Sentiment and Vision in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, and *The Cricket on the Hearth*

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This essay is an exploration of the ways in which sentimentality is manifested through the visible, and through associative functions of the eye, in two of Dickens's Christmas books of the 1840s. The term sentimentality is by no means homogenous, either in its practice in literature and the visual arts in the mid-nineteenth-century, or in its interpretation by modern critics and theorists. Sentimentality is often associated with the exaggerated emotional portrayal of pathetic scenes (particularly the deaths of children), designed to elicit emotional responses from the reader.[1] This essay however draws upon the definition of the sentimental in eighteenth-century moral philosophy with the aim to provide a more historicised account of its function in Dickens's texts. I argue that behind the often hyperbolic emotional descriptions in *A Christmas Carol* and *The Cricket on the Hearth* rests a concern with the self's need to take social, ethical and moral care of others, and an interrogation of the role of literature and art in tutoring the reader's emotional response.

The 1840s mark a redefinition in Dickens's visual practice, and the Christmas books (*A Christmas Carol*, 1843; *The Chimes*, 1845; *The Battle of Life*, 1846, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, 1846; and *The Haunted Man*, 1848) signal the importance of the visible in his writing between 1843-48, from the material appearance of the books, to the proliferation of visual details, verbs and images throughout the text, and the special care given to the illustrations. In the Christmas Books, the narrative demonstrates that looking is not just a function of the eye; it is also a culturally and socially constructed act. Vision is used to provoke moral or empathic responses in the reader through the use of pity (the text's sentimental practice); and eyes, which proliferate in the writing, function as sites of sentimental expression (through the act of crying).[2] Thus the eye plays an important role in reinforcing Dickens's sentimental practice. This relationship between vision and sentiment finds its origins in eighteenth-century moral philosophy, as Adam Smith's figure of the "Impartial Spectator", of central importance to the development of ideas around sympathy, is constructed mainly through the visual. Through a close reading of these two texts, this essay suggests that focusing on the function of vision within that philosophic discourse illuminates further connections between Victorian sentimentality

and eighteenth-century moral philosophy, challenging our critical interpretation of a term that more usually signifies 'feelings which…are in some important way unearned, being had on cheap, come by too easily, and directed at unworthy objects'.[3]

In conclusion, I offer suggestions as to how this reading of Dickens's sentimentality impacts upon, and is also shaped by, the author's interest in blindness, which I argue changes significantly throughout the 1840s. I demonstrate this through a comparison of Dickens's novel *Barnaby Rudge* (1842), in which blindness signals moral vacuity in the villainous character Stagg, to the Christmas story *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1846). I argue that the representation of the blind girl, Bertha Plummer, whilst sentimentalised, also offers a more complex interrogation of the possibility of an ethical system outside of the visible.

II

There has been limited critical debate about Victorian sentimentality. The sentimental's association with nineteenth-century culture is in general seen as derogatory, and sentimentality is often used as a pejorative term; an accusation of employing excessive emotion for an unworthy object. However, if we look back at the eighteenth-century origins of the sentimental mode, a more complex range of meanings emerge, which have both resonance and relevance for our understanding of sentimentality's function in the nineteenth-century. For example, Jessica Riskin has recently defined sentimentalism as 'the notion that sentiments originated in physical sensations, and the conviction that sentiments were in turn the foundation of social life', demonstrating further that sentimentalism underpinned the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility, and, moreover, the empirical sciences.[4] The central eighteenth-century texts to define the sentimental movement were David Hume, *Essays and Treatises* (1758) and his discussion of the passions in *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), and Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759).[5] Hume stressed that we act not on the basis of thought but of feeling, and that we all possess a moral "sentiment" that we get pleasure from responding to. Smith's account extended Hume's realignment of morality from the rational to the emotional by stressing the visuality of this inner sense. He afforded primacy to sight in both the construction of and social functioning of taste and sympathy, arguing that this moral sense took place through looking at either beautiful objects (engendering feelings of

pleasure); or objects of suffering (engendering feelings of pity and sympathy). Moreover, Smith created the metaphor of the 'internal … impartial spectator,' and a doctrine of sympathy based upon the ability to imagine what it would feel like to subject our actions to the perception of others:

> We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from this. But we can do this in no other way than by endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them.[6]

Peter de Bolla's account of 'the sentimental look' in the eighteenth-century historicises the relationship between vision and sentiment, and offers a model for understanding and interpreting the sentimental as a visual practice. De Bolla outlines Smith's demonstration that if all members of society acted solely upon the information they derive as individuals from their own experience then the social would collapse under the weight of self-interest. The treatise advances an alternative ethical system, which relies upon an awareness of otherness to function correctly:

> Smith comes up with a solution to this problem through his appeal to the imaginative imputation of what another might feel, based on the evidence of our own experience. This, the doctrine of sympathy, is the motor that governs a just and ethically correct society.[7]

Moreover, 'such sympathetic reactions are primarily governed by what we *see*. From the first, then, the visual is crucial in determining the entire system'.[8] Significantly, in Smith's treatise, what we 'see' is also what we imagine; vision is not just the empirical act of looking.[9] This fusing of the physical faculty of sight with the imagination not only adds weight to the notion of the moral sense as a sixth sense, it also calls attention to the slippage between systems of moral philosophy and visual and literary culture of the period (as de Bolla's study alerts us to). Further, Smith's discourse of the impartial spectator offers potentialities for future readers and writers exploring the role and limits of the imagination in highlighting and intervening in social problems; potentialities played out in literature of the early-mid nineteenth-century.

