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Exploring the Interface between Drama and Disability Theory

David Feeney

Visual Impairment Scotland

It is often contended that physical anomaly is received more positively within the art world than in society, from which it follows that the social reception of disability might be enhanced by the application of certain aestheticizing measures. Focusing on the reception of blindness, the essay suggests that imaginative affirmations of the condition, when conducted according to visual criteria, serve frequently to isolate blind people from their natural resources of aesthetic receptivity. Instancing a variety of literary sources, but concentrating on portrayals of blindness by Irish playwrights, the essay examines some of the issues that problematize the process of marshalling components of an aesthetic approach to blindness for social application, raising questions regarding the constitution of genuinely affirmative imaginative renderings of disability.

I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on
Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn.

W.B. Yeats, "High Talk"

Anita Silvers has suggested that the inconsistency whereby disabled people, while frequently socially ignored, have historically generated a wealth of artistic fascination, can be explained in terms of the discrepancy between the orders of significance attributed to normality in art and in life. In what amounts to an inversion of the corresponding social response, the exceptional is received within the art world with considerably more fervour than the typical. While "normalcy appears to be a regulative ideal affecting our social responses to other people's corporeal configurations," Silvers observes, the same ideal has little purchase where aesthetic reactions to those same bodies are concerned (238). She then points to a significant discrepancy between the rigidity of the "prescriptiveness" with which individuals are expected to conform with precedents in their everyday social lives, and the excitement with which radically new forms of identity are embraced within the art-world. Being "interpretive" rather than "coercive," art's history does not repudiate new forms in the way that human history does.

Silvers' suggestion is that the invigorating influence that "novel configurations" have exercised over art history might be extended and applied to the task of informing social consensus about the enlivening part played within the human collective by the disabled community.

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder also identify the significance of novelty within the domain of representations of disability with their observation that "disabled bodies and lives have historically served as a crutch upon which artistic discourses and cultural narratives have learned to ensure the novelty of their subject matter" (13). In this essay I will explore some of what is involved in the recommended process of shepherding the concept of novelty from the domain of artistic configuration into that of the lived experience of disability. By way of a cautionary illustration of one of the hazards attending the proposed crossing between the traditionally remote domains of aesthetic principles and lived experience, I will focus on the suggestion that a considered application of the charms of novelty, which arguably account for a considerable share of the allure that blindness has historically held for the sighted artist, might go some way toward alleviating whatever degree of reticence can be said to characterize the social reception of the condition. As my model for novelty, I propose a reworking of the most celebrated theoretical treatment of the quality as it was first controversially included by Joseph Addison as an aesthetic category:

Every thing that is *new* or *uncommon* raises a Pleasure in the Imagination, because it fills the Soul with an agreeable Surprise, gratifies the Curiosity, and gives it an Idea of which it was not before possessst. We are indeed so often conversant with one Sett of Objects, and tired out with so many Shows of the same Things, that whatever is *new* or *uncommon* contributes a little to vary human Life, and divert our Minds for a while with the Strangeness of its Appearance: it serves us for a kind of Refreshment, and takes off from that Satiety we are apt to complain of in our usual and ordinary Entertainments. (541)

I will suggest that the natural predilections of the visual sensibility which assigns itself the task of aestheticizing blindness can problematize the recommended process of marshalling the components of our social response for aesthetic application. Exposing Silvers' canvassing of the social exploitation of artistic measures to a brief reading of passages involving blind characters from works by J. M. Synge, Brian Friel, and W. B. Yeats, I will filter my general approval of her motive through a cautionary emphasis on the need for vigilance in the process of ushering the concept of novelty across the frontier she means it to traverse. My principal suggestion is that when applied to the phenomenon of blindness, Silvers' conception of the relationship between the reception of strangeness in art and life needs to be recast. The readings at the centre of this

essay issue a distinct cautionary reminder that as we apply Silvers' hypothesis regarding the potential (mis)applications of novelty, we need to be mindful of the fact that when sighted people aestheticize blindness in the terms of visual or iconographic orthodoxies, their gesture, however well intentioned, may well result in the isolation of blind characters and audience members from their own reserves of aesthetic receptivity.

