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Not forgetting happiness:

The tripartite model of disability and its application in literary criticism

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary article draws on the social sciences to posit a tripartite model from which literary research into disability can benefit. Ableism and disablism are defined by normative positivisms and non-normative negativisms respectively, but consideration is also given to non-normative positivisms. Informed by experiential knowledge, the model is illustrated with reference to a trilogy of literary representations of blindness: George Sava's novel *Happiness is blind* (1987), Brian Friel's play *Molly Sweeney* (1994), and Stephen Kuusisto's memoir *Eavesdropping* (2006). The result is a complex reading that recognises problems but also non-normative renderings of happiness.

Points of interest

- Based on experience and theory, this article introduces the tripartite model of disability.
- The model recognises the affirmation of socially accepted standards, alongside problematised and affirmed deviations from those standards.
- This model is applied to literary representations of blindness from the past few decades that are found to challenge commonplace assumptions about disability and suffering.
- Not only characterisation and narrative but also staging, critical readings, and authorial factors are considered.

Introduction: Disability and happiness

Whether the ‘primary focus for justice’ should be ‘the distribution of happiness, wealth, or something else’ (Vehmas and Watson, 2014: 643) is an intriguing question because disability and unhappiness constitute a likely combination according to many modes of representation. The absence of discourses about happiness and disability is entrenched both culturally and historically (Sunderland *et al.*, 2009). The ableist assumption is that people seeking to access the so-called full benefits of citizenship must have minimum levels of corporeal, intellectual, and sensory capacity, not to mention accordance with various subjective and cultural aesthetic conditions (Snyder and Mitchell, 2010; Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). In these terms, those of us who identify as disabled become wanting and deviant. In relation to happiness, the presence of impairment is regarded and represented as an impediment for first and third parties alike (Kirk, 2009), while the unimpaired body masquerades as the precondition for its pursuit (Jordan, 2013). Consequently, according to many modes of representation, disability tends to be associated with negativity rather than positivity.

One source of this unhappiness is in the problematics of the research that can come to underpin cultural representations. For instance, some work suggests that those of us who identify as disabled misreport levels of happiness, while non-disabled people miscalculate the emotional impact that disability would have on their lives (Ubel *et al.*, 2005). This suggestion makes sense insofar as discourses about unhappiness and disability are culturally and historically entrenched, and as such are likely to have a negative impact on research participants, whether or not they identify as disabled. Moreover, researchers are similarly affected by these discourses and may add to the problem, as exemplified in a questionnaire about a trial for insulin: participants were asked if they looked forward to the future, if they

threw things around when upset or angry, if they got touchy or moody about diabetes, if they hurt themselves or felt like hurting themselves when they got upset, if they wished they were dead, if they wished they had not been born, and so on (Swain and French, 2000). The assumptions of suffering in this kind of questionnaire chime with the majority of news reports on disability around the world and serve only to break or discourage links with happiness. Thus, those of us who identify as disabled may use terms that range from negative to positive when discussing ourselves and our experiences, yet this is not reflected in the official discourses of disability (Sunderland *et al.*, 2009). In brief, the problem is that too much research about disability can be unnecessarily limited and misleading.

In disability studies, representations of unhappiness can be critiqued in many ways. Most obviously, the British social model of disability (which I refer to as the social model here) can be invoked to argue that such unhappiness arises from a disablist society and not from one's biological impairment. Accordingly, even though some highly medicalised studies have rather predictably found that restricted mobility and/or physical loss have psychological consequences, that some people report a variety of depressive symptoms following the onset of impairment, others report relatively favourable levels of happiness (Dunn *et al.*, 2009). Given that the 'disability movement, like other emancipatory movements, is based on a positive sense of a group difference' (Vehmas and Watson, 2014: 648), we might choose to invoke more recent approaches that encompass individual, collective, and cultural positivisms, whereby it is emphasised that those of us who identify as disabled can lead full, satisfying, and even exemplary lives (Swain and French, 2000; Koppers, 2009; Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). In accordance with the affirmative model, for example, positivity about both impairment and disability may be asserted. To affirm a positive identity around impairment is to repudiate the dominant value of normality, so this model offers more than a transformation

of consciousness about disability, it facilitates an assertion of the value and validity of the lives of people who have impairments (Swain and French, 2000). Alternatively, if a rhizomatic model is invoked, far from being regarded and represented as an impediment to happiness for first and third parties (i.e., disabled people and nondisabled friends, family, colleagues, etc.), disability becomes a site of richness and artful living (Kuppers, 2009). These and other such approaches recognise that those of us who identify as disabled may find happiness by transcending the very norms to which we are meant to aspire.

