Introduction
Embodying Nineteenth-Century Blindness

An image of a blind man by the illustrator, antiquarian and curator John Thomas Smith, etched in 1816 and published the following year, introduces the main themes of this book (Figure 1).[1] The man's clothes are tattered and ill-fitting, emphasising his poverty. He is depicted as static, still: propped up against a wall, his long cane functions not so much as a guiding tool but as an object that pins him in place. Smith's representation of sensory modes underscores further a sense of helplessness and passivity in his subject. The man's eyes are turned downward, as if anticipating and rejecting his visual apprehension by the artist and, in turn, the viewer. The image is silent: the beggar's mouth is closed, and rather than speaking, he wears a placard which is inscribed in ink print, bearing perhaps his story, a plea for charity or advertisement for his wares – which he himself cannot read. Contributing further to the impression of stillness, both his hands clutch his hat, which is turned outwards to await alms, or meagre payment for the tracts he sells.

Smith's etching perpetuates an image of the blind person as helpless and dependent. It underscores the way in which this man's blindness disables him on several fronts: it (seems to) render him immobile, restricted from moving easily through the new spaces opening up in London; and it renders him poor, as he is unable to participate in an economy that was becoming increasingly dependent upon the labour of healthy, non-disabled individuals. In particular, wealth potential is associated here with visual literacy: the man's income derives from the sale of ink print tracts, and whilst the man cannot read either the tracts or the advert he wears around his chest, he directs it towards a passerby who can. This man's story, and indeed his status as a subject of the engraving, is rendered in a visual medium, to which he, as a blind person, has no direct access. Distanced from his story, he suffers a loss of voice: a palpably common recurrence in blind people's experiences of this period, and which *Blindness and Writing* seeks to redress.