An All-Too-Resolute Brightening of the Oedipal Gloom

The first modification that ought to be made to Silvers' observation is that, though it arguably has considerable purchase within a discussion of modern art, a connection between despondence and blindness infiltrates several older literary portrayals of sightless experience. Milton's Samson comes immediately to mind, as does Charlotte Brontë's depiction of Edward Rochester. In Schiller's *William Tell*, the son of Henry of the Halden, after the blinding of his father, cries,

To die—is nothing—nothing but to live,
And not to see is misery indeed! (qtd. in Monbeck 29; see also, Twersky 27)

Rudyard Kipling memorably concludes *The Light that Failed* with what is portrayed as the only possible congenial resolution to the dilemma in which his blind protagonist, Dick Helder, finds himself: "His luck had held to the last, even to the crowning mercy of a kindly bullet through his head" (208). Describing a widespread imperative within disability studies to "expose physical difference as an ideological phantasm," Mitchell and Snyder observe that the psychological and physical trappings of disability have been exploited to "metaphorize nearly every social conflict outside of its own ignoble predicament in culture," to the expense of explorations of disability as an experience "in its own right" (12). Although the history of literary prototypes of disability is complex and varied, and though the array of social meanings historically attributed to disability resists generalisation, many of the essays collected by Mitchell and Snyder trace a history of "metaphorical opportunism" (17), acknowledging that disability draws a surprising amount of attention from authors and artists alike. The works examined in this essay testify to the heterogeneity of imaginative delineations of disability, given that two of my three examples are free of the exploitative propensity implicit in the accusation of opportunistic metaphorization.

Notwithstanding Silvers' problematical rendering of Mitchell and Snyder's work, she is correct to point to the incontrovertible frequency with which the

distinctiveness of blind characters is portrayed positively by artists in more recent times. The extent to which the enthusiasm and keenness for novelty that informs many of these portrayals can be said to be meaningfully affirmative is, however, open to debate. Scanning the history of literary representations of blindness, Georgina Kleege has traced a twentieth-century lifting of the “Oedipal gloom” (74). Having identified the same gradual brightening of literary depictions of blindness, Michael Monbeck ventured the observation that “this new perspective is only rarely encountered until very recently” (30). What Kleege describes as the “chip[ping] away at lingering remnants of the Oedipal image” (90) is a twentieth-century phenomenon that has been described in detail by David Bolt. He points out that the allocation of magically heightened powers of discernment to blind characters, while seeming to alleviate a history of negative stereotyping, actually belies the hours of graft that must be undergone by newly blind people before the senses remaining to them can be used more effectively. Citing a wealth of examples, including works by such diverse writers as Rupert Thompson, Margaret Atwood, James Joyce, Arthur Conan Doyle, Stephen King, August Strindberg, Anita Shreve, Raymond Carver, George Sava, Jose Saramago, and Dylan Thomas, Bolt observes that the literary arts are replete with instances of so-called positive stereotyping. (When compiling a list of ‘literary affirmations’ of blindness, Henry Green’s *Blindness*, H. G. Wells’ “The Country of the Blind,” D. H. Lawrence’s “The Blind Man,” and J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, might also be included.) I want here to discuss in some detail how the issue under review is exemplified by the contrasting portrayals of blindness by three Irish dramatists.

The Aesthetic Dividend Yielded to an Aurally Receptive Disposition

The Well of the Saints represents Synge’s first concerted attempt at the three-act form, and is often depicted as something of a rung that had to be tested before he could scale the heights of what is generally regarded as his supreme dramatic achievement, *The Playboy of the Western World*. Published in 1905, *The Well of the Saints* depicts the plight of a blind couple, Martin and Mary Dougl, who, when we are first introduced to them, are living a relatively contented life, begging for subsistence on the periphery of a village community in the east of Ireland. Martin and Mary’s peace of mind begins to dissipate, however, as word reaches them of the impending arrival of a wandering saint who carries water with healing properties capable of restoring the eyesight they lost in early youth. Upon being unblinded Mary and Martin discover each other’s ugliness with

a perfectly reciprocated contempt and have trouble seeing beyond the unsightly throughout most of the remainder of the play.

