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Blindness as Metaphor

There is a casual cruelty, an offhanded thoughtlessness, about metaphors of illness. As Susan Sontag demonstrated some years ago, illness constitutes a special category of metaphor; to speak of cancer as just another word for what the dictionary defines as "a source of evil and anguish" is to massively deny the reality of mutilating surgery, chemotherapy, hair loss, pain, and hospice care, but also, and more importantly, to freight an already onerous diagnosis with the crippling stigma of an unspeakable disease.[1] Sontag's main concern in writing her influential essay was in fact double: on the one hand, to dispel what she calls variously "metaphorical thinking" (3) and "the trappings of metaphor" (5) that surround cancer; on the other, to debunk what she describes as myth, or what we might call by analogy, "mythical thinking." Just how metaphor and myth mutually inform each other is never spelled out in *Illness as Metaphor*; they are used interchangeably—although metaphor is granted a special status in light of its rhetorical antecedents. The impetus that drives Sontag's essay is not so much, as she makes explicit in her more recent sequel and companion essay, "AIDS and its Metaphors," the idealistic desire to contribute to cultural transformation, as the more

urgent therapeutic goal of changing the prospects of those who are diagnosed with those fearsome diseases of our modern and postmodern time, cancer and AIDS; for the misuse of metaphor and the proliferation of myth can, in Sontag's view, prove fatal. Looking back from the vantage point of ten years of being cancer free, Sontag spells out in her second essay the intent of her first:

> *My purpose was, above all, practical. For it was my doleful observation, repeated again and again, that the metaphoric trappings that deform the experience of having cancer have very real consequences: they inhibit people from seeking treatment early enough, or from making a greater effort to get competent treatment.* The metaphors and myths, I was convinced, kill. *(102; emphasis added)*

To a great extent her concern is more with the myths than the metaphors of the major illnesses—tuberculosis, cancer, and some years later, AIDS—for they are the disabling and punitive aspects of the discourse of certain, but not all, scourges that afflict mankind. The major thrust of writing on the metaphors and, above all, myths of illness is to save lives.

Today I would add metaphors of disablement and disfigurement to this register of bodily metaphors that void words of their charge of pain and sorrow, dread and death, and invest them with the language of stigma and shame and burden them with negativity. What makes some of these metaphors so difficult to extirpate is that these metaphors are catachreses, that is they belong to that peculiar and little understood category of figures that signifies (at least in French, for there are interesting divergences between English and French definitions of this figure) a necessary trope, an obligatory metaphor, to which language offers no alternative: e.g., the leg of the table, the arm of the windmill.[2] And blindness is a privileged example of so-called metaphorical catachresis, at least according to the bible of all students of French rhetoric, Pierre Fontanier's definitive nineteenth-century recasting of Dumarsais's eighteenth-century treatise, *Les Figures du Discours* (1821–30)[3], which was adopted throughout France as a basic manual:

> Blindness *must have at first referred only to the deprivation of the sense of* sight*; but he who does not clearly distinguish ideas and their relationships; he whose reason is disturbed, obscured, does he not slightly resemble the* blind man *who does not perceive*

> *physical objects? The word* blindness *came naturally to hand to also express this deprivation of moral sight. And how without these* obligatory metaphors, *without these* catachreses, *would one have succeeded in retracing these ideas. (Fontanier 216–17)*

There are then, following Fontanier, metaphorical catachreses, but catachreses are not properly speaking tropes. Metaphors, by their very nature, strive toward catachresis; indeed no less rigorous a rhetorician than the late Paul de Man, uses the two terms, trope and catachresis, interchangeably. Consequently, there is little place in his thinking for the characteristic surrealist metaphor, which comes as close to being arbitrary and gratuitous as is rhetorically possible.

Clearly, according to Sontag, metaphors of illness do belong or are relegated to a special category, old (early modern) and used up metaphors, what we might call not only enforced but also dead metaphors:

> *Illnesses have always been used as metaphors to enliven charges that a society was corrupt or unjust.* Traditional disease metaphors are principally a way of being vehement; they are, compared with the modern metaphors, relatively contentless. . . . *Such metaphors do not project the modern idea of a specific master illness, in which what is at issue is health itself. (Sontag 72; emphasis added)*

Blindness, which is not always or even ever, strictly speaking, an illness, would no doubt fall into this category of such devalued metaphors. Blindness is, of course, linked to illness (diabetes, multiple sclerosis) or parasitic infections ("river blindness"), or, it is alleged, bad habits like masturbation (!), but its causes are various and have varied over the years: it can be congenital; brought on by the excess oxygen given premature infants; a by-product of conditions such as glaucoma and macular degeneration, retinitis pigmentosa, cataracts, tumors; or the result of accidental injury to the optic nerve or of a traumatic visual experience—nor does this list exhaust the aetiologies of blindness. In some instances blindness can be cured by surgery or vision restored by psychic recovery. But in all cases of legal or partial blindness it is viewed not so much as an illness than as a handicap, an infirmity, a deprivation. As Paul de Man writes in one of his most brilliant essays, "Autobiography as De-facement," which deals with Wordsworth's autobiographical *Essays upon Epitaphs*:

> *As is well known, it is this episode which furnishes, in an early variant, the textual evidence for the assumption that these figures of deprivation, maimed men, drowned corpses, blind beggars, children about to die, that appear throughout* The Prelude *are figures of Wordsworth's own poetic self. . . . But the question remains how this near-obsessive concern with mutilation, so often in the form of a loss of one of the senses, as blindness, deafness or, as in the key word of the* Boy of Winander, muteness, *is to be understood and, consequently, how trustworthy the ensuing claim of compensation and restoration can be. (924)*

Blindness is not, however, contrary to what de Man implies here, just one form among many forms of sensory deprivation, no more than it is, as Fontanier suggests, one trope among many. And this for a number of reasons. First and foremost because blindness as metaphor came under deconstruction in America to be the currency of the realm. Blindness is, as we know, the transcendental trope of de Manian tropology, a central metaphor in de Man's work, in which disfigurement too has its place ("Shelley Disfigured," "Autobiography as De-facement"). Indeed, not surprisingly, blindness is the privileged trope of mutilation:

> *Like the protagonist in the Hardy story, he [Rousseau] is disfigured,* défiguré, *defaced. And also as in the Hardy story,* to be disfigured means primarily the loss of the eyes, *turned to "stony orbs" or empty holes. This trajectory from erased self-knowledge to disfiguration is the trajectory of* The Triumph of Life. *("Autobiography" 61)*

As the title of the central essay that gives de Man's most influential collection of essays its title, "The Rhetoric of Blindness," famously signifies, blindness is bound up with rhetoric. "Blindness and Insight" places blindness at the center of a theoretical system trained on figurative discourse, or, to put it another way, in de Man's rhetoric the metaphor of blindness is the trope of tropes. The metaphor of blindness is inscribed in a critical genealogy that links Rousseau to Derrida and Derrida to de Man. For de Man, "Derrida's commentary on Rousseau can be used as an exemplary case of the interaction between critical blindness and critical insight, no longer in the guise of a semiconscious duplicity but as a necessity dictated and controlled by the very nature of critical language" ("Shelley" 46). In

what, then, does the interaction between critical blindness and critical insight consist?

