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**The Image of Idiocy in Nineteenth-Century England:
A History of Cultural Representations of Intellectual Disability**

Patrick McDonagh

A Thesis

in

The Humanities Program

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
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Abstract

The Image of Idiocy in Nineteenth-Century England: A History of Cultural Representations of Intellectual Disability

**Patrick McDonagh
Concordia University, 1998**

Over the nineteenth century, the popular and the scientific understanding of idiocy changed in conjunction with shifts in social concerns and the emergence of new discourses. An examination of representations of idiocy over the century foregrounds the manner in which the condition was given shape and meaning. The dissertation traces the history of the idea of intellectual disability in England from the start of the nineteenth century up to the initial articulation of eugenics, and argues that the idea of intellectual disability acquired new significance in the Victorian era, eventually stabilizing somewhat with the notion of the idiot as degenerate. Political, gender, economic, religious, literary and scientific discourses interact to weave a notion of what intellectual disability means and how it should be interpreted. This dissertation examines the ways that idiocy is constructed by these discourses, and to what ideological purpose, by reading critically texts involved in the construction of the notion. These texts include Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy," Dickens' Barnaby Rudge, Scott's Waverley, and Gaskell's "Half a Life-time Ago," among other literary works, as well as medical, scientific and sociological writings. The dissertation is organized thematically and, for the most part, chronologically to sketch out a cultural history of the idea of idiocy, with an emphasis on delineating the factors that shaped perceptions (the idiot as holy fool, as innocent, or as degenerate), as well as on the ideological significance of the notion of idiocy. Throughout the dissertation, special emphasis is placed on the relation of intellectual disability to gender notions, and the varying interpretations of the significance of intellectual disability when associated with men or women.

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Staying sane is one of the major challenges of graduate work, I've discovered. For their assistance and tremendously appreciated moral support, I thank my aforementioned proofreaders, all fine imbibers, along with Cheryl Simon, Fred McSherry, Pat Baker, Mary Louise Sacconaghi, Corinne Jetté, Kristine Markovic, Alexandra Pasian, Mark Rozahegy, Lynn Beavis, Rob McFadden, and a raft of fine people who might best be characterised as "La Cabaners" (they know who they are).

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for my parents,

Gloria and Mike

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Preface
Disability Studies: A Brief Literature Overview

Disability studies is a relatively new academic endeavour. How new it is depends largely upon who is defining the term. B. J. Gleeson argues that it arose in the 1950's and grew throughout the 1960's and 1970's civil rights movements, although he acknowledges that even now "it remains in the United States mostly a discourse on policy issues, such as employment, physical access, benefit rights and de-institutionalization" (180). Other commentators, especially in the United States, proclaim it to be of much more recent birth. "Disability studies is a field of study whose time has come," writes Lennard J. Davis in his introduction to The Disability Studies Reader, published in 1997 (1).¹ Linton et al observe in a 1995 article that "as with many of the new interdisciplinary fields, creating the category 'disability studies' didn't create the scholarship," but that "the formal establishment of the field some fifteen years ago provided an organizing structure for research and theory across the disciplines focused on disability as a social phenomenon, a perspective largely ignored or misrepresented in the curriculum" (4). Campbell and Oliver effect a compromise, noting that "The decade of the 1980's saw a transformation in our understanding of disability" (19). At any rate, disability studies as a relative to cultural studies is a recent phenomenon.

Given the recent transformation of the field, it is probably not surprising that work on cultural representations of disability is rare and often superficial; as Tom Shakespeare has complained, much work in disability studies has tended "to bracket . . . questions of culture, representation, and meaning" (283). There

¹ Davis also notes that only in 1997 did the Modern Language Association update its database to include terms relevant to disability studies (Disability 6).

are, in fact, no comprehensive published studies of the cultural history of the idea of intellectual disability. The lack of work on cultural representations of intellectual disability, and the paucity of work on representations of disability in general, means critical precedents for this project, and for much of disability studies in general, are found elsewhere. Prominent among these models are works analysing the social construction of alterity, such as Foucault's Madness and Civilization and History of Sexuality, Sander Gilman's Disease and Representation, Susan Sontag's Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors, and Leslie Feidler's Freaks, and Robert Bogdan's Freak Show. Each of these texts examines aspects of the construction of difference as it relates to apparent bodily "dysfunction," if not always to intellectual difference. Bogdan, notably, has done some work on representations of intellectual disability in one chapter of Freak Show, in addition to his numerous other sociological works on people with intellectual disabilities.

There have also been some analyses of the portrayals of people with disabilities in general in some contemporary works. David Hevey's The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery is ground-breaking in this respect, although he focuses primarily on the social and political consequences of contemporary imagery in attacking the "nihilism and negativity" of charity photography (Hevey 3). Gina Herring has written "Mental Retardation and Faulkner's Ironic Vision" (1989) on mentally handicapped characters in William Faulkner's works, but this unpublished dissertation does not attempt to consider how Faulkner's use of intellectual disability fits into a larger social discourse; rather, she examines how Faulkner uses the notion of mental retardation to subvert various forms of literary, cultural and ethical

authorities. Rosemarie Thompson at Hunter University is presently editing two books of essays on this issue (although they have yet to be released), and Davis' The Disability Studies Reader (the first text of its sort on the American market) contains essays examining disability imagery, among other things. However, because this field has not been explored in depth, there is not yet a body of primary material that has been collected and "canonized" as material for reference or study.² Even compiling a bibliography of works to examine has proven onerous and, with primary literary texts, rather haphazard at first.

There is a growing body of material dealing with the history of intellectual disability from various perspectives, building on Kanner's History of the Care and Study of the Mentally Retarded (1964) and Scheerenberger's History of Mental Retardation (1983). These works trace a history of the political, legal, medical and educational responses to intellectual disability, although all are positivist in their structure, mapping the apparent progress of educational reform, social services and public perception. More recently, scholars working in the nascent field of disability studies have produced works examining social and institutional history, and intellectual disability. The first book-length effort in this area may well be Tyor and Bell's Caring for the Retarded in America (1984); there are also unpublished doctoral theses, notably Spencer Gelband's "Mental Retardation and Institutional Treatment in Nineteenth Century England, 1845-1886" (1979) and Michael Barrett's "From Education to Segregation: an Inquiry into the Changing Character of Special Provision for the Retarded in England, c. 1846-1918" (1986). More recently, work in the field has been finding

² An attempt to address the lack of a disability corpus/canon has been made by the Disability Studies Project headed by Simi Linton at Hunter College, New York. See their "Disability Studies Biography," Radical Teacher 47 (1995): 32-39. Also, Steve Taylor and Perri Harris have compiled a bibliography on "Disability Studies and Mental Handicap" for Disability Studies Quarterly.

publishers. Philip Ferguson has analyzed the manner in which intellectual disability was socially constructed in the nineteenth-century United States in Abandoned to Their Fate: Social Policy and Practice toward Severely Retarded People in America, 1820-1920 (1994); this work is concerned with charting the development of social policy rather than investigating the structures that delineate the boundaries of disability. Timothy Stainton's Autonomy and Social Policy: Rights, Mental Handicap, and Community Care analyses the philosophies underlying the development of social policy in Britain and Canada since the mid-nineteenth century, while James Trent's Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States examines the growth of eugenic thought in the United States through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, beginning with the mid-century attempts of Samuel Gridley Howe to establish educational asylums. David Wright's 1993 dissertation, "The National Asylum for Idiots, Earlswood, 1847-1886," forthcoming from Oxford University Press, uses a detailed examination of the Earlswood Asylum archives in a comprehensive history of the institution. Wright has also coedited, with Anne Digby, From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives on People with Learning Disabilities, a collection of essays exploring the manner in which people with intellectual disabilities lived and were perceived in England from the early modern period through to the twentieth century. This 1996 collection is the first book-length social history of intellectual disability.

"Mainstream sociology," laments Len Barton, "has historically shown little interest in the issue of disability" ("Sociology" 6). However, compared to the disciplines of history and literature, sociology is a gold mine of disability-related work. There are a number of sociological works dealing with intellectual

disability, some the most notable being Ryan and Thomas' Marxist-inspired The Politics of Mental Handicap and Farber's Weberian Mental Retardation. Both of these critique the place of people with intellectual disabilities in society, although neither considers the manner in which the idea is constituted culturally. Robert Bogdan, Philip Ferguson, Wolf Wolfensberger and Robert Edgerton also examine the social construction of intellectual disability in numerous articles.³ In recent years, Michael Oliver has established himself as one of the primary sociologists of disability with his many contributions, notably The Politics of Disablement and Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice. Len Barton has also edited Disability and Society: Emerging Issues and Insights, a collection by British sociologists elaborating an "emancipatory sociology" (Barton "Sociology" 3-6). Much other work on disability exists in the social sciences; however, little is written from a "disability studies" perspective, rather articulating the dominant medical or social-services model of disability.

As a result of its comparative youth, disability studies does not have an established corpus of works. This state of affairs is not completely disadvantageous: there seems to be little threat of disciplinary ossification in what can or should be studied. It is, as Davis notes, a field whose time has finally come.

³ See, for instance, Bogdan's "Handicappism" (with Douglas Bilken, Social Policy 7 (1977): 14-19), and "Relationships with Severely Disabled People: The Social Construction of Humanness" (with Steven Taylor, Social Problems 36 (1989): 135-148); Ferguson's "The Social Construction of Mental Retardation" (Social Policy 18 (1987): 51-56); Wolfenberger's The Principle of Normalization in Human Services (Toronto: National Institute on Mental Retardation, 1972), "The Extermination of Handicapped People in World War II Germany," (Mental Retardation 19 (1981): 15-17), and "The Importance of Social Imagery in Interpreting Societally Devalued People to the Public" (Rehabilitation Literature 43 (1982): 166-68); Edgerton's The Cloak of Competence: Stigma in the Lives of the Mentally Retarded (Berkeley: U of California P, 1967) and "Mental Retardation in Non-Western Societies" (in Social-Cultural Aspects of Mental Retardation. Ed. Carl Haywood. New York: Meredith, 1970: 523-559)

1. Introduction: Cultural History and Intellectual Disability

In John Galt's 1823 novel The Entail, Walter ("Watty") Walkinshaw is at one point referred to by the omniscient narrator as a "Natural" who is worried about his inheritance (102). Earlier in the novel, Claud Walkinshaw, his father, says of him that, "haverel though it's like to be, is no sae ill as to be cognost" (36), which Ian Gordon, editing the Oxford World's Classics edition, footnotes as meaning that Watty is to be understood as a half-wit but is not so impaired as to be declared an idiot judicially. Throughout the novel, other characters offer assessments of Watty's prospects: Mr. Keelvin, the family lawyer, suggests that "Watty, not to speak disrespectful of his capacity, might never marry" (57), although the elder Walkinshaw disputes this claim and rebuts Keelvin's later assertion that Watty "should na be meddled wi' but just left to wear out his time in the world, as little observed as possible" (59). Watty does eventually marry and receives the paternal estate in favour of his disinherited older brother, Charles, whose choice of wife has alienated him from his father. A scheming younger brother, George, realizes that Watty's capacity can be called into question, as the lawyer Keelvin had supposed, and eventually, despite Claud Walkinshaw's prediction, Watty is declared legally an idiot, his inheritance reverting to George. Shamed by the decision, Watty slowly withers and dies.

Consider the case of Watty in contrast to that of Maria in Charlotte Yonge's 1860 novel Hopes and Fears, or Scenes from the Life of a Spinster. Maria Fulmont is identified as being "innocent" half way through the novel, when she is in her early teens. Her family, including several close sisters, do not realize she is feeble-minded, although one sister, Phoebe, admits that she "always knew

[Maria] was not clever"; however, Phoebe credits this to Maria's isolation from society, saying of her "She is so good and kind! If only she could see a few things, and people, and learn to talk" (241). It is left to the governess, Miss Fennimore, to diagnose Maria as having "not the usual amount of capacity," noting in fact "that she cannot be treated as otherwise than deficient" (242). After this point, Yonge makes it clearer through her descriptions and the statements of the other characters that Maria is in fact deficient, but the revelation comes as a shock to the family (and in fact to this reader: I wasn't sure if it was Maria or Bertha, the stuttering rationalist, who was deficient until the "outing," even though I knew one of them was). Once the label is applied, the characterization alters: Maria is revealed as "the poor innocent" (321) she always was, and descriptions of her prior to her diagnosis - such as her "leav[ing] off trying to read a French book that had proved too hard for her" (121) - assume a new portentousness.

Watty Walkinshaw, the "haverel" of The Entail, is legally declared an idiot but for the reader (and in the world of the novel) this construction remains contingent upon the case elaborated by the prosecution: that Watty's grief was excessive and took unconventional forms, and that he could not manage money responsibly. The reader can acknowledge the strength of the case before Watty and accept Watty's legibility as an "idiot," but must remain aware of the limitations of the label and the manner in which it is constructed and imposed. Idiocy is an unfixed state: Watty clearly seems to fit the designation in some areas, whereas in others he is an irreproachably honorable gentleman. The legal term "idiot" carries authority, but of a limited sort. Thirty-seven years later, though, the limits on this authority are fast disappearing. Maria Fulmont

becomes fully the “poor innocent” as soon as everyone realizes that this is her state; after Maria is fixed as being deficient, Yonge is able to refer to her walking with “the shuffling gait of the imbecile” (372). Idiocy as a formal category is at least in part a social role in Galt’s novel, but resides completely within the individual for Yonge. We will return to these novels later in the dissertation.

This distinction is not solely a consequence of differing whims on the parts of Galt and Yonge. Instead, as I will argue in the coming pages, the concept of idiocy alters over the course of the nineteenth century, acquiring a formal status in medical, sociological and pedagogical discourses, whereas previously its primary formal articulation was in jurisprudence. This dissertation argues several points: first, that idiocy is not a trans-historical (or ahistorical) condition but rather is constructed and given meaning within specific socio-historical contexts; second, that the idea of idiocy gained importance as a site of ideological contention over the course of the nineteenth century; and third, that as a consequence of the ideological struggle waged over the image of idiocy, by the end of the century the image is stripped of its complexity and multivalence, becoming instead a clear and forceful sign of degeneration.

People were of course familiar with the notion of idiocy and idiots before the nineteenth century, but earlier those terms - and the numerous other terms used to designate intellectual disability - were social identities marking one’s place (usually marginal) within a community. The idea of idiocy as a social category has been largely displaced by developments since 1800, when Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard began his educational experiments with Victor, “le jeune sauvage de l’Aveyron.” This dissertation examines that period in the nineteenth century

when idiocy assumes new meanings, in part due to research in education and biology, but also as a consequence of social, political and economic concerns, including the immigration and urbanization associated with the industrial revolution, and political responses to new problems posed by these alterations in the economic landscape.

With its growing profile as an issue of concern in the nineteenth century, the notion of idiocy is ideologically destabilized, becoming the site of political contention as its varying possibilities for meaning are explored by different groups. This process, this battle to identify and consolidate the meaning of idiocy, is profoundly implicated with other social issues of the period. Seen in this way, idiocy as we understand it is thus not a stable trans-historical condition, but rather is an idea, a category formed within a culture for its own particular purposes. The notion of idiocy is not simply descriptive of a state of being; it is functional. And, as this dissertation will argue, the social function of idiocy - its cultural significance - shifted dramatically over the course of the nineteenth century. The consequences of this shift are with us still, in everything from post-asylum housing and funding crises to the neo-eugenicist impulse behind much of the work carried out in the Human Genome Project.

Thomas Kuhn has argued that scientific disciplines develop not in a clear progression but through the investigation of dominant paradigms, with old paradigms being displaced by new ones as new information renders the old ones unworkable. In Kuhnian terms, England in the nineteenth century saw its development of the first socio-scientific paradigm of idiocy, and with it the development of a new professional discourse. When Itard began his

educational experiments with Victor of Aveyron, he had no intention of launching a new area of endeavour called "special education," but was attempting to leave his mark upon a supposed *tabula rasa*.¹ According to Kuhn, "early fact-gathering is a far more nearly random activity than the one that subsequent scientific development makes clear" (15); the observation also holds for developing educational theories, as Itard's work demonstrates. Kuhn goes on to argue that "the formation of specialized journals, the foundation of specialists' societies, and the claim for a special place in the curriculum have usually been associated with a group's first reception of a single paradigm" (19). At a professional level, among physicians and academics in Britain, this phenomenon occurs with intellectual disability in the second half of the nineteenth century, starting with the formation of the first large educational institution, the Asylum for Idiots at Highgate, in 1847 and the publication of the Journal of Mental Science (1855), and in the United States with the founding of professional groups such as the Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Persons in 1876 (and with it the annual Proceedings of the Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions for Idiotic and Feeble-minded Persons).² Retrospectively, though, Leo Kanner identifies Itard's work with Victor as the start of medical as well as pedagogical interest in idiocy ("Medicine" 166).

Popular ideas of intellectual disability, of course, inhabited a broader cosmos than those ideas considered legitimate by professionals, and include

¹ Itard figures prominently as a founder of special education in Scheerenberger's History of Mental Retardation , Kanner's History of the Care and Study of the Mentally Retarded, and Ryan and Thomas' The Politics of Mental Retardation.

² This journal changed its name to the Journal of Psycho-Asthenics in 1896, to the American Journal of Mental Deficiency in 1940, and, in 1987, to The American Journal on Mental Retardation, as it is presently known.

theologically inspired notions of idiocy as marking one as being favoured by God or, conversely, stained by Satan. Folk legends also link idiocy to changelings and fairy children (Haffter, Eberly). These popular notions are of importance, in part because of the manner in which they demonstrate the resilience of older conceptions of intellectual disability, but also because of their engagement with the professional notions of intellectual disability and the implication of both popular and professional notions with the various ideological currents and tensions prevalent in the nineteenth century.

In addition to being a new locus of professional and scientific concern, during the nineteenth century intellectual disability becomes ideologically significant in a manner which it previously had not been. This is not to say that ideologies had never affected the manner in which intellectual disability had been understood: certainly the notion of the “holy innocent” was derived from Christian cosmology, and Martin Luther’s disavowal of that notion was linked to iconoclasm of the Reformation (Huet 27-31). But over the course of the nineteenth century, intellectual disability became important for new political and economic reasons, thus spurring the development of an ideological discourse around intellectual disability, one that cannot, in truth, be dissociated from the scientific and educational discourse. The new socio-scientific paradigm is an ideological intervention in the way people with intellectual disabilities were perceived. Eagleton defines ideology as “the processes whereby interests of a certain kind become masked, rationalized, naturalized, universalized, legitimated in the name of certain forms of political power” (202). Certainly over the course of the nineteenth century, the image of the idiot is a battleground for differing perspectives on the role of the state, the limits (or limitlessness) of

science and pedagogy, the position of women in society, and the issue of racial health and degeneration. That for so long the idea of idiocy has been neglected as an object of critical analysis, and that its relation to the patriarchal and colonialist discourse of the nineteenth century has been completely ignored, suggests just how effectively the idea has been absorbed within the ideological framework that shapes its meaning.

This dissertation traces the development of the idea of intellectual disability by examining its discursive construction within a social and historical context, and argues that commonly held conceptions of intellectual disability are the consequences of social forces and ideological positions rather than an objective rendering of a quantifiable condition. Michael Oliver has argued convincingly that the dominant model of disability, the medical model that posits disability as a physiological state, a condition implicit in the disabled individual, effectively masks the manner in which “disability is ‘produced’ as a medical and individual problem within capitalist society” (Politics 11). Oliver opposes this model, which he also calls the “personal tragedy theory of disability” (Politics 1) with a social theory of disability which considers disability (as opposed to impairment, a distinction to be elaborated upon later) as the product of social oppression. Following Oliver, this dissertation contends that people with intellectual disabilities, like other marginalized peoples, are perceived in particular ways and occupy particular social positions not as a consequence of their condition but as a result of the way their condition works within a social system and what it means in that system.

When the notion of intellectual disability is articulated in texts, it is laden with

meanings from the explicit to the subtle and unacknowledged. This work will examine the discourse surrounding intellectual disability in order to uncover the ways in which various factors have engaged with the ideological debates that have shaped how we perceive and define this condition. Disability accumulates new meanings as new ideological systems attempt to absorb it, but it loses old meanings at a much slower rate. Therefore, in nineteenth-century Britain, the once-prevalent theologically inspired reading of intellectual disability, which aligned the condition with either divine or demonic powers, is layered over (rather than replaced) by subsequent readings born of evolutionary theories, social concerns, political philosophies, economic policies, medical hypotheses, and educational strategies, all functioning within the power relations of that society. Occasionally, older concepts of intellectual disability resurface within newer ideological frameworks, or simply refuse to disappear. This accumulation creates a shifting, often contentious set of meanings, defying attempts to package neatly the concept of idiocy.

Names and Naming

Approaching such an issue as “intellectual disability” would seem to require one to define the term: no easy task, and with good reason. Intellectual disability, I would argue, does not exist objectively, at least not in the way that intelligence testing and bureaucratic labeling might suggest. This is not to deny that some people are less capable of managing in society than others, or that some people are indeed severely impaired by their inability to communicate using conventional strategies, or even that some people require constant assistance to complete the most fundamental tasks of living. It is, however, to discriminate between a physical condition and a cultural reconstruction of that

condition. This distinction is critical.

Disability activists and theorists - notably the British Disabled People's Movement - have elaborated a distinction between impairment and disability drawn from the historical materialist notion of first and second natures (Barnes "Review" 380). According to their terminology, "impairment" denotes a physical condition, whereas "disability" is a social condition, a form of oppression, exclusion or constraint.³ Disability is thus a state that "any society *might* produce in its transformation of first nature - the bodies and materials received from previous social formations" (Gleeson 193). The people to whom terms such as "intellectual disability" or "idiocy" refer (or have in the past referred) may well have an impairment of some degree. However, the goal of this dissertation is not to evaluate the meaningfulness of the impairment or the accuracy of terms used to designate it, but rather to investigate the process by which this impairment is reproduced ideologically within the culturally meaningful notion of "idiocy."

People who are now designated "intellectually disabled" (at least in Canada - other designations have assumed priority in other countries) have been known by a staggering number of epithets over the years, and the condition denoted by any one term may not be absolutely identical to that denoted by another, especially as each term is the product of a specific social and cultural environment. This state of affairs poses an interesting problem for historical

³For recent articulations of this distinction, see Colin Barnes, Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination; Paul Abberley, "Work, Utopia, and Impairment," in Barton, ed., Disability and Society; Michael Oliver, The Politics of Disablement; and Bill Hughes and Kevin Paterson, "The Social Model of Disability and the Disappearing Body: Towards a Sociology of Impairment," in Disability and Society 12.3 (1997).

research. We have no way of knowing for certain if someone called a simpleton in the early nineteenth century would have been known as an imbecile in the 1890's, or as moderately or mildly retarded in the 1960's; it is quite possible that these correlations might have held for some individuals, but not for others. Even in their own times, such terms were remarkably vague. Rather than being an insurmountable difficulty for this project, though, these shifting terminologies and diagnostic categories foreground the linguistic construction of intellectual disability; and in this work, after all, it is not the impairment itself that is under examination, but the discourses that elaborate upon it and constitute its social and cultural meaning. As both John Galt and Charlotte Yonge suggest, albeit with different goals, idiocy becomes real as a socio-cultural phenomenon when it is named.

But what are we to make of these shifting terms? How are we even to determine if they refer to the same general phenomenon? In The Archaeology of Knowledge, Michel Foucault writes of his work on madness:

It would certainly be a mistake to try to discover what could have been said about madness at a particular time by interrogating the being of madness itself, its secret content, its silent, self-enclosed truth; mental illness was constituted by all that was said in all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its developments, indicated its various correlations, judged it, and possibly gave it speech by articulating, in its name, discourses that were to be taken as its own. Moreover, this group of statements is far from referring to a single object, formed once and for all, and to preserving it indefinitely as its horizon of inexhaustible ideality; the object presented as their correlative by medical statements of the seventeenth or eighteenth century is not identical with the object that emerges in legal sentences or police action; similarly, all the objects of psycho-pathological discourses were modified

from Pinel or Esquirol to Bleuler: it is not the same illnesses that are at issue in each of these cases: we are not dealing with the same madmen (32).

To meet this problem, Foucault elaborates the notion of discursive formations, statements in which “one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations)” (38). The critical concern of Foucault’s strategy is not whether one is referring to exactly the same physiological condition across the years, but whether the terms used to designate a condition are part of a repeating, transforming and connected discourse. The goal shifts from describing a presumed objective condition to analysing the terms, the language and structures, that articulate the cultural idea of that condition, and thus confer upon a condition - be it madness or idiocy - its status as an objective state. This is not to say that this dissertation does not consider the actual condition of people with intellectual disabilities - those labelled “idiots” - in nineteenth-century England, or that their experience is ignored; however, for the purposes of this dissertation, the emphasis is more fully on what was said about idiocy, and how the discourse of idiocy functioned in the culture of the period.

As Oliver contends, disability definitions, and especially medical definitions of the sort favoured by the World Health Organization, inevitably require a reification of the concept of “normality” that “ignores the issue of what normality actually is” by failing to acknowledge “the situational and cultural relativity of normality” (*Politics*, 4). Foucault makes a similar point when he shows that the rise of “reason” in the Enlightenment necessitated a formalized “non-reason”: “What is originitive [of madness] is the caesura that establishes the distance

between reason and non-reason; reason's subjugation of non-reason, wresting from its truth as madness, crime or disease, derives explicitly from this point" (Madness ix-x). In the case of disability, a form of normality had to be identified before deviance could be properly located. This project began in earnest in the nineteenth century, especially, according to Lennard J. Davis, with "industrialization and with the set of practices and discourses that are linked to late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century notions of nationality, race, gender, criminality, sexual orientation, and so on" (Enforcing 24); these issues will be explored in more detail over the course of this work.

The idea of normalcy is, according to Ian Hacking, "one of the most powerful ideological tools of the twentieth century" (169). Hacking traces the word "normal" in its present usage to the 1820s, and links the concept to that of standardization, an increasingly important concern as industrial machinery drove the economy (165). However, he argues, "normal" itself in its present usage has a medical history, imported into popular discourse by Auguste Comte, who elaborated the idea that the pathological was simply an extension of the normal. Thus, the Comtean normal becomes an "existing average" as well as a "figure of perfection"; these formulations are later contested by Francis Galton, who thought of the "normal" as merely mediocre (168-9).

According to Donald MacKenzie in Statistics in Britain, the rise of statistics between 1865-1930 did not merely influence the idea of disability; indeed, he argues, it was because of the Galtonian emphasis on eugenics and the middle-class anxiety over the growing numbers of poor and working-class people in London that statistics prospered as a new science. The idea of the demographic

norm grew out of fear of those retroactively constructed as abnormal. As Davis concludes, "Any bell curve will always have at its extremities those characteristics that deviate from the norm. So, with the concept of the norm comes the concept of deviations or extremes. When we think of bodies, in a society where the concept of the norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants" (Davis Enforcing 29). Davis's argument is readily apparent in the standard definition of intellectual disability as a score of 70 or less on an IQ test, which is, as the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders notes, is "approximately 2 standard deviations below the norm" (39).

Intelligence tests (most famously Alfred Binet's) were developed and implemented at the end of the century specifically to determine whether or not children would benefit from schooling (Wooldridge 2-3), and mark the culmination of the project to define intellectual normality. As a result of the nineteenth-century project to establish clear boundaries between normality and deviance, some terms such as "simpleton" were abandoned by the professional community, presumably because they were primarily social labels denoting community status as much as anything else, rather than scientific labels pointing to intrinsic qualities; "idiot," on the other hand, assumed a new significance as an objective medical term, in addition to its later gradations, "imbecile" and "feeble-minded." Wright observes that while the mid-Victorian era saw a new standardization in terminology to either idiots or imbeciles, he notes that "whether this represented a new 'modern' terminology or merely reflected a formal language of certification which was not replicated in daily popular discourse is difficult to say" ("Childlike" 130); however, references in literary works suggest that popular discourse continued to employ a much wider

range of terms.

Regardless of terminology, the borderline between intellectual disability and normality often seemed disturbingly unclear, as both the Galt and Yonge examples demonstrate. It is this point, the boundary between the two, where many cultural representations of intellectual disability are articulated. According to Tom Shakespeare, “disabled people are seen to be ambiguous because they hover between humanity and animality, life and death, subjectivity and objectivity” (295).⁴ Shakespeare draws upon the concepts of liminality and anomaly, articulated by anthropologists Victor Turner and Mary Douglas respectively, to elaborate upon the place of disabled people in society and in cultural representations. This ambiguity can be ominous, he argues, especially to people without disabilities. “When boundaries are breached, and identities seem threatened,” writes Shakespeare, “behavior is devoted to re-establishing the fixities, reinforcing categories and power relations” (294). As C. F. Goodey shows in two articles on the construction of idiocy, John Locke actively constructed his category of the rational human in contradistinction to the irrational idiot (“Psychopolitics,” “John Locke’s Idiots”). Boundaries can also be retrenched by establishing new terms and criteria to distinguish and isolate deviance, such as notion of “feeble-mindedness,” which acquired status as a formal designation in the late-nineteenth century specifically to contain those people who had the dangerous capacity to appear normal.⁵

⁴ Huet makes a similar point when discussing teratology in early modern Europe: “By presenting similarities to categories of beings to which they are not related, monsters blur the differences between genres and disrupt the strict order of nature” (4).

⁵ In the United States, Henry H. Goddard coined the term “moron” in the early twentieth century to designate those people who could pass as “normal”; see Goddard’s 1912 study The Kallikaks, as well as James Trent’s Inventing the Feeble Mind, Stephen Jay Gould’s The Mismeasure of Man, and David Smith’s Mind’s Made Simple.

On a fundamental level the labels and syntax used to identify disabilities reflect the speakers' positions. Certainly the label most favoured by the American disability civil rights movement, "people with [intellectual] disabilities," is meant to denote a politically active group whose members are determined to foreground their humanity, with the disability assuming the status of a secondary characteristic, rather than as a primary designation.⁶ However, this label is not without critics. Gleeson argues that "the endless tendency to reinvent titles for disabled people is characteristic of a vacuous humanism which seeks to emphasize a 'human commonality' over the material reality of oppression," and denounces this formulation as "a retrograde terminological change which effectively depoliticises the social discrimination that disabled people are subjected to" (182), a criticism shared by Oliver (Politics xiii).⁷

Most designations are not adopted by people with disabilities (or disabled people), but rather are imposed from without, and reflect the society in which they are articulated. The term "retarded" gained popularity in the middle of the this century with the belief that through education the people so named could in fact "catch up" with the non-retarded; "feeble-minded" denoted what was thought to be an inherited weakness (Stockholder 169). Obviously, one must employ some term to designate the people who are implicated in the notion of intellectual disability. Throughout my work, I will be alternating between the "people with..." formulation when referring to people identified as "idiots" and

⁶ A variant on this phrasing, "People First," has been adopted as the name of the international self-advocacy group for people with intellectual disabilities; the formulation is also evident in the name of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990).

⁷ That American activists employ this phrasing condemned by British theorists (and British-inspired theorists like Gleeson, who is based in Australia) highlights the distinction between British collectivist and American individualist notions of culture and society.

when discussing contemporary issues or concerns, and whatever designation - e.g., "idiot," "innocent," "softy" - is used in the text being examined.⁸ My rationale for using the "people with . . ." formulation, despite the forceful objections to it by some disability activists, is twofold. The first reason is purely pragmatic: I am working in a North American environment, and hence will use the dominant contemporary North American phrasing. My second reason allows me to make this pragmatic decision, and thus is more fundamental: because my dissertation will alternate between the "people with . . ." phrasing and that used in the primary text under examination, there is already an inherent foregrounding of the social construction and oppression of people with disabilities. My shifting between terms should not be interpreted as an uncomfortable compromise, but as a productive act: the tension between the terms is critical to my argument. The varying meanings of the different labels (including the "people with . . ." label) are laid bare when no one is given priority as a more "correct" or "accurate" term for designating a particular state of being, impaired or otherwise. In the context of this work the "people with . . ." formulation is not a blinkered designation that ignores material oppression but rather a strategy for divorcing the people so implicated from the oppressing condition.

There is, of course, the essential (or essentialist?) dilemma to confront here: how can one argue against the notion of idiocy or intellectual disability as an inherent stable state while not only continuing to use the term but also making claims for people identified as idiots or intellectually disabled? In short, does not

⁸ As there is no solid consensus on how the condition itself should be known, I have chosen to use the term "intellectual disability." It is commonly used and generally understandable. Other contenders as the most recent dominant term include "learning disability" (favoured in Britain), developmental disability (used in the American Journal on Mental Retardation), and cognitive disability. All of these terms will no doubt be replaced in the not-so-distant future; none is more accurate than the others.

an analysis of the group designated by the term “idiot” assist in reifying the notion that it attempts to dismantle? I have found no easy answer to this question, although I do have strategies for dealing with the problem. First, I do not believe that to identify a socially oppressed group is necessarily to reify them as a homogeneous entity; “idiots” existed as members of a social category, although not necessarily as a distinct and definable group on other grounds, and it is as members of a social group that I refer to them. However, one must maintain a consistent emphasis on the conditions and processes of the formulation of the idea of idiocy to guard against any tendency (on behalf of the writer or the readers) to reify “idiocy” as a fully objective and trans-historical condition.

Methodology

How, then, to interrogate the notion of intellectual disability as it has been constructed over history? As I observe above, Foucault argues in favour of examining what he terms “discursive formations” that constitute not a thing but the articulation of notions, to “write a history of discursive objects that does not plunge them into the common depth of a primal soil, but deploys the nexus of regularities that govern their dispersion” (*Archaeology*, 48). In the case of intellectual disability, this nexus includes various discursive strands: the literary, scientific, economic, and sociological, among others. However, Foucault’s model risks becoming dissociated from material considerations; this dissertation, while adopting some Foucauldian strategies, will also strive to consider discursive practices as they are linked with material concerns.

At the level of evidence, one can argue that all history is textualized. This should

not, however, prohibit one from positing a referent, a “real world” with its attendant tensions, struggles, failures and triumphs. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has warned, with Foucault and his followers in mind, that “contemporary critics tend to insist disproportionately on history as the ways in which authors have written about the past at the expense of what might actually have happened . . .” (216). Taking this warning to heart, my intent here is to foreground the complex relationship between discourse - the textual constructions of intellectual disability - and the material factors that affect the social position of people with intellectual disabilities. Gleeson has asserted unhappily that “disability studies have remained nearly silent on the issue of history” and have shown a distressing tendency to “[trivialize] the past to the point where it is little more than a reification of the present” (185). A more productive strategy, he notes, would be to develop a historical materialist understanding of disability “as a historically- and socially-specific outcome of social development” (192); my argument will follow Gleeson’s suggestion by exploring the idea of idiocy in the social transformations that occurred in England over the nineteenth century.

My strategy throughout this dissertation is to examine relevant texts for those strands of meaning that end up weaving the notion of disability, reading literary texts in conjunction with scientific, sociological and educational works. Literary works provide a useful central point of analysis, as they foreground the symbolic functions of disability in a manner that is often repressed in other forms of writing that presume objectivity. Literary texts often present disabled characters in symbolic or “supporting” roles but rarely as central characters. Leslie Fiedler, writing of disability in literature, observes that

Not until the rise of sentimentalism and the obsession with the excluded

and the marginal, which climaxes in the reign of Victoria, did the blind, the deaf and the halt become major characters in large numbers of books written by authors and intended for readers who, thinking of themselves as non-handicapped, are able to regard the handicapped as essentially alien, absolute other. In such a context, fellow human beings with drastically impaired perception, manipulation and ambulation tend, of course, to be stereotyped, either negatively or positively; but in any case rendered as something more or less than human. (qtd. in Oliver Politics 61)

These literary representations become instructive for readings of non-literary works as well; the stereotypical qualities assumed by “idiot characters” can be employed to illuminate those non-literary works that presume objectivity.

It is important to stress that I am not reading novels and poems as social histories. I am not using literary texts as evidence of how people with intellectual disabilities were treated in society; I am not even using them to reveal attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities. Rather, I am examining the significance of intellectual disability within what Mary Poovey calls the “symbolic economy” of texts: that is, within the relations of signs and symbols that constitute a text’s meaning, the “internal structure of ideology” (15). This dissertation asks “What did idiocy *mean* to people in nineteenth-century England? And *why* did it mean what it did?”

The symbolic or metaphorical uses of characters with intellectual disabilities, like those of the other disabled characters Fiedler writes of, often express culturally charged beliefs about the subtext of intellectual disability, a subtext often less overtly explored in non-fiction works, and rarely articulated in the

same manner. As Shakespeare argues, drawing upon the idea of fetishisms, “Disabled people are objects, on to which artists project particular emotions, or which are used to represent specific values or evils” (287). Indeed, John Langdon Down complained in 1862 that “The opinion which has been formed, both in and out of the [medical] profession, in reference to idiocy, has arisen more from the representations of poets and romance-writers than from the deductions of rigid observation. The popular novelist, in this as in other cases, seizes on the characteristics of some exaggerated specimen, portrays them by the aid of a vivid imagination, and henceforth the exaggeration becomes the type of a species in the mind of men” (“Condition” 92). These exaggerations notwithstanding, literary works would thus seem to be a productive site of analysis for examining the (often contradictory) ideological uses of intellectual disability and the tensions inherent in the notion.

Also, because (as I will argue) intellectual disability does not assume meaning apart from that generated by its context, I will consider those elements that provide the stuff of this context, and form the popular image of disability. Literary, scientific, medical, sociological and other texts comprise the discursive space in which the idea of idiocy takes shape: they express its points of cohesion, its tensions, and its directions of development. This development is not linear and progressive, but rather the product of conflicting notions (and applications) of the term. As Poovey notes of ideology and gender in Victorian England, “what may look coherent and complete in retrospect was actually fissured by competing emphases and interests” (3); notions of disability may in retrospect appear similarly unified, but one goal of this dissertation is to lay bare the contradictions and tensions in the competing ideologies governing the

meaning and function of idiocy. My strategy throughout will be to read literary texts in tandem with non-literary texts that more explicitly approach the issue of intellectual disability or related concerns. The juxtaposition of literary and non-literary evidence allows us to layer the symbolic function of idiocy, most explicit in literary works, over the more apparently objective renditions of the idea expressed in non-fiction works. In this way, literary and social-history analyses play a counterpoint to one another, enabling fuller readings of both types of evidence. An understanding of the symbolic functions of intellectual disability, when carried to non-fiction works, helps to reveal more fully the ideology motivating and validating notions of idiocy and intellectual disability. And for literary studies, this strategy for reading problematizes the image of the idiot, making explicit its complex semiotic productivity in texts, a function consistently ignored by literary critics. Literary and non-fiction texts thus provide complementary and productive articulations of the idea of idiocy.

Ultimately, the meaning of the idea of idiocy is reproduced in its consequences for people identified as "idiots." For an understanding of these consequences, it is necessary to go to social histories of idiocy, a field not heavily documented. Fortunately, the past few years have seen a good deal of activity in this area. My dissertation makes constant references to these histories in order to underline the relation between the cultural meaning of idiocy and the social place of people with intellectual disabilities. The consequences of being identified as an idiot almost always include marginalization, although the manner and degree range greatly over time and place, from the near-complete integration (although in a subordinate position) of many agrarian communities, to the state-sponsored genocide of Nazi Germany.

Overview of Chapters

As a result of the dearth of work in this field, I was initially tempted to write a comprehensive history based on a broad range of texts, from anglo-saxon verse to contemporary film, but upon sober reflection decided in favour of a considerably more restricted project - texts generated from the beginning of the nineteenth century up until the first articulation of the idea of eugenics, by Francis Galton, in the 1880s. This range is bordered at the beginning by two significant texts, Wordsworth's poem "The Idiot Boy," from the seminal romantic work Lyrical Ballads, and Itard's report on Victor, the "wild boy of Aveyron"; the dissertation ends in the period when degeneration anxiety is formulated and the idea of eugenics is born. These fears of degeneration would eventually result in the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act, inspired by participants in the eugenics movement and the Charity Organisation Society (C.O.S.), who saw the feeble-minded as the root of many of the social ills they sought to eliminate. British sources are emphasized throughout, but texts from abroad are also considered where they are relevant to the direction of thought in Britain, such as the influential writings of Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, Édouard Séguin and Samuel Gridley Howe.

The next chapter presents an examination of two prominent representations of intellectual disability at the beginning of the nineteenth century, William Wordsworth's poem "The Idiot Boy" and Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard's Wild Boy of Aveyron. Wordsworth's poem, published in 1798 as part of the Lyrical Ballads project, presents the "idiot boy" of the title as aligned to a natural benevolence in a largely nostalgic reference to medieval beliefs that such people were,

because of their natural innocence, closer to God. Written during a period of agricultural enclosures and growing rural poverty and displacement, though, the poem also marks the passing of the “natural” world that it celebrates. At the same time, Itard’s piece on Victor, the feral boy of Aveyron, heralds a new era in which idiocy will be presented as something that can be overcome by dedicated and enlightened pedagogues - in the process making people with intellectual disabilities fit for inclusion in rational society. But while these texts articulate different notions of intellectual disability, their very existence foregrounds the ambivalent status of idiocy at the turn of the century. Criticism of Wordsworth’s poem regularly rested upon the question of whether or not an idiot boy was a fit subject for poetry; in comparison, critics of Itard’s educational experiments with Victor argued that the endeavour was a lost cause because Victor was not merely a “wild boy” but also an idiot, and thus insensible to any attempts at education. This chapter focuses on the construction of Wordsworth’s idiot boy, Johnny Foy, and Itard’s subject Victor in relation to notions of the natural and the feminine, arguing that the problem of idiocy was framed along these terms and that Itard’s attempt to overcome Victor’s incapacity can be read productively as an attempt to incorporate qualities constructed by Itard as “masculine,” in opposition to the “feminine” qualities embodied by Johnny Foy’s mother in “The Idiot Boy” and by Victor’s gouvernante, Mme Guérin.

The third chapter will develop the relations of idiocy and gender more fully, primarily through an analysis of literary texts. It argues that the idea of idiocy is embodied differently in men and women, and that there is a remarkable degree of resilience to gendered notions of idiocy. Briefly put, idiocy in men is represented as a lack, a diminishment, or an incapacity; in women it is instead

often portrayed as a reduction to a presumed essential female nature. In order to demonstrate the endurance of these notions, this chapter covers a broader time span than other chapters (approximately fifty-five years). It also investigates some alternate applications for these gendered associations, considering representations of idiocy by Victorian feminist writers such as Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot in addition to more “mainstream” representations by male writers such as George Crabbe, John Galt and Charles Dickens.

The fourth chapter deals specifically with Charles Dickens' novel Barnaby Rudge. Perhaps the only intellectually disabled character in Victorian fiction to also be the title character of a major novel, Barnaby is interesting for a number of reasons. This chapter examines Dickens's use of Barnaby's idiocy in relation to the Gordon Riots portrayed in the novel and to the Chartist threats present at the time of the novel's composition, arguing that Dickens uses an idiot character in a central role to licence a neo-paternalist state involvement in caring for the poor and disadvantaged. Written in a time of political and economic turmoil, the novel uses idiocy to investigate social ills and justify a “paternalist” government.

The fifth chapter focuses on the idea of the “innocent” idiot, especially as it is articulated by advocates of educational idiot asylums. The chapter begins by examining the more complex notion of the “holy fool,” a conventional literary image, and follows the transformation of this image into that of the more unidimensional “innocent.” The goal of this transformation, the chapter argues, was to sanitize and render more pitiful the idea of the idiot, and thus elicit support for asylums where people with intellectual disabilities could be educated. However, it also stripped from the notion of idiocy the associations

that gave it the substance that would enable one to see the “innocent” as holy - it actively removed the innocent from divine protection by claiming human responsibility for the “reclamation” of the idiot, making the idea of idiocy more vulnerable to later demonization. This argument is developed with reference to literary texts, notably Sir Walter Scott’s Waverley, Eliot’s Brother Jacob, George MacDonald’s “The Wow o’ Riveen,” Margaret Oliphant’s Salem Chapel, and two novels by Charlotte Yonge, Hopes and Fears and Pillars of the House, as well as writings by Dora Greenwell and other apologists for the asylum system.

The sixth chapter examines the development of the idea of the degenerate idiot in literature (Wilkie Collins’s No Name and The Law and the Lady; Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Aurora Floyd) and in numerous writings on degeneration by commentators such as Henry Maudsley and W. R. Greg. From the middle of the century, social commentators had been concerned with the growth of what Stedman Jones labels “outcast London.” These concerns occasionally stimulated people such as Henry Mayhew to examine in detail the problems of London’s poor; more often, the response was fear and moral condemnation. Idiocy was increasingly thought to the consequence of people living for generations in filthy, crowded and vice-ridden conditions, and was located aggressively among the poor and working classes. With the development and dissemination of theories of evolution, recapitulation, and degeneration, the image of the idiot adopted a more sinister aspect: that of a degenerating humanity threatening the health of the British race.

The conclusion forms a summary and epilogue of the argument developed over the course of the dissertation, and briefly discusses the immediate

consequences of degeneration theory to people with intellectual disabilities. Ultimately, I argue, the image of the idiot must be rescued from neglect. As Goodey as argued, academics have resolutely ignored the cultural construction and ideological implications of the idea of idiocy. The argument that follows makes an effort to redress this major critical oversight in the field of cultural analysis.

2. Wild Boys, Idiot Boys: Intellectual Disability at the Start of the Nineteenth Century

"I have often applied to idiots, in my own mind, that sublime expression of Scripture, that their life is hidden with God," wrote William Wordsworth to John Wilson in June 1802 (Letters 297). The poet was by no means alone in thinking this way about idiots; after all, he refers to scriptural precedent in this articulation of the idea of the "holy innocent," that belief that idiots must be innocent by nature, incapable of sin.¹ But the idiot reflected many other beliefs; he was a repository for a vast range of meanings. Even Wordsworth places limits on his approval of idiots in his letter, noting that "my 'idiot' [of "The Idiot Boy"] is not one of those who cannot articulate, or of those that are unusually disgusting in their persons" (Letters 297).

