Victorian Freaks
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THE MASSIVELY DEFORMED “Elephant Man,” Joseph Merrick,¹ found by Dr. Frederick Treves in a filthy Whitechapel shop room in 1884, remains one of the most iconic and best-known members of the Victorian freak pantheon. Merrick’s great suffering, and equally great resilience of spirit in the face of constant physical privation, received its first extensive, and arguably most poignant, treatment in Treves’s “The Elephant Man” (1923), a mythopoeic medical memoir that has inspired numerous creative works and forms a valuable contribution to the literature of metamorphosis.² While it has become critically commonplace, even clichéd, to comment on the archetypal resonances of Merrick’s rhetorical transformation from animalized freak to noble hero, the precise cultural dimensions of Merrick’s humanization in the course of Treves’s prose remain underexamined.³ Tales of human-brute transformation may be timeless, but the process by which metamorphosis is accomplished routinely corresponds to historically embedded concepts of human identity. In the essay that follows, I argue that Merrick’s narrative movement from “elephant” to “man” is accomplished through Treves’s manipulation of his patient’s relationship to what had become at the end of the nineteenth century a particularly important and troubled emblem of human progress—language. I read Treves’s narrative against
contemporary discourses of language origin and silence, showing how Merrick’s initially perceived speechlessness participated within larger cultural associations of inarticulacy with animality. In “The Elephant Man,” Treves seems to enact a triumph of language, in which the deviance of the freak is (partially) abated through his adoption and refinement of those linguistic skills—speaking, reading, and writing—deemed essential to human subjectivity. Yet in this process, language itself loses its status as a transcendent marker of human progress and comes to denote the same kind of mythological atavism associated with Merrick’s freak show presentation. As a freak show spectacle, Merrick’s alterity was created through exaggerated reference to his physical deformity; as a character in Treves’s medical memoir, his alienation from the realm of fully evolved masculinity is a product of his linguistic abilities.

By tracing the story’s indebtedness to broader historical concerns about the relationship between language and civilization, my essay participates in the project of recent cultural model scholarship on disability. This discourse has worked to denaturalize the meaning of disability, arguing that physical abnormality is more a construct of culture than of nature. As Lennard J. Davis writes, disability “is part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances. Disability is not an object—a woman with a cane—but a social process that intimately involves everyone who has a body and lives in the world of the senses.” Physical normalcy and irregularity, rather than representing two permanently opposed and inherent states of being, are fluid concepts involved in a recurrent process of dialogue and mutual remaking. Such a claim, while by no means novel within the poststructuralist identity politics of race, class, and gender, has only relatively recently been applied to the category of disability, with the handicapped body still appearing to many as a last bastion of essential, irreducible difference. To call for a reevaluation of the latter assumption is not to suggest that the chief impediments faced by people with disabilities are solely, or even primarily, socially imposed—to make such a claim about Joseph Merrick’s condition would be to gratuitously underestimate the extent of his physical disability—but rather to mobilize a more politically and culturally nuanced approach to the history of physical aberration.

As we interrogate the literary and historical contexts through which the dehumanization of specific groups—the disabled, women, racial minorities, and so on—has been produced, we also need to excavate the assumptions behind our favorite metaphors of liberation. In
particular, it is time for a reevaluation of the ideological function of voice. It has long been common in the radical identity politics of the left to assume a rather simplistic connection between language, autonomy, and rights. The oppressed are the “silenced” whose liberation will ensue when credence is finally granted to their marginalized “voice.” A perfect example of this trope can be found in the introduction to The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability (1997), in which editors David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder state, “As with most minority populations who have sought to break down the barriers of racial, class, and gendered discrimination, disability studies scholars define their political program as an effort to redress the social ‘voicelessness’ and institutional neglect of disabled people.” It is my contention that we need to rethink and perhaps abandon this rather exhausted formula of language as enfranchisement, particularly in the study of disability, for several reasons. The first is metaphoric: to anathematize speechlessness is to sustain what Lennard J. Davis calls the “foundational ableist myth[h] of our culture . . . that the norm for humans is to speak and hear, to engage in communication through speaking and hearing.” A scholarship that addresses, among other topics, the social history of the deaf and mute should perhaps seek another critical register. The second, and most compelling, reason lies in the unreflective ahistoricism of the critical equation of language, voice, and empowerment. Rather than simply assuming the connection between voice and autonomy to be a natural one, we need to interrogate the problematic social, historical, and political means by which speech became installed as guarantor of the kind of human sovereignty denied to “freak” subjects such as Joseph Merrick.