Although de Bolla argues that the sentimental look had faded by the end of the 1760s, he also qualifies that 'like all cultural forms, the sentimental look, once formed, does not entirely vanish: it remains "in potentia", awaiting the moment when an alignment

once again allows it to resurface and for it to be enlisted in other arguments about the cultural domain and on behalf of other constituents within the republic of taste'.[10] Judith Stoddart and Paul Davis both offer suggestions why the sentimental look may have resurged once again in the 1840s, a period dominated by shifting economic, industrial and aesthetic conditions. Stoddart writes that:

> These decades (the 1830s and 1840s) were marked by what might be called a representational crisis in which political and aesthetic modes of representation were firmly linked in public debates. It was in response to this crisis that the characteristics of the sentimental as we have come to recognize it – a natural, emotional response, a reflex of universal human nature instead of a particular form of cultural competence – seem to emerge.[11]

Stoddart also identifies contradictory attitudes amongst critics of sentimental art, noting that 'on the one hand modern readers see Victorian sentimental art as firmly rooted in a time and place, so constrained by circumstances that discussions of it must be prefaced by a critical apologia. On the other hand, in their descriptions of sentimentalism, critics often lapse into a kind of dehistoricized reader response in which the author's or readers' emotions can be directly assessed and transcribed'. Significantly, Stoddart states that Victorian sentimentalism 'can be seen as a means of marking out and solidifying a quite particular way of seeing. The relationship between reason and emotion was by no means a clear-cut binary early in the nineteenth century'.[12]

Stoddart's argument that the sentimental eye can be characterised in the visual arts by its attempt to stabilise the oscillating perspective of perceptual orientation can be translated into literature, where we might characterise the sentimental eye by its attempts to stabilise the oscillation of time. We cannot however see through this eye; we can only track some of its movements.[13]

III

I shall now consider the ways in which we might track some of the movement of Dickens's sentimental eye in two of the Christmas Books, and the contradictory ways it appears in the texts. Dickens's writing in the 1840s demonstrates a marked preoccupation with the idea of perception (most notably seeing), and the relation of perception to knowledge. This preoccupation with perception can itself be seen as a further vestige of Dickens's inheritance of eighteenth-century sentimental literature, if we recognise

sentimental literature's absorption of emerging scientific ideas (both English and continental) around perception.[14]

A consideration of the relationship between the sentimental and vision in Dickens suggests ways in which selfhood is ordered in the text; to look is to be reminded of one's responsibility to others, and illustrates that the self does not exist in isolation. In the Christmas Books, considerable energy is invested in using the eye to affect the reader, but this effort is undermined as visual relations are shown to be unstable and changeable. The example of blindness necessarily signals the limits of this model, questioning how far one can be aware of the true nature of others without sight. I take the sentimentality in Dickens to be those episodes filled with an overabundance of emotional detail, and the often-excessive narrative interpretation of that detail. The excess we associate with sentimentality in Dickens both conceals and contributes towards the collapsing of subjective and objective boundaries in the text, as a large amount of narrative energy is expended in illustrating the point that individuals must be able to look at themselves, before they can see others.

Over the course of *A Christmas Carol* both Scrooge and the reader must learn to use their sentiment; the eye is implicitly and explicitly involved in this education. Our first glimpse of Scrooge suggests the importance of having a moral vision. We are told that 'even the blindmen's dogs appeared to know him [Scrooge]; and when they saw him coming on, would tug their owners into doorways and up courts; and then would wag their tails as though they said, "no eye at all is better than an evil eye, dark master!"'[15] Vision is not simply a physiological operation; rather, it is understood to be something that can be directed towards a purpose, for good or evil. This is emphasised further with the character of Tackleton in *Cricket on the Hearth*, who is also depicted with a similarly evil eye, described as having 'always one eye wide open, and one eye nearly shut … the one eye nearly shut, was always the expressive eye'.[16] The claim that it is better to be blind than to have 'an evil eye' suggests further the power inherent in vision, as both Scrooge and Tackleton are presented as harsh, exacting masters who exploit and repress their workers. The pair's vision is retrained over the course of each book; once taught to use their sentiment, they become generous and fair employers. The visible appearance of Marley's ghost leads to a chain of events which opens the eyes of both Scrooge and the

reader to their social and moral responsibility. Indeed, a contemporary review of *American Notes for General Circulation* drew attention to Dickens's own moral vision:

> In all his tales there is a latent desire to improve and strengthen the charities of life, raise the trampled upon, soften intolerance, diffuse knowledge, promote happiness…but in Dickens there are better things than these – there is sympathy for, and a perfect appreciation of, all that is good, and true, and beautiful in the human heart, though buried in the depths of poverty and covered in a guise too mean to be penetrated by the eyes of superficial observers.[17]

Moreover, Dickens does not just see what is 'good' and 'true' – he also attempts to use the visual practices of his own writing to direct his reader's vision towards moral purposes. This technique resonates with Peter de Bolla's definition of the 'sentimental look':

> Neither gaze nor glance, the sentimental look operates via a fully somatic insertion into the visual field. It makes the body present to sight, folding it into a set of gestures or attitudes that enable the viewer to feel his or her presence in the visual sphere, feel the self in sight, and in so doing it stimulates the cognitive process of affective response. Where the gaze objectifies things seen and the glance skids off them, the sentimental look presents the viewer to the object and to vision, allows the viewer both to recognize itself in the place of the seen and to identify with the process of seeing. It is, then, a technique of the subject.[18]

In *Carol*, the sentimental works as a way of bringing together the text's status as both a fiction of the self and a treatise on the self's social and ethical responsibility to others. Scrooge's journey to and visions of his own self across time, precedes his transformation into a caring and benevolent member of society. Scrooge's transformation is generally dated to the episodes in Christmas Present and Future when he witnesses the Cratchitts' Christmas dinner, with the disabled figure of Tiny Tim acting as a poster to elicit sympathetic responses both from Scrooge and the reader.[19] Mary Klages argues that Tiny Tim carries the visible weight of sentimentality in the text, operating within a "semiotics of disability".[20] This is witnessed in Bob Cratchit's dialogue with his wife, in which he notes that Tiny Tim goes to church hoping that people will see him ' "because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk and blind men see"' (*Carol,* 80). However, Scrooge's first sign that he is capable of feeling occurs when he meets his younger self in the past – 'a solitary child,

neglected by his friends'. At this point, Scrooge does not need to see – it is enough for him to hear the Spirit's brief description to experience self-recognition: 'Scrooge said he knew it. And he sobbed' (*Carol*, 57).