As the eighteenth century turned into the nineteenth, the British Isles were experiencing a population burst and the development of all arable land (along with much non-arable land). The world of Betty Foy and her son Johnny, the hero of Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy," was almost an anachronism when the poem was published in 1798. In this cultural environment, the image of idiocy was capable of conveying a range of meanings. Indeed, a polyvalent significance has long been a feature of the condition: it was divine or demonic; human or bestial; innocent or degenerate; a consequence of mismatched parents, maternal impressions, or devious fairies switching a human infant with

¹ This interpretation of intellectual disability has a prominent heritage. Saward locates the origins of the Christian version of the holy fool in the scriptures of Saint Paul, and singles out medieval Cistercian monasteries as especially endorsing this ideal, taking "the child, the idiot, the pauper, the weak man" as spiritual models (73). Erasmus articulated the notion of the holy innocent in The Praise of Folly, noting that "the theologians assure us they can't even sin" (117), and claiming fools are "the only ones who speak frankly and tell the truth" (118). Enid Welsford, examining medieval notions of folly, suggests that these "lucky-unlucky" people fulfill the complementary roles of mascots, talismans, and scapegoats (55-75).

a changeling. But despite this variety of workable interpretations, idiocy, unlike lunacy, did not carry a great deal of overt ideological weight. This claim does not deny that constructions of idiocy performed ideological work before the nineteenth century. It is rather to foreground the fact that attitudes toward idiocy, though broad, were also established and were articulated within a framework that was apparently without serious contention. This stability in the range and balance of interpretations of idiocy is reflected in social policies for people with intellectual disabilities at the time. According to Peter Rushton, "the statistical evidence indicates simply enough the way that the conceptual and practical differences between idiots and lunatics shaped local policies. Idiocy was overwhelmingly a domestic problem" ("Lunatics" 41), left to families and communities. Idiocy was dealt with in this manner to the end of the eighteenth century, notes Rushton, who argues that "the matter-of-factness in the reaction of local authorities . . . suggests a degree of acceptance of the possibility of mental illness and a consensus about the feasible responses" (40). Whatever idiocy meant, it was part of the world: idiots existed, and other people - their family, their neighbours - lived with them.

This state of affairs was about to change, and the initial catalyst was in the woods of southern France. While Wordsworth was composing "The Idiot Boy" early in 1798, a young child, perhaps twelve years old, was sighted living wild in the forests of Aveyron, France. But his days as a wild child, a type designated *homo ferus* by the Swedish naturalist Linnaeus, were not to last much longer, and after the wild boy of Aveyron had been captured, after he had been surveyed by the intellectuals and physicians of Paris, after he had been the subject of a philosophical and pedagogical investigation carried out by a young

physician, Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, the understanding of idiocy as well as the place of the idiot in society would slowly alter. The later chapters of this dissertation trace some of the features of this change, and search for some of the causes; this chapter looks at the way the notion of idiocy was comprehended in the early 1800s, in the calm before the storm of interest, attention, and anxiety that focussed on it later in the century.

This chapter deals primarily with two texts, Wordsworth's poem "The Idiot Boy" and Itard's reports on the wild boy of Aveyron, and makes reference to a third, Robert Southey's poem "The Idiot." My interest in these texts is twofold. First, I am concerned with how the image of the idiot is constructed and reproduced, especially in association with other ideas, notably beliefs in what constitutes the "natural," the "female," and the "human." Secondly, this chapter examines the responses of readers to the idea of idiocy and to specific representations or instances of it. In the case of "The Idiot Boy," this involves examining the poem and Wordsworth's comments on it, as well as criticisms from other readers, many of whom felt the subject matter was inappropriate for poetry. In the case of the wild boy of Aveyron, the focus shifts slightly to consider the range of texts on the wild boy himself, and the debate over the probable success (or lack thereof) of any attempts at education, as well as Itard's reports, which ultimately transform the way the wild boy can be perceived and thus responded to.

William Wordsworth and "The Idiot Boy"

Wordsworth's poem "The Idiot Boy" is both a literary text drawing on certain aesthetic traditions and a cultural document produced at a particular moment in history and bearing the imprint of this historical moment. Each of these realms is

important when we try to determine what an idiot boy is doing in a poem. The poem cannot be read strictly as evidence of how “idiot boys” were treated in 1798, because it generates meaning through the use of particular poetic forms and associations. That is, the “idiot boy” of the poem exists in a world created through symbol and metaphor, not as a clear reflection of the social place of people with intellectual disabilities. However, the manner in which the image functions in this literary environment does indicate something about what idiocy could signify to Wordsworth and his readers, and it implies certain associations between idiocy, the natural world, and femininity, as my argument will demonstrate.

Mary Jacobus presents the poem as a “shaggy dog story that one reads for its humour and humanity” (“Idiot Boy” 239), which adopts the conventions of the comic ballad - the “intrusive narrator, the double rhymes and jokes, the clowning” (“Idiot Boy” 244)² - to “[concede] human absurdity without devaluing humanness” (“Idiot Boy” 258). Ultimately, Jacobus concludes, the poem is “perhaps more tender in its insight than anything else he wrote” (“Idiot Boy” 263), with a “comedy and seriousness [that] are complementary and inseparable” (“Idiot Boy” 265). It is, in sum, a fully realized, complex mock-heroic ballad, with sympathetic (if absurd) protagonists engaged in an apparently serious, even life-threatening incident which is resolved in a manner both comic and satisfying. The threat to life is both real - Susan Gale’s illness - and imagined: the narrator imagines Johnny having wild and supernatural adventures, something common enough in the popular ballads of Gottfried Bürger, such as the best-selling “Lenore,” translated into English from German

² John Danby, drawing associations between the poem’s teller and its protagonist, refers to its “simpleton-narrator” (52).

in 1796. In his 1800 Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth refers to “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” in condemning the reading public’s “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation” (249). “The Idiot Boy” plays with this “degrading thirst,” producing instead a rural romp. However, approval of the poem, as we shall note later, was not always expressed by Wordsworth’s contemporaries.

In his 1800 Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth notes that “a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place [primarily the war with France], and the encreasing [sic] accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies” (149). According to Wordsworth, then, this “savage torpor” is a consequence of tedious urban employment and debased journalism.

Wordsworth's assessments of the general reader's weaknesses suggest where his own concerns lay. Marilyn Butler has written of the rising interest in pastoral themes at the end of the eighteenth century as being a consequence of increasing urbanism, suggesting that “enthusiasms for the remote past are all aspects of primitivism, and have their roots in a more general principal still, a revulsion against sophisticated urban life in favour of a dream of the pastoral” (20). Anxiety over growing population, especially in the Midlands and North, are

“reflected in literature by frequent contrasts between an innocent idyllic countryside and a corrupt town. Perhaps . . . Wordsworth and Jane Austen ultimately reflect a group consciousness and a nostalgia for a primarily agrarian world” (Butler 25).

The “primarily agrarian world” Butler refers to was rapidly disappearing. One factor was population: English population grew from around five million in 1700 to 8 million in 1800 (Wrigley and Schofield 577). With this growth came economic shifts as well. E. A. Wrigley has argued that the development of an “advanced organic economy,” which depended upon land for economic growth, formed the first stage of Britain’s industrial revolution, and lasted into the early nineteenth century (17). He observes that “As population and production expanded, the demands made upon land were certain to rise at least *pari passu*. Either this meant taking new and poorer land into use, or coaxing a larger output from the land already in cultivation, or, more probably, some combination of the two” (19). The challenge of finding new productive lands to feed the growing population led to the anxieties expressed by Thomas Robert Malthus in his Essay on the Principle of Population, published in the same year as Lyrical Ballads. As Malthus argued, “Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetic ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second” (20). Population growth with limited space for agricultural development threatened disaster; thus, to the Englishman of 1798, the present state of affairs was not without worries.

As Malthus’s fears suggested, agricultural land in Britain was already heavily

exploited and were under continual development to increase productivity. Forests were cleared for cultivation; swamps and marshes were drained. Indeed, in "The Idiot Boy," Betty Foy's absent husband is "at the wood,/ Where by the week he doth abide,/ A woodman in the distant vale" (ll. 37-39): he is a participant in the process of altering the face of the British countryside, and signals to the reader the disappearance of the world of Johnny Foy's midnight ride.

Raymond Williams observes of late eighteenth-century writers that "It is significant and understandable that in the course of a century of reclamation, drainage and clearing there should have developed, as a by-product, a feeling for unaltered nature, for wild land" (Country 128). With Wordsworth, he argues, the sympathy with nature extends also to the "recognition, even the idealisation, of 'humble' characters, in charity and in community." These characters, though, were disappearing, along with their world, at least for Wordsworth, who "saw them . . . as receding, moving away into a past which only a few surviving signs, and the spirit of poetry, could recall" (Country 130). They became for Wordsworth the outcasts, vagrant wanderers, whose lonely perceptions were also those of the poet. As Williams notes, they become "merged with [their] landscape, [figures] within the general figure of nature, . . . seen from a distance, in which the affirmative power of Nature is intended as the essential affirmation of Man" (Country 132). Solitary man communes with and gains strength from Nature.³

³ "Nature," observes Raymond Williams, is perhaps the most complex word in the language" (Keywords 219). He notes that in the late eighteenth century it acquired "a selective sense of goodness and innocence," which is in large part how Wordsworth employs the term (223).

Wordsworth was no solitary labourer, though, but rather a Cambridge-educated sophisticate. As William Empson notes, the pastoral is “based on a double attitude of the artist to the worker, of the complex man to the simple one (“I am in one way better, in another not so good”) (19). This ambivalence is clearly evident in Wordsworth’s contributions to Lyrical Ballads, doubly so in “The Idiot Boy” as the narrator, who displaces the poet somewhat in this poem, is himself a comic figure. The subject matter and the respect given to the protagonists (the “I am in other ways not so good” component of the formulation) features prominently in critical denigrations of the poem.

In his Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth describes his poetic project as being “to make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature” (245). He goes on to explain his choice of humble subject matter:

Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are under less restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that situation our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and from the necessary character of rural occupations are more easily comprehended; and are more durable; and lastly, because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (245)

Wordsworth justifies his adoption of the language of rural people by arguing that it is “a far more permanent and philosophical language than that which is

frequently substituted for it by poets," although he also notes that, in taking the language of the common man, he has "purified" it of its "real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust" (245). But we must take these claims with a grain or two of salt. While the poems of Lyrical Ballads take the lives and experiences of the low and simple as the substance of poetry, they do not represent humanity in an essential being but rather construct a particular image of humanity: the "lonely creative imagination" seeking to "transform nature," the "man driven back from the cold world and into his own natural perception and language seeking to find and recreate man" (Williams Country 132).

In constructing his poetic vision, Wordsworth was developing a tradition rather than making a radical break with the past; the "romantic" literature Wordsworth is credited with founding is, as Butler notes, a retrospective construction (1), and a tradition somewhat older than Lyrical Ballads had been dealing with similar issues.⁴ The ballad format itself had experienced a resurgence in interest and popularity over the previous thirty years, since the publication of Percy's Reliques in 1765 (Butler 58), a point not lost on Wordsworth and his partner, Coleridge.

Interestingly, Wordsworth and Coleridge collaborated on Lyrical Ballads not simply because they shared some ideas about how poetry should be written, but also because they planned a trip to Germany in the summer of 1798 and needed money to finance the excursion. The collection of poems was to provide those funds, and the writers must have been fairly certain that an audience

⁴ For a comprehensive investigation of Wordsworth's engagement with literary tradition in Lyrical Ballads, see Mary Jacobus' Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads 1798.

existed already for the works they were presenting. In short, Lyrical Ballads was not a radical work whose aesthetic choices shocked a public addicted to heroic couplets expressing urbane wit. Rather, it was working within an established tradition with both an audience and, significantly for Wordsworth and Coleridge's summer plans, a reliable market.

Wordsworth's subjects, then, are rural folk not because they are necessarily closer to "truth" but because in poetic convention, especially (but not only) pastoral poetry, they are frequently used as representatives of a particular kind of consciousness. Wordsworth's representations draw on aesthetic tradition rather than social fact. In order to understand "The Idiot Boy" in its context, then, we must not simply consider the Preface of 1800 but also this aesthetic tradition, which includes the histories of the images he employs.

The poem's links to the pastoral tradition are significant as the pastoral intersects at points with the notion of the "holy innocent," a category often imposed upon people with intellectual disabilities. Empson notes that in the pastoral, "the simple man becomes a clumsy fool who yet has better 'sense' than his betters and can say things more fundamentally true; . . . he is in contact with the mysterious forces of our own nature, so that the clown has the wit of the Unconscious; he can speak the truth because he has nothing to lose" (18). The image was well entrenched in literary form: the intellectually disabled individual was often credited with a unique form of grace, or an intangible affinity with the divine (of course, these qualities did not seem to gain for people with intellectual disabilities an especially comfortable social position). However, although Wordsworth employs this traditional figure, the "holy fool," he

reconstructs it for his own purposes.

Wordsworth's poem, then, is actively engaged with a history of images and conventions: heroic ballads, pastoral verse, comic tales. It also draws on conventional notions of the intellectually disabled person as a "natural" and as a "holy innocent." That Johnny is an idiot boy, a "natural" voyaging unattended in the natural world is significant. That he is a holy innocent, a child who is protected by providence and who contends with supernatural forces in Betty Foy's imagination, is also meaningful. People with intellectual disabilities had been known as "naturals" since at least 1533⁵, and their condition was reputed to give them a closer link to both the natural and the supernatural.⁶ As Jerome McGann observes, "Ecological nature is Wordsworth's fundamental sign and symbol of his transcendent Nature Wordsworth translates those ecological forms into theological realities: nature as Nature, the Active Universe and the manifest form of the One Life" (300). For Wordsworth, then the conceit of the "holy natural" is an effective vehicle for his artistic project: the idiot boy becomes a comic representative of transcendental Nature, a variant expression of St. Paul's claim that human wisdom is folly to God.

But a more precise reading of the poem is necessary to support and elaborate upon this assertion. When Betty Foy sets "him who she loves, her idiot boy" on a quest to fetch a doctor for her ailing neighbour Susan Gale, she is trusting both

⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary credits Thomas More with the first use of the term, although it may well predate More's usage.

⁶ Karl Haffter also notes that "mentally retarded children were . . . clearly taken for changelings," a being which was "the child of nature demons of semi-human form which lived under the earth or water" (56). Similarly, Susan Schoon Eberly suggests that the people with intellectual disabilities may have been refigured in folktales as "solitary fairies" such as the Brownie, the Gille Dubh, and others. She argues that "many of these characters seem to me to represent the person who was mentally retarded and, often, physically different as well" (71).

her neighbour's life and her son's own well-being in his hands - and, the narrator makes clear, to the instinctive intelligence of the pony, a "horse that thinks" (l. 122).

Johnny sets off, while Betty waits with Susan, and, notably, Johnny does not appear again until the final few stanzas of the poem. He does, however, increasingly occupy his mother's thoughts as she awaits his return with growing anxiety. The bulk of the poem narrates Betty Foy's fears for her son and her own attempts to find him after he is late returning. The comic element is lodged in Betty Foy's absurd notions and the narrator's hypotheses of what fates or adventures may have waylaid her son. Even while absent for much of the poem, Johnny Foy remains its centre.

Betty Foy sends her "natural" son to fetch a physician, a paragon of rational thought; were we to construct a spectrum of degrees of rationality in this poem, the doctor and Johnny Foy would be at opposite poles. The two are fundamentally opposed, as the Doctor's brief appearance in the poem demonstrates:

And now she's at the doctor's door,
She lifts the knocker, rap, rap, rap,
The doctor at the casement shews,
His glimmering eyes that peep and doze;
And one hand rubs his old night-cap.

"Oh Doctor! Doctor! Where's my Johnny?"

"I'm here, what is't you want with me?"

"Oh Sir! You know I'm Betty Foy,

**And I have lost my poor dear boy,
You know him - him you often see;**

**He's not so wise as some folks be."
"The devil take his wisdom!" said
The Doctor, looking somewhat grim,
"What, woman! should I know of him?"
And grumbling he went back to bed. (ll. 257-271)**

Johnny, instead of fetching the doctor, predictably gets lost along the route, except that he is not truly lost: he is on the pony, who has decided to graze in the sweet meadow grass. As soon as Betty Foy diverts her mind from the supernatural trials she imagines for Johnny, and thinks like a pony, she is able to find her son.

Susan Gale too recovers, her anxiety over Betty and Johnny Foy overwhelming her own disease and sending her into the night in search of her friends. (readings such as John Danby's which dismiss Susan Gale's disease as an "imaginary illness" (54) miss the point here). Johnny's disappearance into nature works as strong a cure as any doctor's medicine could. That Johnny, the natural, should provide a catalyst for Susan's recovery is hardly surprising given Wordsworth's aesthetic of transcendence through nature.

The links that Wordsworth draws in this poem between the idiot Johnny, the natural world, the pony, maternal love, and the rural community articulate an aesthetic belief in the curative powers of the non-rational: nature, love, and community. The poem ends as "our four travellers homeward wend" (l. 443), a line that unites the natural world (as the pony is one of the four), maternal love

(with Betty Foy), and the notion of community (the neighbour Susan Gale, and the act of “wending homeward”), in opposition to the rational, urban and unsympathetic world of the doctor. Notably, “The Idiot Boy” also endorses art as curative and non-rational. While Johnny Foy is an idiot boy, he is also, by the end of the poem, a version of Wordsworth’s solitary poet: his final lines invert rational order and describe a world that exists in the imagination, but which has affinities with the natural world:

“The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,
And the sun did shine so cold.” (ll. 460-61)

One may argue that it is the benighted imagination of an idiot, and yet, in the poem’s insistent reversal of rational and irrational, Johnny’s words find a resonance that lends him an odd credibility, which is in fact Wordsworth’s rearticulation of the traditional authority of the holy fool. Peter Rushton dismisses Wordsworth’s portrayal of Johnny and Betty Foy as “sentimentality,” but such a reading works only if we consider the poem as documentary social history (“Idiocy” 59)⁷; it is insufficient for an understanding of the semiotic function of the “idiot” figure. Johnny Foy is a figure who refers to a passing world, an England where the forests are still so large that one could get lost in them (at least according to the imagination of a worried mother). He is also a comic representation of the Wordsworthian solitary poet, finding meaning and

⁷ Wordsworth does provide some “documentary” commentary on the place of people with intellectual disabilities in the world of 1798, however. In his letter to John Wilson, he writes that “the loathing and disgust which many people have at the sight of an idiot, is a feeling which, though having some foundation in human nature, is not necessarily attached to it in any virtuous degree, but is owing in a great measure to a false delicacy, and, if I may say it without rudeness, a certain want of comprehensiveness of thinking and feeling. Persons of the lower classes of society have little or nothing of this: if an idiot is born in a poor man’s house, it must be taken care of, and cannot be boarded out, as it would be by gentlefolks, or sent to a public or private asylum for such unfortunate beings. [Poor people,] seeing frequently among their neighbours such objects, easily [forget] whatever there is of natural disgust about them, and have [therefore] a sane state, so that without pain or suffering they perform their duties towards them” (Letters 296-297).

art in nature.

But this significance is not controlled within the space of the poem, and other readers brought their own responses to the representation of the “idiot boy.” Wordsworth observed in his June 1802 letter to John Wilson that “I wrote [“The Idiot Boy”] with exceeding delight and pleasure, and whenever I read it I read it with pleasure.” However, making the lives of the humble into the stuff of poetry had its limits, and some readers felt Wordsworth transgressed them with “The Idiot Boy.” Even friends were not convinced by the poem. However, the antagonism encountered by the poem is instructive in that the criticism foregrounds certain anxieties harboured about people with intellectual disabilities and their place in the broad scheme of things. Writing in Biographia Literaria some years after collaborating with Wordsworth, Coleridge is relatively gentle in his criticism:

In ‘The Idiot Boy,’ indeed, the mother’s character is not so much a real and native product of a ‘situation where the essential passions of the heart find a better soil, in which they can attain their maturity and speak a plainer and more emphatic language,’ [Wordsworth, Preface] as it is an impersonation of an instinct abandoned by judgement. Hence the two following charges seem to me not wholly groundless: at least, they are the only plausible objections, which I have heard to that fine poem. The one is, that the author has not, in the poem itself, taken sufficient care to preclude from the reader’s fancy the disgusting images of *ordinary, morbid idiocy*, which yet it is by no means his intention to represent. He has even by the “burr, burr, burr,” uncounteracted by any preceding description of the boy’s beauty, assisted in recalling them. The other is, that the idiocy of the *boy* is so evenly balanced by the folly of the *mother*, as to present to the general reader rather a laughable burlesque on the blindness of anile dotage, than an analytic display of maternal affection in

its ordinary workings. (Biographia Literaria II, 48-49)[italics Coleridge]

Coleridge was not alone in his distaste. John Wilson wrote to Wordsworth expressing delight in the Lyrical Ballads, but notes that the poet has lapsed in describing "feelings with which I cannot sympathize, and situations in which I can take no interest." The most startling example of these is, to Wordsworth's young fan, "The Idiot Boy." Wilson writes,

your intention, as you inform us in your preface, was to trace the maternal passion through its more subtle windings. This design is no doubt accompanied with much difficulty, but, if properly executed, cannot fail of interesting the heart. But, sir, in my opinion, the manner in which you have executed this plan has frustrated the end you intended to produce by it; the affection of 'Betty Foy' has nothing in it to excite interest. It exhibits merely the effects of that instinctive feeling inherent in the constitution of every animal. The excessive fondness of the mother disgusts us, and prevents us from sympathizing with her. We are unable to enter into her feelings; we cannot conceive ourselves actuated by the same feelings, and consequently take little or no interest in her situation. The object of her affection is indeed her son, and in that relation much consists, but then he is represented as totally destitute of any attachment towards her; the state of his mind is represented as perfectly deplorable, and, in short, it appears to me as almost unnatural, that a person in a state of complete idiotism should excite the warmest feelings of attachment in the breast even of his mother. This much I know, that among all the people I ever knew to have read this poem, I never met one who did not rise rather displeas'd from the perusal of it, and the only cause I could assign for it was the one now mentioned. This inability to receive pleasure from descriptions such as that of 'The Idiot Boy,' is I am convinced, founded upon established feelings of human nature, and the principle of it constitutes, as I daresay you recollect, the leading feature of

Smith's theory of moral sentiments. I therefore think that in the choice of this subject you have committed an error. (letter to Wordsworth, 24 May 1802; rpt in Wordsworth & Coleridge, 337-8)

Wilson's criticism goes somewhat further than Coleridge's but points to the same flaws: the disgustingness of the idiot boy himself, and the unbelievability of Betty Foy's attachment to her son. These points deserve fuller attention as they belie a concern about the structure not only of human emotion and inclinations, but of the very concept of what is human. Johnny Foy is condemned for being representative of a disgusting condition, one that all humans should turn away from, infer the critics; Betty Foy is condemned for not behaving as these readers feel she should, but rather by loving her son in an apparent fit of irrationality.⁸

The concerns expressed by Coleridge and Wilson are instructive, especially in the way both condemn the mother-child relationship as "anile dotage"

⁸ Lord Byron was both dismissive and satirical. In "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers," he writes:

**The simple Wordsworth, framer of a lay
As soft as evening in his favourite May,
Who warns his friend 'to shake off toil and trouble,
And quit his books, for fear of growing double;
Who, both by precept and example, shows
That prose is verse, and verse is merely prose;
Convincing all, by demonstrations plain,
Poetic souls delight in prose insane;
And Christmas stories tortured into rhyme
Contain the essence of the true sublime.
Thus, when he tells the tale of Betty Foy,
The idiot mother of 'an idiot boy';
A moon-struck, silly lad, who lost his way,
And, like his bard, confounded night with day;
So close on each pathetic part he dwells,
And each adventure so sublimely tells,
That all who view the 'idiot in his glory'
Conceive the bard the hero of the story." (236-254)**

(Coleridge) or "unnatural" (Wilson).⁹ However, Wordsworth's association of the female community of Betty Foy and Susan Gale with Johnny Foy, and his location of them as part of a natural rural world opposed to the rational domain of the doctor, is hardly surprising. As Keith Thomas notes, women, the mentally disabled, and the poor were often considered "beastlike" in early modern England (43)¹⁰, and these associations lingered under various guises through the nineteenth century, although by the time Wordsworth was writing the emphasis had shifted from bestiality to irrationality. The masculine, urban world of the doctor, the man of science, is governed by rationality; Wordsworth explicitly opposes it to an alternative, the world of nature, art and feeling, governed by the maternal love of Betty Foy. Significantly, Johnny Foy's father, while alive and providing for his family, is absent from the world of the poem; there is no male presence, other than the "idiot boy," in the world opposed to the doctor's. Johnny must reside in this world because of his idiocy; he has no access to the rational world of other men. Women - less rational, but as a consequence perhaps also slightly more natural - provide the link - or perhaps the transition - between the idiot boy and the human community, something an insistent rationality cannot do.

An interesting comparison can be made between Wordsworth's "Idiot Boy" and a similar (though rarely published) work by Robert Southey. In The Critical Review of October, 1798, Southey, reviewing Lyrical Ballads, focuses not only

⁹ Such criticisms are not restricted to Wordsworth's contemporaries. V. G. Kiernan condemns the 1798 Lyrical Ballads in general, dismissing what he calls its "idiot style" and "the two unbearable gossips of 'The Idiot Boy'" (102). He praises Wordsworth's additions to the 1800 edition of the Lyrical Ballads, though, noting that "hardly anything of the 'idiot' style survives" and that "Wordsworth has got away from his helpless weaklings to real men, men like old Michael of the 'stern and unbending mind'" (107).

¹⁰ Joyce E. Salisbury also elaborates on the association of the intellectually disabled, the poor and women with animals in her chapter "Humans as Animals" in The Beast Within.

on the content but also the length of "The Idiot Boy":

Upon this subject the author has written nearly 500 lines. . . . No tale less deserved the labour that appears to have been bestowed upon this. It resembles a Flemish picture in the worthlessness of its design and the excellence of its execution. . . . Betty Foy's neighbour Susan Gale is indisposed; and no one can be conveniently sent for the doctor but Betty's idiot boy. She therefore puts him upon her poney [sic], at eight o'clock in the evening, gives him proper directions, and returns to take care of her sick neighbour. Johnny is expected with the doctor by eleven; but the clock strikes eleven, and twelve, and one, without the appearance of Johnny or the doctor. Betty's restless fears become insupportable; and she now leaves her friend to look for her idiot son. She goes to the doctor's house, but hears nothing of Johnny. About five o'clock, however, she finds him sitting quietly upon his feeding poney. As they go home they meet old Susan, whose apprehensions have cured her, and brought her out to seek them; and they all return home merrily together. (qtd. in McElderberry, 490)

While Southey's explicit criticism is mild, his tone is certainly dismissive of the subject matter. Perhaps, however, B.R. McElderberry is right in identifying the root of Southey's dismissal when he claims that "Southey's opinion was much influenced by his having himself published a poem called 'The Idiot' in The Morning Post for June 30, 1798, two months before Lyrical Ballads appeared" (490).¹¹

Southey's poem, like Wordsworth's, employs a ballad format, including as a subtitle a disingenuous notation claiming that "The Circumstances Related in the Following Ballad Happened Some Years Since in Herefordshire." In the

¹¹ Southey's poem has not appeared in any collection of his work; it has been reprinted only recently - apart from its appearance in McElderberry's article - in Duncan Wu's 1994 anthology, Romanticism.

poem, reproduced in Appendix A, the title character is an adult who lives with his mother. When the mother dies, the son, Ned, is bereft; he goes to her grave, digs her up, and takes her corpse home with him. The son fails to understand the nature of death--he gazes at his mother and asks, "Why, mother, do you look so pale,/ And why are you so cold?" Soon, however, the benevolent Deity calls the son to join his mother in eternal bliss.

As this brief summary makes clear, the poem is a blend of pathos and the macabre. While emphasizing the idiot's status as one to whom God is kind, the poem also constructs him as a grotesque figure who transgresses the sanctity of the graveyard in retrieving his mother. The fundamental ambivalence of the character is a startling contrast to Wordsworth's image, and suggests a profound anxiety about the nature of idiocy, an anxiety akin to that expressed by many of Wordsworth's other critics.

Geoffrey Carnall observes that while Southey's Ned was "a deserving object of pity," the appeal of Wordsworth's Johnny transcends pity (82); Southey's poem "shows that he was able to appreciate the pathos of the idiot's condition, but one suspects that he could not enter into the intense joy and pain of mother-love, the exultant idiocy, which is the strength of Wordsworth's poem" (81). Elizabeth Duthie extends this argument to note that, by calling Ned to God, "the poem thus includes a consolation for the feelings of pity it evokes, and so nullifies them. More than that, the reader's reaction of pity for Ned both reassures the reader that he is kind and benevolent (and therefore morally superior), and also puts him in a position of superiority to Ned (we feel compassion for those less fortunate than we are)" (219-20). But the pity is allied

closely to revulsion. Harriet Martineau, recalling the tale over fifty years later in Household Words, wonders "how many elderly people now remember how aghast they were, as children, at the story . . ." (199), while Carnall notes that the poem "certainly has the power of reducing a large class of first-year students to shocked silence" (81).

Southey's idiot adult exhibits qualities distinct from Wordsworth's idiot boy, yet both are informed by an aesthetic tradition that locates in idiocy a divine naïveté. Both also associate the idiot son with his mother, although Southey does this much more forcefully than Wordsworth. Johnny Foy achieves poetic insight; he is a comic everyman, watched over anxiously by Betty Foy, but everyman all the same. Southey's Ned, however, exists on the fringes of human society, and is fully isolated from it upon his mother's death. By inhabiting a perfect and conflict-free world with his mother, he is made a symbol of divine benevolence. Certainly this sort of image is well within the tradition of the holy innocent; although the idiot is blessed and protected by providence, he is not and cannot be a model for human behavior. Southey's idiot is innocent but bestial: his sole bond to human society is his mother. This version of the idiot is in contrast to that presented in Wordsworth's poem, where Johnny Foy, as a member of his rural community, is also a part of the range of human possibilities; Southey's Ned is a pathetic aberration from the "human," and presumably a figure more readily comprehended by Wordsworth's critics.

This chapter has so far examined the range of significance that the idiot boy can assume, given the contexts in which the image functioned. The focus has, thus far, been upon Wordsworth's development of the "natural" or "innocent" literary

figure, readers' responses to this image, and its association with female society. But other critical contexts also exist. For instance, Marilyn Butler, writing of Lyrical Ballads in general, observes that "Wordsworth's experiments with subjects from among the lower orders of society . . . follow thirty years of public interest in this matter . . . and are thus characteristic of the culture of the Enlightenment" (58), especially the primitivist concerns with noble savages (and their British equivalent, noble rural labourers) and wild children. Alan Bewell asserts that "the philosophical discovery of the idiot took place in the eighteenth century" (57) with John Locke's Essay on Human Understanding, and argues that Wordsworth's poem engages with Enlightenment notions of rationality and intelligence. Existing apart from language, Bewell notes, "the idiot occupies the threshold between nature and man, and can be seen as a figure linking the two states" (57). Empiricist philosophy hypothesized that the human brain was a *tabula rasa*, written upon by experience and thus acquiring knowledge as experience was recorded in the form of memory; idiocy, in this formulation, was "a state deriving from the inability to produce or retain memories" (57). However, he argues, empiricists adapted the idea of idiocy to the wild or feral child, apparently raised in nature without learning language. The wild child was an idiot by deprivation, not inherently, and empiricists felt that the development and education under carefully observed circumstances of a wild child would provide the final proof of the philosophy. Yet, Bewell suggests (following others such as Daniel Defoe and Philippe Pinel), most wild children were simply abandoned or lost idiots: the wild child/idiot was "a textual creature, a product of empirical theorizing" (62).

Bewell contends that "the idiot was a 'blank page' in more than one sense, for

he provided the crude material upon which was inscribed the language of the philosophers" (64). Wordsworth burlesques the notion of the wild child, "debunking . . . the Enlightenment" while at the same time "engaging in his own discourse on idiocy" (65). Johnny's ability to speak at the end of the poem suggests to Bewell that Wordsworth replaced the Enlightenment emphasis on rational comprehension with the notion of nature as an "educative power" (65). Ultimately, he claims, "'The Idiot Boy' is patterned on the role that lost idiots played in the Enlightenment" (69). Whether or not Bewell's assessment of Wordsworth's intent is accurate, his argument provides an interesting gloss on the work of Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard with Victor, the "Wild Boy of Aveyron."

The Wild Boy of Aveyron

In 1798, an event occurred which challenged the formulations of idiocy articulated by Romantic poets and critics. In the fields around the French town of Lacaune, in south-central France, a young boy, apparently wild, was caught by woodsmen. He escaped, after being on show briefly, but was apprehended again by three hunters in the following year. He was left with a peasant, who fed him on potatoes and nuts, the only food he accepted, and escaped again after eight days. He reappeared for good on January 8, 1800, in the village of Saint-Sernin in the region of Aveyron, where, perhaps motivated by hunger and remembering the kindness of the peasant, he approached the shop of a dyer. According to Harlan Lane, the boy "slipped across the threshold and into a new life, and a new era in the education of man" (7).

The feral boy was a sensation: crowds gathered to see him in Saint-Affrique, where he was first placed in an orphanage; in Rodez, where he was transferred

for observation to the custody of Abbé Pierre-Joseph Bonneterre, a noted naturalist; and then in Paris, when he first arrived at L'Institution Impériale des Sourds-Muets, headed by Abbé Roche-Ambroise Sicard. He became the subject of newspaper and journal articles as well as learned papers. "L'enfant sauvage de l'Aveyron," as he quickly became known, was a nine-days-wonder in French media and society. His much anticipated and discussed arrival in the national capital distracted the Parisian intelligentsia, as well as regular citizens, from more quotidian concerns.

The wild boy arrived at an opportune time for philosophers. Since Locke's Essay on Human Understanding, writers struggling to articulate the nature of human cognition had hypothesized a sort of unadorned man, a pre-societal figure who, if found and observed, could resolve the debates over exactly how humans came to think. From the mid-eighteenth century, philosophers and natural historians worked to distinguish humans from animals, with savages and *homo ferri* occupying a shifting position. What constituted a human being? Did humans exist on a continuum with beasts and savages, or were they a separate entity? And where did savages then rest on this hierarchy? The questions were not without difficulties.

In his Essay, completed in 1689, Locke theorizes that the human mind is like a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, that acquires knowledge as the memory records experience, from which the mind learns to reason and abstract. France's most notable proponent of Locke's system was Étienne Bonnot, Abbé de Condillac, whose Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines (1746) was an extension of Locke's theories, most notably distinguished by their elaboration of

the link between sensory data and intellectual development (a distinction that greatly influenced Itard's instruction of the wild boy, and later Édouard Séguin's educational methods). The arrival of a wild child, untutored by humans and without the language that enables one to formalize thought, provided a means for philosophers to examine the empiricist ideas of Locke and Condillac.¹²

The Enlightenment sought for authority in primitivisms, as Bewell argued. Lane observes of the era that "nearly every philosopher had his isolated man" (27), from Rousseau's noble savage to Voltaire's *Candide* and Huron Indian, to Condillac's statue who acquires senses one by one, and thus gains sentience and understanding. Wild children throughout the eighteenth century had been the object of speculation by philosophers, as Douthwaite notes: "Enlightenment writers turned children found in the wild into the basis of zoological taxonomies, tales of sin and redemption, schemas of primitive society, or proof of human degradation" ("Homo ferus" 176).¹³ The wild boy of Aveyron was a primitive tossed into the midst of the philosophers, waiting for them to pass judgment on him. He was, in Douthwaite's phrase, "the last natural man" ("Homo ferus" 190).

¹² Other prominent philosophical positions, notably those associated with Descartes and Rousseau, were also affected by the arrival of the wild boy, although no proponents of these positions were extensively engaged with the wild boy. Would a wild child, acquiring language, be able to recognize and present the "innate ideas" hypothesized by Cartesian thought? In what shape might these ideas exist in a pre-linguistic form? The wild boy could conceivably provide answers to these problems. As for the Rousseauian position: Rousseau had argued that socialized man is, to some extent, a degraded man, that the ambivalent morality of civilized life spoils that which, in nature, is noble. Those who sought the noble savage in the wild boy of Aveyron were no doubt somewhat disappointed in the dirty, remote and frightened creature they saw before them. Still, as Lane notes, "a wild child testifies to the extraordinary physical resistance of natural man, able to live naked and without protection in the most rigorous climate, enjoying robust health, free of the many vices of society" (26).

¹³ Of course, even prior to the Enlightenment "wild children" elicited interest, fear, and, to some degree, sympathy. Lucien Malson and Roger Shattuck both describe numerous cases of "wild children" both before and after the Wild Boy of Aveyron, which had garnered interest for various reasons. However, Malson suggests that wild children and the "phenomenon of living beyond the bounds of society" become of interest to philosophers only in the eighteenth century (38).

The timing of the wild boy's capture was serendipitous. Shattuck notes that the Société des Observateurs de l'Homme - a group of sixty doctors, philosophers, and naturalists - had been formed only weeks earlier, in December 1799, in the aftermath of Napoleon's consolidation of power and the apparent end of the bloodshed of the revolution. Shortly after the Society was founded, "stories began to appear in the press about the Wild Boy of Aveyron. Because of the timing, people all over France took notice of him, particularly the Society of Observers of Man. He had come on stage just as the eye of the storm passed over" (50).¹⁴

The creation of the new republican government encouraged philosophers and physicians to believe that circumstances were favourable for the "transmission of the message of the 'semaphore of science and reason' throughout Europe and to future generations" (Staum 3). Knowledge was to be shared among the people; rational discourse was the birthright of all men, to be restored through the efforts of the revolution. Popular imagery of the revolution supported this belief. As Dorinda Outram notes, "much of the political culture produced by the revolution was aimed, whether successfully or not, at redistributing various attributes of the king's body throughout the new body politic" (4). In a world where the state head had been removed and its attributes distributed among the people, the wild boy had a claim on rationality, the human heritage that was

¹⁴ The Society assigned a committee of five members to investigate the Wild Boy: Sicard, as keeper of the Institute where the boy was kept; Cuvier, the anatomist and taxonomist; Pinel; De Gérando, a moral philosopher and naturalist; and Jauffret, a naturalist (Shattuck 31).

to be restored to him by enlightened philosophers.¹⁵

Given his immediate interest to Parisian intellectuals, it isn't surprising that the wild boy was the occasion of a number of learned papers exploring his qualities and, of course, his usefulness for philosophical debates. Bonneterre published his "Notice historique sur le sauvage de l'Aveyron" in 1800; this was followed by an account by another naturalist, J.-J. Virey, "Histoire naturelle du genre humain (avec une dissertation sur le sauvage de l'Aveyron),"¹⁶ later that year. Philippe Pinel too presented a paper on the wild boy at an 1800 conference of the Society of the Observers of Man. Most famous, though, are the accounts of the boy written by Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, "De l'Education d'un homme sauvage ou des premiers développements physiques et moraux du jeune sauvage de l'Aveyron," in 1801, and his later report in 1806.¹⁷

Bonneterre and Virey, in their works on the boy, itemize his various characteristics by beginning with a description of his physical qualities, then progressing on to discuss the boy's deprivation of speech, the development of instincts (including such things as the development of personal attachments), eating habits, and daily regimen. They note with interest his gait, and the fact

¹⁵ Ludmilla Jordanova investigates the symbolic resonance of decapitation in noting that "The intention was to substitute the sovereignty of the people - a body which could survive without the head. A new image of the body politic was being developed that involved extreme decentralisation, and, it has been argued, new physiological models of the body were simultaneously emerging with a corresponding emphasis" ("Medical Mediations" 43). These "new physiological models" were mirrored by new pedagogical strategies employed by physician-pedagogues such as Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard.

¹⁶ Lane renders his English translation of the full title as "Dissertation on a Young Child Found in the Forests of the Department of Aveyron, Compared with Savages Found in Europe in Diverse Areas, with Some Remarks on the Original State of Man."

¹⁷ Itard's first report was translated into English and published in London in 1802 as "An Historical Account of the Discovery and Education of a Savage Man, or of the First Developments, Physical and Moral, of the Young Savage Caught in the Woods near Aveyron in the year 1798."

that, when pursued, the wild boy dropped to all fours to escape his eventual captors; the role of bipedalism in human development was a point of contention among Enlightenment naturalists, with Linnaeus making quadrupedalism one of the defining features of *homo ferus*, distinguishing wild children from civilized humans (Lane 23). Bonneterre also considers theories of wild men and compares the boy of Aveyron to previously discovered wild children. The boy is a subject of precise scientific observation not because he is deprived of some of his senses, but rather because he has survived in the wild, apparently without human contact and, consequently, without experiencing the effects (polluting or beneficent) of civilization. Depending on the inclinations of the observer, the boy could be the perfect specimen of the *tabula rasa* hypothesized by Locke and Condillac or of Rousseau's noble savage. The latter position is strikingly evident in the final paragraph of Virey's summary of the wild boy, just after the author observes that the boy is "truly and purely an animal, limited to simple physical sensations":

Go forth, poor youth, on this unhappy earth, go forth and lose in your relations with men in your primitiveness and simplicity! You lived in the bosom of ancient forests; you found your nourishment at the root of oak and beech trees; you quenched your thirst at crystal springs; content with meagre destiny, limited by your simple desires, satisfied with your way of life beyond which you knew nothing, this usufruct was your sole domain. Now you can have nothing except by the beneficence of man; you are at his mercy, without property, without power, and you exchange freedom for dependence. Thus are poor-born three-fourths of the human race: nothing but bitterness was prepared for you in tearing you away from the protective dryads who watched over you. You had only the one need of nourishment. How many others that you will be unable to satisfy will now relentlessly assail you? How many desires will be born in your footsteps,

and will grow with the tree of your knowledge and with your social ties? How utterly you will lose your independence, bound with our political shackles, caught in our civil institutions; you should truly weep! The path of your education will be sprinkled with tears; and when your pristine soul again turns towards the azure vaults of the sky, when you discern the order and the beauty of this vast universe, what new ideas will germinate in your young head! What love at last opens to you the gates of a new way of life, oh how many new and delicious sensations, how many unknown passions will trouble your vulnerable heart! Oh, may you live happily among your countrymen, may you, man without pretension, display the sublime virtues of a generous soul and transmit to future generations this honorable example, as an eternal proof of what can be done by a student of innocent Nature. (qtd. in Lane 48)

For Virey, the wild boy is a being complete in his harmony with nature, but cruelly transplanted into European civilization.

However, not all people agreed with Virey's assessment of the wild boy's future as an educated citizen of the new republic. Philippe Pinel, in his presentation to the Société des Observateurs de l'Homme, given two days before Itard took responsibility for the boy in 1800, moved away from general arguments to specific observation in asserting that all attempts to teach the wild boy must fail for the simple reason that the boy was an ineducable idiot; his "wildness" was a consequence of a fundamental inability to learn. Wrote Pinel, "It appears that the child retains no idea whatsoever of things that are unconnected with his subsistence or his means of escape, and that, incapable of attention, he has only fleeting ideas which disappear as soon as they are produced" (qtd. in Lane 60). To support his case, he juxtaposed the wild boy's physical and intellectual characteristics against those of established idiots residing in the asylums of

Paris. While in some cases he had advanced skills, especially those that needed to be developed to enable him to survive in nature, Pinel argued that most often the wild boy fell behind the standards set by the institutionalized idiots.

Pinel concludes that "we can conjecture that inhuman or impoverished parents abandoned the child as incapable of education, around nine or ten years old, at some distance from their home, and that pangs of hunger led him to nourish himself on various foods which nature placed within his grasp He seems thus to have remained wandering and vagabond in the woods or hamlets during the following years, always reduced to purely animal instinct and solely concerned with his subsistence and escaping from dangers that threatened him" (qtd. in Lane 69). Finally, judged Pinel, "there is no hope whatever of obtaining some measure of success through systematic and continued instruction" (qtd. in Lane 69).

Despite Pinel's assessment (and Pinel was the undisputed authority of the day), Itard and an ally, Joseph-Marie de Gérando,¹⁸ persisted in believing that Condillac's system could enlighten the wild boy and awaken his intellect. The

¹⁸ Joseph-Marie de Gérando's interest in the wild boy was likely an extension of his interest in non-European cultures. On his capacity as a member of the Société des Observateurs de l'Homme, de Gérando had asked that explorers bring back to Paris live specimens - ideally entire families - of foreign peoples to be studied, and preserved after death. As T. Carlos Jacques notes, "External or non-European nature is retrieved from its place of origin, studied, classified, ranked, and lastly, *preserved*, thereby extending the domain of Europe's knowledge" (193). De Gérando also published in 1800 "The Observations of Savage Peoples" as a guide to French explorers where he advocated a proto-anthropological approach in which the explorer "must assimilate himself or herself to the object of observation, that is, the observer of the savage must become as much like the savage as possible so as to be able to grasp what is a radically different world" (Jacques 213). Itard's proposal for the study of the wild boy accords with de Gérando's interest in the extensive observation of other peoples and cultures, and foregrounds the link between study of the "wild boy" and that of "savage cultures."

debate centered on whether or not the boy was an idiot, and therefore ineducable, or a true "wild" boy who simply had not been exposed to the benefits of civilization, rationality, and language. For Pinel, the boy was a *prétendu sauvage*, whose wildness was only the consequence of his idiocy; he had no doubt been abandoned by heartless parents to die. Itard saw him in the opposite light, as a *prétendu idiot*, whose apparent idiocy was the consequence of intellectual deprivation (Lane 56). Itard's position is made clear in his preface to his first report on the education of the wild boy:

If it was proposed to resolve the following metaphysical problem, viz. '*to determine what would be the degree of understanding, and the nature of the ideas of a youth who, deprived, from his infancy, of all education, should have lived entirely separated from individuals of his species*': I am strangely deceived, or the solution of the problem would give to this individual an understanding connected only with a small number of his wants, and deprived, by his insulated condition, of all those simple and complex ideas which we receive from education, and which are combined in our minds in so many different ways, by means only of our knowledge of signs. Well! the moral picture of this youth would be that of the Savage of Aveyron, and the solution of the problem would give the measure and the cause of his intellectual state" (99)[italics Itard].