The models invoked in disability studies are predicated on embodied epistemology (i.e., experiential knowledge) and as such help to disrupt prejudice. There is no uniformly accepted term for discrimination against those of us who identify as disabled (Harpur, 2012), a form of prejudice sometimes referred to as the nameless apartheid (Goggin and Newell, 2003). Nevertheless, a couple of Anglophone terms have emerged in the form of *ableism* and *disablism* (sometimes spelled *disableism*). *Ableism* is more widely used around the world, while *disablism* is favoured in the United Kingdom (Ashby, 2010), which suggests that the two terms have emerged because of the distinction between person-first and social model language (Harpur, 2012). In essence, both terms denote the same thing (Harpur, 2012), discriminatory or abusive conduct toward people based on physical or cognitive abilities (Harpur, 2009). Here, however, I follow work that has sought to appreciate the respective merits of the terms (Campbell, 2008, 2009; Harpur, 2012; Bolt, 2014a; Goodley, 2014). From such a perspective, *ableism* and *disablism* render radically different understandings of disability: the former is associated with the idea of ableness, the perfect or perfectible body, and the latter relates to the production of disability, in accordance with a social constructionist understanding (Campbell, 2008). Put differently, ableism renders nondisabled

people supreme and disablism is a combination of attitudes and actions against those of us who identify as disabled.

My proposition is that literary research about disability might be enhanced by consideration of a tripartite model based on a conceptual distinction between ableism and disablism. Set out in the first section of this article, the idea is that ableism and disablism can be understood as normative positivisms and non-normative negativisms respectively, both of which should be explored, but that consideration should also be given to what have been elsewhere designated non-normative positivisms (Coole and Frost, 2011; Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). This tripartite model of disability draws on embodied epistemology and is illustrated in the second section of the article with reference to literary constructs of blindness that have medical connections. Other methodologies could be similarly enhanced, but in my example textual analysis is applied to a small selection of literary texts from the past three decades.

The tripartite model of disability: normative positivisms, non-normative negativisms, and non-normative positivisms

The first part of the model pertains to normative positivisms (i.e., the affirmation of socially accepted standards) that are marked by ableism. *Ableism* has been defined as a political term that calls attention to assumptions about normalcy (Davis, 1995); it can be traced back to *handicapism*, a term coined nearly four decades ago to denote not only assumptions but also practices that promoted the unequal treatment of people because of apparent or assumed physical, mental, and/or behavioural differences (Bogdan and Biklen, 1977; Ashby, 2010). The concept of ableism, however, has been societally entrenched, deeply and subliminally

embedded in culture, and rampant throughout history; it has been widely used by various social groups to justify their elevated rights and status in relation to other groups (Campbell, 2008; Wolbring, 2008). That is to say, however we term it, ableism is an age-old concept.

There are many variants of ableism. Cognitive ableism, for instance, is a bias in favour of the interests of people who actually or potentially have certain cognitive abilities (Carlson, 2001); lexism is an array of normative practices, assumptions, and attitudes about literacy (Collinson, 2014); sanism is the privileging of people who do not have so-called mental health problems (Prendergast, 2014); and ocularcentrism is the dominance of visual perception on which this article comes to focus (Jay, 1994). The list could continue, for there has been a proliferation of normative positivisms in modernity.

A thing to remember is that when people endeavour to occupy the subject position of ableism, they buy into a myriad of normative assumptions but often do so without premeditation or intent: they do so by acquiescence. After all, ableism is a deeply rooted, far-reaching 'network of beliefs, processes, and practices' that produces a 'corporeal standard', a particular type of mind and body, which is projected as the perfect human (Campbell, 2001: 44). This network of notions about health, productivity, beauty, and the value of human life itself, represented and perpetuated by public and private media, renders abilities such as productivity and competitiveness far more important than, say, empathy, compassion, and kindness (Rauscher and McClintock, 1997; Wolbring, 2008). Indeed, so pervasive is this network that people are likely to pick up a highly detailed working knowledge of ableism by osmosis alone (i.e., through the gradual absorption of ideas that results from continual exposure).