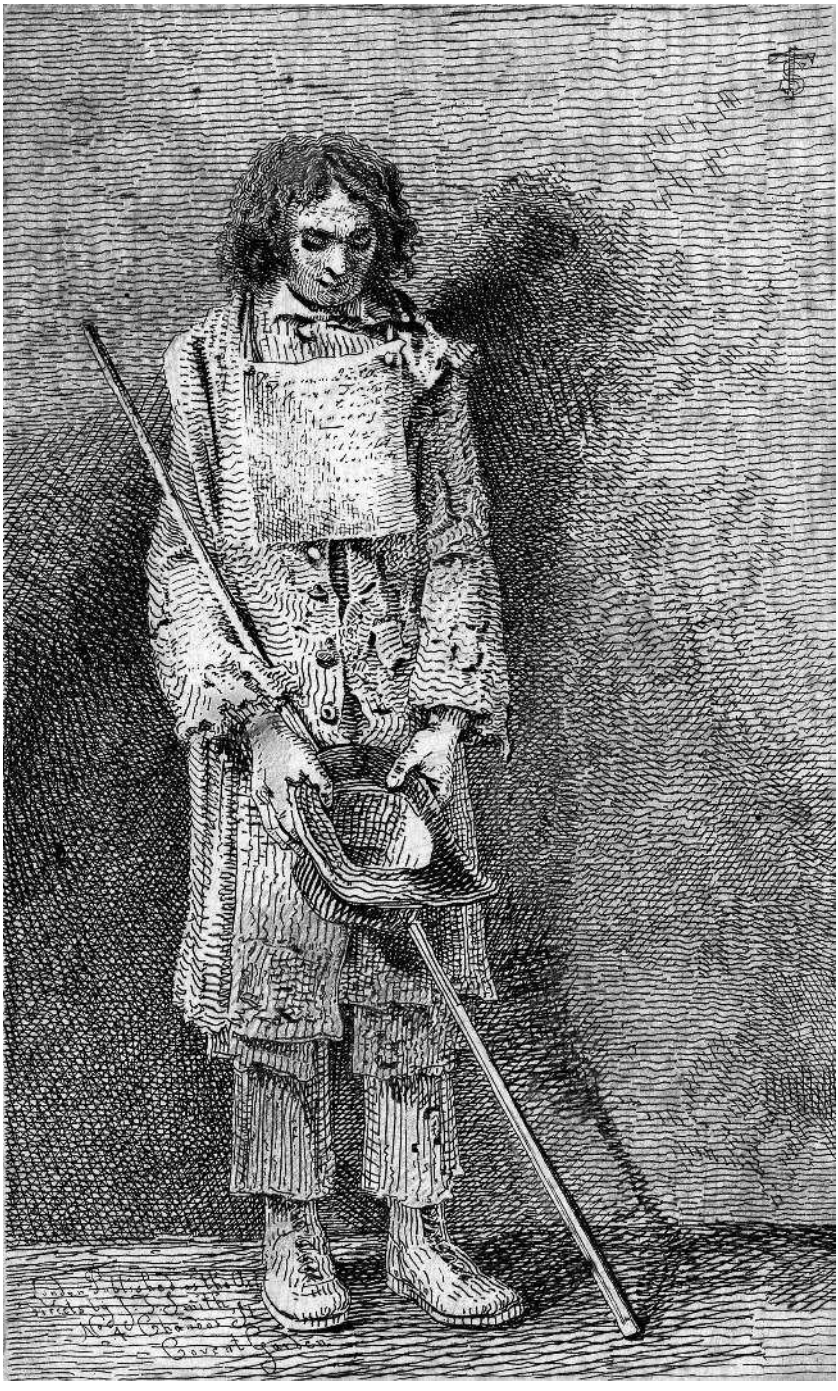

Figure 1 John Thomas Smith, *A Blind Beggar*, etching (1815–16).
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The portrait introduces us to an important factor that structured both the cultural perception *and* experience of visual impairment in the nineteenth century: its increasing identification with the issue of literacy. Produced at a moment of heightened anxiety over the growing numbers of itinerant poor people in urban spaces, Smith's print reinscribes a long-held association between blindness and poverty.[2] Here, however (and in other of Smith's depictions of visually impaired people), the presence of the written word is freshly troubling. Etched on the eve of the introduction of embossed reading and writing technologies for blind people to Britain, Smith's representation of blindness opens up key questions for my study: in what ways does this man's exclusion from a literate culture – on which he seemingly depends above an oral culture to elicit alms and income – disable him beyond his blindness? Crucially both this man's blindness *and* his (il)literacy are placed under the scrutiny of a sighted, literate observer. Smith's portrait exemplifies how the blind person was newly identified with the act of reading, their ability to communicate and interpret text becoming a point of anxious social concern. So whilst Mara Mills argues that 'blindness and reading began to be co-constructed in the twentieth century', she in fact describes a twinning that began in the late eighteenth, and was consolidated in the nineteenth century.[3]

This twinning also permeated wider cultural representations of blindness, particularly in literary texts, investigation of which forms a large focus of my study. William Paulson has pinpointed the emergence of a 'new kind of social and cultural status for blindness' to this period, and he, along with scholars including Kate Flint, Martha Stoddard Holmes and Mary Klages, have impressed how material, as well as spiritual, concerns came to shape its meaning.[4] Yet less attention has been paid towards the central ways in which attitudes towards literacy, and the written word, began to shape the status of blindness in Victorian Britain. One of the key aspects to my argument is that blindness assumed new meanings through its relationship to literacy in the nineteenth century, which in turn produced new forms of experience for people living with or alongside sight loss. These new associations in turn had important implications for the ways in which "sighted" writers invoked blindness in their texts (I use scare quotes here as the binary between sighted and blind cannot always be so rigorously defined). Blindness revealed the arbitrary relationship between the phenomenal creation and appearance of the literary sign and its apprehension by an embodied reader. It thus functioned as a key device through which writers explored the material constraints of text. In this argument, *Blindness and Writing* resonates with Jennifer Esmail's recently published account of the changing status of signed languages for deaf communities in Victorian Britain. She details how 'thinking *through* deafness was

a consistent rhetorical practice that spanned a wide range of Victorian discursive fields interested in human language and use'.[5] Similarly, my project demonstrates the ways in which debates concerning blind people's reading and writing practices were both shaped by, and in turn shaped, Victorian ideas around language and communication in the wider culture. Yet whereas Esmail emphasises the privileging of speech in the shift from signed languages to oralism in deaf communication, this book considers how blind people's literacy contributed to a suspicion about accessing textual materials via solely aural methods, and raised new anxieties concerning the visual and material status of writing.[6]

