Tiny Tim drank [the toast] last of all,” the narrator tells us, “but he didn’t care twopence for it” (56). Subtle though such a mark of his independence may be, Tim’s reluctant participation in this ceremony, despite its clear paternal endorsement, indicates that his judgment is his own. Finally, and most importantly, is an oft-quoted passage, typically employed to demonstrate Tiny Tim’s placement in the canon of disability stereotypes:

“He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see.” (53)

For Mary Klages, such a desire clearly demonstrates that “Tiny Tim already knows his status as a cultural text” (62). And Audrey Jaffe uses this same passage to argue for the idea of Tiny Tim as an object of “sympathetic spectacle” (339).

But the Tim who makes this statement, rather than being trapped within a “cultural text” or objectified as “sympathetic spectacle,” seems not to be entirely bound by the ordinarily rigid conventions of the trope he here employs, firstly because he is himself the source of the metaphor. Though the reader accesses this statement only through a complex sequence of mediation—Dickens as author, omniscient narrator, Scrooge’s supernaturally-supervised surveillance, Bob Cratchit’s reporting to his wife—none of these potentially interpretive figures is responsible for suggesting or framing Tim’s association with Christ. Though these others may be partly responsible for constructing Tim as pathetic and infantilized cripple, Tim’s self-

by the library in 1993.

construction shadows forth a far different identity, one which is clearly associated with the power and benevolence of divinity.

This, certainly, is not the thwarted corpse of the freak, unwillingly displayed, neutralized, carefully preserved and arranged in a museum by and for a “normal” audience. Nor is this the carefully circumscribed and multipli-mediated Laura Bridgman, fenced within her “little enclosure” and hedged about both physically and rhetorically until she is silenced and made captive by the constructions around her. Rather, this is a figure, albeit “Tiny,” who appears to decide for himself what his purpose and identity will be, who invites the public gaze and shapes its meaning instead of submitting unwillingly or unwittingly to public scrutiny while secondary or satellite figures describe his allegorical function. And Tim’s choice of allegory, the assertion of his association with Christ, though limited by the potentially restrictive framework of institutional Christian discourse, nevertheless infers an affinity which is remarkable in its arrogance. Regardless of what others may think, the crippled boy does not perceive *himself* as pathetic or powerless, claiming rather a kinship with the divine which he smugly hopes will be an example or reminder to others, apparently less blessed than he.

There is no doubt that the representation of Tiny Tim is problematic for proponents of disability rights. Certainly, he cannot be hailed as any kind of revolutionary social symbol nor, in this same context, can Dickens be regarded as particularly praiseworthy for imagining such a conventional little figure mouthing such conventional little platitudes. And yet, while the representation of Tim Cratchit may not mark any radical departure from existing tropes of disability, his underlying hubris and his potential for agency suggest the possibility of a disabled figure who

will ultimately challenge the mediation of the satellite. Just as with the representation of Bridgman, the reader here finds a character seemingly encompassed by satellite management; it is from Tim's father, after all (and through the further sequence of narrative mediation already described) that the reader learns of Tim's desire to be looked upon in church; and the other conventions employed to describe the Tiny one construct a disabled child whose physical and social movement is, indeed, severely restricted. But the glimpses of agency which may here be witnessed—the “active little crutch,” the willful little mind, and the smug self-satisfaction of the boy who understands himself as exemplary—indicate the beginning of a shift in Dickens' sense of disability. Tiny Tim's tiny escape from the boundaries established for him, his small defiance of the mediating presence, actually represent the beginning of a struggle in which Dickens continually attempts to recover the role of satellite, again and again revisiting the possibility that disability can be narrated or mediated by an identity or persona external to itself and being confronted again and again with the reality (or fiction) of a disabled character that must speak for itself.

The eruption of disabled agency and the frustration of the satellite endeavor which we begin to see in the *Carol* is even more evident in Dickens' Christmas book of 1845, *The Cricket on the Hearth*. *Cricket* tells the story of a young wife and mother, “Dot” Peerybingle, whose secret but honorable harboring of another young woman's suitor is misinterpreted by an evil-minded neighbor, Tackleton, and thus misconstrued by Dot's loving but dim-witted husband. Recounting the tale of this seeming infidelity, *Cricket's* subplots and images return repeatedly to the contest between the apparent and the actual, reminding the reader again and again of the value of human faith, the need to believe in what seems good, despite appearances,

despite the efforts of cynics to destroy our trust. When Tackleton cruelly exposes John Peerybingle to the spectacle of his wife's secret and delighted *rendez-vous* with a young stranger hitherto disguised as an old man, forcing the kind-hearted husband to witness his Dot's apparent dishonor, both husband and reader are tricked into wrongly doubting an actually faithful wife. We must constantly be guided by trust and instinct, the narrator would seem to say, because our eyes may so readily deceive us and the poisonous constructions of cynics may all too easily lead us astray.

Perhaps the most significant reflection of this seeming versus actual theme is found in the *Cricket* subplot that follows toymaker Caleb Plummer and his "Blind Daughter," Bertha. The two live in a dingy and decrepit little dwelling, "a little cracked nutshell of a wooden house" (213), both doing tedious piecework for Tackleton the toy-merchant whose ill-humor, malice, distrust, and general roughness stand in ironic contrast to the ostensibly joyful nature of his business. Within this subplot, the worn and weather-beaten Caleb, bent, gray, and prematurely aged, seeks to ease the perceived burden of his daughter's blindness by reconstructing for her the miserable material conditions of their life, telling her that their ramshackle hut is bright and fresh, that their worn clothing is new and fashionable, that he himself is still young, handsome, and dark-haired, and that their mean-spirited employer is brimming with disguised benevolence.

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; but lived in the belief of an eccentric humourist who loved to have his jest with them, and who, while he was the Guardian Angel of their lives, disdained one word of thankfulness.

And all was Caleb's doing; all the doing of her simple father!
(214)

Blind Bertha's life is entirely mediated and interpreted for her by her father, whose elaborate fantasy seeks to defy the poverty and unhappiness which surrounds and permeates their existence. So profound is Caleb's re-structuring of his daughter's world that his powers of invention must certainly stretch the limits of the reader's credulity; only in a fairy-tale setting like a Christmas book could such a narrative device be employed at all. Caleb's coat, for instance, is described by the narrator as having been made "from the sack-cloth covering of some old box" (201), but the reader later finds that a credulous Bertha swallows whole an impossible fiction about this "beautiful new great-coat," "bright blue," "[m]ade loose to the figure," in which the weary Caleb claims to have attracted much public notice: Strangers on the street identify him as "a swell" and a persistent beggar refuses to believe, the fictitious great-coat before him, Caleb's claim that he is "a very common man" (216-17). Similarly, Caleb's description of their dwelling-cum-workshop would never have the power to deceive any moderately astute blind person. But despite the fact that Bertha is clearly identified as the one responsible for their general housekeeping, the narrator commenting that the apartment was "[c]heerful and neat ... wherever Bertha's hands could busy themselves," the blind girl readily accepts her father's impossibly generous interpretation of what the narrator describes as "the old crazy shed": "Homely, but very snug. The gay colours on the walls; the bright flowers on the plates and dishes; the shining wood, where there are beams or panels; the general cheerfulness and neatness of the building; make it very pretty" (222). For Blind

Bertha, it would seem, there is no world but the one constructed for her by her father's fictions. Like her predecessors, Laura Bridgman and Tiny Tim, we find the disabled figure here installed in a fully-partitioned space, a universe circumscribed by the mediating linguistic power of a benevolent paternal(istic) satellite.

It may seem, then, that the father's function clearly conforms to the satellite role described earlier. Caleb Plummer performs an explicit mediating function, instructing the blind girl about the nature of the world around her, serving as a channel by which she understands not only what is visible, but also by which she learns the meaning of language and personality. Because the father does not wish his child to suffer, he teaches her to misinterpret the malicious mutterings of Tackleton, who is responsible for the miserable conditions in which the two live and under which they work, who urges them to work without singing, and who openly and repeatedly accuses Bertha of idiocy, because she fails to appreciate his hostility. "If you could only see him, Bertha," the Caleb whispers as an annotation to one of Tackleton's ungenerous comments, "how he's winking at me! ... Such a man to joke! you'd think, if you didn't know him, he was in earnest—wouldn't you now?" (218-19). Just as he teaches his daughter the meaning of the word "red" (the color of the sun at rising and setting), so, too, Caleb instructs his daughter to read Tackleton's bitter commentary as "merry and light-hearted" (219). Thus, without her father's mediation, the world is not only invisible to the blind girl, but it is also incomprehensible.

Like Bridgman and Tiny Tim, Bertha Plummer's disability is circumscribed in other respects as well. In the first place, the reader is presented with a figure who, though otherwise fully able and competent, is nevertheless susceptible to being

fooled by her father's rather transparent deceptions. As Elisabeth Gitter puts it, "Caleb's fictionalizing ... has the effect of making a fool of Bertha. When Tackleton takes her for an idiot, he is accurately describing her position as blind dupe" ("Blind Daughter" 680). That Bertha would never feel the wetness or the cold draughts of their ill-repaired home, that she would not smell the mouldering of the beams and plaster, that she would not feel the chips and cracks in the crockery, that she would not hear the weariness in her father's voice, feel his threadbare clothing or his thinning hair; that she would fail to observe the poor food that both would have to endure—all these details and many others contribute to the sense that Bertha's blindness incapacitates her in a sense that goes beyond seeing or not seeing. Accute of hearing, Bertha picks up on the familiar sound of her brother's footstep while all others are yet fooled by his outward disguise. She is portrayed as alert, sensitive, and "clever" (221); yet despite her perceptive nature, the mature and attentive Bertha is yet infantilized both by her father and by the framer of the narrative, both of whom appear to suggest that Bertha's analytical or interpretive skills are no match for those of a seeing adult. It is not Bertha's blindness which disables her in this instance, but the benevolence of those around her, the activity of an external interpreter who prevents the possibility of her framing a worldview of her own.