The most memorable junctures in the play bear the traces of Synge's youthful enthusiasms for nature and music, such as Martin's description of time he spent sitting

alone in the cold air, hearing the night coming, and the blackbirds flying around in the briars crying to themselves, the time you'll hear one cart getting off a long way in the east, and another cart getting off a long way in the west, and a dog barking maybe, and a little wind turning the sticks. (Synge, *Prose*, 125–127)

When attempting to entice Molly, the belle of the village, to join him on a sojourn southward, instead of painting a vivid picture in her mind of the spectacular masses of wild flowers, Martin assures her that once there, they will not be able to take two steps without "crushing fine flowers, and making sweet smells in the air" (*Prose*, 117). The enraptured state to which Mary is capable of being transported by means of senses other than eyesight is confirmed by her avowal:

There's the sound of one of them twittering yellow birds do be coming in the spring-time from beyond the sea, and there'll be a fine warmth now in the sun, and a sweetness in the air, the way it'll be a grand thing to be sitting here quiet and easy, smelling the things growing up, and budding from the earth. (*Prose* 131)

Martin instinctively continues his wife's line of thought, creating a moment of harmony in a play that is replete with acrimonious confrontations: "I'm smelling the furze a while back sprouting on the hill, and if you'd hold your tongue you'd hear the lambs of Grianan, though it's near drowned their crying is with the full river making noises in the glen" (*Prose* 133).

Sighted people do not generally recognize growth by its smell. Their awareness of the presence of lambs isn't ordinarily impeded by the sounds of a full river. The presence of a full river does not register itself upon the awareness of a sighted person by virtue of its sound if it is within that person's line of vision. Thus, as I have written elsewhere, a sense of collaborative synaesthesia is central to the play's effect (Feeney 47–95). It is as though the audience somehow taps the sensory awareness of the blind couple, their collective eyes supplementing the function served by Martin and Mary's ears and noses. The resultant auditory brightness glosses the monochromaticity of Acts I and III with a richly variegated lustre that betrays as unsurprisingly sightist the concerns voiced by the play's original cast—that is, Synge's heedlessness of the medium's conventional demands for the application of higher and more diverse colour. Synge was sighted, but the series of displacements that his education comprised played

its part in nurturing the type of sensory versatility that is integral to the play's achievement. At 16 the taking-up of the violin resulted in a temporary neglect of his naturalist pursuits—the violin having in turn to compete for his attention with books of language and literature. The love of nature, music, literature, and language were mutually supportive to the extent that Synge expressed a wish “to be at once Shakespeare, Beethoven and Darwin” (*Prose* 12). It is above all, however, Synge's adeptness as a listener—a capacity nourished by all of these endeavours, that lies at the heart of what he volunteers as an aesthetics of blindness.

Blindness, Beauty, and the Aesthetic Limitations of Language

Published in 1994, Friel's *Molly Sweeney* narrates the story of a woman in her forties who consents to undergo an operation to restore the vision she had lost when she was ten months old. Her experiences are narrated from three perspectives—those of her husband Frank, and her ophthalmologist Dr. Rice, as well as her own. The concern for Molly felt by those who are close to her manifests itself in various attempts to orientate her in a sighted world. Her father, for example, teaches her about the colours of the flowers in her garden, while the other characters go to great lengths either to cure her, or to mask the most telling features of her blindness. Rice's sight-restoring measures are initially successful. Shortly afterwards, however, Molly begins to experience a range of difficulties that she had not encountered in her blind world, and feels hopelessly ill-equipped to surmount them.

Molly cannot develop or satisfy an appetite for experience that can genuinely be said to be her own without the complete undoing or escaping of the influence of her various benefactors. While recounting the barrage of inquisitions to which she was perennially subjected as a blind person, the following account flows freely from an isolated episode of direct and crucially unchaperoned experience:

And how could I have told those other doctors how much pleasure my world offered me? From my work, from the radio, from walking, from music, from cycling. But especially from swimming. Oh I can't tell you the joy I got from swimming. I used to think—and I know this sounds silly—but I really did believe I got more pleasure, more delight, from swimming than sighted people can ever get. Just offering yourself to the experience—every pore open and eager for that world of pure sensation, of sensation alone—sensation that could not have been enhanced by sight-experience that existed only by touch and feel; and moving swiftly and rhythmically through that enfolding world; and the sense of such assurance, such liberation, such concordance with it ... Oh I can't tell you the joy swimming gave me. I used to think that the other

people in the pool with me, the sighted people, that in some way their pleasure was actually diminished because they could see, because seeing in some way qualified the sensation; and that if they only knew how full, how total my pleasure was, I used to tell myself that they must, they really must envy me. (Friel 24)

