

Chapter 4: *Poor Miss Finch*

Greek philosophers had called eyes “the windows of the mind.” In *Poor Miss Finch* Collins is interested in exploring what happens when those windows are shuttered by “catarrhactes,” fasteners, barring from the mind sight of the external world. His portrait of Lucilla shows that the blind are not necessarily barred from experiences that sighted persons enjoy and that seeing (optics) is not the same as vision that involves understanding and appreciation. His representation accepts that perception is an activity of the mind that affects self-identity. That is, his novel is testing theories of visual perception. This purpose, generally, critics had failed to understand. So it pleased Collins to receive, belatedly, some favourable comment. In 1884 he wrote to Paul Hamilton Hayne:

In what you so kindly say of my books, the reference to *Poor Miss Finch* especially pleases me. English readers in general have never done me justice in the case of this story. In Germany I hear that they go to the other extreme, and rank *Poor Miss Finch* as the best of all my works, with the one exception of *The Woman in White*. (*Letters* 470)

At home the *Athenaeum's* review of *Poor Miss Finch* had complained that Collins “does not add the analysis of human nature. He is no ‘psychologist’... All that Mr Collins apparently attempts in his actors is to secure certain definite individuality” (Williams 193). The reviewer found the heroine “such a limp lay-figure, that neither does the lover who nearly loses her win our sympathy, nor the villain who nearly deceives her arouse our indignation”(193). According to the *Athenaeum*, Collins had written “with no other object than to amuse” (194). The *Canadian Monthly and National Review* also was unimpressed. Collins, it reported, “does not trouble himself about psychology, subjective analysis, or the how and the why of individual character” (Unsigned Review, *Canadian Monthly* 200). I argue that the merit of Collins’ story is that he tended to observe more than philosophise, and replaced the method of deduction

from assumed principles with a study of character in the context of the physical and social environment--and of all the relations of a surrounding Nature. On that foundation, inductively, yet not entirely free of introspection, he built up a portrait of his character's mind. That is, his *is* a psychological study, going far beyond amusing diversion to offer close and informed analysis in an exceptional case of (temporarily) gained sight that will question assumptions about the self, about knowledge, the relationship between the senses, and between the senses and the processes of the brain to inform our understanding. Collins *is* concerned with details of individual behaviour. For example, in constructing a blind heroine Collins shows that her apparent "selfishness" is the result of her condition. Lucilla Finch is at the centre of her restricted range of perceptions. She can have little or no concept, for instance, of space or shape outside of her body's reach, and little sense of distance outside of time. As her experience is determined by *physical connection*, so those experiences influence the shaping of her personality. In consequence her "selfishness," which has a physiological basis, should not be judged as if it were part of her *moral* character. She is physically "self" centred, not selfishly actuated by self-interest. Nor should it be supposed that Collins is showing support for the "mechanical" view of determinism that demands how things "must" operate. Lucilla's adaptations to cancel the handicap of blindness make problematic any simplistic explanation of her behaviour independent of her physical condition.

Lucilla is shown to be chiefly informed by her sense of touch which is at arm's length and forward or to the side, not behind. Her physical directness matches, and seems to determine, the directness of her behaviour. Helen Keller defined a straight line in terms of her direct action, thus: "When I have something to do that must not be set aside, I

feel as if I were going forward in a straight line bound to arrive somewhere, or go on forever without swerving to the right or to the left" (quoted von Senden 39). Collins applies the reverse psycho-physical linkage when he makes Lucilla behave precipitately. What may be "seen" as her impetuosity can be understood simply as a projection of forward movement.