So, too, Bertha's role as an object of charity serves a dual function, working to confine her within a category of limited agency even while it constructs a significant and meaningful identity for her father, the otherwise inconsequential middle-aged piece-worker. Caleb is himself virtually enslaved to the tyrannical Tackleton, apparently incapable of asserting himself before his employer. He is widowed, sexless, aged, and unattractive. He is neither remarkably intelligent nor

particularly gifted in his work. And yet, his daughter's blindness allows him to play the role of hero, to act out his own fantasy of identity both for himself and his neighbors. Before his blind daughter, he plays the part of dandy, his supposedly "fashionable" new great-coat, his "dark hair" (217), and his feigned energy and cheerfulness serving as components of the heroic figure he would like to be.⁷³ Caleb's re-imagining of the villainous Tackleton, too, as a kindly and generous master, helps him to create a more favorable self-portrait. By pretending that Tackleton's emasculating sarcasm is, in fact, a cover for benevolence, Caleb successfully defends his failure to assert himself—and to protect his daughter—from his employer's rudeness. Finally, not only does Caleb's constant re-making of his daughter's universe suggest a kind of divine omnipotence, but so too, his apparently unrelenting life of self-sacrifice, the fact that "he every day denied himself, that she might be the happier" (220), enables both Caleb and his larger audience to regard his mediating function as explicitly Christ-like. Despite poverty and weariness, Caleb, like Christ, persists in a sacrifice designed to benefit others. When he secretly orders a tiny rose-bush for his daughter, John Peerybingle remarks at the cost of such an item, especially "at this season" (202), but Caleb's compensation actually comes in two forms: The gratification he will presumably feel at seeing his daughter delighted with the little gift (for which he will decline to take credit); and the less obvious

⁷³ Following in the tradition of Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind* (1990), Gitter suggests that blindness may be seen as partaking of a larger, more metaphorical kind of unseeing; and relying on this trope of blindness-as-insensibility, she observes that Bertha's blindness may be seen as permitting "an undisturbed voyeuristic freedom," and as consequently enabling in others "the power of self-invention." In the eyes of the blind girl, Gitter proposes, the mediocre man "can be as manly and handsome as the younger or more powerful rivals whom he fears" ("The Blind Daughter," *SEL* [Autumn 1999], 684).

(though no less important) satisfaction he must receive from the Peerybingles' recognition of his charity. Though it may seem clear from the outset that Caleb's satellite activity is devised purely for the purpose of improving the pathetic blind existence of his daughter, the reader may readily observe how the satellite performance, the preventive interpretation and self-sacrifice acted out upon the blindness of the daughter, may actually serve to benefit the satellite as well as the satellite's intended object. Indeed, by objectifying the daughter, by severely restricting her contact with reality, and by thus forcing her into a role of increased dependence, the apparently altruistic activity of the satellite may easily be regarded as more self-indulgent than otherwise.

In many respects, the depiction of Bertha re-visits and re-inscribes the same pathetic or sentimental tropes already discussed. For in addition to the infantilization and objectification already described, Caleb's daughter is also reduced and circumscribed by other characterizations typically employed for the representation of blindness. The blind girl exists as an object of charity not only for her father, but also for Dot Peerybingle, who "[r]egularly once a fortnight" journeys with her husband to the Plummers' abode with "Veal and Ham-Pie and things, and the bottles of beer" and there, besides cheering and entertaining Bertha, also as "a solemn part of this Insitution of the Pic-Nic ... perform[s] all Bertha's household tasks, ... trimm[ing] the fire, and swe[eping] the hearth, and set[ting] the teaboard out, and dr[awing] the curtain, and light[ing] a candle" (226, 225, 239). Bertha's blindness thus presents an opportunity not only for the father's satellite activities, but also for Dot to demonstrate that kind-heartedness for which her husband offers explicit praise: "It was a kind thought in the first instance," John says of his wife's

visits, “and I honour you for it” (226). Though her charitable behavior may seem to arise naturally out of Dot’s kindness, such “kind thought” ultimately serves as a part of that symbolic capital which preserves the doubted wife’s endangered reputation. Thus, the insistent construction of Bertha Plummer as “the Blind Girl” functions as a device which limits Bertha’s agency at the same time that such delimitation benefits others. Likewise, in addition to being squeezed into her role as object of charity, Bertha is also endowed by the narrator with a number of more active features typically associated with blindness: The acute hearing which enables Bertha to recognize her brother’s footstep while others are yet deceived by his outward disguise represents one of those “compensatory faculties” with which blind people are traditionally believed to be endowed (Paulson 7); Bertha’s musical ability, too, locates her within a tradition of blind poets and singers beginning with Homer; and her occupation as a piece-worker, fixing unseeing eyes onto lifeless dolls (“Cricket” 202), marks her as belonging to the modern tradition of disability, in which “good” disabled people are occupied with and defined by institutional forms of productivity—knitting, stringing beads, and making brooms.

Finally, the unusual quality of Bertha’s sexuality also corresponds to certain conventions surrounding blindness, marking her both as a potential sexual threat as well as unfit for adult sexual union, a creature without “normal” sexual boundaries who must simultaneously be protected and guarded against. Whereas an ordinary—that is, a sighted—Victorian girl is typically depicted as falling in love only after an eligible man has declared his affection and honorable intentions toward her, the blind nature of Bertha’s sexual identity leads her to bestow her affections where they are not reciprocated. Following her father’s deceptions, Bertha is misled into a

devotion for the unworthy Tackleton. Thus, the groping quality which the narrator of *Cricket* depicts as extending into all areas of the blind girl's sightless life results in excesses and indiscretions invisible to herself:

The Blind Girl took [Tackleton's] hand and kissed it; held it for a moment in her own two hands; and laid her cheek against it tenderly, before releasing it. There ... was unspeakable affection and ... fervent gratitude in the act ... (219)

Like the other blind girls discussed in Chapter Three, this one is marked, by her blind behavior, as sexually available. To revisit, once again, Derrida's troubling interpretation of the blind, the blind girl here may be seen "like all the blind ... a sort of ... unveiled sex from head to toe, vaguely obscene and disturbing." Blind Bertha may be regarded as a participant in sighted culture's eroticization of the blind "man." Recalling Derrida again: "More naked than others, a blind man virtually becomes his own sex, he becomes indistinguishable from it because he does not see it, and not seeing himself exposed to the other's gaze, it is as if he had lost even his sense of modesty. The blind man has no shame ..." (104-106). Thus, though Caleb assumes responsibility for misleading his daughter—"have I deceived her from her cradle, but to break her heart at last!" [238])—the active, the immodest nature of Bertha's love, reaching out towards its object, "vaguely obscene and disturbing," engaged in fantasy, committed where there is no requital, signals the failure of "normal" (i.e., sighted) feminine erotic constraint. The confession of her love for Tackleton—"I have sometimes wished that I could see ... him—only once dear father, only for one little minute—that I might know what it is I treasure up,' she laid her hands upon her breast, 'and hold here!'" (236)—clearly demonstrates an active force, a seemingly shameless self-exposure. Though Bertha may otherwise hold her peace on the

subject, her erotic potential remains a dynamic force, a freakish power associated with her blindness, which invites the reader to question the blind girl's erotic self-control, and which excludes her from the realm of normal, sighted Victorian girls, chaste and virginal. Though Bertha is portrayed in many respects as child-like, a helpless innocent, her apparently uncontrolled/uncontrollable erotic impulse reinforces the sense that Bertha's blindness requires discipline and restriction. Without her own sense of sexual boundaries, the blind girl apparently requires the presence of the satellite's regulating influence.

Ultimately, both Bertha's sexual safety and the safety of her beloved object are secured by her removal from the economy of reproductive domesticity. For the conclusion of *Cricket* relies on the depiction of Bertha "sightless and partnerless, playing her harp so that others can dance" (Gitter, "Blind Daughter" 686).

Attendant upon the scene in which she cannot be an active participant, removed from the potential eroticism of the dancing itself, Bertha's "punishing exclusion from the fairy-tale ending" works to show "that sexuality becomes the limit of the blind person's ability to participate fully in domestic life" (Gitter, "Blind Daughter" 686; Klages 77). As Mary Klages comments, "while nondisabled bodies can be sites of reproduction without compromising the bonds of empathy that form the basis of all social bonds, disabled bodies cannot. Dependent on empathy for their survival as well as for their social utility as 'signs,' blind people like Bertha are forced to remain on the margins of family life, barred from becoming centers of their own families because of the contradictions between blindness and sexuality" (77).

Moreover, the end of Dickens' tale, while ostensibly neutralizing Bertha's unruly sexuality, suggests the possibility that the the blind girl's undisciplined erotic

impulses may continue to pose a social threat. For Bertha ultimately turns her originally misplaced affections in the direction of her father, discovering in him the anonymous beloved object she had mistakenly sought in the form of Tackleton: ““The benefactor whom I first began to reverence and love, because he had such sympathy for me ... [is] here in you. Nothing is dead to me. The soul of all that was most dear to me is here—here, with the worn face and the grey head”” (265). The transfer of Bertha’s affection and dedication is thus accomplished without material alteration; the father becomes the beloved object and the daughter’s erotic groping may thus be seen as persevering in a kind of blind desire. And while the endogamous, the suggestively incestuous nature of this narrative finale may not be terribly unusual for a Dickens text, it does hint at Bertha’s further erotic misprision. The passionate impulses of the blind girl seem to require a discipline which is, perhaps, beyond the powers of the satellite.

These elements combine to recreate that picture of the satellite relationship already described. The satellite—in this case Caleb (or perhaps Dot)—while apparently working to serve the disabled subject, ultimately functions as a force which surrounds the disabled, encapsulating her within an architecture, literal or figurative, which serves to create a meaningful identity for the satellite, to aggrandize his role even while it imprisons the disabled. Once again, however, the trouble with such a structure is not only the political difficulty inherent in the objectification of the human subject it centers, but also and more immediately, the elemental instability built into such objectification. Though Bertha’s father may create a narrative that imprisons his daughter in what would be a gilded cage, and though the narrator of the *Cricket* story may reduce the blind girl to a simple symbolic alliterative, “Blind

Bertha,” capturing within that epithet an almost absurdly sentimental trope of helpless blind femininity, neither narrator is entirely successful in his efforts. Like her disabled predecessors, Laura Bridgman and Tiny Tim, Bertha Plummer, too, erupts out of the symbolic boundaries established by the satellite narrative.

First and foremost is the signal failure of Caleb to mediate for his blind daughter in a way that actually separates her from the world, in a way that prevents her from understanding her surroundings or communicating with others without his interpretive intercessions. Even while he dupes her in many respects having to do with material appearances and circumstances, he does not succeed at actually creating a happier world for her; her own desire and her own interpretive powers leading her into an unhappy love for Tackleton which is beyond the father’s mediation, beyond his narrative intention or control. Bertha’s agency, while only dimly perceived or understood by her father and others, is nevertheless a meaningful factor in her own destiny. The desire of the satellite to mediate the disabled subject entirely, acting as sole agent between that subject and a larger world, is ultimately depicted as an aspiration which cannot and should not be satisfied, regardless of intention. No one, the writer seems to imply, can be justified in narrating the world for another human creature, in creating fictions by which others are called upon to live.

