The Origins of Blind Autobiography in Visionary Antebellum New England

JUSTIN CLARK

At the outset of his self-published, Boston-printed 1835 autobiography *Anecdotes of the Blind*, Abram V. Courtney presented his reasons for writing it. “I have observed that men generally take an interest in matters relating to the blind, or others deprived of the ordinary means of communicating with their fellows,” he remarked. Pity alone did not account for the public’s attentiveness, he believed; rather, “the study of the means whereby persons so deprived gain knowledge, cannot be indifferent to any one who wishes to know and understand his own mind.”¹ Although he was the first American to write an autobiography focused on his visual impairment, Courtney seemed confident that a sympathetic audience would receive him. Indeed, despite considerable obstacles, dozens of nineteenth-century American blind authors followed him into print. In the next four decades, at least twenty-five personal accounts of blindness appeared in book or pamphlet form, a large number of them written or published in New England (see appendix).²

As a former itinerant book peddler who earned his living in the period’s rapidly expanding print market, Courtney was

---


undoubtedly aware that antebellum readers were voracious, eager to read works even by socially unpolished authors such as himself.3 Equally important, as an applicant to the nation’s first school for the blind, Boston’s recently established New England Asylum for the Blind (1829; later renamed the Perkins Institution, then the Perkins School), Courtney had experienced firsthand the public’s growing interest in the blind. In the 1830s and beyond, Perkins regularly organized public exhibitions and published reports of its students’ academic and vocational achievements and arranged private tours for such famous visitors as Charles Dickens and Davy Crockett; the latter “was not a little astonished” at being led by Courtney from the Tremont House to the Asylum, as his proud guide later boasted.4 If live audiences and eminent persons were intrigued, even astonished, by the blind, Courtney could safely assume that ordinary American readers would be as well.

In recent years, disability scholars have investigated the outsized role that blind characters and authors played in the rise of Anglo-American, middle-class sentimental culture. Rendered helpless by no fault of their own, the saintly blind characters of antebellum print and stage narratives such as *The Lamplighter* and *The Cricket on the Hearth*, scholars assert, offered an increasingly literate and upwardly mobile middle class an opportunity to indulge a genteel sympathy.5 I do not dispute

---

3Such tales of unvarnished truth, as one historian has called them, reveal that nineteenth-century middle-class readers were not only fascinated by the works of refined bellettrists but also hungry for the supposed authenticity of more socially marginal authors. See Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Publishers expected peddlers not only to distribute their printed wares but to report on the reading interests of the rural customers they encountered. Though Courtney could not read the works he sold, he almost certainly was familiar with their content. See Rosalind Remer, “Preachers, Peddlers, and Publishers: Philadelphia’s Backcountry Book Trade, 1800–1830,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 14.4 (Winter 1994): 501. For a general description of the role of New England peddlers in distributing books and pamphlets, see David Jaffe, “The Village Enlightenment in New England, 1760–1820,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 47.3 (July 1990): 327–46.


this finding, but the blind served another role, equally if not more important: they addressed Americans’ mounting curiosity about the nature of physical and spiritual vision. Just as Courtney was launching his *Anecdotes*, Boston’s lecture halls, bookstores, and presses were buzzing with discussions about such inexplicable phenomena as clairvoyant somnambulism and transcendentalism. It was no accident that Boston was the center of vigorous debate. Despite being a redoubt of rational and theologically liberal Christianity, Boston began in the late 1820s to attract a growing number of religious nonconformists, including Free Thinkers, Finneyites, Swedenborgians, Millerites, and others, all of whom offered visionary alternatives to the pious-yet-rational empiricism of Unitarian Cambridge and Boston.

Facing the twin threats of skepticism and visionary Protestantism, the city’s newly ensconced Unitarian elite advanced eyesight, a God-given yet wholly natural blessing, simultaneously to contest evangelicals and mystics, who grounded their faith in interior visions, and skeptics and deists, who denied all visible evidences of the divine.

By invoking the blind in lectures and exhibiting them at charity events, Unitarians thus channeled the public’s sympathy and fascination into a platform for promoting rational Christianity. As the blind recognized that the public’s attentiveness extended beyond mere sympathy to a broader psychological and spiritual inquisitiveness, they found their voice. By speaking to the physical, psychological, and spiritual capacities of vision as well as their corresponding limits, blind autobiographers both precipitated and used the period’s debates to establish a new literary genre, one that significantly shaped contemporary understandings of disability and selfhood.