“The Elephant Man” was not Treves’s first published account of the rare medical condition, now diagnosed as Proteus syndrome, that covered Joseph Merrick’s body with disfiguring tumors. His initial description of the case appeared more than thirty-five years previously, in the Transactions of the Pathological Society for March of 1885. His article, titled “A Case of Congenital Deformity,” summarized the content of his presentation of Merrick to the society in December of 1884. Following a lengthy discussion of Merrick’s physical abnormalities, the piece speculates on the patient’s mental condition. “His intelligence,” notes Treves, “was by no means of a low order.” This assessment was shared by London Hospital chairman F. C. Carr Gomm in a letter to the Times seeking subscriptions for Merrick’s maintenance within the isolation ward. Gomm states that the patient is “superior in intelligence, can read and
write, is quiet, gentle, not to say even refined in his mind.” Gomm’s estimation, coming as it does six months after Merrick’s deliverance from the freak show into the respite of the hospital, accords well with the teleological chronology of the familiar Elephant Man narrative; but Treves’s passing comments are flatly astonishing in their contradiction of the later, canonical script of his relationship with Merrick published in “The Elephant Man.” Here he insists that their initial encounters had left him with the impression that “Merrick was an imbecile from birth. The fact that his face was incapable of expression, that his speech was a mere spluttering and his attitude that of one whose mind was void of all emotions and concerns gave grounds for this belief.” How are we to account for the divergence of these two descriptions? Was Treves’s subsequent downplaying of his initial impression of Merrick’s intellect, perhaps like his inaccurate substitution of “John” for “Joseph,” simply the result of lapsed memory? Or was it the product of deliberate artistic license? Rather than attempting to establish the intention behind the shift, I want to consider the narrative effect that it produces and, more importantly, the cultural rhetoric of silence and speech with which it engages. In order to understand the significance of Merrick’s repositioning from intelligent yet deformed patient to mute imbecile whose mental powers become evident only after his institutionalization, we need to consider late-Victorian debates about the relationship of language to human evolution and progress.

The connection of language with human distinction, and more particularly, with reason, has long been part of the Western philosophical tradition. In the Genesis account of creation, language is given to Adam by God as a means of denoting his difference from, and power over, the other members of brute creation. Subsequent Enlightenment thinkers, while challenging the biblical script of the Adamic moment, nonetheless shared the assessment of language as both source and effect of hegemony. In the first volume of On the Origin and Progress of Language (1772), Lord Monboddo writes, “without reason and speech, we have no pretensions to humanity, nor can we with propriety be called men; but must be contented to rank with the other animals here below, over whom we assume so much superiority, and exercise domination chiefly by means of the advantages that the use of language gives us.” Language thus becomes the sine qua non cause of human identity and power, the ineluctable signifier that, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau notes, separates humans both from animals and from each other. “Speech distinguishes man from the animals. Language distinguishes nations from
each other; one does not know where a man is until after he is has spoken.”

What is fascinating in both these passages is their effortless conflation of language with speech, the latter appearing not simply as an audible sign of the former but as the thing itself. The implications of such rhetoric for those who were organically deprived of the faculty of articulate speech—the deaf and mute, for example—were dire indeed, reducing them to the level of irrational brutes through their inability to enunciate language sounds in a conventional manner.

These connections between language, speech, and human reason became the object of renewed scrutiny and feverish debate with the rise of Darwinian theory in the latter half of the nineteenth century. As Douglas Baynton notes, “The idea that speech separates humans from animals is by no means associated exclusively with evolutionary thought. . . . What a particular culture emphasizes at any one time is what is significant, however, and during the latter half of the nineteenth century the emphasis shifted in Anglo-American thought from the possession of an immortal soul to the possession of speech.” When the evolutionary hypothesis replaced the theory of separate species creation with one of gradual descent from a common ancestor, language emerged as the (seemingly) sole exclusive trait left to humans, one at which Darwin marveled without ever being able to satisfactorily explain. Deeming it “half-art and half-instinct,” he claims in *The Descent of Man* (1870) that “through the power of intellect, articulate language has been evolved; and on this his [man’s] wonderful advancement has mainly depended.” In the same work, however, he had previously traced a different arc for linguistic evolution, arguing that “the continued use and advancement of this power [of speech] would have reacted on the mind itself, by enabling and encouraging it to carry on long trains of thought.” Language is rendered arcane through its positioning as both aftermath and catalyst of human progress and intellectual development. Evolutionary theory further destabilized the traditional status of language by presenting it as a vulnerable product of a random natural selection process that might just as easily lead to its eventual extinction. In its post-Darwinian incarnation, the assertion that “speech equals humanity,” inherited from the theological and the rationalist tradition, became particularly fraught, straining under the weight of a new monogenetic paradigm that denied innate species difference.