Both narrators discover that the life of one person, disabled or no, cannot be entirely shaped or controlled by another. And the *Cricket* narrator’s troping of “Blind Bertha” as pathetic dupe likewise disintegrates with this lesson. The narrator of the Christmas tale can no more maintain his objectifying and disabling delimitation of “the Blind Girl” than can Bertha’s father. The desire to act as satellite to the disabled, to re-tell her story to the world and to retail the world to her,

is persistently thwarted by the unexpected agency of the blind subject. Despite every effort to intervene and to contain her within the conventional parameters established by satellite mediation, Bertha refuses to reside passively within the enclosure constructed. Her productive labor, despite its conventional appearance, is one measure of her worth: She makes a material contribution to the world and by her work is able to help support both herself and her father.⁷⁴ Similarly, Bertha's expressions of erotic desire are never effectively quelled and, despite the observations of critics who read the conclusion of *Cricket* as a denial of the blind girl's sexual potential, the reader must remain alive to the fact that Bertha's passions are her own; they may be repulsed or redirected, but Caleb's sense of his daughter as an innocent incapable of erotic love is proved erroneous. The fact that he must now keep a close eye on the blind girl, that he must acknowledge her adult sexuality even while he guards her from herself and others is as much a testament to her potential sexual power as it is a form of control and confinement.

Most remarkably, Bertha's place and identity as disabled are significantly challenged by her own apparent desire to assume the role of caretaker. While others appear motivated to maintain her in a condition of blind helplessness, Bertha seems equally motivated to express her own potential by herself serving as a satellite. The reader may glean some fragment of this attitude in Bertha's meaningful labor both as housekeeper and as toymaker; as such, she may already be regarded as taking care of others. But Bertha's plans for her own future, whether as devoted wife or devoted daughter, revolve much more explicitly around a fantasy of herself as custodian of another helpless and ailing human creature. When assigning her own love for

⁷⁴ Such labor seems to anticipate and ought certainly to remind readers of the labors

Tackleton to her young friend May, the villain's chosen bride, Bertha fantasizes that the marriage will be composed not of tender kisses and caresses, but rather of attentive nursing care. Caleb confesses to his daughter that Tackleton is "a little older than May," but adds "that don't signify."

"Oh father, yes! To be his patient companion in infirmity and age; to be his gentle nurse in sickness, and his constant friend in suffering and sorrow; to know no weariness in working for his sake; to watch him, tend him, sit beside his bed and talk to him awake, and pray for him asleep; what privileges these would be! What opportunities for proving all her truth and devotion to him!" (223)

Since this is the whole description of Bertha's fantasy of marriage, it may thus be seen that the blind girl's passion is bound up entirely with anticipating her imagined lover's future incapacity, his "infirmity and age," his "sickness," his "suffering and sorrow." She imagines Tackleton confined to bed while a loving woman attends to his needs, working, watching, tending, talking, and praying while the body of her beloved lies prone, the passive recipient of his wife's active attentions. And following the revelation of Tackleton's meanness and her own father's true condition as "an old man worn with care and work ... a spare, dejected, thoughtful, grey-haired man ... despondent and bowed down and striving against nothing," the broken-hearted Bertha seems immediately cured of her unfortunate attachment, readily and joyfully transferring all her affection to her worn and dejected father. "Throwing herself upon her knees before him" at this description, Bertha pulls her father's "grey head to her breast" in a posture that specifically reproduces the act of nursing an infant and, as she is assured of his being "worn" and "bowed down," such a revelation of her father's physically decrepit condition seems simultaneously to cure her of her own disability. "It is my sight restored," she cries out. "It is my

of Jenny Wren from *Our Mutual Friend*.

sight! ... I have been blind, and now my eyes are open” (264). And indeed, the restoration of Bertha’s sight appears to be interwoven with the revelation of her father’s physical frailty and her own anticipated role as nurse to the ailing man:

“‘There is not a gallant figure on this earth,’ exclaimed the Blind Girl, holding him in her embrace, ‘that I would love so dearly, and would cherish so devotedly, as this! The greyer, and more worn, the dearer, father! Never let them say that I am blind again. ... The soul of all that was most dear to me is here—here with the worn face, and the grey head. And I am NOT blind, father, any longer!’” (264-65). And while this exclamation does conform with certain conventions of sentimental rhetoric, relying as it does on the ideas of sight and blindness as metaphor, Bertha’s statement also exposes both her own struggle for agency and her justifiable understanding that real agency and identity are born out of satellite service. Bertha correctly understands that she is trapped within the construction of her own blindness until she becomes the guardian or architect of another enclosure.

This erupting of Blind Bertha out of her prescribed role invites the reader to consider a number of possibilities in reference to disability and the satellite relationship. Foremost among these is that Dickens seems less and less able to describe and contain disabled figures within conventional symbolic boundaries. Though he may initially appear to depict disabled characters as helpless or villainous, as objects rather than as people, he seems increasingly challenged in his ability to maintain these characterizations; certainly in the instance of *Cricket*, we find a character who seems at first to subscribe insistently to the most conventional possible troping of blindness—helpless, groping, passive, feminine, child-like, musical, sensitive, and accute of hearing. She is, at least at the outset, more “Blind

Bertha” or “the Blind Girl” than she is Bertha Plummer; but by the end of the narrative, not only do we find Bertha exerting the possibilities of her own agency, but we also discover a shift in the narrative that reflects this emerging power. For while Bertha is identified by the narrator throughout almost exclusively as “Blind Bertha” or “the Blind Girl,” the closing pages of the tale retreat from this appellation, and rely instead on the simple designation “Bertha,” as if conceding that the character must now be understood as being and belonging to herself instead of being and belonging to the idea of Blindness.

This emerging or erupting of the disabled out of conventional symbolic boundaries, especially insofar as it manifests itself as a desire to assume the role of satellite, also testifies to a struggle or contest for power between disabled and satellite subjects, an agreement that disability is somehow, strangely, a site of latent power, but that such power is more readily wielded by an intermediate agent. Thus it happens that so many are anxious to give voice to the deaf-blind Laura Bridgman, even while shielding her from direct contact with an “outside” world; thus it happens that the lesson of Tim Cratchit is relayed through a series of narrative voices; and thus it happens that Bertha Plummer, blind though she may be, imagines a role of active independence as nurse to a husband or father. As with Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan, satellite and disabled, in the midst of their intimacy and in the midst of their mutual dependence, struggle for power, for primacy, and for identity; and such a struggle seems often to be characterized not only by a question as to who will lead, but also by a question of who actually is the disabled.

This potential conflation of identities ultimately suggests yet another possibility: That disability has a contaminating influence, and that caretaking is a

curative activity. For just as though he stands before Barnum's infamous "WHAT-IS-IT?" exhibit, the satellite is constantly in a condition of measuring and defining his own identity according to the disabled specimen. For Caleb Plummer, such a measurement enables his own fantasies of himself as a handsome and dashing young man; for Dot Peerybingle, the spectacle of Bertha's blindness permits her to re-inforce her self-image as a worthy and faithful wife. The presence of the disabled also gives rise, however, to a legitimate anxiety regarding the permeability of the categorical boundary between self and other, between disabled and satellite. With Blind Bertha's groping after the satellite position, with her reaching outside the boundaries of her enclosure, the reader is presented with an almost uncanny oscillation between disabled and satellite, between blind and sighted, between object-exhibit-specimen and spectator. The activity of the satellites surrounding Blind Bertha testifies to the potentially therapeutic powers of satellite activity; and yet the proximity of satellite to disabled serves both to re-inforce and to obscure categorical boundaries between the two; Bertha's sensitivity enables her understanding that recuperation, and thus agency, may come with the activity of nursing and the role of satellite; and yet, Bertha's reaching beyond the established categorical limits infers the inherent threat of the disabled. If one affirms one's own able-bodied condition by distancing the disabled with that incantation "There but for the grace of God go I," one simultaneously expresses both fundamental difference and fundamental similarity. The adage is supposed to serve as a manner of sacrifice to appease the diety and prevent a mutation from able-bodied to disabled; however, the threat of such transformation is bound up within the rhetoric of the prayer. The pattern is inescapable; the effort to construct agency and identity around the body of the

disabled returns inexorably to the earlier question: “Who or what am *I* in relation to this other creature?” and the logic of that question enforces an almost tidal reflexivity, a measure of the self understood only in terms of disability.

Moreover, this apparent oscillation, the disturbing conflation of self and other, of satellite and disabled, results, as has been seen elsewhere, both in the attempted re-inforcement of conventional boundaries surrounding disability and in an increasing awareness that disability cannot successfully be contained. Within Dickens’ writing this growing awareness is nowhere more apparent than in *David Copperfield*. Abounding as it does in representations of disability, this text seems wholly engaged in the questions this chapter has so far explored. For not only is *Copperfield* replete with disabled characters, but so too do these characters challenge the limitations and definitions which would ordinarily be imposed upon them, resisting first of all the idea of disability as fundamentally deviant, extraordinary, and apart, and ultimately contesting the traditionally passive role assigned to the disabled by satellite mediation.