It is difficult (and unnecessary, for my purposes) to look back over the past two centuries to confirm whether Pinel or Itard was correct. What interests me is why this debate arose, and the assumptions underlying it: that idiots were necessarily ineducable and unfit for enlightened society. This debate mirrors concerns by critics of Wordsworth's poem: just as his subject matter was not fit for poetry, the wild boy may not be fit for education. Much of the despair over educating idiots can be seen traced to Locke's notion of the place they

occupied in the human world, as both Pinel and Itard drew upon Condillac for the foundation of medical theories. Indeed, as Pinel had been Itard's teacher, he filtered Condillac's work to his pupil (Lane 74). To understand why idiots were ineligible for education, it is worth travelling back to Locke's writings on idiocy in his *Essay*.

In Book II of the *Essay*, Locke argues that reason is what distinguishes men from brute animals. Immediately after making this argument, he establishes a distinction between idiots and madmen based upon their apparent reasoning processes.

How far idiots are concerned in the want or weakness of any or all of the foregoing faculties, an exact observation of their several ways of faltering would no doubt discover: for those who either perceive but dully, or retain the ideas that come into their mind but ill, who cannot readily excite or compound them, will have little matter to think on. Those who cannot distinguish, compare, and abstract, would hardly be able to understand and make use of language, or judge or reason to any tolerable degree; but only a little and imperfectly about things present, and very familiar to their senses. And indeed any of the forementioned faculties, if wanting, or out of order, produce suitable effects in men's understanding or knowledge.

In fine, the defect in naturals seems to proceed from want of quickness, activity and motion in the intellectual faculties, whereby they are deprived of reason; whereas madmen, on the other side, seem to suffer by the other extreme: for they do not appear to me to have lost the faculty of reasoning; but having joined together some ideas very wrongly, they mistake them for truths, and they err as men do that argue right from wrong principles. For by the violence of their imaginations, having taken their fancies for realities, they make right deductions from them. . . . In

short, herein seems to lie the difference between idiots and madmen, that madmen put wrong ideas together, and so make wrong propositions, but argue and reason right from them; but idiots make very few or no propositions, and reason scarce at all." (Locke II, 11, 12-13)

Locke doesn't simply dispose of idiots with this formulation, though, as they pose a particular difficulty for his conception of humanity. According to his criteria, they exist somewhere between the human and the animal, occupying a liminal position that is neither one nor the other.

There are creatures in the world that have shapes like ours, but are hairy, and want language and reason. There are naturals amongst us that have perfectly our shape, but want reason, and some of them language too. There are creatures, as it is said . . . that, with reason and language, and a shape in other things agreeing with ours, have hairy tails; others where the males have no beards, and others where the females have. If it can be asked, whether these be all men or no, all of human species? it is plain, the question refers only to the nominal essence: for those of them to whom the definition of the word man, or the complex idea signified by that name, agrees, are men, and the other not. But if the inquiry be made concerning the supposed real essence, and whether the internal constitution and frame of these several creatures be specifically different, it is wholly impossible for us to answer, no part of that going into our specific idea; only we have reason to think, that where the faculties or outward frame so much differs, the internal constitution is not exactly the same. But what difference in the internal real constitution makes a specific difference, it is in vain to inquire; whilst our measures of species be, as they are, only our abstract ideas, which we know; and not that internal constitution, which makes no part of them. Shall the difference of hair only on the skin, be a mark of a different internal specific constitution between a changeling [an intellectually disabled child born to normal parents] and a drill, when they agree in shape, and want of reason and speech? And shall not the want of reason and speech be a sign to us of

different real constitutions and species between a changeling and a reasonable man? And so of the rest, if we pretend that distinction of species or sorts is fixedly established by the real frame and secret constitutions of things.” (Locke III, 6, 22)

To address the problem posed by the apparently (for Locke) ambivalent humanity of the idiot, Locke attempts to structure a new taxonomical position:

Twould possibly be thought a bold Paradox, if not a very dangerous Falsehood, if I should say, that some Changelings, who have lived forty years together, without any appearance of Reason, are something between a Man and a Beast. . . . Here every body will be ready to ask, if Changelings may be supposed to be something between Man and Beast, ‘Pray what are they?’ I answer, Changelings, which is as good a word to signify something different from the signification of MAN or BEAST, as the names Man and Beast are to have significations from one another. (Locke IV, 4, 13-14)

C. F. Goodey argues that “Locke’s view of what it is to be human emerged upon forfeit of a sacrifice; . . . a concept of ‘man’ is generated only by excluding from that concept certain ‘men’” (“Locke’s Idiots” 249), those who appear in Locke’s taxonomy as an “infringement of natural law” (“Locke’s Idiots” 237). Locke’s notion of natural law as it applies to species distinction is problematic, and based on the belief that humans are distinguished from animals by rational processes. Otherwise, and without this distinction, humans would lapse into a dangerous zone where they could be understood as simply another form of animal. Locke’s conception of the human and of human understanding requires the idiot as a sort of “buffer zone” between man and beast, negotiating the “abyss” created when reason is identified as the defining human characteristic

("Locke's Idiots" 248).¹⁹

Thus, the debate around the wild boy was not concerned with whether or not it was worthwhile to educate an idiot, as both Pinel and Itard, following Locke and the dominant beliefs of the day, agreed it was not, but rather on the source of the boy's apparent incapacity. Itard's opening paragraph to his first report on his attempts to educate the boy give a good sense of his perspective:

Cast on this globe, without physical powers, and without innate ideas; unable by himself to obey the constitutional laws of his organization, which call him to the first rank in the system of being; MAN can only find in the bosom of society the eminent station that was destined for him in nature, and would be, without the aid of civilization, one of the most feeble and least intelligent of animals; - a truth which, although it has often been insisted upon, has not as yet been rigorously demonstrated.

(91)

This truth Itard intended to demonstrate by educating the boy, whom he named Victor.²⁰

¹⁹ Goodey elsewhere elaborates on the long-term political consequences of Locke's distinctions: ". . . the creation of idiots on or beneath a terrain of reason as purely human ability and purely mental labour, is the ploy by which the rest of us are able to present ourselves to authoritarian bullies as intelligent, moderate, autonomous citizens capable of consent and democratic government" ("Psychopolitics" 112). Thus, the theory of rational consent fundamental to liberal democracy necessitates the construction of a contrast group, those incapable of rational consent. As Goodey notes, "at the strange birth of liberal England there are some other anomalous offspring emerging. Totally determined inhuman idiots, at the opposite end from liberty, are necessary to the theory of consent" ("Psychopolitics" 114).

²⁰ Itard's project found a literary counterpart almost twenty years later in Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein, in which Victor Frankenstein (an allusion to the wild boy?) creates a man, but fails to allow his creation the assistance of civilization. Hence the monster develops from a "blank slate" to a being whose antipathy towards Frankenstein, who had abandoned him and set him apart from society, leads to the death of the doctor and those close to him. Shelley's novel reads almost as a gloss of Itard's project gone awry. It also, like Itard's work with Victor, intersects with anxiety about "savage" peoples; see, for instance, H. L. Malchow's "Frankenstein's Monster and Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain." As Malchow argues with reference to the abolitionist movement later in the century, to many philanthropists, "the slave, like the monster [and like Victor and the later pupils of idiot asylums], was indeed a *tabula rasa*, a cultureless creature ready to receive their moral teaching and their theology" (115).

Itard developed five objectives for his training program, based on the ideas of Condillac and applying some of the techniques used by Sicard at L'Institution Impériale des Sourds-Muets (where Itard was the new resident physician, through which he first came in contact with Victor), and the concept of "moral medicine," "that sublime art" introduced from England into France by Pinel (Itard, 101). In his report, Itard presents his agenda:

My objectives were,

1. To attach him to social life, by rendering it more pleasant to him than that which he was then leading, and, above all, more analogous to the mode of existence that he was about to quit.
2. To awaken the nervous sensibility by the most energetic stimulants, and sometimes by lively affections of the mind.
3. To extend the sphere of his ideas, by giving him new wants, and by increasing the number of his relations to the objects surrounding him.
4. To lead him to the use of speech by subjecting him to the necessity of imitation.
5. To exercise frequently the most simple operations of the mind upon the objects of his physical wants; and, at length, by inducing the application of them to objects of instruction. (102)²¹

I will not concern myself with describing and assessing Itard's training regimens; Lane has already performed this task admirably. Rather, I will consider the narrative form that Itard employs to report his pedagogical

²¹ His successes were limited, according to his own assessment of the project. Victor never acquired speech, although he did learn other means of communicating his desires. He did not prove to be the receptive blank slate that Itard had hoped, and the pedagogue's attempts often led to frustration on both sides. But historically, the meeting of Itard and Victor is important as the first experiment in what was later to become known as special education, especially as developed by Édouard Séguin, Itard's student who actively sought to educate the mentally disabled, and individualized education, pioneered by Maria Montessori, who identified Itard and Séguin as her primary influences (Lane 279).

experiments with Victor.

Itard's textual rendition of Victor's education articulates certain relations and assumptions which reflect the way Victor was perceived by Itard and which shaped the way the idea of Victor was reproduced for the readers of the report. Note that I am not attempting to assess whether or not Itard accurately portrays his charge, nor whether he treats Victor properly or improperly. Instead, I am interested in the way Victor is reproduced as a textualized figure, a character in a history composed for an audience of professional people - physicians and philosophers, administrators and politicians - whose approval Itard required for the support of his training program with Victor and for his professional reputation. The next section of this chapter will examine the narrative of Victor's education, with a further emphasis on the representations of the relationships Victor develops with both his tutor and his "gouvernante," Mme. Guérin.

Itard's choice of narrative format rests upon his professional commitment to experiment and observation, and is perhaps best characterized as a form of case history. His first report, "De l'éducation d'un homme sauvage ou des premiers développements physiques et moraux du jeune sauvage de l'Aveyron," published in 1801, presents the philosophical questions quoted above, and is organized around his initial attempts to solve the riddles of the human intellect posed by the wild boy.

Each of the project's five pedagogical objectives is treated separately, and in increasing detail; while Itard's description of the work carried out to meet the first objective contains four paragraphs, that of his fifth and final one stretches to

seventeen paragraphs of considerably longer and more detailed descriptions (a point to which we will return). Because he had been working with Victor for less than a year when the report is written, he draws only preliminary conclusions: notable among them are the observations that "man is inferior to a great number of animals in a pure state of nature," and that the "moral superiority . . . said to be *natural* to man, is merely the result of civilization" (138). [italics Itard] He also proposes that "the progress of teaching may, and ought to be aided by the lights of modern medicine, which of all the natural sciences can co-operate the most effectually towards the amelioration of the human species, by appreciating the organical and intellectual peculiarities of each individual" (139).

As a physician, Itard brought the professional concerns of his time to his analysis and textual reconstruction of Victor. The narrative documents his various successes and failures in his pedagogical and intellectual quest. He is writing at a time when, as Foucault has noted, the objective and wide-ranging medical gaze is the arbiter and guardian of truth, liberty and knowledge, a time when "the majestic violence of light, which is in itself supreme, brings to an end the bounded, dark kingdom of privileged knowledge and establishes the unimpeded empire of the gaze" (*Birth* 39). Itard's position in his text accords with this notion: he is both disinterested observer and agent of change, measured with the physician's documentary eye.²² The translation of Itard's observations into text adopts the case history, which, as Thomas Laqueur has noted, "constitute[s a] humanitarian [narrative] not only because of [its] policy implications or because doctors were leading figures in a wide range of reform

²² According to Roger Shattuck, Itard was also Pygmalion, drawing on Condillac's theories relating intelligence to the awakening of the physical senses (75); writes Shattuck, "as [Itard or Madame Guérin] rubbed his small, scarred body, they were really reenacting the scene of Pygmalion trying to infuse human life into his statue" (80).

movements both in Great Britain and on the Continent, but also because they make bodies the common ground of humanitarian sensibility and explicate the history of their suffering" (182).²³ The case history, in short, elicits sympathy from readers.

In the case history, the physician isolates problems and defines objectives, as Itard does, and then documents his progress in overcoming those problems and meeting those objectives. But, notes Rita Charon in her analysis of modern case histories, "medicine, committed to recapturing a lost ideal state [that of complete health and wholeness], is thus a heroic and conservative undertaking" (119). This problem faced by modern physicians was also confronted by Itard: that this "platonic longing for well-proportioned truth and beauty" (120) is destined to be unrequited, and there is thus an apologetic or melancholic note to case histories. Indeed, by the time of his second "Rapport fait à s.e. le Ministre de l'Intérieur sur les nouveaux développements et l'état actuel du sauvage de l'Aveyron," written in 1806 (although published in 1807) at the request of the Minister of the Interior, Itard is uncomfortably aware of his failure.

"My Lord," he opens the second report, "To speak to you of the Wild Boy of Aveyron is to remind you now of a name which arouses no interest; it is to recall a being forgotten by those who saw him for but a moment and despised by those who thought to judge him" (141). He goes on to claim that he "would gladly have enveloped in a profound silence and condemned to eternal

²³ Other critics have also observed a shift in rhetorical strategies at the end of the eighteenth century as writers used an appeal to sentimentalism to engage a broader audience. As Mark Salber Phillips notes with respect to historiography, "the doctrine of sympathy . . . though equally emphasizing spontaneous response, refocused attention on the actual rather than the ideal; at the same time, the educative goal sympathy entailed was not so much a readiness for action as a kind of spectatorial fellowship" (128).

oblivion an undertaking whose outcome offers less a story of the pupil's progress than an account of the teacher's failure" (141). As Charon observes of case histories, "the response being sought from the readers of the case is not so often praise as forgiveness" (121). While Itard does include the proviso that "to judge this young man properly, we must compare him only with himself" (142), his second narrative is a history marked by greater hesitation, a distraught sense of his own ambivalent accomplishments. He concludes that "many of the facts speak in favour of his possible improvement whilst others suggest the contrary" (178), with at least one commentator suggesting that even this much optimism is motivated by Itard's need to maintain his state funding, both for his own research and for the support of Victor (Candland 36).

This brief assessment of Itard's narrative should demonstrate the manner in which Victor is textualized and presented to the world, not only as an "unfortunate creature" (142) but also as a failed experiment, a being whom society could not fully reclaim. Itard divides the share of blame between his own failings and Victor's initial deprivations. The heroic quest implicit in a case history would make Victor either the beneficiary of his patron's talents, had Itard fulfilled his objectives, or, as in this opposite case, reconstruct Victor as an object of compassion, who remains blighted by intellectual darkness despite the best efforts of the struggling yet valiant Itard. This is not to say that Itard intended such a reading, but rather that it is an inevitable outcome of the narrative form employed. Laqueur argues that "a particular cluster of humanitarian narratives," including the novel as well as the case history, "created 'sympathetic passions' that "bridged the gap between facts, compassion, and action" (179). Some of these narratives were intended specifically to elicit compassion or stimulate

reform, but that consequence was linked not solely to content but also to form: “certain sorts of stories, whatever their purpose, have the capacity to engender the kind of moral concern that arose in the late eighteenth century” (197). This moral authority established by the case history narrative licenses Itard to make claims for both compassion and support for Victor.

In the final sentence of the second report, Itard argues Victor’s claim to continued support from the state:

. . . from whatever point of view one looks at this long experiment, whether one sees it as the methodical education of a wild man, or whether one restricts oneself to considering it as the physical and moral treatment as one of those creatures born ill-favoured, rejected by society and abandoned by medicine, the care that has been lavished upon him, the care that is still his due, the changes that have taken place, those one hopes are still to come, the voice of humanity, the interest aroused by so cruel a desertion and so strange a fate, all these things combine to commend this extraordinary young man to the attention of scholars, the solicitude of our administrators and the protection of the government.
(179)

Itard’s claim for support is made more complex and startling by a concession: against his earlier assertions of Victor’s innate abilities, he accepts that Victor may have been “born ill-favoured.” This admission is astonishing and had profound implications for the treatment of idiots, as for the first time, claims were being made for the capacities of idiots to learn. Itard does not go so far as to designate Victor an idiot, but he does allow the possibility. Victor is also, notably, presented as a responsibility of the French state, setting the precedent for later, much broader claims that others such as Itard’s student Séguin will

make for people with intellectual disabilities, claims that will, within forty years, see the establishment in France of state educational asylums devoted to carrying out the very sort of training pioneered by Itard and Victor.²⁴

Within his narrative, Itard also describes his relationship to Victor. The pedagogue is not simply an observer, but also an agent of change; his acts and motivations figure prominently. He plays with Victor; he caresses the boy; throughout the text he displays a deep attachment to his charge. Notably, however, he is also an authority figure, a role which requires distance on his part, especially when compared to Mme. Guérin. This household of Victor, Itard, and Mme Guérin (M Guérin dies part way through the period covered by Itard's reports) has clear divisions of labour, and these affect Victor's relationship to his tutor: "The friendship he displays for me is much weaker [than that for Mme Guérin], as might naturally have been expected. The attentions which Mme Guérin pays him are of such a nature, that their value may be appreciated at the moment; those cares, on the contrary, which I devote to him, are of distant and insensible utility" (115). Itard is quick to point out that his reception by Victor is linked directly to his goal of education, and that those "hours of favourable reception" that he does enjoy are those "which I have never dedicated to his improvement" (116).

Usually, though, Itard plays the role of the patriarch, the embodiment of law and rationality in the household. One instance provides a clear illustration of this role. When Victor runs away and is lost for two weeks, his reunion with Mme

²⁴ Asylums in America and Britain, modelled on those started by Séguin in France, were first established in the 1840s. The development of British asylums is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Guérin is “most touching”:

Scarcely had Victor seen his gouvernante than he turned pale and lost consciousness for a moment; but when he felt her arms around him, he quickly came to his senses and showing his joy by shrill cries, the convulsive clasping of his hands and a radiant face, he offered to the eyes of all not so much a fugitive forcibly returned to his keeper as an affectionate son gladly running to the open arms of the one who had given him birth. (170)

However, while Victor is also happy to see Itard, his tutor is careful to instill in the boy a sense of his transgression:

. . . as soon as he saw me, he sat up and held out his arms. But when he saw that instead of going to him I stood where I was with a cold demeanour and an angry face, he dived back beneath the covers and began to cry. I increased his emotion by my reproaches, uttered in a loud and threatening voice; his tears increased and he sobbed long and loud. When I had taken him to the utmost degree of emotion, I sat on the poor penitent’s bed. This was always my signal for forgiveness. Victor understood, made the first move of reconciliation, and everything was forgiven and forgotten. (170)

The point, of course, is that through this self-conscious display of authoritarian wrath, Itard was careful to ensure that, even if all was forgiven, it would not be readily forgotten. The text is replete with other examples of Itard’s performative embodiment of the law. On one occasion, he threatens to throw Victor out of a window in order to get the boy to attend to lessons, after several days of trying less dramatic options (131-33).

While Itard maintained some paternal distance from Victor, Mme Guérin slipped into a more stereotypically maternal role. Her contributions to Victor’s education

were no doubt many; certainly with regard to the first pedagogical objective, to awaken in Victor a pleasure for the company of people, her importance is paramount. Itard's strategy is to

treat [Victor] kindly, and to yield a ready compliance to his taste and inclinations. Mme Guérin, to whose particular care the administration [of the Institute for Deaf-Mutes] had entrusted this child, acquitted herself, and still discharges this arduous task, with all the patience of a mother, and the intelligence of an enlightened instructor. So far from directly opposing his habits, she knew how, in some measure, to comply with them; and thus to answer the object proposed in our first general head.
(103)

Itard's four paragraphs on the boy's growing attachment to the company of others relate not the specific manner in which Mme Guérin achieves this goal, but rather the bouts of joy and melancholy that characterized him.²⁵ Victor's much-underplayed relationship with Mme Guérin is not treated in any depth by Itard, seemingly because of its lack of critical and philosophical interest.

However, this omission belies another belief: that the bonds of woman and child

²⁵ Itard notes how the "grand phenomena of Nature" induce in Victor "the quiet expression of sorrow and melancholy": "I have often stopped for whole hours together, and, with unspeakable pleasure, to examine him in this situation; to observe how all his convulsive motions, and that continual rocking of his whole body diminished, and by degrees subsided, to give place to a more tranquil attitude; and how insensibly his face, insignificant or distorted as it might be, took the well-defined character of sorrow, or melancholy reverie, in proportion as his eyes were steadily fixed on the surface of the water, and when he threw into it, from time to time, some remains of withered leaves. When, in a moon-light night, the rays of that luminary penetrated into his room, he seldom failed to awake out of his sleep, and to place himself before the window. There he remained, during a part of the night, standing motionless, his neck extended, his eyes fixed toward the country illuminated by the moon, and carried away in a sort of contemplative extasy, the silence of which was interrupted only by deep-drawn inspirations, after considerable intervals, and which were always accompanied with a feeble and plaintive sound" (104). Itard goes on to note that "it would have been as useless, as inhuman, to oppose these habits": instead, he allows Victor to continue them in order to "associate them with his new existence, and thus render it more agreeable to him" (104). It is presumably this longing for the forest which stands in the way of Victor's socialization unless it is rendered in the more acceptable (and even desirable) form of melancholy, thus leading to Itard's inclusion of this passage in his already-brief treatment of how he hopes to render social life more acceptable and pleasant to Victor.

are natural, needing no investigation, while those of man and child are rational. Victor already has the capacity to form links with the housekeeper because his natural state would not exclude this capacity.

The assumption that the natural child forms an automatic bond with his female keeper reasserts the link between femininity and idiocy evident in the poems of Wordsworth and Southey. Victor's assimilation into the world of Mme Guérin requires no analysis, according to Itard; her success with her component of his education is, in Itard's representation, not due to pedagogical strategies or specific modes of interaction so much as to an innate capacity, an understanding of Victor's needs. Mme Guérin's official role in Victor's education is restricted to awakening in him a pleasure in human company, a project which would seem, according to Itard's narrative, to require the development of feeling but not necessarily of rational intellect. Mme Guérin's role is not to arouse Victor's intelligence but to render him friendlier and more pliable: like Johnny Foy. Intellect, on the other hand, is a masculine responsibility. Thus, Itard's role is as progenitor of rationality, of the law of civilized man; a child without such influence in his life risks becoming tractable but irrational, like Johnny Foy, or, indeed, like Victor, who lived with Mme Guérin for years after Itard abandoned his experiments in despair. Victor died in his forties, in 1828.

At the start of the nineteenth century, idiocy existed as an ideologically stable concept: while there were opposing interpretations, these oppositions balanced one another and thus the ideological significance of idiocy was relatively minor and uncontested. Idiots existed and were cared for as much as necessary, as research by Peter Rushton and Jonathan Andrews demonstrates, and although

the concept began to acquire importance with John Locke's association of humanity with rationality, his formulations were of interest primarily to philosophers and intellectuals. But the stability of the concept of idiocy was about to change, in a manner drawing on Locke's distinctions but with a force gathered from the work of Itard, developments in other areas of knowledge and changes in the social and economic character of England.

Wordsworth's "Idiot Boy" looks back nostalgically to a passing order, a rural innocence (also, interestingly, denigrated by Karl Marx as "rustic idiocy," as Rushton notes ("Idiocy" 59)). But Itard's experiments with Victor were to initiate a slow alteration in the meaning of idiocy: it would cease to be a permanent state, becoming instead a condition that might be relieved. But this change in the understanding of idiocy had a greater effect in that it subverted the notion of innocence. Into the Edenic innocence of the idiot's mind Itard and Victor had brought the fruit of knowledge. The conviction that idiocy could be overcome would greatly problematize the notion of the innocent. If idiocy is a state to be overcome, how can the idiot be innocent? Some of the problems suggested by this question will be explored in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

However, before examining the destabilization of the concept of idiocy in the Victorian era, we must deal with the broader issue of gender and intellectual disability. In each instance described in this chapter - the poems of Wordsworth and Southey as well as the experiment by Itard - the idiot boy exists primarily in relation to a family environment. In the two poems, the family is natural, although *sans père*. And because the idiot boys of Wordsworth's and Southey's poems live in households without men, there is no rational force.

Indeed, Betty Foy is condemned by many readers as being as “irrational” as her son (“the idiot mother of ‘an idiot boy,’” in Byron’s words). The challenge of the idiot is similar in some ways to the challenge to rationality and power posed by the disruptive character of the feminine. These points will be returned to when we discuss the role of paternalism in Victorian institutions, which were often modelled on an idealized notion of a nuclear family. In the case of Victor, the natural family is replaced by a surrogate family formed by Itard and Mme. Guérin. Victor’s family is investigative, experimental; it is part of a project ultimately seeking to redress the weaknesses apparent in the natural families described by Wordsworth and Southey, where the maternal dominates over patriarchal rationality. This relation of idiocy to gender will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

3. Diminished Men and Essential Women: Gender and Intellectual Disability

Through the first decades of the nineteenth century, the notion of intellectual disability was of little cultural concern in that it remained ideologically stable. The work carried out by Itard with Victor of Aveyron assumed importance for an understanding of intellectual disability only retrospectively, as Edouard Seguin, founder of the first educational program for people with intellectual disabilities, and others looked back to Itard for inspiration. But if the concept of idiocy had not yet become the site of ideological contention that it would be later in the century, it was not without significance. As the previous chapter demonstrated, the durable notion of the holy innocent could be adapted to Wordsworth's rearticulation of the relation between people and the natural world. But the notion of idiocy was also significant in conjunction with other attributes, notably gender, and indeed later anxieties over people with intellectual disabilities drew upon long-standing associations between idiocy and gender. This chapter will investigate some gendered characteristics of notions of idiocy, focusing on the different ways that idiocy is constructed and interpreted with men or women. The goal of this chapter is to explore the primary symbolic associations with gender evident in representations of intellectual disability.

My historical range in this chapter will be considerably broader than in other chapters in order to foreground the consistency of gendered associations of idiocy. While intellectually disabled women and men are not represented identically over history, there are recurring features that may be interpreted in different frameworks according to the specific social and cultural context. To adapt an idea from Mary Poovey, gendered notions of idiocy perform different

sorts of ideological work according to specific contexts; however, the characteristics that allow them to perform this work may have a fairly stable core. This chapter seeks to describe a historically resilient core of gender associations with intellectual disability by examining a number of nineteenth-century texts.

In general terms, the ideological work performed by intellectual disability does not function in isolation but is instead closely linked to other ideologically productive and contentious notions such as gender. Poovey, in examining the construct of “woman” in mid-Victorian England, argues that it performs ideological work in two related senses. First, “representations of gender at mid-century were a part of the system of interdependent images in which various ideologies became accessible to individual men and women”; second, these representations also “constituted one of the sites on which ideological systems were simultaneously constructed and contested” (2). Thus, debates over divorce laws or the medicalization of childbirth by the introduction of painkillers became the grounds for the formation and articulation of ideological positions.

Much feminist criticism has already examined the competing discourses that struggled to compose the form of “woman.” As Elizabeth K. Helsinger *et al.* point out in The Woman Question, the “predominant form of Victorian writing about women is not pronouncement but debate” (xi). In the nineteenth century, the “woman question,” as Helsinger *et al.* demonstrate, was constructed within legal, medical, scientific, economic and religious discourses, as well as through direct political engagement and literary expression. According to Poovey, throughout these different realms of discourse, a “characteristic feature” of the “symbolic

economy" was "the articulation of difference upon sex and in the form of a binary opposition" (6); that is, sexual difference signified and acted as a model for a range of other distinctions. Kaja Silverman agrees with Poovey in asserting that "male" and "female" constitute our culture's "fundamental binary opposition," and continues to note that "its many other ideological elements, such as signifiers like 'town' and 'nation,' or the antithesis of power and the people, all exist in a metaphoric relation to these terms. They derive their conceptual and affective value from that relation" (34-35). This discursive strategy of structuring meaning according to oppositions is dominant, although some contentious or anomalous issues slip beyond the framework of binary oppositions or are "under construction" within this opposition. As Poovey writes, that which "may look coherent and complete in retrospect was actually fissured by competing emphases and interests" (3).

The second half of the nineteenth century was marked by burgeoning feminist thought. Philippa Levine dates formalized feminism in Victorian discourse from the 1840s, noting that the growth of educational facilities for girls in this period provided a ground for feminist thought in the coming generation (26-51). As Helsing *et al.* note, although "many of the particular issues debated by Victorians had also been discussed before," Victorians "did not trace their views back to the immediate past" beyond the odd reference to blue-stockings or Mary Wollstonecraft (xv). According to them, until at least the 1860s feminist writers made the oppression of married women the focus of their concerns; as Margaret Oliphant noted in a 1856 Blackwood's, "marriage is like dying - as distinct, as irrevocable, as complete" (qtd. in Helsing *et al.* 6).

Legislation slowly recognized the oppression of women. The Infant and Child Custody Bill of 1839 allowed women to petition the courts for custody of children under seven, and visitation rights to older children; despite the bill's limitations, it was, according to Harriet Martineau, "the first blow struck at the oppression of English legislation in relation to women" (qtd. in Helsinger et al 13). The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 allowed women to divorce a husband who was consistently adulterous and abusive; the double-standard persisted, however, in that a man was still permitted to sue for divorce if his wife had one adulterous episode.¹ The Married Woman's Property Act of 1870 was another major piece of legislation in that it allowed women to claim certain private property within a marriage; previously, all of the woman's property became her husband's upon marriage. This Act was revised in 1882 to extend further rights to women.

In a very real sense, the feminist struggle consisted of attempts to counter dominant notions (and the laws that expressed these notions) of masculine property, which included wives and children, in addition to the property brought into marriage or earned by a woman. The right to own oneself as well as one's earnings was of central concern to Victorian feminists. In practical terms, the claims to property and the transmission of property over generations - that is, patrimony - lay at the heart of economic distinctions between men and women.

Recently, historians and literary critics have also turned their attention to the construction of ideas of masculinity in the nineteenth century, with James Eli Adams asserting that "The masculine is as much a spectacle as the feminine" (11). As many writers have argued, the dominant aesthetic governing Victorian

¹ The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1884 extended the rights of women with respect to divorce, but equal divorce laws were not passed until the 1920s.

notions of masculinity and the middle-class gentleman (that paradigmatic expression of the Victorian man) invokes the idea of self-control. Herbert Sussman has suggested that “the formations of Victorian manhood may be set along a continuum of degrees of self-regulation” (3), and that this construction of masculinity was “threatened at one extreme by emasculation and at the other by social eruption and individual dissolution . . .” (25); Robin Gilmour argues that “gentleman” is not only a social status but also a moral category involving paternalistic responsibility and personal restraint. Kaja Silverman, in her elaborate investigation of masculinity, argues that a “dominant fiction” valorizing the identification of masculinity through a “symbolic Law” marginalizes other possible forms or expressions of masculinity. This Law is expressed in the Victorian period in part by the aesthetic of “self-regulation” analysed by Sussman, or the moral construction of identity described by Gilmour. It is also practically embodied in traditional patriarchal authority of the type described by David Roberts as rooted in the nuclear family but extending beyond it to render “paternal authority generalized, impersonal, and hierarchical,” forming a “pattern of authority that was repeated in the public schools and universities, in the army and navy, and in the Church and local government” (“Paterfamilias” 76). Of course, as Poovey, Silverman and John Tosh observe, masculine and feminine do not exist as separate conceptual entities but are defined in relation to one another. Indeed, as Tosh notes, a crucial feature of masculinity is its “relative invisibility,” its status as “the norm against which women and children should be measured” (180). The idea of idiocy also exists in relation to this masculine “norm.”

In nineteenth-century representations, idiocy interacts with gender to provide a

commentary on (or perhaps criticism of) the construction of sexual difference. Some nineteenth-century writers saw in idiocy a condition that affirmed the dominant construction of gender difference; others employed the image to oppose these constructions. Representations of idiocy intersect with gender identity in two primary ways: in the sexual identity of the idiot, and in the relationship of the idiot with other figures, usually (although not exclusively) a caretaker. The gendered representation of intellectual disability adapts and exaggerates what were perceived as certain fundamental gender characteristics. Thus, representations of women with intellectual disabilities consistently emphasize physical or sexual appetites. This association is durable. John Fletcher's 1621 drama, The Pilgrim, has a "bedlam" scene featuring a female "fool" Kate - described as being "as lecherous as a she-ferret" - who is separated from the madmen because, as one character points out, "If any of the madmen take her, she is pepper'd; They'll bounce her loins" (III, vi)². Julia Douthwaite, writing on Marie-Angelique Leblanc, the "wild girl of Champagne" who was captured in 1731, notes that her sexuality was of prime interest to her contemporaries, reinforcing the "apprehension in political theory that female nature threatened the social order, and in medical discourse that it was the site of miasmatic disorders" ("*Homo ferus*" 187).³ At the end of the nineteenth century, notes David Gladstone, the "face of degeneracy" was "inescapably female" as intellectually disabled women were identified as prime

² In the symbolic structure of the play, Kate's identity - and her licentiousness - is blurred with the female heroines, one of whom disguises herself as Kate at one point. Kate's qualities are thus not the isolated marks of a fool but are shared among women. In general, bedlam scenes in early modern drama act as critical and ironic commentary on the "sane" world; cf. Vanna Gentili's "Madmen and Fools are a Staple Commodity" and Robert Reed's Bedlam on the Jacobean Stage on the dramatic use of madness and folly, and Michael MacDonald's Mystical Bedlam for a historical analysis of the significance of Bedlam Hospital.

³ Douthwaite elaborates her analysis of Marie-Angelique Leblanc in "Rewriting the Savage: The Extraordinary Fictions of the 'Wild Girl of Champagne,'" focusing more on the construction of humanity than of gender in this article.

culprits in the supposed decline of the health of the race (157). The image of the intellectually disabled woman provided a vehicle for the expression of sexual anxiety in a range of contexts, although the particular articulations of these anxieties are historically specific.

Male characters, on the other hand, were rarely identified as sexual threats. Rather they were generally represented as being incapable of handling money and business affairs. This association is also long-lived. Shakespeare's character Cloten, in the play Cymbeline, is described as a fool who "cannot take two from twenty . . . and leave eighteen" (II i 57-8); his head is called an "empty Purse" with "no money in it" (IV ii 113-4). The ability to manage money had since the middle ages been used to establish idiocy. The Natura Brevium of 1652 provides as a legal definition of idiocy the following: "He that shall be said to be a sot and idiot from birth, is such a person who cannot count to number twenty, and tell who was his father or mother, nor how old he is, so that it may appear that he hath no understanding or reason, what shall be for his profit, or what his loss; but, if he have sufficient understanding to know and understand his letters, and to read by teaching or information, he is not an idiot" (qtd. in Bucknill and Tuke 103).⁴ This legal definition exists in conjunction with notions of masculinity, being primarily a means of determining who shall care for and profit from the property and resources of someone declared an idiot. Thus, notes Richard Neugebauer, "only disabled individuals with personal or real estate were brought to the attention of the medieval Chancery of the Court of Wards and Liveries," the offices which then administered their wealth ("Mental" 27); the majority of those declared idiots are men, although twenty percent of

⁴ See articles by Richard Neugebauer, as well as Basil Clarke's Mental Disorder in Earlier Britain for more detailed explanations of the legal criteria and consequences of declarations of idiocy.

the cases in the Court of Wards records refer to women who, as widows or heiresses, could hold property ("Mental" 27). Intellectual disability thus functions as an economic liability in the masculine world of commerce and exchange, and also as a threat to patrimony and the authority of the patriarchal line, if one cannot manage the demands of one's inheritance.

Over the course of this chapter, I will examine the way these gendered concerns become articulated in nineteenth-century texts. This chapter is divided into two main sections: the first focuses on representations of intellectual disability by writers (all male, as it happens) articulating the dominant patriarchal discourse, whereas the second examines those by feminist women writers. In each instance, the relationship between disability, sexual identity and sex roles will be investigated to explicate the ideological work performed by the idea of idiocy in conjunction with gender. I should note that I use terms such as "patriarchal" to designate a political and economic system (and the discourses articulating this system) that is structured around the idea of patrimony and which endorses notions of masculine authority. I do not intend to suggest that the patriarchal rule is an expression of an essential masculinity. Nor do I mean to suggest that "matriarchal" structures reflect an inherent or essential femininity. These terms are used to designate political structures rather than any presumed essential qualities of men or women.

Masculine Perceptions of Intellectual Disability

In the Victorian period, notes John Tosh, the idea of "manliness" occupied many volumes of text, making it a "high profile ideology of masculinity, if there ever

was one" (180). The ideological structure of masculinity has been explored in a number of contexts; for instance, Kaja Silverman, drawing on Althusser, Levi-Strauss, Lacan and Freud, argues that notions of gender are ideological expressions that conform to a "dominant fiction," which, in the western world, is "above all else the representational system through which the subject is accommodated to the Name-of-the-Father. Its most central signifier of unity is the (paternal) family, and its primary signifier of privilege is the phallus." This dominant fiction, the rule of the "name-of-the-Father," is an expression of the "symbolic Law" which "is lived via those components which are most central to the dominant fiction, albeit always in ways that are significantly inflected by the ideologies of gender, class, race and ethnicity" (34). The dominant fiction thus functions within a political context. As Tosh notes, "ruling groups not only valorize particular features of their own masculine code; they also marginalize or stigmatize other masculine traits in a way which cuts across more familiar social hierarchies" (190-91), so that denigrated notions of masculinity transverse class lines. An analysis of John Galt's 1823 novel The Entail according to the terms described by Silverman will demonstrate how the dominant fiction is articulated in the case of Walter (or Watty) Walkinshaw, the "fatuous" son of the novel's patriarch.

The Entail is a novel of embattled versions of male subjectivities, each subject to a patriarchal law that the novel endorses as an ordering principle of society, but which is manipulated and abused by Claud Walkinshaw. Given the novel's concern with the perpetuation of the father's line, it is a rich site for investigating some of the "gender consequences" of idiocy in the early nineteenth century. These consequences are expressed in two modes: the relation between Watty

and the ideological construction of masculinity, and the relations between Watty and the women around him. My reading of the novel will be informed by Silverman's argument that male subjectivity is based on an identification of the penis with the Phallus: an identification, in other words, of masculinity with the Name-of-the-Father, the paternal Law. Paternal law is expressed also through the integrity of the patrilineal line, as the novel makes clear with its frequent reference to the Biblical story of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and with civil law which strips Watty of his claim to the estate.

The importance of patrilineage and inheritance is signaled in the first line of The Entail: "Claud Walkinshaw was the sole surviving heir of the Walkinshaws of Kittlestonheugh" (3). Through a successful career as a pedlar along the borders, Claud earns enough money to buy the farm of Grippy, once part of his patrimony; from this stone he steps to the next, marriage to Grizy Hypel, daughter of the Laird of Plealands, also formerly part of the Kittlestonheugh lands. But the heirless Laird is concerned with the survival of his name and so entails his estate on Walkinshaw's second (or, should the second die, his third) son, on the condition that the boy take the Laird's surname and thus ensure patrilineal progression. Thus does Watty come into line for an estate, despite being a second son. Watty's chances of full patrimony are greatly increased, though, when lawyers⁵ discover that the entail is only partly binding. Watty inherits the estate, but need not give up the Walkinshaw name, thus setting in motion Claud's plan to disinherit Charles in favour of his second son so as to restore the full Kittlestonheugh estate to the hands of one Walkinshaw.

⁵ Lawyers and clergymen, as representatives of human and divine law, are prominent figures in this novel. The lawyer Mr. Keelevin and the Reverend Kifuddy provide a moral commentary on Claud Walkinshaw's plans throughout the novel. The lawyers who assist George in taking the estate from Watty are portrayed as unscrupulous manipulators of the truth.

The issues of inheritance and the continuance of the patriarchal line are problematized in consequence of Watty's mental capacity, which is, as Claud notes, "meted by a sma' measure" (25). As Basil Clarke has shown, from the late thirteenth century the crown had extended its prerogative to include the property of the intellectually disabled; the crown would take the profits of the lands "against the obligation to provide necessities, but only for the patient's lifetime" (58-9). By the sixteenth century, the crown no longer took full possession of a declared idiot's estate, but instead appointed a guardian responsible for the idiot and his family; after the idiot's death, the land would revert to the next-in-line (Neugebauer "Treatment" 165). Idiocy is thus identified not simply as an inability to handle money, but, as The Entail suggests, as a threat to patriarchal authority.

The integrity of patrimony, the capital of patriarchy, the generational embodiment of Silverman's "Name-of-the-Father," is placed in danger when transmitted to an idiot. Thus, the first half of The Entail tells the story of Watty's increasing isolation from the dominant fiction. He is wrongly invested with authority by his father, with only his close alliances to his mother and later his wife enabling him to "pass" as a man. But the novel does not present Watty as being devoid of valuable qualities. The first mention of his character is his mother's assessment that he is "a weel-tempered laddie" (24); clearly the reader is expected to believe in Watty's innate goodness. His union with the attractive, lively and unconventional - in some senses, almost masculine - gameskeeper's daughter, Betty Bodle, reinforces this perception. The narrator anticipates readers questioning Betty's interest in Watty:

Such a woman, it may be supposed, could not but look with the most thorough contempt on Walter Walkinshaw; and yet, from the accidental circumstance of being often his playmate in childhood, and making him, in the frolic of their juvenile amusements, her butt and toy, she had contracted something like an habitual affection for the creature; in so much, that, when her father . . . proposed Walter for her husband, she made no serious objection to the match; on the contrary, she laughed, and amused herself with the idea of making him fetch and carry as whimsically as of old, and do her hests and biddings as implicitly as when they were children. (79-80)

Betty's interest in Watty, then, is motivated by two factors: she has gained an affection for him over the years of their acquaintance, and she perceives satisfaction in a relationship where she will not have to submit herself to male rule. Betty and Walter are an appropriate couple because neither fits the model of the dominant fiction in which the female is subordinate to the male. Instead, the structure of their relationship is such that Betty is the "head" of the family - appropriate, given her intellectual superiority to Watty. Yet this marriage does not seem to symbolically castrate Watty as the court case does; rather, the author experiments with an alternative subjectivity, allowing it, for a brief space, credence and authority within the world of the novel, an example of what Mikhail Bakhtin would identify as the inherent polyglottal nature of the novel genre.

Of course, this state of affairs cannot last, and Betty dies in childbirth. Watty's despair over his wife's death, followed soon by that of his infant daughter, prompts him to rechristen his niece, Charles' orphaned daughter, Betty Bodle, a circumstance which facilitates the court case being mounted against him. Other

factors in the case against him include his reluctance to give his mother enough money to keep their house, because he had been saving his inheritance for his daughter and is unaware of exactly how much money he has; and his sharing of the house, and the entire wealth of the estate, with Charles' widow and children. Indeed, he plans to settle his estate on his niece, redirecting his patrimony to a female line. Watty's crimes are thus not moral, but symbolic: he sins against his patrilineage in mishandling his name, his authority, and his money. According to John Tosh, "dominant masculinity is constructed in opposition to a number of subordinate masculinities whose crime is that they undermine patriarchy from within or discredit it in the eyes of women" (191). Watty is an idiot precisely because he is not capable of fulfilling his responsibilities within the patriarchal structure of The Entail's world, and thus undermines that structure. While Galt does briefly consider a state of affairs in which Watty can prosper as Betty's partner, Watty must ultimately be removed from the novel so that the patrimony can wend its way to the rightful heir, and patriarchy as a dominant fiction can be reaffirmed.

Watty is defined in large part through his relationships with women: his mother, his wife, Betty Bodle, his daughter of the same name, and then his niece, to whom he also gives that name after his daughter has died. Indeed, the women of the novel function to justify the dominant status of patriarchy, in part through association with Watty, who is clearly not a conventional patriarch. His inability to manage without assistance denies him the privileges of a man.

The court case, in which the jury delivers a verdict of "Fatuity,"⁶ is a symbolic castration. When Mr. Threeper asks "What are you, Mr. Walkinshaw?" he responds, "A man, Sir. - My mother and brother want to mak me a daft ane" (197), clearly expressing the belief that a daft man is a lesser expression of the gender. Watty ceases to become relevant in the battle for the patrimony, as he no longer has any authority within the dominant fiction. One cannot be a man and an idiot simultaneously; the declaration of idiocy is a visible and public castration.⁷

The burden of idiocy not only denies Watty full masculinity; it also infantilizes him. In a telling exchange with his brother, Watty says "I dinna like big folk . . . Cause ye ken, Geordie, the law's made only for them; and if you and me had ay been twa wee brotherly laddies, playing on the gowany brae, as we used to do, ye would ne'er hae thought o' bringing yon Cluty's claw frae Enbro' to prove me guilty o' daftness" (211). Watty's identification with children is suggestive. Galt's construction of his idiot character draws on the tradition of the holy innocent as a truth-speaking critic of society, while simultaneously sentimentalizing this notion and making Watty the object of pathos: a compensation for his inability to function within the patriarchy.

⁶ The use of various terms to indicate intellectual disability, even in legal concerns, was common. Drawing on court records dating from the thirteenth century, Clarke writes that "A feature of the evidence which is striking is the number of phrases used to convey mental disorder or incapacity; it seems to indicate an ability to recognise firmly enough such states, an ability which was more stable than the ways of expressing it. Doubtless in individual cases the choice of phrase meant something very specific to the witness or official employing it . . . but certainly no close consistency seems discernible in the vocabulary, though some phrases are more frequent than others" (61).

⁷ The case against Watty is reminiscent of a real court case against Henry Roberts, who was tried and declared an idiot in 1747; according to at least one contemporary anonymous writer, the case was a flagrant and (successful) attempt by Robert's relatives to take his estate. See "The Case of Henry Roberts. . ." in Three Hundred Years of Psychiatry 1535-1860, edited by Richard Hunter and Ida MacAlpine.

Interestingly, the Lady Grippy assumes a new seriousness after the verdict against her son. Up to this point in the novel, Galt presents her as a comic character who obstinately denies her son's incapacity. When she finally, in anger, decides that Watty is a "born idiot," she remains a foolish, credulous figure who cannot see through George's manipulations as he convinces her to testify against Watty. But when Watty is declared fatuous, and soon after dies (several years later in the time-scale of the novel, but several pages in the text), Grizy Walkinshaw becomes a determined matriarch who struggles to maintain her family, promote the claims of the rightful heir, James, and resist her scheming son George.