Kaplan provides an illuminating discussion of the significance of crying and tears in the display of moral sentiments, writing that the tears of sentimentality 'can dissolve the barrier that destructive individual and social pressures have erected to prevent the free expression of feeling.[21] Tears carry a plurality of signification within *Carol*, functioning as a visible sign to the reader of Scrooge's own possession of feeling and emotion; the water the tears are made of signifying both a purifying and dissolving act that occurs in weeping; and reminding us that the eyes are the primary site for the representation and action of sentimentality. The narrator continues to tell us that:

> They went, the Ghost and Scrooge, across the hall, to a door at the back of the house. It opened before them, and disclosed a long, bare, melancholy room, made barer still by lines of plain deal forms and desks. At one of these a lonely boy was reading near a feeble fire; and Scrooge sat down upon a form, and wept to see his poor forgotten self as he had used to be.
>
> Not a latent echo in the house, not a squeak and scuffle from the mice behind the panelling, not a drip from the half-thawed water-spout in the dull yard behind, not a sigh among the leafless boughs of one despondent poplar, not the idle swinging of an empty store-house door, no, not a clicking in the fire but fell upon the heart of Scrooge with a softening influence, and gave a freer passage to his tears (*Carol*, 58).

The act of crying is emphasised through its expression in three different forms – sobbing, weeping, and tears. Scrooge's first moment of self-recognition occurs when he sees himself, lonely and reading. His reliving of the scene (which is also aurally rendered), from the sighing of the boughs to the clicking in the fire, all work upon Scrooge's heart 'with a softening influence'.

Nostalgia frequently intersects the sentimental, suggesting that memory is heavily interwoven in the ability to feel compassion for others. Philip Davis argues that *Carol* offers 'the impossible but almost needful thing', which is:

> The opportunity to have feelings about your own feelings, vicariously, as if you were looking back at yourself as another person who was also you. Scrooge has to learn to look both ways: at the past scenario before his eyes, and at the person who is doing the seeing. From this double perspective, normally impossible to us and displaced, he feels his own feelings: at one time he feels the same again as he did in the past and forgets his present self; at

> another, he has feelings excluded from those expressed in what he sees, in regret for what became of him.[22]

Davis argues further that *Carol* is after real dynamic remembering, when what has happened to you is felt by you in terms of the direct feelings themselves, and not just their indirect effects on you ever after.[23] The passivity Davis identifies in this remembrance makes the subject the object of his or her own feelings, and of time. Self is neither linear nor progressive, but circuitous, both subject and object of its own gaze. In *Carol*, that gaze is violent and disturbing, as at one point although Scrooge begs the Ghost of Christmas Past to '"show me no more!"' he is ignored by the 'relentless Ghost' who 'pinioned him in both his arms, and forced him to observe what happen next' (*Carol*, 67). There is an explicit violence in directing the self towards self-recognition in the recovery of feeling; a violence that requires great narrative energy.[24]

Interestingly, the special care given to illustrations, and the material production of the text, indicates a certain tension in Dickens's sentimental vision. Dickens himself invested great care in making *Carol* visually and materially attractive. *Carol* was designed to look as seasonal as possible, using red and green colours on the title page and endpapers (although production problems subsequently resulted in the use of yellow, red and blue); four of John Leech's designs were to be hand-coloured. Dickens's motivating factors were however not straightforwardly aesthetic, or social. As Ruth Glancy points out, his immediate intentions for *Carol* were economic; in producing a book for the Christmas market, he hoped to offset the poor sales of his novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which was in progress in monthly instalments in 1843.[25] Dickens proposed to his publisher that he would cover the book's expenses, although he underestimated how large the expenses would be – he made £230 when he had expected profits of £1,000. Later books were therefore not hand-painted; however, they continued in the vein of lavish production, and were illustrated by a range of successful and popular Victorian artists, such as Daniel Maclise, Clarkson Stanfield, Richard Doyle, John Tenniel and Edwin Landseer.

IV

In *Cricket on the Hearth*, sentimentality is figured through the display of persons and objects. The narrative is structured around a series of scenes, culminating in Tackleton "showing" John Peerybingle's wife, Dot, in an act of infidelity with Edward Plummer, and

the spirits of the hearth showing John scenes from his marriage in Dot's defence. As Elisabeth Gitter notes, the plot is organised around seeing, watching and spying.[26] As with *Carol*, seeing clearly in *The Cricket* is shown to be something that is experiential, rather than intuitive. Throughout the books the central characters must learn not only to see beyond their 'empirical blindness', [27] but also to use their moral sentiment as well as their eyes to see what is truly there. The interrelations between the blind girl Bertha Plummer and the other sighted characters question the extent to which accurate perception lies outside of the faculty of vision, and is dependent upon other factors, such as the emotions.