In *David Copperfield*, as elsewhere, Dickens may initially seem bent on reinscribing conventional tropes of disability. The writer seems to justify Aunt Betsey’s benevolent imprisonment of the “mad” Mr. Dick, for instance, by showing how childishly incapable Dick would be of taking care of himself; the facial disfigurement of Rosa Dartle serves to reveal an inner truth, that she is psychically scarred and that she is inclined to behave in a violent and anti-social manner; the peg-legged Tungay of Copperfield’s early school days is represented as being incomplete mentally and socially as well as physically; and the early chapters of the novel portray the “volatile” dwarf, Miss Mowcher, in an alarmingly villainous

manner, Dickens having designed her as an aider and abettor in the seduction of Little Em'ly. But whereas this sort of stereotyping or troping of disability ordinarily serves to delineate the space such characters (or people) may be permitted to occupy, defining the disabled as object—pathetic, incompetent, incomplete, evil, or essentially non-human—the disabled characters here partake of a somewhat different quality. Most significantly, these characters seem to exist, not apart from, but along a continuum with other ostensibly nondisabled characters depicted in the text. It is uncommonly difficult to tell, for instance, if characters like the semi-senile Dr. Strong, the weak and alcoholic Mr. Wickfield, the manic Mrs. Gummidge, or the near monomaniacal Mrs. Steerforth ought to be classed in the same category with Mr. Dick, whose psychiatric condition is itself a subject for rancorous debate within the narrative. Likewise, a number of other characters are presented with disabilities that are progressive: Mr. Omer, for instance, is initially portrayed as a healthy middle-aged man, but subsequent encounters depict the increasing severity of the haberdasher's asthma, which ultimately requires him to rely on a wheelchair; Mr. Barkis, too, is slowly reduced to near motionlessness throughout the course of the novel, his rheumatism becoming so serious that he cannot “be shaken hands with” but instead offers “the tassel on top of his nightcap” for the purposes of polite greeting (365, ch. 21); similarly, David's young wife Dora “withers” and dies while still in her young adulthood. In all this, the writer seems to indicate that illness and disability are a part of the ordinary course of life; despite any freakish idiosyncrasies, the disabled here are not explicitly partitioned off from the “normal,” nor are these characters symbolically set apart in their narrative roles. The depiction of disability as being incremental rather than catastrophic, and the idea that conditions like

“madness” may not clearly be defined, lend further support to the notion that Dickens, though he continued to rely on objectifying stereotypes, increasingly regarded disability as integral to the “normal” human condition, a state of being which could not be rigidly categorized and thus set apart for exhibition and interpretation.

So, too, the nature of the satellite relationships depicted in *Copperfield* lends additional weight to the idea that Dickens is becoming confirmed in his apparent sense that disability cannot successfully be mediated or contained. The very fact that there are so many potential satellite relationships within the novel—Barkis and Peggotty, Dr. Strong and Annie, Mr. Creakle and Mr. Tungay, Mr. Dick and Aunt Betsey, Mr. Omer and his granddaughter, Mr. Wickfield and Agnes, Mrs. Gummidge and Mr. Peggotty, Rosa Dartle and Mrs. Steerforth—is an indication that the subject continues to present unresolvable difficulties; like a wound that will not heal, the tender spot must continually be re-visited, probed and examined, dissected and re-sutured, until some satisfying outcome is achieved. Despite this nearly constant re-visiting of the satellite relationship, however, it would be difficult to conclude that any real resolution is achieved. For while the pervasive appearance of satellites in the novel might seem to suggest that the writer regards disability as an identity requiring mediation, in fact, the satellite relationships depicted here are even more unstable and even more hotly contested than in earlier Dickens texts. In some instances, this contest for power manifests itself as a heated battle around the disabled subject, a legion of would-be satellites gathering about a site of power and potential, as is the case with Mr. Dick, with Dr. Strong, and with Mr. Wickfield. In other instances, as with Bertha Plummer in *Cricket*, *Copperfield*’s disabled characters reach beyond the

scope established for them by their satellite mediators, refusing to occupy positions of passivity and frequently seeking (sometimes successfully) to exchange roles, working ultimately to reduce the satellite attendant to a condition of dependence and docility, as is the case with Rosa Dartle and Mrs. Steerforth as well as with Mrs. Gummidge and Mr. Peggotty. Here, once again, the proximity of satellite and disabled serves both to re-inforce and to obscure categorical boundaries between the two.

Regardless of how this contest may manifest itself, however, the very existence of such contention reaffirms the idea that disability serves as a potential site of power and that it is regarded by author, by narrator, and by the satellite contestants within the text as a source of identity, authority, symbolic meaning, and authentic personal narrative. The appearance of power and importance attributed to a condition of misfortune and physical difference is evident from the animated satellite activity which frequently encompasses disabled figures throughout *Copperfield's* narrative. Mr. Wickfield, for instance, whose obsession with his daughter Agnes and whose incipient alcoholism both gradually increase until they consume his mind and his life, “impair[ing his] power of concentrating his memory and attention” and consigning him to bed with symptoms of rheumatic fever (845, ch. 54; 813, ch. 52), is attended by a series of satellite figures, all of whom orbit around his perceived disability. This attention begins with the benevolent services of Agnes Wickfield, who manages her father's house, arranges his meals, and serves out his port wine. She watches him, moreover, with an almost clinical eye, “observ[ing] quickly” when he falls into a “silent” and “brooding” condition and taking immediate steps to “rouse” him from this “state” (281; ch. 15). As the narrative

progresses, however, Agnes' satellite role is challenged by Uriah Heep, and despite efforts on her part to maintain her father within her own keeping, Uriah ultimately displaces Agnes as Wickfield's primary agent and caretaker, the clerk's malevolent designs working deliberately to diminish Wickfield's power and to (further?) disable him both mentally and physically. A subsequent contest between Uriah Heep and Tommy Traddles results in Traddles assuming legal agency for the now bedridden Wickfield, and Traddles, in turn, cedes his interest in Wickfield back to Agnes, who declares that she has "always aspired . . . to render back some little portion of the love and care I owe him" and that she wishes as the "utmost height of [her] hopes" to "devote [her] life to him." Finally, Agnes confirms her satellite role by stating candidly "To take our future on myself, will be the next great happiness—the next to his release from all trust and responsibility" (846, ch. 54). Though the motivation of each satellite figure seems to be dramatically different—indeed, though some may argue that Wickfield cannot even truly be regarded as disabled—the power dynamic which structures this incredible series of exchanges remains fairly constant. Despite the apparent benevolence or malevolence of each satellite figure, each one observes and controls Wickfield's attitudes and actions, infantilizing him and further disabling him. Agnes sets out to "devote" herself to her father, but speaks in the same breath of releasing him "from all trust and responsibility." Uriah too, protests that he wishes to protect Wickfield from care and dishonor, but he does so by plying the older man with liquor and seizing control of his business. Even Traddles, whose motives may seem the most disinterested, excludes Wickfield from any part in the planning or discussion of his own future. And each of these satellites, while inspired by different motives, may be seen as gaining from his or her assumed power and

authority. Agnes' maturity and independent identity are secured by her role as caretaker; Uriah's "partnership" with Wickfield buys him a screen of respectability behind which he may execute a variety of villainous schemes; and Traddles' "power of attorney" over Wickfield's interests establishes him as an honest, intelligent, and industrious young lawyer, whereas he had before been portrayed as somewhat of a failure.

The satellite contest orbiting Dr. Strong, too, is not unlike the one which encompasses Wickfield. Though the doctor, like Wickfield, may qualify as disabled only in an equivocal way, the extent to which his mind is portrayed as absent or wandering and the extreme vulnerability to which such wandering opens him may certainly be regarded as characteristics of disability. The idea of Dr. Strong's incompetence is stressed from the moment he is introduced in the narrative; his imperfect grooming, the disarray of his dress, and the sartorial assistance of his young wife Annie all suggesting that the doctor is not really capable of looking after himself. Moreover, Copperfield likens the doctor's eye, at this first meeting, to that "of a long-forgotten blind old horse who once used to crop the grass, and tumble over the graves, in Blunderstone churchyard" (282, ch. 16), the explicit reference to blindness here serving to ground further descriptions of the doctor's "blindness" to everything that goes on around him. For the doctor, with his "cogitating manner," is painfully oblivious of a world which seems eager to defraud him. He is beset by those who would "abuse his kindness" (286), and by "marauders" wishing to beg from him, but he is not usually "aware of their presence" even when they come to "within a few yards of him." (Recall the "inattentional blindness" described in Chapter Three.) According to Copperfield, "Outside his own domain, and

unprotected, [the doctor] was a very sheep for the shearers" (294-95, ch. 16). And the doctor's insensibility is not limited to the concrete and material—his clothing, his money, and his immediate physical environment. Perhaps the greatest evidence of his borderline senility is his failure to recognize the suspicions which are so copiously cast upon his beautiful young wife. All these elements contribute to creating a portrait of Dr. Strong as a child-like innocent, a portrait which is not unfavorable, certainly, but which clearly suggests that he is not a responsible adult figure, and that he is not able to care for himself. This appearance of incompetence as disability is ultimately augmented by the furious satellite activity which revolves around the doctor in his oblivion. The most benevolent of these satellites is the doctor's wife, who helps him dress, who ties his shoes, and who tries gently to shield him from the ceaseless mercenary onslaughts of her mother and her degenerate cousin. The doctor's mother-in-law, commonly referred to as "the Old Soldier, on account of her generalship, and the skill with which she marshalled great forces of relations against the Doctor" (296, ch. 16), is another, her satellite role defined both by her position of command and by her determined efforts to negotiate between her poor relations and the doctor's unprotected wealth. So, too, the masters and boys of Dr. Strong's school may be regarded as mediating figures, their interessions on his behalf and their vigilant guarding of his innocent charity endowing them with a power which is a key element of satellite identity.

[I]f any sort of vagabond could only get near enough to his creaking shoes to attract his attention to one sentence of a tale of distress, that vagabond was made for the next two days. It was so notorious in the house, that the masters and head-boys took pains to cut these marauders off at angles, and to get out of windows, and turn them out of the courtyard, before they could make the Doctor aware of their presence; which was sometimes happily effected within a few

yards of him, without his knowing anything of the matter, as he jogged to and fro. (295, ch. 16)

Indeed, the doctor is so beset by those who would make use of him, who would act on his behalf, or who would do him a service that it becomes impossible to gauge the actual extent of his ability or disability. For in addition to those mentioned above, there are many others who contend for some share of what would be the doctor's own authority, including Annie's cousin Jack Maldon, Mr. Wickfield, Uriah Heep, Betsey Trotwood, Mr. Dick, and Copperfield himself. As with many of the other figures described thus far, the reader here finds the doctor so absolutely hedged in by those asserting their desire to render assistance that the idea of his apparent imbecility might well be understood as the infantilizing construction of those around him. As with Wickfield, despite the widely divergent motives and enterprises of these various satellite figures, one may consistently observe in the activity of the satellite a benefit to him or herself and a limiting (howsoever benevolent) of the power and agency of the subject being assisted. And once again, as with Wickfield and others, the contest that surrounds the disabled subject serves to identify this figure as a site of latent power and authority.