Reconstructing Blindness in Post-Revolutionary New England

A century earlier, Courtney and other antebellum blind autobiographers would likely not have found the same level of interest in their psychological insights. In early eighteenth-century New England, the blind’s claim to charity derived less from their sensory deprivation per se than from their traditionally marginal economic status. Typically they were treated as indigents, particularly when they strayed from their native communities. As in real life, fictional Anglophone representations of the blind prior to the nineteenth century tended to treat them as members of a largely undifferentiated underclass. Blind beggars abounded on stage and in print not because their disability uniquely interested the public but because they exemplified the broader curse of poverty and the capriciousness of misfortune. In Puritan New England, moreover, blindness was often deemed a sinner’s punishment, which could be relieved only by specific acts of providence. Increase Mather recorded accounts of liars being struck with blindness, while his son Cotton interpreted rare instances of literacy among the blind as blessed instances of divine intervention. Capable of being assuaged by God but not by human agency, physical blindness became

---

6 The selectmen’s minutes for Boston noted in 1718 that “Thomas More a blind man, belonging to Virginia” was warned to depart after two weeks, while the same treatment was given to “John Ballow a Sickley man very Poor.” On the other hand, in 1721 the Massachusetts House of Representatives reimbursed John Billings six pounds for, over the previous year, having supported “John Wocononick, a blind Indian, who lost his Sight in the Publick Service,” which suggests that Billings’s town offered the blind the same relief typically given to other local indigents. A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, Containing the Records of Boston Selectmen, 1716–1736 (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1885), pp. 40–41; Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts: 1721–22 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1922), p. 28.

7 Such, for instance, was the narrative of the popular story “Blind Beggar of Bethnal Green,” in which a famous aristocrat lost his sight in battle and became a mendicant. For an exploration of the association between poverty and blindness in medieval Europe, see Edward Wheatley, Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

for New England’s clergy an effective and affective analogy for the equally intractable spiritual condition of its wayward people.9

Later, as evangelical religion swept over the region, New Englanders reconceived physical blindness less as a proxy for poverty and spiritual blindness than as a pathway to regeneration. Typical was the New England Tract Society’s Happy Poverty, or the Story of Poor Blind Ellen (1815), a “well-authenticated narrative” of a long-suffering woman who, though blind since the age of six, “maintained herself . . . without any assistance from the parish” and contrived to live on only a shilling a week. Upending the earlier assumption that the blind should receive in-house relief, the blind but content Ellen faithfully attended church, supported herself by spinning silk, and cared for a woman even more disabled than she.10 In the broadside The Experiences of Nancy Welch, a Blind Woman, a Marblehead, Massachusetts, resident, sightless since infancy, described how her conversion had helped her endure her blindness: “If I have lost my natural sight, / Yet I can prize that greater light.”11 The same was true of the titular blind character in The Blind Man & Little George, written by one of the most popular authors of children’s literature in Boston, British evangelical Mary Martha Sherwood. After sustaining his affliction and suffering “darkness within, and darkness without,” Sherwood’s blind man gave up his sinful and intemperate habits and turned to God. His story of spiritual salvation helped reform his immediate audience of one—the young, sighted truant Little George—a moving, sympathetic development the book modeled for its larger print audience.12

---


10Anon., Happy Poverty, or the Story of Poor Blind Ellen (Boston: New England Tract Society, 1815), pp. 1, 4–5; see also, anon., Blind Willie, Or, the Way to Heaven (Boston: American Tract Society, 1800).

11Nancy Welch, The Experiences of Nancy Welch, a Blind Woman (Boston: N. Coverly, Jr., 1810).

Even though blindness had the power to humble the spirit, for early national New Englanders it did not confer any special inner vision. Instead, New Englanders continued to understand blindness primarily as a form of economic deprivation. Urban slums, which brought to mind images of beggars and street-organ grinders, were thought to give rise to blindness. As the famous ophthalmologist Edward Reynolds, cofounder of the Boston Eye Infirmary, instructed, “Whoever would study the diseases of the eyes must pass by the houses of the affluent and enter those of the poor.” “The great majority of all these cases,” he went on, “belong to the humbler ranks of society, and have their prolific parentage in the various privations and sorrows unavoidably consequent upon poverty.” On several occasions, Courtney attempted to peddle his books around Boston and was brusquely advised to go to the almshouse instead. Not until Unitarians attempted to suppress the visionary religious culture of the 1820s and 1830s did blindness stir sentiments beyond pity and a vague aversion.