A world opens itself to Molly and she is enraptured. The passage offers a beautiful and elaborately detailed account, but is prefaced by a deceptively humbling assertion that the entity in question defies description. Here there seems to be something of the ploy of the poet who declares that the ways of his love are uncountable, only to proceed by enumerating them exhaustively. There is more to it than this, however, because rather than merely endeavouring to employ a standard rhetorical trope, Friel, by indicating the presence of a domain where language does not exercise dominion, appears to implicate himself in a crisis of faith in the power of words. The stark contrast between this account of Molly's intuitive experience and the aesthetics that her father endeavours to engraft onto her sensibility by describing her environment to her in predominantly visual terms is central to the play's rendering of a non-visual aesthetics. The most striking difference between the two scenarios is that between the distanced or disinterested observation of her surroundings and the embodied participation within them. Molly can talk of "offering" herself to her experience, and of the "total pleasure" and "liberation" that is born of an eagerness for, and a "concordance with," the world of sensation, because this experience, unlike her vicarious appreciation of the colourful garden, involves an unmediated and rapt involvement.

Molly's swim is characterized by the type of engagement with her surroundings that aesthetic theorists, guided by their traditional insistence on the maintenance of a critically objective observational perspective, have tended to overlook. The liberation of which Molly speaks so passionately seems to be due largely to the complete closure of the distance between herself and nature that her earliest aesthetic tuition had forced open. Her appreciation of swimming is derived from her exceptional sense of continuity with her world. She is fleetingly afforded the opportunity to function as a participant rather than as a vicarious observer. Molly's preference for intimate engagement, rather than distanced appraisal, serves as an intriguing exemplification of Louis Arnaud Reid's claim that there is "more knowledge" in aesthetics than in science or history because "it is a knowledge in which the whole embodied person participates by being as well as knowing. It is a knowledge in which embodied imaginative being is an essential part of the knowing" (279). Although proponents of the necessity to aesthetic appreciation of psychically aloof observation would doubtlessly disregard such proximity and somatic engagement as de-aestheticizing, Friel's

portrayal of Molly's keen immersion in her environment, together with the play's implicit respect for the vexed relationship between differentiability and disinterest, are impressive features of his imaginative rendering of a marginalized aesthetic.

The Influence of a Portraitist's Sensibility

Yeats's *On Baile's Strand* was initially staged as part of the inauguration of Dublin's Abbey Theatre in 1904, but heavily revised for a 1906 production. It treats the theme of the madness that befalls Cuchulain, King of Muirthemne, after his inadvertent killing of his own son. After our cursory introduction to the play's Fool and Blind Man—Yeats took care to invest the latter with a visual memory so that retinal absence can be transformed into remembered visual presence—Cuchulain and Conchubar, High King of Uladh, enter by the main door, engaged in tumultuous debate. Conchubar reminds Cuchulain that he had once confided to him while they had been drinking that he longed to have a child with Aoife, that “fierce woman of the camp” (Yeats 487) in Scotland. Because Aoife does not at any juncture make an appearance on stage, Cuchulain's rendering of her celebrated beauty has to be taken on trust by the audience. Hurlled into an immediate frenzy by the mere allusion to his former lover, Cuchulain accuses Conchubar of admiring only servility in women, and embarks on the following tirade:

A fierce woman of the camp!
 But I am getting angry about nothing.
 You have never seen her. Ah! Conchubar, had you seen her
 With that high, laughing, turbulent head of hers
 Thrown backward, and the bowstring at her ear,
 Or sitting at the fire with those grave eyes
 Full of good counsel as it were with wine,
 Or when love ran through all the lineaments
 Of her wild body—although she had no child,
 None other had all beauty, queen or lover,
 Or, was so fitted to give birth to kings. (Yeats 487)

This is Aoife exclusively as light waves reported her to Cuchulain. However vehemently Yeats came to deride and attempt to conceal and suppress his painterly instinct, this lyrical passage, its portrayal executed through an effective assimilation of visual imagery, is at least partially the product of Yeats's familiarity with the conventions of visual art. What is most extraordinary about

Yeats's painterly feat is that the only thing that threatens to save Cuchulain from the "romantic isolation" traditionally the lot of the solitary recipient of such visual beauty, is that Blind Man has encountered it too.