The reviewer for *The Athenaeum* is wrong, too, about the lover and the villain failing to arouse sympathy and indignation. Oscar's character is depicted as a cross between a tiger and a lamb, "a compound of anomalies" (49). He has been "unserved," his personality dislocated by the disgrace of a false accusation of murder, so demeaning that he has felt forced to repudiate his name and seek retreat in the country. He is so insecure he fears to be seen lest he be recognised (19, 20) so that, even before physical disfigurement, Lucilla's blindness must seem an advantage to him. Nugent is a character self-divided, torn between desire and loyalty to his twin whose nature complements his own. His self-division earns both pity and contempt when the potentially heroic figure, driven by an excess of unreasoning passion, betrays his twin and himself. Collins is projecting a consistent pattern for all three leading characters, and it is not only the blind heroine who experiences a crisis in self-image that arouses sympathy.

Though a reviewer credits Collins with originality in his concept of a heroine and with "evidence of observation and research," he/ she goes on to complain "the heroine fails to charm" (Unsigned Review, *Saturday Review* 196). The gist of the argument is that it is acceptable to misrepresent blindness for artistic purposes and claims, "Fidelity is, after all, not the foundation of all fiction" (197). The reviewer's taste is for "the work of art that suggests to us bright impressions and graceful fancies"

(197). That is, the attack is against the realism acknowledged in Collins' fiction. But as I have already pointed out, Collins repeatedly asserts that fiction is founded on facts (e.g. *Man and Wife* 5,7). These days P.D. James declares "a novel that lacks scientific credibility loses its power" (Address to the Royal College of Medicine, October 2002, quoted in Wilkie Collins Society newsletter, winter 2002). In *Poor Miss Finch* Collins again strives for accuracy in his depiction of sensory deprivation. In the dedication he explains, "the attempt has been made to appeal to an interest of another kind [from the ideal and sentimental point of view] by exhibiting blindness as it really is" (xxxiii). His novel, he claims, will not be romanticised as elsewhere in fiction and drama where blind people feature. So, although it was his common practice to adapt his novels for the theatre, always Collins refused to adapt this novel, with the result that he was doubly angry when an "idiot" (*Letters* 362), without permission of the writer, attempted to stage *Poor Miss Finch*. Collins had known the novel was not suited for the theatre for he understood that no realistic representation of blindness was achievable from a sighted actress because the sensory system operates as a complex of interconnections--something blind Jonathan Hull understood when, recently, he recorded his own experience of blindness:

to obtain insight into the manoeuvrability problem of another mode of cognition it is not enough to delete the faculty most immediately affected (in our case, sight). One must allow the ramifications of the mode to be experienced by deleting a second sense (touch) showing how the nature of the second sense, and its usefulness within the mode as a whole, undergoes change. Touch is not the same for the sighted person as it is for the blind person. Deleting sight but leaving touch untouched gives a false impression because touch is affected when sight is deleted. (Hull 83)

Collins' efforts to represent blindness accurately compromise the expectations of moralists (like the *Saturday Review's* reporter) whose critical theory (reflected in the words "bright" and "graceful") is idealistic.

The reviewer is reliant on the out-dated theory of impressing the brain from an external stimulus and the moral idealism is an extension of Idealism, the philosophy that accepted that our perceptions are real enough and part of our created constitution. Collins' "realism" shows that he has moved on to a mind-based (not sense-based) understanding of perception. Writing for the *Journal of Mental Science* (c.1870), Fothergill reported:

The union of psychology and physiology is the closing of the circuit, in one direction, of the pursuit after knowledge, and marks the initiation of a rational comprehension of the mind and of its relation to corporeal conditions....The days of the minor Trinity--the soul, the mind, and the body--are numbered; the advent of a physiological psychology is at hand. (Fothergill 562)

As early as *Basil Collins* had written of an author's moral "duty" but maintained that "duty" was not to be exercised at the expense of "truth to Nature." In the novels that followed *Basil Collins'* realism whittles away at the idealism that demanded favourable representation of social well-being even when it was known to be delusory.¹