Irrespective of intent, the widespread endorsement of ableism has dire consequences for society. Many bodies and minds are constructed and positioned as Other, meaning that many people fall outside the dominant norms of bodily appearance and/or performance and thus face social and material exclusion (Ashby, 2010; Hodge and Runswick-Cole, 2013). From this perspective, impairments are necessarily negative: they must be improved, cured, or else eliminated altogether; they certainly cannot contribute to an affirmative subjectivity (Campbell, 2008). In effect, ableism becomes a combination of discrimination, power, and prejudice that is related to the cultural privileging of nondisabled people; it oppresses those of us who have so-called mental health problems, learning difficulties, physical impairments, sensory impairments, and so on (Rauscher and McClintock, 1997; Eisenhauer, 2007). The normative positivisms of ableism indirectly result in the exclusion, victimisation, and stigmatisation of those of us who identify as disabled.

Despite its dramatic effects, ableism has been referred to as a nebulous concept that evades both identification and definition (Hodge and Runswick-Cole, 2013). What is more, the term has been deemed limited in content and scope on the basis that it should not allude exclusively to disability, but should be used as an umbrella term (Wolbring, 2008), a call for terminological specificity that is answered to some extent by the term *disablism*. After all, although ableism itself is often obscured, the value it places on certain abilities leads to disablism (Wolbring, 2008; Hodge and Runswick-Cole, 2013). It might be said, therefore, that the normative positivisms of ableism result in the non-normative negativisms of disablism.

Accordingly, the second part of the model pertains to non-normative negativisms (i.e., problematised deviations from socially accepted standards) that are marked by disablism. The

term *disablism* is derived from the social model of disability, whereby the everyday practices of society perpetuate oppressive structures on those of us who have biological impairments (Madriaga, 2007). Discriminatory, oppressive, and/or abusive behaviour arises from the belief that we are somehow inferior to non-disabled people (Miller *et al.*, 2004). As so-called less able people we are discriminated against, and different abilities become defined as disabilities (Thomas, 2004; Wolbring, 2008). Disablism, then, involves not only the 'social imposition of restrictions of activity' but also the 'socially engendered undermining' of 'psycho-emotional well-being' (Thomas, 2007: 73). It is arguably a more profound, targeted, and specific development of ableism.

This specificity notwithstanding, disablism is not necessarily explicit. Adapted from aversive racism theory, the term *aversive disablism* has been coined to denote subtle forms of prejudice (Deal, 2007). Like aversive racism, aversive disablism is often unintentional, so aversive disablism may recognise the problems of disablism without recognising their own prejudice (Deal, 2007). Given such subtleties, it is part of my proposition that ableism and disablism might be critically conceptualised on a continuum that moves from normative positivisms to non-normative negativisms.

This ideological continuum can be illustrated with reference to, among other things, social and cultural constructs of visual perception. Ocularcentrism, as already noted, is the dominance of visual perception that is a fact of life for most people in most societies and as such becomes manifest in countless normative positivisms. A consequence of this variant of ableism is that those of us who do not perceive by visual means are necessarily Othered. Moreover, ocularcentrism predicates what has been elsewhere designated ocularnormativism (Bolt, 2014b), whereby the senses of touch, hearing, smell, and so on, are culturally and

socially problematised. The normative positivisms become non-normative negativisms as non-visual means of perception are judged in visual terms and thus found wanting.

In order to discourage simplistic readings if not renderings of disability, the third part of the proposed model pertains to non-normative positivisms (i.e., affirmed deviations from socially accepted standards) that depart from ableism and disablism. It is not enough to recognise disability along a continuum of difference that defines human variation; it is important to consider the ideology of neoliberal inclusiveness (Jordan, 2013). Ironically, thanks to neoliberalism, disability is in some ways more present than ever, a state of affairs that, in part, has resulted from tolerance that can be thought of as inclusionism (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). The meaning of *inclusionism* is that opportunities may well have opened to formerly excluded groups, which must be commended, but for inclusion to become truly worthwhile it must involve recognition of disability in terms of alternative lives and values that neither enforce nor reify normalcy. There is a need for non-normative positivisms because the fight for equality is both limited and limiting in its very scope, while empowering and progressive potential is offered by the profound appreciation of Peripheral Embodiments (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). That is to say, inclusion may well be paramount but can become transformative and more comprehensively productive when disability is recognised as a site for alternative values.