The 'Blind Girl', Bertha Plummer, is especially involved in the narrative's sentimental practice, at a most obvious level because her portrayal is constructed with the intention of eliciting the reader's pity and sympathy. The emphasis placed on the visual in the formation of sympathy in Smith and Hume's moral philosophy alert us to a further privileging of sight in sentimental texts. Smith asks:

> were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face?[28]

Smith's call to bring such a man into society, where he is 'immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before' draws upon Hume's claim in *Treatise* that 'the minds of men are mirrors to one another'. Moreover, there is an intimate relationship between empiricism and blindness, deriving from the privileging of vision in the Enlightenment. As Jessica Riskin shows, there was an especial interest in the thoughts and sentiments of blind people.[29] Further, the blind were also test cases of empiricism, as Alenka Zupancic demonstrates in his questioning of whether there is 'a necessary inner connection between the project of the Enlightenment and the figure of the blind man?'[30] The obsession with blindness in the Enlightenment can be traced back to John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), which drew upon "Molyneux's problem" of what the blind man restored to sight would see, crucially as a way of re-orientating philosophy away from Cartesian optics. As Zupancic argues, 'the question posed by Molyneux was one of *the* questions of the time'.[31]

However, before I treat the depiction of blindness in *The Cricket on the Hearth*, it is helpful to look at an earlier depiction in order to see the way in which the relationship between blindness and sentimentality develops in Dickens's writing. In his novel *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), Dickens subverts sentimental responses in his portrayal of the blind villain, Stagg, a character who anticipates and plays upon the charitable responses of others to his "suffering". It could be suggested that Dickens's unfavourable representation of Stagg derives from the centrality of vision in the formation of sympathy taken to its extreme; without the faculty of sight, he suggests, Stagg is devoid of human emotion. A critical episode in the novel comes when Stagg presents himself to Barnaby Rudge and his mother Mary in the guise of the blind beggar. Stagg catches Barnaby's attention as 'a new object', a 'man with dusty feet and garments, who stood, bareheaded, behind the hedge that divided their patch of garden from the pathway, and leant meekly forward as if he sought to mingle with their conversation, and waited for his time to speak. His face was turned towards the brightness, too, but the light that fell upon it showed that he was blind, and saw it not'.[32] Stagg calls out to the voices of Barnaby and his mother, asking them to speak again and '"cheer the heart of a poor traveller"' (*BR*, 375). Barnaby asks Stagg whether he is '"frightened in the dark"', and the widow notes that he has wandered from the road 'in a tone of pity'. Stagg plays on the social role the blind beggar is expected to fulfil; reminding the sighted of the scale of human suffering, and the need to display compassion to those less fortunate. Although the narrator refers to her almost invariably as 'the widow', emphasising her economic disadvantage, Mary's impulse is to give Stagg bread and cheese, although Stagg declines this as 'through the kindness of the charitable' he has already eaten and is not hungry (*BR*, 376).

However, Stagg subsequently drops his mask to reveal the true purpose of his visit, after first sending Barnaby on a 'charitable errand'. Stagg subverts expectations by mocking the notion of sentimental feeling, ironically explaining to Barnaby's mother that '"I have taken the liberty to get him out of the way for a short time, while you and I confer together, and this precaution arising out of the delicacy of *my sentiments* towards yourself, you will excuse me, ma'am, I know."' (*BR*, 377 emphasis my own). Before Stagg threatens to expose her part in falsifying her husband's death after he murdered Reuben Haredale, the narrator notes that:

> The change in his manner was so unexpected, the craft and nakedness of his deportment were so much aggravated by his condition – for we are accustomed to see in those who have lost a human sense, something in its place almost divine – and this alteration bred so many fears in her who he addressed, that she could not pronounce one word (*BR*, 378).

John Bowen notes that Dickens added 'for we are … almost divine' to the manuscript in small letters above the line. The Pilgrim editors of the text suggest that they were added in response to a letter protesting against his treatment of Stagg, to which Dickens wrote in reply:

> My intention in the management of this inferior and subordinate character, was to remind the World who have eyes, that they have no *right* to expect in sightless men a degree of virtue and goodness to which they, in full possession of all their senses, can lay no claim – that is a very easy thing for those who misuse every gift of Heaven to consider resignation and cheerfulness the duty of those whom it has deprived of some great blessing – that whereas we look upon a blind man who does wrong, as a kind of monster, we ought in Truth and Justice to remember that a man who has eyes and is a vicious wretch, is by his very abuse of the glorious faculty of sight, an immeasurably greater offender than his afflicted fellow. (Pilgrim, 2, pp.336-7)

Further, Bowen notes that the Pilgrim editors add that Dickens's treatment of Stagg changes from this point in the novel, probably as a response to the protest.[33]

The alteration of Stagg's character signals a critical turning point in the relationship between blindness and sympathy, and vision and morality, in Dickens's narrative voice, which is further reappraised over the course of the 1840s. Dickens begins to explore more explicitly the question of whether emotion can take place outside of, or without, the faculty of vision. The following year, immediately preceding the writing of *Carol*, Dickens visited the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston. During the visit, which formed part of a wider institutional tour of America, Dickens met both the leader of the Institution, Samuel Gridley Howe, and his most famous pupil, Laura Bridgman, who, following an infant infection, retained only the sense of smell. In "Laura Bridgman's History", Dickens focuses on how the blind girl is taught 'the purely arbitrary language in common use' by giving her 'a knowledge of letters by combination of which she might express her idea of the existence, and the mode of existence, and the mode and condition of existence, of any thing'.[34] Whilst the account of Laura is still sentimental, repeating that the reader should feel pity for her, there is a greater preoccupation with the question

of how one might know the world and language without vision (a preoccupation far less explicit in *Barnaby Rudge*). This shift is founded upon an attempt to imagine the interior space of blindness, and the blind, rather than simply look at the blind as an object of pity. It opens a problematic discourse of whether blindness offers potentiality for or limitations to the imagination, a discourse that informs the portrayal of Bertha in *The Cricket on the Hearth*.