The Miracle of Natural Sight

In the opinion of most contemporary observers, antebellum Boston was the nation’s foremost philanthropic center. By 1840, the city supported thirty charitable institutions through private or public funding, and it provided indispensable leadership for the asylum movement. Much of that reform energy can be traced to Unitarian influence. In educating the blind, abolishing corporal punishment in the common schools, and reforming


14Among the charitable organizations listed in an 1830 address by former mayor Josiah Quincy, for instance, were the Humane Society, the Boston Dispensary for the Medical Relief of the Poor, the Massachusetts Charitable Society, the Boston Penitent Female Refuge Society, the Boston Fragment Society, the Boston Female Asylum, the Boston Society for the Religious and Moral Instruction of the Poor, the Boston Asylum for Indigent Boys, the Fatherless and Widows’ Society, the Howard Benevolent Society, the Seamen’s Friend Society, and numerous others. Josiah Quincy, An Address to the Citizens of Boston: On the XVIIth of September, MDCCXXX, the Close of the Second Century from the First Settlement of the City (Boston: J. H. Eastburn, 1830), pp. 65–66.
insane asylums, Boston's Unitarians acted upon their belief that humans were perfectible.\textsuperscript{15}

Even so, few if any of the many groups targeted by reformers, from juvenile delinquents to convicts to orphans to the mentally ill, were accorded as much publicity, or were viewed with such fascination, as the blind.\textsuperscript{16} No ward of Boston's numerous other asylums received a fraction of the attention enjoyed by Laura Bridgman, a deaf-blind Perkins pupil who became the most famous child in antebellum America,\textsuperscript{17} and no other institution drew the steady stream of visitors that Perkins did. One indisputable factor in that phenomenon was the Unitarian culture that pervaded that time and place, a culture that valued the external senses for their role in supplying and evaluating the “moral evidence” upon which the rational Christian established his faith.\textsuperscript{18} For at least a decade before the blind attained celebrity, Boston's largely Harvard-educated ministers and reformers read and endorsed the arguments of natural theologians and Scottish Common Sense philosophers. As William Paley's \textit{Natural Theology} and Thomas Reid's \textit{Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind}, key texts taught at Harvard, emphasized, “the structure of the eye, and of all its appendages . . . do clearly demonstrate this organ to be a masterpiece of nature’s work.” Ironically, it was the blind who

\textsuperscript{15}As more than one scholar has argued, the battle between these optimistic Unitarians and their Calvinistic peers launched the secular reform culture that eventually took hold throughout the nation. See Conrad Edick Wright, \textit{The Transformation of Charity in Postrevolutionary New England} (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992). For the broader reform context, see T. Gregory Garvey, \textit{Creating the Culture of Reform in Antebellum America} (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), p. 72, and David J. Rothman, \textit{The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the Republic} (New York: Little Brown, 1971).

\textsuperscript{16}Starting with a class of 6, the Perkins School admitted only 10 students in 1835; founded in 1824, the Boston Eye Infirmary, by contrast, saw 886 patients in its first month. See Charles Snyder, \textit{Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary: Studies on Its History} (Boston: Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, 1984).

\textsuperscript{17}So her biographers have persuasively argued. See Elisabeth Gitter, \textit{The Imprisoned Guest: Samuel Howe and Laura Bridgman, the Original Deaf-Blind Girl} (New York: Macmillan, 2002), and Ernest Freeberg, \textit{The Education of Laura Bridgman} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

\textsuperscript{18}For the centrality of sensory experience to Unitarian theology and moral philosophy, see Daniel Walker Howe, \textit{The Unitarian Conscience} (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988).
understood this best. "How many mysterious things must a blind man believe, if he will give credit to the relations of those that see? Surely he needs as strong a faith as is required of a good Christian."\textsuperscript{19}

Popularized by his student Dugald Stewart, Reid’s argument echoed the traditional Christian position that faith was blind, yet it ironically inferred that faith from empirical evidence. For just as the blind individual, “if he were candid and tractable,” would “find reasonable evidence of the reality of this gift [sight] in others, and draw great advantages from it to himself,” so the Christian could reasonably trust the inspiration of the authors of scripture, whom, Reid emphasized, had received their inspiration through a faculty no more supernatural than eyesight. Similarly, if a sighted individual considered how much he was able to deduce about the invisible operation of the natural world by using his eyes, he would realize that much of what he sensed about the visible world transcended raw sensory data. Thus, though eyesight was not a miracle, and the divine could not be directly seen through it, the eyes constantly assured the reflective believer that the presence of an invisible world could be inferred from visible nature itself. Reid’s commonsense arguments thus rendered faith the only possible outcome of Enlightenment scientific empiricism, without forcing the believer to rely on modern visions, on the one hand, or reject scripture’s divine inspiration, on the other.