Writing to his Canadian publishers, Collins further explained his purpose: "The object of the story is to show the modifying effect of the circumstances on the calamities that afflict human life" (*Letters* 347). He does not deny that blindness can be a misfortune but his novel demonstrates that blindness need not be calamitous. And Collins' unflattering portrait of Reverend Finch laying hubristic claims to special providence dismisses any lingering notion that Lucilla's blindness is providential. Whenever Reverend Finch invokes "inscrutable Providence" Collins reveals Finch's meanly selfish motives for interfering

¹ Writing "realistically" respected the mind-body relationship; it was not an attempt to disguise the fact that the stories were fictional. Collins' art criticism (extracts have been quoted in the previous chapter) argues only that in fine art the methods used to achieve illusions should not be obvious. Fact and fiction are merged and Collins delivers social critique, psychological study and new science in one package without departing from the view he expressed through Miss Jessie in *Queen of Hearts* (31) that story is the fundamental means to engage readers.

in Lucilla's affairs. Whether it is, for example, to display piety (198) or place his dignity above Lucilla's good (185) or, regularly, for financial gain (99, 100), Collins ironically juxtaposes Reverend Finch's moral weight with his small stature. A specially funny sequence, punning on "red herring," occurs at the breakfast table and debunks Reverend Finch's manipulation of religion for his own appetite:

'My plans for Oscar and Lucilla were completely arranged. My relations with my wedded children were pleasantly laid out. I saw my own future; I saw the future of my family. What do I see now? All, so to speak, annihilated in a blow. Inscrutable Providence!' He paused and lifted his eyes and hands devotionally to the ceiling. The cook appeared with the red herring. 'Inscrutable Providence'--proceeded Mr Finch, a tone lower. 'Eat it, dear,' said Mrs Finch, 'while it's hot.' The rector paused again. His unresting tongue urged him to proceed; his undisciplined stomach clamoured for the herring. The cook uncovered the dish. Mr Finch's nose instantly sided with Mr Finch's stomach. he stopped at 'Inscrutable Providence'--and peppered his herring. (100-101)

Collins' portraiture recognises Lucilla's cataracts as a medical problem, not a divine punishment and medical treatment as a service to humanity, not as a challenge to divine wisdom.

Lucilla Finch's particular eye-condition is outside the pattern of statistics then being reported in varying types of journals. For instance, in the family-orientated *Household Words*, "The Irish Union" had no explanation for the 46,000 cases of epidemic ophthalmia reported in Irish workhouses during the early 1850s (173). The respected *Quarterly Review's* "Blind People" lamented that the statistics of blindness in England were of the "scantiest kind" and quoted at some length figures from the 1861 Census of England and Wales (456-57). Another worrying set of figures was reported in "Contagious Ophthalmia" in the *Popular Science Monthly* by Brudenell Carter in 1874. In poor-houses and pauper schools he recorded that in a population of 1,062 only 183 had escaped ophthalmia while 204 had suffered from more than ten attacks and risked serious sight impairment (377-78). Lucilla cannot be assimilated as a statistic, lost among

the 30,000 blind people in Great Britain, 20,000 in England of whom one seventh were under twenty years of age and of whom only 760 were receiving instruction in thirteen existing schools scattered through the counties.² She is exceptional, one of only a handful of cases to have received sight after early blindness.

The statistics suggest the extent of the problem blindness was and account for the range of informative, philanthropic and pragmatic attempts to deal with the problem that a number of journals continued to record. *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* provides a good example of the range of interest in blindness. The second item in volume 1 (1844) reports on "Hydrocyanic Acid--A Remedy for Blindness." Volume 16 (1851) contains the short story, "Blind Walter", a rags -to -riches story of a blind busker in a complicated love triangle. ("Blind Walter" does not escape the sentimentality that Collins consciously avoids.) Volume 29 contains "A Plea for Eyes" (concerning glasses) while in volume 44 (1867) a more enquiring item, "The Blind", stresses the disabling effects of blindness and contrasts the situation for rich and poor. It engages the debate about distinguishing colours and understands that regaining sight requires new learning.³ Volume 45 (1868) reports on "Writing Machines for the Blind". Interestingly, the Chambers brothers had regularly supplied free copy of their journal to the blind school to be read to pupils. For the blind who were also poor, the chaplain to St George's Fields (the largest blind asylum in Britain) held that only the case of the deaf mute was worse; blindness was a massive handicap ("The Blind" 381).