This analysis of power relations around the disabled may be undertaken, moreover, perhaps even more interestingly and fruitfully, by an examination of the interactions between the doctor and Mr. Dick, who is himself surrounded by a whirl of satellite activity. While Mr. Wickfield and Dr. Strong may be defined as disabled based on the arguments proposed herein, there is certainly less room for debate in defining Mr. Dick as a disabled figure. Though to the last Aunt Betsey expresses supreme contempt for the idea that Mr. Dick is mad, the reader is nevertheless constantly exposed to the assessments of others which confirm our sense of the

character's disability. The narrator tentatively suggests such an interpretation after his very first encounter with Mr. Dick, asking his aunt if Mr. Dick is "at all out of his mind?" And Aunt Betsey's reply here—"He has been *called* mad"—works, like her other denials, to reinforce the idea of Dick's madness (259, ch. 14). Indeed, in Mr. Dick's candid assessment of himself, he is all too ready to confess his own impairment: "What do you consider me," he asks David, "in this respect?" touching his forehead," and suggesting the possibility "Weak?" to which the narrator is forced to assent. Within the same passage, Mr. Dick goes on to describe himself as "simple," a "simpleton," a "poor fellow with a craze," a "weak-minded person," and as "mad Dick" (719-21, ch. 45). Moreover, he asserts that Aunt Betsey, despite her avowals to the contrary, is fully aware of his madness.

"She pretends I am not. She won't hear of it; but I am. I know I am. If she hadn't stood my friend, sir, I should have been shut up to lead a dismal life these many years." (720)

Aunt Betsey is, indeed, Mr. Dick's primary satellite; she rescues him not only from a miserable asylum life, but also from heartless relatives who "ill-used" him before he came into her keeping (257, ch. 14). Mr. Dick lives in her house and she strictly governs all aspects of his life, his daily occupations, his finances, his overall conduct, and the identity he is to inhabit both in his own view and in that of the outside world. Aunt Betsey dictates that Mr. Dick must eschew all reference to King Charles' the First's head in the Memorial he is writing; she allows him, according to Copperfield, "to rattle his money, [but] not to spend it" (307, ch. 17); she arrests him in undignified expressions of delight; and she is persistent in her claim, both to himself and to others, that Mr. Dick is a person of uncommon wisdom and prudence, rather than a madman.

“Mr. Dick,” said my aunt, “don’t be a fool, because nobody can be more discreet than you can, when you choose. We all know that. So don’t be a fool, whatever you are.” (248, ch. 13)

“He is the most friendly and amenable creature in existence; and as for advice!—But nobody knows what that man’s mind is, except myself.” (260, ch. 14)

“You are a very remarkable man, Dick!” said my aunt, with an air of unqualified approbation; “and never pretend to be anything else, for I know better!” (732, ch. 45)

Though Mr. Dick may benefit from Aunt Betsey’s intercession, it is clear from all this that she is the primary manager of his identity. Even in Mr. Dick’s own Memorial, his very autobiography, Aunt Betsey establishes what may and may not be said. Despite Aunt Betsey’s almost unlimited command over Mr. Dick’s actions and identity, however, she does not assume her satellite role unchallenged, but only “[a]fter a good deal of squabbling” with Mr. Dick’s brother and his other relatives (260, ch. 14). Despite his apparent foolishness, and despite the responsibilities involved in caring for him, Mr. Dick is nevertheless regarded as commodity, valued among other things for the potential authority he will bring to whoever acts as his agent.⁷⁵

For Aunt Betsey, such authority is desirable not only for the sake of asserting control over another, not only for the opportunity to demonstrate her own strength and prowess, but also because it procures for her both the right to assume masculine powers and privileges, and a form of comparative evidence—a proof that her own eccentricities should not and cannot be defined as madness. As with the satellite desires expressed by Blind Bertha (and as with the contest for power and identity

⁷⁵ It is certainly the case with all three of the characters examined here—Mr. Wickfield, Dr. Strong, and Mr. Dick—that the satellite activity surrounding them may

between Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller), Aunt Betsey's satellite activities serve to compensate for her own potential madness. By proving that she is mistress of Mr. Dick, Aunt Betsey maintains a standing in the "normal" community that her atypical conduct and lifestyle might otherwise call into question. Mr. Dick does seem to benefit from Aunt Betsey's care and kindness, but the pattern already described continues to prevail. Aunt Betsey's rigid control and infantilization of her disabled charge are designed to maintain him in a position of helplessness, while she assumes a power, authority, and identity which would not otherwise be possible for her.

Ironically, though perhaps not surprisingly, Mr. Dick's desire to serve as satellite to Dr. Strong functions in a remarkably similar manner. The reader first witnesses the development of this relationship during David's school-days as Mr. Dick accompanies the doctor in his walks, listening to "scraps out of the famous Dictionary" (310, ch. 17); and Mr. Dick "resume[s] his companionship with the Doctor" when Copperfield begins his tenure as Dr. Strong's secretary (589, ch. 36). Though there is little in the ordinary intercourse of this "companionship" that would characterize Mr. Dick's as a role of service, there is a subtle quality in his "veneration for the Doctor," as well as in the fact that "he devoted all his spare time ... to these perambulations," getting up earlier "to make it more," that bespeaks an attitude of care and attention belonging to the satellite (689, ch. 42). It seems not only that Mr. Dick enjoys the doctor's company for its own sake, but also that he wishes to ingratiate himself, to do whatever he can to improve the doctor's existence. As the narrator describes it, Mr. Dick was "never wavering in his grateful service, never diverted from his knowledge that there was something wrong, or from his wish to

have much to do with the potential for financial gain. Though a point very workthy

set it right" (690). Ultimately, of course, Mr. Dick intercedes to repair the breach between Dr. Strong and his wife, realizing that the doctor is powerless to act for himself, that others are prevented from intervening due to the delicacy of the situation, and that he himself is empowered by his disability to act where others are helpless.

"A poor fellow with a craze, sir," said Mr Dick, "a simpleton, a weak-minded person—present company, you know!" striking himself again, "may do what wonderful people may not do. I'll bring them together, boy. I'll try. They'll not blame *me*. They'll not object to *me*. They'll not mind what *I* do, if it's wrong. I'm only Mr Dick. And who minds Dick? Dick's nobody! Whoo!" He blew a slight, contemptuous breath, as if he blew himself away. (721, ch. 45).

Disability here is reconized as enjoying a privilege which does not and cannot belong to the able-bodied. At the same time, Mr. Dick's activity as a mediator here, his "amiable concern" as he "supported [Mrs. Strong] on his arm" and "laid his other hand upon the Doctor's arm, causing him to look up with a distracted air" (724, ch. 45), has a curative or redemptive effect. By serving as satellite, by performing the function of mediation, Mr. Dick transgresses the boundaries of disability and is acknowledged, if only momentarily, as being in his right mind. For not only does Aunt Betsey earnestly express her faith by the ejaculation, "'*That man mad!*'" (724), so too does the narrator "descry... a strange gleam of good sense" in Mr. Dick's plan (722). So, just as Aunt Betsey proves her own status as "normal" through her care of Mr. Dick, Mr. Dick exhibits his own powers and abilities through his service to Dr. Strong. Ultimately, the interweaving here of disabled and satellite, the obscuring of categorical lines between the two, points both to possibilities for power and authority inherent in the satellite relationship and to the complex dynamic of that

of consideration, it is not the focus of the argument here.

power. And thus, Dickens' fiction seems increasingly to be opening itself to the idea that disability cannot be firmly defined, nor can it be located or fixed within a single person or category.

But while *Copperfield's* explorations of the satellite relationship do seem to indicate a growing awareness that the disabled cannot be understood merely as symbol or trope, an "armature for fantasy," an inert or passive object upon which to build meaning and narrative, the role of satellite, with its attendant powers and its possibilities for the affirmation of normative identity, continues its appeal. For Dickens as writer, the most powerful aspect of this appeal has to do with his identity as story-teller. Though he acknowledges, and nowhere more firmly than in his preface to *David Copperfield*, that he has a kind of faith in the reality of his own fictions, the writer nevertheless experiences an enduring desire to own and control his own stories, to use his characters, and to transform life into art for the sake of finally managing and directing an ungovernable reality. The very creation of *David Copperfield* is, as a whole, an effort of this kind. For the novel is perhaps most famous for its autobiographical content, its re-writing of Dickens' life in a more controlled and satisfying way. Indeed, the autobiographical nature of *David Copperfield*, its "very complicated interweaving of truth and fiction" (as Dickens himself put it in an 1849 letter to friend and biographer John Forster) (House 5:569), has garnered more critical attention than perhaps any other single aspect of the text. The humiliation of Dickens' childhood employment as a laborer in a blacking factory is transformed into a term of labor in a wine bottling warehouse, from which degradation the young David successfully delivers himself; Dickens' impecunious father is transmuted into the comic Micawber, a clownish character for whom the

narrator feels sympathy, but with whom he shares no real connection or obligation; Dickens' youthful infatuation with Maria Beadnell, a passion which it took him years to recover from, is re-written as an "undisciplined" young marriage, from which Copperfield is rescued by the early death of his lovely but foolish young wife. And while these are perhaps the best known autobiographical episodes within the novel, such examples are legion.

Among those lesser-known elements of life fictionalized within *Copperfield* is the strange case of Mrs. Jane Seymour Hill. Immortalized as *Copperfield's* villainous-cum-heroic dwarf beautician Miss Mowcher, Jane Hill, described by an 1838 edition of *The Town* as an "interesting *little* lady" and as "one of the *greatest* London characters," was "a near-neighbour of [Charles Dickens']" (Storey 5:674n4). Like her fictional counterpart, Mrs. Hill was a dwarf as well as a manicurist and chiropodist, and there can be little doubt that she served as Dickens' inspiration for Miss Mowcher, for he acknowledges in an 1849 letter to Mrs. Hill that he is "bound to admit" that he "yielded to several little recollections of [her] general manner" (5:675). But while such inspiration may not be in any way unusual, writers typically drawing on sources from life for the development of their fictions, Dickens' unconsidered appropriation of Mrs. Hill as the original for Miss Mowcher nevertheless reflects his sustained desire both to use disability as a symbolic device and by so doing to play the part of satellite; for by transforming Mrs. Hill into one of his own fictional creations, by retailing, re-telling, and re-constructing that lady's identity and personal narrative, Dickens enacts a kind of ownership, a commodification of disability that belongs distinctly to the satellite mode.