> *The critical reading of Derrida's critical reading of Rousseau shows blindness to be the necessary correlative of the rhetorical nature of literary language. Within the structure of the system: text-reader-critic (in which the critic can be defined as the "second" reader or reading) the moment of blindness can be located differently. If the literary text itself has areas of blindness, the system can be binary; reader and critic coincide in their attempt to make the unseen visible. Our reading of some literary critics [Poulet, Blanchot, Lukács, Derrida] . . . is a special, somewhat more complex case of this structure: the literary texts are themselves critical but blinded, and the critical reading of the critics tends to deconstruct the blindness. (de Man,* Blindness *111)*

Given the paradoxical relationship between blindness and insight, it follows logically that a "non-blinded" author such as Rousseau exerts a powerful magnetic attraction on blinded critical readers. The metaphor of blindness foregrounds the figure of metaphor, of figurality itself, though all metaphors do not, granted, deploy their action in the realm of the senses:

> *The undoing of the representational and iconic function of figuration by the play of the signifier does not suffice to bring about the disfiguration which* The Triumph of Life *acts out or represents. For it is the alignment of a signification with any principle of linguistic articulation whatsoever, sensory or not, which constitutes the figure. The iconic, sensory or, if one wishes, the aesthetic moment is not constitutive of figuration. Figuration is the element in language that allows for the reiteration of meaning by substitution; the process is at least twofold and this plurality is naturally illustrated by optical icons of specularity.* But the particular seduction of the figure is not necessarily that it creates an illusion of sensory pleasure, but that it creates an illusion of meaning. *(de Man,* Blindness *141)*

One might rephrase the preceding sentence: "the particular seduction of the figure is especially that it does not create an illusion of sensory pleasure," for the entire passage bespeaks an anxiety about the lures of figuration rooted in figuration's reliance on an absent ground of

embodied sensory pleasure and pain. For de Man, the last in a long line of anti-rhetorical rhetoricians, the figure is suspect because of its foundational immersion in the material world. In an attempt to somehow set apart rhetorical approaches to literature from those that share rhetoric's awareness of the impossibility of achieving unmediated access to the world of phenomena, one of de Man's most astute readers, Wlad Godzich, the author of the preface to *Blindness and Insight*, writes somewhat lamely: "Rhetoric knows itself as rhetoric, hence its superiority to other textual practices" (xxvi).

Well and good, but to know the rhetoricity of one's own textual practice, at least in the case of metaphors of illness, disfigurement, and disabling is not to go the full distance, is merely to forfeit blindness for denial. Surely it is not to acknowledge what a full embodiment of metaphor might mean and accomplish. Indeed, what I am calling de Manian denial is not as fully achieved as he would like and as his followers would suggest, for the body returns in de Man and it returns disfigured. The body that haunts "Shelley Disfigured" is the body of the drowned Shelley, "the actual death and subsequent disfigurement of Shelley's body, burned after his boat capsized and he drowned off the coast of Lerici" (66), which has come over the years, to borrow a mythical analogy de Man enlists elsewhere, to cling like Dejanira's tunic to the body of the text.

Thus in his *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida, the blind/insightful critical reader of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*, offsets his commentary of pictorial representations of blindness by alluding to his own body, indeed to a facial paralysis that strikes him while he is about to set to work on the exhibition and the catalogue commissioned by the Louvre. Thus what might appear at first as an extraneous and distracting intrusion of the author's body into the text becomes the very mechanism whereby Derrida dis-figures the figure, preempts "metaphorical thinking," to the extent that that thinking involves a disembodiment. His body is here, as in other recent texts, insistently foregrounded. The almost irresistible pull of metaphor when talking about blindness is here checked, or at the very least revealed. Recounting the events surrounding the organization of the exhibit Derrida explains that he had to cancel the first scheduled meeting with the curators of the Cabinet des Dessins for medical reasons:

> *It is July 5th, and 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). On July 5th, this trivial ailment has just begun to heal. (Derrida 32)*[4]

This instance of non-blindness, of enforced perpetual sight, the failure of the eyelid to close persists for several days, during which Derrida undergoes a series of tests, which are duly listed. In this instance blindness is quite literally monstrous. It is after the deferred first meeting that the idea for the exhibition comes to him like a bolt from the blue: "That same evening while driving home [we are at the 11th of July], the theme of the exhibition hits me. All of a sudden, in an instant" (32).

I too have sustained a diminution of sight, but one that has lasted far more than five days and that will be with me always. On 24 December 1996 I consulted my opthamologist about certain strange disturbances of vision I had begun to experience some days earlier: filmy flamelike floaters and the overlay of my vision by what seemed to be a layer of filthy tape. He immediately sent me to consult the great Boston retina specialist, Dr. Trexel Topping, and his diagnosis was swift and at the time not overly alarming: I had a detached retina. I was operated on Xmas morning in what is today a routine outpatient procedure. The operation was pronounced a success, and yet when I returned for a follow-up visit some two weeks later I was told that the operation had failed and would have to be repeated. I had a total of four such operations, each followed by an awkward recovery where a gas bubble injected into the eye forced me to keep my head bent. It became necessary for me to take a semester's sick leave, as I was obliged to adopt a series of unnatural positions to maximize the pressure of the gas bubble on the recalcitrant retina. Slowly I stopped reading, watching television. Only the telephone and the radio kept me going, nourished my mind, and brought the world within hearing range. When the fourth operation failed—and each operation, I was told, would diminish my vision—the doctors resorted to the only procedure left in their arsenal. Silicone was injected into my eye to keep the retina down flat, and it remained there for over a year, reducing the vision in that eye to an indistinct blur. I still had my intact vision in my right eye, but not for long, for in a freakish sequence of events the retina of that eye too came detached. In this instance the operation was a success, but as these operations do, they caused me to develop cataracts in both eyes, both the good and the bad one. I could read but my depth perception was gone, ascending and especially descending stair-

cases became a perilous exercise, and, of course, driving was out of the question. In time, first one cataract was removed and then the silicone and eventually the other cataract. Some two years after the initial detachment, following a short laser treatment, I recovered if not my original vision—which was never very good to begin with; myopia makes one a prime candidate for detached retinas—then the best vision I have had in two years. The left eye, battered by my repeated surgeries, is at best a spare, but were something to happen to my "good eye" I would never be able to read again, as the vision in my right eye is now largely peripheral. The dirty tape has been removed, but the scarring left from my operations has left in its wake something like a crinkled piece of Saran wrap, that causes letters to jump and break up and makes reading an eye chart an act of visual acrobatics.

My bolt of lightning came, curiously, not after the ultimate laser treatment but just before. I had never intended to write about my experience, but serendipity intervened and my subject found me: one evening I decided to rent two films on video that on the face of it had nothing in common other than that I had never seen one—auteur Douglas Sirk's Hollywood classic, *Magnificent Obsession*—and had missed the other, the previous season's popular hit, *You've Got Mail*. Their fortuitous connection, which perhaps only a person who has dealt with vision problems could make, provoked in me a sudden and irresistible impetus to write about blindness: both real and metaphoric, for as is already clear, the two are bound up with each other.