It is perhaps as a result of these pressures that the relationship between speech and humanity became the focus of such heated debate in late-Victorian philological and scientific circles. Scholars continually
cited language in either their rejection or teleological appropriation of Darwin's work, insisting that it stood as evidence of our total separation from the animals or of the necessarily progressive (and human-centered) course of evolution. The most vocal and exuberant participant in these debates was German-born philologist F. Max Müller, whose famous declaration in 1861 that “Language is our Rubicon, and no brute will dare to cross it” posits language as supreme weapon in the contest for species supremacy, one that animals simply lack the courage to claim. For Müller language and human thought were not simply connected but synonymous, and thus implicitly any individual incapable of the former must necessarily be devoid of reason. Müller's “scientific” work, seemingly anthropocentric in its insistence on the exclusivity of human language, in fact creates a criterion whereby certain subjects (mutes, aphasics, infants) may be disqualified from the category of the human. To speak is to be human, and to be silent or inarticulate is to be something else entirely—an animal, a savage, an infant, or an evolutionary throwback. Summing up this sentiment with particular clarity, Müller's most famous disciple, Ludwig Noiré, notes in 1895 that “so long as the child does not feel this instinct [language], so long as it contemplates, touches, cries, asks for food, and so on, up to that time it represents the period of speechless humanity—this time at which human nature has not as yet separated from animal nature.” Humanity, far from being a birthright to all those born of Homo sapiens parents, becomes a selective status one earns through the acquisition of language.

Of course, the rather extreme Müllerian view of the necessity of articulate language to reason was not accepted unanimously in late-Victorian scientific and philological communities. Opponents such as anthropologist E. B. Tylor, linguist W. D. Whitney, and Assyriologist A. H. Sayce pointed to the existence of gesture and sign communication systems as evidence of the existence of language without audible words. “We must be careful to remember,” cautions Sayce in Introduction to the Science of Language (1879), “that language includes any kind of instrumentality whereby we communicate our thoughts and feelings to others, and therefore that the deaf-mute who can converse only with his fingers or the lips is as truly gifted with the power of speech as the man who can articulate his words.” Sayce's theoretical move here is as fascinating for what it leaves intact as for what it accomplishes—rather than rejecting the dependence of language on conventional signification that underlies Müller's logic, he simply extends the definition of signification to include sign language. Deaf-mutes may be said to
“speak” because they manifest thought through a recognizable physical performance. But what of those subjects who, by virtue of physical incapacity, are unable to engage in a similar performance, who are rendered doubly abject through their inability to speak or signify thought through other kinds of bodily movements? Speculating on the condition of such individuals, E. B. Tylor had written in *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization* (1865) that “though . . . the deaf-and-dumb prove clearly to us that a man may have a human thought without being able to speak, they by no means prove that he can think without any means of physical expression.”

The physically inexpressive are here relegated to the same dehumanized and irrational status previously occupied by the deaf and dumb. Language, Tylor suggests, may exist without vocal support, but not without *some kind* of physical accompaniment. Reason, that highest and most exalted quality of the human, can be manifested only through the functioning body.

This equation of reason with speech allows us to better understand the commonly noted alliance of certain types of disability with animality in nineteenth-century culture. The disabled body is deemed alien, not simply by virtue of irregular appearance or function but by the extent to which it is unable to perform the external cultural rituals associated with evolved humanity—the cojoining of thoughts to signs, for example. In his freak show appearances, Joseph Merrick’s alterity seems to have been produced chiefly through the visual register, emphasized through tawdry handbills depicting the spectacular transformation of a man into an elephant. Far from being denied, Merrick’s linguistic proficiency was incorporated into the show, exemplified in a (perhaps ghostwritten) autobiographical pamphlet that poignantly detailed his sufferings before receiving the “kindness” of showman Sam Torr. In Treves’s account, however, Merrick’s initial animality is less a product of the physical deformities that receive diminishing attention throughout the narrative than of the verbal and expressive difficulties that result from his condition. Unable to cure his patient’s physical body, Treves instead “humanizes” Merrick by equipping him with the language skills he (seemingly) hitherto lacked.

“The Elephant Man” opens with a scene of cartoonish physical metamorphosis. In tones of fascination and repugnance, Treves describes the canvas banner that first drew his attention to Merrick’s exhibition in premises across from the London Hospital. Of particular horror to Treves is the manner in which the freak’s hybridity is staged, suggestive not of grotesque fusion but of a steady evolutionary reversal.
Painted on the canvas in primitive colours was a life-size portrait of the Elephant Man. This very crude production depicted a frightful creature that could only have been possible in a nightmare. It was the figure of a man with the characteristics of an elephant. The transfiguration was not far advanced. There was still more of the man than of the beast. This fact—that it was still human—was the most repellent attribute of the creature. There was nothing about it of the pitiableness of the misshapened or the deformed, nothing of the grotesqueness of the freak, but merely the loathing insinuation of a man being changed into an animal. Some palm trees in the background of the picture suggested a jungle and might have led the imaginative to assume that it was in this wild that the perverted object has roamed.29

The image derives its potency from the contemporary obsessions with degeneration and racial decline. Treves is disgusted by what he recognizes as a specter of colonial and biological “backsliding.”30 His own project might be read as an attempt to restore evolutionary development to an anthropocentric course, presenting Merrick not as man-turning-into-animal but as animal-turning-into-man through the ministration of love, cleanliness, and conversation. In humanizing Merrick, Treves also recuperates the nineteenth-century logic of social and evolutionary progress that this initial iconography violates.