This shift in character may be explained within the narrative as a consequence of her learning the truth about her sons due to the trials she has endured, and thus developing a new gravity. However, I propose an alternate reading: as a mother who loves her fatuous son, Grizy can be nothing other than a comic character in the world constructed by the novel. The initial portrayal of Grizy recalls Coleridge's assessment of Wordsworth's Betty Foy as a study in "anile dotage": in the world established in this novel, one cannot "rationally" love an idiot son. Grizy's move to rationality and seriousness - that is, the shift in the way in which she is portrayed by Galt - is possible only because her character is no longer associated with that of Watty but rather with James, the proper recipient of the patrimony.

An excess of maternal love for any child was seen as dangerous in the Victorian period, according to Sally Shuttleworth: "the sacred passion can itself be

demonized, turned into an avenging force which destroys both the angelic mother herself and the concord of the domestic hearth, revealing all too clearly the precarious balance of the patriarchal bourgeois order" (43-44). Clearly, the anxiety Shuttleworth documents as surrounding the role of motherhood predates the Victorian period. Motherly excess in the case of an idiot child must have seemed especially irrational and dangerous, especially when it endorses that child's claim to rights within the patriarchal order. Mothers of idiot sons risk being perceived as deviant, as Walter Scott had noted ironically in his 1814 novel Waverley. He elaborates on the hypothesis that a deviant mother will bear a deviant child through Rose Bradwardine's explanation of the family history of Janet Gellatley and her son David: "Once upon a time there lived an old woman, called Janet Gellatley, who was suspected to be a witch, on the infallible grounds that she was very old, very ugly, very poor, and had two sons, one of whom was a poet, and the other a fool, which visitation, all the neighbourhood agreed, had come to her for the sin of witchcraft" (114).⁸ Rose presents this tale ironically, while Scott himself footnotes the episode for a brief authorial intrusion, describing a real-world historical precedent and noting that "The accounts of the trials for witchcraft form one of the most deplorable chapters in Scottish story" [sic] (115).

Yet even if intellectual disability is not seen as a mark of a demonized maternity, it usually is associated with the "female" both by virtue of the fact that it "unmans" its bearer, and because women usually act as caretakers for the disabled individual. As a general rule, intellectually disabled men appear with

⁸ For more on the construction of mothers as witches, see Deborah Willis's Malevolent Nurture: Witch-hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England. Scott's association of poet and fool recalls the "holy-fool" image, which will be examined (along with Waverley) more fully in Chapter 5.

“protectors.” These protectors are usually women, although toward the mid-nineteenth century, as notions of masculinity began to emphasize traditionally female qualities of compassion and generosity, male characters also assumed the guardian role: the relationship of Smike and Nicholas in Charles Dickens’s Nicholas Nickleby provides an example of this phenomenon. Intellectually disabled men without guardians are consistently represented as posing a danger either to others or themselves. Steve Hargreaves of Mary Braddon’s Aurora Floyd is a murderer; Barnaby Rudge, of Dickens’s novel of the same name, also becomes dangerous when separated from his mother. Isaac Scratchard, the simple-minded protagonist in Wilkie Collins’s short story “The Ostler,” is rendered frightened and sleepless because the women he has trusted have exploited rather than assisted him. And Watty is declared “fatuous” when his mother finally agrees to testify against him.

The idea of masculinity alters over the course of the nineteenth century, as Tosh, Sussman and Adams have shown. The increasingly dominant middle-class aesthetic of masculine self-regulation, and its female counterpart, the image of the “angel in the house,” recreates relations between idiot or simple characters and their patrons. These characters increasingly become a measure of the goodness of their patrons; they are the objects of charitable acts that define the actors as responsible citizens. In Dickens’s 1850 novel David Copperfield, the weak-minded Mr. Dick lives under the protection of Betsy Trotwood in a state of affairs that recalls that of Watty Walkinshaw and Betty Bodle. Trotwood both rejects and appropriates male authority: she resumes her maiden name after her marriage breaks down, and indeed renames Copperfield “Trotwood” when he arrives in her household, in a clear denial of

patriarchal possession and lineage.⁹ Mr. Dick, whose good nature is consistently noted, is a man whose potential is hidden to all but his patron. Eventually, he performs the act that Betsy had long predicted would vindicate her belief in his abilities by reconciling Doctor Strong and his wife Annie, and thus consolidates his claim to a limited sort of masculinity allowed within the world of this novel.

David Copperfield marks an attempt by Dickens to restructure masculine identity by incorporating what would be considered “female” characteristics. Gail Turley Houston notes that Dickens attempts a “flight into androgyny” in trying to “[break . . .] the rigid gender rules of Victorian society” and to “fashion [himself] within a unique ‘gender’ category reserved for the author” (215). Similarly, Mary Poovey argues Dickens reconfigures the writer’s occupation within a domestic space made masculine: the private sphere becomes a source of masculinity, a point also made by John Tosh in his observation that in the mid-nineteenth century, true masculine identity was that which was revealed in one’s home life (188). According to Carol Christ, male writers constructed the notion of the “angel in the house,” that paradigm of Victorian womanhood, not only as a means of containment, prescribing a sphere of influence that women should not venture beyond, but also because they “associate the ideal of the angel in the house with a fear and distrust of male action and sexuality” (159). Uncertain of and uncomfortable with male sexual energy, Christ argues, male Victorian writers created an image that was a model for both female and male conduct, a “more feminine ideal of male behavior” (160). In this context, Mr. Dick can exist: not as a hero, as that is the role occupied by David Copperfield, but

⁹ Interestingly, Mr. Dick also dispenses with his surname, Babley, which he “can’t bear,” according to his patron Betsy Trotwood (257).

rather as a figure whose innate decency is not compromised by his lack of rational thought. The differences between Mr. Dick and Watty illustrate this shift in the construction of the masculine identity of the intellectually disabled character. Like Watty, Mr. Dick is not financially responsible, and thus is forbidden to actually spend money without Betsy Trotwood's approval. However, in order to spare him mortification, she permits him to have coins to jingle in his pocket, and these coins enable Mr. Dick to pass as a man of some resources in society. They also publicly express his claim to a Phallus (in the Lacanian sense), although the claim is exercised under the control of his patroness. Thus Mr. Dick is rendered superficially valid, incorporated within the patriarchal structure as the recipient of benevolence and charity, although without the ability to exercise power independently.¹⁰

While male idiot characters are represented as a debased form of masculinity barred from enjoying the benefits of patriarchal power, female characters are represented as posing a threat to that power due to undisciplined carnal appetites. In The Female Malady, her study of women and madness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Elaine Showalter shows how the "pervasive cultural association of women and madness" developed, "feminizing" the very

¹⁰ The mid-Victorian association of masculinity and social responsibility is perhaps linked to the changing British economic environment. Thomas Haskell argues that the notion of charity and paternalism is directly linked to the rise of industry and trade in the mid-Victorian period. He counters the argument that a vaguely defined "class interest" prompted the rise of humanitarianism with the argument that capitalism and, more specifically, the mode of personal responsibility and manners of perception and action (what he calls recipes) stimulated by market economies also created the grounds on which the idea of humanitarianism could be based. Market transactions required both a sense of discipline and a "far-sightedness," in that one had to act not with immediate but future gain in mind. This extension of conceptual horizons also creates the possibility that one could analyse such things as slave-trading and slave-owning relationships and find grounds to condemn them, which would have been less likely without the level of analysis and manner of perception created by market relations. The same shift in sensibilities would allow people to perceive those with intellectual disabilities as warranting support in the form of educational asylums which were just beginning to flourish as Dickens wrote David Copperfield.

idea of madness (4) while also developing complex theories about female insanity. Ludmilla Jordanova argues that in the realms of science and medicine, “women versus men, nature versus culture, became key terms in . . . conflicts of the period” (Sexual 30). Theories of gender become entwined with those of nature, and of man’s (specifically male) relation to nature; as both Showalter and Jordanova illustrate, representational art consistently presents nature embodied in a female form, while rational science is rendered as a masculine viewer or investigator.¹¹

Women’s presumed isolation from the world of rationality had political consequences and served to identify them with children and idiots in the minds of Victorian law-makers. In 1868, Frances Power Cobb published “Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors,” the essay’s title designating “the four categories under which persons are now excluded from many civil, and all political rights in England.” She goes on to observe that these categories “were complacently quoted this year by the Times as every way fit and proper exceptions; but yet it has appeared to not a few, that the place assigned to Woman is hardly any longer suitable” (110). Yet, unsuitability aside, the association of women with idiocy and other mental conditions was pervasive, and was hardly confined to the realms of law and politics.

Idiocy and insanity, as the opposites of rationality and coherence, were constructed as fundamentally female; for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

¹¹ Interestingly, David Wright has observed in his dissertation on the Earlswood Asylum that male admissions outnumbered female ones two to one (83). He suggests several possible reasons for this difference: it may reflect popular beliefs that males were more likely than females to be intellectually disabled; it may result from the greater likelihood that males would be institutionalized as a result of violent behavior; or it may reflect the “general bias of Victorian society towards the need for a self-sufficient male breadwinner.”

physicians and philosophers, notes Showalter, insanity was simply more comprehensible in women. "In contrast to the rather vague and uncertain concepts of insanity in general which Victorian psychiatry produced, theories of female insanity were specifically and confidently linked to the biological crises of the female life-cycle . . . during which the mind would be weakened and the symptoms of insanity might emerge" (55). Especially disturbing was puerperal insanity, or "mental disorder occurring within the month after confinement" (57): women so afflicted "flaunted their sexuality in ways that shocked physicians," including masturbating frequently, so that "psychiatrists wondered whether these manifestations were the pathological result of organic disturbance or the revelations of a salacity natural to women but kept under control in daily life" (59). Female insanity was, as Showalter demonstrates, unsettling to Victorians largely because of its hints about female sexuality.¹² While female idiocy does not carry precisely the same significance as insanity, concerns about female sexuality are embedded in most representations of intellectually disabled women in the Victorian period.

An example from early in the nineteenth century expresses the dominant male anxiety of the period. "Letter XX" of The Borough, George Crabbe's long poem depicting village life, published in 1810, tells the story of Ellen Orford, one of the "poor of the Borough." An affair with an unfaithful lover leaves Ellen with a

¹² Male sexuality also had associations with idiocy, but these do not seem ideologically significant until the latter half of the nineteenth century and concern over racial degeneration (and even then, female sexuality remained the more significant issue). I have found no nineteenth-century portrayals of male "idiot sexuality." However, in John Cleland's 1748-9 novel Fanny Hill, Louisa seduces a "perfect changeling, or idiot" tellingly nick-named "Good-natured Dick" to determine whether there is any truth to the popular belief that "nature had made him amends in her best bodily gifts for her denial of the sublimer intellectual ones" (197-8). It turns out that nature had indeed provided compensation. Yet, while the editor glosses the passage as referring to a widely-held belief in the physical endowments of male idiots, more mainstream writers seem to evidence little overt concern with male sexuality, at least not until the end of the nineteenth century.

daughter, who is both beautiful and an idiot. Ellen eventually marries another man, but he is worked upon by religious zealots and condemns his wife and step-daughter until, finally despairing, he kills himself. With him Ellen has had four sons, three of whom die young; the fourth is condemned to die for unnamed crimes, but is pardoned and transported, although he eventually drowns. However, before he meets his watery fate, the poor idiot-daughter is raped or seduced and has a child, and Ellen fears that the father may have indeed been her own son. Ellen eventually becomes a schoolteacher in the village, and in her old age goes blind. The poem (Letter XX) ends with her saying "...my Mind looks cheerful to my End,/ I love Mankind and call God my friend" (l. 336-7)

As Jerome McGann observes, Crabbe's poetry was a "poetry of . . . empirical research" (306), and the story of Ellen Orford "vigorously forbids any solution that is grounded in the Romantic Imagination" (301). That is, rather than presenting a form of salvation through transcendent notions of Art or Nature, as Wordsworth would, Crabbe locates his characters in a social world where Ellen can conclude her story by reaffirming her faith in man and God, even though there is no apparent earthly reward for such faith. Crabbe's lines describe characters whose goals are simple survival in a hostile and oppressive world. Yet, while compiling a relentless documentary of these struggling characters, Crabbe also constructs them according to powerful and resilient stereotypes. Ellen Orford's daughter is a case in point.

The ideologically-motivated stereotype of "woman" is on its way to becoming the domestic goddess asserted so frequently in mid-Victorian fiction: an attractive, capable and responsible homemaker who will manage the domestic

sphere as the man manages work in the public sphere. The idiot-girl will be unable to meet the demands of this position, but she does provide a portion of the promised package: she is so physically attractive that Ellen "survey'd/ With dread the Beauties of [her] Idiot-Maid" (l. 217). The idiot-girl is a woman without the qualities that would make her desirable as a wife; with these culturally valued qualities subtracted, she is left with an identity almost entirely defined by and expressed through her sexuality. Yet throughout the daughter remains morally innocent. Her association with sexuality is largely passive, as a woman more easily exploited than others. Thus, whereas intellectual disability in men is defined as a lack, in women it is seen rather as a reduction to a fundamental characteristic: female sexuality. In the case of Ellen Orford's daughter, her danger is increased by her beauty, which is not supplemented with those qualities which would make it valuable; it may serve to attract suitors, but it cannot gauge their worthiness or protect her from unscrupulous promises. As such, in the nineteenth century, Crabbe's idiot-girl also provides an unsettling parody of the notion of woman.¹³

The association of Ellen's daughter with transgressive sexual activity is difficult to miss. The daughter is born as the result of a premarital affair in which a

¹³ Interestingly, The Borough also provides another description of an idiot in Letter XVIII, "The Poor and Their Dwellings." The narrator describes briefly an "ancient widow" who lives with her idiot-son:

With her an harmless Idiot we behold,
Who hoards up Silver Shells for shining Gold;
These he preserves, with unremitted care,
To buy a Seat, and reign the Borough's Mayor:
Alas! - what could th'ambitious Changeling tell,
That what he sought our Rulers dar'd to sell? (l. 40-45)

There is little anxiety surrounding the male idiot, who lives comfortably in his peaceful association with his mother. Crabbe's character collects shells as money and aspires to patriarchal authority as Mayor. Crabbe's social criticisms are forceful and radical, but his representations of male and female idiots are rooted in convention.

gullible Ellen is seduced by a rake, and she dies in childbirth after having been raped. In The Borough, the daughter's condition is the punishment, the reminder, and the expression of the mother's transgression. Ellen's own sexuality both causes and is punished by the idiot-girl, and, while Crabbe is careful to identify Ellen's faithless lover as a primary cause of her predicament, he also emphasizes the idiot-girl's role as a symbolic reprimand which keeps Ellen from making the same mistake. As Ellen recounts her story,

**Four Years were past; I might again have found
Some erring Wish, but for another Wound:
Lovely my Daughter grew, her Face was fair,
But no Expression ever brighten'd there;
I doubted long, and vainly strove to make
Some certain Meaning of the Words she spake;
But Meaning there was none, and I survey'd
With dread the Beauties of my Idiot-Maid. (l. 210-217)**

In this passage, Ellen explicitly identifies her daughter's condition as a warning to caution her from taking another lover. Both for the narrator and the reader, the idiot-girl is linked with Ellen's unlicensed sexual activity, her "erring Wish."

To some degree, this "erring Wish" haunts most representations of intellectually disabled women. Intellectually disabled women are frequently portrayed as being sexually unstable, incapable of guarding virginity and rationing sexual favours solely to a deserving husband according to the socioeconomic model of conventional marriage. As such, they become a threat to the Victorian notion of "woman," as well as, by their sexual availability, a danger to the ideal of a rational and well-regulated masculinity. This understanding of the female idiot thus renders essential the dominance of masculine rationality for the

maintenance of an orderly society.

However, women with intellectual disabilities also embody a paradox in that they are often represented as sexual innocents. Thus, while she is a threat, she is also in need of the protection of masculine authority, and provides further justification for its existence. The notion of the sexual innocence of the woman with an intellectual disability seems descended from the figure of the holy innocent, the belief that the individual was in fact incapable of committing sin due to an inability to understand rational thought. In much Victorian fiction, the innocent female idiot appears as a character who is notable for a resolute asexuality, or at the very best a repressed sexuality, a feature paralleled by many representations of able-minded Victorian heroines. In Corrupt Relations, Barickman *et al.* argue that as the "Victorian novel in general shifts attention from courtship as a relation between individuals to courtship as a ritual conditioned by family life," or, in other words, a "shift from an erotic to a domestic center" (8), so that the erotic qualities of the heroine are displaced in favour of domestic ones. Maggy in Dickens's Little Dorrit, Ariel in Collins's The Law and the Lady, and Mrs. Wragge in Collins's No Name are all notable for the vagueness of their shape and the obvious lack of femininity in their appearance, rendering them sexually non-threatening.¹⁴ But, as might be expected, the

¹⁴ Wilkie Collins's narrator describes Ariel as having a "round, fleshy, inexpressive face" with "rayless and colourless eyes." She has "nothing but an old red flannel petticoat, and a broken comb in her frowsy flaxen hair, to tell us that she was a woman" (210). Dexter, Ariel's cousin, calls her a "mere vegetable" and claims that "a cabbage in a garden has as much life and expression in it" (211). Mrs. Wragge is described as having "a large, smooth, white round face - like a moon - . . . dimly irradiated by eyes of mild and faded blue, which looked straightforward into vacancy" (202). Interestingly, following Barickman *et al.*'s observation in the shift of emphasis to from erotic to domestic qualities in the Victorian novel, we also find that all three of these figures are represented as domestically incompetent (especially Ariel and Mrs. Wragge, whose ostensible responsibilities lie within a domestic sphere). See Deirdre David's article "Rewriting the Male Plot in Wilkie Collins's No Name," for instance, in addition to Barickman *et al.* in their chapter on Collins.

repressed sexuality of these female characters resurfaces elsewhere.

Maggy, the eternal 10-year-old of Little Dorrit, provides a good example. She first appears as “an excited figure of a strange kind” crying out “Little mother, little mother!” after Amy Dorrit, who calls Maggy a “clumsy child” when she bumps into Dorrit and Arthur Clennam and falls down, spilling her basket of potatoes in the mud (140). Dorrit explains Maggy to Clennam: “‘When Maggy was ten years old,’ said Little Dorrit, watching her face as she spoke, ‘she had a bad fever, sir, and she has never grown any older since’” (143). A ten-year-old who has eight-and-twenty years, Maggy is intellectually like a child and physically like a large bald good-humoured baby, “with large bones, large features, large feet and hands, large eyes and no hair” (142).¹⁵ But while Maggy is comparable to a large infant (an impression furthered by the accompanying drawing by Phiz, Dickens’s illustrator Halbot K. Browne), she also expresses the needs denied by Amy and is representative of an active desiring subjectivity, even though her activity in the story is limited. Maggy embodies those things that Amy Dorrit cannot admit that she wishes for.

¹⁵ Dickens’s portrayal of Maggy continues:

Her large eyes were limpid and almost colourless; they seemed to be very little affected by light, and to stand unnaturally still. There was also that attentive listening expression in her face, which is seen in the faces of the blind; but she was not blind, having one tolerably serviceable eye. Her face was not exceedingly ugly, though it was only redeemed from being so by a smile; a good-humoured smile, and pleasant in itself, but rendered pitiable by being constantly there. A great white cap, with a quantity of opaque frilling that was always flapping about, apologised for Maggy’s baldness, and made it so very difficult for her old black bonnet to retain its place upon her head, that it held on around her neck like a gipsy’s baby. A commission of haberdashers could alone have reported what the rest of her poor dress was made of; but it had a strong general resemblance to seaweed, with here and there a gigantic tea-leaf. Her shawl looked particularly like a tea-leaf after a long infusion. (142)

Despite the detail of the description and illustration, there is an ambivalence in Dickens’ portrayal suggested by his repetitions of “seemed,” “about,” and numerous “buts,” which Brian Rosenberg identifies as one of Dickens’ characteristic “extended efforts to describe something that is not finally describable, to see something that cannot finally be seen” (53): intellectual disability is thus constructed in this critical formulation as something ultimately incomprehensible.

Maggy assumes importance not so much in her plot function as in her symbolic function. She is present at major incidents in the story, acting, as Elaine Showalter notes, as “a kind of chaperon and catalyst combined,” a holy innocent bringing good luck to Amy, whose virtue is expressed through her care for her helpless companion; she is also, however, a “shadow” for Amy Dorrit, an expression of “Little Dorrit’s physical, aggressive and uninhibited self” (35). Showalter argues convincingly that in Little Dorrit, “it is through the technique of doubling - the creation of pairs of characters, one of whom embodies the ‘mystery and strangeness’ of the other - that Dickens attempts to penetrate the secrecy of personality” (31). Drawing on the Jungian notion of the “shadow” as an “archetypal aspect of the psyche . . . which represents spontaneity, creativity, and strong emotions, but also lust, criminality and violence” (31), Showalter demonstrates how Dickens uses Maggy to express components of Amy Dorrit’s character. Maggy also indulges the physical drives that Amy represses. If Amy is marked by her stunted growth, a consequence of early malnourishment and later her sacrifice of her meals for her father, Maggy is characterized by her lust for food and her policy of self-indulgence. Poovey has observed that as late as the mid-eighteenth century, “woman was consistently represented as the site of willful sexuality and bodily appetite” (9). Maggy is a mid-Victorian comic reproduction of this willful appetite: Showalter observes that “Maggy betrays the appetite and the competitiveness which Amy has struggled to extinguish” (35).

Dickens’ construction of Maggy suggests a sort of generosity toward the image of the idiot, which is certainly in keeping with his practical support of a

humanitarian asylum movement.¹⁶ However, like Crabbe before him, he also constructs Maggy as a repository of desires and impulses controlled by more proper women. Also, while Maggy is an innocent, it is tempting to speculate that her status as such is valid only so long as she remains asexual. Unlike Ellen Orford's beautiful "Idiot-maid" daughter, Maggy is physically unattractive: she is aggressively infantilized, as Dickens's description of her suggests, and thus is rendered without sexual desire or desirability and thus emptied of threat. In this, Maggy also parallels Amy, who is physically infantilized by malnutrition and self-denial, and who recreates a father-child relationship with Clennam in the novel. Maggy's status as Amy's double also precludes the acknowledgement of any overt sexual desires.¹⁷ For the female idiot to be welcomed into the world of Little Dorrit, she must first be stripped of all external signs of femininity.

The Feminist Refiguring of Intellectual Disability

So far, I have discussed only male writers representing intellectual disability. Not surprisingly, the way gender functions in representations of idiocy can be affected by the gender of the writer, and the concerns expressed by Victorian women in their representations of idiocy tend to be distinct from those of their male counterparts, especially in the second half of the century as feminist writers critique the inequities of Victorian society. While one cannot claim that male and female writers necessarily conceptualize idiocy differently, one can

¹⁶ Dickens used his magazine, *Household Words*, to support the development of asylums for the education of people with intellectual disabilities, praising the work being done by John Conolly in the Essex asylum.

¹⁷ That is not to say that sexual desire is absent. When Amy tells Maggy the story of the Princess and the spinning-woman who hides her "shadow" - ie, her unexpressed love for another - it is, as Showalter notes, an expression of Amy's desire for Clennam ("Guilt" 29, 36). Maggy recounts the story to Clennam, but garbles it so that its subtext is incomprehensible to him.

identify specific instances in which early feminists adapt the image of the idiot in opposition to dominant readings of idiocy and gender in a critique of patriarchal authority.

Elizabeth Gaskell adapts the notion that an intellectually disabled man is a diminished man to perform a critique of patriarchal authority in general. In her short story "Half a Life-Time Ago," Susan Dixon honours her mother's deathbed request to look after her younger brother Willie, forcing Susan to choose between her brother and her lover, Michael Hurst, who wishes to place him in the Lancaster Asylum. After refusing to commit Willie, Susan is abandoned by Michael and isolates herself from all society, living with a servant and caring for her brother while running her farm; even after Willie's death, Susan rebuffs suitors and remains in solitude.

John Kucich has observed "one of the more curious patterns in Gaskell's work is her frequent inversion of her protagonists' sexual identity. In many of these characters, gender is not blurred or revised; it is flatly reversed. Women are rigidly masculinized, and men rigidly feminized, in static and stereotypical ways" (188). Certainly, one can argue that Susan Dixon is in a sense "masculinized," and perhaps Willie is "feminized." Michael Hurst is emphatically not feminized, however; indeed, given Gaskell's descriptions of the men populating the world of this short story, Hurst may be excessively male.

The men of the Westmoreland district, writes Gaskell, are especially distinguished by a pleasure in "drinking for days together, and having to be hunted up by anxious wives, who dared not leave their husbands to the

chances of the wild precipitous roads, but walked miles and miles, lantern in hand, in the dead of night, to discover and guide the solemnly-drunken husband home" (4). Such drunkenness, notes Terence Wright, is "taken as a sign of manliness" in this story. And, as he goes on to note, "Violence seems almost equally routine . . ." (192). The qualities Susan acquires over the course of the story are instead those of a steady farmer and manager, one who knows not only the "butter and chicken that every farmer's wife about had to sell," but also those items that fall on "the man's side" - livestock, grain, produce - so that her financial savings become the object of speculation among townspeople (50). Susan Dixon's apparent "masculine" qualities, then, are those that she exhibits when engaged in the commercial sphere of activities.

Most commentators, when examining Susan's relationship with Willie, find the influence of Wordsworth at work in the story. Terence Wright notes that the story "may be indebted to Wordsworth - for some of its names, one of its characters, who is an 'idiot boy,' and the lyrical opening . . ." (191). Angus Easson claims that the story is "obviously, even consciously in the idiot brother, a prose Lyrical Ballad, emphasizing the lines of feeling kept open through love" (22). Yet while Gaskell exploits many of the same associations with idiocy that are evident in Wordsworth's poem, the tone of "Half a Life-Time Ago" is undoubtedly more somber than that of "The Idiot Boy." Easson notes that Susan's love for Michael does not remove "the hardness of the sacrifice," suggesting that, "For Gaskell perhaps, . . . idiots are too nearly tragic; to Betty Foy's untroubled love for her idiot boy, Gaskell adds in [Susan] Dixon the strain of looking after a recalcitrant irrational being and the emotional suffering of love denied" (202). Indeed, Gaskell presents Susan as mirroring Willie's idiocy at points. Susan tends Will

through fits, but afterwards, "when he was laid down, she would sally out to taste the fresh air, and to work off her wild sorrow in cries and mutterings to herself. The early labourers saw her gestures at a distance, and thought her as crazed as the idiot-brother who made the neighbourhood a haunted place" (48). The idiot brother acts to some degree as a symbolic double for Susan, his incapacity both the cause and expression of her own isolation in the male world of the Westmorelands.

However, while he acts to some degree as a double for Susan, Will is more meaningful as a double for Hurst, whom he supplants in Susan's life. Although Will is less than a man in terms that are immediately accessible to the readers of the tale, as well as to the characters in it, Michael hardly prospers in comparison.

In honouring her mother's deathbed request that she care for Willie, Susan accedes to a matriarchal authority rather than take Michael Hurst's name, the obvious choice in a patriarchal world. While Susan cares for the declining Willie, Hurst marries another woman and proves to be an incapable husband. Susan glimpses her possible "other" life when she witnesses a drunken Michael Hurst beating a horse (46) and hears reports of his drunkenness and improvidence (51). Hurst's death in a snowstorm leaves his widow and children in worse poverty than Willie had caused for Susan, a disjunction which would have been significant to Gaskell's readers. As Peter Rushton has shown, with respect to poor law benefits, "idiocy was an accepted cause of poverty, both for the individual and the family, and is often cited as a self-explanatory note in lists of households too poor to pay rates or people deserving of special charity"

("Lunatics" 40). Thus, Susan's wealth and competence are all the more dramatically opposed with Michael's poverty, incompetence, and drunkenness.¹⁸ Michael is similar to Willie in his inability to be responsible for himself and those around him. Willie's idiocy provides a critique of masculine folly - the drunkenness, violence and wastefulness that Gaskell foregrounds throughout the story - that condemns women to subservience and poverty; Susan's "cries and mutterings" outside her cottage thus signify not only the oppressive character of her immediate fate, but in a larger sense the oppression of women in general in a patriarchal society.

Willie Dixon is not a Wordsworthian idiot boy so much as an image which Gaskell employs to critique masculine power while valorizing female strength. The conclusion of the story bears out this reading: Susan's adoption of Michael's widow and orphans, after they nurse her back to health from a stroke, is possible because of the skills she has developed and the money she has earned and saved. Anne Mellor, writing about female romanticism, argues that the recurring idea of an all-female community not only offers a model of "personal fulfillment," but more significantly, contests "the patriarchal doctrine of the separate spheres by articulating a very different domestic ideology" (84). Gaskell's conclusion not only sees Susan Dixon happy, but also locates her in a community notable for its independence from masculine authority and the behaviors which, for proto-feminist writers such as Gaskell, render this authority unjust.

¹⁸ Gaskell's critique of male authority is the more pointed in that, by the time this story was written, the idea that drunkenness caused idiocy in one's offspring was gaining currency, thus linking the two in the popular imagination. According to Samuel Gridley Howe, writing of idiots in American asylums in 1848, "out of 359 idiots, . . . 99 were the children of drunkards," but even this number he claims is low, for "many persons who are habitually intemperate do not get this name . . ." (28). This point is discussed more fully in Chapter 6.

Representations of female idiots or simpletons by women writers also tend to employ the “doubling” strategy to render the characters meaningful in the symbolic economy of the story. Indeed, female writers often use the idiot character as an expression of an aspect of female sexuality, although in a manner very different from their male counterparts. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in The Madwoman in the Attic, female writers in the nineteenth century experienced what they term an “anxiety of authorship” in their struggle to articulate a female voice that will be true to their own experience, and articulate stories from a female point of view. This struggle is exacerbated by the fact that the writer, and literary tradition itself, is conceptualized as male. For Gilbert and Gubar, the image of Jane Eyre’s madwoman in the attic becomes a cipher of the Victorian woman writer: a repressed creative figure, one simultaneously threatening and desirable. The incarcerated madwoman is an expression of the writer’s shadow self. Images of the idiot partake of some of the same symbolism as those of the madwoman, but the idiot character is less a creative-destructive force struggling for expression than it is an oppressed and manipulated (usually sexual) identity.¹⁹

In George Eliot’s Romola (1863), the title character, an intelligent, attractive and sensitive woman, marries the unscrupulous egotist Tito Melema. One of his betrayals involves another “wife,” the simple Tessa, who bears Tito’s children

¹⁹ A good example of an idiot “double” who expresses a heroine’s economic rather than sexual oppression is found in Charlotte Brontë’s Villette, where Lucy Snow finds herself alone with Marie Bloc, a “cretinous” student characterized by a tendency towards inertia, when everyone else leaves the school in the summer. Marie’s condition seems to parallel Lucy’s state of isolation. Paul Emmanuel thinks Lucy “weak” for finding Marie tiresome - he finds Marie both abhorrent and a challenge to his self-sacrificing nature (278-80). Lucy is depressed through the summer until Marie’s kindly old aunt comes to take Marie away.

while wrongly believing herself married to him. Tito also denies his adoptive father, Baldassarre, who ultimately kills him. In Gilbert and Gubar's reading of the novel, Baldassarre, the wronged father, acts as a double for Romola, the wronged wife.²⁰ However, Romola is also doubled by Tessa, a "simpleton" (27) whom Romola perceives as having "a child's mind in a woman's body" (438). Tessa reproduces Romola's trusting simplicity: Romola is seduced and betrayed as surely as is Tessa. It is worth noting that as the heroine of a Victorian novel, Romola could not be allowed to suffer her double's fate without alienating the novel's readership. Instead, the illegitimate children - the conventional sign of a gullible woman betrayed by an unscrupulous man - are given to her double. Tessa thus represents not so much Romola's sexually active and potentially disruptive side (as she would in the dominant patriarchal discourse), but rather her exploitation. As in Gaskell's "Half a Life-Time Ago," the novel ends with an all-female community: Romola eventually lives with Tessa and helps to raise her children, creating a matriarchal environment that rejects the self-interested philosophy embodied by Tito and his fellow Florentines.²¹

- Margaret Oliphant's Salem Chapel, published in 1863, the same year as Romola, also presents an idiot character as an expression of an aspect of female sexuality. Alice Mildmay is described as "a beautiful girl - more beautiful than anything mortal" (405), and her beauty combined with her idiocy makes her especially vulnerable. Alice is kidnapped by her father, a degenerate

²⁰ According to Gilbert and Gubar, "What distinguishes the heroine from her double is her deflection of anger from the male she is shown justifiably to hate back against herself so that she punishes herself, finding in self-abasement a sign of her moral superiority to the man she continues to serve"; human life thus "finds redemption through suffering" (498).

²¹ Gilbert and Gubar suggest that Romola's identification with a "dispossessed" woman may reflect Eliot "obsessively considering her own ambiguous 'wifeness'" (495).

aristocrat, who, as one character suggests, plans to “make a decoy of her, and sell her somehow, either to be married, or worse -” (253). While the reader is left to interpret the possible motives for the kidnapping as he or she pleases, sexual exploitation is high on the list of likelihoods. The plot is complicated by the fact that Alice is being cared for by Susan Vincent, sister of Arthur Vincent, the dissenting minister of Salem Chapel who is the novel’s protagonist. Susan has become engaged to a man who is later discovered to be the unscrupulous father under an assumed name, and in taking his daughter, he also abducts Susan. Thus the kidnapping of Alice also threatens to become the desecration of the virginal Susan, another example of the exploitation of the idiot woman mirroring threats to the integrity and self-governance of women in general.²² This novel will be discussed again in Chapter Five.

When portraying female idiots or simpletons, these writers depart from the dominant tendency to construct the idiot characters as expressions of unregulated female appetites (primarily sexual, but also, as in the case of Maggy, gustatory). The female idiot is still associated with sexuality, but instead the emphasis shifts onto her vulnerability to exploitation. She becomes an expression not of a threatening and undisciplined but rather an oppressed and exploited sexuality.

The notion of intellectual disability exists in a complex relation with gender. It is contingent upon both the viewer, who interprets the notion of idiocy, and the sex

²² Margaret Oliphant returns to this problem in the novel Innocent, in which the title character is endangered by her innocence borne of educational deprivation. While Innocent is not described as intellectually disabled, Barbara Thaden notes that she resembles a feral child (40), both in the fact that she has only one dress and in that she is very much a *tabula rasa*. See Thaden’s The Maternal Voice in Victorian Fiction for a comprehensive reading of the novel.

of the idiot being described or portrayed. There are, of course, numerous other factors that affect the way idiocy is constructed and perceived in the nineteenth century (and, indeed, the way intellectual disability is constructed and perceived today). I have explored idiocy and gender associations over a broad historical period in this chapter not to argue that all male characters and all female characters are portrayed in the same manner and for the same reasons over the years, but rather to underscore two points. First, in any representation of idiocy, gender identity is significant. There is no such thing as an idiot beyond gender; even the amorphous Maggy in Little Dorrit is rendered meaningful as a woman through her doubling with Amy. Second, there are, broadly speaking, predictable associations made in Victorian representations of idiocy and gender, especially within the dominant fiction described by Silverman: idiocy is identified as a lack in men, but as an essential element of the nature of women. Thus, men with intellectual disabilities are denied claims to authority within a patriarchal society, while women with intellectual disabilities serve to validate the sovereignty of the masculine over the feminine in the binary opposition that structures understanding of gender in Victorian England.

The first two chapters of this dissertation have sought to outline some of the main characteristics of the idea of intellectual disability at the start of the Victorian period and foreground the consistent gender associations evident in representations of idiocy. The chapters following this one will examine more precisely representations of idiocy at particular historical moments, as the notion becomes ideologically unstable and thus is rendered a subject of anxiety and debate.

4. Barnaby Rudge, Violence, and Paternalism: Politicizing the Idiot

Charles Dickens' 1841 novel Barnaby Rudge, which narrates the tale of the anti-papery Gordon Riots of 1780, has long been linked to its author's anxiety over the threats posed by the Chartist movement of the 1830s and 1840s, the novel's period of gestation and composition.¹ While specific historical parallels may be tenuous, Dickens' concern with the proper and just exercise of authority, specifically paternal authority, evident even in the most cursory reading of the novel, is very much a product of and participant in the contemporary discourse concerning the status of paternalism as a social philosophy and the role of the state in early Victorian society. This chapter will argue that Dickens engages with this debate on paternalism through the association of the "idiot" or "natural" Barnaby Rudge, a figure most Victorian readers would agree needs a strong paternal guide, with the disruptive and rebellious mob.

Dickens uses Barnaby's idiocy to endorse a paternal responsibility embodied in the state - a social, moral and political role analogous to that exercised by Gabriel Varden and Mrs. Rudge over Barnaby for his own safety and welfare. In presenting this argument, the chapter will first explore the relation of Dickens' version of the Gordon riots of 1780 to the Chartist movement of his own time. Then it will examine notions of paternalism, the rule of the father, and authority in the novel, both as an articulation of political positions and with specific relation to the character of Barnaby. Finally, it will propose a symbolic connection between the conflation of Barnaby with the mob, the debate over

¹ Barnaby Rudge took five years from when Dickens first proposed it under the title of "Gabriel Varden, the Locksmith of London," to its completion (Butt and Tillotson 77-78). This delay is generally attributed to conflicts with his first publisher. However, had the project proceeded according to Dickens' original schedule, it would have been his second rather than his fifth novel.

traditional paternalism, laissez-faire liberalism and state intervention in social issues in early Victorian England, and the foundation of educational asylums for people with intellectual disabilities in the late 1840s.

The Gordon riots lasted for six days, from June 2-7, 1780, beginning as a protest calling for the repeal of the Roman Catholic relief act of two years earlier. Dickens' story is generally factual in recounting specific events, although, as George Rudé notes, it is heavily romanticized (268)². In addition, Dickens recreates the riots as being manipulated by a cabal of self-interested figures, notably Gordon's secretary, Gashford, and Sir John Chester, a conspiracy with no historical foundation.³ What did happen was that on June 2 some 60,000 members of the Protestant Association met to deliver a petition to Parliament; their leader, Lord George Gordon, presented the petition while the crowd waited outside. A fragment of the crowd later burned down a Catholic chapel; another was looted and its contents burned in the street. Over the next five days, the burnings and lootings continued, while the rioters shouted "No Popery!" and sported blue cockades (Rudé 272). Rudé suggests that the riots were not directed against the Roman Catholic community as a whole (avoiding the large Irish immigrant communities, for instance), but rather showed evidence of a "distinct class bias" (286). He concludes that "behind the slogan of 'No Popery' and the outward forms of religious fanaticism there lay a deeper social purpose: a groping desire to settle accounts with the rich, if only for a day, and to achieve some rough kind of social justice" (289). Whether or not this interpretation is

² Despite this "romantic" treatment of the riots, at least one historian, Christopher Hibbert in *King Mob*, quotes *Barnaby Rudge* extensively to illustrate the "ambiance" of the riots.

³ Butt and Tillotson note that Dickens' version of the riots "require a cold-blooded villain manoeuvring in the dark" (86); in other words, for Dickens, the riots must stem from an evil patriarch rather than social oppression.

accurate, the apparent rebellion against wealth and authority certainly provides a parallel to the Chartist threats of the 1830s and 1840s, and forms a central conflict in Dickens' novel. Indeed, when the Maypole ostler Hugh is recruited by the rioters, he mistakenly cries "No Property" instead of "No Popery" (359).

The strength and accuracy of Dickens' reference to the Chartist movement in his portrayal of the Gordon riots has long been a point of discussion, although it has become critical orthodoxy to observe that some association must have existed.⁴ Dorothy Thompson identifies the years 1838-40 as those when the "mutual hostility between the [working and middle] classes was at its height" (Outsiders 58); Gareth Stedman Jones argues further that it is only in the early 1830s that the broad concept of "the people" as a political force splits into separate working and middle classes, thus generating this hostility (Languages 104). According to John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, "the events of 1836-41 made [Barnaby Rudge] almost journalistically apt. The Poor Law riots, the Chartist risings at Devizes, Birmingham, and Sheffield, the mass meetings on Kersal Moor and Kennington Common, and most pointed of all, the Newport rising of 1839 with its attempt to release Chartist prisoners - all of these, with their aftermath of trials, convictions, and petitions against the punishment of death, gave special point in 1841 to 'a tale of the Riots of '80'" (82). But while parallels certainly exist between the novel and contemporary events, similarities do not necessarily

⁴ Historians as well as literary critics assert this claim. Dorothy Thompson writes of Victorian novels dealing with class conflict: "Like the children's classic of a later generation, The Wind in the Willows, the characters in Victorian novels acted out their lives with the knowledge that the woods around them were full of threatening and dangerous creatures, creatures without individual names, who waited their chance to emerge under cover of darkness to loot, murder, rape, fire and destroy. They are the voiceless labourers in Alton Locke, the miners in Felix Holt, the denizens of Wodegate in Sybil, the strikers in North and South. They are also the Gordon Rioters in Barnaby Rudge and the *tricoteuses* in A Tale of Two Cities, though distanced here in a historical setting" (Chartists 250).

breed allegory. Butt and Tillotson continue with the disclaimer that "[t]he imperfections of the historical parallel . . . were less obvious then than now," and that "Dickens was responding not to enlightened historical analysis, but to the average man's horror of looted chapels and distilleries, armed robbery in the streets, prisons and mansions ablaze" (82). Dickens' version of the Gordon Riots refers to Chartism in that both incorporate the threat of violence directed against state authority. With regards to political programs, however, the similarities between the Chartists and Dickens' rioters become more vague.

Some readers, though - most aggressively Thomas J. Rice - have argued that the novel makes direct reference to the political events of Dickens' time. While Rice agrees that the "novel should not be read solely as political propaganda to the exclusion of other concerns," he also asserts that "several important features of Barnaby Rudge . . . can be clarified by this emphasis" ("Politics" 52). Rice refers to the novel's "political allegory" ("Politics" 60) and asserts that "the 'message' of [the] novel bears on more than its immediate frame of reference" ("Politics" 53) in its less-than-covert warning of the threat posed to the middle classes by the union of what he calls ultra-Tories and ultra-radicals⁵, represented in the novel by Sir John Chester and Sim Tappertit, respectively. In another article, Rice argues also that the novel explores models of domestic government, both in the political and the household sense; indeed, Dickens assumes, "as would his readers, that the household, as the basic social unit, reflects and determines the welfare of the nation" ("Barnaby" 83). The just use of authority in the face of domestic insurrection thus becomes the primary concern of the novel.

⁵ Otherwise known as traditional Tory paternalists and "physical-force" Chartists.

Most writers are less emphatic about the relation between Barnaby Rudge and Chartism than Rice, although most concur with his more general assertion of the novel's concern with proper government and the relation of the household to the state. Patrick Brantlinger suggests that the Glasgow cotton spinners, who went on strike in 1837, are a "primary source" for Dickens' portrayal of Sim Tappertit and the 'Prentice Knights (38); he further adds that "it is not clear . . . that Dickens is much concerned about trade unionism or any other Victorian controversy. His treatment of the 'Prentice Knights points to unionism just as that of the Gordon Riots points to Chartism, but the lesson . . . is vague" (40). Alison Case argues that "Sim's function as a 'representative' of the oppressed working classes . . . seems to be precisely to deny the validity of identifying such a group and allowing it certain interests and rights peculiar to itself" (144). For Myron Magnet, the portrayal of the Chartist-like 'Prentice Knights as "harebrained" and "highly reactionary" (142) suggests that Dickens perceives the Chartist movement as "a foolish attempt to hold back a present that in any event had already arrived."⁶ Dickens, he argues, "believes unreservedly in the progress of civilization" (143).

Whether or not Dickens shared the Victorian notion of progress (and it seems likely that he does, at this point of his career), he wholeheartedly endorsed the authority of the state and the need for members of a civilized society to respect

⁶ This reading of Chartism recalls Stedman Jones' revisionary analysis of Chartism which suggests that the movement, rather than marking a beginning of a self-conscious working class, as E.P. Thompson had argued in The Making of the English Working Class, was in fact the last expression of "a radical political protest extending back into the eighteenth century" (Kent 103). Magnet's reading of Dickens' response to Chartism clearly suggests that Dickens conceives of Chartists as advocating a return to a disappearing England. See also the essay "Rethinking Chartism" in Jones' Languages of Class.

this authority. Writing of the idea of the “noble savage,” Dickens asserts that “if we have anything to learn from the Noble Savage, it is what to avoid he passes away before an immeasurably better and higher power than ever ran wild in any earthly woods, and the world will be all the better when his place knows him no more” (“Noble Savage” 472-3); for Dickens, natural man requires the discipline of responsible civic authority. In an analysis of Dickens’ positions on Chartism, the Indian Mutiny and the Jamaican Affair, three contentious political events coinciding with his literary career, Peter Scheckner notes that in each case he assumed conservative positions defending the state and suggests that, “as much as he genuinely detested social injustice, Dickens more feared social rebellion, class conflict, and radical change. He reserved his great sympathy for the downtrodden if, as a social class, they stayed that way” (99). Chartist groups, especially those such as the London Democratic Association, whose “aim . . . was to arouse London to [a] state of militancy and ‘preparedness’. . . .” (Bennett 94), would find little sympathy from Dickens. Brantlinger, citing Dickens’ responses to the 1853-4 Preston strike, concludes that he was “more interested in presenting the conflict between workers and masters in moral and psychological terms than in economic ones” (50).

Dickens’ position on Chartism was likely similar to that expressed in Thomas Carlyle’s essay on the movement, “Chartism,” with which Dickens sympathized (Ackroyd 302). “Chartism,” in Carlyle’s assessment, “means the bitter discontent grown fierce and mad, the wrong condition therefore or the wrong disposition, of the Working Classes of England” (205). It is “the feeling of injustice” (229), or “the claim of the Free Working-man to be raised to a level, we may say, with the Working Slave; his anger and cureless discontent till that be done” (267).

