

# Ability

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IN Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), our narrator Lucy Snowe, an English teacher in a Belgian boarding school, is forced to spend a two-month vacation at her workplace caring for a student with severe disabilities: "the house was left quite empty, but for me, a servant, and a poor deformed and imbecile pupil, a sort of crétin, whom her stepmother in a distant province would not allow to return home."<sup>1</sup> This description is faintly compassionate, figuring the student as innocent victim within a fairy tale. Exiled by a wicked stepmother, the student is, like Lucy, bereft of family and friends. Lucy continues calmly, "The crétin did not seem unhappy. I did my best to feed her well and keep her warm, and she only asked food and sunshine, or when that lacked, fire."<sup>2</sup> But, as Paul Marchbanks points out, Lucy's tone abruptly shifts after Lucy describes a bout with psychic anguish. During this episode, an older female relative of the student appears: "It was some relief when an aunt of the crétin, a kind old woman, came one day, and took away my strange deformed companion."<sup>3</sup> Now that the student has been enfolded in a kinship relation, she becomes the object of the narrator's revulsion: "The hapless creature had been at times a heavy charge . . . I could not leave her a minute alone: for her poor mind, like her body, was warped: its propensity was to evil. A vague bent to mischief, an aimless malevolence, made constant vigilance indispensable."<sup>4</sup> Lucy endows the student with an intent to harm, an intent that she interprets as random (because what would it mean to imagine that the student wants to harm her for a particular reason?). This shift is followed by yet another that deprives the student of even this immoral agency, rendering her animal: "As she very rarely spoke, and would sit for hours together moping and mowing, and distorting her features with indescribable grimaces, it was more like being prisoned with some strange tameless animal, than associating with a human being."<sup>5</sup> Lucy concludes by referring to the revolting bodily care she was inappropriately assigned: "These duties should not have fallen on me; a servant, now absent, had rendered them hitherto."<sup>6</sup>

This passage brings up several tensions surrounding the term "ability." Certainly, Lucy's ability—economically, physically, intellectually, morally, and narratively—depends upon the positing of subjects with lesser ability around her. But are there other ways to think about ability

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in the rich context this passage provides? Here, I would like to point to the tendency to focus on the physical rather than intellectual in disability studies and then turn to recent critiques that set considerations of debility alongside the antinormativist work of disability studies. I am guided by two questions: How are the physically disabled seen as recuperable and thus human within a liberal capitalist logic, while the intellectually disabled are not? And how might a focus on structural processes of debility enrich our understanding of the Victorian period?

Fiona Kumari Campbell in her entry on “ability” in another Raymond-Williams-inspired project, *Keywords for Disability Studies*, charts changes in its meaning from Aristotelian notions of “‘monstrous’ bodies as natural *anomalia* . . . that represented different types of ‘ability,’” through the medieval period, when it began to be used in a more exclusive, legal sense to limit access to inheritance and rights, to the early modern period, when it began to describe bodily health.<sup>7</sup> It was not until the Enlightenment, with its promotion of reason and self-development, that ability and disability began to appear in binary relation. During the industrial age, utilitarian thinking reconceptualized ability from a personal characteristic to a measurable quality of a specific population “capable of selling their labor.”<sup>8</sup> The nineteenth century in Western Europe thus linked ability and economic productivity, a fusion that our neoliberal present has not only inherited, but also globalized and accelerated.