To be *against metaphor* makes as little sense as to be against interpretation, to cite Sontag one last time. The lesson of structuralism is, as the linguists and philosophers of the past forty years or so have irrefutably demonstrated, that the fantasy of stripping language of its figurality, is just that, a fantasy and thus doomed to fail. The catachresis of blindness cannot be dissolved by ideological fiat. The realm of the senses must, however, as I hope to show in what follows, be extended to include all manner of sensual deprivation: lack of vision, lack of hearing, lack of speech, lack of taste, lack of smell, lack of touch. The world of those deprived of the full use of one or several senses is commonly viewed as abnormal; to be fully sensate, as to be fully healthy, must be seen in the reversal of values I am proposing as the marked term. The relentless focus on ever greater sensual plenitude is pornographic, a denial of the frailty of the human body, of the weight of genetic destiny, of the play of accident and chance and of the vicissitudes of history. For too long the study of the realm of the senses has been bound up with the exaltation of

that curious reified theoretical object, the Body, and though that Body has been studied as "tremulous," "in pain," in pieces, the site of torture, disciplining, discrimination, illness, and other forms of insult and injury, it has been regarded as drawing meaning from an implied healthy norm. Whether viewed as a pleasure body or a pain body, the Body qua body has been posited as integral and fully sensate. It is time to consider the body as the locus of sensory deprivation that is not reducible to metaphors, discourses, myths, and all manner of idealistic constructs, but that is not intelligible outside of language. In what follows I will argue that even as the traditional metaphorization of blindness continues to inform modern and postmodern fiction and film, taking an increasingly technological turn, a newly reconceptualized body institutes a departure from that tradition and takes into account the realm of the senses and the tensions between mythical and scientific theories of blindness.

The Gay Medusa

Qu'on se figure une tête de Méduse gaie.
(Hugo, L'homme qui rit *341)*

When we say, as we so often do, that love is blind we generally mean to say that the slings of Cupid's arrow are capricious, and cause one to choose inappropriate objects. To say that love is blind is to suggest that if only Cupid properly aimed his bow, or the lover had twenty-twenty vision he or she would see the blemishes that mark and mar the beloved, would distinguish clearly between the beloved's true identity and the idealized image fashioned by the specular, narcissistic gaze, and hence fall out of love. But there is another way to understand blindness in love, and that is to understand that blindness sets one free, that blindness to the other's physical appearance and gestural language is precisely what enables the lover to see—rather to hear, because what is at stake here is a massive repudiation of the supremacy of vision—the lover's true soul. We are clearly here in the orbit of what is commonly and reductively referred to as Platonic love. As Socrates reminds Alcibiades, who has just praised his superior beauty: "A man's mental vision does not begin to be keen until his physical vision is past its prime, and you are far from having reached that point" (Plato 106). Platonic love involves two forms of mutually exclusive vision: the physically acute vision of youth and the discerning mental vision of age. Desire derives from the former; the ability to apprehend beauty is the prerogative of physical decline. Let us

call the mature man's erotic blindness *fortunate blindness*. And let us call fortunate blindness one of the great myths of blindness.

This is the central conceit of Victor Hugo's latest, strangest, and least-read novel, *L'homme qui rit*, a historical novel published in 1869 and set in the England of the post-Cromwellian era. Hugo's monster, Gwynplaine, is no ordinary monster: no victim of a congenital malformation, or of a pregnant mother's fantasy,[5] his monstrosity is a man-made construction, his disfiguration, deliberate. A victim of the so-called *comprachicos* [buy children], a freemasonry composed of child sellers dedicated to producing monsters for sale to courts and circuses, Gwynplaine, who is abandoned on the coast of England in 1690 by a band of *comprachicos* fleeing recently enacted laws against all manner of vagrants, was as a child the victim of a particularly evil form of cosmetic surgery that transformed his infant face into a hideous mask: permanently disfigured, he can never wipe the laugh from his face. And that incised grimace is destined precisely to produce laughter:

> *Two slits for eyes shining with what seemed to be a borrowed light, a hiatus for a mouth, a snub protuberance with two holes for nostrils, a flattened face, all having for the result an appearance of laughter; it is certain that Nature never produces such perfection single-handed. (Hugo 364)*

This deliberate disfigurement introduces what will be the first disjunction between exteriority and interiority in the tale, the difference between the rictus plastered onto Gwynplaine's face and his pensive, that is melancholic interior:

> *It was Gwynplaine's laugh which created the laughter of others; yet he did not laugh at himself. His face laughed; his thoughts did not. The extraordinary face which chance or a special and weird industry had fashioned for him, laughed alone. Gwynplaine had nothing to do with it.* The outside did not depend on the interior. *(366; emphasis added)*

But the principal disjunction at the heart of Hugo's fiction of monstrosity lies elsewhere. Hugo—whom no one ever accused of being subtle—produces in this astonishing novel the most fully realized and explicit modern rendering of an archetypal folktale that, as I hope to demonstrate in what follows, recurs to the present day in truncated, ever more metaphorical popular cultural artifacts and is possibly the greatest

myth of blindness in the West: I am referring to the tale of Beauty and the Beast, first consigned to literature by Gabrielle Susanne Barbot de Gallon de Villeneuve in her *La Jeune Américaine, et les contes marins* (1740) and recast in its most enduringly popular form by Mme Leprince de Beaumont in her *Magasin des enfans, ou dialogues entre une sage gouvernante et plusieurs de ses élèves de la première distinction* (1756), which was first translated into English in *The Young Misses Magazine* in 1761. It is this version of the tale that Jean Cocteau credits in his 1946 masterpiece *Belle et la Bête*.

In Beaumont's ur-tale, of which all subsequent versions are variants, the most surprising feature is the speed at which Belle's fear of the monster is converted to esteem and eventually, love. This accelerated conversion is due to the manifestations of the monster's courtly respect for the highborn and cultivated young woman; indeed, whereas the tale of Beauty and the Beast is linked to the ancient tale of Cupid and Psyche—with its central theme of eroticized blindness—the Beast's modern sensibility drives a wedge between the two tales: "it becomes clear how much the myth of 'Cupid and Psyche' has diverged, in 'Beauty and the Beast,' into the delicacies of amour courtois: the male serving female, the female saying no, the male suffering faithfully of lovesickness, the female saying yes" (Hearne 19). For "Cupid and Psyche" and "Beauty and the Beast" are, as modern folklorists have shown, a pair: one the ancient, one the modern version of the group of myths categorized as "animal groom."

On exploring the monster's magnificent chateau, the plucky young maiden comes upon a door bearing the words: "Apartment de la Belle." Pushing the door open she is "blinded" by what she finds:

> *She opened it quickly and was quite dazzled with its magnificence. The things that chiefly took her notice were a large library, a piano, and several music books.*
>
> *"Well," she said to herself, "I see that time will not hang heavy on my hands for want of something to do." (Leprince de Beaumont 29–30)*

It is because the respectful and egalitarian monster recognizes beauty's bookishness and provides her with a library of her own that she almost immediately overlooks his horrific appearance:

> *"You are very good to me," answered Beauty. "I admit I am pleased with your kindness; and when I think of that I almost forget how ugly you are."*

> *"Yes, yes," said the Beast. "My heart is good, but still I am a monster."*
>
> *"There are many in the world," said Beauty, "that deserve that name more than you, and I prefer you just the way you are to those who, under a human form, hide a corrupt and ungrateful heart." (33)*

However much la Belle overlooks the monster's hideousness, she cannot bring herself to accept his marriage proposal. His monstrosity presents an insuperable obstacle to their union, though it favors their companionability. No amount of voluntarism, of rationalization can, however, turn her esteem for the good beast into passionate love, such as the one Psyche experiences for her invisible (divine) lover; it is only when Beauty finds the beast pining away for her upon her return from her father's home that she understands that she truly loves the beast and agrees to marry him: "Alas! I thought I felt only friendship for you, but the grief I now feel convinces me that I cannot live without you" (42). To see the Beast is revealed to Beauty as the very life-source.