Despite his peripheral relation to the main sequence of dramatic events, Blind Man, by virtue of what he has seen, becomes a solitary and pivotal dynamic connection between the polar forces of prudence and heroism as they are represented in the play. His visual memory forges a coincidence of periphery and centre, and serves as the point of support that permits the play's treatment of these themes to maintain its delicately crafted equilibrium. We are next introduced to Aoife's son, however, and it promptly becomes apparent that the treasured visual spoils, to which Blind Man is privy, are vested with significance by virtue of being one component of the resembling relation that allegedly exists between mother and son. Having never perceived the Young Man, Blind Man cannot, within the elaborate structure of the play, appreciate or avail of the significance of the knowledge he proudly but so purposelessly harbours. The significance of Aoife's beauty is presented chiefly in terms of the extent to which it is traceable through the appearance of a descendent. Her son is valued, in turn, as a vessel for, or exhibition of, certain obscurely perceived residual qualities rather than for any qualities that can be said to be uniquely his.

Yeats's filtering of Blind Man's remembered epiphany through the impracticable medium of visual resemblance suggests that the evasive identity at the heart of the resembling relation, rather than any genuine concern for the sensory modalities remaining to blind people, constitutes the most significant manifestation of Yeats's fascination with the so-called novelty value of the sightless condition. The play addresses the diachronic enrichment of experience afforded by the detection of a resemblance between two entities separated by a temporal lapse. Because Yeats does not entertain the idea that resemblance might be a cross-modal phenomenon, Blind Man knows nothing of the significance of his visual keepsake, he knows of riches without experiencing enrichment. The figure of the Young Man, in Cuchulain's case, serves to vaguely rekindle an old infatuation and to reawaken and reaffirm an old conviction in relation to his former lover's beauty and heroic nature. The fact that Blind Man has not seen the Young Man, or perceived him in any way, isolates him, in turn, from the significance of the beauty to which the young warrior's presence attests, and that Blind Man himself has been privileged enough to witness. While the sense of familiarity experienced by Cuchulain serves as a bridge to the heroic past, filling him with a vague but curiously reassuring sense of continuity (see Lowenthal xxxiii), Blind Man becomes, in essence, an unwitting vessel of a knowledge that, while treasured, cannot be converted into a form

that could have much practical or aesthetic value in his present circumstances.

There is no 'now' in Blind Man's aesthetic experience—his aesthetic being resides entirely on the far side of the conduit through which the past makes meaningful contact with the present. His aesthetic is all precedent, that is to say, with no culmination—beginning and ending, as it does, in what has become an alien sensory modality. Rather than being an emblem of continuity, Aoife is for Blind Man a solitary remnant of an irretrievable past. Blind Man's visual memory serves as the only indication that he possesses an aesthetic sensibility at all. His essentially passive corroboration of the elaborate visual description supplied by Cuchulain seems to exhaust his aesthetic repertoire, as Aoife's beauty seems to be exhausted by a visual description of her. By investing Blind Man with a conception of beauty that is anchored in a mode of perception that is no longer accessible to him, Yeats isolates the figure of Blind Man from crucial facets of his own aesthetic.

Aoife's beauty, as it is still related to by Blind Man, appeals to what has long been a remote and outgrown predilection. The aperture of visual memory appears to render his non-visual senses helpless to marshal any type of rivalling aesthetic criteria. Yeats seems to have been attracted by the obvious intrigue afforded by invisibility or conditions of obscured vision—but chiefly because of the opportunities for revelation that they occasion. In order for dramatic revelation to occur, a certain amount of preliminary concealment is necessary. This aspect of Yeats's cursory rendering of a blind character exemplifies an authorial complicity in the attitude toward renderings of disability attributed to readers by Mitchell and Snyder:

Physical and cognitive differences mark lives as inscrutable and mysterious, and thus we approach these artistically embellished differences with a distanced curiosity that simulates intimacy while staving off the risk of an encounter. We experience disability through an anticipation of our desire to "know" the secret labyrinths of difference, without significantly challenging our investment in the construction of difference itself ... Readers' experience of the dual pleasures of fascination and repulsion also evolve out of an ability to leave the site of a fiction with our own membership in normalcy further consolidated and assured. (15)

Rather than filter visual memory through Blind Man's contemporary sensations, Yeats places the emphasis in *On Baile's Strand* quite squarely on all that has been relinquished in order for Blind Man to conduct his business as shrewdly as he does. Visual absence is portrayed not as a non-visual presence, but exclusively in terms of remembered visual presence. It can be considered a measure of Yeats's iconography that the distinction he depicts between vision and blindness amounts to the distinction between directly perceived picture and remembered

picture. There is no trace in the play of a non-visual manifestation of beauty. Its apparent association of blindness with the discontinuation of direct aesthetic experience means that in *Blind Man's* heavily mnemonic aesthetic the beautiful thing has always already been and gone. The much celebrated visual component of Yeats's sensibility is betrayed by the dissonance between *Blind Man's* awareness of the play's most celebrated site of beauty and his contemporary sensory experience, and the inaccessibility to him of the nature and significance of the resemblance at the heart of the aesthetic. Because no attempt is made to reconcile this incongruity between *Blind Man's* awareness and his current sensory configuration, he is excluded from the realm of the Yeatsian living beauty, positioned at a helpless remove from his own resources of aesthetic receptivity.

Conclusions

The social reception elicited by blindness has to be distinguished from social attitudes to disability in general. Commentators such as Richard Stayton French, Hector Chevigny, and Michael Monbeck have noted that the attention received by 'the blind' seems disproportionate in relation to the numbers of people actually living with the condition (see, for example, Chevigny 81; Monbeck 2). There are many more prevalent and disturbing impairments, it is often contended, that are served by fewer agencies and evoke less sympathy. Martin Whiteman and Irving Faber Lukoff, for example, make the point in relation to the kind of response that blind people are capable of generating, that though a lot of physical handicaps share common characteristics, it is notoriously difficult to tell what a particular person's attitude to blindness will be from what one knows about that particular person's reaction to other physical handicaps (Monbeck 2). W. W. Fenn describes how the tapping of a blind man's cane along a street "never fails to awaken our liveliest and tenderest sympathies" (162). He remarks on the way in which we are invariably moved to "contribute liberally to the maintenance of the instrumentalist who produces it," showing him also "a consideration, in his passage along the street, which we do not accord to any other wayfarer" (Fenn 162). Chevigny would have us believe that the function assigned by Silvers to the process of aestheticization is already more than adequately socially fulfilled:

Toward the blind the world presents a face it turns to no other group on earth. Everyone else must struggle for his survival. The blind, however, need not want. Society, profoundly convinced of the utter helplessness of the man who has lost his sight, stands ever ready to help him. (Chevigny 77)

Whether or not this positive social attitude is the consequence of a visually generated misconception, visually impaired people often benefit from it at some level. It is often otherwise with positive artistic portrayals of blindness by sighted artists. Bolt says that the so-called positive stereotyping of blind characters in fictional portrayals “situate achievement in a causal relationship with blindness, effectively removing the person from the equation” (97). Such “beneficial blindness” is in reality, according to Bolt, beneficial only to “prejudiced people who wish to maintain the binary logic of ‘the blind’ and ‘the sighted’, them and us” (98). The composition and misapplication of novelty would appear to account for these mixed consequences of artistic rendering of the sightless perspective.

Throughout his reflections on the concept of novelty in the *Spectator* articles alluded to at the outset of this essay, Addison resorts to a variety of terms to denote the idea of rarity. This idea refers to the correspondence that exists between an object that constitutes a component of a small sub-set of perceived data and the larger set within which it is entirely incorporated, rather than that which pertains between object and beholder. The items that Addison offers by way of illustrating his concept of “strangeness,” or novelty, make it clear that this attribute relates to a quality that is latent in each of the objects themselves:

Groves. Fields, and Meadows are at any season of the year pleasant to look upon, but never so much as in the opening of the Spring, when they are all new and fresh, with their fresh Gloss upon them, and not yet too much accustomed and familiar to the Eye. For this reason there is nothing that more enlivens a prospect than Rivers, Jetteaus or Falls of Water, where the Scene is perpetually shifting and entertaining the Sight every Moment with something that is new. We are quickly tired with looking upon Hills and Valleys, where everything continues fixt and settled in the same Place and Posture, but find our thoughts a little agitated and relieved at the sight of such objects as are ever in motion and sliding away from beneath the Eye of the Beholder. (542)

The objects listed here are unified by their subjection to a certain flux—each is suffering a process of relentless change—or, as Robin Dix puts it, “Each object is constantly taking on ‘novel’ forms—‘novel’ not because they are forms new to an observer, but because the objects themselves have never taken precisely that form before” (384). Of course these newly configured objects will not have been encountered by a beholder before, but this relationship is only coincidental and of secondary importance—it is contingent upon the quality of novelty that inheres in the object, rather than being itself the basis of that novelty. This element of permanent transition and variety is at odds with a history of stock representations of blindness in literature and film—only significantly deviated from in relatively recent times—that tend either to be infected by variations of “Oedipal gloom,” or to be inspirational accounts of bravery and triumph in the

face of adversity (Kleege 74). H. Garland Minton accounts for a great deal of the homogeneity of these portrayals with his remark that “the person who can see instinctively uses visual standards when he tries to assess the situation of the blind person” (73).

Silvers’ objective has little chance of being realized through the subordination of the qualities that are uniquely inherent in the aesthetic experiences of blind people—considered novel not because of the uniqueness of each blind person, but rather because of the foreignness of the condition to the spectatorial vantage within which it is so eagerly captured—to the standards and conventions that exemplify the orthodoxies of the sighted aesthetic experience. Many artistic depictions of blindness, wistful yet betraying a suggestion of furtive gratification, seem crudely disguised paeans to all of the glowing treasure ceded to night in blindness. This accounts for the curious sense of indulgence at the heart of *On Baile’s Strand*. Little social good is likely to come from instances where the novelty of blindness is resorted to as a means of indulging and gratifying the sighted perspective. The contributions of Synge and Friel suggest that in order to instigate the process Silvers recommends, the condition of blindness needs to be aestheticized in non-visual terms. Because such an approach frequently proves to be a leap too far for ‘the sighted author’, and because of the generally affirmative social attitude elicited by blindness, the type of aesthetizations of sightlessness envisioned by Silvers often prove counter-productive—a phenomenon from which those concerned for the practical welfare of members of ‘the visually impaired community’ could conceivably derive a curious sense of encouragement.

We can easily imagine how Yeats’s portrayal of blindness might be deconstructed according to the socio-political criteria adopted by Mitchell and Snyder. While the Blind Man of *On Baile’s Strand* is implicated in the play’s most impressive site of beauty, Yeats elects not to dwell on the ways in which this beauty might present itself to non-visual channels. Though Blind Man is not overlooked when Aoife’s beauty is evoked, his blindness is. Beauty still registers itself on Blind Man’s awareness through a discontinued sensory modality. A retrogressively parasitical relationship with the sense of which he is no longer in possession is all that prevents Blind Man from being excluded from the aesthetic domain entirely. Yeats’s rendering of Blind Man’s tenuous relation to aesthetic value invites the charge that the depiction was designed to nourish and gratify the perspective that regards beauty exclusively in terms of visual appearance. The primacy of visual memory within the play’s treatment of beauty exhibits a conviction of the aesthetic redundancy of the senses that remain to Blind Man. The difficulty in reconciling the portrayals of blindness

by the three playwrights in any straightforward way supports Mitchell and Snyder's description of both the "expansive array of disabled prototypes who populate our imaginative worlds," and the "complexity of delineating disability as a symbolic space" (16–17). *The Well of the Saints* and *Molly Sweeney*, through their diversely positive renderings of non-visual aesthetics, highlight the dangers of regarding the history of artistic renderings of disability as an elaborately conniving exercise in power relations. If imaginative portrayals of blindness all attained their significance in a calculatingly manipulative manner, characters who deviate from the ideals championed by the politically dominant (sighted) groups would be portrayed as deficient in their faculty for aesthetic appraisal. The three plays considered here illustrate the reductiveness of such indiscriminate condemnation.

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