As Harvard-educated Unitarian rationalists took up pulpits and assumed other prominent positions in 1820s Boston, they deployed the commonsense gloss on natural vision as a key weapon in their battles against both visionaries and skeptics. The recent successes of the Finneyites, the Shakers, and other new sects, the anti-revivalists claimed, could be attributed to

their leaders' talent for disordering their followers' senses. "The infernal den [of Satan] and its grizzly inmates, in all their hideous accoutrements, are so glowingly drawn up that they seem dancing in the vision of the culprits," one Massachusetts detractor proclaimed in 1827. From their pulpits, Boston's Unitarian clergymen propounded natural vision and its wondrous physiological apparatus as a far truer tool of faith than visionary experience. "He who shuts his eyes upon God's creation, and will not see in it the God which it reveals to him, will soon worship a God which his own gloomy imagination has formed," warned John Pierpont, minister of the Unitarian Hollis Street Church, in 1833, as he expounded upon the moral influences of physical science.

By the late 1820s, Unitarian leaders were spreading their message not only from the pulpit but at the ostensibly nonsectarian podiums of Boston's proliferating lecture societies. In 1830, Bradley Newcomb Cumings, a religiously undecided dry goods clerk, listened carefully as the Unitarian educator John Park lectured "on Sensation, as a source of knowledge, or the means of ascertaining truth." A significant portion of the lecture was devoted to the blind, as was the following week's presentation, when Park asked "if there was in the audience one who doubted there ever was a Julius Caesar [sic]; or a Bonaparte, or any other distinguished person, whom we had never seen; for his part he felt as certain of it, as if he had seen them; and also of the Battle of Bunker Hill, or any other remarkable event.


which had ever occurred.”

Just as the blind could rely on the vicarious sensations of the sighted, so could modern Christians rely on the sensory experiences of onlookers as reported in scripture. In Park’s lecture, the blind served as models of rational Christianity, for they grounded their faith not in personal, interior visions and revelations but on the indirect testimony of reliable eyewitnesses. Inspired by Park, Cumings continued to attend Boston’s frequent lectures on sensation. Three times in 1832, he heard the superintendent of Massachusetts General Hospital, Gamaliel Bradford, lecture on the topics of “Spectral Dreams,” “Omens,” and “Apparitions” (“they are seen often by drunkards, as often by convalescents from fever, and are the effects of a nervous imagination” and “proceed from nocturnal causes,” Cumings learned). In dismissing supernatural visions as the product of disordered biological processes, Bradford thereby implicitly discredited a major source of evangelical authority, linking it to such to antebellum social ills as intemperance, nervousness, and possibly libidinosness.

By defining the limits of legitimate sensation, Boston’s Unitarian lecturers aimed a blow not only at visionary religion but at another local threat, the increasingly vocal skeptics who banded together in the late 1820s as the Boston Society of Free Inquirers. In January 1830, Cumings heard Jerome Van Crowninshield Smith, port physician and future Boston mayor, commence a lecture at the Boston Athenæum on his new pamphlet Animal Mechanism: The Eye with an attack on skepticism. Smith, who would pseudonymously produce a satire of visionary culture a few years later, remarked “that the Organ of Vision ought to be sufficient proof of the existence of a God; and he made the remark at this time, because on Saturday last, he saw a person who believed in no God.” In the pamphlet, aimed

---

26 Cumings, Journal, 11 January 1830. Under the name Joel R. Peabody, Smith wrote A World of Wonders, or, Divers Developments, Showing the Thorough Triumph
not at experts but at those “only interested in the beauties of science,” Smith presented the eye not simply as a mechanism of divinely perfected design but as a sublime mystery:

No one has been able to explain how or why we see. Although the visual organs are constructed with such exact references to the laws of light, that telescopes and microscopes, made upon truly philosophical principles, are but imitations or modifications of the apparatus of the human eye,—there is still a difference between the animate and inanimate, the most wonderful and astonishing. The first is a perceiving instrument; the second, a receiving.27

If an expert who knew everything about the eye still regarded it as an astonishing mystery, then an astonishing mystery it must be.

It is difficult to know how many of Cumings’s fellow audience members were drawn to a more rational faith by the lectures on sensation. Cumings, for one, attended Unitarian, Universalist, and Methodist sermons and even heard Kneeland speak. It is certain, however, that Boston’s lecture culture fed public interest in the blind not just as sufferers but as strangely reliable authorities on the spiritual resource that the sighted so often took for granted. After taking in a dozen lectures on sensation and blindness, Cumings attended an 1833 exhibition of the blind at Boston’s Masonic Temple. There, Perkins students demonstrated their ability to read from embossed texts, perform mental arithmetic, answer geographical questions, and—most impressive to Cumings—navigate Boston’s notoriously labyrinthine streets unassisted. Perkins’s director, Samuel Gridley Howe, “said he would send one of his pupils home, who had been at the Temple but once before; he strolled off and was gone but twenty minutes, when he returned with the article he was sent for.” The audience was amazed. “The...