Blindness and Writing is concerned then with the extent to which literature was understood by nineteenth-century audiences to be a visual medium, both at the level of content and form. In this respect, my approach towards literary inscriptions of blindness clearly builds upon those critics who have considered blindness in relation to visual culture.[7] In his influential account of the relationship between drawing and blindness, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, the philosopher Jacques Derrida writes that 'every time a draftsman lets himself be fascinated by the blind, every time he makes the blind a *theme* of his drawing, he projects, dreams, or hallucinates a figure of a draftsman, or sometimes, … some draftswoman'.[8] This is because to draw involves an act of blindness, a turning away from observation of the object at the moment of inscription. The trace of drawing proceeds 'in the night', outside the field of vision; the draughtsperson's hand a haptic echo of a blind person's.[9] Extending the *trait* of the pencil on paper to the line of writing, we can identify a shared concern with literary writers in the nineteenth century who portray blindness in their texts. To inscribe a figure of blindness is a self-reflexive action by writers: an acknowledgement of the limits to the privileged nature of vision in the construction of writing. Derrida's account of blindness stresses its lack – as a type of non-seeing – but also describes how a compensatory discourse of touch adhered to it. Such a compensatory discourse became all the more sharply defined with the development of raised print and finger reading from the 1820s onwards in Britain. In nineteenth-century culture, blindness cohered debates concerning the (multi)sensory regimes of text, as the tactile abilities of blind people were set in complex and contradictory ways against the widespread conception of reading and writing as visual acts.

Blindness and Writing proposes that this contradictory treatment of blindness within the nineteenth-century literary imagination was shaped by three distinct but interrelated themes. Firstly, blindness was subject to

a changing status within shifting sensory hierarchies. The expansion of blind people's writing practices – embossed literature, biographical writing, fictional writing – developed within a culture that tended to privilege vision as the best sensory mode for accessing knowledge about the world and communicating it in language. This had several important effects. It initially circumscribed the possibilities for blind people's writing practices, which were at first governed by visual prejudices. For example, experiments in embossed literature were accompanied by anxiety as to whether the finger could be an equal substitute for the eye – debates which continued to marginalise blind people. At a representational level, sighted writers frequently framed blind people and blindness as objects of suspicion and fear. Contrarily, the evidence of blind people's intellectual and tactile abilities helped to challenge this emphasis on vision's superiority, in turn opening out a wider sensory environment for literary culture, both imaginatively and materially.

Secondly, blindness came to occupy a prominent place in cultural debates concerning the relationship between reading and the material form of the book. Blindness drew attention to the ways in which the material form of the page and book, as well as the ways in which text is perceived, shaped the creation and interpretation of textual meaning. Experiments with embossed literature, which received a significant amount of public attention and scrutiny in the period, exposed writing as a technology compatible with particular users, rather than an essential, spiritual medium. Blindness posed a challenge to idealist and referential systems of language, and suggested how language was contingent upon the interrelation of two material entities: the text and the human body.

Thirdly, the lived, embodied experience of blindness and visual impairments became arguably more pervasive, as warfare and industrialisation aggravated the spread of infectious diseases and eye injuries. A rise in incidences of visual impairment had certain important effects, not least encouraging the development of ophthalmology as a medical discipline in the nineteenth century, which was supported by an expanding textual reference base. Ophthalmological discourse both conceptualised blindness as a problem in need of medical intervention, and supplied writers with a new set of images and associations developed from a more precise symptomology, which I elaborate throughout *Blindness and Writing*. Ophthalmology tended, however, to divorce the individual from the body, reducing a person to his or her symptoms. In order to counter the reductiveness of medical models of blindness, I seek to recuperate aspects of the lived experience of blind and visually impaired people. This includes

the introduction of testimonies by both prominent blind spokespeople who are now largely forgotten from the historical record, alongside a re-evaluation of more popular and canonical figures. I thus demonstrate how blindness had a strong bodily, as well as symbolic, currency for Victorian writers. Moreover, the relationship between blindness and writing was gendered, as the material practices of literary production and reception (such as the roles of originator of literature vs transcriber or amanuensis) were coded variously as masculine and feminine.

So whilst this book, interdisciplinary in focus, explores a range of discourses about blindness produced by diverse writers, what unites my discussion is that the majority of writings about blindness I investigate emerge from a lived, embodied experience of impaired vision and sight loss. In the literary texts I discuss, blindness is not simply metaphorically deployed (although there is not always a clear disjuncture between embodied and metaphorical conceptions of visual impairment, a point I return to at the end of this introduction). Rather, it frequently has a specific experiential referent for writers: for example, those who were subject to persistent eye disease (Wordsworth), and those who acted as carers for family members with eye conditions (Charlotte Brontë). It is with this focus on lived experiences of blindness that *Blindness and Writing* differs most significantly from recent studies that have investigated the relationship between blindness and literary form.[10] Notably, it departs from David Bolt's important study of the relationship between blindness and Anglophone literature of the twentieth century, in which he argues for the recurrence of situations in which 'the person who does not have a visual impairment assumes a kind of authorship, indeed authority, as the person who has a visual impairment is told rather than asked about her or his own life'.[11] The examples I discuss challenge this framework by considering the ways in which writers identify with blind and visually impaired people, and incorporate such identifications in their literary works. Yet I also attend to the ways in which the lived experience of blindness was itself shaped by social and cultural conditions and prejudices, a theme resonant with Bolt's notion of the 'metanarrative of blindness'. This concept articulates how literary representations of blindness have power to define people with visual impairments, displacing agency.[12] Let me briefly expand upon this point by outlining the relation of my project to the field of disability studies.