Treves responds to Merrick’s real presence with as much uneasiness as he does to the show banner, yet for different reasons. In his pictorial depiction, the Elephant Man presents a spectacle of evolutionary recidivism; in the flesh, he is a figure of lack, a body devoid of mind. Ushered to the back of the showroom, Treves finds Merrick huddled alone over a tiny fire, appearing as “the embodiment of loneliness.”31 When Merrick stands up, the full extent of his malformation becomes apparent. “In the course of my profession,” Treves writes with palpable discomfort, “I had come upon lamentable deformities of the face due to injury or disease, as well as mutilations and contortions of the body depending upon like causes; but at no time had I met with such a degraded or perverted version of a human being as this lone figure displayed.”32 The narrative then moves into a lengthy and almost ornate description of Merrick’s specific abnormalities, intricately detailing the stumpish protuberance covering his mouth and the papillomas growing over his skin. In these descriptions, one has the sense of a human being reduced to pure matter. Merrick, at this stage, is all body, a physical specimen whose seeming lack of any transcendent, intellectual, or moral qualities is more unsettling than the deformities he presents.
What is the source of lack, the missing ingredient that allows Treves in his early description to present Merrick not as a human but as a ramshackle compendium of competing pathologies? It is linguistic expression. Unable to comprehend Merrick’s speech or indeed recognize it as such, Treves the medical examiner simply cannot, as his prose playfully suggests, make the specimen into a man. He writes, “I made little of the man himself. He was shy, confused, not a little frightened and evidently much cowed. Moreover, his speech was unintelligible. The great bony mass that projected from his mouth blurred his utterance and made the articulation of certain words impossible.” Without the animating principle of articulate language, Merrick appears simply as a bundle of animal flesh, a “thing,” a “panic-dazed dog,” and an “object” not yet recognizable as a human being. These perceptions were further augmented by the deformities of the head that rendered Merrick as unable to make facial expressions, as to utter his thoughts through intelligible words. Indeed, it is the combination of these two incapacities—to signify via speech or facial expression—that drives Treves’s initial narrative assessment of Merrick’s mental state. “I supposed that Merrick was imbecilic and had been imbecilic from birth. The fact that his face was incapable of expression, that his speech was a mere spluttering and his attitude that of one whose mind was void of all emotions and concerns gave grounds for this belief. The conviction was no doubt encouraged by the hope that his intellect was the blank I imagined it to be. That he could appreciate his condition was unthinkable.” Most interesting about this passage is its radical relocation of the source of Merrick’s aberrance from the body to the expressive faculties. Merrick’s deformities, compelling and substantial as they were, are not alone enough to account for his profound alterity: they only acquire their full pathos when supplemented by silence. Merrick’s appearance is horrifying, but worse still, indeed, beyond the limits of Treves’s imagination, is that this appearance thwarts the manifestation of an active and intelligent mind. Robert Bogdan’s contention that the freak is a socially constructed rather than natural artifact finds eloquent confirmation in Treves’s careful displacement of Merrick’s tragedy from his physical to his linguistic condition. While Treves’s motivations in this presentation must remain to a certain extent unknowable, the emphasis on language allows him to retain a self-presentation as physician-hero. As would-be healer of Merrick’s body, Treves was a failure; as restorer of Merrick’s communicative abilities, Treves was an unqualified success.

Yet the fact that, as we have seen, Treves almost certainly exaggerates the extent of Merrick’s linguistic incapacities in “The Elephant Man”
seems less indicative of a deliberate mendacity than of his engagement with a surrounding literary tradition that reproduced the philological equation of voice with agency. This scenario, in which the subject transforms from mute animal to fully realized human through the discovery or improvement of language skills, is one that had been played out repeatedly in Victorian realist and fantastic fiction. Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens both work within this paradigm of linguistic humanization in their respective sentimental treatments of deaf-mutism, *Hide and Seek* (1854) and “Dr. Marigold” (1865). Each narrative features a beautiful and loving deaf-mute female protagonist who, after being exhibited as a freak in early childhood, gains dignity and freedom when rescued by a benevolent male protector (the role that Treves would assume toward Merrick) and admitted into a wider network of written or signed communication. Thus the ill-used Sophy in “Dr. Marigold,” who, on first appearance, looks “as if she had escaped from a Wild Beast Show,” grows into maturity and motherhood after her tutelage in a school for the deaf and dumb. The more she is able to, if only metaphorically, “voice” her thoughts through signs, the more autonomous and the more content she becomes. A similar process of humanization through language acquisition occurs in late-century imaginative fictions such as Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (1894) and H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896). In the former, the feral child Mowgli gains ascendancy over the other animals through his expert acquisition not only of the Master Words of the Jungle but also of the speech of men. His linguistic proficiency is contrasted with the gibbering chatter of the monkey people who “have no speech of their own” and thus live in total anarchy. In Wells’s short horror novella, Moreau’s animal subjects are transformed into quasi-humans through their surgical equipment with larynxes. While the transformation is never quite complete—the Beastfolk become terrible parodies of humans rather than idealized rational citizens—the logic of Moreau’s perverted science is coextensive with that of these other literary metamorphoses. Language acquisition is the prime catalyst for the category collapse between the animal and the human, the “freak” and the normal. Treves, whose writing displays an affectionate familiarity with the conventions of popular romance, manipulates the events of Merrick’s history to make them resonant with an eager public taste for tales of exotic metamorphosis and linguistic enfranchisement.