According to Rice, both Dickens and Carlyle sought a "definition of the just revolt" ("Barnaby" 84), although neither find this definition in Chartism. For Carlyle, as for Dickens, Chartism was the inevitable, if lamentable and appalling, outbreak of a poorly governed and cared-for working class. But it was also primarily a complaint grown from abusive treatment by those who should know better. That is, the Chartists' complaint cannot be considered seriously as a political challenge but rather must be read as the response to the moral collapse of those paternalists - the aristocracy, the gentry, and, in Carlyle's view, captains of industry - who should be ensuring the welfare of the working people. For Carlyle, Chartism reflects a social rather than a political problem, and as a social problem the solution could be found in greater moral responsibility on behalf of both industrialist-paternalists and their employees. Carlyle suggests that the pragmatic solution lies in both legislation and personal responsibility, in the forms of better education for the masses and in increased emigration by unemployed labourers.

Carlyle's assessment of moral failings among the paternalists in the Chartist conflict has another component embedded in the very name of the "paternal": a fundamental anxiety over what Carlyle and others perceived as the "feminine" aspect of mob violence. In The French Revolution, Carlyle describes the Parisian mob as "a genuine outburst of Nature; issuing from, or communicating with, the deepest deep of Nature" (198). Later, he elaborates on a specific instance of the "unpremeditated outbursts of Nature": the "Insurrection of Women," before which the theatricalities of the Revolution are "like small ale" (267). Carlyle's reproduction of the Revolution as an eruption of female violence was the norm, rather than the exception. As Dorinda Outram notes in her work

on the representation of the body in histories of the Revolution, “an image of women, as destructively propelled by physicality, passion and desire, was adopted by the whole nineteenth century” (127).⁷ Dickens was familiar with Carlyle’s history of the French Revolution, and indeed drew heavily on it, and its location of the threat of violence in female participation in politics, for A Tale of Two Cities. For Dickens, as with Carlyle, mob violence, in addition to indicating a moral lapse, had a peculiarly feminine component, a point to which we will return later.

If Dickens read contemporary social problems as moral rather than political issues, it isn’t surprising that he did much the same with historical conflicts. When he wrote Barnaby Rudge, the dominant model for the historical novel was to be found in the tremendously popular work of Sir Walter Scott. Yet while it is as commonplace to note Scott’s influence on Barnaby Rudge as it is to note that of the Chartist movement, this influence did not inspire imitation. Kim Ian Michasiw, drawing on Harold Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence, argues that for Dickens, Scott was “both a way of understanding history and history itself, both Dickens’ precursor in historical fiction and his predecessor as a great popular novelist” (577). Case builds on Michasiw’s observations to argue that Dickens actively opposes Scott’s view of history. Rather than presenting history as driven by conflicting or opposed interests held by different groups or individuals, Dickens casts it as a battle between good and evil. In rewriting

⁷ For more on the representations of women employed in relation to the French Revolution, see the chapter “Incorruptible milk: Breast-feeding and the French Revolution” in Mary Jacobus’ First Things: Jacobus notes that campaigns against women’s revolutionary groups in France were marked by two motifs: “the tendency to view women’s political participation as inherently dangerous” and “the tendency to locate the threat of disorder generally posed by the Revolution in the confrontation between warring groups of women” (217). In contrast to these beliefs, notes Jacobus, the image of the mother (and not an aristocrat’s wet-nurse) breast-feeding her infant children was mobilized as an expression of the popular revolution.

history, he rejects it (Case 130). Indeed, she argues, the lack of apparent motives for the violence of the Gordon Riots may have been part of its appeal to Dickens as a subject for a novel (134), as it enables him to represent the riots as a conflict between good and evil forces rather than a political struggle. Dickens' response to Scott is to write not history but anti-history, to reconstruct specific struggles as timeless, ahistorical battles between good and evil.

The moral component of Dickens' critique in Barnaby Rudge is expressed as an investigation of paternal authority. "Historical consciousness," as Case notes, "is . . . replaced by an ahistorical family, and by a moral code which is supposed to transcend historically conditioned, class- or culture-bound values" (144). Since Steven Marcus' influential reading of the novel, criticism has, as Michasiw observes, been divided into two streams: that focusing on the story's political subtext, and that exploring its psychological drama. Marcus identifies both of these interests in the novel, but ultimately prioritizes the latter. His chapter on Barnaby Rudge in Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey is entitled "Sons and Fathers," and his reading of the novel's engagement with history is subsumed by a concern with the Oedipal drama. The past establishes authority over the present as surely as fathers dominate their sons (181). And in most cases, this adherence to the past as a source of authority is expressed as a meaningless tyranny.⁸

Dickens' representatives of traditional masculine authority do not fare well in the

⁸ Marcus' criticism of the novel is liberally laced with references to idiocy associated with other sources of authority: the world of the novel is dominated by "tyrannic and imbecile authority" (178); the country justice is a "moral imbecile" (182); John Willet is an "idiot father" (190). Marcus extrapolates Barnaby's idiocy to make it a general feature of abusive or irresponsible paternalist authority (both familial and social) in the novel.

novel. Sir John Chester, the Machiavellian aristocrat whose moral structure is borrowed from the Earl of Chesterfield (Magnet 84-94), occupies one such traditional seat of power, by virtue of his high birth, yet he is also one of the driving forces behind the riots. Another representative of traditional authority, the country judge who tries to buy Barnaby's raven Grip and later sentences Barnaby to hang, is described in conventionally flattering terms:

...this gentleman had various endearing appellations among his intimate friends. By some he was called 'a country gentleman of the true school,' by some 'a fine old country gentleman,' by some 'a thorough-bred Englishman,' by some 'a genuine John Bull;' but they all agreed in one respect, and that was, that it was a pity there were not more like him, and that because there were not, the county was going to rack and ruin every day. (435)

Yet these titles all denote a foolish, ignorant and self-important man, as Dickens goes on to demonstrate, finally concluding his lengthy description with the observation that, "Barnaby being an idiot, and Grip a creature of mere brute instinct, it would be very hard to say what this gentleman was" (435).⁹

Ned Dennis, the state hangman, also provides a vehicle for Dickens to satirize notions of justice and the corrupt authority of the state, especially in Dennis' numerous proclamations that hanging is the very essence of the English constitution. When Stagg, the blind extortionist, is shot by soldiers, Dennis complains, "Do you call *this* consitootional? Do you see him shot through and through instead of being worked off like a Briton? . . . Where's this poor feller-creetur's rights as a citizen, that he didn't have *me* in his last moments?" (627).

⁹ The class represented by the country judge was also satirized by Dickens in an 1841 political squib entitled "The Fine Old English Gentleman, to be said or sung at all conservative dinners" (Magnet 160-1).

From Dennis' perspective, all the rights of the British subject are encapsulated in the right to be hanged - or worked off, in his terms - but apparently do not extend beyond this dubious privilege. At the same time, the proper authorities, such as the Mayor of London, who does nothing to quell the riots, are also condemned by Dickens. After the mob's first destructive episode, he writes that "[h]ot and drunken though they were, they had not yet broken all bounds and set all law and government at defiance. Something of their habitual deference for the authority erected by society for its own preservation yet remained among them, and had its majesty been vindicated in time, the secretary [Gashford, one of the figures behind the riots] would have had to digest a bitter disappointment" (466). The fact that proper authority remains silent while abusive authority asserts its will becomes one of the novel's central concerns, demonstrating Dickens' interest in the articulation of (or the challenge of articulating) a just and benevolent yet strong authority.

The vacuum in proper or just political authority is paralleled in Dickens' portrayal of family relationships. John Willet oppresses his son, Joe; John Chester abuses both his legitimate heir, Edward, and his bastard son, Hugh.¹⁰ The elder Rudge blights his son's intellect through his murder of Reuben Haredale. Even Gabriel Varden, the locksmith who is the only good patriarch in the novel, struggles with his apprentice, Sim Tappertit, in an economic and professional relationship modeled on that of parent and child. In the novel's other prominent master-servant relationship, Rudge Sr. murders Reuben Haredale but disguises his crime so that it appears a second servant, the

¹⁰ That both of these fathers are named John is significant, as several critics have observed. Dickens' own father, John Dickens, from whom he was estranged, was at the time borrowing money on his famous son's name, and occasionally simply forging his son's signature (Ackroyd 324).

gardener, had committed the deed.

Gabriel Varden, the "Locksmith of London" who was the original title character for the novel, is the only successful patriarch in the story. Despite being married to a woman who, until after the riots, never recognizes his goodness, and being saddled with Sim Tappertit, who wishes to displace Varden and kidnap his daughter, Varden remains hearty and cheerful. In a story concerned with the failure of authority, both on a familial and social level, Varden clearly represents a moral centre; throughout, he is a model figure, bearing his ills gracefully (unlike the surviving Haredale brother) and assisting those who have wronged him, even the apprentice who would happily have seen him dead. Yet even Varden, in both his role as father and as civilian, is not immune to the conflicts of the riots, and is very nearly killed by the crowd.

Whether the novel offers any conclusion to the difficulties it describes is a matter of some debate. Those critics favouring a psychological reading suggest it does not. Indeed, Marcus suggests that it "seems to pose the question of whether there may not exist in personal life and in society certain relations of conflict, injustice and suffering which are not susceptible to reconciliation. The energies that are opposed to one another and the issues they encompass are those we recognize as pertaining to the conduct of power - personal and sexual power, social and political power" (188). The "suicidal passion" which he perceives as permeating the novel has its roots in "a radical disorder in the individual's relation to authority" (210), also reflected in the tortured, and ultimately irreconcilable father-son relationships that provide tension throughout the novel. For Marcus, the novel is not just a response to the Chartist threats of the

1830s filtered through a more distant historical event, but a prescient work that anticipates the growing unmanageable disorders of society and personal life. "To have seen this in 1840," writes Marcus, "was to have gazed into the heart of the affliction that goes by the name of modern civilization" (211).

Magnet comes to a similar conclusion, drawing on Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents in claiming that "the point . . . is that if you want to have civilization, then you must resign yourself to enduring the repression, often enough excessive, out of which civilization is born and by which it is perpetuated" (65). Even in the case of Gabriel Varden, authority is linked to force. Early in the second half of the novel, the locksmith appears as a sergeant of the Royal East London Volunteers, overseeing his regiment. Further, his social status as a locksmith indicates the ambivalent role he performs in safeguarding society. The locks he makes both maintain safety and reinforce an authority which is not always just.¹¹ When he refuses before the mob to break the lock on Newgate prison, he is both affirming the sanctity of social authority and justifying an oppressive power, an ambivalent position of which Dickens is aware. But it would be wrong to assume that Dickens, generally a liberal thinker, did not value or condone the ability of the state to assert its power forcefully in a just cause; indeed, most evidence suggests the opposite (Middlebro'; Schenker).

The failure of the father's responsibility is most evident in the linked characters Hugh and Barnaby, both of whom are abandoned sons. Hugh is orphaned when his beautiful gypsy mother is abandoned by her lover, later revealed to be

¹¹ Judith Flynn has observed the superabundance of phallic imagery in this novel, including "keys, guns, pikes and standards, [and] the Maypole itself" (68); Dickens's use of this imagery is highly ambivalent.

Sir John Chester, and reduced to stealing to support her young child; captured and convicted, she is hanged by Ned Dennis. Barnaby embodies his father's crime, being formed as an idiot because his father, bloodied from murdering his employer, confronts his wife and charges her to say nothing of having seen him. She, pregnant, collapses in fright and gives birth to Barnaby, described in the novel as an idiot who has a small birthmark "that seemed a smear of blood but half washed out" (87) and an aversion to the sight of blood. Thus, paternal authority at both the familial and societal level fails these two figures. The evils of the specific fathers Chester and Rudge are reconstituted in the social rebellion of the riots, led by their abandoned sons. The abuse or abdication of paternal authority within the family does not simply mirror the riots; it is profoundly implicated in Dickens' explanation of the mob's violence. As with Carlyle, bad fathers (and paternalists) lead to social rebellion.

Interestingly, given the amount of attention paid to fathers in the novel, little has been written on its mothers, and on female authority; indeed, most critics of the novel ignore the female characters, as well as the issue of gender, entirely. To some degree, Dickens reflects Carlyle's anxiety about women and mob violence expressed in The French Revolution. Both Mrs. Varden and Miggs, the housekeeper, offer financial support to Lord Gordon's Protestant Association; Miggs actively assists the rioters when they abduct Varden to break the lock at Newgate Prison. But Dickens' assessment of female power is no more unidirectional than his critique of paternalism: there are, in the novel's formulation, faulty women, like Mrs Varden, disputing her husband's authority in the realm of political issues, and there is the good mother, Mrs. Rudge - although, as a woman, she is limited in what she can give her son.

The “maternal fright” theory of intellectual disability was widely accepted throughout the nineteenth century, with Dickens writing in 1853 that idiocy is “generally associated with mental suffering, fright, or anxiety, or with a latent want of power, in the mother” (“Idiots” 499). Marie-Hélène Huet, writing of the belief that idiocy and various forms of “birth monsters” were the result of maternal impressions, observes that the “maternal imagination erased the legitimate father’s image from his offspring and thus created a monster” (8); they were, she notes, “products of art rather than nature” (5). Thus, idiocy becomes a manifestation of women’s impressionable intellects, the bodily reproduction of an undisciplined imagination. Barnaby is a product not only of his father’s crime, then, but also his mother’s mental qualities.

As is often the case with male idiot characters, Barnaby lives alone with his mother: for the most part, no father is present, and he is yet another male idiot character associated with female rule. When beyond his mother’s direct influence, Barnaby becomes dangerous, one of the leaders of the rebellion. He has not the rational capacity that would govern his acts in the absence of his mother, although in her presence maternal love makes him pliant. Notably, Barnaby becomes a more rational figure at the end of the novel when he and his mother are incorporated into a larger community symbolically presided over by Gabriel Varden, who also is responsible for saving Barnaby from the gallows. While maternal love makes Barnaby a fundamentally decent although tractable individual, paternal authority is associated with improved capacity for self-government.

Dickens's choice to portray Barnaby, an "idiot" or "natural," at the center of the riots foregrounds the mob's "moral idiocy" (Magnet 80). Barnaby is an odd title character, as in many ways he seems peripheral to the main action of the novel; still, for some reason Dickens saw fit to name the book after him instead of Varden, the cheery, hearty and thoroughly decent locksmith, the epitome of solid middle-class citizenry. One must wonder why Barnaby receives such attention, especially given his extended absences from the novel (he disappears from Chapters 26-45, for instance). The answer hinges on Barnaby's particular symbolic usefulness, a feature that stems from his status as an idiot, and goes beyond his role as a cipher for the diabolical folly of crowds.

Natalie McKnight has noted that most studies of Barnaby Rudge the novel, while having little to say about Barnaby Rudge the character, say even less about his idiocy. Her observation is borne out by a survey of the criticism. David Craig sees Barnaby as an "innocent madman decked with feathers, a quasi-Shakespearean Fool or Wordsworthian Idiot Boy" (76), but adds nothing more to this observation. Butt and Tillotson note Barnaby's affinity with Waverley's David Gellatley, although they credit Patrick Robinson with first pointing out the similarities in 1841(78). Gordon Spence, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, likens Barnaby's wardrobe to Madge Wildfire's in Scott's The Heart of Midlothian, while noting that, like Johnny Foy, he is close to his mother (15). Many comparisons, unfortunately, do little more than note that there are other "idiot" characters in the history of English literature.¹² While other observations seem accurate enough so far as they go, they don't investigate

¹² it might be interesting to survey how frequently literary characters with intellectual disabilities are compared to Wordsworth's "Idiot Boy." One of the goals of this dissertation is to render extinct this critical reflex.

very thoroughly the significance of idiocy within the discourse of the novel and in its engagement with other contemporary discourses.

Many of the works that do consider Barnaby's idiocy tend to be of the "diagnostic case study" genre, a particularly unprofitable subspecies of literary criticism. Leonard Manheim has argued that Dickens got it wrong in calling Barnaby a "natural" or an "idiot" (although Manheim himself uses the term "mental defective"), and that Barnaby is in fact schizophrenic.¹³ Sir Russell Brain, however, claims that Barnaby is a fine specimen of a mentally defective (again) character (135). Thelma Grove, with the advantage of additional work carried out in the field of clinical psychology over the years, is able to proclaim Barnaby "the first autistic hero in English literature" (147). All of these criticisms assume the stable, transcendent reality of "schizophrenia," "mental deficiency," and "autism"; they reify these categories while failing to consider the discursive construction of intellectual disability, its predecessors, and related conditions.

However, not all responses to *Barnaby Rudge* discount his function, although most read his idiocy as a formal element of the literary text and within a literary tradition, rather than as a condition engaged with extra-literary contexts. Still, an overview of these readings is instructive as idiocy's function within a text is engaged with the production and reproduction of those other discourses that also constitute it. Thus, Iain Crawford's argument that Dickens draws on Wordsworth's earlier image but alters it so that Barnaby and his world are both

¹³ Interestingly enough, while Barnaby doesn't count as an idiot, despite the narrator's claims that he is, John Willet, the Maypole owner, a man of "profound obstinacy and slowness of apprehension," (BR 45) is defined by Manheim as "feeble-minded" (89), a category adopted in the nineteenth century to catch those whose apparent lack of intelligence, while not debilitating, made them undesirable participants in the social gene pool.

darker and more critically presented than that of Johnny Foy, and the idea of the "natural," linked as it is to the murderous rioters, becomes much more ambivalent, is interesting in that it suggests a variant application of idiocy. Indeed, Crawford notes, following Alan Bewell, that Dickens and Wordsworth "may be seen to be engaged in a broader shift in attitudes towards mental retardation which occurred throughout the nineteenth century" (41), although he does not develop this point any further.

Juliet McMaster also elaborates on Barnaby's status within literary tradition, arguing that he is a "holy fool" and using that point to lead into an analysis of Barnaby's dreams. In opposition to other Dickens works, she claims, Barnaby Rudge validates the "visionary" through the eventual accuracy of Barnaby's dreams and perceptions; McMaster links Dickens as imaginative novelist to Barnaby as visionary, and reads the story as an aesthetic argument about the "shadowy everyman's land that lies between conscious and unconscious regions of the mind" (15).

If Barnaby is an articulation of an individual unconsciousness, as McMaster's rather romantic reading suggests, he has also been frequently seen as representing in part the crowd subconscious, or an element of it, a point of view perhaps best expressed by Marcus. He argues that the three lead rioters, Barnaby, Hugh, and Ned Dennis the Hangman, represent a perverse Freudian trinity, with Dennis as a superego gone berserk, Hugh as a violent and brutal id, and Barnaby as a defective ego (211). However, Marcus also discusses Barnaby independently, as a "holy fool," and links him to King Lear's Tom O'Bedlam and Wordsworth's "Idiot Boy" (191). Barnaby's "innocence," though,

“alternates with generalized emotions of anger, vindictiveness, and violence,” creating behavior “whose consequences are indistinguishable from those which proceed from calculated wickedness” (192). Barnaby’s innocence is threatened because it can only survive “in a society informed by the moral authority of love” (194), and not the world of political machinations. This reading is also endorsed by Jerome Buckley, who, while arguing that Grip’s role in the novel is as an ironic chorus and not a devil (despite the raven’s claims to the contrary)¹⁴ , suggests that Barnaby serves as “counterpart or analogue to a madness far deeper than his own, the militant unreason that enlists his innocent and witless support” (33).

While Marcus and Buckley interpret Barnaby primarily as being representative of the folly and madness of the crowd, Magnet argues for Barnaby and Hugh¹⁵ as instances of “natural man,” figures who have not experienced the civilizing although repressive father and thus represent an undisciplined and violent unconscious. Magnet flirts with the claim that Barnaby is a projection of Dickens’ own Oedipal fantasies, and hence is “imbued with murderous, anticivilized Oedipal violence” (82), although he does not pursue it with vigour, noting only that he “cannot but note . . . the virtue of Freud’s theory here.”

Other writers, of course, are also aware of the Oedipal drama unfolding in the novel, and even in the character of Barnaby; Marcus, for instance, likens

14 The relation of Barnaby to Grip, his pet raven and familiar, deserves fuller investigation but lies outside the scope of my specific argument in this chapter.

15 These two characters are united consistently throughout the novel, both working at the Maypole, leading the riots, and mounting the scaffold together. Cf. Barbara Stuart, “The Centaur in Barnaby Rudge.”

Barnaby's meeting with his father on the highway to that of Laius and Oedipus, except, of course, in that Rudge Sr. survives the encounter (192). Michasiw also elaborates on Barnaby's place in the Oedipal drama of the novel, but recasts it in terms of Lacan rather than Freud. "[D]eprived of the naming function of the father," writes Michasiw, "Barnaby has no center about which to order his chaotic perceptions" (584). This center is only provided when Stagg, his father's emissary, "presents Barnaby with that perfect Victorian alias for the transcendental signifier - gold" Barnaby's energies then "coalesce" around this new object until he actually meets his father (584). Michasiw concludes his challenging and sophisticated reading of Barnaby by observing that "[i]n the absence of the primal paternal negative, everything may write upon Barnaby and does, leaving his identity as coherent as that of an overused, never-cleared bulletin board. In this he is a fair figure for the postmodern artist, but for Dickens he will not serve" (585).

Natalie McKnight also perceives something of the postmodern deconstructionist in Barnaby, noting that he is a conventional holy fool character, under-drawn by Dickens, who has the ability to go past the sign to the signified (a tension established early on, argues McKnight, by Dickens' distinction between the Maypole sign and the Maypole building in the opening paragraphs of the novel). Barnaby, perceiving things in a manner which is unlicensed by authority, represents the return of society's repressed. However, she complains, Barnaby essentially disappears toward the end of the novel (his final speech, McKnight notes, is before he is being taken off for execution; after his pardon, he remains silent). Barnaby becomes more "normal" at the end of the novel, cutting back on his wild ramblings and working harder to assist his mother, a circumstance that

leads McKnight to claim that Dickens has “decentered, minimalized and ultimately silenced” Barnaby in the novel that bears his name (91).

Giving Barnaby a voice, as McKnight desires, was never Dickens’ goal in writing the novel. Barnaby serves as a useful symbol both of the rioters’ folly, as the above critics note, and of the undisciplined subconscious, something located within the individual. Interestingly, even those critics who acknowledge and elaborate upon the political components of the novel identify Barnaby as a creature of the subconscious, which is accurate so far as it goes. Indeed, the character of Barnaby apparently lends itself especially well to readings of the psychological issues embedded in the novel. However, when critics discuss the novel’s political dimensions, Barnaby is usually abandoned and other characters and events analysed. Criticism of the character in the novel bearing his name thus constructs him as existing within a literary tradition, and perhaps even a psychological or philosophical discourse, but not in a political discourse. This is a mistake, because Barnaby, as an idiot, provides a useful metaphor for an unruly crowd deficient in proper leadership, which, notwithstanding the powerful “natural” metaphors (such as the sea) governing his description of the mob, is much how Dickens constructs the Gordon rioters. For Dickens, the rioters, while they may represent that element of the individual and social psyche not sufficiently governed, are also a civil disturbance. The rights and responsibilities of a citizen are foregrounded in the character of Gabriel Varden, who, as Magnet notes, “personifies the public, institutionalized social authority of the state,” but is also “a flesh-and-blood individual citizen, plentifully endowed with the civic virtues; and, in that capacity, he demonstrates to us the kind of civil courage required even from a ‘private’ individual” (155). The

crowd may be a social unconscious, but it is at the same time a group of people in need of proper government, the "just authority" whose dormancy the novel laments. This description is, significantly, also the form that Carlyle gives to the disaffected working men's groups that made up the Chartist movement.

Dickens' attitude toward Barnaby, and toward idiots in nonfictional writings, demonstrates his belief in the possibility of a harmonious, inclusive society. Although, as McKnight notes, Barnaby is "silenced" at the end of the novel, he is also incorporated into the post-riot community that grows around the new Maypole Inn, as managed by Joe Willet, and populated by the numerous children he has with Dolly, daughter of Gabriel Varden, the benevolent patriarch who also orchestrates Barnaby's pardon and saves him from the gallows. Indeed, the violence and horror of the riots have a positive effect on Barnaby, as Dickens describes it:

Some time elapsed before Barnaby got the better of the shock he had sustained, or regained his old health and gaiety. But he recovered by degrees: and although he could never separate his condemnation and escape from the idea of a terrific dream, he became, in other respects, more rational. Dating from the time of his recovery, he had a greater memory and a greater steadiness of purpose; but a dark cloud overhung his whole previous existence, and never cleared away.

He was not the less happy for this; for his love of freedom and interest in all that moved or grew, or had its elements, remained to him unimpaired. He lived with his mother on the Maypole farm, tending the poultry and the cattle, working in a garden of his own, and helping everywhere. He was known to every bird and beast about the place, and had a name for every one. Never was there a lighter-hearted husbandman, a creature more popular with young and old, a blither or more happy soul than Barnaby;

and though he was free to ramble where he would, he never quitted Her, but was forevermore her stay and comfort. (737)

McKnight interprets this passage as the minimalizing of Barnaby: he is stripped of much that makes him a unique fool, and “normalized” in the new community of the Maypole Inn. On the other hand, Barnaby’s ending prompts David D. Oberhelman to analyse his treatment in terms of John Conolly’s programs of “moral management,” suggesting that it is this program, applied by Mrs. Rudge to Barnaby, that regenerates him at the end of the novel.¹⁶ Barnaby’s absorption into the community at the story’s end is thus, for Oberhelman, an endorsement of a specific program of treatment for idiots and lunatics.¹⁷ But while Barnaby’s idiocy is seen in psychological and, for Oberhelman, therapeutic terms, it also has a political dimension overlooked by the novel’s commentators.

¹⁶ Oberhelman’s reading is one of the few that actually takes note of Mrs. Rudge; indeed, female characters get very short shrift from critics of the novel, except for Judith Flynn, who argues that Emma Haredale and Mrs. Rudge, as conventional images of Victorian womanhood, are uninteresting, and that Dolly Varden, Mrs. Varden, and Miggs are expressions of an undisciplined femininity which the narrative strives to contain. One would expect more attention to be paid to these characters. Reader-response critics could have a field day with Dolly Varden, who became something of a cult figure after the novel came out, initiating a new fashion in coquettish “Dolly Varden” hats and muffs. She is also perhaps the only character from literature to have a game fish named after her.

¹⁷ Unfortunately, “moral management” as described by Oberhelman, while used to treat lunatics, was rarely used on idiots in 1841, when the novel was published; indeed, John Abercrombie, whose work Dickens had read, claimed in 1830 that “Idiocy can seldom be the subject of either medical or moral treatment” (345). While Seguin’s work would dispute Abercrombie’s assertion (his first book, published in 1846, was entitled *Traitement moral, hygiène et éducation des idiots*), this theory was not yet available to Dickens. In order to work around this problem, Oberhelman claims that idiocy and lunacy were not carefully distinguished in the nineteenth century, which is incorrect. It is more likely that Dickens was aware that people put their intellectually disabled kin to work on simple chores, as was also common in workhouses and in those lunatic asylums that also kept idiots. Andrews notes that “within institutions, the tractability of the simple-minded and their ability to work” may have made them desirable inmates (78). Rushton also notes that, in London, “workhouse idiots were sometimes lodged and employed around the house” (“Idiocy” 57). According to Wright, an inability to contribute to the household economy was a primary motivator for institutionalization in the early years of the British idiot asylum (“Childlike” 131); asylums were at this point temporary educational institutions rather than permanent custodial ones, and one of their goals was to render the idiot child capable of assisting in the household economy.

David Roberts has shown that the 1830s and 1840s saw the publication of more than thirty books espousing "paternalist social ideas," as well as an "endless outpouring of novels, pamphlets, and articles that championed the same principles" (25). Many writers at this time, notes Asa Briggs, condemned the "social disintegration consequent upon the rise of factory industry": William Cobbet eulogizing the "chain of connection' between the rich and the poor," or Robert Southey attending to the "bond of attachment" (155). The disruption of traditional paternalist structures of relations between the social ranks stimulated a search for a sound theoretical basis for paternalism. Traditional British paternalism, Roberts claims, could be identified as "authoritarian, hierarchic, organic, and pluralistic" (2).¹⁸ As the term suggests, paternalism posits a parent-child relationship between the classes. The ruling classes existed - in an ideal case - as a benevolent father to those beneath them, to whom they had certain responsibilities, such as ensuring that their tenants and labourers were sheltered, fed, and capable of meeting their needs. In return, the lower classes owed respect and deference, as well as labour, to their superiors in station. Notes Peter Mandler, "these principles were easily sustainable in periods of agricultural expansion and . . . the vogues for labour discipline which periodically swept through the eighteenth century" (134), although, according to Roberts, paternalism waned in the the eighteenth century with the "constitutional victory of parliament over Stuart absolutism, the intellectual triumph of the Newtonian world picture, and the economic ascendancy of capitalism" (15).

However, the dramatic changes in nineteenth-century English society and

¹⁸ Roberts defines the term broadly here, as indeed, he argues, its practitioners would have defined it, had they thought to define it at all (2).

economy initiated philosophical struggles to construct a form of paternalism suitable to the conditions of the age (Roberts 57). Roberts suggests that this new paternalism was characterized by its oft-reiterated claim that property had its duties as well as its rights, an assertion which became the "hallmark" of paternalism as a social and increasingly political philosophy in the 1840s (4). "How an Aristocracy," asked Carlyle, "in these present times and circumstances, could, if never so well disposed, set about governing the Under Class? What should they do; endeavor or attempt to do? That is the question of questions . . ." ("Chartism" 249). However, the efficacy of paternalism, especially of the traditional sort, applied to the unprecedented challenges of the 1830s and 1840s was questionable.

Paternalists of the classic sort - parodied by Dickens in the country judge who condemns Barnaby, for instance - were vigorously opposed to the interference of legislation into what they conceived to be their realm of influence and power. Advocates for traditional paternalism did not believe that legislation could address the problems faced by society; instead, the problem was a question of moral soundness. The country simply needed better paternalists, men who were more committed to Christian values and more concerned about those beneath them in the social hierarchy: their tenants and their labourers. Increasingly, though, in urban centers, the rights and duties of paternalism were broadened to apply not just to aristocracy and gentry but also to captains of industry, the leaders of the new economy, who, argued Carlyle, existed in a paternalist relation with their employees. Carlyle's argument here is resolutely moral rather than political.

It would be a mistake to suggest that the actual motivations for paternalism were primarily theoretical, suggests Derek Fraser: the response of the state to social problems was very much "practical, pragmatic, unplanned, [and] *ad hoc*" (108).¹⁹ Some social and economic situations encouraged pragmatic solutions drawing on traditional paternalist, legislative reformist, and laissez-faire liberal positions to counter the problems being generated by industrialization and urbanization. These particular instances enabled reformers to appropriate the moral claim of paternalists while not threatening the laissez-faire liberals in their more meaningful strongholds, such as their domination over adult male labour. Roberts notes that legislation protecting the helpless received broad support from across the spectrum of political and economic positions. "[A] concrete image of the helpless, the weak, the poor, and the injured formed the rationale for government interference. Of all these images of the weak and the helpless, none was more poignant and affecting than that of the helpless child. It was the central image in all debates on factories, mines, and lace- and print-works bills just as it was on education and reformatory grants" (190). Helpless children had previously been incorporated as a political responsibility as the state acted *in loco parentis* for orphans as well as lunatics, idiots and prisoners, and had long done so as a part of common-law doctrine. "The paternal government intervened," observes Roberts, "not so much to maximize happiness or for reasons of private right or public honour, but where the weak and helpless of Her Majesty's children needed protection" (191). Fraser identifies early legislation to protect children in factories as one of the first initiatives of what

¹⁹ The primary motivations for the various laws and legislations that developed in response to the economic conditions of the industrial revolution are subject to much debate among historians; for some overviews of the issue, see Jenifer Hart's "Nineteenth-Century Social Reform: A Tory Interpretation of History," A. J. Taylor's Laissez-faire and State Intervention in Nineteenth-Century Britain, Peter Mandler's "The Making of the New Poor Law *Redivivus*," and Gareth Stedman Jones's Languages of Class.

would later coalesce into the welfare state (15-27).²⁰

Among those who needed the protection of a paternal state was, not surprisingly, the idiot. Idiocy as a condition was infantilized, with observers constructing idiots as ageless children, anomalies confounding notions of age and intellect, an association also implicit in the idea of an "innocent." Dickens describes Mrs. Rudge reminiscing about her son's infancy, when he was "old and elfin-like in face, but very dear to her, gazing on her with a wild and vacant eye" (250). When Barnaby becomes a man, his "childhood" is "complete and lasting" (250). Barnaby is forever "a relying, loving child to [Mary Rudge] - never growing old or cold at heart, but needing . . . care and duty in his manly strength as in his cradle-time" (195).²¹ David Wright suggests that this infantilization may have its roots in the fact that because "idiocy was identified in childhood," the "disability of the individual evoked strong allusions to the permanency of childlike dependence" ("Childlike" 124). In any event, it was enough of a phenomenon to become a cliché: constructed as a man-child, Barnaby would shock no-one.

By the early 1840s, word of new approaches to educating idiots, developed by Itard's pupil Édouard Séguin in France, was making its way to England. The result would be a new institution borne of the union between neo-paternalism and reformist optimism - the educational asylum for idiots - as well as a new

²⁰ A. J. Taylor argues, though, that "if the origins of the Welfare State are to be traced to the nineteenth century, the gestation period was long; in little over a decade the Edwardians accomplished more than the Victorians had achieved in the first two-thirds of the century" (56).

²¹ When Dickens describes his visit to Park House asylum in 1853, he refers to an "idiot old man of eight" and an "idiot child of thirteen . . . as to its bodily growth, a child of six; to its mental development, nothing" (497). As Roberts notes, the image of the helpless child gains support for projects such as asylums, and Dickens certainly endorses this strategy in his writings.

belief in the possible reclamation of these most "helpless" of individuals. In the June 4, 1853 edition of Household Words, Dickens wrote (with William Henry Wills, his assistant editor) a piece entitled "Idiots." In this article, Dickens argues that, although different parts of the world may perceive the idiot in slightly different ways, "the main idea of an idiot would be of a hopeless, irreclaimable, unimprovable being. And if he be further recalled as under restraint in a workhouse or lunatic asylum, he will still come upon the imagination as wallowing in the lowest depths of degradation and neglect: a miserable monster, whom nobody may put to death, but whom every one must wish dead, and be distressed to see alive." This portrayal seems greatly at odds with the character drawn in Barnaby Rudge, and indeed it turns out that Dickens is setting up a straw idiot. In the next paragraph he refutes this bleak image.

Until within a few years, it was generally assumed, even by those who were not given to hasty assumptions, that because an idiot was, either wholly or in part, deficient in certain senses and instincts necessary, in combination with others, to the due performance of the ordinary functions of life - and because those senses and instincts could not be supplied - therefore nothing could be done for him, and he must always remain an object of pitiable isolation. But a closer study of the subject has now demonstrated that the cultivation of such senses and instincts as the idiot is seen to possess, will, besides frequently developing others that are latent in him but obscured, so brighten those glimmering lights, as immensely to improve his condition, both with reference to himself and to society. Consequently there is no greater justification for abandoning him, in his degree, than for abandoning any other human creature.

The article continues by delineating the manner in which idiots can be improved, and provides anecdotal evidence based on the works of various writers, including John Abercrombie's Inquiries Concerning the Intellectual

Powers and the Investigation of Truth, but more directly upon visits to Park House Asylum, Highgate, opened in 1847 by Dickens' friend, Dr. John Conolly.²² Dickens praises the institution wholeheartedly, saying it deserves "all encouragement and support" and calling it "truly humane." He concludes his eulogium to the philanthropic asylum with the wish that one may come, "through the instrumentality of these establishments, to see the day, before long, when the pauper idiot will be similarly provided for, at the public expense." Dickens' wish is a clear endorsement of the neo-paternalist projects that flourished in Victorian England; his desire to see them invested with legislative authority presages the development of what we now know as the welfare state.²³ Indeed, the 1845 Asylums Act (which provided a legal interpretation of idiocy as a form of insanity) required all counties to build asylums, although by 1850 only sixteen of 38 had done so, the others tightening the definitions of lunacy and relegating the idiots and harmless lunatics to workhouses (Roberts, 144). Clearly, however, Dickens was also calling for a sharper legislative distinction between the needs of lunatics and idiots, noting that "in the Insane certain faculties which once existed have become obliterated or impaired; and

²² Dickens also planned to visit its sister institution, Essex Hall Asylum, near Colchester, but apparently this visit never took place (Stone 489).

²³ Dickens' interest in what I am terming neo-paternalism - the union of traditional paternalist values with philanthropic enterprises and, ideally, legislative reform - does not suggest that he endorsed paternalism in its traditional forms. Roberts, primarily referring to Dickens' later works, says his novels "had an added dimension to them that led them away from paternalism and toward humanitarianism, and away from deference and toward rebellion" (94). This assertion seems less true of Barnaby Rudge, however. Dickens himself expressed a profound antipathy toward Sir Robert Peel's conservative government, which embodied traditional paternalist attitudes and values (Ackroyd 327).

that, in Idiots, they either never existed or existed imperfectly.”²⁴

That philanthropic initiatives to assist idiots, lunatics and other helpless members of society could garner broad support from the population and the endorsement of royalty testifies to the belief in neo-paternalist and “interventionist” solutions. Seven years after the publication of Barnaby Rudge, the first major English institution for idiots opened. Highgate Asylum for Idiots first accepted patients in April 1848 (Gelband 63).²⁵ By 1850, the building was full and a sister institution, Essex Hall, Colchester, was established. A new building, which was to become the Earlswood Asylum, also known as the National Asylum for Idiots, was under construction by 1853 (Gelband 64). These initiatives were not exercises in traditional British paternalism, although they were primarily philanthropic enterprises. Motivated by feelings of religious duty and social responsibility, the asylum proponents express the growing Victorian impulse to support those deemed worthy of assistance. Dickens insistently argued that this sense of responsibility should be extended from philanthropic endeavours to state intervention in the development of institutions to support the less fortunate of society.

24 The Idiocy Act of 1886 addressed this difference, although its influence was slight, being absorbed as it was in the Lunacy Act of 1890. The political conflation of idiocy with lunacy in these bills did not reflect ideas about the two conditions, which were both professionally and popularly conceived of as distinct, but rather was a formulation reflecting bureaucratic needs (Gelband 32-33). Many critics, such as Oberhelman and Magnet, seem to be misled by this legal conflation to believe that the Victorians did not distinguish between the two states. While there was certainly some overlap in qualities attributed to the two conditions, idiocy and lunacy conjured distinct images for the Victorians.

25 In fact, the first English institution specifically for people with intellectual disabilities was Rock Hall House School, Bath, founded by two sisters named White in 1846. It began with four students and never exceeded thirty. The pedagogy emphasized literacy and arithmetic skills, religion and “moral culture.” The school eventually became the Magdalen Hospital School (Barrett 29).

Dickens' concern with the betterment of idiots in society was paralleled by his attitude toward general education. In an April 1848 manuscript, "Ignorance and Crime," he responds to statistics on London crime from 1831-1847. "One extraordinary feature of the tables," he notes, "is the immense number of people who have no trade or occupation" (108); he goes on to observe the high rates of illiteracy which seems to accompany these numbers. "This state of mental comparison is what has been commonly called 'education' in England for a good many years. And that ill-used word might, quite as reasonably, be employed to express a teapot" (108). He expands his point:

The comfortable conviction that a parrot acquaintance with the Church Catechism and the Commandments is enough shoe-leather for poor pilgrims by the Slough of Despond, sufficient armour against the Giants Slay-Good and Despair, and a sort of parliamentary train for third-class passengers to the beautiful Gate of the City, must be pulled up by the roots, as its growth will overshadow this land. Side by side with Crime, Disease, and Misery in England, Ignorance is always brooding, and is always certain to be found. (109)

The solution, according to Dickens, involves

Schools of Industry, schools where the simple knowledge learned from books is made pointedly *useful*, and immediately applicable to the duties and business of life, directly conducive to order, cleanliness, punctuality, and economy - schools where the sublime lessons of the New Testament are made the superstructure to be reared, enduringly, on such foundations . . . - schools on such principles, deep as the lowest depth of Society, and leaving none of its dregs untouched, are the only means of removing the danger that beset us in this nineteenth century of our Lord. (109)

Again, Dickens' answer to a social problem takes the form of a solid endorsement of a type of neo-paternalist project, in which Society, through the authority of the government, behaves responsibly to its lowest members, and they repay Society with their allegiance and obedience, much as traditional paternalism had worked in the seventeenth century.²⁶ The helplessness of the deserving poor, the ignorant, and the intellectually disabled in society authorize the new approaches to paternalism advocated by Dickens, and provide its fullest justification.

Dickens' response to the Chartist threats of the 1830s, threats which may have stimulated him to write about the Gordon Riots and the burning of Newgate in Barnaby Rudge, are perhaps best seen in the light of his belief in a benevolent paternal state. That Dickens felt ambivalence about the Chartists is generally assumed. No doubt he sympathized with some of their objectives; indeed, portions of Nicholas Nickleby were excerpted in a Chartist magazine, the Penny Gazette of Variety and Amusement (Ackroyd 326). But the Chartist affiliate organization called the Protestant Association, formed in 1839 as a direct imitation of Lord George Gordon's association of 1780 (Ackroyd 326), and the fringe Chartists' threats of violence and revolution appalled Dickens, as implied by his portrayal of the destructive mob in Barnaby Rudge.

Gabriel Varden stands alone in the novel as a proper patriarch, one who defies

²⁶ Thirty years later, people would read a similar problem as a sign of growing moral and intellectual degeneracy, a phenomenon that will be treated more fully in Chapter 6. Dickens' interest in the institutions erected by the state for its own protection and for the aid of the helpless is clearly evident in American Notes, based on an 1842 voyage he undertook immediately after finishing Barnaby Rudge. Interestingly, while in the United States, Dickens met Samuel Gridley Howe, whose work as director of the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind involved training the blind, deaf and dumb prodigy Laura Bridgman (79-94). Howe was to found the Massachusetts School for the Feeble-Minded in 1848.

the rioters when they abduct him to open the locks at Newgate. He believes in order and authority tempered with generosity and mercy, and is clearly the tale's moral center. Varden reconciles Edward Chester and Haredale, facilitating Emma Haredale's marriage; he supports Joe Willet's love for his daughter Dolly, although he is remarkably obtuse about recognizing their mutual interest. Varden makes possible that "society informed by the moral authority of love" which enables Barnaby's innocence "to have the power of grace" (Marcus 194). The locksmith guarding the sanctity of authority is tempered by the benevolent patriarch, the model of a good paternal government.

Barnaby himself is an obvious subject for paternal guidance - one who cannot choose for himself because he simply hasn't the capacity. In this sense, as the eternal child that he is, Barnaby becomes the perfect symbol of a people needing good government (and definitely needing governing). Barnaby is that element of the crowd that is led into folly; he is the innocent incapable of knowing the consequences of his actions, and thus requiring a gentle but firm guiding hand. He is the helpless poor driven to desperation, the ignorant man exploited. He is, in his idiocy, the perfect justification for a new political program to assist the helpless.

However, Barnaby's activities with the rioters also foreshadow the coming anxiety over intellectual disability in society. Dickens found it possible to see Barnaby as an innocent, albeit one loaded with political significance and in need of caring government. A generation later, after the writings of Darwin and the growth of what Stedman Jones identifies as "Outcast London," the

presumed innocence of the idiot becomes problematic as idiocy is also feared as a sign of degeneration not only within the individual but also threatening the social body. Barnaby's plight would stimulate Dickens to call for educational reforms and asylums. In the latter years of the century, though, the same image would prompt fears of degeneration. The next two chapters examine the process of cultural reproduction of the idea of the idiot as both innocent and degenerate.

5. The Holy Fool Diminished: Pitying the Innocent

For much of the nineteenth century, people with intellectual disabilities lived in their home communities, as members of a family or a neighbourhood, although their status was still quite marginal. It is not surprising that Barnaby Rudge is incorporated into the new Maypole community at the end of the novel bearing his name; such was not an unusual fate for idiots in the 1840s.¹ But in the mid-nineteenth century, a new phenomenon arose to displace people with intellectual disabilities from this position: the idiots' asylum. The first major British asylum, Highgate, later the National Asylum for Idiots, opened in 1848; parents sought to have their child accepted at the asylum, which would then provide education in useful skills that could enable the child to contribute to the family economy before the child returned to his or her home. These lofty educational aims served to guide asylum admissions and activities for some years after their initial founding. Much of the propaganda that accompanied asylums in their quest to educate idiots drew explicitly upon the idea of the holy innocent, in what Michael Barrett calls the "aristo-ecclesiastical" rationale for asylum-building. This rationale builds upon traditional Tory notions of paternalism in arguing that it was the responsibility of the upper classes and established institutions such as the Church of England to ensure the well-being

¹ Even later in the century, of course, there are a number of representations of people with intellectual disabilities incorporated into (usually rural) communities, where, although they are not necessarily "equals" to their fellows, they do occupy an acknowledged social place; examples include Silly Jim in George Eliot's Scenes of Clerical Life (1858) and Thomas Leaf in Thomas Hardy's Under the Greenwood Tree (1872). Leaf is referred to as "silly by nature," although as Reuben Dewy notes when introducing Leaf to the Vicar, "he's a' excellent treble, and so we keep him on." He praises Leaf further: "He's very clever for a silly chap, good-now, sir. You never knowed a young feller keep his smock-frocks so clane; very honest too. His ghashty looks is all there is against en, poor feller; but then, we can't help our looks, you know, sir" (82-3).

of the less fortunate, such as people with intellectual disabilities.² In sum: these “innocents,” God’s favoured “children,” should not be neglected by man, but should rather have their needs met by those who stood in the position of guardians of British society and culture. Traditional paternalism thus was merged with new ideas of philanthropy and, in some instances, the paternal government to create a system for improving the lot of people with intellectual disabilities.