It is only when la Belle discovers that she loves the beast with all her heart and soul that the spell in whose thrall the beast had been held is broken and he is transformed into Prince Charming, indeed into the God of Love himself: "How great was her surprise to find that Beast had disappeared, and in his place she saw at her feet one of the most handsome princes the eye ever beheld, who returned her thanks for having put an end to the charm under which he had so long remained" (42).

Hugo's genius consists in his rendering of the relationship between Beauty and the Beast as the pairing not just of an animal-like male and a refined female beauty, but of a male monster with a *blind female* beauty, Déa, the abandoned child raised alongside Gwynplaine by the itinerant philosopher, Ursus. For blindness is gendered and, predictably, gendered as female. It is beauty's embodied blindness that holds the key to the scenario of the love of the apparently hyperbolically mismatched couple. Thus in the chapter that bears the title, "Oculos non habet, et videt," a reversal of the verse from the Gospel, "Oculos habent, et non vident," Hugo writes: "Only one woman on earth saw Gwynplaine. It was the blind girl" (Hugo 375).

According to the logic of blindness that Hugo embraces, physical blindness is but the actualization of metaphorical blindness, thus the blind lover is the lover par excellence. To speak of blindness and enamoration is to commit a pleonasm: "To be blind and in love, is to be

twofold blind. In such a situation, dreams are dreamed. Illusion is the food of dreams. Take illusion from love, and you take from it its [sustenance]" (Hugo 395). There are then two kinds of blindness operative in the love of Déa for Gwynplaine: the sheer physical blindness of Beauty and the garden variety blindness of the deluded lover, the metaphoric blindness that affects the besotted lover and the fortunate psychical blindness that endows the besotted with quite literally a second sight. For if one pursues this logic to its extreme, sightedness *is* blindness, seeing is an impediment in the quest for true vision: "To see, is a thing which conceals the true" (Hugo 396). Hence the blindness associated with oracles and prophets. "It is that Déa, who was blind, could perceive the soul." It is not in spite of Déa's blindness, but rather because of it, that she pierces the hideous outer envelope that hides Gwynplaine's soul: "Booby! do souls require eyes to see one another?" (Hugo 388).

The blind person as *seer* is the central figure of the literature of blindness, precisely the one de Man borrows from the canon; it rests on the double, oscillating meaning of seeing, as both a physical and a cognitive act. Not only then must the metaphor of blindness be embodied, but further the metaphorical and literal meanings of vision must be held apart to dispel the myths of blindness and their metaphorical "trappings."

At the heart of Hugo's tale, the Romantic pairing of opposites gives new meaning to the expression "made for each other." In Hugo's romantic code the monstrous man and the blind woman are the two halves of the androgyn, complimentary damaged beings; each member of the couple compensates for what is lacking in the other:

> *These two miseries found shelter in the ideal, and each absorbed the other. The rejected found a refuge; two blanks, combining, filled each other up. They held together by what they lacked. . . . Had Déa not been blind would she have chosen Gwynplaine? Had Gwynplaine not been disfigured would he have preferred Déa? . . . Each had deep need of the other, and this was at the bottom of their loves. (383)*

Déa and Gwynplaine are the perfect couple in that their love is based on their mutual need—in the strongest possible sense of that word. Like Beauty and the Beast, they quite literally cannot live without each other. Beauty's blindness underwrites two potent and complementary myths of misogyny: first, that women should be seen rather than see; second, that despite their beastly appearance, men posses an inner beauty waiting to be revealed. Hugo's reinvention of the pairing of Beauty and the

Beast—which, as we shall see below, is anything but innocent—is tinged with pathos, the special romantic pathos that attend the pairs of outcasts that people his imagination: e.g., Quasimodo and la Esmeralda in *Notre-Dame de Paris*. As William R. Paulson remarks in the Hugo chapter of his remarkable *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France*[6]:

> *Founded on intense reciprocal need, with each in effect occupying the position of the blind beloved with respect to the other, Gwynplaine and Dea's love attains a state of near-perfect complementarity, and the narrator's ecstatic commentaries constitute a veritable theory of sexuality defined by innocence, undifferentiation, and symbiosis. . . . Gwynplaine's and Dea's love is stable, eternal, and forever locked in the form of an original symbiosis. (Paulson 189–90)*

Recycled in the trappings of Romanticism, the love of Beauty and the Beast represents the height of the *grotesque*, which is for Hugo the modern aesthetic par excellence; according to the veritable manifesto of modernity, the *Preface to Cromwell* (1827), it is the grotesque that separates the ancients and the moderns:

> *In the thought of the moderns . . . the grotesque plays a major role. It is everywhere; on the one hand, it creates the deformed and the horrible, on the other the comic and the buffoon. . . . [B]eside the sublime, as a means of contrast, the grotesque is according to me the richest source with which that nature can provide art. (199)*

As Hugo views the history of art, architecture, the law, and literature from antiquity to the present, the advance of the grotesque is the cutting edge of progress, culminating in the Romantic cultivation of the supreme antithesis to the aesthetic of the sublime, or rather in the foundation of a distinctively modern sublime, which takes the form not of a uniform beauty, but a beauty born of jarring contrasts and unholy alliances:

> *It would be excessive to further emphasize this influence of the grotesque in the third civilization. On the contrary in the age of romanticism everything bears witness to its intimate and creative alliance with Beauty. Even the most naive popular legends explain at times with an admirable instinct this mystery of modern art. Antiquity would not have made* Beauty and the Beast.

In Hugo's very Hegelian aesthetic, "Beauty and the Beast" is the tale par excellence that marks the irreversible progress from the ancient to the modern, indeed that inaugurates modernity.

Contemporary folklore studies have borne out Hugo's peremptory affirmation, for if this myth is transnational, it is anything but transhistorical: it is a myth that is shaped by and reflects the time (mid-eighteenth century) and the place (England) of its production. According to Ruth B. Bottigheimer, "Beauty and the Beast" must be read as a characteristically eighteenth-century tale of "the institutionalization of commercially-based marriage" (Bottigheimer 11). The lesson Mme Leprince de Beaumont enjoined upon her young charges was no different from that of many novels of the period, from *Pamela* to *Pride and Prejudice*. Bottigheimer writes: "Marriage to an unattractive mate to secure a family's welfare is by no means restricted to the fairy tale world of 'Beauty and the Beast'" (8). Whether or not one agrees with Bottigheimer's economistic reading—and there are nearly as many readings of "Beauty and the Beast" as there are variants of the tale—her argument in favor of contextualizing the fairy tale and thereby historicizing it seems to me irrefutable.[7] All the more so if one takes note of the fact that the eighteenth century was marked by a nearly obsessive preoccupation on the part of British and French philosophers—beginning with Locke, and including Berkeley, Diderot, and Condillac—with the question of blindness: to the extent that, as folklorists have pointed out, "Beauty and the Beast" is to the modern period what "Cupid and Psyche" is to antiquity, blindness providing the trace of the early tale of love in its modern rendition; the shadow cast by the darkness of the ancient tale falls over its modern variants.