Most egregiously, in his assertion of such power, in his appropriation of Mrs. Hill's identity as disabled, Dickens transforms the self-reliant and respectable chiropodist into a disreputable caricature. Trevor Blount's introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *Copperfield* observes, for instance, that Miss Mowcher had "[q]uite obviously ... been intended as a typically grotesque, paradoxical comment on false appearances" (23). And it is generally recognized that Mrs. Hill was herself correct in an early assessment of her fictional double (following the December 1849 number of *David Copperfield*), that Dickens makes "insinuations" about Miss Mowcher which "may be construed to the worst of purposes" (Storey 674n5), those insinuations being that Miss Mowcher "would assist Steerforth in his seduction of Little Em'ly" (675n2). Such a supposition, though perhaps difficult to prove, is altogether in keeping with Dickens' confession that he did "not mean [Miss Mowcher] to be a very good character" (675), as well as with *Copperfield's* initial description of Miss Mowcher, whose "roguish grey eyes" and "uncommonly knowing face" lend a sinister air to her banter about Little Em'ly (386, ch. 22).

"I love my love with an E, because she's enticing; I hate her with an E, because she's engaged. I took her to the sign of the exquisite, and treated her with an elopement, her name's Emily, and she lives in the east? Ha! ha! ha! Mr Copperfield, ain't I volatile?" (394)

As *Copperfield* observes, "her tone and look implied something that was not agreeable to me in connexion with the subject" (393). Altogether, the re-creation of Mrs. Hill as Miss Mowcher finds Dickens once again attempting to enfold disability within conventional parameters and tropes, his narrative performance establishing himself as satellite to a richly meaningful symbol—a distorted body housing an evil and distorted personality. With Mrs. Hill as a model, Dickens is thus able to re-imagine and re-invent the disabled body, translating its meaning and importance for

an extensive audience of readers, teaching them what the disabled figure means and delineating the particular symbolic space which it may occupy.

The difficulty is that this figure, like the disabled characters discussed above, also fails to remain within her prescribed enclosure; Dickens' suggestion of a symbolic meaning for anatomical deviance and his desire to use the disabled body for narrative purposes are frustrated by the very person whose identity he appropriates and objectifies. For the correspondence between Dickens and Mrs. Hill, initiated by the latter, actually begins with a letter of resentful complaint, confronting the famous author as to his seizure of her identity and his unwarranted maligning of her character.

Sir.

If you had attacked me in the full time of health and wealth and happiness I think perhaps I could have borne it with patience but now widowed in all but my good name you shew up personal deformities with insinuations that by the purest of my sex may be construed to the worst of purposes. All know you have drawn my Portrait—I admit it but the vulgar slang of language I *deny*. May your Widow and Children never meet with such Blighting wit as you have poured out on my miserably nervous head. Should your book be dramatised and I not protected madness will be the result. I have suffered long and much from my personal deformities but never before at the hands of a Man so highly gifted as Charles Dickens and hitherto considered as a Christian and Friend to his fellow Creatures

Now you have made my nights sleepless and my daily work tearfull. Tell me how I have deserved your anger. Waiting your answer I remain

With all due respect

Yrs.

Jane Hill (Storey 674n5)

These indignant objections may be regarded as an eruption of the disabled not only out of an established symbolic enclosure, but even beyond the parameters of fiction itself. For Mrs. Hill, herself holding out her “personal deformities” as a form of emotional currency, may be regarded as re-embodying the fictional Miss Mowcher,

who, with her “bodily defects” (526, ch. 32), seems to have stepped outside the pages of the narrative to reprimand the author for his ill-treatment. Indeed, in a note written to John Forster shortly after receipt of Mrs. Hill’s letter, Dickens sends a copy of the epistle to his friend, commenting that it is “from Miss Mowcher” (Storey 676). Once again, the disabled thwarts satellite efforts to appropriate, mediate, and narrate the meaning and experience of the disabled self.

Moreover, this conflict between disabled and satellite, this contest for agency and ownership of disabled identity, is not limited merely to the objections of Mrs. Hill. For Dickens did reply to her letter, explaining why he thought his fictionalization of her would not do any harm or cause her “a moment’s distress,” though his offer to “alter the whole design of the character and remove it, in its progress, from the possibility of . . . [a] bad construction” seems designed merely to placate (675), especially since, in his letter to Forster, Dickens refers to Mrs. Hill’s letter as “the queerest adventure” and to the writer as “Miss Mowcher,” calling her complaints “serio-comic” and suggesting that he is “tempted” to use her letter for his own purposes (676). Though Mrs. Hill is motivated to assert herself, it seems initially as though such assertion would be fruitless, since Dickens seems to resist her claims, reinforcing his own position as apparent superior. In particular, Dickens’ reference to the real-life chiropodist as “Miss Mowcher” accentuates his own role as author-narrator-satellite; it is a symbolic pushing back of the disabled figure into the prepared enclosure.

Mrs. Hill, however, was not so easily dealt with, refusing to be pacified by Dickens’ assurances, rejecting her appointed place as passive object, and forbidding that the meaning and identity of her figure be assigned by the writer’s satellite

activity. Rather than trusting to whatever amends Dickens might make of his own accord, and sensing perhaps that he still regarded her as an object of fun, Mrs. Hill instead employed a solicitor who followed his client's initial note with a more legal-sounding letter underscoring the damage which Dickens was perpetrating with his pen. The solicitor is rather veiled in his threats, writing only that Mrs. Hill "had been advised 'by several of her Friends' to adopt a course 'to which I will not more particularly allude'" (Storey 676n6), but is undoubtedly hinting at a possible legal recourse. To this letter, Dickens responds with greater seriousness, now "pledging" himself to make the "alteration" in Miss Mowcher which he had previously proposed only in the most conditional language (677). Though the disabled may still require a satellite (here in the form of a solicitor), the satellite in this case is clearly operating as agent and mouthpiece, as a functionary or prosthetic of the disabled, rather than as a manager or keeper. A chastened Dickens heeded Mrs. Hill's threat-by-proxy and undertook to make the promised changes. In a sense, we may regard Dickens' authorial control as being subsumed by the interference of the disabled. As with Laura Bridgman, shut within her closet, Dickens' ability to speak here—to make the sounds and meanings that grow out of his own voice and desire—is silenced, and in place of that voice, the reader is treated instead to a narrative prescribed by the disabled. For a moment, Dickens becomes, like Mrs. Hill's solicitor, a prosthetic device, managed and controlled by the disabled, and by managing the meaning of her own "personal deformities," rather than allowing their meaning to be managed by another, Mrs. Hill assumes control of the text and power over the satellite.

Mrs. Hill's success here, her compelling Dickens to alter his narrative, bespeaks more, however, than the disabled's potential for power and self-

determination, more than the seemingly inevitable thwarting of satellite mediation. For the revised Miss Mowcher—a heroic little figure who lectures Copperfield about what might, in today’s language, be called his “ableist attitude,” and who single-handedly captures and detains Littimer, Steerforth’s actual assistant in the seduction of Little Em’ly—though she represents a substantial change from the corrupt and “volatile” Miss Mowcher of the December number, yet occupies an equivocal position. On the one hand, the reader may readily recognize in her voice an echo of Mrs. Hill’s reprimand—“Come!” says the new Miss Mowcher,

“you know you wouldn’t mistrust me, if I was a full-sized woman!”

I felt that there was much truth in this; and I felt rather ashamed of myself.

“You are a young man,” she said, nodding. “take a word of advice, even from three foot nothing. Try not to associate bodily defects with mental, my good friend, except for a solid reason.” (526, ch. 32)

—and in her actions a reflection of Mrs. Hill’s tenacity:

“The little woman, being in Southampton, met [the fugitive Littimer] walking along the street—picked him out with her sharp eye in a moment—ran betwixt his legs to upset him—and held on to him like grim Death. . . . He cut her face right open, and pounded her in a most brutal manner, when she took him; but she never loosed her hold till he was locked up. She held so tight to him, in fact, that the officers were obliged to take ’em both together. . . . She said in Court that she’d have took him single-handed (on account of what she knew concerning him), if he had been Samson.” (930, ch. 61)

On the other hand, the re-representation of Miss Mowcher, her assertiveness here and her heroic capture of Littimer, come at rather a steep price. In the first case, though the reader may hear echoes of Mrs. Hill’s reproof, the original figure, the real-life chiropodist, is encased once again in fiction and is thus, once again, entirely subject to the will and management of the author-narrator-satellite. Though Dickens may employ Hillian ideas, attitudes, and personality traits, his work is nevertheless

encapsulating the disabled anew in a fictional enclosure which is altogether under his own management. At the same time, while the narrative of Miss Mowcher's fearless capture of the villainous Littimer depicts the disabled as a robust and self-determined figure, it persists in certain characterizations which do not seem entirely favorable: The mention of Miss Mowcher's "sharp eye" suggests an overall sharpness which may be indicative of wit, but which is hardly indicative of good-nature; the association with "grim Death" re-inscribes the symbolic meaning of the disabled, if not as evil, yet still as a powerful and corrupting force; and the sheer determination of the "little woman," too, presents the reader with an exhaustingly inescapable adversary. Moreover, in addition to slapping at Mrs. Hill with these subtle jabs, Dickens' narrative choices force Miss Mowcher to undergo imprisonment as well as a "brutal" beating in order to secure her redemption; and these punishments, though apparently unmerited within the fiction, may nonetheless be regarded as a form of narrative castigation for the pertinacious Mrs. Hill. She may prove her ability to force Dickens' hand, but the prostheticizing of the satellite, in this instance, hardly leaves the satellite figure powerless.