Hall was crowded,” wrote Cumings; and “the exhibition was well worth seeing.”

Five weeks after attending the exhibition at the Masonic Temple, Cumings took in another, much larger event at Faneuil Hall, a charity fair intended to help defray the expense of moving the Perkins school to its prospective new home next to the Boston Athenæum. The fair’s organizers had converted Faneuil Hall into what was invariably described as a wonderland, where Perkins students were stationed next to tables of luxurious goods presided over by the predominantly Unitarian daughters and wives of the city’s leading merchants. The hall was mobbed. “[V]ery many persons have been obliged to go away, not being willing to wait their turn,” Cumings observed. Fifteen thousand tickets sold in a city of less than sixty thousand; a half-century later, the *Boston Evening Transcript* pronounced the fair the most significant social event of the decade.

Such public exhibitions played an important role in redefining blindness as a state of sensory deprivation that did not necessarily lead to a debilitating economic dependency. Well-clothed and groomed, the blind individuals who demonstrated their skills evinced that when afforded educational opportunities, they could flourish. Still, the 1833 fair poignantly dramatized the sensory gap between the blind and the sighted, as the latter indulged themselves in the fashionable spectacle of affluence that the blind could not enjoy. It was no accident that a generation of New England female poets, including Frances Osgood, Hannah Gould, and Lydia Sigourney, used such events as backdrops for sentimental musings on blind sensibility. Sigourney’s 1827 poem “The Deaf, Dumb, and Blind Girl at a Festival” pitied the young maiden who sits “with drooping head” in “solitary gloom” amid so much “smile and

---

28Cumings, Journal, 26 March 1833.
29Cumings, Journal, 30 April and 1 May 1833.
30*Liberator*, 11 May 1833, p. 75; *Boston Evening Transcript*, 17 December 1837, p. 18.
song and mirth.”³¹ Osgood, on the other hand, addressed a sighted audience in her 1833 *Sketches for the Fair*:

> Yet, blest in vision’s radiant light  
> and grateful for the gift of sight,  
> Oh! stranger, come! We’ll show you all  
> the treasures of our crowded hall.³²

Invited to indulge the senses with which they were blessed, the sighted were drawn to these highly stimulating spectacles of insensibility, their pity relieved by a flurry of commerce intended to benefit the blind on their journey toward greater self-sufficiency.

In the late 1820s, sighted New England writers joined professional reformers in using the blind to promote an empirical Christianity hostile to both visionary Protestantism and unseeing skepticism. “Cover your eyes for a short time, and you shut out this world of beauty,” noted Lydia Sigourney. Reflecting on the deprivations of her deaf-blind muse, Julia Brace, Sigourney instructed readers of Boston’s 1828 *Juvenile Miscellany*, “For every new idea which you add to the mental storehouse, praise Him who gives you with unveiled senses to taste the luxury of knowledge.”³³ The same year, the popular novel *The Well-Spent Hour*, by Boston writer Eliza Lee Cabot Follen, featured several chapters in which a mother patiently explains the anatomy of the eye to her daughter, lamenting the fate of the blind only to set up her primary moral message: “And now, my dear, when you go into a garden and dance with joy at the sight of the flowers . . . of whose goodness ought you to think?”³⁴ The answer, of course, was God. Such writings bridged the vision-derived apologetics of 1820s Harvard

---


with the more popular celebration of visible nature that would characterize middle-class sentimental culture for decades to come.

Even so, the sympathy lavished on sensible yet sensory-deprived blind individuals presented a contradiction for Unitarian writers. “[T]o suppose that there can be a full and harmonious development of character without sight,” the Unitarian *Christian Examiner* posited in 1848, “is to suppose ‘that God gave us that noble sense quite superfluously.’”[35] No sighted individual would willingly concede, of course, that vision was anything short of a necessity, but if a providential God did not arbitrarily punish his creatures, then what compensations did he confer on the blind? For those writers who wrestled with the question and who observed those blind individuals who were making their way in the world, the answer that emerged was that blindness stimulated interior visions that the ocular eye did not afford. It was a longing for access to this inner sensibility that drew Lydia Sigourney to Julia Brace and Laura Bridgman.[36]

In her poetry, Osgood attempted not only to understand but to inhabit the sensibility of the blind. Presenting the Fair for the Blind through the imagination of an unsighted child, she portrayed Faneuil Hall as a forest wonderland in which kind fairies tended to the youth’s desires.