Disability studies significantly reveals how the experience of impairment is situated within particular social and cultural milieu. Following on from the disability rights movement of the 1960s to 1970s, disability

studies emerged as an academic discipline in the 1980s, shaped by research and thinking from the sciences, social sciences and humanities, and motivated by a concern to trace the social (rather than just medical) meanings of disability.[13] Early disability studies was characterised by a neo-Marxist critical stance, which emphasised how disability came into being with the growth of capitalist economies in the nineteenth century. One of the most important theorisations of disability studies is the social model of disability. This model understands 'disability' to be a socially produced phenomenon, by which individuals are disabled by institutions and environment, rather than by their physical, cognitive or sensory impairments. Bodily impairments, or differences, become disabilities in relation to the qualities and values that are valorised by dominant communities at particular moments.[14] The social model roots the tightening identification between impairment and disability in the nineteenth century, as capitalist forms of production changed the relationship between people with and without impairments. The construction of blindness as a *disability* is, in many ways, a nineteenth-century phenomenon, arising from concern about the role that people with visual impairments could play in a newly industrialised society, and shaped by its increasing medicalisation. Indeed, as Smith's portrait worries about the itinerant identity of this blind man, so more typically the material wants and needs of blind people came under the purview of an emerging capitalist society anxious about charitable giving, as it increasingly linked individual value with ability.

One materialisation of the difficulties blind people faced in adjusting to increasingly mechanised modes of work and labour can be found in the growth of asylums during the nineteenth century. Martha Stoddard Holmes notes that in the context of anxiety over the New Poor Law (1834), the number of institutions and societies for blind people rose from 4 to 154 between 1799 and 1899.[15] John Thomas Smith's concern to document London beggars – many of whom were blind or visually impaired – in the 1810s was explicitly tied to a call for reform of the poor laws to remove beggars to workhouses and thus make such people invisible.[16] Martha Stoddard Holmes describes the anxieties concerning the 'deserving poor' that structure representations and understandings of blind people in social and educational texts, as well as the ways in which blind people resisted being cast as dependents to either the state or charities. Whilst I do not wish to repeat Holmes's careful study of the representation of blind people in these texts, what does emerge in these discourses is a prejudice that blind people cannot compete in a society which privileges the visual. I use this point to argue that the privileging of the visual nature of language systems

in nineteenth-century culture meant that blindness was experienced as a disability in a print economy. And moreover the anxiety that blindness was an *obstruction* towards print culture – because it closes down the possibility of reading or writing ink print texts – permeates its representation in literary texts, helping to shore up prejudices against visual impairment.

Thus, the disablement of people with visual impairments in the nineteenth century's print economy also found expression within the popular representational modes circulated by that economy. As Douglas Baynton argues, the concept of normality that emerged in the nineteenth century became deployed in all aspects of modern life as a means of measuring, categorising and managing populations, co-opting the natural in order to legitimate discriminatory practices against subjects who did not fit the norm.[17] Cultural representations contributed towards a process of naturalising disability, whilst fixing the idea of a normal, able body.[18] Lennard J. Davis argues that disability emerges as a problem in relation to the construction of normalcy in the nineteenth century. He shows how the concept of the norm, and normal body, entered European culture in this period, evidencing this through the development of statistics as a branch of knowledge, and traces how the novel as a form 'promotes and symbolically produces normative structures'.[19] Cultural forms played a powerful role in the management of subjects with physical difference, for example by entrenching attitudes of fear and pity in their intended nondisabled user; or presenting people with impairments as outside certain social institutions, such as marriage and family life.[20] Recent literary and cultural disability studies have done much to further our understanding by theorising the powerful and widespread ways in which representational modes have effected the cultural understanding and embodied experience of disability.[21] David Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder were among early critics advocating for closer analysis of the relationship between literary form and disability. They have been particularly influential in their theorisation of 'narrative prosthesis', a concept that outlines how disability has been deployed by literary writers to help consolidate cultural ideas of the normal body. Importantly, they identify the ways in which literary strategies of representing disability have had a 'visceral effect on the lives of disabled people', arguing: 'Literature serves up disability as a repressed deviation from cultural imperatives of normativity, while disabled populations suffer the consequences of representational association with deviance and recalcitrant corporeal difference.'[22] Mitchell and Snyder stress that unlike other identities such as race, sexuality and ethnicity which are notable for their absence from historical forms of representation, there has been