Reading blindness in contemporary literature: Novelistic, dramatic, and autobiographical representation

While the tripartite model can be applied productively to any literary representation of disability, in this article I focus on George Sava's *Happiness is blind*, Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney*, and Stephen Kuusisto's *Eavesdropping*. Most obviously, these texts have been chosen for their detailed representations of visual impairment (the inclusion of life writing in the form of Kuusisto's *Eavesdropping* proves particularly important in this respect). On a more general level, though, my rationale pertains to the social model of disability from which the tripartite model is ultimately derived. After all, the three texts are contemporaneous in their publication with the proliferation of work on the social model and yet relate to the contrasting approach of medicalisation in several ways (e.g., the medical profession is portrayed in both *Happiness is blind* and *Molly Sweeney*, not to mention biographical facts about Sava's career as a surgeon and Kuusisto's faculty appointment in a college of medicine). In addition, the 1987 novel, the 1994 play, and the 2006 memoir provide variety in terms of publication date and genre.

Literary representations of blindness take many forms and one of the richest is the novel. Published in 1987, *Happiness is blind* is one of a number of works by George Sava that draws on medical insights gained from his successful career as a surgeon. In this novel, Anthony Street is a test pilot who sustains a facial injury that leaves him, as the blurb puts it, 'hideously disfigured'. Consequently, unable to find employment and shunned by his friends, he turns to a life of crime. He breaks into a flat but is interrupted by the owner, Helen Bourne, who, again as the novel's blurb puts it, 'lives alone despite the fact that she has been blind since birth'. This seemingly unfortunate meeting marks the beginning of a romantic relationship that results in the two characters getting married and having a child together.

Before relating the tripartite model to this novel it should be acknowledged that, given the ubiquity of ableism and disablism, it is hardly surprising that positivity tends to be obscured in representations of disability. In Australia, for example, official professional and public discourses about disability and rehabilitation are predominantly negative, yet many potentially positive discursive and narrative factors are hidden beneath ableist if not disablist ways of knowing, being, acting, and describing in academic, policy, and practice settings (Sunderland *et al.*, 2009). This being so, the first thing to note when analysing *Happiness is Blind* is that it contains massively problematic representations of disability. If social stereotypes become tropes in textual representation (Garland-Thomson, 1997), then Sava's novel is underpinned by much in the way of stereotyping. Beauty and the beast, blindness-darkness synonymy, and the fifth-sixth sense are just a few of the recurrent tropes that are utilised in the work (Bolt, 2014b). One illustration of such problematic representation is offered when Helen becomes a mother:

I want to see. I want to look on the sunshine. I want to see my child. All these years I've been happy and content in my darkness and now, when I've got something to be really happy about, I feel miserable for the first time. (Sava, 1987: 176)

Illustrated here is the way in which normative positivisms lead to non-normative negativisms. Ocularcentrism renders motherhood a fundamentally visual experience and ocularnormativism dictates that vision is a necessary condition of its enjoyment, if not its very success. This example of problematic representation is one of several but, despite the again predictable medicalisation of disability, the novel also contains passages that can be interpreted far more positively.

What the novel illustrates is that the continuum of normative positivisms and non-normative negativisms can be disrupted by the recognition of non-normative positivisms, meaning that the proposed tripartite model becomes tee-shaped in its conceptual form. More specifically, for the purpose of the example I use in this article, the often swift and imperceptible regression from ocularcentrism to ocularnormativism can be blocked. Accordingly, the reader of *Happiness is Blind* is informed that Helen is unique *because* rather than *in spite* of her blindness, that she has ‘found the secret of turning disability into a source of strength’ (Sava, 1987: 163). Resonant with the constructive reframing of hearing loss as Deaf Gain (Bauman and Murray, 2009), as well as the subsequent reframing of disability loss as disability gain (Garland-Thomson, 2013), the transformation is illustrated when Helen persuades Tony to discuss and recognise virtues in his so-called ugliness:

“You are easier to talk to than most people,” she remarked, as they sipped their coffee. “Easier for me to talk to, perhaps, I should say. You see, so many people talk with their faces as well as their voices that I lose half their meaning. You have got to put all your meaning into your voice.” (Sava, 1987: 156)

Here the idea is that, because of his facial injury, Tony’s mode of communication becomes focused on the verbal, an audible form that is particularly pertinent to Helen, given that she does not perceive the visual cues of body language. Moreover, with allusion to the rhizomatic model of disability, it might be said that there is comfort in the company of people whose impairments might be different, but whose experiences chime together (Kuppers, 2009). Thus, non-normative positivisms can be identified in the very meeting of these two disabled characters.