> The youth shall sip the rich ice-cream  
> And bless the hand that gives it him:  
> The lover views those slippers rare  
> Of scarlet hue,—and broidered fair  
> And see, in thought, two fairy feet,  
> That bound his coming steps to meet,  
> And fondly think how light and free,  
> With such a shoe, that bound would be![37]

---


For sentimental writers, the sensory gulf between sighted and unsighted that the fair exposed was bridged by the joyful visions that each alike could experience “in thought.” Sheltered as they were from the chaos of the sensory world, however, the blind were more adept than the sighted at developing their imaginative vision. As Osgood would later apostrophize in “To the Blind Lecturer,” a poem dedicated to one of the children at the fair:

But he, whom nature thus bereaves,
Is ever Fancy’s favorite child;
For thee, enchanted dreams she weaves
Of changeful beauty, bright and wild.38

Faced with a contradiction—why would a universally providential deity exempt any of his creatures from the miracle of vision?—sentimental writers crafted a resolution: the blind “saw” too, just differently.

But what, precisely, did the blind see? By the mid 1830s, the nation’s first blind autobiographers sensed the public’s newfound interest in that question, and they set out to address it in print.

The Emergence of Blind Autobiography

Almost all antebellum blind autobiographers tell essentially the same story: after living a life of adventure marked by varying degrees of charity and adversity, the blind individual fortuitously discovers the larger blind community, usually at Perkins school or a similar, subsequently founded institution. In encountering the sympathy and attention of the sighted in these communities, the protagonist recognizes the value of sharing his or her experiences with a larger audience via print.

Abram Courtney’s Anecdotes of the Blind (1835), the first of the genre, established the expectations of the form. Born in Albany the son of a ship’s captain, Courtney related how he refused to let his childhood blinding prevent him from

performing such vision-dependent feats as climbing lightning rods and ship’s riggings, riding horseback, and crossing Indian-inhabited frontier territory. “Perhaps it is because, seeing no danger, I fear none,” Courtney offered modestly. After learning about and traveling to the Perkins school and witnessing the public’s vigorous interest in its exhibitions, Courtney took it as his duty to describe how it was possible to know what he knew despite being deprived of sight’s blessings.

“I can pronounce what dishes are on table, and what flowers and fruits are in a garden, by the smell, and can judge of meat in the market, by the feeling,” Courtney explained in a passage that went on for pages. Such explications likely served several purposes. As with many socially marginal authors, Courtney confronted a skeptical readership, one predisposed to distrust the authenticity of his experiences. “People have sometimes deemed me an impostor, and have consequently treated me rudely, on account of the degree of perfection to which my ear has been cultivated,” Courtney wrote. “I forgive them, and wish any one who doubts the reality of my blindness, may try it by any test that does not involve bodily injury.”

To allay suspicion, Courtney and other blind autobiographers felt compelled to disclose the assistance they had received in producing their publications, in some instances even including portraits of themselves and their amanuenses in their works (see figs. 1 and 2).

Exploring the sensory experience of blindness did more than simply establish an author’s authenticity. In specifying the intensification of their hearing, touch, and smell, blind autobiographers engaged the public’s growing curiosity about the limits of the senses. Soon after their extensive coverage of the Fair for the Blind in 1833, newspapers in New England and across the nation began reporting amazing accounts of somnambulists such as Jane C. Rider, a Springfield, Massachusetts, servant who engaged in activities intriguingly similar to those recently exhibited by Boston’s blind. While in her temporarily blind, somnambulistic state, Rider was able to read books

simply by touching them, identify colors while blindfolded, and navigate rooms in total darkness. It is difficult to know to what extent Perkins’s students inspired Rider and subsequent antebellum somnambulists, but investigators and commentators frequently demanded the same feats of both groups and used the example of the blind to authenticate reports of somnambulistic vision. Even Perkins’s director, Samuel Gridley Howe, appears to have entertained the possibility that one of his blind students possessed a magnetically induced clairvoyance.\textsuperscript{40} Courtney, however, disputed the legitimacy of such occult phenomena. Without naming any particular individuals, he disdained those who “impose on credulity” by claiming to know the color of flowers and like objects by touch. “They might learn the flowers by the scent and commit the colors to memory,” he offered by way of explanation.\textsuperscript{41}

Rejecting any comparison with occult pretenders, blind autobiographers portrayed their compensatory capabilities as fully understandable, as ordinary manifestations of the sensory experiences of all individuals. Benjamin Bowen, the subject of Osgood’s “To the Blind Lecturer,” was a member of the 1832 class at the Perkins school and later a successful public speaker and author of the oft-reprinted \textit{A Blind Man’s Offering} (1847). In his “Reply” to Osgood’s poem, Bowens insisted that “through the darkness, I can view / Much that is beautiful and bright,” and he proceeded to describe the pleasure he experienced in mentally envisioning a bucolic scene with a “verdant lawn,” a “gently flowing stream,” and “a thousand flowers . . . / That ever in the sunlight gleam.”\textsuperscript{42} Placed just after a short autobiographical sketch in his lengthy \textit{A Blind Man’s Offering}, the