The propaganda used to garner support for the new institutions drew upon the long-established notion of the “holy innocent,” in which the person with an intellectual disability is constructed as a divinely-favoured being incapable of sinning and thus is ensured of salvation, a belief which has parallels in laws restricting the responsibility and culpability of people with intellectual disabilities.³ The notion of the innocent, as writers such as Enid Welsford and Paul V. A. Williams have pointed out, is historically linked with that of the “holy fool,” and is thus marked by a tension between the idea of a pure and innocent figure, a helpless being requiring compassion, and one who subverts authority and order. Williams also notes the relation between the European fool figure and the North American Indian trickster, identifying them as “if not exactly the

² Barrett’s use of the term “aristo-ecclesiastical” is somewhat problematic in light of evidence such as David Wright’s that the families were perhaps the leading participants in the diagnosis, labeling and institutionalization of people with intellectual disabilities. Barrett’s term is accurate in its designation of the philanthropic prime movers of the asylum movement, but risks obscuring the significant involvement of other strata of society.

³ No less an authority than Édouard Séguin claimed that the belief that people with intellectual disabilities were “innocents” favoured by God was one of the obstacles standing in the way of education for idiots (“Review: Traitement” 3).

same animal, . . . belonging to the same species" (Williams 1).⁴ This chapter will trace the relation of the trickster-like element of the holy fool to that of holy innocent in Victorian representations of idiocy, highlighting a shift in dominant representational strategies that occurred in the 1850s and 1860s, after the establishment of educational institutions for people with intellectual disabilities. With the development of asylums and the propagation of new attitudes toward intellectual disability, the tension between the figure of the trickster and the innocent "holy fool" created a split in notions of intellectual disability.⁵

A brief history of the idea of the holy fool, a term which has long carried metaphorical significance in the Christian tradition, may be helpful. John Saward traces the first articulations of the idea to St. Paul, who, in his first epistle to the Corinthians, writes ". . . I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle of unto the world, and to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honorable, but we are despised" (1 Cor 4:9-10). The apostles, in their state of poverty and persecution, commit the foolish act of renouncing worldly power and wealth in preaching the word of Christ, but in so doing reveal something greater: faith in God promising redemption. In Paul's formulation, folly is a "relative concept" which "only has meaning in distinction from some kind of wisdom" (Saward 3), whose foundation folly then serves to undermine. Folly in this sense is subversive.

⁴ C. G. Jung also notes the similarities of trickster and fool figures, especially in medieval fool ceremonies. The fool/trickster is for Jung a shadow figure, "both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being, whose chief and most alarming characteristic is his unconsciousness" (203).

⁵ Peter Rushton has noted that while in law people were defined as "idiots," "the language of petitioners [for relief in support of idiots] showed much greater variety in terms, possibly reflecting a higher sensitivity or tact. The most commonly used alternative term was 'innocent' . . ." ("Idiocy" 53).

Erasmus exploits the notion of natural folly (as intellectual disability was often known in the early modern period) to develop social and philosophical critiques. In his The Praise of Folly, written in 1509, the narrator, Stultitia, or Folly herself, asks “doesn’t the happiest group of people comprise those popularly called idiots, fools, nitwits, simpletons, all splendid names to my way of thinking?” (116). Not only are they freed from both the mundane and the spiritual crises facing others, due to their “lack of reasoning power,” they cannot even sin (117). Further, Stultitia notes, “they are indeed under the protection of the gods, and most of all, under mine; and for this reason they are rightly held in honour by all” (117). She then identifies one more important characteristic of the fool: “They’re the only ones who speak frankly and tell the truth,” which has a “genuine power to please if it manages not to give offense, but this is something the gods have granted only to fools” (118-9). Erasmus uses the image of the fool - and of Stultitia, the goddess of Folly - to make the same claims for speaking truth without offense, although, in true fool-fashion, the rhetorical strategy “propounds an insoluble dilemma of permanent uncertainty,” as Walter Kaiser points out: “Stultitia says that what seem to be her absurdities are actually truths. Yet, because Stultitia says it, it may not be so, since the truth of Stultitia may be foolishness” (36-37).

Thus, the apparent and presumed innocence of people with intellectual disabilities becomes a means for social critique, a strategy well-entrenched in tradition. As Michel Foucault observes of the late middle ages, “While the man of reason and wisdom perceives only fragmentary and all the more unnerving images of [wisdom], the Fool bears it intact as an unbroken sphere: that crystal

ball which for all others is empty is in *his* eyes filled with the density of an invisible knowledge" (Madness 22). [italics Foucault] In medieval and early modern Europe and England, popular festivals employed the image of the "natural fool" in parodying authority, thus providing Erasmus with a handy source for his own critique of knowledge and ethics in The Praise of Folly. These "fool-festivals" both subverted and affirmed authority, as Mikhail Bakhtin has argued with respect to the carnivalesque in literature, and as historians such as Natalie Zemon Davis and Sandra Billington have shown in their studies of charivari, folly and festivals. Ultimately, though, the "wisdom of fools" was a "forbidden wisdom" that "presages both the reign of Satan and the end of the world; ultimate bliss and supreme punishment; omnipotence on earth and the infernal fall" (Foucault Madness 22). The literary image of the holy fool thus evoked awe and fear, even if the intellectually disabled individual in person did not.

A different and considerably less subversive version of the Christian fool is portrayed in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress: Mr. Feeble-mind, who describes himself as "a man of no strength at all of Body, nor yet of Mind, but would, if I could, tho' I can but crawl, spend my Life in the Pilgrim's way" (317). Assisted by Mr. Great-heart and Mr. Ready-to-halt, Mr. Feeble-mind succeeds in the pilgrimage to meet his master; he is far more innocent than trickster, although he requires assistance rather than pity, a more significant motive in the Victorian

era.⁶

Certainly, as this overview suggests, the figure of the holy fool encompasses both the innocent and the trickster. This association is still evident in early and mid-nineteenth-century literature, from the idiosyncrasies of David Gellatley in Waverley, to the mild and ultimately productive indiscretions of Mr. Dick in David Copperfield (referred to in Chapter 3) and the fateful persistence of Jacob in George Eliot's Brother Jacob. These trickster-innocent characters perform symbolic functions different from those of the version of the innocent used by the asylum-building apologists, although the two are certainly not incompatible and the literary conceit of the trickster was occasionally brought into play in propaganda for asylums.

Over the Victorian era the idea of the Christian "innocent" becomes separated from that of the trickster. However, for much of the nineteenth century, the idea of the trickster-like holy fool still allowed the possibility of moral and political critique. Sir Walter Scott's novel of Jacobite rebellion, Waverley, provides a good example.

Waverley, published in 1814, tells the story of young Edward Waverley's involvement in the Jacobite rebellion of the mid-1700s. It also features a simple-minded retainer, David Gellatley, who is used as a messenger and general

⁶ A comparison can be made between Bunyan's Mr. Feeble-mind and Mr. Great-heart and Charles Dickens' Smike and Nicholas in Nicholas Nickleby: like Bunyan's characters, one of Dickens' characters assists the other. Nicholas confronts evils with Smike and allows Smike to reach a peaceful end to his journey. However, Smike elicits pity in a way that Mr. Feeble-mind does not. This difference may be in part due to the differing significance of intellectual disability, although it is also certainly a consequence of the different literary genres in which Bunyan and Dickens were working.

servant on the Baron of Bradwardine's estate. David first seems to Edward, and the narrator, as being a melange of mental difference:

It was apparently neither idiocy not insanity that gave that wild, unsettled, irregular expression to a face which naturally was rather handsome, but something that resembled a compound of both, where the simplicity of the fool was mixed with the extravagance of a crazed imagination. (82)

Edward likens David to "one of Shakespeare's roynish clowns," observing to himself that "wise men have been led by fools" (83). Later in the novel, Scott describes Jane Gellatley's love for her son by quoting Wordsworth's lines "Him whom she loved, her idiot boy" (439). David is a character drawn explicitly from literary tradition.⁷ However, in addition to being constructed from the works of previous writers, David also serves to foreground the historical and political specificity of the world of the novel.

In his first appearance in the story, David is designated "an innocent" by the family butler, who observes that "there is one such in almost every town in the country" (84). Scott ends the chapter describing Waverley's arrival in Scotland by noting that "in Scotland, a single house was called a *town*, and a natural fool an *innocent*." (85). Ina Ferris has argued that the "distinctiveness and relativity of signifying systems" denoted by this passage marks for Waverley and the reader a specific space that is "not simply ethical but historical and cultural" (103). In short, David - or the term used to define him - becomes a

⁷ David is also associated, although less explicitly, with Will Somers, Henry VIII's court jester; like Somers, David sleeps with his masters hounds and is even linked with them at the end of the story, when the Baron reflects on the "gratitude o' thae dumb brutes, and of that puir innocent," observing that he is "obliged to Colonel Talbot for putting my hounds into such condition, and likewise for puir Davie" (484). Will Somers was a well-known figure appearing in various early modern texts. See, for instance, Samuel Rowley's play When You See Me, You Know Me (1604) and Robert Armin's much republished jest-book Foole Upon Foole (1600).

distinguishing feature of the particular world described by Scott.⁸ A similar point is made by J. Th. Leerssen in his study of Scott's use of dialect in the novel. The characters that speak in dialect - the Jacobite rebels and the Gellatleys - belong not just to Scotland but to a failed and discredited political enterprise. The use of dialect renders these characters more foreign and primitive to a British readership; that those notable Jacobite sympathizers who are successfully integrated into the British culture at the end of the novel either do not speak in dialect or speak with a limited dialect further underlines the role speech plays in creating an "other." David Gellatley, the innocent, becomes for *Waverley* the protagonist, as well as for readers of the novel, the first explicit marker of Scottish difference, both by the "peculiarity of his dialect" (Scott 83) and by his intellectual difference.⁹

For all his symbolic importance, David reappears only sporadically in the

⁸ In Lady Sydney Morgan's *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* (1827), a story of Irish subjection, Robin, the porter of O'Brien manor, is described as "one whose intellect had only been awakened to extortion, and whom indigence had almost stultified to idiotism" (Vol. 1, 265). He is barely communicative and is impoverished-looking, despite (or perhaps because of) his decrepit livery. Like David Gellatley, Robin serves to provide "local colour" for the novel, creating a particular image of "Ireland" for Morgan's readers. Later, when O'Brien, Robin's master's son and the novel's protagonist, returns home, he is "disgusted" by Robin, who doesn't seem to even recognize him. (Vol. 2, 196). Robin's mother is described as being "scarcely more human" than her son (Vol. 2, 195) - conforming to the pattern that male "idiot" characters are associated with their mothers. Robin seems to be representative of the degenerated state of the native Irish (as well as the impoverished Irish aristocracy). His appearances are brief, only when O'Brien returns to his ancestral home. Interestingly, at another point in the novel, the narrator, in describing the English in Dublin, refers to a "feeble race of imbecile fanatics" (Vol. 2, 150). According to Ferris, reviewers of Morgan's work generally commended her "mimetic power" in delineating "Irish scenery and Irish manners" (46), while decrying what they saw as "high-strung, overwrought writing" (47) and her suspicious political sympathies. One cannot help but suspect that this criticism condones her description of the Irish servants while condemning that of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy.

⁹ Dialect versions of English were historically perceived as lesser or more primitive forms of the language; David Gellatley's speech is thus not only Scottish but is less developed and sophisticated than the standard English in which Scott writes his novel. This use of language parallels later notions of phylogeny and recapitulation in connection with intellectual disability: in this case, the idiot character speaks a less evolved language, while later in the century, the same image will recall a less evolved race.

novel¹⁰ - for instance, he appears in motley dress when the Baron of Bradwardine is hiding in exile during the Jacobite rebellion. Edward finds David wandering the Bradwardine estate after it has been pillaged by English troops, and follows the "poor simpleton" (435) who, in answer to Edward's question about the fate of the inhabitants of the estate (Edward "forgetting the incapacity of Davie to hold any connected discourse"), responds that they are all "A' dead and gane" (436). David then leads Edward to the Baron's hideout, the Baron being gone, but not dead after all. Yet David's deceit is not without reason, according to Jane, his mother, who asserts to Edward that "Davie's no sae silly as folk tak him for.... He wadna hae brought you here unless he had kend ye was a friend to his Honour" (439). David's cunning duplicity marks him clearly as a trickster as well as an innocent.

This trickster function is even more explicitly asserted when Jane credits her son with saving the Baron, substituting himself for his master when the Baron was being pursued by English soldiers:

Davie was in the wood, and heard the tulzie, and he, just out o' his ain head, got up the auld grey mare that his Honour had flung off him to gang the faster, and he came out o' the very same bit o' the wood, majoring and looking about sae like his Honour, that [the soldiers] were clean beguiled, and thought they had letten aff their gun at crack-brained Sawney, as they ca'd him; and they gae me saxpence, and twa saumon fish, to say naething about it. - Na, na; Davie's no just like other folk, puir fallow; but he's no sae silly as folk tak him for. (440)

David straddles two literary worlds: he is a character in a historical realist novel,

¹⁰ Despite his infrequent appearances, Ferris notes that Gellatley was a "particular favorite of the reviewers" (87).

and thus is made to help populate a realistic world; and he is a stock figure of literary tradition, the natural fool, the innocent trickster, who, in his odd moments of inspiration, both deceives and enlightens those around him. David Gellatley is a somewhat secular version of the innocent, functioning primarily in a political context, as a participant in a rebellion. However, the term "innocent" necessarily invokes a Christian cosmology, and indeed the fact that David, his master the Baron of Bradwardine, and Edward Waverley are all eventually pardoned bespeaks a political analogy to the belief that innocents cannot sin. Waverley, like David (and like Barnaby Rudge in Dickens' novel almost thirty years later), is also an innocent caught in a struggle that he does not understand and thus misinterprets. And like David, he is spared a harsh judgment, coming to a happy end by marrying the Baron's daughter Rose.

The figure of the innocent trickster was still available to writers later in the century, and indeed never fully disappears, although it displays considerably less vigour in George Eliot's 1860 novella, Brother Jacob. Jacob Faux is the innocent who unintentionally reveals his brother David as a low schemer and charlatan. David is a confectioner who uses candy to deceive his brother when he stealing from his parents' savings. After disappearing to America, David returns to another part of England, sets up a new business under the name of Edward Freely, and succeeds in becoming engaged to the daughter of one of the better merchant families in town. He resumes contact with his family when they advertise for him, offering a share of his inheritance if he reappears. But his return also reacquaints him with Jacob, who discovers the new confectioner shop and appears as David's wedding arrangements are being made. Jacob, speaking an English that recalls David Gellatley's primitive dialect, claims that

Edward is in fact his brother "Zavy come back from z'Indies" (46) which greatly disturbs the party, who note Freely's resemblance to Jacob. Eventually the eldest brother Jonathan appears to fetch Jacob home; he confirms the story. The wedding is canceled, and Edward Freely leaves Grimworth to search his fortune elsewhere. Concludes the narrator of her tale, "we see in it, I think, an admirable instance of the unexpected forms in which the great Nemesis hides herself" (55).

Jacob's innocence is critical to his success as a nemesis (also, interestingly, a female figure). His desire for candy, and consequent love for David, growing however from the confectioner's plan to use his art to deceive his brother, creates an ironic situation where the fool is an unwitting trickster, unlike Scott's actively deceptive character. Jacob reveals David to the world in all his unsuccessful and petty machinations. Eliot removes Jacob from an overtly Christian context in denoting him a force of the "great Nemesis . . . herself"; however, Jacob still functions solidly within the tradition of the innocent trickster.

But the union of the trickster with the innocent was becoming harder to maintain (indeed, Eliot's story has lingered at the margins of her corpus), especially with the proliferation of idiot asylums through the 1850s. Daniel Defoe argued in his 1697 Essay Upon Projects that "fools" required their own asylums, but his proposed "fool-house" was never built. Instead, if parents could not support their disabled offspring, people with intellectual disabilities lived on the charity of the parish, often in a workhouse with others of the homeless poor. Reports on workhouse conditions by Poor Law commissioners frequently noted the

presence of "one or two idiots" in addition to other inmates (Crowther 25).¹¹ Similarly, Janet Saunders notes that "in 1849 the Poor Law Board had expressly stated that the weak-minded pauper must either be classed as a lunatic and treated as such, or not a lunatic and therefore requiring no special treatment in the general workhouse" (283). The population of lunatic asylums would occasionally include idiots (Pinel saw idiocy as a category of insanity), but for the most part, they were actively excluded from these institutions, in part because they were thought "incurable" and in part because they were rarely considered a threat (Rushton "Lunacy" 40; Allderidge 158).¹²

But by the 1840s, news from Europe suggested that idiots could in fact be educated and integrated into society. John Conolly, at the time Superintendent of the Hanwell Lunatic Asylum, visited Édouard Séguin's educational facilities for people with intellectual disabilities at the Bicêtre in Paris and was impressed by what he saw, writing that "nothing more extraordinary can well be imagined. . . It is difficult to avoid falling into the language of enthusiasm on beholding such an apparent miracle. . . ." (qtd. in Gelband 56). Samuel Gaskell, medical superintendent of the Lancaster Asylum for lunatics, also wrote in glowing terms of his visit to the Bicêtre for Chamber's Edinburgh Journal. Meanwhile, Johann Jacob Guggenbühl's school for cretins, founded in 1841 on Abendberg, a

¹¹ Crowther quotes one inspector who reported: "J.T. an idiot, 44 lives alone - earns, and does, and is, nothing. Receives 2s 6d and one loaf. (Qn. how does she live? Relieving officer replies, that he 'has no idea'.)" (219). Saunders notes that people with intellectual disabilities were useful in workhouses as they provided able bodies for labour, which was especially beneficial to workhouse administrators as the workhouses became more and more akin to infirmaries (283-4)

¹² Families with money could place their intellectually disabled members with other families who would be paid for their upkeep. George Austen, Jane's brother ten years her senior, was placed (along with his intellectually disabled uncle, Thomas Leigh) with the Culham family in a nearby village (Tomalin 25) where he lived until 1838; his death certificate gave his occupation as "Gentleman" (8). Tomalin suggests that George's distance from his family and his disability made him an "unmentionable" for the other Austens (192).

mountain in the Swiss Alps, was also drawing the attention of a number of English physicians and philanthropists. One visitor, William Twining, wrote enthusiastically of Guggenbühl's work in "Some Accounts of Cretinism and the Institution for its Cure on the Abendberg" in 1843. The Reverend Andrew Reed also visited Guggenbühl's school before establishing the Asylum for Idiots at Park House, Highgate, also known as the National Asylum for Idiots and the largest institution of its kind in the country. The school also acquired numerous English sponsors (Gelband 48-49). Unfortunately, Guggenbühl's reputation did not outlive his fame; by 1859, tales of neglect and fraud had been confirmed; only one-third of the school's pupils were actually cretins, and contrary to claims, none had ever been cured, the tremendous success stories actually referring to normal children (Gelband 49).

Guggenbühl's work did have repercussions in England, though. In addition to the influence it exercised on Reed, the first British asylum, Rock Hall House School in Bath, was founded in 1846 by two sisters named White who had been motivated by Twining's account of the school on Abendberg. The Bath school was anomalous in that it remained small, beginning with four students and never having more than thirty; however, like later, larger institutions, the school's pedagogical emphasis lay not only on reading, writing and arithmetic but also on developing religious knowledge and "moral culture" (Barrett 29).

Further development followed quickly. Reed, who established a reputation as a philanthropist in the mid-1830s with his work building orphanages, founded the Asylum for Idiots in 1847, the first pupils being admitted in 1848 (Gelband 61-63). The institution expanded to include a "sister" asylum at Essex in 1850, and

in 1852, due to further overcrowding, purchased the site upon which the Earlswood Asylum was erected; the Prince Consort laid the first stone in 1853, and the asylum opened in 1855 (Gelband 105; Wright). The asylum building boom was well underway.

There is some contention over the impetus behind asylum-building. The newest orthodoxy is the "social control" theory, its most notable English proponent being Andrew Scull, whose Museums of Madness develops in an English context the themes of confinement and moral control first explored by Michel Foucault in Madness and Civilization. Gelband and Barrett develop Scull's hypothesis that asylums served primarily as a means of social control, although David Wright argues in his dissertation on the Earlswood institution that the "social control" theory does not take into account the complex reasons that people would be committed to these asylums (usually by families who could not support them) nor the fact that the institutions were originally committed to the education of individuals and insisted upon their eventual return to their family and community, his arguments recalling similar points made by Michael Ignatieff and Mark Finnane critiquing the notion of "total institutions" in the Victorian era, as well as Tyor and Zainaldin's study of the Massachusetts School for the Feeble-Minded. Wright's conviction that Benthamite notions of social control were not a primary factor in initiating asylums provides an important corrective to what can become a reductionist view of a complex situation. While social control was definitely the most significant long-term consequence of asylums, the original motivation seems to have been a melange of factors, including control but also being driven by the optimistic belief that education "reclaimed" idiots ("Idiot Asylums" 57) and integrated them

into the social and economic life of the nation and by the desire for some families to remove troublesome or expensive relatives from their care and into an institution.

But garnering public and political support for the asylums and their attempt to extend the benefits of education and rational thought - or, in the words of some writers, raising the inmates "to the level of humanity" ("Idiot Asylums" 70) - also involved a vigorous rearticulation of the image of the "innocent" and his relation to society. The publicity campaign made the idiot the object less of wonder and fear, key components in the notion of the holy fool or trickster-innocent, the "forbidden wisdom" referred to by Foucault, and more an object of pity and charity.

The attempt to reduce idiocy to innocence has a related although seemingly opposite consequence. As James Kincaid notes in his work on the eroticization of the child in Victorian culture, "purity . . . provides just the opening a sexualizing tendency requires; it is the necessary condition for . . . erotic operations . . ." (13). Innocence becomes the absence of meaning, a negation of significance. Like the child, the idiot, constructed as innocent, becomes an empty space where others can perceive whatever they see fit or appropriate. Of course, the idea of idiocy has long provided a place for viewers to impose their own meaning; however, previously idiocy existed in a state of ideological dormancy and the relative balance achieved among differing semiotic meanings of the condition meant that it attracted little attention. The asylum proponents were the first to argue publicly and aggressively for the priority of this one interpretation of the condition.

However, like the eroticized Victorian child described by Kincaid, the idiot made fully innocent and childlike also invited a form of sexual typecasting, although unlike the child, the idiot in himself - or, more frequently as the century wore on, herself - is cast as degenerate and threatening. His (or her) innocence becomes the consequence of the depravity of others, the sad outcome of immoral indulgences. This issue will be explored more fully in the following chapter; here, we will investigate the parameters of the innocence that defines the idiot in asylum literature.¹³

In 1846, John Conolly, one of the founders of the highgate Asylum, was soliciting public support for asylums. One speech included the following appeal.

It is for the poor, poor idiot we plead -- for the idiot, the lowest of all the objects of Christian sympathy, -- for the idiot, the most needing charity, and for whom charity has done nothing. We ask that his soul may be disimprisoned; that he may look forth from the body with meaning and intelligence on a world full of expression; that he may, as a fellow, discourse with his fellows; that he may cease to be a burden to society, and become a blessing; that he may be better qualified to know his Maker, and look beyond our present imperfect modes of being to perfected life in a glorious and everlasting future. (qtd in Barrett, 107)

The idea that the poor idiot is deserving of Christian charity is not new, but the manner in which Conolly restructures the idiot's relationship to divinity (as well as to society) is indicative of a new way of thinking about idiocy in the mid-

¹³ The relation between idiocy, sexuality and degeneracy seems relatively recent. Peter Rushton observes of the period before 1800 that "Interestingly, there are no accounts of a dangerously uncontrolled sexual appetite, even among mature and adult victims. Some literary images seem to dwell on the possibility of enhanced sexual appetite among 'fools,' but one legal authority felt that the capacity to have (actually to 'beget') children was proof of normality rather than idiocy" ("Idiocy" 51).

nineteenth century. Previously, the idiot was credited with, if not divine inspiration, at least a closeness to God (and/or nature) that other people could not duplicate. The new asylum-builders do not refute this notion, but instead adapt it so that the intellectually disabled individual becomes important not for the intrinsic qualities conferred by his preferred relation to the divine but for the opportunity he affords good Christians to act charitably. Part of this response is no doubt due to an evangelical movement that had been growing since the 1830s, and in which Christian responsibility required active expressions of faith and charity. The social expression of this evangelicism often took the form of philanthropy, and asylum-building was, at least initially, the realm of such noted philanthropists as the Reverend Andrew Reed, the driving force behind Highgate, the National Asylum for Idiots.¹⁴

This attitude is present in a number of prominent writings on the asylum movement. In 1854, author, economist and philosopher Harriet Martineau wrote a piece for Household Words, the journal edited by Charles Dickens, entitled "Idiots Again," in which she observed that "it used to be thought a very religious and beautiful thing (it certainly was the easiest thing) to say that it pleased God to send idiots, and other diseased or defective children, to try and discipline their parents by affliction, and so on" (197). But Martineau articulates another strategy: cut down on the number of idiots by "attending to the conditions of sound life and health," and by "discountenancing, as a crime, the marriage of blood relations." Then, for those idiots who are born, she encourages education to ameliorate their condition, to "make the most and the best of such faculties as

¹⁴ I am using the term "evangelical" broadly here, to include both those with evangelical attitudes in the Anglican church and the more strictly Evangelical movement of Wesleyans and Puritans (Cf. Houghton 228). Reed himself was an "independent" minister.

these imperfect beings possess" (200). Martineau's argument moves away from the notion that the "holy innocent" should, indeed must, be left in the state in which God delivered him, instead assailing the idea of the holy innocent as a means of eluding responsibility, first for the very presence of people with intellectual disabilities, and then for their care and education. Like Séguin before her, she attempts to transfer the responsibility for idiots from the divinity to society and the state, and in so doing, explicitly opposes the notion of the holy innocent.

Other supporters of asylums seem less conscious of the contradiction between the idea of the holy innocent and the goal of education, which would strip the innocent of his supposedly essential innocence. Wrote "RT" in "Crétins and Idiots: a Short Account of the Progress of the Institutions for their Relief and Cure" (1853), the establishment of idiot asylums in England was a result of the "too long neglected branch of Christian love and charity . . . gradually extending itself in the hearts and sympathies of the benevolent British public" (126). The Christian responsibility for idiots is a theme reiterated by later writers, and although one could be Christian without necessarily seeing the idiot as "innocent," that time-honoured notion provided an effective marketing tool. One active propagandist for the asylum movement was the poet and writer Dora Greenwell, whose efforts included editing a collection of short stories featuring intellectually disabled figures, which were then sold to raise money and sympathy for the Royal Albert Asylum (Gelband 336).¹⁵

¹⁵ This strategy was not unprecedented. In 1857, Eliza Grove edited a collection of poems, entitled The Hive: or Mental Gatherings, which were "written in honour of the redemption of the idiot" and for the support of the National Asylum for Idiots (Gelband 84). In 1862, she edited Narrative Poems for the benefit of the Earlswood Asylum.

An 1868 article by Greenwell in the North British Review provides an illuminating expression of some of the goals of asylum advocates. In "On the Education of the Imbecile," Greenwell represents the asylum movement as a heroic endeavour. Her opening paragraph establishes the dominant tropes of her argument:

In every human being, be he the mightiest or the meanest among the family of Adam, there exists a vast dimly lighted region of unknown extent and uncertained resources; a world of which we as yet know too little even to define its boundaries, and of which we can only say, in vague and general language, that it lies between mind and body, between soul and sense. It is a realm thick sown with subtle affinities, thick peopled with analogy, hint, and suggestion, some of them obscure, and some of fearful import. Far off there is a murmur as of the ocean, and we hear far inland the rush and roar of a mighty cataract; dark untracked woods are around us, and through them the river of life flows down. But who has tracked that river to its unknown source? Who through marsh and jungle, and waste of whirling burning sand, has won his way to the centre of this mysterious realm, and there ascended some height of vantage commanding it from sea to sea? (73)

Comparing the explorer of human nature to Cortez gazing "Silent upon a peak of Darien," she claims that "if we would desire, amid the complications of an incomplete and struggling existence, to be truly useful and helpful to our fellow-creatures, we must learn not to turn aside from Humanity under its more strange and conflicting aspects" (73). For Greenwell, engagement with the less fortunate "idiot" is critical for an understanding of humanity itself: "it need not surely surprise us to find that we advance greatly towards the clear understanding of man's whole nature, through the contemplation of its exceptional and abnormal phases" (75). "Idiocy" and "Imbecility" become, in this formulation, a realm of

both intellectual and even aesthetic challenges that cannot fail to be rewarded: ". . . amongst the abnormal conditions of humanity, imbecility, at first sight so repulsive, so barren of all suggestion, will appear, when we come to look at it more closely, to be rich in analogical reference and full of tender poetry" (76).¹⁶ Engagement with the problem of idiocy, Greenwell suggests, stimulates creative and intellectual insights.

The idiot is "one who is never strong enough to cast off the swaddling-bands of infancy," an eternal child "disinherited from his very birth" (77) of his claim to humanity. This situation is, argues Greenwell, one of national concern. The education of the idiot is not a concern "of mere philanthropy," although she notes that "it has chiefly been considered in that light"; rather, "it is a question which connects itself most closely with almost every other social one," including psychology, education, and the relation of people to one another and to God (78-79). Noting that England and Wales contain "about 50,000 idiotic and weak-minded persons,"¹⁷ a "formidable battalion," she asserts "How all-important to the life of the family, to the well-being of the nation, becomes the question of their susceptibility to improvement! How worthy of the attention of the Government of every Christian State! For the idiot, as it has been truly

¹⁶ Other literary references abound in Greenwell's text. She notes that "The spectacle of idiocy fast bound in the iron misery of an imperfect [physical] organization, awakens in the mind the thought of a fatality more gloomy and irresistible than that which presides over a Greek drama" (78). The state of idiocy is also compared to "the pit where humanity lies bound like Joseph, and forgotten of his brethren" (91); and the "idiot" is compared to "the lady in Comus, 'locked up in alabaster'" (94). Rousseau is also alluded to in Greenwell's claim "each is created free, although born in chains" (74).

¹⁷ This number is debatable. The unsigned article "Idiot Asylums," which appeared in the 1865 Edinburgh Review, notes that there were 18,611 pauper idiots, according to an 1862-3 report of the Poor Law Board (38). Michael Donnelly refers to an 1830s estimate that put the number of idiots and lunatics in England, Scotland and Wales at 20,000 (88); Michael Barrett quotes an 1877 survey identifying 10,599 "idiots and imbeciles under 20," 17,749 adult idiots and imbeciles, and 7,615 "harmless lunatics" for a total of 35,963 in England and Wales (144).

remarked, does not sink alone" (79). The task of educating the idiot becomes one of critical domestic and national importance (a noteworthy conflation that we will explore shortly) and must fall then to the best men and women that the nation can produce, people of "zeal and devotion" (91) who call forth

the powers of genius itself . . . [n]ot to breathe life into a statue or to bid the canvas speak; not to command a listening senate or to win the smile of beauty and love; not to gain the coveted laurel or to obtain a name among our fellow-men; but to awaken a ray of intelligence in some poor sickly and repulsive child, whose nature is perhaps too torpid to respond to kindness, and whose faculties are certainly too dull to guess at the great sum of time and thought and care that is spent over his improvement. (98)

Greenwell's representation of the heroic task of educating people with intellectual disabilities is directed here at the readership of the intellectual and reformist North British Review.¹⁸ Her construction of a Christian hero exploring the poetic and uncharted dark continent of the human intellect clearly draws upon the language of British imperialism; the intellectually disabled person thus becomes another unmapped territory to be colonized in a brilliant rhetorical strategy to gain support for her object of more government support for asylums. But the imperialist imagery of Greenwell's argument works effectively because it is linked with another stream of discourse, that of the Victorian family.

The notion of the holy innocent depended in large part upon the affinity of innocence with childhood and thus the infantilization of people with intellectual disabilities. As "children" in a sense (and they were, before the law, considered

¹⁸ Her article is sandwiched between pieces on the "Greek Gnomie Poets" and "Zwingli the Reformer," a fifteenth-century Swiss intellectual.

to be children), people with intellectual disabilities were part of a larger social family, that represented by Victorian society as a whole. As Greenwell makes clear, the education of idiots was crucial to the happy functioning of the national family, and indeed the family of humanity. The idiot is constructed as an infant “who may perish with cold and hunger, although he is the Father’s son” (78). Greenwell wishes to ensure that this fate is avoided.

It is time that England, who for her 50,000 imbeciles has as yet provided asylums for just *one thousand*, to ask whether we are to continue to allow the weakest, the least fortunate among us, to drift hither and thither as chance and fate direct, the very *flotsam* and *jetsam* of humanity, or to decide whether as a nation we will seek to emulate the wise and loving economy of our Divine Founder, and strive to heal that which is sick, to bind up that which is broken, to bring back that which is driven away, to gather up of these fragments and leavings of human existence, ‘so that nothing may be lost.’ (80-81).

God provides the paternal model as well as the divine economy within which the idiot will function productively. The family, as the model for the Victorian brand of paternalism that informed society and the economy, becomes the dominant paradigm for understanding intellectual disability according to Greenwell and her allies.¹⁹ The colonial imagery which also shapes Greenwell’s argument must be seen in this context: Greenwell’s explorers are missionary-adventurers bringing new lands into the Christian fold. As Gelband observes, “Saving the souls of idiots was as feasible and important to [Victorians] as saving the souls of aborigine heathen” (84).

¹⁹ As the next chapter will make clear, by 1868 the notion that people with intellectual disabilities are “innocents” is by no means uncontested; Greenwell is writing in an environment which is increasingly perceiving people with intellectual disabilities as a sign of the degeneration of British culture.

That asylums also took the family as a model has been observed by Gelband, who notes that an extended family metaphor turned founders and superintendents into father figures to both patients and junior staff, with relations among the junior staff and patients as being constructed as “similarly familial” (177).²⁰ An unsigned article²¹ entitled “Idiot Asylums,” appearing in the Edinburgh Review in 1865, repeatedly stresses the “benevolent interest of the Queen,” the matriarch of the age, in the endeavours of the Highgate Asylum, and also notes visits to that institution by Prince Albert (44). And as the asylum students fit into the English family, so they also form a family of their own, with the masters as paternal figures. Indeed, as the article suggests, the masters also supplant the mother in the world of the asylum:

The choice of masters and teachers is by no means easy. They must be born teachers, devoted to their work, men in whom no weakness is visible, endued with extreme patience, and able to command with calmness, force, and decision. Great medical tact and skill are also needed, and that gentle treatment of invalids which caused a youth at Earlswood to say, ‘I love the doctor better than my mother.’ (48)

The family model was necessary to the paternalist philanthropic project which first erected idiot asylums. Later government initiatives continued to employ the language of paternalism for as long as the asylums remained educational

20 As research by David Wright suggests, this model was perhaps less evident in practice than in theory. Staff turnover was high, and the “total institution” (in Erving Goffman’s sense of the term) established for both staff and residents at the asylums occasionally made for antagonistic (or at least tense) relations between different groups of staff as well as between staff and superiors. See Ch. 4, “The Staff,” of Wright’s “National Asylum for Idiots.”

21 Gelband attributes the article to the Rev. Edwin Sidney; however, as it is a review article, and two works by Sidney are under review in it, I am reluctant to follow his attribution without further evidence.

institutions.²² The family actually played a direct role in the institutionalization of individuals, as well. David Wright's analyses of the admission documents at Earlswood show that families themselves provided the "diagnosis" of idiocy when committing children, with physicians simply repeating in their diagnostic entries what they had been told by parents ("Childlike" 121-3). Idiocy was most meaningful within the family, and asylums, as teaching institutions, had to prepare pupils to return to their families and function in them. The family was thus both a practical and an ideological model.²³

The stories selected by Dora Greenwell for her 1869 booklet to encourage support for the Royal Albert Asylum reflected the place of the idiot in the family of God, thus asserting his innocence and providing a model for what Greenwell considered proper and desirable attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities. Representations of people with intellectual disabilities in the stories selected by Greenwell (all of which had been published previously) tend toward non-threatening "holy innocents" stripped of any trickster function. The stories also contained strong Christian messages, the image of the idiot being used as a sign of God's love rather than of strange and unknown inner regions. This strategy is a shift from that employed by Greenwell in her article in the North British Review, and is perhaps explained by the broader readership the booklet of stories could expect. In short, whereas the article developed the idea of the heroic colonial explorer-missionary, the stories appealed to Christian pity and

22 And indeed for some time beyond, when asylums had shed their educational responsibilities and served to segregate the intellectually disabled population from the rest of society, the paternalist argument that asylums protected the individuals from a harsh and competitive world persisted.

23 The inverse may also be true. One might suspect that after their children "graduated" from asylums, families were expected to model their treatment of the child upon the asylum methods. So far as I know, this line of inquiry has not been explored.

charity and developed more explicitly the idea of the holy innocent. Caroline Bowles Southey's "Harmless Johnny," an excerpt from "Chapters on Churchyards" first published in 1824 in Blackwood's Magazine, and George MacDonald's "The Wow o' Rivven," first published in 1864 in Good Words for 1864,²⁴ provide good examples of this tendency. As the image of the innocent becomes more overtly a means not only of articulating not only a religious faith but also an active social and political program, it becomes further removed from the trickster character portrayed in Waverley and Brother Jacob.

Caroline Bowles Southey's "Chapter in Churchyards" begins (not surprisingly) as a meditation on mortality; after the narrator ponders several other graves, she comes to the humble site, already "quite level with the even sod," where lies "the poor outcast of reason. . . the workhouse idiot" (319). He is described as "one for whom no heart was tenderly interested" (319), his parents being long dead; Johnny is an orphan, although at seventy years of age, and the absence of family provides much of the pathos of the story. However, at the same time he is represented as a figure whose status in the community is secure (albeit marginal). The fact that the story is over forty years old when Greenwell republishes it suggests that its appeal is in part nostalgic for a time when the community more obviously (at least in retrospect) mirrored the family; the world of Southey's tale is already passing when she writes of it in 1824 (a story about graveyards can hardly help but be elegiac). The text emphasizes "Harmless Johnny's" role in the community performing odd tasks, his pleasure in dressing in military clothing and playing at soldiers with the village children, and his

²⁴ Gelband notes that two other stories in the collection, the Countess de Gasperin's "A Poor Boy" and Jean Watson's "Benji of Mildon" also represent the intellectually disabled individual as "a symbol of redemption" (337). Unfortunately, I have not been able to acquire copies of these stories.

inevitable tearful response to music (except in church, where he very decorously controls himself). But he is now dead to all music, notes that narrator, bringing the readers back to the present, and he shall sleep undisturbed

till the call of the last trumpet shall awaken him, and the mystery of his earthly existence shall be unfolded, and the soul, emerging from its long eclipse, shall shine out in the light of immortality - At that day of solemn reckoning, how many, whose brilliant talents, and luminous intellect, have blazed out with meteoric splendour, not to enlighten, but to dazzle and mislead, and bewilder the minds of their fellow-mortals, in the mazes of inextricable error - How many of those who have so miserably abused the great trust reposed in them, shall be fain to exchange places with that unoffending innocent (320)

Johnny presents a warning to others: intelligence does not lead to salvation. In Greenwell's collection, the story serves to remind readers of the innocence of the idiot (as well as of the forever-lost world of paternalistic England before the industrial revolution), although at the same time the readers are expected to make the link between Johnny's salvation and those spiritual benefits which will also accrue to them through the support of an asylum.

In George MacDonald's "The Wow o' Rivven," the Colonel, so named for his wardrobe of tattered military clothes, wears on his sleeve where the military stripes would normally be, a piece of fabric in the shape of a bell. The bell is more than decoration, as the narrator assures us: "It was, indeed, the baptism of the fool, the outward and visible sign of his relation to the infinite and unseen" (131-2). The Colonel had been found as an infant almost seventy years earlier by a traveller from the village, crying in the moss, "hardly wrapt in rags, and

untended, as if the earth herself had just given him birth"; rescued and taken into the village, he grew to be "what he was now - almost an idiot" (134). The Colonel's relation to the divine is mediated through his relation to the natural world, the earth being presented as his mother.²⁵

Occasionally mocked by children and villagers, but generally accepted and tolerated, the Colonel befriends the story's heroine Elsie, who lives a life of self-deprivation. Elsie, like the Colonel, is an outcast; she has grown up without parents, although "she had faint memories of warm soft times on her mother's bosom, and of refuge in her mother's arms" (135). Instead, she is raised by an unsympathetic brother, and while "[t]enderness was the divine comforting she needed . . . it was altogether absent from her brother's character" (137). Her conflicts with her business-like brother and his bulldog (a sign of the brutality of the brother's coarseness, as the narrator points out) leave her feeling marginalized and unhappy; a frustrated and unexpressed love for a village boy who leaves for university does not help her state of mind. A bond grows between Elsie and her fellow-sufferer, the Colonel, and eventually she discovers that his call "Come hame, come hame, the Wow o' Rivven," refers to a church bell and graveyard in the nearby ancient parish of Ruthven. Elsie, through the narrator, ponders the revelation.

It was no wonder that the fool, cast out of the earth on a far more desolate spot than this, should seek to return within her bosom at this place of open doors, and call it *home*. For surely the surface of the earth had no home for him. (152)

²⁵ The earth as mother is not surprising in a story from a writer whose links to romanticism have often been commented on. See, for example, Colin Manlove's "MacDonald and Kingsley: A Victorian Contrast," Roderick McGillis's "Phantastes and Lillith: Femininity and Freedom," and William Raeper's "Introduction," all in The Gold Thread: Essays on George MacDonald. Ed. William Raeper.

The church becomes an entry into the bosom of the maternal earth, a portal through which the colonel could return to his true home. And indeed, his notion of home becomes elevated symbolically.

It is possible that in the mind of the idiot there may have been some feeling about this churchyard and bell, which, in the mind of another, would have become a grand poetic thought; a feeling as if the ghostly old bell hung at the church-door of the invisible world, and ever and anon rung out joyous notes (though they sounded sad in the ears of the living), calling to the children of the unseen to *come home, come home.*" (153)

The Colonel's "iambic cry" (159) is related to creative activity in this significant passage; as Colin Manlove shows, for MacDonald, "the human imagination . . . is God working in man" (145).²⁶ The call to return to the home, to the lost phantasmic family, is an articulation of the divine. When the Colonel dies, he is buried in the Ruthven churchyard; when Elsie soon after also sickens and dies, she is buried next to the Colonel.

The Colonel, designated both a "prophet-fool" (154) and a "defenceless idiot" (156) by the narrator late in the story, acts as a guide for the more intelligent and perceptive Elsie. His disability allows a passage to both eternal and domestic bliss.

Side by side rest the aged fool and the young maiden; for the bell called them, and they obeyed; and surely they found the fire burning bright, and heard friendly voices, and felt sweet lips on theirs, in the home to which they went. Surely both love and intellect were waiting them there. (165)

²⁶ A number of other writers have made similar observations about MacDonald's writing. Roderick McGillis, writing about the novel *Phantastes*, interprets its argument as being "that each person must become a living text, poem, or song" (45). The Colonel's song is thus short but to the point.

Heaven in this passage becomes a domestic Victorian hearth, an idealized home and family. Not only is the Colonel called to the heavenly hearth, but through association with him and her willingness to care for and sympathize with him, Elsie too finds a home. In treating kindly the least of her earthly brethren, she assures herself a place in the celestial family, where the benevolent patriarch is God himself. Interestingly, MacDonald's images of divine bliss are domestic and maternal. The Victorian God is one who assumes shape in the warmth of the family parlour, a domestic God tended, presumably, by angels of the hearth.

The asylum is thus presented, through its association with stories such as "The Wow o' Rivven"²⁷ and "Harmless Johnny," as another means by which good Christians could help both poor idiots and their own souls simultaneously. Further, the family under God the Father is implicitly paralleled by the paternalist organization of the asylum, although the particular Victorian expression of the family evoked a domestic warmth. Philanthropists, physicians and clergymen support and operate the asylums, carrying out their social roles according to paternalist beliefs in the responsibilities of the upper classes, and, increasingly, the professional classes as well.²⁸

However, not all representations of the Christian innocent were mobilized in the service of the asylum movements. The works of Charlotte Mary Yonge, a high-church novelist very popular in the latter half of the nineteenth century,

²⁷ The format of the short story collection tends to suppress the heterodox elements of MacDonald's version of Christianity. A preacher, MacDonald was removed from his ministry after hypothesizing that animals might well have souls (Prickett 21).

²⁸ The Christian organization of idiot asylums is a significant feature. Lilian Zihni suggests that John Langdon Down's "strong religious beliefs" were instrumental in getting him the position of medical superintendent in 1859 at Earlswood, "an institution with a strongly Christian ethos" (34).

occasionally include intellectually disabled children as part of a family environment. Yonge's characters are not institutionalized, even though asylums may be briefly presented as options. In the High Anglican world of Yonge's Hopes and Fears and Pillars of the House, the "innocents," Maria and Theodore respectively, become the responsibilities of their respective families, primarily of one especially devoted family member. As Saunders notes, as late as the 1880s most families of all classes opted to care for their own if possible, seeing the asylum as a last resort (291); Yonge's families are thus (as is usually the case with her novels) reasonably accurate portrayals of mid-Victorian social realities. However, her representation of intellectual disability is also meaningful in the context of Yonge's own political agenda (and given the strongly evangelical impetus behind the asylum movement). An adherent of the Oxford Movement in its earlier incarnations, she was a vigorous apologist for a conservative version of social responsibility in which the upper classes in alliance with the Church of England exercised the responsibility for the poor and helpless.²⁹ If one could care for the unfortunate personally, then one did. Both authority and responsibility in Yonge's novels are located within the family, and, as David Brownell has noted, the "typical Yonge novel is about a large family of devout High Church principles" (171). Indeed, as Catherine Storr has observed, in Yonge's novels the "authority of the human parent is intimately equated with the divine authority of the Anglican Church" (110); similarly, Raymond Chapman suggests that Yonge's work is distinguished from mainstream domestic novels in "the place which she accords to the Church of

²⁹ Yonge's affiliation with the Oxford movement has been explored most thoroughly by Barbara Dennis. In "The Victorian Crisis: A Contemporary View" she argues the case for Yonge as a "reliable witness" to the Movement and to conflicts within the Anglican church throughout the Victorian period (29). This argument is further elaborated in her Charlotte Yonge (1823-1901): Novelist of the Oxford Movement. See also Raymond Chapman's Faith and Revolt.