Ultimately, the strange fluctuation of power between disabled and satellite may be read as a kind of waltz (or perhaps a tango?); the fluid nature of the exchange—the struggle which is almost sexual, sometimes violent, but in which both partners depend on one another for a sense of the dance—does indeed embody a kind of conflict, but it is also, and more significantly, a balance, an ongoing testing of boundaries and a living experiment in identity. Dickens, as is fitting given his place in literary and cultural history, seems initially to assume that he will take a leading role in this dance, that the mediator-narrator-satellite will determine meaning and

direction; but the persistent challenge offered to his early efforts at control force the author into a questioning of his own author-ity. Dickens seems finally to come face-to-face with the fact that the encapsulation of the disabled logically involves the captivity of the satellite. And the writer's continued forays into questions of power and control, of agency and self-determination reflect a meaningful shift in his understanding of this balance. Though he never entirely abandons the sentimental or pathetic tropes of disability which characterize his earlier writing and which seem initially to function as a means of empowering the author-narrator-satellite, Dickens' depictions of disability in his later works, and his depictions of satellite relationships especially, demonstrate a new consciousness that "normal" and (what will come to be called) "disabled" are not stable and reliable categories, and that the relationship of power between these two sets, insofar as they may be identified as such, partakes of the same kind of instability. The crazed hostility, for instance, that pervades *Great Expectations* may be seen as emanating from the ruin of Satis House, but whether a psychotic Miss Havisham is responsible for wreaking so much damage, or whether the responsibility for this malignancy ought to be located in the lover who jilts her, in Estella, the heartless adopted daughter, or in the universe of greed which opens Pip to Miss Havisham's manipulations, cannot be resolved. Miss Havisham appears sometimes as an intelligent and devouring insect, infecting and maneuvering those around her, and sometimes as the hapless victim of another's cruelty, dependent on others for any human connection to the world around her. In a different vein, but partaking of a similar ambiguity, Jenny Wren and Silas Wegg of *Our Mutual Friend* both illustrate Dickens' ongoing interrogation of the meaning of disability and the role of the disabled. For Silas Wegg, a rather villainous "one-legged street seller of

ballads and miscellaneous items” (Davis, *Charles Dickens* 292), who searches London in hopes of re-purchasing the bones of his missing leg, may be read as personally and symbolically incomplete, as well as incompetent and fraudulent (in his position as illiterate reader to the Boffins); at the same time, Wegg’s determination to re-possess his missing leg may be seen as an articulation of his desire for agency, an insistence that he owns and controls his own body and his own meaning. While Jenny Wren, “a precocious and crippled 13-year-old who makes doll clothing and acts as parent to her alcoholic father” (Davis 292), may be seen as a recapitulation of the pathetic Blind Bertha, also relegated to a world of dolls rather than a world of fellow-humans; or Jenney Wren may be regarded, as Paul Davis submits, as fulfilling a parental role, as taking the place of satellite to her own father. In all three of these instances, despite possible appearances of psychic or anatomical deviance, the disabled is represented as occupying a recognizable place within the human continuum, and in all three of these instances, the writer revisits and re-complicates the question of disabled agency—whether the disabled is acted for, acts for him or herself, or for another. Though Dickens may begin his career with a rather stilted and conventional notion of disability as defining a person-object whose place it is to be passively represented for certain established social goals, it would appear that his continued attempts to depict disabled figures as passive objects, and his ongoing effort to serve as a mediator or interpreter of disability to a larger public, result in a perpetual revision of his notion of disabled identity. Ultimately, it seems, Dickens comes to realize that disability cannot be summed up by any single social convention, nor can it be managed or controlled by any designated intermediary; rather, it escapes all possible attempts at mediation and categorization, taking its own place within the

human family, insisting on the right and necessity to speak for and represent itself, and reaching sometimes beyond its assigned enclosure to exercise power and control over the encroaching satellite figure.

CONCLUSION

In some respects this dissertation may be described as a theoretical experiment. It is a working out and a testing of the characteristics that define the peculiar relationship between disabled identity and that other self—the satellite—that constructs itself in reference to this centered figure. In the course of this experiment, I believe I have begun to open up a new way of looking at Disability and also that I have proposed *new readings of some important Victorian texts.*

The theory of the satellite-disabled relationship which is presented in these pages and which is illustrated here by examples from history and fiction describes a complex dynamic in motion around the disabled. The word “disabled” (rather than “disabled body” or “disabled person,” for instance) is used advisedly, for it is the presence of disability (or the perceived presence of disability) in the abstract that is essential here; the disability may or may not be physical, may or may not be visible, may or may not be disabling, may be connected to a “real” person or to a fictional character; it may be constructed within the imagination of an onlooker; it may even be “generic” in form, enabling us to think and write about figures like “the blind girl.”

Briefly, this theory proposes that disability may be read as a site of power, authority, and authenticity, that insofar as it is regarded as “special” and especially insofar as it captures the interest and attention of an audience (even when that interest manifests itself as horror, disgust, or as some other form of political oppression), disability may be seen as occupying a central position; in this way, disability may be interpreted as being akin to celebrity. It is often desired or perceived as desirable, even while it is simultaneously described in negative terms or

treated with personal and social indignity. As a central identity, the disabled attracts a world of individuals—satellites—who wish to interact with and construct their own identities around the perceived meaning of the disabled. Sometimes these are caretaker figures: Medical or religious affiliates, family members, educators, interpreters, guides. But perhaps just as often, these satellites are not acting in any formal assistive capacity in relation to the disabled. Often they are well-meaning strangers who approach apparently disabled people on the street with offers of help, just as strangers approach celebrities for snapshots or autographs. Sometimes they are writers or artists who wish to capture the power and meaning of disability within their own medium, which representation they may then offer to their own audience. The satellite may be a fundraiser (like Jerry Lewis), a jailor (like *Jane Eyre's* Rochester), or a loving father (like Caleb Plummer of Dickens' *Cricket on the Hearth*).

Fundamental to the satellite role is only this: The attempt at some assistive, mediating, or interpretive gesture in relation to the disabled, an effort to connect in a way that appropriates some aspect of the power, authority, or authenticity that is perceived as belonging to the disabled.

Also crucial to this theory: The identities constructed within this framework and the dynamic of power between satellite and disabled are both extraordinarily fluid. Even while the disabled is centered within this structure, seemingly endowed with an extraordinary—even a supernatural—power, this figure is also denied agency and identity. Like some representations of femininity, this approach to disability may imprison by elevation, by rendering the disabled as sacred, or by categorizing disability in any way that insists on its other-ness. In effect, the person inhabiting disabled identity is subject to exclusion, or even erasure, by the intent external focus

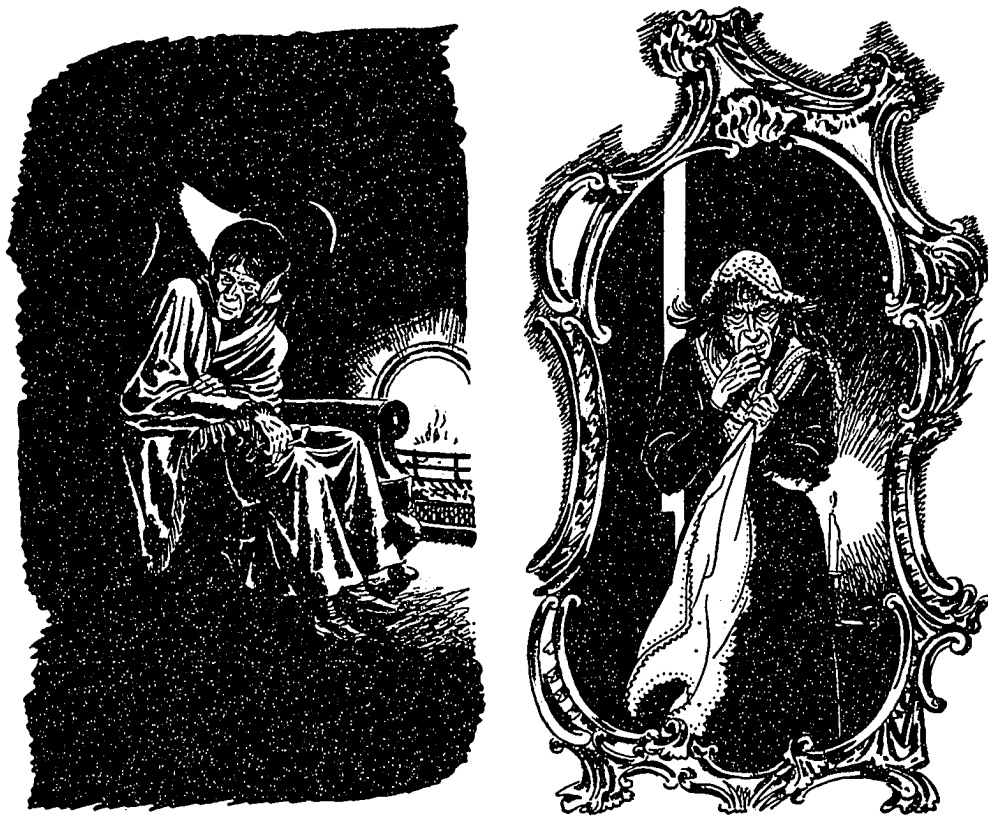
on disability as an all-defining identity. At the same time, the satellite, who approaches the disabled and constructs an identity in relation to this figure, finds itself on some terrifically unstable ground, in part because the disabled is already an indefinite (perhaps an indefinable) figure, an identity upon which the satellite cannot securely exercise his difference, but perhaps even more significantly because the performance by which the satellite chooses to enact his identity—demonstrating a special relationship with disability—is one which necessarily marginalizes the figure undertaking the performance. The satellite is always secondary, always an afterthought, never the center of attention or concern; he or she is always effectively masked by the primary body, the disabled.

While this project has been somewhat experimental in nature, suggesting possible avenues for further investigation, exploring perhaps as much as it explains, it also offers, I believe, a significant contribution to the fields of Victorian Studies and Disability Studies. By generating a discourse that makes disability more accessible to “mainstream” students of Victorian literature, this dissertation (and the work that grows out of it) will, hopefully, encourage other scholars and other readers to read disability as a more integral element of Victorian fiction. And by offering a theory that posits the disabled-satellite relationship as a kind of antagonistic partnership, I hope that Disability scholars and activists will be encouraged to re-read this dynamic in ways that acknowledge how much each of us is indebted to the other in the process of self-discovery and self-determination.

APPENDIX
Strange Migrations:
Eruptions of the Disabled Self in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

In an Illustrated Modern Library edition of *Jane Eyre* first printed in 1944, two striking pictures attract the reader's attention. The first of these depicts Rochester in female garb, a fringed shawl draped about his shoulders and a plain bonnet covering his head as he peers out into a dark room. He sits almost cowering in a large wing-back chair and his face is deeply shadowed, the lines in his forehead, under his eyes, and around his mouth and nose exaggerated by the dim light shed from a fireplace off to one side. This illustration is supposed to portray the master of Thornfield masquerading as an old "gipsy" fortune-teller in order to manipulate the feelings and fantasies of the young women then staying at his mansion: Jane, Blanche Ingram, and his other female guests. The second representation uses a mirror to frame an image of a furious Bertha Mason Rochester. Illuminated by a single candle set behind, the figure described in the illustration is dressed in a dark gown and is partly covering her wild black hair with Jane's bridal veil as she tears at it with her teeth. Of greatest significance, Bertha's heavily etched face here bears a remarkable resemblance to Rochester's in the illustration discussed above. The deeply graven lines in the face, the tousled black hair, the haggard features, the unkempt feminine garments, the angry, vacant-looking eyes, and the look of fierceness in both portraits is suggestively similar. In and of themselves these illustrations may be quite ordinary, but the likeness they imply is haunting.