The eighteenth century emerges from the intersection of folklore and philosophy as the pivotal moment when blindness as a philosophical issue and marriage as an allegory of blindness converge in the modern myth par excellence, "Beauty and the Beast." In answer to his own question, "Why did the blind—their perceptual faculties and their surgical cure—become the subject of intense cultural interest in eighteenth-century France?" (3), Paulson takes note of a crucial development in eighteenth-century medicine: "It appears that only around the beginning of the eighteenth century was an effective surgical technique developed for the removal of cataracts that had caused blindness" (11). He is referring here to the first cataract operation carried out in 1728 by William Cheselden. For as Paulson amply demonstrates, the question that fascinated sensationalist Enlightenment philosophers were "cures" for blindness. As Foucault remarks in *Birth of the Clinic*:

> *When it has untied its old kinships, the eye is able to open at the unchanging, ever present level of things. . . . What allows man to resume contact with childhood and to rediscover the permanent birth of truth is this bright, distant open naiveté of the gaze. Hence the two great mythical experiences on which the philosophy of the eighteenth century had wished to base its beginning: the foreign spectator in an unknown country, and the man born blind restored to sight. (65)*

Because the discourse on blindness is not transhistorical, the fascination with and implications of cures for blindness serves as a marker enabling one to distinguish between the status of blindness under the Enlightenment and Romantic regimes. Again in Paulson's words: "In many of the eighteenth-century writings studied here, blindness implicitly means congenital and possibly curable lack of sight; in many nineteenth-century writings it means incurable *loss* of sight" (4).

Eros is not, far from it, the only sphere in which blindness deploys its alleged superiority over vision, for what is at stake ultimately in these modern fictions of blindness is intersubjectivity itself: thus embodied blindness enables vision to pierce monstrosity in relationships between self and other that lie outside of the carnal, of the heterosexual or the homosexual, or even the animal and human sexual encounter, and this lends weight, I think, to the Platonic reading of this folktale disparaged and dismissed by Marc Shell in his brief essay on "Beauty and the Beast"[8]. Socrates, it will be recalled, is described by Alcibiades in the final scene of *The Symposium*, as resembling figures of Silenus, both in his Satyr-like (beastly) appearance and in his reliance on rhetoric to dissimulate his inner, ideal beauty and goodness:

> *Anyone who sets out to listen to Socrates talking will probably find his conversation utterly ridiculous at first, it is clothed in such curious words and phrases, the hide, so to speak, of a hectoring satyr. . . . But if a man penetrates within and sees the content of Socrates's talk exposed, he will find that there is nothing but sound sense inside, and that this talk is almost the talk of a god. (Plato 110–11)*

Conjuring metaphor with metaphor, Alcibiades demonstrates the link between Socrates's use of rhetoric and his ugliness: playing on the double meaning of the comparison with statues of Silenus, Alcibiades equates the deceptive language or "piping" of the Satyr with the deceptive exterior of

these statues of unsightly men which, when broken apart, are discovered to contain "little figures of gods" (100).

Confirming the historicity/modernity of the tale of Beauty and the Beast—and its pivotal role in the passage from Enlightenment to Romanticism—in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818)[9] the Beast is, like Gwynplaine, a manufactured monster, the product of the mad experimental scientist, Frankenstein. Shunned by his fellow men, the Monster hides out in a "kennel" adjoining the cottage where the exiled De Lacey family lives. When, after many months spent spying on the unhappy family, the wretched Monster decides to make his presence known and to throw himself on the mercy of his unwitting neighbors, he chooses a moment when the children, Agatha and Felix, are gone from the cottage and the aged and blind patriarch is alone:

> *I revolved many projects; but that on which I fixed was, to enter the dwelling when the blind man should be alone. I had sagacity enough to discover, that the unnatural hideousness of my person was the chief object of horror with those who had formerly beheld me. My voice though harsh, had nothing terrible in it; I thought, therefore, that if in the absence of his children, I could gain the good-will and mediation of the old De Lacey, I might by his means be tolerated by my younger protectors. (Shelley 128)*

Not daring to tell even the kindly blind old patriarch of his monstrosity, the fiend describes his "friends" in veiled terms:

> *"They are kind—they are the most excellent creatures in the world; but unfortunately, they are prejudiced against me. I have good dispositions; my life has been hitherto harmless and in some degree beneficial, but* a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, *and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster." (130; emphasis added)*

The Monster knows from bitter experience that the sight of him inspires horror and ostracism in his fellow man, whose vision is clouded by prejudice—and where prejudice is present in fiction, as in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, there is moral blindness and where vision is present, there is moral judgment. Prejudice is a visual disturbance, it forms a cataract-like film that prevents accurate vision, that clouds judgment.

The myth of the moral blindness of the sighted is inextricably linked with the myth of the superiority of the sense of hearing over seeing, of the moral superiority of the physically blind over the sighted. Blindness

is placed in the service of a critique of oculocentrism; it is its linchpin. Thus the kindly old blind man responds to the monster by glorifying his fortunate infirmity:

> *"If you will unreservedly confide to me the particulars of your tale, I perhaps may be of use in undeceiving them.* I am blind and cannot judge of your countenance*, but there is something in your words which persuades me that you are sincere." (130; emphasis added)*

But before the fiend can recount the tale of his creation in all its particulars to his blind benefactor, the children return and, as predicted, turn on the miserable creature, who retires to his "hovel" and in short time returns to his maker, to request that he manufacture a companion for him: *Frankenstein* is, then, an anomalous version of the "Beauty and the Beast" scenario precisely in that the monster is male and lacks a female beauty to love and redeem him. The sought-for love of a (blind) beauty is the guarantor, the very condition of his humanity. And in this post-Enlightenment, post-Revolutionary tale, the access of the animal to universal, human brotherhood is doomed to fail, for post-Enlightenment universalism is grounded in exclusion: the founding Declaration of the Rights of Man excludes even as it includes. If the Enlightenment sought to include the blind in the public sphere through education and surgery—the medical equivalent of social reform—in the post-Enlightenment period the incurably blind became conflated with the monster. Hence the incurably blind beggar in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is ultimately banished from the pale by the standard bearer of Enlightenment values, the pharmacist Homais.

The persistence of renderings of "Beauty and the Beast" till the end of the millennium argues powerfully for its survival well into the era of postmodernism, but just as the representation of blindness changes from the Enlightenment to Romanticism, so too do the inextricably linked themes of blindness and interspecies love undergo significant transformations from modernism to postmodernism. Indeed, though there continue to be fictional renderings of the tale—notably Angela Carter's "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon"—the tale of Beauty and the Beast is most widely disseminated in the medium that has dominated the twentieth century: film. Just as in the early nineteenth century "[t]he restoration of sight as a spectacular moment was to enjoy its greatest literary fortune in the theater" (Paulson 80), throughout the twentieth century the spectacle of recovered vision in its folkloric as well as scientific form was transferred from stage to screen. The adaptations of "Beauty and the Beast" to film are

numerous, varied, and range from the most literal to the most figurative. That this millennial folktale should recur in film is not, perhaps, particularly surprising, given film's endless capacity for recycling and appropriation, but the fact that this tale turns on problems of vision poses particular challenges to its casting in a preeminently visual medium.