England as a visible and vital force" (73). Yonge's social philosophy, which Barbara Dennis describes as "conservative . . . even reactionary" ("Victorian" 36), reflected traditional notions of paternalism, opposed to the new articulations of the term which saw the involvement of government as well as traditional sources of authority such as the church in ensuring the welfare of the less fortunate.

In Hopes and Fears, Phoebe commits herself to looking after her sister Maria, a "poor innocent" (321). Maria's intellectual disability comes to light only when the governess, Miss Fennimore, points it out to Phoebe, her affectionate sister having perceived only that Maria "was not clever" (241). Phoebe consoles herself with the knowledge that "such people cannot do wrong in the same way as we can," although her rationalist governess notes only that Maria "cannot be treated as otherwise than deficient" (242). Yonge explicitly contrasts Fennimore's interpretation with Phoebe's Christian response, and valorizes the latter. The revelation of Maria's handicap in fact stimulates Christian sympathy in the sister: "There was a fresh element in Phoebe's life. The native respect for 'the innocent' had sprung up within her, and her spirit seemed to expand into protecting wings with which to hover over her sister as a charge particularly her own" (243). Phoebe's urge to become her sister's guardian angel is significantly seen as a "native" response: respect for "the innocent" is, in Yonge's view, a natural response atrophied in those who have suppressed their Christian inheritance.

Later in the novel, after her mother has died and Phoebe has committed herself to caring for Maria, her sister Julianna announces that she has "found a capital

place . . . for Maria - a Dr. Graham, who boards and lodges such unfortunates. Sir Bevil had an idiot cousin there who died” (356-7)³⁰; another sister, Augusta, insists that Phoebe cannot stay with Maria because she “could not receive [Maria]; she can never be made presentable” (357). Phoebe’s integrity is revealed through her struggles to resist the pressures of her family, and indeed her heritage. Her father had made his fortune from a gin distillery; Phoebe and her brother Robert, a priest working the very slums created by his father’s industry, owe their spiritual education to Honora Charlecote, a neighbouring landowner and Anglo-Catholic, rather than to their own family. And it is Honora’s nephew Humfrey Charlecote, newly returned from Canada, who provides Phoebe with a happy ending, pursuing her to be his wife and gallantly accepting Maria as part of a holy trust. Thus the family, and the responsibility entailed within, prevail. Maria remains in the family both as a maiden sister and an innocent child.

A similar situation is occupied by Theodore in Pillars of the House. Theodore and his twin sister Stella are born just before their father, a minister, succumbs to consumption (he has time to name and baptise the twins, and then he departs from the novel). Theodore is more clearly disabled than Maria of Hopes and Fears, and the family (excepting the mother, who dies three years after the

³⁰ Not all asylum reports were laudatory, as Yonge’s readers no doubt were aware. The August 5, 1857 Daily Telegraph identified “filth, obscenity, discomfort, semi-starvation, and, worse than penitential monotony” as characteristics of idiot asylums, and noted that at the Earlswood Asylum, “everything appears to exist that could render a human abode a den of misery and degradation” (qtd. in Gelband 137). The asylum board contested this report and invited the editor of the newspaper to visit the asylum, and, after this visit occurred, the Telegraph largely retracted its claims. Other critical reports also appeared in the press from time to time, and, as Gelband notes, asylum boards “felt that uncontrolled publicity was injurious to their cause” (140).

father) acknowledge his disability from his childhood.³¹ Still, he grows up with the family, tended to primarily by Felix, the oldest child, who is sixteen at the start of the novel, and later also by his twin. While a constant presence in the family, Theodore is rarely more than alluded to in passing (usually to say that he is in the background humming and playing on his concertina, a favorite occupation as he gets older). His status in the family is never contested in the same manner as Maria Fulmont's is in Hopes and Fears, although at one point, in a state of pique, his sister Alda mutters of asylums (1, 338); however, when her good humour is restored, the asylum threat disappears from the novel.

Theodore's central moment in the novel is his last - at seventeen, he is in a river-boating accident with his family, and drowns. Felix, in pulling the failing Theodore to shore, arouses his consumptive tendencies and within the year he too has died, at 34, and the novel, sans protagonist, ends. But Yonge's goal (or one of them, at any rate) is to demonstrate true Christian charity and responsibility through Felix. Lettice Cooper has observed that Yonge's novels usually develop one of two themes: "the fulfillment of a task or a reconciliation" (39). Pillars, she notes, is the former. Felix lives a life of labour and self-denial,

³¹ Mrs. Underwood suffers a fall days before giving birth to the twins, and in the novel this is the explanation for Theodore's disability. Interestingly, Annis Gillie suggests that "Theo Underwood was the child of parents exhausted by procreation. His appearance was not that of a mongol, though his musical capacity was characteristic of that group. All subnormal children were grouped together [at the time of the novel's publication], and Charlotte Yonge generalized below her usual standard of observation" (104-105). Theo was the youngest of the thirteen Underwood children. Dr. John Langdon Down, who identified the condition known as mongolism and later Down's Syndrome, hypothesizes in "Mental Affection in Childhood and Youth" that clergymen had a disproportionate number of intellectually disabled offspring because "it is a profession which, by its very gentleness, is likely to draw to its enclosure less the powerful will, the vigorous thought, and the ratiocinative brain, than those with bodies weak and emotions strong; men who may be classed as gently good than as grandly great" (41). The grandly great class of men - lawyers, doctors, and scientists - were less likely to have intellectually disabled offspring due to their "mental and physical vigour" (41). Not surprisingly, Down draws his data for these conclusions from studies by Francis Galton, the founder of eugenics.

coming into his heritage - the Underwood estate that was taken from his father through a trick of inheritance - only at the end of the novel (the river on the estate is reputed to claim one Underwood every generation - Theodore, obviously, in this case). There is little else for Felix to do when he assumes the estate - he has raised his siblings, seen them married and settled (he dies days after Stella's wedding), and lost the only one who would depend upon him in the future. Without Theodore, Felix's work is done, and he can go on to his heavenly reward; indeed, the earthly Underwood estate, the family heritage, is merely foreshadowing for Felix's final inheritance.³² As with MacDonald's "The Wow o' Rivven," this novel ends with a graveyard scene: the graves of Theodore and Felix next to one another, with the family estate and the natural world surrounding them. Theodore becomes representative of Felix's means to salvation; he doesn't provide the catalyst for Felix's goodness, by any means, but through his helplessness he provides a symbolic reminder. The union of graveyard, family estate, and nature reinforces the connection between the significant components of Yonge's universe: the eternal and Christian, the familial, and the natural worlds.

At the same time as the proponents of educational asylums and of Christian responsibility were rearticulating the image of the childlike Christian innocent, a parallel and related discourse on degeneracy was taking form. As Kincaid observes, isolating innocence as the primary feature of a figure (be it a child or an idiot) empties that figure of significance, making it a repository for a range of other meanings. Representations of intellectual disability had long balanced notions of innocence with those of bestiality; the idiot was pure, but could not

³² The novel's subtitle, "Under Wode, Under Rode," alludes to the cross ("the rode") the Underwoods (especially Felix, it would seem) must bear to achieve their destiny.

offer an example (at least, not literally) to others without leading them to degradation. In foregrounding the Christian innocence of idiots, asylum apologists deprived idiocy of its trickster-like qualities and opened it to reshaping by other discourses.

Margaret Oliphant's Salem Chapel provides a good example of the tension between the notions of innocence and degeneration in the construction of idiocy. The novel's subplot features Mrs. Hilyard, an eccentric needlewoman (and, it turns out, a fallen gentlewoman) who has an imbecile daughter with her sensual and deceitful husband, Col. Mildmay. They separate, she living under an assumed name and sending her daughter, Alice Mildmay, away so her husband cannot find her, as she fears what he would do with his beautiful but simple daughter.³³

The daughter Alice is intriguing in that, while her own essential innocence is repeatedly asserted, she is the offspring of a union of overly sensual (and perhaps criminal) parents, as the novel makes clear. In comparison, Dr. Rider, one of the centers of moral authority in the novel, says outright that the Vincents, the dissenting-church family whose fortunes the novel relates, "have such pure blood in [their] veins; not robust . . . but far better - such sweet, perfect health as one rarely meets with nowadays" (330). However, the imbecile Alice also

³³ As the Colbys note, Salem Chapel and other novels in the Carlingford series were written with an eye toward high sales, and "were modelled upon novels which were making money" (45). In "Sensation Novels" in the May 1862 Blackwood's Magazine, Oliphant wrote an extensive review of works in what was then a new genre; her main focus, and highest praise, was for Wilkie Collins's Woman in White, which has several plot parallels in Salem Chapel, including what the Colby's call the "dismal melodrama" of the Mildmay subplot (45). The novel remains one of her most popular, although it has what biographer Merryn Williams calls "a shadowy place in English literature" (76). Oliphant's present obscurity is unfortunate; according to Williams, she was "more prolific than any other Victorian with any claim to distinction" (51) with over 125 book-length works as well as hundreds of articles in magazines.

provides the catalyst for the recovery of Susan Vincent, who lies in a coma after having been abducted by and then escaping from the nefarious Col. Mildmay. Alice's condition mirrors Susan's: both are threatened sexually by Colonel Mildmay, and both are (as the novel repeatedly asserts) innocent. The term is loaded and refers to Alice's moral innocence, Susan's legal innocence of the attempted murder of her abductor, and, in both of their cases, sexual innocence. The fact that Susan remains innocent is underscored by her recovery in the presence of Alice. At the end of the novel, after three years have passed, Susan is still Alice's guardian, and Arthur sees the two of them as emissaries from an "enchanted country" (459): "two beautiful young women, unexpected apparitions, who transformed life itself and everything in it. Was one his real sister, strange as it seemed? And the other - ?" (460).

Alice remains the "other" at the end of the novel; she is ultimately unnameable, undecipherable, and unapproachable, and indeed lends some of her strangeness to Susan, who seems to be an honorary innocent for her trials. Alice's ethereal appearance and redemptive powers place her clearly within the "innocent" tradition, and fifty years earlier her character might also have included an element of the "trickster, as David Gellatley does; however, as the child of overly sensual parents, she is instead linked to notions of moral and physical degeneracy.

With the rise of the asylum movement, the holy innocent lost its trickster elements and became another figure mobilized for the paternalist initiatives of the times. The mid-Victorian "innocent" is a new version of an old image, stripped of its more unsettling elements so as to better gain the public support

needed for the operation of asylums, and, in one sense at least, the control of irrationality. The asylums, created by philanthropists as educational institutions, promised that debased humanity would be redeemed by love and discipline, ingenious innovation and zealous devotion. In short, the asylum, and the paternalist forces behind the asylum movement, sought to take that which it saw as bad, and to make it good. However, this objective created a representational dilemma. The figure of the innocent as favoured by God was necessary to gain support for the asylum, yet it also had to be reconstructed as needing the redemption the asylum offered. The innocent was stripped of its more unsettling "trickster" qualities, but these qualities were the very characteristics that denoted the innocent's divine protection: the ability to speak truths, to mock the comfortable, to resist the categories of rational and worldly life. The figure of the innocent drew its power from that unknown realm identified by Greenwell; asylums sought to map this territory, to make it known and mundane, to rob it of its mystery. In effect, they sought to remove that which connected the image of the innocent to the divine, the very essence of the image itself. In presenting the innocent as needing redemption to achieve humanity, they emptied the image of its significance. Their laudable objective was to make the intellectually disabled individual a more fully accomplished and functioning member of society, but reconstructing the figure of the "innocent" as someone needing redemption implied a question that is not treated in the literature of asylum propagandists: that of the irredeemable idiot. What if "innocence" cannot be redeemed? What does it then become? In the 1860s and later, the answer seemed clear: it became degeneracy, and threatened the very integrity of the race.

6. Moral Depravity and Racial Degeneracy: The Threatening Idiot

Early in Wilkie Collins' 1863 novel No Name, the narrator questions "If we dare to look closely enough, may we not observe, that the moral force of character and the high intellectual capacities in parents seem often to wear out mysteriously in the course of transmission to children?" (11). The spectre of degeneracy is thus invoked right away in this story of two girls who are discovered to have been illegitimate and who, due to a trick of the law, are accidentally disinherited when their parents are killed in a train accident. Magdalen, Collins's problematic heroine, is scheming and ambitious; Norah, the morally upright sister, is without vitality or initiative.

The sensation novel - a genre that flourished in the 1860s - was characterized, according to Jonathan Loesberg, by "constant concern with identity and its loss"; identity is typically seen in legal and class senses, rather than as in its psychological aspect (117). Elaine Showalter argues that "the popularity of sensation fiction in the 1860s came from its exploitation of repressed sexual fantasy and covert protest against the restrictions of domestic respectability," and also notes their "emphasis on secrecy as the condition of middle-class life" (2). Certainly, these observations describe the plot of No Name. Norah and Magdalen are women displaced because of a secret - they were illegitimate children - whose revelation comes with the loss of their parents and protectors; they become inhabitants of a world in which they not only have no status, but they also have no claims to the name of their father.

The destabilizing of status, the anomalous category, the blurring of moral status

as well as class identity, are constant features of the uncertain, dangerous world of the sensation novel. In No Name, Collins develops the character of Mrs. Wragge around several blurred categories. For instance, the enormous size of Matilda Wragge - she is over six feet tall, and is, in her husband's words, constantly "uneven" in some way or another - contests with conventional notions of femininity and wifeliness (David). But another of her features - her intellect - is also called into question in the novel.¹

Mrs. Wragge is first described as having "a large, smooth, white round face - like a moon - encircled by a cap and green ribbons; and dimly irradiated by eyes of mild and faded blue, which looked straightforward into vacancy..." (202). She is described by her husband (not a reliable judge, though) as being "only a little slow. Constitutionally torpid. . ." (203), although other characters less generously describe her as "no better than an idiot" and an "imbecile lady" (443). However, to Magdalen, she is an "innocent creature" (391) incapable of guile, accidentally revealing Magdalen's plans for recovering her family's fortune to her arch-enemy, although Mrs. Wragge is also an agent of "good" in so doing (in that her acts lead to the novel's happy ending). Her honest and trusting nature eventually see her welcomed into the heroine's family at the novel's conclusion.

Mrs. Wragge is beyond doubt a sympathetic, comic figure. But more to the point, Mrs. Wragge is also a disturbing figure for both Magdalen and the Captain

¹ Critics do not have any easier a time defining Mrs. Wragge than the novel's characters. Catherine Peters comments on their "grotesque parody of domestic life" and refers to Mrs Wragge as "huge, pathetic [and] retarded" (250-51). Deirdre David argues that Mrs. Wragge subverts conventional Victorian notions of femininity in her parodic marriage to Captain Wragge; Barickman et al. suggest that her apparent idiocy is a reflection of the oppressed state of women in matrimony.

because she is not what she seems. She appears as a large and clumsy individual, but not apparently idiotic. And indeed, her status in this respect is in doubt. The characters in the novel cannot decide how to designate Mrs. Wragge, although the issue is raised on several occasions. This ambivalence towards definitive categorization foreshadows later concerns in identifying and labeling the "feeble-minded," a designation popularized in the latter portions of the century as it became expedient to single out those who would lead to the further degeneration of the race, should they produce offspring. The feeble-minded - and especially the fertile women among them - became particularly dangerous because they carried the seed of idiocy without seeming to do so. They existed on the border at which normality (itself a new concept in the 1860s) slipped into deviance, and their very presence was seen as posing a threat to the integrity of the British nation.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century in England, an interweaving set of issues stimulated concern over the possible degeneration of what was thought of as the "British race." Degeneration itself assumed various shapes, and the cultural anxiety was evidenced in numerous journal articles, medical and sociological works, and social initiatives. This degeneration anxiety - and, more immediately, as Daniel Pick argues in Faces of Degeneration, anxiety over the presence of the presumed degenerate (180) - arose from a number of converging factors: Darwin's 1859 work introducing the idea of natural selection, The Origin of Species; a population that had doubled between 1800 and 1850 (Wrigley and Schofield 588); increased immigration, including Irish fleeing the potato famine of 1848; and, as Stedman Jones argues in Outcast London, the growing urbanization of London. The ever-expanding "outcast"

culture of the poor and the seasonally employed proved a catalyst for the development of demography and statistics, which sought to identify a "norm," as Donald Mackenzie and Ian Hacking have shown. Notions of Darwinism and a laissez-faire economic structure merge in Herbert Spencer's rephrasing of Darwin's theory of "natural selection" as the "survival of the fittest" (Bannister 15), a doctrine which, to its followers, seemed at first glance to explain the growth of the English empire and justify the inequalities of class structure. However, as many commentators later in the century would observe, the growing numbers of the poor and the various immigrant communities also created an apparent threat to the health and vitality of the "Anglo-Saxon" race. In this context, the term "degeneration" quickly came to designate a number of supposed evils: racial, physiological, moral and intellectual degeneration was perceived to be the necessary result of living in an unhealthy and vice-ridden urban environment.

The consequence of degeneration anxiety was significant for people with intellectual disabilities. In this context, the idea of intellectual disability acquired a new set of meanings; thus, people with intellectual disabilities also assumed new qualities along with a new social significance and, eventually, a new space: the segregated asylum. As Barrett has noted in "From Education to Segregation," asylums, which first opened in 1846 with the goal of educating idiots and then returning to their community with some skills enabling them to assist in household economies, switched, around the end of the century, to segregating people who were rapidly coming to be seen as a danger to the

genetic heritage of the country.² This chapter will delineate how the idea of intellectual disability interacts with broad concerns over degeneration fed by class fears and evolutionary theory to be constructed in the works of mid-century theorists like Samuel Gridley Howe and John Langdon Down, tracing the revision of ideas of intellectual disabilities that prompted the incarceration of people identified as being intellectually disabled.

Any analysis of the relation of the idea of intellectual disability to concepts of racial deterioration requires a consideration of the social (including colonial), scientific and medical discourses that weave throughout discussions of degeneration in the second half of the nineteenth century. To this end, this chapter will first examine some early sociological writings; then it will consider how Darwinism and theories of evolution interact with medical concerns of social hygiene and broad anxiety over the growth of “outcast London” to create the category of the “degenerate.” Finally, it will investigate representations of intellectual disability in this conceptual environment.

In Outcast London, Gareth Stedman Jones argues that as early as in the 1850s and 1860s there was growing unrest over the numbers of poor in London, who were rapidly building cramped and unhealthy neighbourhoods. Thomas Beames’ The Rookeries of London, published in 1850, is a case in point. In defending his choice of the term “rookery” to describe the groups of paupers congregating together in London neighbourhoods, Beames writes:

The tenants of these Rookeries, like the birds from whom they take their name, have much in common - want, with its offspring, recklessness; they

² Barrett identifies the “segregation” role of the asylum as beginning around 1895, also the year that the Charity Organisation Society established the “National Association for the Care of the Feeble-Minded,” a segregationist lobby group.

are the pariahs, so to speak, of the body social, a distinct caste, yet not bound together otherwise than by common wants - with their jealousies, discords, and antipathies; as if it were not too true of them, as of others, that a man's foes may be they of his own household. (4)³

Rookeries is an early sociological text in which the author journeys into the London underworld, defines and describes it, and ultimately attempts to propose some means of bettering the condition of the people he has found there. This sort of writing constituted a popular genre, reaching its epitome with Henry Mayhew's writings on London's poor labourers, written from 1849-51. Mayhew's analysis of the problems facing Londoners "commenced as an effort at social reconciliation" after the cholera plagues of 1849⁴ and the decline of Chartism, according to E. P. Thompson (45), but was "a reconciliation so searching that it was profoundly disturbing" (47). Jones argues further that Mayhew's analysis did not reduce the lot of the poor to the consequence of weak moral fibre, but rather that his interpretation "made intelligible the economic behavior of the London poor" (Outcast 263). "All casual labour," writes Mayhew, ". . . is necessarily uncertain labour; and wherever uncertainty

³ On the relation of sociological and anthropological discourse to the British colonialist project, as implied by Beames' use of terms such as "caste" and "pariah," see Beer's "Speaking of the Other."

⁴ Beames, writing of the cholera epidemic, asks "Yet where did [the Angel of Destruction] do his work? -- Amidst the dwellings of the rich, where wealth could soothe disease, and tax the powers of science in its aid, -- where, if Death left aching hearts, and yawning voids, it left not poverty to aggravate domestic sorrow? Were these homes laid bare? No! seldom. But where want, scanty food, and confined cabins, fostered disease, --where the cesspool found no vent for its Stygian tide, --where open sewers generated noxious vapours, --where the crowded courts and pent-up masses beckoned the destroyer" (219).

In contrast, Charlotte M. Yonge's 1864 novel The Trial has its patriarchal physician protagonist, Dr. Henry May, identify an outbreak of scarlet fever as emanating from "those wretched Martins, in Lower Pond Buildings . . . living in voluntary filth" (6). The condition of the poor becomes an issue of moral deterioration for Yonge, whereas fifteen years earlier Beames had seen it as the consequence of unfair social structures. Interestingly, martins (a type of swallow) also live in large colonies like rookeries; thanks to Robert Martin for this observation.

exists, there can be no foresight or providence" (qtd in Jones, Outcast 263). In this, Mayhew is exceptional among Victorian commentators.

Beames, like Mayhew, whom he cites as his exemplar (39), is similarly concerned with the social and economic factors circumscribing life in the "rookeries." While he labels them "fraternities" (164) that are "the *nurseries* of felons" (149), he tempers his condemnation by identifying the social forces making them thus, and ultimately labels the sober British middle classes as a whole the "degenerate offspring" (212-13) of their ancestors for failing to address the health and economic problems constraining the poor in the "rookeries" (a condemnation that could not have been uttered in those terms fifteen years later, when degeneration's metaphorical value was absorbed within Darwinian discourse). In Beames' formulation, these social problems are interpreted in terms of a bad (or dysfunctional) family; at issue is a moral decline, not just among the poor but also among those others whose inaction and indifference have allowed social conditions to deteriorate to the point where people are living in "rookeries." Beames' analysis of the problem is by no means as extensive or even as sympathetic as Mayhew's, although he clearly expresses the same desire for a reconciliation between the classes, the same wish for a broader responsibility for society, recognizing and assisting its less fortunate members. But this reconciliation was not to occur. In the 1860s and 1870s, few writers felt optimistic enough to propose bettering the lot of the paupers, and more writers constructed travelogues (rather than treatises) for the

mixed pleasure and disgust of their readers (Jones 14).⁵ Indeed, E. P. Thompson notes that by the time Mayhew's London Labour and the London Poor was released in book form in 1861, it was already being "typed as quaint" (43).

In 1861, John Hollingshead was able to write in Ragged London that

We are evidently surrounded by a dense population, half-buried in black kitchens and sewer-like courts and alleys, who are not raised by any real or fancied advance in wages; whose way of life is steeped in ignorance, dirt, and crime; and who are always ready to sink, even to death, at their usual period of want. How many they really number, what they really profess to be, and in what proportions they may be found in different parts of the metropolis, are secrets that no census has ever fully exposed. (6)

This passage opposes the affluent and civilized middle-class "we" to a "ragged London" which existed as an unmeasured threat. Perhaps even more disconcerting to his audience was Hollingshead's claim that poor children of London were surprisingly, even perversely, healthy.

Where are the emaciated children who have often been dangled before our eyes? Certainly not in the black-holes inhabited by the poor. What is it that gives fulness [sic] to the cheeks, agility to the limbs, and even bone and sinew to the form? It cannot be food. A block of coarse bread, taken at uncertain intervals, is far from forming the supposed necessary three

⁵ For instance, see the "travelogues" of Thomas Archer, The Pauper, the Thief, and the Convict: Sketches of some of their Homes, Haunts, and Habits (1865); James Greenwood, The Wilds of London (1874); and George R. Sims, How the Poor Live and Horrible London (1889). Archer describes seeing "idiots" during a visit to the workhouse: "In the warmest corner of the yard, too, a whole row of female idiots, of various ages, sit blinking and lounging, as it seems to me, with a vague consciousness of superiority in the fact of nothing at the moment being expected of them. The same stout, beef-faced young woman who is the peculiar representative, I fancy, of all pauper idiocy, offers her hand as we pass, and asks after our health in the same thick utterance as though she spoke during sleep, and while suffering from greatly enlarged tonsils" (75-76).

meals a day, and yet those children who get nothing but this plain and scanty fare astonish those who know them best by their healthy vigour. These children live in the streets, and draw their nourishment from wind and mud. They are not stunted, far from it, and with few exceptions are stronger than the children of the middle class. (9)⁶

The image of the poor child, so often used to elicit sympathy from the Victorian middle classes (Roberts 190), is displaced by a healthy specimen from ragged London. The poor child, no longer an object of compassion, here suggests that the street children and their presumably hearty parents present a threat to the less rugged middle class.⁷ This strange and unlikely union of pauperism with a perverse vitality drawing nourishment from wind and mud resurfaces in later writings on degeneration in Victorian cities, notably those by W. R. Greg, James Cantlie and J. Milner Fothergill.

In 1866, John Morgan, physician to Salford Hospital and Honorary Secretary of the Manchester and Salford Sanitary Association, published The Danger of Deterioration of Race From the Too Rapid Increase of Great Cities, based on a lecture given to the Social Science Congress in Sheffield, October 10, 1865.

⁶ The editor of the Everyman edition of Hollingshead's Ragged London, Anthony Wohl, flags this passage and notes that "[t]his is certainly questionable, for the infant death rate among urban working-class children was certainly higher than that for middle-class children" (196). In a recent article, Robert Sapolsky has suggested that, while in general terms wealth is linked with better health, in the mid- and late-nineteenth century, the children of the middle classes had restricted physical contact with adults because handling infants too often was thought to spoil them and render them too self-indulgent. According to Sapolsky's thesis, then, children of the lower classes, denied the benefits of Victorian notions of child-rearing, experienced more human contact as infants and thus those who survived were more vital.

⁷ This anxiety is repeated throughout the latter portions of the century; perhaps its most prominent literary manifestation is in the relation between the Morlocks and Eloi in H. G. Wells' The Time Machine (1895). There were, in comparison, many works also urging the self-improvement of the working and middle classes, most notably the much-republished oeuvre of Samuel Smiles, including Self-Help (1859) and Workmen's Earnings, Strikes, and Savings (1861). Indeed, the notion of "self-help" was an oft-invoked formula for personal success, and examples of the poor who strove to improve their station were often presented as exemplars in Smiles' works.

Morgan argued that not only were populous cities a risk even to healthy citizens, but that the immigrants that came to them from the countryside were generally the most hardy of the native stock, whose emigration to the city caused them to decline while leaving a less healthy rural population. His warning received wide recognition, and although its immediate impact is difficult to discern, The Lancet of June 23, 1866, endorses his argument by noting that "If the consequences, then, of this social agglomeration be, on the one hand, increase of political power, of wealth, of commercial and social prosperity, and successful competition with other nations, they are, on the other, an overtaxing of the physical and mental energies at our disposal, and a premature consumption of national life-blood" ("Deterioration" 691).⁸

The causes of this deterioration Morgan traces to three primary sources, which he is "disposed to look upon as the most distinctive, and at the same time, the most fatal": "vitiating air, constitutional syphilis, and the abuse of alcohol" (25). The "noxious gases" forming a "murky mass" that "hangs like a shroud over the city" (29) charge a serious toll on the health of the urban dweller (and foreshadow T. S. Eliot's opening lines to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"). As for syphilis and alcohol abuse, Morgan notes that these, while "originating in the vicious courses of individuals, are not confined in their consequences to the guilty sufferers, but are passed on to the offspring, and thus become, year by year, more generally diffused among the great mass of the people" (26). With

⁸ The Lancet's article "Race Degeneration," February 17, 1866, lumped Morgan with Bénédict Augustin Morel whose theories of racial degeneration were gaining currency in France. The Lancet expressed skepticism about human intervention in attempts to create a better race, but conceded that social conditions affected health, a point it more thoroughly endorsed in its June 23 article. The article credited the supposed French degeneration to changes in modes of living brought about by the rise of manufacturing industries and to the subdivision of agricultural land. Morel, on the other hand, argued in 1857 that a "slow accumulation of morbidity across generations" resulted in "complete idiocy, sterility and death" (Pick 51).

regard specifically to syphilis, Morgan writes that “[i]f we consider the abiding consequences too often associated with this disease, and the insidious manner in which it is liable to be passed on to the offspring, leaving an impress on the constitution which even several generations cannot wholly erase, we shall see good grounds for believing that, wherever the blood of the community is extensively contaminated by this poison, there likewise fears may be entertained respecting the future vigour of the race” (33-34). Alcohol, he goes on to note, renders one weaker and less employable. Yet, despite these dire warnings, for Morgan, the deterioration of race does not necessarily involve a fear that the British race is degenerating, or travelling “backwards” on the path of imagined evolutionary progress. Indeed, he refers to “that lowered standard of the public health which I have spoken of under the ominous title of ‘deterioration of race’” (35), and suggests that the answer to the problem is to be found in better public hygiene, increased emigration from crowded urban areas to the colonies, and the creation of suburban communities along train lines for urban workers. In Morgan’s view, the English race may be less healthy, but it is not, as a consequence, less English.

However, while Morgan may not have engaged with the new Darwinian discourse in his analysis of race deterioration in cities, the connection was slowly being formulated. Pick notes that “Insanity and criminality [and we might add idiocy here] were increasingly cast as symptoms of a wider social pathology. A specific bio-medical conception of degeneration was already to be seen in England in the 1850s and the 1860s” (178). Jones identifies a growing distrust of the poor, a distrust which is cast in a moral framework condemning the poor as choosing their condition, so that “pauperism, poverty’s visible form,

was largely an act of will," and the poverty of the poor was, as in earlier times, "associated with drink, early marriage, improvidence, irreligion, and idleness" (286). However, as the problem of poverty is more and more frequently pathologized, the condition, while not shedding its moral taint, assumes another set of meanings drawn from biological theory. "If," as Peter Morgan suggests, "the laws of biology could be granted the universal applicability and inevitability of physical law, then so many social sores could be sterilised without resorting to the surgery of economic reform. . . . If beggars, instead of being the casualties of an inadequate man-made system, could be seen instead as domestic pigs reverted to a worthless feral form by their built-in retrogressive tendencies, then this identification removed much perplexity" (94). The poor become poor because, according to Herbert Spencer's reformulation of Darwin, they are not among the fittest and thus do not survive as successfully. When this sketch of a theory is further shaded with moral judgment, the poor become less fit because of their moral lapses.

The consequence of evolutionary theory on discussions of class and race was that these mid-Victorian "Others" were, for many English writers, occupying a

lower rung on the evolutionary ladder.⁹ As Gillian Beer observes of Victorian anthropological journals, "we are usually presented with a conversation among gentlemanly peers, a conversation that frequently fails in irony, does not sufficiently observe itself, and makes possible that strange and characterizing locution of the time: 'mankind' as meaning white, implicitly middle- and upper-class, Europeans, distinguished from all other ethnic groups" ("Speaking" 80). Given these assumptions, the lower classes within British society become a further problem in that their level of evolutionary development does not equal that of their class superiors, conveniently reflecting social stratification but also unfortunately posing a threat due to their large, and growing, numbers.

One manifestation of evolutionary theory in Victorian thought was the relation of ontogeny and phylogeny. Consider C. S. Wake's paper on "The Psychological Unity of Mankind" in the Memoirs Read before the Anthropological Society of London (1867-9):

It is a familiar idea, and one which appears now to be accepted as a truth, that 'mankind' (a term which, in this relation, has probably been used as synonymous with the Caucasian, or Indo-European, race) resembles in its totality an individual man, having, like him, an infancy, a childhood,

⁹ Of course, notions of class and race were also instrumental in the development of evolutionary theory. As Young shows, both Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace, who developed the theory of natural selection independently from and coterminously with Darwin, found not just inspiration but also (in Darwin's case) a theoretical framework in the writings of Thomas Malthus in population. As Darwin wrote in autobiography,

In October 1838, that is, fifteen months after I had begun my systematic inquiry, I happened to read for amusement Malthus on Population, and being well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long-continued observation of the habits of animals and plants, it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of a new species. Here, then, I had at last got a theory by which to work; but I was so anxious to avoid prejudice, that I determined not for some time to write even the briefest sketch of it. (qtd. in Young 126)

Dov Ospovat has explored Darwin's debt to Malthus and to other elements of his social, philosophical and scientific environment in The Development of Darwin's Theory (1995).

youth, and manhood. In the early ages of the world man was in his infancy: and from that stage he has progressed, by gradual steps, until now he may be said to have attained - at least in peoples of the European stock - to a vigorous manhood . . . The fact, which appears to have hitherto escaped attention, is the present existence of various families, exhibiting every stage of the supposed development. (qtd. in Beer, "Speaking" 81)

The theory expressed by Wake was characterized by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel's 1866 claim that "ontology recapitulates phylogeny": the belief that "an individual, in its own growth, passes through a series of stages representing adult ancestral forms in their correct order . . ." (Gould, Mismeasure 114). "Recapitulation," writes Stephen Jay Gould, "ranks among the most influential ideas of late nineteenth-century science."¹⁰ According to the recapitulation theory, "the gill slits of an early human embryo represented an adult ancestral fish; at a later stage, the temporary tail revealed a reptilian or mammalian ancestor" (Mismeasure 114). Recapitulation also had applications in the organization of human hierarchies. In this schema, "the *adults* of *inferior* groups must be like *children* of *superior* groups, for the child represents the primitive adult ancestor" (Mismeasure 115). Recapitulation theory thus serves to justify scientifically the British imperialist project by constructing colonised peoples as "children" in relation to their "adult" overlords.¹¹

¹⁰ Gould writes that "the law of recapitulation was 'discovered' many times in the decade following 1859," including in Fritz Müller's Für Darwin (1864), the neo-Lamarckists E. D. Cope's and A. Hyatt's independent publications of 1866, and Haeckel's Generelle Morphologie der Organismen (1866), praised by Thomas Huxley as "one of the greatest scientific works ever published" (Ontogeny 76).

¹¹ Recapitulation theory is the biological equivalent of "stadial" theories of society popular in the eighteenth century. T. Carlos Jacques, drawing on John Locke's formulation, writes that according to the stadial theory "each specific society has experienced a similar history in terms of its internal constitution, and each passes through numerous organization stages with varying degrees of success until the highest stage is attained, namely, that of [Locke's] contemporary Europe" (Jacques 203).

Given the prominence of the theory of recapitulation, it should not be surprising that it was also used to describe forms of intellectual disability. In 1866, the same year as Haeckel's Generelle Morphologie der Organismen was published, John Langdon Down published the article for which he is most well known, "Observations on an Ethnic Classification of Idiots" in the London Hospital Reports. Down, the medical superintendent at the Earlswood Asylum, one of the largest (with the Royal Albert Asylum) in the country, studied many different people with intellectual disabilities and came to a startling conclusion. Writes Down, "I have been able to find among the large number of idiots and imbeciles which come under my observation . . . that a considerable portion can be fairly referred to one of the great divisions of the human family other than the class from which they have sprung" (128). He hypothesized that many forms of idiocy were in fact genetic throwbacks, atavars of earlier, less evolved races: while he observes that "[o]f course there are numerous representatives of the great Caucasian family," he describes the others - the Ethiopian, the Malay, the North American Indian and the Mongolian - in more detail, identifying each "race" according to stereotypical physical features.¹² Thus the Ethiopian variety

¹² Gould has noted that Down's classifications "embody an interesting tale in the history of scientific racism" ("Dr. Down's Syndrome" 162), and suggests that Down's identification of mimicry among the "mongoloid" children has its roots in the European strategy of dismissing the complexities of Oriental culture as due to a "facility for imitative copying, rather than to innovative genius" ("Syndrome" 166). Zihni, noting that the American Civil War was being fought at this period, suggests that Down's "discovery" of racial regression was motivated in part by his abolitionist sentiment (50-53). As a monogenecist, Down believed that all races were part of a single linear human development; polygenecists argued that other races were in fact not human, or at any rate were part of a different evolutionary lineage, thus justifying their enslavement. Certainly the possible significance of his theory to abolitionists was not lost on Down, who questions "if . . . racial divisions are fixed and definite, how comes it that disease is able to break down the barrier, and to simulate so closely the features of the members of another division?" and concludes that his observations "furnish some arguments in favour of the unity of the human species" ("Ethnic" 131). Zihni credits John Conolly with bringing recapitulation theory to Down's attention in the first place (43).

is marked by "the characteristic malar bones, the puffy lips, and retreating chin," as well as "the woolly hair . . . although [it is] not always black, nor has the skin acquired pigmentary deposit." Concludes Down, these individuals are "specimens of white negroes, although of European descent" (128). The Malay variety are identifiable by their "soft, black, curly hair, their prominent upper jaws and capacious mouths," and the North American natives by "shortened foreheads, prominent cheeks, deep-set eyes, and slightly apish nose" (128-9).

The most common of Down's varieties, though, and that which he focuses on for the second half of his paper, is the Mongolian. Indeed, Down notes, "a very large number of congenital idiots are typical Mongols. So marked is this that, when placed side by side, it is difficult to believe that the specimens compared are not children of the same parents" (129). He concludes from the evidence before him that "there is no doubt that these ethnic features are the result of degeneration" (129). This point has, he suggests, "considerable philosophical interest" in that these "examples of retrogression, or, at all events, of departure from one type and the assumption of characteristics of another" help to "furnish some arguments in favour of the unity of the human species" (130).

Down's application of recapitulation theory was the first expression of it in such detail relating to intellectual disability, and no other scientist or physician pursued his line of thought quite so vigorously.¹³ The "European negroes" discerned by Down thus remained in the realm of undeveloped theory rather than acquiring the authority of scientific truth. "Mongolism" was the only one of

¹³ However, Down was not the only professional to perceive apparently "mongolian" features in people with trisomy-21; Sir Arthur Mitchell identified them as "Kalmuc" idiots in 1876 (Zihni 59).

Down's categories to be adopted, and the term remained in use until recently¹⁴; "mongolism" is now, of course, known as "Down's Syndrome," and the characteristic physical features of people with Down's Syndrome are traced not to an atavistic Mongolian but to an extra twenty-first chromosome, a condition known more formally as trisomy-21. However, Down's categories, while not in themselves fully accepted, were an expression of a discourse that had significant consequences for people with intellectual disabilities, as well as for the Victorian immoral trinity of lunatics, criminals, and paupers.

Perhaps most important is that Down's recapitulation theory quickly merges with the more pervasive belief that so-called degeneracy was the consequence of moral weakness. Although Down doesn't address causes of idiocy in his paper on ethnic classifications, in another document published the next year in The Lancet, "On Idiocy and its Relation to Tuberculosis," he claims that

No-one who has had an opportunity of investigating the influences which are at work in the production of congenital mental diseases can fail to be struck with the fact that they are, for the most part, to be traced to some inherent vice of constitution in the progenitors. He will discover in the parents elements of degeneracy which must have had their share in producing the catastrophe. He will notice how by degrees the stock has deteriorated. He will be able to estimate how intemperance or sensuality leads slowly but surely to idiocy - how physical weakness of the parents culminates in the mental blight of the child. (132)

To examine the links perceived between intellectual disability and moral

¹⁴ Gould also observes that "Down's theory for trisomy-21 lost its rationale - even within Down's invalid racist system - when physicians detected it both in orientals themselves, and in races lower than oriental by Down's classification. . . The condition could scarcely be due to degeneration if it represented the normal state of a higher race. We now know that a similar set of features occurs in some chimpanzees who carry an extra chromosome probably homologous with the twenty-first of humans" ("Syndrome" 167).

decrepitude in the mid-nineteenth century, we should look back to that influential work of Samuel Gridley Howe, On the Causes of Idiocy, published in 1848 in the United States and widely read in England (Harriet Martineau cites it in her 1854 article "Idiots Again"). Howe had been involved in educating the apparently ineducable for some time before he became intrigued by Seguin's work at the Bicêtre in Paris and John Conolly's moral training of the insane in England. As head of the Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind, Howe had achieved fame by educating the deaf and blind prodigy Laura Bridgman (whose fame was later eclipsed by Helen Keller), and had seen his efforts lauded by Dickens in American Notes; he had also had some success training blind students who had been diagnosed as idiots. In 1846, he was appointed to chair a commission on idiocy in Massachusetts, leading to his 1848 report (Trent 13).

In the preface of his report to the Governor of Massachusetts, Howe proclaimed that

We regarded idiocy as a disease of society; as an outward sign of an inward malady. It was hard to believe it to be in the order of Providence that the earth should always be cumbered with so many creatures in the human shape, but without the light of human reason. It seemed impious to attribute to the Creator any such glaring imperfection in his handy-work. It appeared to us certain that the existence of so many idiots in every generation *must* be the consequence of some violation of the *natural laws*; - that where there was so much suffering there must have been sin. We resolved, therefore, to seek for the sources of the evil, as well as to gauge the depth and extent of the misery. (vi)

Seeking, Howe and his compatriots had no difficulty in finding evil practices abounding. The evils were not just evidenced in intellectual blights, though:

Howe insisted that idiocy was a manifestation of physiological disorder. Specific causes remained shrouded in secrecy, but, he noted, "The whole subject of idiocy is new. Science has not yet thrown her certain light upon its remote, or even its proximate causes. There is little doubt, however, that they are to be found in the CONDITION OF THE BODILY ORGANIZATION . . . If any bodily peculiarities, however minute, always accompany peculiar mental conditions, they become important; they are the finger-marks of the creator, by which we read his work" (ix) [Howe's emphasis]. The relation of the body to the soul Howe likens to that of a musical instrument and a musician, except that "the idiot's body is a wretched thing, and its few strings are so sadly awry, that even in a seraph's hand it could give nothing but jarring and discordant sounds" (12).

The physical, material basis of intellectual disability was a claim reiterated throughout the latter half of the century, especially as "materialists" and "alienists" (who used psychological moral treatment to cure insanity) struggled for priority in the profession, and control of the prestigious and lucrative asylum industry (Jacyna). Locating intellectual disability in physiology provided a means to link the physical state of the disabled child with that of the degenerate parent, and identified practices that could, by weakening the parent, lead to idiocy in offspring.

Howe sought the causes of idiocy in family history and singled out five primary factors, the first (and most all-encompassing) of which was the poor "physical organization" of the parents. Here Howe anticipates the later criticisms of urban lifestyles such as those of Morgan, Cantlie and Fothergill, although with more vivid moralizing rhetoric:

It is said by physiologists, that among certain classes of miserably paid and poorly fed workmen, the physical system degenerates so rapidly, that the children are feeble and puny, and but few live to maturity; that the grandchildren are still more puny; until, in the third or fourth generation, the individuals are no longer able to perpetuate their species It would seem that startled nature, having given warning by the degenerated condition of three or four generations, at last refuses to continue a race so monstrous upon the earth.

We see here another of those checks and balances which the exhaustless wisdom of God pre-established in the very nature of man, to prevent his utter degradation. . . . a race of men, abusing the power of procreation, may rush on in the path of deterioration until, arrived at a certain point, . . . the procreating power is exhausted. . . . (25)

The language of moral judgment and degeneration are fully evident here, although it would take another decade for the same tone to develop in Britain. Scrofula, with its broad range of symptoms, characterized Howe's degenerate parents and seems a constant in his case histories: it is the manner by which moral and physical weakness can be detected by the practiced "eye of the physiologist" (25-26).

Howe further entrenches a moral interpretation of idiocy in his second cause, intemperance. His surveys suggest that in a study of 359 people designated idiots, 99 were the children of drunkards; he claims also that many others may well have warranted the label. "Thus," he concludes, "directly and indirectly, alcohol is productive of a great portion of the idiocy which now burdens the commonwealth" (28). Indeed, alcohol is probably involved in the process that creates the low physical organization of many scrofular parents.

His third cause of idiocy, masturbation, Howe does not support with statistics. Instead, he rages against the practice, "a monster so hideous in mien, so disgusting in feature, altogether so beastly and loathsome, that, in very shame and cowardice, it hides its ugly head by day, and, vampyre-like, sucks the very life-blood from its victims by night" (29). While he concedes that his language "may be extravagant" (30), he justifies it with the assertion that

there are among those enumerated in this report some who not long ago were considered young gentlemen and ladies, but who are now moping idiots, - idiots of the lowest kind; lost to all reason, to all moral sense, to all shame, - idiots who have but one thought, one wish, one passion, - and that is, the further indulgence in the habit which has loosed the silver cord even in their early youth, which has already wasted, and, as it were, dissolved, the fibrous part of their bodies, and utterly extinguished their minds. (30)

Howe's concerns here express the "pervasive and obsessive masturbation phobia that took hold of America during the early nineteenth-century" (Barker-Benfield 167), linked to the belief in what Barker-Benfield calls the "spermatoc economy": the belief that loss of sperm weakened both the body and the mind,

and that it must consequently be rationed for appropriate usage (181).¹⁵

Howe's fourth cause is intermarriage of relatives, and he identifies 17 of 359 people designated idiots as being to parents "nearly related by blood," extrapolating to suggest that "idiocy is only *one* form in which nature manifests that she has been offended by such intermarriages" (34), a belief developed later by other writers.¹⁶ Finally, notes Howe, attempts to procure abortions also must be the cause of many instances of idiocy, his fifth cause, which he characterizes as "one of the forms in which the fruit of sin reappears to punish the sinner and forewarn all beholders" (36).