\textsuperscript{40}As one article reported, “It is the same power which safely guides the somnambulist over house-tops . . . [which] enables the blind man to read with his finger his embossed letter-bible” (“The Five Senses,” \textit{Family Magazine}, vol. 4, 1837, p. 109). For Howe’s magnetic experiments on another clairvoyant, Perkins student Lurena Brackett, see Sheila O’Brien Quinn, “Credibility, Respectability, Suggestibility, and Spirit Travel: Lurena Brackett and Animal Magnetism,” \textit{History of Psychology} 15.3 (August 2012): 273–82.

\textsuperscript{41}Courtney, \textit{Anecdotes of the Blind}, p. 26.

\textsuperscript{42}Benjamin B. Bowen, \textit{A Blind Man’s Offering} (Boston: Published by the Author, 1847), p. 25.
BLIND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

poem established Bowen’s principal qualification as an author: he might not see, but his imagination was as fertile as that of any sighted writer.

Other antebellum blind autobiographers echoed Bowen’s insistence that his life was rich in sensory experience. Describing the impressions made upon him while traveling through the Tennessee wilderness, blind autobiographer and Perkins visitor James Champlin claimed, “Some believe that because a man cannot behold a landscape, a spot of beautiful scenery, or a lofty mountain, that he can know but little about it.” Champlin

FIG. 1.—Benjamin B. Bowen, The Blind Man’s Offering (New York: Published by the Author, 1852), frontispiece. Reproduced with the permission of The Eberly Family Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State University Libraries.
disagreed, of course. “It is not by vision alone that we are enabled to distinguish beauty, sublimity, or grandeur.” The blind man “can imagine by association, beauties and charms, of which he can have no real or literal appreciation.”

The blind New England minister and autobiographer Timothy Woodbridge, for whom “all the forms of nature were familiar to my imagination,” offered a similarly confident assessment of his apprehension of nature’s bounty: “I have enjoyed the fine moonlight and the jewelry of the heavens over my head, as much as the man of perfect vision.”

---


maintained that even though “her soul’s ‘windows’ have been darkened,” nonetheless “a fruitful imagination still culls beauty and majesty from the mind’s clear vision.” Inner vision, and the literary sensibility it enabled, did not require functioning eyesight.

Most antebellum blind autobiographers shared mental visions that were deeply meaningful yet ultimately secular and consistent with New England rationalism. “It is probable that our first parents, when exiled from Eden, retained during their whole lives some recollection of the awful presence of Him whom, while in their innocence, they were permitted to see,” Bowen mused, as he drew an analogy with his recollection of his mother’s face, which he had happily contemplated before he was blinded at the age of six weeks. “I have always fancied (I suppose some persons will regard it as a mere illusion of the imagination) that I still retain some remembrance of the beautiful and thoughtful countenance of her on whom my eyes first gazed.” After his eyesight was just briefly restored to him in a Boston clinic—likely the Boston Eye Infirmary—Courtney conveyed his visual remembrance of physician Dr. Warren, probably John C. Warren, similarly. The medical procedure had been “exquisitely painful; but, for a moment, I did enjoy the inestimable blessing of sight, and that was compensation enough. I saw my benefactor’s face, and forget it I never shall. . . . May God reward him!” In discussing his personal encounter with nature, Woodbridge claimed Wordsworth’s “visionary powers of eye and soul.” Such visions, though described in the language of miracles, were natural. Replayed before the mind’s eye, they lived on long after vision was lost, affording the blind access to the ongoing blessings of the sighted.

Part of blind autobiography’s appeal was related to its engagement, both explicit and implicit, with the ongoing controversy of transcendentalism. When George Ripley offered his

---

45 Anon., *The Blind Woman’s Offering* (Boston: Wm. H. Hutchinson, 1852), p. 27.
46 Bowen, *A Blind Man’s Offering*, p. 11.
THE NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY

1834 sermon “On Faith in the Invisible,” his insistence that he could “see” the unseen world stirred controversy. The blind, on the other hand, inhabited that murky realm and, thus, could legitimately present themselves as credible, rational spokespersons for it. Blind autobiographers such as Bowen cultivated that perception. “To the mind of the blind man all material objects idealize themselves,” he reported. “All that he touches, all that he hears, become, as it were, to him spiritual verities.”