Masks and Metaphors

Peter Bogdanovich's 1985 film, *Mask*, presents an interesting variant on the relationship between physical blindness and monstrosity. This "small" film is, as we are told in the opening credits, based on the true story of Rusty Dennis, the mother of Randy Dennis, a boy born monstrously disfigured by an extremely rare and inevitably fatal disease—cranial diaphyseal dysplasia—involving calcium deposits that give his face a leonine appearance—this condition is called "leonitis"—that is only heightened by his adolescent mane of curly reddish hair. In a series of increasingly tightly focused opening scenes, Randy's monstrosity is unmasked.

The film's central conceit, as indicated by its title, is the notion of the mask. Now as Terry Castle has pointed out, the eighteenth century marked a radical turning point in the significance of the mask and masquerade; drawing on the anthropologies of Mikhail Bakhtin and Roger Caillois, Castle locates in the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth centuries the desacralization and concomitant secularization of the mask, which was in ancient times bound up with "the joy of change and reincarnation," but which came in the wake of the emergence of the modern individual subject to stand for subterfuge and deception (104).

In *Mask*, however, the mask fulfills a different function, the one we have already encountered in *L'Homme qui rit*. It operates in both instances as a trope, a metaphor not *of* but *for* blindness, for the inability of the sighted to pierce appearances, especially the hideous. As Randy, a remarkably bright and well-adjusted child, faces the pitiless gaze of his high school classmates, their assumption is that his face is not his own, rather a mask that may be dropped at will. "Hey kid, why don't you take off your mask," shouts a student at his new school. To this literal use of the word mask, Randy retorts by playing on the mask's symbolic meaning: "I'll take off my mask if you take off yours," because, as this film makes clear, in Randy's case the mask is only an extreme example of the mask that all social beings wear; it signals to us that Randy's disfigured face is

not the face of the radically other, but rather that it is located on a continuum going from the most ordinary face to its most monstrous distortion. Randy's leonine face—the leonine face is a trace of the leper and it recurs frequently in modern depictions of the Beast, as in the elaborate leonine face of *la Bête*—designates the place of the monstrous, where the bestial and the human touch and where the metaphoric and the real flow together, for if this is a "true story," it is also a filmic adaptation enlisting the skill of makeup artists to fabricate a masklike face. The hideous mask is only the concretization of the symbolic mask behind which the subject hides his or her deepest desires and most intimate nature. And in a paradox that flows from the very notion of monstrosity, what lies behind the repulsive exterior of the monster is goodness.

On the recommendation of his caring high school principal, Rusty spends the summer as an assistant counselor at a camp for the blind, where he meets "Beauty", a lovely blond girl who matches his passion for baseball with a passion for horses. They fall in love and exchange several kisses. However, when the blind girl's well-to-do and protective parents come to pick her up they are horrified by Rusty's "mask," and they do everything to cut their daughter off from Rusty, who, as was predicted by the doctors—who represent the voice of science—dies shortly thereafter.

The increasing metaphorization of the scenario we have been tracing blinds the spectator of contemporary cinema to its debt to millennial folktales. For every form of popular entertainment that, like Walt Disney's animated film *Beauty and the Beast*, explicitly acknowledges its sources, there are many that do not.

On the face of it, nothing about Douglas Sirk's 1950 Hollywood melodrama, *Magnificent Obsession*, signals its belonging to the corpus of rewritings of the "Beauty and the Beast" scenario, though blindness is centrally thematized. Bob Merrick (Rock Hudson), the male protagonist, is a bored, reckless, and spoiled playboy who enjoys driving fast cars and speedboats. At his lakeside mansion, he provokes an accident while resisting all entreaties from his friends to slow down and crashes his speedboat. In order to save his life the local rescue squad borrows the only resuscitation device on the lake, which belongs to the good doctor Wayne Phillips, who has only recently remarried. As luck would have it, just after Bob Merrick's accident the doctor suffers cardiac arrest, and deprived of the life-giving machine, dies. When he recovers, Bob Herrick learns of the doctor's death and of the part he unwittingly played in it and attempts to

make good by writing out a generous check and handing it to the doctor's widow, Helen. She, however, refuses to accept the gift of the guilt money and further rejects all of Bob Merrick's offers of friendship. In an attempt to flee him, she jumps out of his car and is the victim of an accident that leaves her blind. (Jane Wyman, winner of the best actress Oscar for her role of the deaf-mute girl in *Johnny Belinda* [1948], seems to have been typecast as a disabled person.) The stage is now set for the reenactment of the "Beauty and the Beast" scenario: the hunky Rock Hudson would appear to be totally unrelated to the congery of disfigured monsters we have described thus far. His monstrosity—and there is no doubt that he is viewed by the good doctor's family and colleagues as a selfish monster unworthy of being saved—is purely figurative, purely moral. Only the blind widow, whom he befriends under an assumed name, Robbie Robertson, as she takes the sun on the lakefront beach, recognizes his goodness and generosity and grants him the moral rehabilitation that he seeks. In fact, when he does ultimately reveal his true identity to Helen, it turns out she had suspected the truth for some time; indeed, at the moment they meet on the beach, she recognizes his voice: "I have heard your voice, haven't I?" she asks him. This secret recognition enables Helen to mask her love of the man responsible for her husband's death—they were after all married for only six months—and to transform her blindness into the means of her sexual gratification. But when, after a team of high-powered European doctors has pronounced her blindness incurable, Bob proposes marriage, she flees. Unable to find her, he becomes, as he had always wanted to, a doctor, indeed a neurologist. In a final scene, in the best tradition of Hollywood melodrama, but also in keeping with an older theatrical tradition that often stages the lover of a blind woman as her surgeon (Paulson 80–85), he must perform the operation that will restore his beloved's sight. What we have in this instance is a mixed rendering of the basic scenario: a metaphorico-moral monster paired with a literally blind beauty.

Fortuitously paired with *Magnificent Obsession* through the accident of my video rentals, *You've Got Mail* took on for me a significance that might have otherwise escaped me: not so much that of a degraded remake of Ernst Lubitsch's *Shop around the Corner*—though it is that—starring James Stewart, as that of a postmodern reworking of the "Beauty and the Beast" scenario. For in the virtual reality of *You've Got Mail*, the scaffolding of the body has been completely dismantled, and what remains is a totally metaphorized version of the tale. Beastliness is incarnated

by Tom Hanks, who as Joe Fox, heir to a Barnes and Noble-type book business, represents the evil forces of encroaching capitalism, whereas Beauty takes the appealing form of Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan), who represents the old-fashioned, organic bookselling tradition—indeed her innocence and goodness are reinscribed by her specialty in children's literature. In a classic scenario of the evils of capitalism, the huge, transnational, faceless forces of capitalism triumphant are arrayed against the small-scale, face-to-face charms of personalized local commerce. What is innovative about this reinscription of old tales and modern myths is the way in which author and director Nora Ephron enlists and incorporates the technology of the internet. Having met in a chat room under the protective cover of pseudonyms, Joe and Kathleen carry on an intimate, heart-to-heart correspondence; in the virtual, faceless, figurative world of cyberspace, the postmodern metaphorization of blindness is bound up with the substitution of the mask for blindness; hence the chat room of cyberspace, where strangers meet and exchange the most intimate confidences under the protective guise of pseudonymous identities, is a technological masked ball[10]—they become friends, soul mates. Yet when they cross each other in the street they are entirely blind to the other's "true" identity, and when they are actually introduced at a party, in their confrontational roles at opposite ends of the economic scale, they take an instantaneous dislike to each other and spar in the best tradition of the initially mismatched couple of screwball comedy. In the course of events, they decide to meet face-to-face. In a scene that virtually rescripts the analogous scene from the Ernst Lubitsch film, a crucial dissymmetry is introduced: Kathleen arrives first and is seen and recognized by Joe—or rather by the associate he delegates to look in the café in his stead. From that moment on, the proper imbalance of the "Beauty and the Beast" tale is restored: the Beast is endowed with sight, and Beauty is disadvantaged by blindness. It is only gradually that the love story that unfolds under the cover of darkness is aligned with the real, diurnal relationship, as the Tom Hanks figure is transformed from Meg Ryan's persecutor into her instructor in sight.