Recast as a casualty of language rather than of disease, Joseph Merrick becomes curable in a way denied to him through the medical paradigm alone. Treves establishes the trajectory for this treatment almost
immediately upon his installation of Merrick within the isolation ward at the London Hospital. His first task is to document Merrick's speech. “I at once began to make myself acquainted with him to endeavour to understand his mentality. It was a study of much interest. I very soon learnt his speech so that I could talk freely with him. This afforded him great satisfaction for, curiously enough, he had a passion for conversation, yet all his life no one had talked to him.” Merrick’s “passion” for dialogue is perhaps not so curious after all, suggesting a canny complicity with Treves’s plan of rehabilitation. Conversation afforded him the entrance into the social networks from which his malformed body had excluded him; it is for this reason that Merrick expressed the desire to be housed in an institute for the blind and continually displayed a preference for being heard rather than being seen, despite Treves’s suggestions to the contrary. Deprived of almost all other activities, Merrick reads, writes, and talks—to Mr. Carr Gomm, to the Princess of Wales, to the nurses and doctor who manage his care, to the various society members who visit and bring him books, to actress Mrs. Kendal, and, most of all, to Treves himself. And through this intercourse a magical type of transformation seems to ensue. The speech that “was so maimed that he might as well have spoken in Arabic” begins to change, to lose the character of random, phatic sound and morph into a legible and rich language, one through which Merrick is able to narrate the poignant and tragic events of his personal history. The emergence of this self-narration is itself the most significant event in his history, signaling a resistance to, if not reversal of, the continual waves of deformity that had been gradually “animalizing” Merrick since birth. In the narrative, Merrick as individual is made to recapitulate the evolutionary history of the species, shedding the taint of a bestial past and ascending to human status as he attains control over speech.

Yet just as the text seems to epitomize the triumphant and familiar plot of language as humanizing agent, so does it foreground some of its failures and gaps. Imaginatively inspired by contemporary literary, anthropological, and philological accounts of speech origin, “The Elephant Man” inherits some of their uncertainties about the transcendent and empowering function of language. Merrick, does not, after all, actually “acquire” language after a period of mutism; he has had it all along and simply went unheard. His voice, when finally articulated, works not to grant him his own agency but to interpolate him into a master narrative created by someone else. Throughout his tenure in the London Hospital, Merrick remained dependent on Treves as translator,
a task necessitated by the persistent ungainliness of his speech. Due to Merrick’s irregular pronunciation, recounts Treves, “I had occasionally to act as an interpreter.” While Treves downplays the possibility of any interpretive license in these translations—noting, for example, that he allowed a letter from Merrick to the Princess Alexandra, which opened with the unorthodox salutation “My dear Princess,” to pass unedited—his enduring confusion as to Merrick’s Christian name points to the existence of misrepresentation, whether deliberate or unintentional. The much-vaunted voice acquired by Merrick is one, as numerous commentators have pointed out, subject to constant mediation.

Far from denying this rupture between speaking and accurate self-representation, between language and autonomy, “The Elephant Man” foregrounds the necessity and vagaries of translation that attend every act of articulation.

Thus, while Merrick is humanized in and through language, the humanity thus conferred is hardly an independent, masterful, or, indeed, masculine one. His “voice,” once recognized, remains generally incoherent and frequently invokes the same chain of associations—the deformed body as primitive, childish, and unmanly—present in Merrick’s freak show exhibitions. Merrick’s speech is routinely described as “chatter,” not the eloquent expression of a long-suppressed intellect but the trivial and idle prattle of an incessant talker. Describing Merrick’s early days in the isolation ward, Treves writes, “I—having then much leisure—saw him almost every day, and made a point of spending some two hours with him every Sunday morning when he would chatter almost without ceasing.”