It must be acknowledged, of course, that this identification of non-normative positivisms may raise concerns about compensatory powers, a notion widely problematised in relation to cultural representations of visual impairment (Monbeck, 1973; Kirtley, 1975; Kleege, 1999; Bolt, 2014b). Nevertheless, a close reading of *Happiness is Blind* can reveal a number of departures from ocularnormativism. For instance, music and poetry are said to bring Helen beauty, as does the touch of silk, fur, and so on. She goes on to explain that ‘normal people’ know little of such beauty but it is present for those who wish to appreciate it (Sava, 1987: 157). This comment on aesthetics, that the ‘resources of life are infinite to those who know how to draw on them’, diminishes connotations of compensatory powers. After all, the resources to which Helen refers must be engaged with actively, meaning that impairment is neither necessary nor sufficient as a condition of ability. The thing to stress is that normative compensatory powers involve, say, being able to *see* with one’s hands or ears, whereas non-normative positivisms value the senses in and on their own terms.

So although *Happiness is Blind* contains many problematic representations that may be categorised as normative positivisms and non-normative negativisms, it redeems itself on many counts. Helen goes through the ocularnormative phase of longing to see, but the eponymous state of happiness is ultimately found when the eye surgery is unsuccessful. She brings the novel to its conclusion by critiquing the sighted majority for looking on blindness as an affliction: ‘You do not know what it is to be blind, and you naturally think that without eyes our lives must be incomplete and denied most of the things you cherish. It is not true’ (Sava, 1987: 192). The salient point is that these moments of happiness are not rendered legitimate by ocularnormative representation. Helen owns the means of perception that are available to her; she does not find her own way of seeing. For this reason it can be argued that

the novel departs from ableism and disablism, that it ventures beyond ocularnormativism and recognises the potential of non-normative positivisms.

Comparably complex literary representations of blindness can be found in contemporary work in the age-old genre of drama. Published in 1994, Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney* depicts the medical profession in many ways. Accordingly, the play contains various attempts to 'orientate' Molly in a 'sighted world': her father 'teaches her about the colours of the flowers in her garden, while the other characters go to great lengths either to cure her, or to mask the most telling features of her blindness' (Feeney, 2009: 90). Molly is a massage therapist who has been classed as blind since she was a baby. She leads a happy life that can be interpreted in terms of non-normative positivisms until, at her husband's behest, her ophthalmologist performs an operation that has bittersweet consequences. Though restoring her sight after forty years of blindness, the medical intervention leaves her institutionalised and gravely ill. That is to say, the non-normative positivisms are destructively reframed as non-normative negativisms by the patriarchal element in the play and, for the title character, the consequence is critical.

The play contains many non-normative negativisms, the most striking being the way in which Molly is objectified by her husband Frank and her ophthalmologist Mr Rice. Frank puts much time and effort into the compilation of what amounts to a medical, educational, sociological, and philosophical study of Molly's life (Bolt, 2014b). Notably, it is not Molly's name that takes pride of place on the work; the folder's cover reads only 'Researched and Compiled by Frank C. Sweeney' (Friel, 1994: 6). This nominal displacement can be interpreted as a manifestation of Frank's authority over Molly, the implication being that, as well as the folder, he has compiled her very life experience (Bolt, 2014b). A similarly self-serving

approach is taken by Mr Rice, who endeavours to cure Molly in order to rescue his own career. These dynamics are indicative of Molly's 'downfall, as it is her desire to please the others that makes her agree to the operation, despite her own misgivings about losing her unique sightless world' (DeVinney, 1999: 113). By Frank and Mr Rice alike, Molly is framed in non-normative negativisms as she becomes a project to distract them from their own inadequacies.

Non-normative negativisms are rife in critical readings of the play, especially those that refer to metaphor. Many recent works of literary disability studies have explored the problematics of metaphor in detail (Vidali, 2010; Murray, 2012; Titchkosky, 2015). But the thing to stress for the purpose of the present article is that the process of metaphorisation is a substitutive one: whether we substitute entire objects for others or 'use parts for the whole, the effect is to distract, to disengage from the initial object' (Davis, 2012: x). For example, if we say 'a woman is a rose', for whatever reason, 'we are looking away from the woman toward the rose' (Davis, 2012: x). In the process of metaphorisation, then, the apparent focus is displaced and thus rendered superficial. Accordingly, in the discourse around *Molly Sweeney* it is often recognised that female representations of Ireland are 'extremely problematic symbols in contemporary Irish literary and cultural studies, as are feminine national abstractions in postcolonial critique worldwide' (Moloney, 2000: 286). The comparable metaphorisation of disability, though, is approached with less sensitivity and awareness. It has been asserted that the 'blind Molly acts as a symbol for Gaelic Ireland, the partially sighted Molly serves as a metaphor for the colonized country, and Molly hospitalized for madness represents the postcolonial state' (Moloney, 2000: 286). In these and other such readings, which fall on the continuum that moves from normative positivisms to non-normative negativisms, engagement with the representation of disability is actively avoided.