To See and Not See

At First Sight represents the ultimate undoing of the myth of blindness and the scenario of "Beauty and the Beast" and a return to the epistemological preoccupations of the Enlightenment. While the myth of

blindness is undone by bringing the scientific gaze to bear on the stuff of myth, the myth of miraculous curability through science is called into question by the discovery of the constructedness of sight. Based on a case study by the eminent neurologist and scientific writer Oliver Sacks, "To See or Not to See," *At First Sight* recounts the poignant true story of Virgil, or as he is called in the film, Val, who loses his sight at the age of three through a combination of congenital cataracts and retinitis pigmentosa. Raised in a safe country town, watched over by his overly protective sister, Val earns his living as a masseur at a local spa for stressed-out urbanites. After a scary drive in the woods—the only faint trace of the lost fairy-tale world of "Beauty and the Beast"—Amy (Mira Sorvino), a high-powered architect from New York, arrives as a guest at the spa and signs up for a massage. She is immediately taken by Val, whose magic fingers unlock and release her tears and tension. Because Virgil wears dark glasses and is intimately familiar with his surroundings, and because she first sees him while crossing the dark wood ice-skating on a frozen pond with an ice hockey stick in hand, she is unaware that he is blind. However when she realizes that he is, her reaction is unusual: back in her hotel room she blindfolds herself to try to approximate Val's blindness. Unable to navigate the room she crashes into the furniture.

The fact that the blind figure is male is only the first of many differences between this story and the previous examples we have considered. Deeply attracted to Virgil, indeed in love with him, Amy uses the internet to locate a surgeon known to take on such cases. The results of the operation are surprising: Virgil is cured of his blindness, but contrary to our expectations, he recoils from the world he discovers. Whereas French melodramas and Hollywood films have led us to greet restored sight as a miracle, an instantaneous passage from blindness to vision, the scientific literature that Sacks draws on, stretching back to the celebrated Molyneux case that inspired Locke, testifies to the veritable catastrophe that suddenly restored vision can bring, leading in some cases to depression, suicide, or a longing to recover blindness. The scene where Virgil's bandages are slowly unwound is astonishing: rather than bursting with joy at having his vision restored to him by a miracle of modern science, Virgil practically screams in pain and shuts his eyes fast. The first sight of the antiseptic hospital room, which the camera lens beautifully captures, is blurred but garish. In his line of vision stand two total strangers: his sister and his lover. There is no connection between what he perceives and what he knows; the world is reduced to repulsive facticity. Here is the actual scene as recounted by Sacks:

> *The following day, the bandage was removed, and Virgil's eye was finally exposed, without cover, to the world. The moment of truth had finally come.*
>
> *Or had it? The truth of the matter . . . if less "miraculous" than Amy's journal suggested, was infinitely stranger. The dramatic moment stayed vacant, grew longer, sagged. No cry ("I can see") burst from Virgil's lips. . . .*
>
> *Virgil told me later that in this first moment he had no idea what he was seeing. There was light, there was movement, there was color, all mixed up, all meaningless, a blur. (Sacks 113–14)*

In short, the newly sighted Virgil finds himself in a state that neurologists call "agnosic," which is to say he is "*mentally* blind" (117). What everyone, including Virgil, expected to happen—"A man opens his eyes, light enters and falls on the retina: he sees" (115)—does not. The lesson of this modern Molyneux experiment is instructive and sobering: seeing is not, as is commonly thought, an innate activity, an inborn natural skill; rather it must be learned. Seeing is the outcome of a veritable visual apprenticeship that is routinely served by infants, but painfully enjoined on an adult. As in the case of Virgil and others like him—there have been few such recorded cases in the history of medicine—perception without interpretation produces a visual soup, not the precisely ordered and discriminating visual spectacle arrayed before the normally sighted:

> *In the newly sighted, learning to see demands a radical change in neurological functioning and, with it, a radical change in psychological functioning, in self, in identity. . . . Though blindness may at first be a terrible privation and loss, it may become less so with the passage of time, for a deep adaptation, or reorientation, occurs, by which one reconstitutes, reappropriates, the world in nonvisual terms. It then becomes a* different *condition, a different form of being, one with its own sensibilities and coherence and feeling. (141–42)*

But there is more: those who have been blind since early childhood live in a different realm of the senses than the sighted: they are "touch" people: "to him, a touch square in no sense corresponded to a sight square" (126). To see as the normally sighted do he must reprogram his perceptual and sensory system, he must go from being a "touch person" to being a "vision person" (just as in *You've Got Mail* Kathleen must reprogram her vision of

Joe; she must go from being a "writing person" to being a "vision person"). Similarly, the early or congenitally deaf are "vision persons," and many are so attached to their alternative (visual) language of Sign that they have militantly resisted the hegemony of hearing represented by cocheal implants and the abolition of Sign. And just as the Enlightenment was fascinated by the epistemological problems raised by blindness, so too did the middle of the eighteenth century mark a turning point in the history of deafness in which France played a leading role: the invention of Sign by the Abbé de l'Epée (1776), the founder of what was to become the National Institution for Deaf Mutes, was followed by the invention of Braille in the 1830s by the blind student of the Paris Institution des Enfants Aveugles, Louis Braille. For the deaf, seeing is hearing, just as for the blind, touching is seeing. The world of sensory deprivation is ruled by another tropological system, that commanded by synesthesia and favored by so-called visionary poets such as Victor Hugo, Charles Baudelaire, and Arthur Rimbaud; synesthesia is the trope of liminal sensory states that arise not when the senses are overloaded—etymologically synesthesia is from the Greek *sunaisthêsis* meaning "simultaneous perception"—but rather thrown out of balance: in synesthesia vision is handed over to speech, smell is made tactile, and motion is translated into sound. In the realm of deficient senses, the crossing of sensory borders is an effect not of plenitude, but of lack: absent one sense, another comes to substitute for it, to supplement its absence rather than to add to its presence.

For Virgil the chain of percepts slips and slides under the chain of signifiers, and the proper segmention resulting from the pinning down of the signifying chain on the phenomenal world does not occur, or rather it occurs only at the cost of great effort, leaving the subject stranded in the horrific limbo of what Sacks calls mental blindness. Small wonder that when Virgil loses his sight just as suddenly as he had regained it, far from being despondent, he is relieved. This second and final blindness befalls him like a deliverance. Here there occurs a striking difference between Sacks's account of Virgil's case and the filmic adaptation of Virgil's story: whereas Virgil succumbs philosophically to his secondary and more radical blindness, as the shadow of blindness falls over Virgil in *At First Sight,* he is shown rifling through magazines and all manner of picture books, desperately trying to store a visual bank, to see all there is to see before the curtain of darkness finally falls for good. Because film is an eminently visual medium, it cannot go gently into the night; it must, to paraphrase Dylan Thomas, rage, rage against the dying of the light. The

myth of oculocentrism must be preserved at all costs, including flouting scientific accuracy.