This interest in blindness also signals the ways in which Dickens infuses these philosophic discourses with more consciously literary concerns. The mythic and poetic treatment of blindness has a long heritage, stretching back to antiquity, as Homer, mythologised as the first writer of the Western tradition, is also portrayed as blind.[35] Oedipus's self-blinding, and the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*, provide the writer with two central literary examples in which the relationship between seeing and knowing are crucially tested. More significantly still, the figure of Milton looms large in the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century cultural imagination, with an especial interest into the nature of his blindness, and questioning of the ways in which his blindness facilitated the production of his poetry.[36] In this tradition then, insight is the compensation for a lack of physical, material sight; as Kate Flint articulates, 'considering blindness dramatises the co-presence of inner and outer vision, and hence problematises the representations of each'.[37] However, within moral philosophy, and its absorption into wider cultural discourses, blindness offers not just a trope with which to examine the 'nature and limitations of visual experience'.[38] Moreover, blindness interrogates the situation of the subject within the social, as relations with others are understood to be figured visually, through the function of the imagination which springs from real, literal sight.

In *The Cricket on the Hearth*, sentimental discourses, interrogating the relationship between self and others, both impact upon, and are shaped by, an interest in the textual nature of blindness. We are told, from our initial introduction to Bertha (referred to at first as 'The Blind Girl' or 'The Blind Child') that:

> The Blind Girl never knew that ceilings were discoloured, walls blotched and bare of plaster here and there, high crevices unstopped and widening every day, beams mouldering and tending downward. The Blind Girl never knew that iron was rusting, wood rotting, paper peeling off; the size, and shape, and true proportion of the dwelling, withering away. The Blind Girl never knew that ugly shapes of delf and earthenware were on the board; that sorrow and faintheartedness were in the house; that Caleb's scanty hairs were turning

> greyer and more grey, before her sightless face. The Blind Girl never knew they had a master, cold, exacting, and uninterested – never knew that Tackleton was Tackleton in short, but lived in the belief of an eccentric humourist who loved to have his jest with them, and who, while he was the Guardian Angel of their lives, disdained to hear one word of thankfulness (*Cricket*, 214).

Knowing and seeing are emphatically linked here. The repetition of 'never knew' both heightens the pathos of the situation, and also, through the negative, increases the episodic and scenic nature of the writing, as Bertha's 'never knowing' implies that *on no occasion* did she know. Bertha's 'belief' in a master who was 'an eccentric humourist' also pointedly secularises and satirises the contemporary faith and knowledge debate, as both her faith and knowledge (not in the spiritual but in the economic system) are misplaced. Although Bertha's blindness is shown here to limit her knowledge of the visual and spatial – the discolouration of the ceilings, the blotched and bare walls, the space of the unstopped and widening crevices, the shape of the earthenware – her inability to see is also associated with an inability to perceive the emotional environment she lives in, those forces and atmospheres seemingly outside of vision. Her father's desire that 'her great deprivation might be almost changed into a blessing' and his misrepresentation (or perhaps, colouring) of their living environment also makes Bertha blind to perceiving 'that sorrow and faintheartedness were in the house' (*Cricket*, 214). Vision is not just a matter of interpreting the evidence brought before the senses; but also responding accurately to the larger environment in which the evidence is located, and the systems it points to.

Bertha is depicted as necessarily helpless and dependent because of her impairment (in need of her father's sight, which she calls her 'patient, willing eyes' [*Cricket*, 222]). Whilst I do not wish to collude with the text in its depiction of Bertha as helpless, the complexity of her representation emerges if we return to the text's wider visual, perceptual and sensory schemes. Julia Miele Rodas points out that the depiction of Bertha is in many ways reductive, arguing that:

> She is portrayed as alert, sensitive, and 'clever'… yet despite her perceptive nature, the mature and attentive Bertha is yet infantilised both by her father and by the framer of the narrative, both of whom appear to suggest that Bertha's analytical or interpretative skills are no match for those of a seeing adult.[39]

Elisabeth Gitter adds to this by arguing that the story's sentimental veneer barely conceals a punishing aggression directed towards the "Blind Daughter", who, surrounded by eyes and games of seeing, is herself shrouded in sightlessness.[40]

However, within the story as a whole, Bertha is not the only character to be presented as a pathetic or sentimentalised figure, if we interpret sentimentality as being made an object of care and pity for others. The narrative voice assumes a paternalistic tone in its description of the Peerybingles and Caleb Plummer, often reducing these figures in size by referring to them in diminutive terms such as 'little'. Moreover, both Caleb and John Peerybingle, despite being sighted, experience visual distortions which challenge John's sense of self and Caleb's ability to make sound judgements of visual evidence. The narrator writes that Caleb has experienced confusion as a result of deceiving his daughter:

> But I think Caleb's vague bewilderment of manner may have half originated in his having confused himself about himself and everything around him, for the love of his Blind Daughter. How could the *little* man be otherwise than bewildered, after labouring for so many years to destroy his own identity, and that of all the objects that had any bearing on it! (*Cricket*, 218) (emphasis my own).

Gitter argues that Bertha's blindness 'neutralises the old man's guilt; unable to return his gaze, she is pure object, incapable of subjectivity; she connotes, in Laura Mulvey's terms, pure "to-be-looked-at-ness"'.[41] In Mulvey's psychoanalytic formulation, pure 'to-be-looked-at-ness' functions as a lack, absence, or castration onto which the active male can 'live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not of meaning, but of making'.[42] However, Caleb's subjectivity is also confused as a result of his role as visual framer; his own selfhood is recognised to have been radically undermined precisely by these attempts to control and reinscribe the visual and material world in which he and Bertha live; the narrative explicitly recognises the limits to both the male gaze and the fantasy it projects upon its female subject.