Speech here becomes a pleasurable activity rather than a vehicle of thought, a form of indulgent physical exchange between patient and physician. Treves infantilizes Merrick by reference to his mode of, and juvenile enjoyment in, conversation. The articulate Elephant Man, “amiable as a happy woman” in his new home, displays a verbal eloquence notable more for its “childlike simplicity” than its depth. The narrative ascribes a similar childishness to Merrick’s written communication. During a holiday in the country, Merrick writes to his patron repeatedly, documenting the banal daily events of his first-ever sojourn in nature. Treves declares these epistles to be “the letters of a delighted and enthusiastic child.” In contrasting the naïve and giddy femininity of Merrick’s language to Treves’s authoritative masculinity, such descriptions reinforce the conventional gender dynamics of the doctor-patient relationship. Figured as an amiable and compliant child-woman, Merrick becomes a suitable subject for penetration by
a male medical gaze that constructs, defines, and controls his identity according to its own rules. The process is strikingly analogous to Said’s account of nineteenth-century Orientalist philology—in either case, the language of the racial or physical deviant becomes evidence not of a disavowed equality but of that Other’s essential passivity and infantile inferiority to the dominant mainstream culture on which it relies for explication.49

No linguistic practice more signifies Merrick’s failure to attain complete civilized masculinity in “The Elephant Man” than reading. In one of the narrative’s greatest (and perhaps least self-conscious) ironies, the same passionate literacy that initially testifies to his unsuspected intelligence comes to reinscribe Merrick in the paradigmatic savagery he seeks to abandon. Treves notes:

I found Merrick, as I have said, remarkably intelligent. He had learnt to read and had become a voracious reader, I think he had been taught when he was in hospital with his diseased hip. His range of books was limited. The Bible and Prayer Book he knew intimately, but he had subsisted for the most part upon newspapers, or rather upon such fragments of old journals as he had chanced to pick up. He had read a few stories and some elementary lesson books, but the delight of his life was a romance, especially a love romance. These tales were very real to him, as real as any narrative in the Bible, so that he would tell them to me as incidents in the lives of people who had lived. In his outlook upon the world he was a child, yet a child with some of the tempestuous feelings of a man. He was an elemental being, so primitive that he might have spent the twenty-three years of his life immured in a cave.50

Merrick’s passion for romance becomes here emblematic not of a love of literature but of a primitive mentality unable to distinguish the parameters between the real and the fabulous. Like the fetish-worshipping savage of Victorian anthropological literature, he cannot differentiate between the products of nature and those of the imagination.51 Thus Merrick’s enduring belief (never actually disproven) that his mother was beautiful is described as a “fiction . . . of his own making,”52 his attitude toward women derived not from experience but from “the many romances he had read.”53 Just as he endows real individuals with idealized features drawn from sentimental fiction, so, too, does he reify the lives of invented characters. Following a memorable trip to the pantomime, Merrick develops what, for Treves, is a curious and endearing
investment in the reality of the performance. “To him, as to a child with the faculty of make believe, everything was real: the palace was the home of kings, the princess was of royal blood, and fairies were as undoubted as the children in the street, while the dishes at the banquet were of unquestionable gold. He did not like to discuss it as a play but rather as a vision of some actual world.”

Merrick’s engagement with art, as with his practice of conversation, is intended to aid in his transformation from animal to man, but instead it again marks him as a child and primitive.

Treves’s insistence on the quasi-atavistic nature of Merrick’s reading practices indicates not only a paternalistic condescension toward his patient but also his own critical self-positioning as a writer. In juxtaposing the love of romance with savagery, he aligns himself with late-Victorian romancers such as Andrew Lang and H. Rider Haggard who defended their genre on the basis of its appeal to our submerged instinctual impulses. For Lang writing in 1886, the love of the romance constituted a “savage survival,” one that Haggard claimed to be “coeval with the existence of humanity . . . it is like the passions, an innate quality of mankind.” But while Lang and Haggard put a decidedly positive spin on the “primitive” taste for romance, seeing in it a means of revitalizing or, more importantly, remasculinizing a literary climate exhausted by naturalism, Treves clearly reads it as a sign of cultural and personal immaturity. The troubling reality of Merrick’s erotic desire for women is thus sublimated through the romanticized and thus infantile manner in which it manifests, his genre preference being used to negate both his sexuality and his maturity. Given Treves’s clear identification of the romance with childishness, misrepresentation, and primitivism, it is curious that he should choose to imbue his own narrative with some of its elements. His conclusion borrows romantic techniques and tropes, presenting Merrick not as a terribly afflicted everyman but as a fantastical hero whose own life challenges the distinction between the real and the invented. Referencing Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Treves writes: “As a specimen of humanity, Merrick was ignoble and repulsive; but the spirit of Merrick, if it could be seen in the form of the living, would assume the figure of an upstanding and heroic man, smooth browed and clean of limb, and with eyes that flashed undaunted courage. . . . He had escaped the clutches of the Giant Despair, and at last had reached the ‘Place of Deliverance’ where ‘his burden loosed from off his shoulders and fell off his back, so that he saw it no more.’” Release comes at last to Joseph Merrick through the soothing power of metaphor.
As a tale of metamorphosis, “The Elephant Man” remains incomplete. Certainly, Merrick transforms over the course of the narrative—from filthy, mute animal into woman, child, noble savage, and, lastly, literary hero—but he never fully attains the latter part of his famous freak show epithet; while no longer “elephant,” he is not quite fully developed “man,” either. This failure is not a result of personal inadequacy but of the medium through which Treves attempts to change his patient’s status. Language does not function here as the straightforward appendage to hegemonic human subjectivity. When silent, Merrick is little more than a beast, but when he speaks, he chatters like a woman; when he writes, he does so with the innocence and naïveté of a child; and when he reads, it is with the untutored wonder of a primitive savage. The very faculty that should elevate humanity above the lesser animals instead situates Merrick within other categories of subalternity.