Lucilla is not blind from any common cause--ophthalmia, smallpox,

² Figures are from the census of England and Wales of 1861, reported in "Blind People" (456-57).

³ This item appears to be a summary of the article from the *Quarterly Review* mentioned above. Both articles probably rely on *Blind People, their Works & Ways* by Mr Johns, chaplain to St George's Fields blind asylum.

fever or childhood accident. She is not poor and has never known scarcity or institutionalisation. Her financial security (she has been her uncle's beneficiary) divorces her from the problems of economic survival that restricted the poor blind to cobbling, hemstitching, basket weaving or begging and leaves Collins free to concentrate on how blindness affects personality and on how people are informed through sensory perception. (Just as he did in *Hide and Seek* Collins isolates the particular issue of sense deprivation from possible confusion with other influencing factors. This I take as indication of his methodical approach to his "experiment" with a deaf/blind heroine.)

Though the anatomy of cataract was known, the causes of cataract were unexplained at the time of the novel's writing and hypotheses to account for the condition were sometimes mutually opposed: excess of irritability operating on the capsule, and deficiency of irritability upon the lens ("Sir William Adams" 4 162). Anecdotal reports of speedy onset (like Lucilla's case) countered reports of gradual progress of the disease. In either event,

by whatever process the disorder may be produced, it is obvious that it is not likely to be easily within the reach of medical treatment; and the almost uniform failure of general, and local remedies, leaves no other resource for the patient than an operation. ("Sir William Adams" 164)

Collins does not attempt to describe the causes of Lucilla's cataracts. Nor does he give details of Lucilla's surgery. The ordinary operations employed for the removal of cataract were three: couching, or depression; extraction; and absorption ("Sir William Adams" 166). Absorption appears to have been Sir William Adams' preferred mode of operation though he insisted on fitting the method of treatment to the particular case (167). His

⁴ Adams was a surgeon specialising in treatment of eye disease in private and public practice. In 1817 he published his report of "A practical inquiry into the Causes of the frequent Failure of the Operation of Depression, and of the Extraction of the Cataract, as usually performed; with the Description of a Series of new and improved Operations, by the practice of which most of these Causes of Failure may be avoided. Illustrated by Tables of the comparative success of the new and old modes of practice."

work was being done fifty years before Collins' novel appeared and certainly surgical treatments were improving. In 1834 cataracts interfered with the Duke of Sussex's office as President of the Royal Society. After operation he was re-elected in 1836 (Hall 65). But it would not follow necessarily that successful treatment in the aged to restore sight would guarantee sight in a case of *congenital* cataract. Lucilla's case, it must be stressed, is extremely rare. Even were she to gain the function of her lens, she would still need to learn to see. And, unlike a baby learning to see, she must also unlearn the perceptual experience of her lifetime. For instance, she must adapt to the new organising principle of space rather than continue to depend on sequential time to control her movements. In Berkeley's words:

'distance or outness ... is only *suggested* to our thoughts ... they (viz. *visible ideas and visual sensations*) come to signify and suggest them (viz. *distance, and things placed at a distance*) to us, after the same manner that words of any language suggest the ideas they are made to stand for. Insomuch that a man born blind, and afterwards made to see, would not, at first sight, think the things he saw to be without his mind, or at any distance from him.' (quoted "Berkeley and Idealism" 822)

Collins' focus is not on surgery but on psychology. Apart from the chill when Lucilla handles the doctor's horrid instruments and the reader is allowed to "see" lint and bandages "huddled together anyhow" inside the surgeon's shabby hat, there is no attempt to sensationalise detail. Collins plays down any reader's potential fear of surgery and reduces that sequence to one paragraph (231).⁵ The operation itself occurs off the page, "off stage" as it were. Instead, Collins concentrates on the effects of blindness and of gaining sight after life-long blindness. In this he is very precise.