It is striking that in all the examples we have studied, with the exception of the scientific text based on a true-life story, "To See and Not to See," and the pseudoscientific *Frankenstein*, blindness is an attribute of the female protagonist, of femininity. Though there is a long and glorious tradition of great male blind writers, what Derrida refers to as "the great tradition of blind writers" (39)—i.e., Homer, Milton, Joyce, Borges—in fiction blindness is almost always feminized.[11] One might cite as an exception Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, but Rochester is only temporarily blinded by the fire that destroys his manor, and in due time recovers his sight and sees his infant son. How then are we to account for the gendering of blindness, which constitutes an intrinsic part of the myth of blindness as it does of Animal Groom folktales? Why are female protagonists in both fiction and film disproportionately afflicted with this form of sensory deprivation?

A consideration of yet another mixed metaphorization of the Beauty and the Beast pairing, Edmond de Rostand's hit fin-de-siècle play, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, suggests that what is at stake in nineteenth-century variants of the founding myth is proper female object choice. Repeatedly—and this is especially true of female-authored fiction—the nineteenth-century heroine and her twentieth-century filmic counterpart reenact an identical trajectory that leads from improper to proper object choice, and the Beast, whether embodied or strictly figural, represents the proper object choice.

Twice remade in the nineties, first by Steve Martin (*Roxanne*), then by Jean-Paul Rappeneau (*Cyrano de Bergerac*), the story of the man with the grotesque nose in love with the beauteous but figuratively blind Roxane is, as Rappeneau remarks in an interview, clearly a variant of the central tale of proper female object choice: "It is the myth of Beauty and the Beast, ugly outside, beautiful inside."[12] But the disjunction between the hideous appearance and the beauteous interior, between surface and depth, which here as in *L'homme qui rit* is accompanied by the disjunction between laughter and melancholy, does not account for the play's ironies. For the central theme of *Cyrano* is the impersonation of another's voice. The cast of *Cyrano* complicates the relatively simple situation of the many other variants of the old tale we have seen, in that the couple becomes a triangle. The Beast is given a rival, a handsome young man who is deficient not in any sensory dimension, but in the mental. Bedazzled by

the handsome young would-be lover's physical lineaments, Roxane is blind to poor Cyrano with his misshapen nose, but more important fails to understand or understands too late (when Cyrano is dying) that the beautiful young man—the improper, specular love-object—was but a puppet, a mouthpiece for Cyrano's language of love and seduction. In short, the drama of *Cyrano* contains in *nuce* the de-synchronization that occurs in *You've Got Mail*. In the central scene of the play, Act III, scene vii, Cyrano and Christian stand beneath Roxane's balcony and Christian begins to address Roxane. It is only when he falters, unable to sustain the lover's discourse the *précieuse* Roxane expects, that Cyrano takes over, at first prompting the tongue-tied lover and eventually becoming his voice. It is only under the cover of darkness and in the guise of the handsome Christian that Cyrano can speak from the heart.

When Cyrano's eloquence begins to work its effect on Roxane, she calls on him to join her on the balcony. Terrified, he refuses: "'O madam! Let us profit / by this dear moment, when, the night between, / unseen we murmur with muted voice'" (Rostand 144). Though Rostand's play represents the perfect and quite unique fusion of "Amor and Psyche" and "Beauty and the Beast," it is very explicitly not so much a revival of the folktale as a parody of the genre; thus when in the final scene the dying Cyrano reveals to Roxane his true identity and she exclaims: "Je vous aime," he responds: "'No! in the fairy-tale / when she has breathed 'I love,' the prince, / all pale, / feels his own ugliness pour up in flame— / but I, beloved, you see am still the same'" (216). *Cyrano* is the anti-"Beauty and the Beast"; there are no miracle cures for Cyrano.

I am as always wary of drawing triumphalist conclusions; for no more than there are miracle cures for blindness, are there miracle cures for the human need to mythify the compensatory gifts of the sensorily deprived. Just as blindness is viewed in a certain figural tradition as a higher form of insight, in a modern scientific vocabulary such as that of Oliver Sacks it is viewed as the paradoxical means to achieve a higher form of creativity. In his Preface he writes:

> *Defects, disorders, diseases . . . can play a paradoxical role, by bringing out latent powers, developments, evolutions, forms of life, that might never be seen, or even be imaginable, in their absence. It is the paradox of disease, in this sense, its "creative" potential, that forms the central theme of this book. (xvii)*

Any impairment of the five senses cannot be viewed as anything but a challenge, any loss of sensual apprehension of the world as anything but a catastrophic diminution of human potential. But as long as the dysfunction or deprivation of vision is metaphorized, viewed as monstrous or disproportionately gendered as female, representation is placed in the service of ideology and blindness, naturalized. The time has come for a new body language, one which would emanate from a sensorium that is grasped in its de-idealized reality, in its full range of complexity.

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Notes

1 Speaking of Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*, Sontag observes that in it there are "virtually no uses of cancer as a metaphor" (82, footnote).

2 A recent *New Yorker* (26 Jul. 1999) cartoon rings the changes on the link between figures of speech and bodily injury by literalizing a common expression: a man with the blade of a knife sticking in his back sits across from a physician who cheerfully reports: "Good news. The test results show it's a metaphor." Thus metaphor, carried to its literal extreme, becomes itself the source of piercing and pain.

3 All translations are mine except where otherwise noted.

4 See *Circonfessions* 89, 97, 108–09, 115, 117–118, 123, where the son's eye, frozen open, mirrors the mother's blind eye.

5 See Huet 106.

6 I shall refer often to this text, which I came across midway in writing this piece, and which constitutes an essential contribution to the study of blindness in the French philosophical, literary, and medical tradition.

7 For a typical example of a historicized reading of the tale, see Hains.

8 Writes Shell:

> In the "Animal Groom Story" the hero or heroine does not marry an ugly man with a beautiful soul, as the proponents of the view that "Beauty and the Beast" is simply an allegorical expression of the rational soul's journey toward intellectual beauty would have it, nor a man with apparently sexual=ugly desires, as the proponents of the psychoanalytic view would have it) [sic], but an animal. "Beauty and the Beast" is ultimately about bestiality and the human family. (7)

9 My thanks to Barbara Johnson for reminding me of this apt text, about which she has written so memorably.

10 Speaking of the link between "Cupid and Psyche" and "Beauty and the Beast," Marc Shell writes: "it is, as though, from Beauty's viewpoint, she might as well be sleeping with anyone or anything, as in a great masquerade where all beings can or do pass for one another" (9).

11 Just as, one might add, beastliness is generally masculinized. Though as Bruno Bettelheim points out there does exist a corpus, albeit a small one, of Animal-Bride folktales, there are two persistent differences between the male beast and the female: first, "in most Western fairy tales the beast is male and can be disenchanted only by the love of a female"; second, in the instances of enchanted females, they are not beastly: "in practically all examples of animal brides there is nothing dangerous or repugnant in their animal form; on the contrary, they are lovely." All of which leads Bettelheim to confirm his initial hypothesis: "only the male aspects of sex are beastly" (285).

12 Jean-Paul Rappeneau, director of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, as qtd. in Le Goff 88.

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