In its depiction of this potential for language to depreciate as well as elevate the speakers in which it is installed, Treves’s narrative underlines Alastair Pennycook’s important critique of the discourses of (Anglo)-linguistic humanism. Rather than unreflectively celebrating the empowering function of language training, Pennycook writes, “we need to consider what language is all about, that language has to do with discourses and voice, that we cannot stop short by assuming that once someone has access to a language, they have access to doing what they need or want to do through language.” Simply put, to use a language (whether your first or second) is not necessarily to have control of it. Merrick’s failure to attain through language an equivalent status to that of his benevolent and learned English male patron is not an exception to a strategy that worked for others, as the briefest survey of Victorian colonial and working-class education will show. Like Merrick, the Indian recipients of Thomas Babington Macaulay’s infamous Anglicized educational policy and the British working-class beneficiaries of the 1870 Education Act never quite received the transcendent boon that English language and literacy was supposed to have conferred on them. Without wishing to undermine the dire psychological consequences of colonial language imposition, it remains important to point out that the possibility for empowerment through language remains limited in any context, whether imperial or not. Language may have been vaunted by the Victorian philologists as sovereign key to human identity, but in practice it remained simply one trait among many, its humanizing significance easily trumped by other pathological, racial, class, or gender stigmata. This point continues to be overlooked in the
contemporary politics of oppression that persistently equate voice with agency. Just as commentators such as Lennard J. Davis and Elaine Scarry have observed, “silencing” can be a politically repressive strategy, and so too can the installation or “discovery” of language within a hitherto silenced subject. Treves’s “The Elephant Man,” itself a freakish narrative in its grotesque genre conflation of medical realism, Victorian sentimentalism, and sensational romance, might serve as a foundational text for a reevaluation of the terms and ideological premises through which we seek to liberate the socially abject.

Notes

1. Despite Treves’s continual references to his patient as “John,” Merrick’s actual Christian name was Joseph. It remains unclear, as Peter Graham, Fritz Oehlschlaeger, Michael Howell, and Peter Ford point out, whether Treves’s mistake was the result of memory lapse, mishearing, or deliberate renaming. See Peter W. Graham and Fritz Oehlschlaeger, Articulating the Elephant Man: Joseph Merrick and His Interpreters (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), and Michael Howell and Peter Ford’s The True History of the Elephant Man (New York: Penguin, 1980).

2. Graham and Oehlschlaeger’s Articulating the Elephant Man provides a comprehensive survey of the most prominent retellings of the Merrick story, including Bernard Pomerance’s play The Elephant Man (1979) and David Lynch’s film of the same name and same year.

3. This tendency to view the freak as a psychological archetype is epitomized by Leslie Fiedler in Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self (New York: Anchor Books, 1978), a groundbreaking work that helped catalyze the recent resurgence of academic interest in spectacular performances of disability. Like Fiedler, Graham and Oehlschlaeger trace the popularity of “freaks” to their evocation of timeless fears and desires about human identity. They claim that “Merrick’s story has endured primarily because its depths are truly mythic. . . . As the epithet ‘Elephant Man’ suggests, Merrick’s is a story of metamorphosis. Imprisoned in a body being continuously and grotesquely remade through a process he could neither understand nor control, Merrick faced what every human being who grows old or falls ill must endure: the sense of exclusion from the world of the healthy and normal, the dilemma of whether to accept a blighted body as an attribute of essential identity or to reject it as a misleading mask, the sufferer’s painful questions about cause and effect, about personal guilt or cosmic cruelty” (3). Here, Merrick’s story, like that of so many other so-called freaks, becomes depersonalized, moving from case history into abstract, universal metaphor for all humankind.

4. For more on the distinction between medical, cultural, and social models of disability, see Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell’s Cultural Locations of Disability (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).


7. The term “disabled” has rightly been criticized for robbing individuals of their dignity by defining them wholly through their disability rather than recognizing them as complex agents whose physical differences form only one part of a complex identity. While recognizing the legitimacy of this protest, I preserve the term here for motives of historical accuracy. Victorian writings on the case unanimously essentialize Merrick through his pathology: he never emerges as simply “a person with disabilities” but constantly as a *disabled person*, whose every action and personality trait is interpreted through the lens of his physical aberration. We risk blurring the representational violence historically perpetrated against people like Merrick if we wish away the invidious terms used to define them and replace them with gentle anachronisms that were never used in the nineteenth century.