Bertha's existence in this make-believe world is more distinctly unsettling because it is uncertain whether she can be who she thinks she is, depending upon how far we accept that subjects are determined by the objective world around them. Rodas recognises

the problems of subjective agency that Bertha's representation raises, as her desire for Tackleton, even though dimly perceived, is nevertheless a meaningful factor in her own identity.[43] She adds that:

> the narrator of the Christmas tale can no more maintain his objectifying and disabling delimitation of 'the Blind Girl' than can Bertha's father. The desire to act as satellite to the disabled, to re-tell her story to the world and to retail the world to her, is persistently thwarted by the agency of the blind subject…most remarkably, Bertha's place and identity as disabled are significantly challenged by her own apparent desire to assume the role of caretaker.[44]

Bertha also reminds us of a later depiction of female blindness, Millais's *The Blind Girl* (1856), the subject of which is dependent upon her companion, whose main function, as Kate Flint argues, is that of 'interpreter, the same role which Jane Eyre adopts in relation to the maimed Rochester'.[45] However, the companion, turning her face into the blind girl's shawl, suggests that the sighted can create their own physically dark spaces; blindness is not merely the domain of the blind. Millais's painting can be read, similarly to Dickens's story, as a critique of the way in which blindness operates within the seemingly visible, for even though the sighted assume that they possess a full vision, in comparison to the painted blind girl or Bertha, much remains that they cannot see. Thus, the binary between the blind and sighted is broken down.

To some extent, Bertha's relation to her emotional world also reflects the interpretation of sentimentality as 'passivity of the mind in relation to feelings'.[46] The uncertain extent of her agency within a fantasised objective world allows us to play out the opposing views of sentimentality identified by Michael Tanner as either being 'an intrinsic property', or 'necessarily relational'.[47] Bertha is revealed to be a more than a sentimental poster, and in fact a complex interrogation of self, paradoxically by the processes of sentimental feeling themselves.

Caleb's confession to Bertha also problematises the reader's faith in the narrative, especially unsettling in a narrative in which the nature of his misrepresentation is suggestive of the act of writing itself:

> "My dear blind daughter, hear and forgive me! The world you live in, heart of mine, doesn't exist as I have represented it. The eyes you have trusted in, have been false to you…Your road in life was rough, my poor one … and I meant to smooth it for you. I have altered objects, changed the characters of people, invented many things that have never been, to make you happier. I have had

> concealments from you, put deceptions on you, God forgive me! And surrounded you with fancies" (*Cricket*, 262).

The illustration for chapter two, "Chirp the Second", depicts Caleb's inventive world (figure 1). Summoning forth spirits and fantasies from the toys he makes for Tackleton, Caleb is positioned in the role of storyteller, blurring the distinction between the real and the imaginary. Bertha, her shut eyes signalling her blindness, participates in Caleb's make-believe world by holding out a doll, her raised face and smile clearly demonstrating her enjoyment and pleasure at Caleb's narrative. In this illustration, she most clearly occupies the same space as the reader.

Finally, the blurring between inner and outer vision in *The Cricket*, and the idea of 'true resemblances', raise the question of how far spiritual sight is or is not privileged over secular in the period. Bertha denies to her father that her blindness is a 'great affliction', arguing instead that she had 'never felt it, in its fullness, never!'. Yet she goes on to reflect that:

> "I have sometimes wished that I could see you, or could see him – only once, dear father, only for one little minute – that I might know what it is I treasure up," she laid her hands upon her breast, "and hold here! That I might be sure and have it right! And sometimes (but then I was a child) I have wept in my prayers at night, to think that when your images ascended from my heart to Heaven, they might not be the true resemblance of yourselves…" (*Cricket*, 236)

Bertha herself links seeing to knowing, as her sometime desire to see is a desire 'to know' and to be 'sure' and 'have it right'. The 'true resemblance' in this instance is what lies outside of Bertha's perception – an image derived from corporeal sight. Thus whilst she invokes 'Heaven', true sight is still dependent upon the accurate perception of the material body. Just as distortion of objects is shown to bewilder Caleb, so here the subject's relation to the physical world is recognised to be integral to the experience of truth and knowledge. The narrative is ambivalent as to whether such a system is flawed. We could either interpret this as proving that vision and visual scenes are untrustworthy and capable of deception, or conversely that vision itself is essentially truthful (only the medium through which we experience *visions* has the power to misrepresent). This turns on the question of whether the objective world exists in fact, or whether the objective world is only brought into being in the subject's mind, through seeing. This also suggests the

limits to the sentimental vision at work in the narrative, as the reader is asked to invest in something potentially false. Dot breaks the fairytale narrative device by verbally revealing that Caleb is 'an old man, worn with care and work. He is a spare, dejected, thoughtful, grey-haired man. I see him now, despondent and bowed down, and striving against nothing' (*Cricket*, 264). The violence of Bertha's reaction locates her within melodramatic and sentimental modes of representation, and also reopens the debate of what accurate perception might be. She cries:

> "It is my sight restored. It is my sight!…I have been blind, and now my eyes are open. I never knew him! To think I might have died, and never truly seen the father who has been so loving to me!"
> There were no words for Caleb's emotion (*Cricket*, 264).

Caleb's revelation to Bertha becomes the book's central sentimental force, with the real, as opposed to 'fancies', eliciting the strongest emotional responses in both the characters and the reader.