Even the staging of the play can prove problematic with the tripartite model in mind. Molly's use of soliloquy is particularly significant in this respect. After all, the non-normative positivisms of her characterisation are demonstrable in the fact that she breaks the metaphorical 'glass wall around the other soliloquists', for the 'other characters' refusal to do so then becomes part of their personalities' (DeVinney, 1999: 113). However, these non-normative positivisms are sometimes contradicted in the staging. All three characters remain onstage throughout the play, but in the 1994 premiere at the Gate Theatre in Dublin, Molly was 'the only one to look at the others while they spoke', even though the character could not 'physically see' (DeVinney, 1999: 113). This aspect of the production is said to stage 'the fact that she is the only character capable of emotional engagement with and understanding of the others' (DeVinney, 1999: 113), a reading that illustrates the regression from ocularcentrism to ocularnormativism in its rendering of proper human communication. What is more, unlike the 1994 production at the Almeida in London, which featured a spotlight on each character's chair that implied equality among the viewpoints expressed, the 2011 production at the Gate Theatre in Dublin 'featured a single, dangling light bulb above each character's head that only came on when Molly spoke', meaning Molly's 'narration was privileged as more truthful than the stories told by Mr. Rice and Frank' (Russell, 2013:215). Again, the trouble is that this privileging is signified by purely visible means. The non-normative positivisms of Molly's characterisation become disrupted by the normative positivisms and non-normative negativisms of the dramatic staging and its discourse.

Implicit in the dramatic use of sight and light to signify truth and understanding, the metaphorisation that is frequently applied in representations of visual impairment pertains to knowledge. Blindness, according to an interview with Stephen Kuusisto, 'functions most

often as an ableist metaphor for lack of affect or an inability to understand the world’ (Savarese, 2009: 202). In a slip from normative positivisms to non-normative negativisms, visual terms are used to make epistemological points and thus invoke the notion that seeing is synonymous with knowing, from which it all too easily follows that not seeing is synonymous with not knowing (Bolt, 2014b). However, it has been asserted that *Molly Sweeney* does not give ‘credence in its ultimate discourse to casual assimilations between seeing and understanding’, for an ‘unsentimental refutation of long-established metaphors of light and darkness, ignorance and knowledge’, lies at the heart of the play (Upton, 1997, 347). Unsurprisingly, it has also been suggested that sight becomes a metaphor for knowledge, but the thing to note here is that the ‘easy equation of sight and insight is troubled by the unreliability of perception and memory’, that the sighted characters are ‘the least insightful’ (DeVinney, 1999: 111). What is more, the ‘unreliability of sight extends to the audience’, for the play admits of a ‘truth beyond the physically realized world that we see onstage’ (DeVinney, 1999: 111). In some respects, then, the epistemology explored in *Molly Sweeney* is characterised by non-normative positivisms.

This epistemology informs a reading of key scenes in the play. From the outset the audience is informed that when Molly ‘spoke of her disability, there was no self-pity’ and that she ‘had a full life and never felt at all deprived’ (Friel, 1994: 5, 6). Molly goes on to assert the pleasure she derives from work, radio, walking, music, cycling, and especially swimming:

Just offering yourself to the experience – every pore open and eager for that world of pure sensation, of sensation alone – sensation that could not have been enhanced by sight – experience that existed only by touch and feel; and moving swiftly and rhythmically through that enfolding world; and the sense of such assurance, such

liberation, such concordance with it . . . Oh I can't tell you the joy swimming gave me. I used to think that the other people in the pool with me, the sighted people, that in some way their pleasure was actually diminished because they could see, because seeing in some way qualified the sensation; and that if they only knew how full, how total my pleasure was, I used to tell myself that they must, they really must envy me. (Friel, 1994: 15)