8. Mitchell and Snyder, 11.


10. Merrick’s pathology, as Howell and Ford have pointed out, has been subject to a long series of misdiagnoses (141). His freak show name inadvertently promoted the false impression that he suffered from elephantiasis, and Merrick himself believed his condition to be the result of maternal impressions. Recent investigators have discarded the most common twentieth-century diagnosis of neurofibromatosis and named Proteus syndrome as the most likely source of Merrick’s deformities. See Graham and Oehlschlaeger, 81.

11. Quoted in Graham and Oehlschlaeger, 17.


13. Frederick Treves, “The Elephant Man” (1923), in Howell and Ford, 194. All subsequent references from the text are taken from this edition.


16. Monboddo deliberately excludes inarticulate communication from the category of rational language, writing, “though we say, the language of looks, and of gestures, or signs, such as our dumb persons use; also the language of inarticulate cries, by which the brutes signify their appetites and desires; yet, in all those senses, the word [language] is used metaphorically, and not as it ought to be used in the style of science” (6). Thus discussions of the “language” of the dumb are deemed as unscientific as those of the language of animals.


19. Ibid., 534.
20. Ibid., 519.
25. Sayce, 2.
27. Davis, 40.
28. Howell and Ford, 183. The authors also write, “There is room for some debate as to whether he actually wrote it or whether it was written for him. On this point anyone who reads it must make their own judgement, but on balance the tone and content, the words and phrases chosen, have an authentic feeling. Joseph most probably was its author, even if he did write it under the expert tutelage of Mr Torr or his resident copywriter. The fact that he gets his own birth date wrong may itself be seen as a slight confirmation of his authorship since, as we know, he rarely got it right” (89–90).
29. Treves, 190.
30. It should be noted, of course, that there is no such thing as backsliding in evolution. The term itself, as H. G. Wells points out in “Zoological Retrogression,” simply refers to adaptation through natural selection rather than progressive improvement. Nonetheless, the Victorian tendency to read evolution as a perfecting process allowed certain kinds of modifications to be read as reversals. See H. G. Wells, “Zoological Retrogression,” Gentleman’s Magazine 271 (1891): 246–53.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 193.
34. Ibid., 191, 195.
35. Ibid., 194.
37. Treves is not, however, to be blamed for his inability to treat Merrick’s physical ailments. The extremely rare condition from which Merrick is now commonly supposed to have suffered, Proteus syndrome, remains difficult to diagnose and treat today.

40. While public taste is notoriously prolix and difficult to pin down at any given moment, romantic tales of exotic adventure and fantastic transformation came to constitute a significant portion of the publishing market at the end of the nineteenth century. Representative authors in this style include H. Rider Haggard, H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, Grant Allen, Bram Stoker, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Also popular were naturalist accounts of working-class attempts to transform the protagonists’ lives through either literacy or literary success, such as George Moore’s *Esther Waters* (1894), George Gissing’s *New Grub Street* (1891), and Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895). The reading public’s interest in such narratives may have derived from their own sense of the nation’s linguistic transformation at the hands of recent educational reform. The 1870 Forster Education Act had mandated primary education for all, regardless of class, thus seemingly creating Britain’s first mass reading (and writing) public. It is hardly surprising that the public might be interested in fantastic narratives about the humanization of their own fellow citizens through language.

41. Treves, 197.

42. In speaking of Merrick’s wish to be housed amidst the blind or in a lighthouse, Treves claims, “I had no great difficulty in ridding Merrick’s mind of these ideas. . . . He appeared day by day less frightened, less haunted looking, less anxious to hide, less alarmed when he saw his door opened” (200). He even suggests that this tolerance for other peoples’ gaze grew into a marked fondness, stating, “He liked to see his door pushed upon and people look in” (202). While it certainly seems true that Merrick grew more accustomed to being seen while under Treves’s care, his continual avoidance of unmediated public space indicates that Merrick’s fear of visual exposure never entirely evaporated.

43. Ibid., 195.

44. Ibid., 197.

45. Ibid., 203.

46. Ibid., 197.

47. Ibid., 199.

48. Ibid., 209.

49. Nineteenth-century linguists imagined themselves, writes Said, as “surveying, as if from a particularly suited vantage point, the passive, seminal, feminine, and even silent and supine East, then going on to articulate the East, making the Orient deliver up its secrets under the learned authority of a philologist whose power derives from the ability to unlock secret, esoteric languages.” See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 137–38.

50. Treves, 197.

51. In his classic anthropological work *Prehistoric Times* (1865; London: Williams and Norgate, 1912), John Lubbock establishes the inability to distinguish between the external world of reality and the internal world of the imagination as a unifying characteristic of savage societies. “Savages very generally believe in witchcraft. Confusing together subjective and objective relations, he is a prey to constant fears” (557).

52. Treves, 198.

53. Ibid., 201.

54. Ibid., 207.


58. Macauley’s 1835 “Minute on Indian Education” claimed that English education in India would produce “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect.” Qtd. in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2002), 91.