Martha Stoddard Holmes makes a similar point in *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture*. Her study traces the instabilities in Victorian conceptions of the deserving and undeserving poor as they applied to the figures of “the innocent afflicted child and the begging imposter.”<sup>9</sup> Both were defined by their exclusion from the economic realm: nonproductive, they were affect-generating objects of compassion and derision, respectively. Meanwhile, Rosemarie Garland Thomson in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* argues that the figure of the physically disabled threatened the idea of the monadic liberal individual that undergirds U. S. notions of democratic citizenship, “mock[ing] the notion of the body as compliant instrument of the limitless will.”<sup>10</sup>

Both Holmes’s and Thomson’s groundbreaking works set Victorian ability within liberal discourses and chart disability’s distance from those norms. As their subtitles indicate, they also focus on the physical. Licia Carlson and Christopher Krentz have noted that disability studies tends to ignore or malign intellectual disabilities.<sup>11</sup> I do not think that is the case with these two works, but it is striking how few Victorianist studies

analyze intellectual disability (for notable exceptions, see Marchbanks and McDonagh).<sup>12</sup> Can we relate this to another set of concerns that have emerged in critical theory? I am thinking of the shift from analyzing the cultural representation of disability to analyzing the structural conditions that produce disability or, as Jasbir K. Puar has put it, debility.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on Lauren Berlant's notion of slow death, Puar's concept of the right to maim examines how states deploy biopolitical practices to produce undesirable parts of the population as disabled. In this framework, debility in the neoliberal age is a process that accompanies racialization and the brutalities of finance capitalism. It opposes but constitutes the idea of disability, understood as a privileged identity available only to white, middle-class subjects. Disability can emerge because debility is being obscured.

*Villette* is interesting for the ways that it narrates an intense affective transfer between the disabled student and Lucy, suggesting something like what Anna Hickey-Moody calls "slow life," "a slow temporal ecology of sensory aesthetics that is posited by cultures of intellectual disability," which she argues offers a materialist critique of the processes that produce what Berlant terms slow death.<sup>14</sup> But if we are interested in historicizing ability in relation to disciplinary power and biopolitics, we might want to turn to the two ghosted characters in the *Villette* passage: the servants. When M. Paul later observes to Lucy that she was alone over vacation, Lucy corrects him, "'Not quite alone: Marie Broc' (the crétin) 'was with me.'"<sup>15</sup> She names the student for the first time, but disappears the servant who was also there. The second invisible servant is Marie's caretaker, whose presence is invoked by her holiday absence, which has caused Lucy to have to care for Marie's bodily functions. Lucy explicitly disavows this labor as not hers; her proper work is to teach the neurotypical daughters of the Belgian bourgeoisie and gentry to speak English. As Puar notes, caretakers of the disabled are often themselves debilitated. There is more to say than I have room, but as we continue to explore Victorian ability, we might begin to think about how physical and intellectual disabilities are opposed and set within scales of economic productivity and to track how industrialism, free market ideology, and empire debilitated and racialized working-class and colonized populations.

#### NOTES

1. Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853; New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), 134.
2. Brontë, *Villette*, 135.

3. Brontë, *Villette*, 135; Paul Marchbanks, "A Costly Morality: Dependency Care and Mental Difference in the Novels of the Brontë Sisters," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 4, no. 1 (2010): 55–71.
4. Brontë, *Villette*, 136.
5. Brontë, *Villette*, 136.
6. Brontë, *Villette*, 136.
7. Fiona Kumari Campbell, "Ability," in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, ed. Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 12.
8. Campbell, "Ability," 13.
9. Martha Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 95.
10. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 43.
11. Christopher Krentz, "A 'Vacant Receptacle'? Blind Tom, Cognitive Difference, and Pedagogy," *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (2005): 552–56; Licia Carlson, "Feminist Approaches to Cognitive Disability," *Philosophy Compass* 11, no. 10 (2016): 541–53.
12. Patrick McDonagh, *Idiocy: A Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008).
13. Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
14. Anna Hickey-Moody, "Slow Life and Ecologies of Sensation," *Feminist Review* 111 (2015): 140–48, 140; Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Summer 2007): 754–80.
15. Brontë, *Villette*, 174.



## Aestheticism

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ONE of the curious aspects of the term aestheticism is that it has succeeded—particularly since the 1990s—in defining a thriving area of English literary history that, for reasons that require some