a 'plethora' of representations of disability in visual and discursive works.[23] Yet the ubiquitous nature of this imagery has served to further marginalise disabled people and has contributed to their social erasure. Mitchell and Snyder describe how, rather than acting as a realist marker of disability experience, the widespread tendency of disability representation in literature acts as a narrative prosthesis that helps to shore up the normal; either by serving as stock characters, or as a metaphor for deviance.[24] In this analysis, disability is 'foundational to both cultural definition and to the literary narratives that challenge normalizing prescriptive ideals'.[25]

Mitchell and Snyder are concerned with the ideological work that literature does in the management of bodily difference, and note the stages in which critical approaches to disability studies have progressed from its initial theorisation of negative imagery.[26] Whilst their study is alert to the inherent problems of universalising disability representation, and calls attention to its 'variegated historical patterning', they identify modern and postmodern renderings of disability as most likely to disrupt 'normalcy narratives'.[27] More recent analyses have complicated this rendering of the nineteenth-century novel as inherently denigrating of disability by illustrating the complex and multilayered meanings – material and symbolic – that bodily impairment connoted to both writers and readers.[28] Certainly my interpretative approach, which also draws upon phenomenology, tracks the multiple ways in which blind and partially sighted people resisted – as well as conformed to – their society's ocularcentric narratives. I show how blind people recognised the potential for literary form to be a tool for resistance as well as an instrument of control. In so doing, they both articulated their own identity as blind people and helped to reconceptualise reading and writing as a multimedia experience. Significantly, unlike Mitchell and Snyder, I also consider how the representation of blindness in literary texts by sighted authors is frequently underpinned by experience of visual impairment, a point I return to below. These different modes of engagement between blindness and literary form are sometimes recognisable as forms of narrative prosthesis; but at other moments more clearly disrupt notions of the normal, ideal body.

So whilst my project shares with those critics who have identified the intersections of social and cultural constructions of disability, I am less beholden to a social constructionist position, to borrow Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's terminology. Rather, I adopt a phenomenological approach to the material I bring forward.[29] This is partly because the changing forms of literary media, alongside the construction of blindness as disability, share focus in my investigation. A phenomenological approach allows me

to track the multiple intersections of blindness and literary media, whilst mapping more fluid encounters between 'sighted' and 'blind' people. Such an approach opens out the surprising ways in which seemingly sighted authors identified as blind, both negatively and positively.[30]

If the field of disability studies more widely has provided literary and cultural studies with tools to analyse and interrogate the production and circulation of disability representations, specific projects have also focused attention on the relationship between visual disability and literary and cultural form. These studies have drawn attention to the significant binary not only between vision/blindness, but also language/knowledge. In her introduction to a special issue on blindness and literature for the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, Georgina Kleege notes both the fascination that blindness has held for cultures 'since the beginning of time' and the fact that blindness is often synonymous with 'prejudice, obliviousness and ineptitude'.[31] Contributions to this special issue trace manifestations of both of these observations, examining the role of language in shaping popular conceptions of and associations with blindness; as well as the formation of these ideas in literary texts from the medieval to contemporary periods. These analyses reveal the complex side effects that blindness induces in literary texts. Tory Vandeventer Perman, for example, considers how the blinding of the adulterous Queen Gwenore in Thomas Chestre's fourteenth-century Middle English *Sir Launfal* is both representative of a narrative drive to control her sexual deviancy, yet also produces 'alternative narratives to common medieval assumptions about courtly masculinity, womanhood, and disability'.[32] And more recently, a special issue of the interdisciplinary journal *Mosaic* took blindness as its theme, with contributions focused largely on the representation of blindness in modern and contemporary literature and culture. As editor Dawne McCance noted, the essays collectively posed 'challenges to Western modernity's idealizing of sight' by repositioning vision as a mode prone to obscurity, as well as the embodied nature of perception.[33] H. Peter Steeves, for example, uses the condition scotoma – a partial loss of vision or visual migraine, which he has been affected by since 2000 – to meditate on the ways in which vision is always already enfolded by blindness. He considers how sighted people often do not see much more than what is in front of them: 'not-seeing is the norm'.[34] And valuably, Mark Paterson re-orientates the enduring fascination with 'what the blind see' to examine instead how blind people feel. Dispelling the common imaginary of blindness as a form of darkness, Paterson draws on writings by blind and visually impaired people, including James Holman, Jorge Luis