V

The alignment of vision and feeling is a significant textual practice in both *The Chimes* and in *The Haunted Man*. In *The Chimes*, reading like a template for Frank Capra's film *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946), Trotty Veck must be taken outside of his self, and made to view the future impact of his death on those he loves, to see his own value. Despite previously being described as 'blind' on two occasions, his new self-awareness leads him to call out to the Chimes:[48]

> "I see the Spirit of the Chimes among you!" cried the old man, singling out the child, and speaking in some inspiration, which their looks conveyed to him. "… I see it, on the flow! I know that we must trust and hope, and neither doubt ourselves, nor doubt the good in one another. I have learnt it from the creature dearest to my heart." (*The Chimes*, 178)

Like Scrooge, Trotty Veck has had to 'brush away the blinding tears, that he might look upon her [his daughter Meg]; that he might only see her' (*The Chimes*, 147). Yet Trotty is not merely a perceiving subject; he is also an object to be seen, a representative of the deserving poor invisible to members of society such as Alderman Cute and Sir Joseph Bowley. The Malthusian exchange between Alderman Cute and Mr Filer is not only a thinly-veiled rebuke to those critics who attacked Dickens's political economy in *Carol*; it also confirms the story's polemical nature.[49] By showing Trotty visions of his family's

own future, Dickens is encouraging empathic responses in the reader, as we see his daughter Meg, her husband Richard and Meg's adopted daughter Lillian fall into tragic decline after his death. This model clearly draws upon that practised in *Carol*, although Trotty Veck, whose self-crisis results from his poverty rather than moral degeneration, does not need to see the error of his ways by looking back to his past. Instead, whereas the reader might be invited to align himself or herself with Scrooge by sharing his vision, Trotty acts as an object of pity; his poverty is created by society's harsh, utilitarian attitudes.

In *The Haunted Man*, Dickens indicates that an ethical subjectivity must be shaped by a self that can see its past actions, both good and bad, in order to function well socially in the present. The visual systems at work in this book are complex. The main character, Redlaw is encouraged by his visual double to accept a gift which makes him lose his memory. The figure of the double demonstrates the text's abiding interest in the supernatural, linking it to the preceding Christmas books. However, the text draws on more complex psychological models of mind and memory (indicated not least in Redlaw's occupation of chemist). Redlaw's loss of memory is described in terms of unseeing, as he laments his 'blinded mind'.[50] Drawing on contemporary theories of disease, the 'gift' contaminates all those who come into contact with Redlaw. Without memory, the ties and relations between others break down, witnessed in the rapid degeneration of the Tetterbys' relationship upon receiving the gift. Desirous to give up this gift, Redlaw appeals to the 'phantoms' and 'punishers of impious thoughts' to ' "look upon me!"' and ' "from the darkness of my mind, let the glimmering of contrition, that I know is there, shine up, and show me my misery!'" Moreover, he recognises that 'it is the same with good and evil, happiness and sorrow, in the memories of men'".[51] The 'savage' child 'with no name or lineage' acts as a warning to future societies, as without the 'softening memory of sorrow, wrong, or trouble', the human is incapable of feeling empathy or caring for others.[52] This relationship between memory and blindness is explored, conterminously to *The Haunted Man*, in *David Copperfield* (1849-50), as David, looking back on his younger self, has to learn to see, from his future perspective, what he was blind to in his present (mainly, his love for Agnes).

Dickens reached a huge audience with the Christmas books; for example, tens of thousands of copies of *The Chimes* were shifted within a few days of publication (by

1845, it had already run into eleven editions). As such, these books were obviously important for Dickens's social ambitions, tapping into an extensive commercial market, and (conversely to the novel form), making a quick and sharp emotional appeal to the reader (there are many records of readers' emotional responses to the books; Carlyle for one was reported to have shed tears).[53] The Christmas Books were reciprocally shaped by and helped to construct their market; appealing to a newly anxious reader, uneasy at the accelerated rate of social and economic change, and troubled by the threat of domestic political revolution. Dickens's skill lay in making recourse to the literary and philosophic vein of the eighteenth-century sentimental mode, which allowed readers a nostalgic response to changing social conditions. In the Christmas Books, vision was crucial in the construction of both textual subjects and readers who were capable of demonstrating empathy and social action. Dickens's use of sentimental technique, echoing Adams's figure of the impartial spectator, encouraged readers to use their imaginations to see and empathise with figures of suffering, offering subtly complex realignments of self in the process.

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[1] The death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is, in line with these associations, often recognised as the central example of Dickens's sentimentality.

[2] Tears and weeping are two signatures of sentimentality, from the crying which proliferates Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey* to William Wordsworth, who wrote of 'thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears'.

[3] Michael Tanner, "Sentimentality", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, (1976-77), 127-47, p.128.

[4] Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp.8-10. On sensibility and sentimentality see also John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling* in the Eighteenth-Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); G.S. Rousseau, *Nervous Acts: Essays on Literature, Culture and Sensibility* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House: a cultural history* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004).

[5] Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1759) and Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1776) are two examples of canonical sentimental texts from literature, even if they do subvert the meaning of sentimentality, (see Fred Kaplan, *Sacred Tears: Sentimentality in Victorian Literature* [Princeton, New

Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987], p.19. Kaplan also explores Dickens's inheritance of these texts, as well as Thackeray's and Carlyle's attitudes towards the sentimental, pp.39-56).

[6] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: University Press, 2002) (first published 1759; taken from the sixth edn, reprt. 1790), p.128

[7] Peter de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.74

[8] De Bolla (2003), p.75

[9] For example, at the start of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith argues that 'as we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations' (11).

[10] De Bolla (2003), p.218

[11] Judith Stoddart, "Tracking the Sentimental Eye", in *Knowing the Past: Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Suzy Anger (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p.204.