In these lines, haptic perception becomes supreme rather than supplementary. More than what has been termed a 'viable possibility for a new way of seeing' (Upton, 1997: 348), Friel offers an 'imaginative rendering of a marginalized aesthetic' (Feeney, 2009: 92). Indeed, the supremacy of visual perception is challenged recurrently as the audience is furnished with Molly's version of events. On the night before the pivotal operation, for example, there is an impromptu party for Molly but, far from being excited at the prospect of visual restoration, she nurses major epistemological concerns (Bolt, 2014b). Why should she have to learn a new way of knowing? Will she ever again experience community in a profound way? These and other such worries about exile and homesickness dramatically challenge the normative positivisms and non-normative negativisms of medicalisation. In Molly's final monologue, she 'comes to be at ease, if not at home, in the vigorous imaginative world of the mind' (Russell, 2013:209). She does not speak of her 'lack of vision' as a disability but a means to 'create the new fantasy world she hopefully occupies and imbues with movement through her mind' (Russell, 2013: 214-15). That is to say, the apparently unhappy ending can be interpreted positively.

If drama is one of the oldest forms of literary representations, one of the newest is the disability memoir, which falls under the rubric of life writing and is the most likely to impart

embodied epistemology. The full importance of this work is recognised, for example, in the concept of autistic presence, which resists the discursive simplification of autism (Murray, 2008). The material nature of this presence, the ‘excess it creates when confronted with any idea of what “normal” human activity or behaviour might be, stubbornly refuses to be reduced to any narrative — medical, social or cultural — that might seek to contain it without reference to its own terms’ (Murray, 2008: xviii), as exemplified in the work of Amanda Baggs, among other people. The presence contains its own logic and methods, which have to be understood, where possible from within, if a full idea of autism’s place in the world is ever to be gained (Murray, 2008). These ‘expressions can be found across a range of cultural productions’ (Murray, 2008: 6), one of which is the disability memoir. These new memoirs are defined by an awareness of disability as social, cultural, legal, and architectural obstacles, but usually involve the formation of a disabled identity (Couser, 2011). For instance, published in 2006, *Eavesdropping* is Stephen Kuusisto’s second memoir about visual impairment – his first being the prize-winning *Planet of the Blind*. With an explicit focus on listening that is captured in the book’s form (i.e., audio postcards), *Eavesdropping* moves from memories of a relatively isolated childhood to those of travelling and meeting people as a successful, highly sociable adult.

Kuusisto’s *Eavesdropping* does not seek to contain the experience of visual impairment in ocularnormative terms, meaning it illustrates non-normative positivisms in many ways. Most explicit in the ‘innovative nature of the audio postcards, variation in sensory perception, such as Kuusisto’s, can often imbue a poet’s sensibilities with a more intense awareness of the body and provide insight into the interaction between body, text, and environment’ (Melancon, 2009: 184). Indeed, encouraged by the Disabled People’s Movement (including the Disability Arts Movement), the writings of many of us who identify as disabled

demonstrate a perspective on life that is both interesting and affirmative, one that can be used positively (Swain and French, 2000). Hence, happiness, according to *Eavesdropping*, can be derived from creative listening. Kuusisto remembers being ‘flat out happy, talking about the wilderness of noises and the hours in a day’ (Kuusisto, 2006: 49). He recalls the happiness of listening to two students from New York University talking about jazz: ‘They had gone to the Blue Note to hear Oscar Peterson. They had grown up on Madonna but now they were grooving in New York and I was happy to be hearing about it’ (Kuusisto, 2006: 80). Furthermore, he writes of raising the ante around the art of listening: ‘I wanted to be a listener. And by this I meant I wanted to be a happy man’ (Kuusisto, 2006: 122). These and other such examples show how *Eavesdropping* represents a departure from the dominant ocularnormative discourse, for happiness is found by savouring experiences of the world via auditory means.

What this memoir also illustrates is the difficulty of departing from the dominance of ocularnormative discourse, for non-normative positivisms are sometimes destructively framed as non-normative negativisms. For example, according to one of the reviews on the back cover, *Eavesdropping* is ‘about vision, ways of seeing with other senses, principally hearing’ (Merwin ctd. in Kuusisto, 2006). Though manifestly supportive, this comment runs counter to the content of the book in which Kuusisto states, ‘I cannot see the world by ear, I can only reinvent it for my own purposes. But admitting this may make me lucky’ (Kuusisto, 2006: viii). Indeed, much as Sava’s Helen moves beyond the ocularnormative phase of longing to see, Kuusisto asserts from the outset that ‘recognition as a sighted person’ is no longer craved (Kuusisto, 2006: vii). To render *Eavesdropping* a memoir about seeing with other senses (or *Molly Sweeney* a play about a new way of seeing) is ocularcentric, manifestly so, but it is also indicative of ocularnormativism, as though all means of perception must be

framed in visual terms. Without the benefit of embodied epistemology, the non-normative positivisms of representation are evidently in danger of being flattened by the discursive continuum of normative positivisms and non-normative negativisms.