Howe's insistence that idiocy is the consequence of moral crimes was not a cry from the fringe. As Kanner notes in his History of the Care and Study of the Mentally Retarded, Howe warrants the credit for establishing "institutional care for retarded children" in the United States (42). Indeed, as his report was intended to gain state funds for an asylum, it is conceivable that Howe may have indulged in some excessive fear-mongering to establish the need to

¹⁵ Interestingly, this aggressive association of idiocy with masturbation is not expressed by English writers. Down refers to masturbation, especially in puberty, as "liable to lead to disastrous results," but elaborates no further in his lectures On Some of the Mental Affections of Childhood and Youth (13). In an 1866 article, he presents the case of a patient whose friends "were very desirous of asserting the non-congenital nature of the mental condition, and attributed it to masturbation," but "the diagnosis formed, however, was that it was congenital, and that masturbation was an accidental circumstance" ("Defective Corpus Callosum" 110). No doubt Howe would have determined otherwise. However, Robert MacDonald has noted that nineteenth-century British physicians were reluctant to discuss masturbation at all, although it was referred to in medical texts as "leading to degeneration" (428-29). The lack of rhetoric on masturbation as a cause of intellectual disability may thus reflect British reticence instead of, or in addition to, a less certain belief in its role in the creation of the condition. In British culture, Peter T. Cominos links prudence in economic matters with "thrift" in the expenditure of semen: "Continenence in sex and industry in work were correlative and complimentary virtues. The Respectable Economic man must not be the sensual man who had failed to conquer himself, but the Respectable sublimated sensual man" (37).

¹⁶ See, for instance, Harriet Martineau's "Idiots Again" in Household Words (1854), reprinted in Harper's Magazine in the United States as "A Chapter on Idiocy."

segregate people with intellectual disabilities from the general population, in addition to providing them with education. Scheerenberger in History of Mental Retardation also notes Howe's influence in establishing an education asylum in the U.S. (104), but does not consider the representation of idiocy that makes up the bulk of the report.¹⁷ The humanitarian act of creating an educational institution was in this case purchased through the dissemination of fear and condemnation. While Howe's achievements were indeed estimable, and his humanitarian concern for his charges seems beyond doubt, he must also be credited with popularizing a particularly damning interpretation of intellectual disability, one which served to encourage segregationists and eugenicists of later generations.

Howe's influence in Britain, where his report was published in 1858, was understandably (given cultural differences) not as great as in the United States; British asylum-doctors on occasion seem to try to distance themselves from Howe's work, with Down noting, for instance, that he has "endeavoured [. . .] to keep [himself] free from the bias of former statistics, especially those of the late Dr. Howe, of Massachusetts" (Mental Affections 32). But these qualifications among British writers demonstrate how wide Howe's influence spread; he was hardly ignored in England, and on other occasions the British establishment

¹⁷ Interestingly, both Kanner and Scheerenberger, in their pages on Howe, quote the same passage from the preface of his report: "The benefits to be derived from the establishment of a school for this class of persons, upon humane and scientific principles would be very great. Not only would all the idiots who should be received into it be improved in their bodily and mental condition, but all the others in the State and the country would be indirectly benefited. The school, if conducted by persons of skill and ability, would be a model for others. Valuable information would be disseminated through the country; it would be demonstrated that no idiot need be confined or restrained by force; that the young can be trained for industry, order, and self-respect; that they can be redeemed from odious and filthy habits, and there is not one of any age who may not be made more of a man and less of a brute by patience and kindness directed by energy and skill" (xiv). Neither quotes from the body of the report.

was at pains to distinguish itself from the claims of Howe's report, while acknowledging his importance.

In moving away from Howe, his British peers among asylum-physicians did not succeed in freeing themselves from him. In "Intemperance as a Cause of Idiocy" given at the Forty-Fifth Annual Meeting of the British Medical Association, Manchester, August 9, 1877, G. E. Shuttleworth, the Medical Superintendent of Royal Albert Asylum, opposes Howe's analysis of the role of intemperance among the causes of idiocy. In his visits of "principal idiot asylums" in U.S., Shuttleworth found that "parental drunkenness occupied, in the estimation of the physicians in charge of those institutions, by no means a conspicuous place in the causation of idiocy." In England, he notes that of 800 cases in Eastwood, "six only were probably occasioned by drunkenness; in two of these, other hereditary influences being also noted" (Shuttleworth 308). But despite these findings, Shuttleworth was reluctant to dispense with the notion that alcohol abuse was somehow implicated in the production of idiocy. "Congenital idiocy," he notes in summary, "was not, as a rule, the *immediate* legacy of the drunkard to his offspring, but physical and mental degeneracy were doubtless the heritage, and scrofulous disease, nervous instability, and even moral obliquity, might oftentimes be amongst the direct bequests. It needed, however, but one step more, the conditions remaining unfavourable, to reach actual idiocy; and thus, in very truth, was visited 'the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the

third and fourth generation” (309).¹⁸

The belief that intellectual disability was the consequence of moral degeneration and thus a sign of the moral decay of society was not limited to people working in asylums (and, in fact, was probably treated with more cynicism there than most other places), but rather entered a broader discourse concerning degeneration and recapitulation.¹⁹ In 1868, William Rathbone Greg draws on Darwin’s work in his “On the Failure of ‘Natural Selection’ in the Case of Man.” The problem, as Greg sees it, is that the human proclivity to compassion and sympathy weakens societies. Happily for Greg, so far the proper racial arrangement had prevailed, with the British empire dominant, but individual communities and class relations were threatened: “We have kept alive those who, in a more natural and less advanced state, would have died [T]housands with tainted constitutions, with frames weakened by malady or waste, with brains bearing subtle and hereditary mischief in their recesses, are suffered to transmit their terrible inheritance of evil to other generations, and to spread it through a whole community” (359). The danger is to be found at the

¹⁸ Responses to Shuttleworth’s paper include those from a veritable who’s who of early work with intellectual disability. J.C. Bucknill, despite respect for Howe, doubted his methodology; Seguin confirms Shuttleworth’s U.S. report and applauds his new work; Down generally approves and notes “he knew the immense practical difficulty in arriving at the truth with regard to the existence of vicious habits on the part of parents of idiots admitted to public institutions.” Of special note is Daniel Hack Tuke’s belief “that the American statistics, if not entirely accurate, might nevertheless have served a useful purpose, and on that ground were entitled to respect” (309). The Lancet does not report what this “useful purpose” might be; we are left to our own hypotheses. One that comes to mind is that Howe’s statistics may have frightened people into behaving “morally”; another is that they may have raised the profile of the “idiot industry” and enhanced the reputations of those involved in this industry.

¹⁹ This discourse was not limited to the scientific, medical or sociological communities, but also included popular writers. In his novel The Water-babies, Charles Kingsley creates the “Doasyoulikes” who eventually degenerate into speechless, ape-like creatures (258-67). George Gissing’s character “Slimy” in The Unclassed is another prime literary example of the urban degenerate.

two ends of the class hierarchy, with the aristocracy and the poor²⁰ : "The *physique* and the *morale* of both the extreme classes are imperfect and impaired. The *physique* of the rich is injured by indulgence and excess - that of the poor by privation and want. The *morale* of the former has never been duly called forth by the necessity for exertion and self-denial; that of the latter has never been cultivated by training or instruction" (360). Unfortunately, though, both classes marry young and breed with impunity, with the consequence that

the imprudent, the desperate - those whose standard is low, those who have no hope, no ambition, no self-denial, - on the one side, and the pampered favourites of fortune on the other, take precedence in the race of fatherhood, to the disadvantage or the exclusion of the prudent, the resolute, the striving and the self-restrained. The very men whom a philosophic statesman, or a guide of some superior race would select as most qualified and deserving to continue the race, are precisely those who do so in the scantiest measure. Those who have no need for exertion, and those who have no opportunities for culture, those whose frames are damaged by indulgence, and those whose frames are weakened by privation, breed *ad libitum*; while those whose minds have been hardened, strengthened and purified by temperance and toil, are elbowed quietly aside in the unequal press. (360-61)

The problem is not with natural selection per se, but with the aberrant social structures that enable the weak, the lazy, and the racially inferior to survive.²¹

²⁰ Harriet Martineau makes a similar division in her 1854 article, "Idiots Again," identifying these social groups as implicated in most of the problems causing idiocy.

²¹ Greg also decries the fact that "the careless, squalid, unambitious Irishman, fed on potatoes, living in a pig-stye, doting on a superstition, multiplies like rabbits or ephemera: - the frugal, foreseeing, self-respecting, ambitious Scot, stern in his morality, spiritual in his faith, sagacious and disciplined in his intelligence, passes his best years in struggle and in celibacy, marries late, and leaves few behind him." Yet in the next sentence, he argues that quality will win out. "Given a land originally peopled by a thousand Saxons and a thousand Celts, - and in a dozen generations, five sixths of the population would be Celts, but five sixths of the property, of the power, of the intellect, would belong to the one sixth of the Saxons that remained" (361).

The answer, Greg suggests, could lie in selected breeding for the amelioration of the race, although he concedes that there is little popular or political support for such a program. His idea is intriguing, though, in that he advocates selected breeding to restore the notion of natural selection (361-2), a contradiction which he does not seem to recognize (instead presuming, no doubt, that there could be little dispute over which class deserves to be perpetuated).

Greg's use of Darwinian theory and his application of the idea of degeneration was widely circulated and received a good deal of approval from his contemporaries, not least of all from Darwin himself, who refers to the issue of natural selection in humans as "ably discussed" by Greg in his 1871 work, The Descent of Man (130), and then reiterates Greg's points in his own discussion. Darwin's theory was, given this evidence, quickly applied to the social issues described by Mayhew and Beames. The anxiety expressed by social writers such as Hollingshead and Morgan, and later Cantlie and Fothergill, was easily adapted to discussions of biological degeneration. More and more frequently, idiocy was drawn into the narrative as a prime example of what happens when a hereditary line enters the path of devolution.

In Henry Maudsley's 1879 article, "Materialism and its Lessons," published in the Fortnightly Review, the links between intellectual disability and racial degeneracy are explicit.²² Maudsley's aim in writing his piece is to oppose materialist theories to "spiritualist" notions (i.e., those founded in religious thought) of moral and intellectual development, arguing that moral depravity is a

²² Maudsley was one of the foremost medical voices of his day. For a brief overview of his life and work, which included his editorship of the Journal of Mental Science, see Trevor Turner's "Henry Maudsley: Psychiatrist, Philosopher, and Entrepreneur," in Bynum et al's The Anatomy of Madness.

physiological concern. Not only is it often determined by material factors, but it also has consequences for later generations: "it was not," he writes, "[. . .] a meaningless menace that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation; it was an actual insight into the natural law by which degeneracy increases through generations - by which one generation reaps the wrongs that its fathers have sown, as its children in turn will reap the wrong which it has sown" (255).²³ From the threat of degeneration, Maudsley develops the idea of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny expressed a decade earlier by Down. European brains, he argues, stand in relation to bushmen brains as they do to microcephalic idiots, a comparison he returns to several times.²⁴ Maudsley also recalls Howe's "musical instrument" analogy: the savage brain, like the idiot brain, is a poor instrument rendering, to the most sensitive touch, at best "a few feeble intellectual notes and a very rude and primitive sort of moral feeling" (253). However, with the threat of degeneracy in England, the nation risks producing sterile idiots not only reminiscent of Bushmen, but in fact actual regressions to that state:

If we were to have a person born in this country with a brain of no higher development than that of the low savage - destitute, that is, of the higher nervous substrata of thought and feeling - if, in fact, our far remote prehistoric ancestor were to come to life among us now - we should have more or less of an imbecile, who could not compete on equal terms with other persons, but must perish, unless charitably cared for, just as the

²³ This particular biblical allusion was popular among those arguing the existence of degeneration: recall G. E. Shuttleworth's use of it in his "Intemperance as a Cause of Idiocy." The gendered association of intellectual disability here is interesting. It is the depraved father who sows the seeds of degeneracy, although the feeble- or weak-minded woman was to eventually become the dominant image associated with racial decline (Saunders 291). Thus, while degeneracy is carried within men, it is perpetuated through women.

²⁴ Maudsley also claims that "it is a well-known fact that many savages cannot count beyond five, and that they have no words in their vocabulary for the higher qualities of human nature" - claims often made of European "idiots," and indeed used in the diagnosis of idiocy (cf. Neugebauer, Clarke).

native Australian perishes when he comes into contact and competition with the white man. (254)

Such evolutionary regressive births must arise, he argues, from "hereditary antecedents": "in fact," he argues, "a person may succeed in manufacturing insanity in his progeny by a persistent disuse of moral feeling" (256). Maudsley uses this argument to claim that the medical theory of materialism reinforces moral behavior, perhaps more so than more conventionally religious moral approaches do, as it poses the threat of racial degeneration in this world along with loss of one's soul in the next.

Other articulations of degeneration and recapitulation are evident throughout the literature of the period. James Cantlie argued in 1885 that healthy Londoners were no more than second-generation town-dwellers, and that it was impossible to find a fifth-generation cockney simply because a family dwelling in the city for that long suffered from what he calls "urbomorbus," or "city disease" (24-5). Cantlie traces this morbid condition to the foul air of the city; for long-term urban dwellers, vigour is lost from the constitution and the family line continues until the offspring are the inevitable sterile idiots. But before they became sterile, these cockney families produce a generation or two of physically weak, feeble-minded offspring, marked in Cantlie's descriptions by a expressionless "solemnity" that telegraphed a lack of mental vigour.²⁵

Cantlie's claims were hyperbolic, but both popular support and professional interest were evident. Writes Jones, "In the 1880s and 1890s the theory

²⁵ In an interesting variant on inter-generational politics, Cantlie claims that it is the young of London who are prematurely old, shaping manners for their elders and telling them how to behave, whereas "it is the old, not the young people who are enthusiastic" (49); he concludes his lament on the "good behavior, . . . fine manners, . . . apathy [and] perfect morals" of the young generation (opposed to the "ambition, energy, enthusiasm and love of enterprise" of their elders) by observing that "it is beyond prophecy to guess even what the rising degeneration will grow into, what the Empire will become after they have got charge of it" (52).

received widespread middle-class support and was given authoritative backing by Booth, Marshall, Longstaffe, and Llewellyn Smith.²⁶ Cantlie's excesses were eliminated, but the interpretations of these more eminent writers were hardly less cataclysmic" (128).²⁷

J. Milner Fothergill, in "The Town Dweller" (1889), follows Cantlie in spirit but travels further from degeneration to explicit claims of recapitulation. As with other writers, Fothergill conflates physical and moral degeneration, and notes that cities breed both. "While the rustic remains an Anglo-Dane, his cousin in London is smaller and darker, showing a return to the Celtic-Iberian race" (113). The reversion can go back even further, he argues. "The cockney," writes Fothergill, "reared under unfavourable circumstances, manifests a decided reversion to an earlier and lowlier ethnic form. In appearance, the East-End, to the mind of the writer, bears a strong resemblance as to figure and feature, to the small and ugly Erse who are raised in the poorer districts of Ireland" (114). He concludes that "this tendency in town dwellers to degenerate on the lines of reversion to older racial types, has an interest of its own for the anthropologist. While the deterioration, both physical and mental, of town bred organisms, is a

²⁶ See, for instance, Charles Booth's Life and Labour of the London Poor in 17 volumes (1902); Alfred Marshall's "The Housing of the London Poor: 1) Where to house them" Contemporary Review 45 (Feb, 1844); G. B. Longstaffe's "Rural Depopulation," Journal of the Royal Statistical Society 56 (Sept. 1893); and H. Llewellyn Smith's and Vaughan Nash's The Story of the Dock Strike (1889).

²⁷ There were literary expressions of this notion, as well. In Margaret Harkness's novel Captain Lobe (published in 1889 under the pseudonym "John Law" and republished as In Darkest London in 1891, capitalizing on the success of Stanley's In Darkest Africa, which appeared the previous year), Harkness writes, "The thing that strikes one most about East End life is its soddenness; . . . hunger and drink will in time produce a race of sensationless idiots" (qtd. in Ledger, 79). Gillian Beer claims that in Harkness' novel, "the voice of the missing link is itself heard, perhaps for the first time in fiction," and that it is also the voice of "the present-day poor and the handicapped, those ignored by a factitious 'civilization'" (Forging 37).

matter not meant for the philanthropist, but for the social economist" (114).²⁸ For writers like Cantlie and Fothergill, idiocy is one more sign of a race declining due to moral and physical weaknesses. Their solutions are sometimes odd (Cantlie was satirized relentlessly for advocating that clean air be pumped into the city (Greenslade 42)) yet the fears they expressed were common enough to their age.

From the mid-century on, anxieties about urban paupers and racial decline and reversion were growing, and consequently the face of idiocy was acquiring a more threatening aspect. People with intellectual disabilities were constructed as indicators of social and moral degeneration, the evidence of vice. While this construction was not new (recall George Crabbe's portrayal of Ellen Orford's daughter), it was gaining a strength and dominance in the popular and professional imagination that it had not hitherto enjoyed by virtue of its association with racial decline. Idiocy as a concept has never had merely one semiotic meaning; different meanings have always coexisted within the boundaries of the image. However, a contest for dominance was being played out, and in the 1860s the terms defining "the idiot" - a figure both innocent and degenerate - were pulling the image in opposing directions.

The sensation novel, as noted at the start of this chapter, gained popularity in the 1860s by playing with fears of both social and individual insecurity and gesturing to the sinister world masked by Victorian respectability. Mary

²⁸ In a telling move, Fothergill dedicates his book "To the shades of the Norse rovers"; later in his text, he begins a paragraph "Assuming the Norse to be the highest type of mankind . . ." (112). Fothergill was not alone in admiring Norse culture in this period - William Morris comes to mind as a contemporary who expressed a similar interest. However, I am not aware of Morris or other writers making claims comparable to Fothergill's for the evolutionary supremacy of the Norse rover.

Elizabeth Braddon was, with Wilkie Collins, the most popular of the "sensation" novelists. Her novel Aurora Floyd was published in 1863, the same year as Collins's No Name (discussed at the start of this chapter) and Oliphant's Salem Chapel (discussed in the previous chapter), at the height of the sensational novel's period of popularity. It was also only four years after Darwin's Origin of the Species, and three years before Down's "Observations on an Ethnic Classification of Idiots." Braddon's novel - like those by Collins and Oliphant - indicates an increasing anxiety over intellectual disability.

In Aurora Floyd, Steeve Hargreaves, the eventual villain of the piece, is described as a "softy" (135). The softy, we are told, had lost his mental capacities in a horse-riding accident, although the term "softy" more frequently seems to designate a congenital disorder,²⁹ and indeed Hargreaves has many congenital defects. His first appearance is inauspicious.

He was a squat, broad-shouldered fellow, with a big head, a pale haggard face, - a face whose ghastly pallor seemed almost unnatural, - reddish brown eyes, and bushy, sandy eyebrows, which formed a penthouse over those sinister-looking eyes. He was the sort of man who is generally called *repulsive*, - a man from whom you recoil with a feeling of instinctive dislike, which is, no doubt, both wicked and unjust; for we have no right to take objection to a man because he has an ugly glitter in his eyes, and shaggy tufts of red hair meeting on the bridge of his nose, and big splay feet, which seem to crush and destroy whatever comes in their way. (134)

Of course, it turns out that the instinctive feeling of dislike is the correct response

²⁹ For instance, "softy" is used to designate a congenital disorder in the case of Gervase Piercey in The Cuckoo in the Nest, Margaret Oliphant's 1892 novel of a degenerate aristocratic family being invaded by the social-climber Patience (Patty) Hewitt, a bar-maid from the local tavern where Gervase imbibes.

to the softy, and when Aurora, the heroine newly married to the owner of Mellish Park, Steeve's home since his childhood, finds him kicking her dog for no reason, she horsewhips him and has him expelled from the estate. The novel articulates what Barrett calls an "aristo-ecclesiastic" response to the softy, the same attitude which was behind the creation of educational asylums, but counters it in the following paragraphs with examples of his viciousness. Hargreaves is thus denied status as an "innocent": his incapacity is after all apparently derived from a misadventure. However, his degeneracy is innate, and his mental weakness becomes an explicit marker, along with his repulsive appearance, of that degeneracy.

Braddon constructs Hargreaves as a bestial idiot without hope of redemption. Paraphrasing Fothergill, we can read the softy not as a problem for philanthropy, but one for social engineering. Janet Saunders notes that the later Victorian period was to construct the idiot, especially "feeble-minded person," as a criminal (276-77). Hargreaves is the idiot as a criminal, depraved and dangerous; according to Braddon's biographer Robert Lee Wolff, Hargreaves is "one of the most notorious murderers in Victorian fiction" (150). When he is expelled from the Mellish estate, he takes up residence in the town, where his deviance alerts no-one. He is far closer to the norm. He is eventually hanged for a murder that he tries to pin on Aurora.

Braddon plays with the image of the idiot by relocating Hargreave's deficiency in an accident and thus denying innocence to the character. Twelve years later, in his 1875 novel, The Law and the Lady, Wilkie Collins represents Ariel, the ironically named cousin of the brilliant but mad and morally corrupt cripple

Misserimus Dexter, as clearly "idiotic" and unabashedly subhuman. She speaks rarely, to little purpose. Her countenance is stoic (similar to the "solemn" countenance identified with degenerate cockneys by James Cantlie). On her first appearance in the novel, the narrator (& heroine) notes "the girl's round, fleshy, inexpressive face, her rayless and colourless eyes, her coarse nose and heavy chin. A creature half alive; an imperfectly developed animal in shapeless form, clad in a man's pilot-jacket, and treading in a man's heavy laced boots: with nothing but an old red flannel petticoat, and a broken comb in her frowsy flaxen hair, to tell us that she was a woman. . ." (210).

Ariel is inextricably linked to Dexter, her brilliant, insane and legless cousin who flies about his room in his wheelchair or, in fits of exuberance, walks on his hands. In the mystery that forms the core of the novel, Dexter is the villain, precipitating the victim's death by relaying to her that her husband does not love her in an attempt to gain her love, as well as entry to her bed. Dexter's open expressions of sexuality mark him as degenerate; interestingly, Collins' plays Dexter's physical disability against stereotype at first, the narrator marveling at his vitality and energy, which only retrospectively become signs of his depravity.³⁰

Ariel remains sympathetic, despite the discourse of degeneracy and bestiality used to construct her by both Dexter and the narrator. Her commitment to Dexter is repeatedly noted in the novel, with the protagonist, Valeria Woodville, finding

³⁰ Collins' biographer Catherine Peters, after noting that Dexter embodies the "dangers of the imaginative and creative inner life," suggests that the "extraordinary portraits of Dexter and his willing slave Ariel . . . may come as much from opium visions as from an imaginative extension of reality" (374). I'm not convinced that Collins would have needed opium to imagine these characters; indeed, the contemporary discourse of degeneracy would have encouraged this sort of portrayal of disability.

in her devotion to her cousin signs that Dexter may not be a villain: "Could a man who was hopelessly and entirely wicked, have inspired such devoted attachment to him as Dexter had inspired in [Ariel] . . ." (303). However, despite her obeisance to him, Dexter is vividly conscious of her deficiencies and describes his relation with Ariel to Valeria in terms that we must by now recognize as consistent with notions of idiocy in the 1870s: "The dormant intelligence of my curious cousin is like the dormant sound in a musical instrument. I play upon it - and it answers to my touch. She likes being played upon" (212-13). Ariel is the poor instrument referred to by Howe and Maudsley, although Dexter, in his arrogance, believes that he plays elegantly on this instrument. Ariel is also later compared by Valeria to a savage when Ariel tries to communicate information to her: "She tried to explain, and failed to find the words. She showed me by imitation, as a savage might have shown me, what she meant" (302). Collins' description of Ariel neatly accords with the terms employed by Maudsley and others to apprehend intellectual disability.

When Dexter is sent to a madhouse at the end of the novel, Ariel, his shadow, attends him there, even though, as an idiot, she is not supposed to be admitted. After he dies, Ariel escapes the madhouse, seeks out her cousin's grave, and dies on it on a cold winter night. The image recalls that of Southey's "Idiot," wringing pathos from its audience. But there is a significant difference: Southey's idiot follows his mother to the grave; Ariel Dexter follows her morally and physically degenerate cousin. Innocence is displaced by degeneracy; maternal love by unregulated sexuality (with, in Ariel's case, hints of incestuous desire). While the narratives about intellectual disability may have changed little, the significance assigned to the condition has moved dramatically.

Steeve Hargreaves and Ariel mark new strategies for representing intellectual disability. Participating in the broader anxiety over degeneracy that characterised much scientific and political discourse, they suggest that the idea of intellectual disability was acquiring a new social significance: the idiot was the failed human, a threat to racial purity and to economic health, a scapegoat for the inability of Victorian society to manage the problems of immigration and urbanization. Toward the latter portions of the nineteenth century, the image of the idiot is becoming a cipher for a broad range of apparently degenerative characteristics and behavior, including unlicensed sexual desire, economic ineptitude, and criminal inclinations. It was also becoming a representative for that part of England which was not prosperous, not successfully middle-class. Idiocy was fast becoming a mark of poverty and pauperism. This new significance was not acquired immediately, and it was not absolute: even in the image of Ariel (though not of Hargreaves) can we perceive some obeisance to the idea of the holy innocent. But the gradual assumption of more ominous meanings can be traced through the latter half of the nineteenth century. Wordsworth's harmless innocent Johnny Foy became much more difficult to imagine, both because the "innocent" figure lost his "trickster" qualities and because the image of the idiot as degenerate was gaining dominance. The likes of Steeve Hargreaves and Ariel form much more believable and threatening embodiments for the image of idiocy.

7. Conclusion: Idiocy at the End of the Nineteenth Century

"Idiocy" has long been accepted as a stable and non-problematic medical and social category, unworthy of analysis or criticism. Only in the past decade has this attitude begun to change in academia. At the start of this dissertation I established three objectives: the first was to demonstrate that the idea of idiocy is not in fact ahistorical, nor an objective quality of a transcendent idiot, but rather an idea constituted by a number of discourses, some seemingly remote from the individuals designated as idiots. The notion of idiocy acquires and generates meaning in historical context, signifying a range of possible meanings in 1800 but shifting to signify something much more specific in 1880.

My second goal was to demonstrate and analyze this shift in the significance of idiocy over the nineteenth century, and to argue that it is the consequence of material factors leading to the representational and ideological destabilization and the consequent increased ideological significance of the image of the idiot. The destabilized cultural meanings of idiocy can be attributed to changes in the economic structure of English society, the growth of cities and the increase in the poor and working classes, the development of theories of evolution and degeneration, and also the discovery of pedagogical strategies for educating the idiot. Only this last factor is discussed in histories by Kanner and Scheerenberger, although recently writers have adopted a more comprehensive response to the term, as evidenced by the volume of essays edited by David Wright and Anne Digby.

My third objective was to investigate how this shift in meaning over the

nineteenth century effectively reduced the complexity of the notion of idiocy, changing it from an intricate and multivalent sign at the start of the century to a figure primarily signifying degeneration at the end.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, idiocy in Britain was implicated in a wide range of discourses, yet was of relatively minor overt ideological importance. In 1798, when Wordsworth published his poem "The Idiot Boy," he was able to draw on traditional notions of the Christian innocent and the natural fool to make Johnny Foy into a sign of natural beneficence. The idiot boy is associated with both the natural world and a rural female community, both of which are constructed in the poem as irrational but at the same time productive and regenerative. The terms of Wordsworth's representation were hardly uncontested, as many of his critics condemned the poem on the grounds that its subject matter was unpleasant, ridiculous, or repulsive; however, as the poem and its commentators show, the image of idiocy had a wide range of possible interpretations. Certainly most readers were familiar with the idea of idiocy and with individuals who had intellectual disabilities. At the start of the century, people with intellectual disabilities were supported within communities by their families or, if they were paupers, on parish relief programs. Unless they were considered a threat due to unpredictable violent behavior, which was rarely the case, they remained free, albeit at the margins of the community.

Consistent among the range of associations made with idiocy were those identifying it with a "female" intellect that was both irrational and natural. This association, explicit in "The Idiot Boy," is also evident in the writings of Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard on Victor, the "wild boy of Aveyron." Itard describes Victor

within the context of a case study as a psychological and philosophical experiment, as well as an innocent child of nature. In his reports, Itard clearly and repeatedly identifies himself as an authority figure not simply educating Victor but imposing rationality upon him, in distinction to the tasks performed by Mme. Guérin, who is responsible for developing in Victor feelings of pleasure in the company of humans. Victor, the refugee from nature, succeeds happily in Mme. Guérin's lessons, but is both less successful and less happy with Itard's. The role of gender and authority remained of importance in educating idiots; an anonymous reviewer of Edouard Seguin's Traitement moral, hygiène et éducation des idiots observed that while a strong-willed male authority was necessary for the initial education of an idiot, "a milder authority, a half-will in the intermediate times may carry out the plans, [so that] a woman attendant, who knows how to resist the perverse will of the idiot without completely understanding how to enforce her own, is sufficient" ("Review: Traitement"18). The female intellect or will, it seems clear, exists somewhere along a continuum between that of the man and that of the idiot.

An investigation of gender issues is thus critical for an understanding of the idea of idiocy. Assumptions about gender characteristics underlie most, if not all, nineteenth-century representations of idiocy. In men, idiocy is interpreted as a lack, a diminishment that leaves the individual incapable of exercising the privileges of masculinity, and thus strips him of all claims to those privileges. The male idiot is only marginally a man, and is often represented as an adult child, as is the case with Watty Walkinshaw in The Entail, or Dickens' Barnaby Rudge. On the other hand, portrayals of female idiots consistently reduce them to an imagined primal and essential sexuality, undisciplined by rationality and

modesty. George Crabbe's portrayal in "The Borough" of Ellen Orford's daughter - an illegitimate child who, raped or seduced, bears her own illegitimate child - is an aggressive rendition of this idea, but the same associations are evident (although used differently) in George Eliot's Romola and Margaret Oliphant's Salem Chapel. Even when not overtly sexualized, female idiots are often associated with physicality or unrestrained physical appetite; the characters of Mrs. Wragge in Wilkie Collins' No Name and Maggy in Dickens' Little Dorrit are cases in point.

Of course, these gender associations can be manipulated for different purposes; while the gendered associations of idiocy were ideologically useful, they were for much of the nineteenth century not particularly stable images. For instance, feminist renditions of idiots (such as in Elizabeth Gaskell's "Half a Life-Time Ago" and Eliot's Romola) tended to adapt the same associations as writings from the dominant ideological position (such as Galt's The Entail), but for different purposes.

The role of gender is not explicitly developed in Dickens' historical/political novel Barnaby Rudge, yet these gender associations inform the representation of Barnaby and the neo-paternalistic government endorsed by Dickens in the novel. Barnaby Rudge is a complex figure, an innocent-trickster who is perhaps the most prominent "idiot" character in Victorian fiction. However, he is also the culmination, at least in the Victorian period, of the multi-dimensional idiot character. Represented as both an exploited innocent and a political threat, Barnaby's idiocy is linked with the political danger posed by the Gordon Rioters in the novel, and by the Chartists at the time of the novel's composition.

Dickens' use of Barnaby as representative of one sort of political unrest, and his neo-paternalist resolution, mark the entry of the idiot into the political discourse of the Victorian era. Dickens' novel politicizes idiocy by making it representative of an entire class of people - primarily the poor and working classes - who need intelligent, firm and benevolent governing. In so politicizing the image, he confers upon it new ideological significance.

This new significance is not just the consequence of Dickens' imagination, but rather a range of factors, including, of course, the growing power of the middle classes and the need to articulate a new set of relationships between the classes. Another important influence was the development in France and Switzerland of strategies that succeeded in educating the idiot, a humanitarian project wholeheartedly endorsed by Dickens and other prominent figures such as Harriet Martineau and John Conolly.

The late 1840s and the 1850s saw the growth of an asylum system dedicated to the education and improvement of the idiot. This endeavour was one expression of the neo-paternalist project advocated by Dickens, although he also lobbied for greater state involvement in building pauper asylums. Early voluntary asylums, run by subscription, relied heavily on charitable donations (Gladstone 141) and thus had to encourage philanthropic gifts to support their work. Motivated by their belief in the educability (and indeed, the "reclamation" to humanity) of the idiot, asylum proponents sought public support by appealing to the Victorian religious sensibility. They often relied heavily on the image of the holy innocent, the idiot favoured by God, to stimulate the philanthropic impulse. The notion of the "innocent" has a long history, and is connected to the

Christian "holy fool." However, the mid-Victorian version of the innocent stripped the "holy fool" of its trickster-like qualities - qualities evident in Walter Scott's David Gellatley in Waverley, and George Eliot's Jacob Faux in Brother Jacob - and reproduced instead a non-threatening creature whose function was to elicit the pity necessary to garner funds for asylums. The mid-Victorian innocent was an empty figure, requiring the assistance of philanthropic donors and heroically dedicated doctors and teachers in order to acquire a human identity.

But the innocent idiot, emptied of meaning and volition of his or her own, became increasingly the repository of anxiety as well as being an object of benevolence and charity. With increasing urbanization and poverty, apparent threats to public health, and the development of theories of degeneration and recapitulation, the image of the idiot assumed a more threatening aspect: that of the degenerate. The comparison to earlier figures is startling. While Dickens' Barnaby Rudge was in need of guidance, he was not in himself evil. By the 1860s, though, a new discourse flourished in which the idiot was the spawn of moral depravity and poor social hygiene. The idiot was more firmly located as a product of the poor and working classes, although occasionally writers would also point to a degenerate aristocracy. The image constructed by educational asylum proponents was of an idiot that could be reclaimed as human; degenerationists countered this assertion with their own, that the idiot not only could not be reclaimed, but that he (and more often, "she") threatened to bring the whole of humanity - or in this case, England - down to his (and her) level. Degeneration theory posited idiocy as both biological and moral threats. Male idiots were likely to become criminals; women were promiscuous and fecund, contributing more and more degenerates to the population while the sober and

upright middle classes declined.

This notion of the idiot as degenerate prevailed and, although other notions did not disappear, they retreated to the margins of the discourse of idiocy. From its fluid and multi-dimensional state at the beginning of the century, the image of the idiot had become comparatively fixed and homogenized.

My analysis of the idea of idiocy goes no further than the initial articulations of degeneration theory, stopping short of investigating the political response to fears of degeneration. My rationale for this is twofold. First, my focus throughout has been on the shifting ideological and semiotic significance of idiocy in the nineteenth-century; degeneration theory marks the end-point of this shift. Secondly, a full history of the consequences of degeneration theory moves well beyond the nineteenth century and through to the Second World War; it was only after the horror of Nazi exterminations in the name of eugenics that degeneration theory and the eugenic enterprise were abandoned. As a result, continuing this dissertation to encompass the full period during which the consequences of degeneration theory continued to be felt by people with intellectual disabilities would have risked tripling its size. Indeed, segregated asylums remained the norm for years after the discrediting of eugenics; only since the 1970s have custodial asylums begun to close their doors and disappear.

However, a brief overview of some of the more immediate late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century consequences of the identification of the idiot as degenerate is in order. To start with, the association of idiocy with degeneracy

contributed to a broadening and refining of the concept "idiocy." With the Idiots Act of 1886, institutions formalized a ranking of "idiots" and "imbeciles," the latter exhibiting a higher cognitive capacity and thus showing greater promise for educational efforts; indeed, it was these "imbeciles" that asylums targeted as those most likely to benefit from the educational opportunities they provided, and the term had certainly been in use for some time.¹ However, fears of degeneracy provided the catalyst for the creation of a third category, the feeble-minded. This group of people was thought to be especially dangerous as they could pass as normal - holding odd jobs, having families - while still posing a threat to the health and order of English society, by such groups as the Charity Organisation Society (C.O.S.), and to the English race, by eugenicists such as Francis Galton and his followers.

The C.O.S., founded in 1869 to organize and assign charitable assistance throughout London, formed something of a "new urban gentry," according to Stedman Jones (269), and was extremely unpopular among working people for its moral interpretation of the causes of poverty. The involvement of the C.O.S. with the construction of the "feeble-minded" can be traced to the Education Act of 1870, which established a national system of elementary schools, meaning that for the first time many poor and working class children appeared in formal classrooms. Many of the children, it appeared, were "suffering from a variety of physical and/or mental problems which prevented them from working well in

¹ Barrett suggests that "representatives of the voluntary idiot asylums were keen to create other categories apart from that of 'idiot' (which was the only permissible term under the Lunatics Act of 1845) . . . so that parents would not be reluctant to send a child to a voluntary idiot asylum for training on account that he or she would have to be stigmatised as an 'idiot.' In short, . . . it was not their intention to make precise distinctions between different types of retardation, but instead to ensure as far as possible that it was understood by all that the voluntary idiot asylums were open to a wide band of abilities and conditions" (162).

school" (Simmons 388). A Royal Commission on the Blind, the Deaf and Dumb, and Afflicted Classes was set up in 1885, in part at the urging of the C.O.S.; the commission found many children "unable to cope with schools because of mental deficiency," necessitating another committee to investigate "feeble-minded" or "semi-imbecile" children and adults (Simmons 388-9).

The C.O.S. involved itself in the issue of the feeble-minded in elementary schools because it believed that these children were "all probable social failures - now at the child-stage" (C.O.S., The Feeble-Minded Child and Adult, 1893; qtd. in Simmons 389). Indeed, according to Simmons, the term "feeble-minded" was coined by Sir Charles Trevelyan in an 1876 motion before the C.O.S., of which he was a Council member (388). Szreter observes that "the C.O.S. . . . had a long-standing interest in devising the most efficient and appropriate care for the feeble-minded as these were disproportionately represented among its destitute clientage" (205-6). In her retrospective of the development of the C.O.S., Helen Bosanquet singles out this group as being of special significance:

Another class of afflicted persons for whom the Society has worked strenuously down to the present day consisted of those known forty years ago as "Improvable Idiots"; and with respect to these it has been the pioneer of a great movement which followed almost exactly on the lines laid down by it. The problem of the Feeble-minded is one which has only slowly differentiated itself from those of the lunatic and the idiot. . . . (195).

By the turn of the century, the C.O.S. and others were calling for the permanent

support of the feeble-minded both for their own good and that of society²; to this end, the National Association for the Care of the Feeble-minded was formed in 1895 (Bosanquet 202). The C.O.S. solution to the threat of the feeble-minded was segregation and control, a program put into action by Mary Dendy, a prominent C.O.S. activist (and the sister of Bosanquet), at her Sandlebridge Boarding Schools, opened in 1902 (Jackson).

As Szreter notes, the ideas informing Dendy's institution had "strong affinities" with Francis Galton's theory of eugenics (206), another school of thought that influenced the fate of people with intellectual disabilities. Although eugenicists were not an organized group like the C.O.S. (the Eugenics Education Society not being formed until 1907), many proponents of eugenic beliefs were members of what N. G. Annan described as Britain's "intellectual aristocracy" and wielded a great deal of authority in intellectual and academic circles.³ Eugenicists argued that society should be meritocratic, one in which ability - measured in part by intelligence - would be rewarded by power and authority. But while in an ideal society humanity would be constantly improving, according to natural selection as understood by the Victorians, in London at the end of the nineteenth century the teeming poor, the unfit and the feeble-minded threatened to become the norm. While Darwinian theory argued that evolution occurred by the survival of the fittest, Galton, Darwin's cousin, worried that the

² In 1910, in the first issue of Eugenics Review, A. F. Tredgold wrote that segregated labour colonies would protect "the feeble-minded against a certain section of society and protect society against the feeble-minded" (qtd. in Wright, "Study" 58). This rationale was later reiterated in the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913. Tredgold was, with Mary Dendy, one of the primary figures arguing that feeble-mindedness was a permanent and unalterable rather than a temporary and improvable condition (Jackson 171).

³ Annan identifies a group of families bearing the illustrious names Galton, Darwin, Huxley, Stephens, Haldane, Keynes, Macaulay, Arnold, Trevelyan and Booth, among others, who had intermarried and sustained their status as intellectual elites over two or more generations.

startling fecundity of London's obviously unfit working classes and paupers suggested otherwise. According to Galton and many of his contemporaries, the English race was threatened by the very success of its weakest, rather than being ensured by the virility of its best (Pick 192; Simmons 394). Galton investigated human heredity with the intent "to learn how far history may have shown the practicality of supplanting inefficient human stock by better strains, and to consider whether it might not be our duty to do so by such efforts as may be reasonable, thus exerting ourselves to further the ends of evolution more rapidly and with less distress than if events were left to their own course" (1), a process that he labelled "eugenics".⁴

Donald MacKenzie argues that Galton's theory is an intrinsic part of the "making of the professional class" (a text which, he laments, has yet to be written) (26). In effect, Galtonian eugenics is informed not only by a desire to apply "the practice and experience of the intellectual aristocracy . . . onto nature" (33) but also as a means of ensuring "class reproduction" - that is, ensuring that one's middle-class status is not threatened even if one does not have "real capitalist wealth" (27). The large numbers of apparently feeble-minded people posed a danger to a functioning meritocracy: the numbers of poor threatened to overrun the more desirable middle classes. Notably, "feeble-mindedness" was constantly defined in terms of morality: men were insolvent and inebriate criminals while women were promiscuous bearers of illegitimate children (Saunders, Simmons), notions which would eventually be extended (or refined) to the idea of moral

⁴ Writes Galton, "We greatly want a brief word to express the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man, takes cognisance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had. The word *eugenics* would sufficiently express the idea; it is at least a neater word and a more generalised one than *viriculture*, which I once ventured to use" (17).

imbecility. Segregation was necessary both to maintain social order, as desired by the C.O.S., and to ensure the biological health of the race, as the eugenicists wished.

In 1904, after much lobbying by the C.O.S. and eugenicists, a Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-Minded was appointed; it reported its findings in 1908. The news was ominous:

Of the gravity of the present state of things, there is no doubt. The mass of facts that we have collected, the statements of our witnesses, and our own personal visits and investigations compel the conclusion that there are numbers of mentally defective persons whose training is neglected, over whom no sufficient control is exercised, and whose wayward and irresponsible lives are productive of crime and misery, of much injury and mischief to themselves and to others, and of much continuous expenditure wasteful to the community and to individual families. (qtd. in Davey 2)

Such claims as the commissioners made were not likely to be ignored. After a further round of lobbying and parliamentary amendments, on July 19, 1913, the Mental Deficiency Act passed Parliament by a vote of 180-3. It took effect on April 1, 1914 (Simmons 397).

The Act defined four levels of "mental defectives" - idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons, and moral imbeciles (the fourth category being at the recommendation of the Royal Commission). By the start of the twentieth century, then, the concept of idiocy had been both refined and broadened. The group of people once indicated by the broad term "idiot" had been divided and ranked into four levels of disability. The term that replaced "idiot" as a general

designation, "mental defective," also included "feeble-minded people" and "moral imbeciles," people who may well have escaped being labeled "idiots" sixty years earlier.⁵

Mental defectives at all levels could, under appropriate circumstances, be committed to segregated homes or asylums. In the words of the Act,

(1) A person who is a defective may be dealt with under this Act by being sent to or placed in an institution for defectives or placed under guardianship -

(a) at the instance of his parent or guardian, if he is an idiot or imbecile, or at the insistence of his parent if, though not an idiot or imbecile, he is under the age of twenty-one; or

(b) if in addition to being defective he is a person -

(i) who is found neglected, abandoned, or without visible means of support, or cruelly treated; or

(ii) who is found guilty of any criminal offense, or who is ordered or found liable to be ordered to be sent to a certified industrial school; or

(iii) who is undergoing imprisonment (except imprisonment under civil process), or penal servitude, or is undergoing detention in a place of detention by order of a court, or in a reformatory or industrial school, or in an inebriate reformatory or who is detained in an

⁵ The Act defined these terms as follows: idiots were "persons so deeply defective in mind from birth or from an early age as to be unable to guard themselves against common physical dangers"; imbeciles were "persons in whose case there exists from birth or from an early age mental defectiveness not amounting to idiocy, yet so pronounced that they are incapable of managing themselves or their affairs, or, in the case of children, of being taught to do so"; feeble-minded persons were "persons in whose case there exists from birth or from an early age mental defectiveness not amounting to imbecility, yet so pronounced that they require care, supervision, and control for their own protection or for the protection of others, or, in the case of children, that they by reason of such defectiveness appear to be permanently incapable of receiving proper benefit from the instruction of ordinary schools"; finally, moral imbeciles were "persons who from an early age display some permanent mental defect coupled with strong vicious or criminal propensities on which punishment has little or no deterrent effect" (qtd in Davey 31-34).

- asylum for lunatics or a criminal lunatic asylum; or
- (iv) who is a habitual drunkard within the meaning of the Inebriates Acts, 1879 to 1900; or
- (v) in whose case such notice has been given by the local education authority as is hereinafter in this section mentioned; or
- (vi) who is in receipt of poor relief at the time of giving birth to an illegitimate child or when pregnant of such child. (qtd. in Davey 35-37)

The broad powers assumed by the Mental Deficiency Act reflect the concerns of those who endorsed degeneration theory - which, as Szreter notes, garnered popular support because it provided a "suitably scientific-sounding sanction for a negative attitude towards the entitlements of the poor" (102), rather than for any presumed scientific accuracy. The beliefs entrenched in the legal phrases would dominate notions of intellectual disability for the next thirty years, and would restrict the lives of people with intellectual disabilities until after the Second World War.

The cultural development of the idea of idiocy is a much-neglected area of study, but one with profound implications. As C. F. Goodey has argued, the idea of idiocy lies at the foundation of what it is to be human - or not human. When John Locke identifies the rational mind as the basic quality denoting a "human," he constructs as its alternative the non-human idiot. Idiocy, suggests Goodey, has long been ignored by the academy - even while madness has been favoured with innumerable volumes of study, research, criticism and analysis - because "the confrontational psychosis of the academy and the professions demands both the construction and the personal denial of an inherent deficit in

intelligence" ("Psychopolitics" 95). The fear of idiocy, its necessary denial, motivates academic neglect.

Yet, as a culturally determined identity, idiocy warrants our study; its history is the history of rationality and intelligence, of nature and gender, of class and oppression. And, for people with intellectual disabilities - or people identified in this way, at any rate - the study of the ideological construction and application of the category "idiot," and its various contemporary manifestations, is critical. The threats posed by eugenic beliefs are far from dead, enjoying a healthy existence and substantial funding in the Human Genome Project. And society is all too willing to ignore the rights of people with intellectual disabilities, treating them as fundamentally less human than others, as the Canadian media response to the murder of Tracy Latimer suggests. However, there seems to be a new interest in intellectual disability, if work in the last decade is any evidence. Perhaps the idea of intellectual disability is about to experience another shift in ideological significance. Should this be the case, it becomes all the more important that the notion of the ahistorical, essential idiot - or, for that matter, "intellectual disabled person" - be laid to rest.

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