[12] Stoddart (2001), pp.192-211, pp.194 & 196

[13] Stoddart (2001), p.196

[14] Jessica Riskin argues that 'the engagement of Enlightenment French science with sentimental English literature should not be surprising. Natural science and literature were not far apart during the eighteenth century, nor were France and England. Diderot…personified the relevant intimacies. He was himself both natural philosopher and man of letters, and his favourite novelists were Richardson and Sterne' (2002), pp.7-8.

[15]Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol, and Other Christmas Writings*, ed. by Michael Slater (London: Penguin, 2003), p.34. All future references are taken from this edition; hereafter referred to in the main body of the text as *Carol*.

[16] Charles Dickens, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, in *Christmas Books: Including "A Christmas Carol"*, ed. by Ruth Glancy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.183-278, p.205. All references are taken from this edition; hereafter referred to in the main body of the text as *Cricket*.

[17] *Westminster Review*, 39 (1843), p. 146.

[18] De Bolla (2003), p.11

[19] Paul Davis notes that 'the story of Scrooge began as a text and became a culture-text. Dickens initiated an ongoing creative process in the Anglo-American imagination'. Further, the text's initial Victorian readers responded more strongly to the events of Scrooge's present rather than his past, and also viewed the Cratchitt's as the text's spiritual centre – a response repeated by many subsequent audiences. (Paul Davis, *The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge* [New Haven: Yale University Press,1990], pp.5; 40-1; 76) .

[20] Mary Klages, *Woeful Afflictions: Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p.78

[21] Kaplan (1987), p.41, pp.103-109.

[22] Philip Davis, "Victorian Realist Prose and Sentimentality", in Alice Jenkins and Juliet John, eds, *Rereading Victorian Fiction* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 2000), pp.13-28, p.25.

[23] Davis (2000), pp.26-7.

[24] Provoking a sentimental response by showing the individual itself outside of time is explored further in *The Chimes: A Goblin Story of Some Bells that Rang an Old Year Out and a New Year In*, in *Christmas Books: Including "A Christmas Carol"*, ed. by Ruth Glancy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.91-182.

[25] Glancy, ed., (1988), p.ix.

[26] Elisabeth Gitter, "The Blind Daughter in Charles Dickens's *Cricket on the Hearth*", *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 39:4 (1999), 675-89, 678.

[27]Emily Walker Heady, "The Negative's Capability: Real Images and the Allegory of the Unseen in Dickens's Christmas Books" *Dickens Studies Annual* (2002), 1-22 (p.15).

[28] Smith, (2002), p.129.

[29] See Chapter 2, "The Blind and the Mathematically Inclined" for an overview of this relationship, Riskin (2002), pp.18-67.

[30] Alenka Zupancic, "Philosophers' Blind Man's Buff", in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. by Renata Salecl and Slavoj Zizek (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp.32-58, p.32

[31] See Zupancic (1996), pp.35-8.

[32] Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty*, ed. by John Bowen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004) (First published 1841). All references are taken from this edition unless otherwise stated; hereafter referred to in the main body of the text as *BR*.

[33] John Bowen, in *Barnaby Rudge*, ed. Bowen (2004), pp.733-34. This also echoes Jesus' exhortation in John 9:40, that guilt is only attributable to those who can see.

[34] Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1842), p.79. Dickens inserts the narrative by the head of the Perkins Institution for the Blind, Samuel Gridley Howe, into the text.

[35] For an overview of this heritage in the visual arts, see Moshe Barasch, *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought* (Routledge: London, 2001). Barasch's study ends in the early nineteenth century.

[36] Several recent studies have reappraised Milton's influence on nineteenth-century culture, arguing that engagement with Milton offered writers creative potency. Catherine Maxwell has recently traced receptions of Milton in Victorian male writers' poetry to argue that castration can be viewed as the essential mark of poethood, as Milton's symbolic language co-identifies blindness, castration and feminisation as the necessary loss for the true compensatory vision (Catherine Maxwell, *Bearing Blindness: The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001], pp.5-4). See also Anna

K. Nardo, *George Eliot's Dialogue with John Milton* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003) for a reappraisal of 1970s feminist critiques of Milton's debilitating influence on nineteenth-century women writers.

[37] Kate Flint, "Blindness and Insight", in *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.64-92, p.64

[38] Flint (2000), p.64

[39] Julia Miele Rodas, "Tiny Tim, Blind Bertha, and the Resistance of Miss Mowcher: Charles Dickens and the Uses of Disability", *Dickens Studies Annual* (2004), 51-98, p.71.

[40] Gitter (1999), p.679.

[41] Gitter (1999), p. 683.

[42] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasurre and Narrative Cinema", in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp.14-28, p.15.

[43] Rodas (2004), p.75.

[44] Rodas (2004), p.78.

[45] Flint (2000), p.75.

[46] Tanner (1976-77), p. 134.

[47] Tanner (1976-7), p. 134.

[48] *The Chimes*, Glancy ed. (1988), pp.128 & 138.

[49] The *Westminster Review* famously attacked Dickens in June 1844, asking 'who went without turkey and punch in order that Bob Cratchit might get them – unless there were turkeys and punch in surplus, some one must go without'.

[50] Charles Dickens, *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain: A Fancy for Christmas Time*, in Michael Slater, ed. (2003), pp.119-230, p.172

[51] *The Haunted Man*, p.199.

[52] *The Haunted Man*, pp. 15, 228, 204

[53] Elizabeth Barrett Browning comments on this episode in a letter from 1845, in *The Brownings' Correspondence*, ed. by Philip Kelley and Scott Lewis, 12 vols (Winfield: Wedgestone Press, 1991), vol 9, letter 1783.