Conclusion: Happiness without cure

This article introduces a tripartite model of disability and illustrates how it can be applied in the analysis of literary representations. Consideration is given not only to normative positivisms and non-normative negativisms but also to non-normative positivisms, meaning that research about literary representations of visual impairment, as in my example, can benefit from understandings of fruitful alternatives to the dominance of visual perception, as well as awareness of ocularcentric assumptions and ocularnormative discrimination.

Much of the embodied epistemology that informs disability studies (especially work around the social model) suggests that the continuum of normative positivisms and non-normative negativisms that the tripartite model disrupts is resonant with the medical modelling of disability. This medicalisation is underpinned by normative positivisms, a preoccupation with which renders paramount the very idea of cure. This being so, if and when the third part of the proposed model is illustrated, it seems possible if not probable that the representation will depart from the medicalisation of disability, from what Kuusisto calls the idea that people who identify as disabled 'are merely patients waiting in line for their proper cure' (Savarese, 2009: 199). In other words, a representation that recognises non-normative positivisms is more likely to be appreciative of the fact that, as Kuusisto puts it, 'no one needs to be cured to achieve a life of dignity and purpose' (Savarese, 2009: 199). The tripartite model, then,

contains an implied logic in which happiness and disability can coexist without the presence or promise of cure.

Despite the various medical aspects of the literary representations considered in this article, the implied logic of the tripartite model is illustrated in my reading and sustained elsewhere in the three texts. For instance, in *Eavesdropping*, Kuusisto laments being offered casual cures by a number of strangers, including a ‘Catholic Woman of the Year’ in a hotel lobby, another woman in a diner, a man who assists people who have impairments around an airport, and another man who is a systems analyst for the airline (Kuusisto, 2006: 83-93). These encounters chime with Sava’s *Happiness is Blind* insofar as cure is not sought by Helen from the outset – although it does become so when she has a child. Ironically, the curative operation is rendered unsuccessful because Helen is so keen to see her child in the sunlight that she removes her bandages prematurely: ‘And then came the sudden blackness – an awful hot blackness. She almost dropped Victor Anthony to the floor with the pain of it. The sunshine was gone’ (Sava, 1987: 189). In this moment Helen’s ocularnormative longing peaks, so she comes to appreciate perception in non-visual ways that depart from medical preoccupations with cure. Along similar lines, in Friel’s *Molly Sweeney*, the title character sets out with appreciation of her nonvisual means of perception but has ocularnormative longings imposed on her. It has even been argued that her surname echoes the Irish myth of the exiled Sweeney, who is doomed to leap from tree to tree, much as Frank ‘leaps at the chance’ of a cure for Molly (Russell, 2013: 210). Thus, although Friel’s ‘theatrical technique’ builds on the ‘structure of Faith Healer, as interwoven monologues recall events from an indefinable location in time and space’ (Upton, 1997: 356), the consequence is an unwanted and ultimately disastrous cure. That is to say, all three of these literary representations challenge preconceptions about disability in their disruption of the notion that cure is a necessary

preliminary of happiness. After all, the assumption tends to be that, for those of us who identify as disabled, medical intervention holds the key to happiness if it is a possibility at all.

This article illustrates the tripartite model of disability with reference to literary representations of visual impairment, but only by way of example. For instance, work on literary representations of hearing impairment can similarly benefit from awareness of not only audiocentrism and hearing loss, but also Deaf Gain. What is more, although I focus on literary representation, other work in the Humanities if not the Social Sciences could be enhanced by the proposed model. The examples could go on and on, the point being that researchers working on disability must be open to the possibility of positive discourse and ensure that the full spectrum of aspiration and flourishing is not reduced in accordance with limited expectations (Sunderland *et al.*, 2009). The ubiquitous assumptions of suffering in representations of disability must be *met with* and thus *disrupted by* embodied epistemology that acknowledges Otherness and victimisation, but not at the expense of happiness.

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