As it happens, Edward A. Wilson's pictures have a peculiar resonance for those engaged in examining the disabled-satellite relationship. For these figures suggest a phenomenon encountered in a number of other places in this dissertation:



Courtesy Random House

These two Edward A. Wilson illustrations from a 1944 Illustrated Modern Library edition of *Jane Eyre* portray Rochester (at left) in the garb of a "gipsy" woman and his "mad" wife, Bertha Mason Rochester (at right), as she tears Jane's bridal veil with her teeth. The remarkable resemblance between husband and wife which is evident here bears out descriptions offered within Brontë's text. This likeness demonstrates only one aspect of the similarities shared by these two, a similitude which is ultimately borne out in the migration of disabled identity from one character to another.

The migration of the disabled into the satellite identity. Though satellite relationships abound in *Jane Eyre*—between Jane and Helen Burns, Jane and her Aunt Reed, Jane and Rochester, Grace Poole and Bertha Mason Rochester, Rochester and his (first) wife—and though the complexity of these relationships certainly deserves a more expansive treatment than I can here provide, what follows is a sample, one aspect of how the satellite syndrome manifests itself within the pages of Brontë's novel.

Classic feminist expositions of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* typically invite the reader to understand the "madwoman" character, Bertha Mason Rochester, as the heroine's "alter ego." Among those who suggest such a reading are Adrienne Rich, who proposes that Bertha exists as Jane's "opposite, her image horribly distorted in a warped mirror" (469), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who interpret the madwoman character as Jane's "avatar," a "specter" who acts out the heroine's secret fantasies and desires (359). While such readings have provided fruitful inroads into Brontë's text, they have also served to limit the explorations of students and scholars who might otherwise regard Rochester's lunatic wife as a more pervasive presence within the narrative. In fact, while Bertha Mason may certainly be recognized as Jane's alias, "avatar," or "opposite," it is also crucial to realize that this woman—designated by her husband as "demon" (308, ch. 11, vol. 2), "fiend" (316, ch. 1, vol. 3), "monster," "wild beast," and "goblin" (326), among other epithets—is also manifest in outlets other than the heroine.

Most obviously, Grace Poole, Bertha's attendant or "keeper" (326), is consistently mistaken by Jane for Bertha. Through much the greater part of her

adventures at Thornfield, the narrator mistakenly attributes Bertha Mason's "oral oddities" and bizarre antics (115, ch. 12, vol. 1)—the strange "demonic laugh" and "eccentric murmurs" (154, ch. 15., vol. 1; 115), the fire set in Rochester's bedroom (155ff), the biting and stabbing of Richard Mason (216ff., ch. 5, vol. 2), the destruction of Jane's bridal veil (297-98, ch. 10, vol. 2)—to the devices of this inscrutable house-servant. Thus, each time Bertha is able to establish some mark of her presence, to assert her existence despite her imprisonment and the fact that she is effectively invisible, this assertion manifests itself through a secondary identity, through the person of the "phlegmatic" and taciturn Grace Poole (162, ch. 1, vol. 2), dumpy, "red-haired," "plain," and decidedly unromantic (112-13, ch. 11, vol. 1). Though the heroine has difficulty reconciling the strange mutterings and dramatic performances of Bertha Mason with Grace Poole's very ordinary aspect, Jane nevertheless interprets Bertha's vocalizations and destructive activities as belonging to this peculiar servant. In this way, the figure of the satellite, Grace Poole, may be regarded as a mask or disguise for Bertha Mason or, alternatively, as an aperture through which the imprisoned woman may enter into and interact with the world beyond her cell.

Also significant, though to a lesser degree, is the way in which the reader finds Bertha Mason manifest in the character of Blanche Ingram, one of the young ladies who visits Thornfield during Jane's tenure there. As Rochester's would-be fiancée, Blanche already occupies a space which must necessarily suggest the unseen wife, but the master of Thornfield makes this strange doubling resonate more explicitly; for speaking of his early marriage, Rochester tells Jane that his young bride, "Miss Mason was ... a fine woman, *in the style of Blanche Ingram*; tall, dark, and

majestic" (321, ch. 1, vol. 3; emphasis added). This "dark" and suggestively exotic description is confirmed, too, by Mrs. Fairfax's description of Miss Ingram—"Tall, fine bust ... olive complexion, dark and clear; ... eyes ... large and black, hair[,] raven-black" (167, ch. 1, vol. 2)—and by Jane's ready interpretation of this description, to wit, that Blanche's good looks (like Bertha Mason's) hint at foreign origins; the governess cautions herself to remember the other young woman's striking beauty, but particularly, "the oriental eye" (169). Blanche's face, too, is marked with a visible "pride" and the discerning Jane finds the other young woman's laughter to be "satirical, [as] was the habitual expression of her arched and haughty lip" (181, ch. 2, vol. 2), both features reminiscent of the young Bertha Mason. Coupling this resemblance with Blanche's imperious manner, her openly flirtatious behavior (196, ch. 3, vol. 2), and her apparent willingness to marry without love, Blanche Ingram might readily be seen as Bertha Mason's doppelganger, a rank echo of that "intemperate and unchaste" wife who haunts the upper story of Thornfield (323, ch. 1, vol. 3).

But besides Bertha's part as alter ego to Jane, in addition to the madwoman's covert presence in (or through) the persons of Grace Poole and Blanche Ingram, a semblance of the imprisoned "maniac" may also be observed (316, ch. 1, vol. 3)—and perhaps most clearly—in another satellite figure, husband and jailer Edward Fairfax Rochester. As with Blanche Ingram, Rochester too seems to bear a resemblance to his Creole bride. A sketch undertaken by Jane's loving fingers depicts, among other features, Rochester's "full nostrils," his wide, "flexible-looking mouth," his "black whiskers" and "jetty hair, tufted on the temples"; the eyes require special attention: "I wrought the shades blacker." Significantly, this likeness brings

pleasure to none but its creator, and is pronounced by Jane's cousin to portray "a very ugly man" (245, ch. 6, vol. 2). Indeed, Rochester's apparent ugliness is universally acknowledged: Trawling for a wealthy husband, Blanche Ingram seeks to flatter Rochester by insisting that she does not desire a good-looking mate, "[a]s if loveliness," she advertises, "were not the special prerogative of woman" (188-89, ch. 2, vol. 2); Rochester's French mistress, Céline Varens, also openly acknowledges her lover's "beauté mâle" and privately speaks of his "personal defects" or "deformities" (151, ch. 15, vol. 1); even Jane repeatedly reminds us that Rochester is not "handsome" (137, ch. 14, vol. 1; 153, ch. 15, vol. 1; 184, ch. 2, vol. 2; 272, ch. 9, vol. 2; 461, ch. 11, vol. 3). And while Jane does not find Rochester's features "fearful," "ghastly," and "savage" (297, ch. 10, vol. 2) (as she does those of his wife), it is quite clear that in some respects at least, his physical appearance is similar to that of his "bad, mad, embruted partner" (306, ch. 11, vol. 2). Both are dark-complexioned (304), of course, and like Rochester, Bertha is quite hirsute, with her "quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane" (307; cf. 297, ch. 10, vol. 2; 299). Jane also remarks that Bertha is "a big woman" (307), "tall and large" (297), "in stature almost equalling her husband," and "show[ing] virile force" besides (307).

Moreover, Bertha's passions—portrayed as a disabling madness—find a correlative in Rochester. Though he may not outwardly rave, it is evident that Rochester is wildly impatient with the forms of courtesy and polite social intercourse: From the moment of our first encounter, the reader finds Rochester "swearing" (118, ch. 12, vol. 1); to Jane's observation that Rochester "is very changeful and abrupt," Mrs. Fairfax acknowledges that he "has peculiarities of temper" and that sometimes "his spirits [are] unequal" (133, ch. 13, vol. 1); the reader witnesses

Rochester's cautioning his houseguests, who are clinging to him after one of Bertha's nocturnal raids below stairs, that they must "keep off" him or he "shall wax dangerous" (217, ch. 5, vol. 2). Rochester, too, is perfectly aware of his passionate disposition:

"I am not a gentle-tempered man ... I am not long-enduring; I am not cool and dispassionate. Out of pity to me and yourself, put your finger on my pulse, feel how it throbs, and—beware!" (320, ch. 1, vol. 3)

His violent or abusive posture in respect to Jane, however, is perhaps most telling, especially during their engagement; Rochester calls her a "sprite or salamander," a "thing" (275, ch. 9, vol. 2), "a capricious witch" (284), a "hard little thing" (286).

The "best words at my service" writes Jane,

were 'provoking puppet,' 'malicious elf,' 'sprite,' 'changeling,' &c. For caresses too, I now got grimaces; for a pressure of the hand, a pinch on the arm: for a kiss on the cheek, a severe tweak of the ear." (287)

Rochester's propensity to violence is not the only mark of passion that demonstrates his similarity to his wife. Indeed, in terms of their enormous sexual appetites, Bertha and Rochester bear a remarkable resemblance to one another; while Rochester claims that his young bride was a slave to her "vices," "excesses," and "giant propensities" (323, ch. 1, vol. 3), regarding his own "dissipation" as merely "reckless" (328), his series of mistresses—Céline, Giacinta, and Clara—and his swift disgust with and disposal of these women (328-29), demonstrates a predilection for sexual self-indulgence which may be regarded as paralleling the rank and riotous vices of his captive wife.

Finally, the disabling of Rochester also functions as a further link between his character and his late wife's. The fact that their disabilities differ in kind—Bertha is

portrayed as “mad” while Rochester is blinded and maimed—matters less in the end than the fact that husband and wife both wind up participating in disabled identity. Indeed, Rochester’s acquiring his disabilities simultaneously with Bertha’s suicide invites us to consider an intriguing possibility: That is, that the similarities detailed above, the manifestations of Bertha Mason within her husband, actually represent a kind of migration of one identity into the other.

Ultimately, this pattern of similitude, the continual manifestation or distorted images of Bertha which permeate *Jane Eyre* serve as a sort of figurative escape. Just as the lunatic literally cannot be confined and is therefore prone to escape from her cell, so, too, on a symbolic level, it is equally difficult to keep her contained. Though we may read Bertha as Jane’s alias, we must also recognize the madwoman as a more pervasive figure within Brontë’s text.

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