49 Referring to both Emerson and Carlyle in his autobiography, Bowen exploited the popular interest in transcendentalism while refraining from endorsing it. In 1847 he celebrated the man or woman “who prizes more the revelations of his intuitions than the doubtful facts he perceives by his senses,” a statement that echoed Emerson’s 1842 definition of the transcendentalist as one who can “perceive that the senses are not final, and say, the senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell.”

50 Still, Bowen was critical of the Sage of Concord and his fellow travelers. Despite his skepticism of sensationalist psychology, Bowen disavowed transcendentalist idealism as well: both schools of thought, he avowed, led to “sensualism and infidelity.”

51 His protestations notwithstanding, however, some doubted Bowen’s independence. Brownson’s Quarterly Review, edited by erstwhile transcendentalist Orestes Brownson, branded Bowen a member of the group and lamented that “his spiritual blindness is more deplorable than his corporeal blindness.”

52 For the most part, however, Bowen attracted favorable notice judging by the reviews of his works in mainstream publications such as the Universalist Review and Godey’s Magazine.

53 Scholars of American literature and culture have explained the antebellum preoccupation with the blind largely in terms

49 Bowen, A Blind Man’s Offering, p. 50.
51 Bowen, A Blind Man’s Offering, p. 129.
of the growth of middle-class sentimentalism. Students of nineteenth-century European culture, meanwhile, have described the ways in which the blind served as symbols of Romantic resistance against the tyranny of Enlightenment empiricism. Yet the blind who addressed the antebellum American public were more than just objects of sympathy or voices of Romantic intuition. They were savvy entrepreneurs operating in an increasingly democratic print marketplace who spotted literary opportunity in liberal Protestants' anxious curiosity about the visionary phenomena in their midst. Disdaining the age's wilder speculations about the limits of sensation, the blind distinguished their compensatory inner vision from the supernatural clairvoyance promoted by the purveyors of suspicious entertainments.

After the Civil War, visionary culture lost much of its fervor in New England and elsewhere in the United States as Anglo-American alienists and neurologists successfully offered secular explanations of the trances and visions commonly attributed in the antebellum period to genuine religious inspiration. Even so, blind autobiography retained a readership, in part because the new age of depth psychology had failed to resolve old questions about the limits of the senses. In what remains one of the nation's best-known disability autobiographies, *The Story of My Life* (1903), former Perkins student Helen Keller expressed her conviction that all people possess a "sixth sense," "a subconscious memory of the green earth and murmuring waters, and blindness and deafness cannot rob him of this gift of past generations." In an afterword, Keller's editor clarified that her extraordinary accomplishments were, in fact, quite ordinary; her uniqueness, on the other hand, she shared with all humanity: "All that she is, all that she has done, can be explained directly, except such things in every human being as never can be explained." The mystery of the eye,

---


championed by antebellum New England’s liberal Protestants, was supplanted by the far greater mystery of the subconscious. Even so, the blind have continued to retain a special authority with regard to the unseen, an authority they earned amid the visionary excitement of antebellum New England.

Justin Clark is a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Southern California. His dissertation explores the impact of urbanization on the development of visionary culture in antebellum Boston.

APPENDIX
Nineteenth-Century Blind Autobiographies by American Authors

Abram V. Courtney, Anecdotes of the Blind (Boston: Printed for the author, 1835).
James Wilson, Biography of the Blind (Birmingham, Eng.: J. W. Showell, 1838).
Benjamin B. Bowen, Daisies and Dew-Drops (Boston: John Henry Eastburn, 1840).
Josiah G. Maxson, The Blind Man’s Book (Brookfield, N.Y.: Printed by the author, ca. 1840). Maxson published four sequels between 1841 and 1844; only the second, third, and fifth installments survive.
Benjamin B. Bowen, A Blind Man’s Offering (Boston: Published by the Author, 1847).
Anon., The Blind Woman’s Offering (Boston: Wm. H. Hutchinson, 1852).
William Artman and Lansing V. Hall, Beauties and Achievements of the Blind (Auburn, N.Y.: Published for the authors, 1856).
George W. Henry, *Trials and Triumphs for Three-Score Years and Ten in the Life of G. W. Henry* (Oneida, N.Y.: Published by the author, 1861).
Annie Kane, *The Golden Sunset; or, the Homeless Blind Girl* (Baltimore: J. W. Bond, 1862).
Peter Mason, *A Blind Man’s History, or the Life of Peter Mason* (Cincinnati: Elm Street Print. Co., 1869).
Mary L. Day Arms, *The World as I Have Found It* (Baltimore: James Young, 1878).