His characterisation of the specific perceptual and psychological

⁵ Sparks' reading that focuses on Lucilla's surgery as a destructive practice typical of those aimed against women is arguing on what is not in the text and misses the fundamental point -- the rarity of Lucilla's case -- which is the basis for Collins' investigation. Collins' story is not about *regaining* sight; it is about an adult *learning to see* and the dislocation that that change brings.

features of blindness relies heavily on the work of previous experts so that even minor observations involving his heroine will have precedent in the literature on blindness. But his emphasis on the psychological disorientation of the newly sighted is necessarily restricted by the mere handful of cases that had been described. Nevertheless, it is possible to locate precedents for Collins' representation of Lucilla's experience somewhere in the research literature; what I can't determine is whether Collins gained his information directly from the original sources because the same examples he uses recur in different reports and researchers seem freely to have borrowed from each other. But the *accuracy* of his representation can be assessed by comparison not only with early reports to which he may have had access but also with subsequent cases where the experience of gaining new sight after early blindness is recorded.⁶ These suggest that his research had been thorough--as he claimed: "Whenever 'Lucilla' acts or speaks in these pages, with reference to her blindness, she is doing or saying what persons afflicted as she is have done or said before her" (xxxiii). The borrowings emphasise that Collins' interpretation of the nature of the experience is made on an informed base.

There is a precedent for Lucilla's love for disfigured Oscar in "Blind Sight-Seeing" (85), a chatty, popular account that describes the happiness of a blind man with an awkward but devoted wife who shares his many interests. Then there is the authoritative precedent reported by Grant who, in one of the earliest records (1709), recounts the story of a young man betrothed to an unattractive lady. Before she removes the bandages after surgery to restore his sight he declares:

Dear Lydia, If I am to lose by sight the soft pantings which I have always felt when I heard your voice; if I am no more to distinguish the step of her I love when she approaches me, but to change that sweet and frequent

⁶ I have relied heavily on Marius von Senden's catalogue of such cases, collected in the 1930s. More recently the work of Gregory and of Sacks continues to confirm the accuracy of Collins' depiction.

pleasure for such an amazement as I knew the little time I lately saw; or if I am to have anything besides, which may take from me the sense of what appeared most pleasing to me at that time (which apparition it seems was you): Pull out these eyes, before they lead me to be ungrateful to you, or undo myself. I wished for them but to see you; pull them out, if they are to make me forget you. (quoted von Senden 32)

Lucilla repeatedly makes it clear that her wish is to see the man she loves; not simply to see. For instance:

'I only care to see Oscar. And, what is more, I only care to see *him* because I am in love with him. But for that, I really don't feel as if it would give me any particular pleasure to use my eyes.' (220).

Later, when she is misled into confusing Nugent for Oscar, she regrets her new sight (362).

An important feature that Collins adds to Lucilla's story is a conviction, expressed in the dedication, "that the conditions of human happiness are independent of bodily affliction." Utilitarians (like philosophers, John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham) had defined goodness as the maximisation of happiness through the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. But Collins consistently reacts against that view by showing that happiness is possible even in adverse circumstances and despite chronic pain. As he was concerned to show in the earlier novel, *Hide and Seek*, Collins' story demonstrates that "it is even possible for bodily affliction itself to take its place among the ingredients of human happiness" (xxxiv) and through *Poor Miss Finch* he reminds readers that the conditions of happiness are not necessarily the same for all people (424). And self-fulfilment is not the prerogative of only healthy heroes or biologically perfect heroines.

Collins was not apologetic about the fairy-tale quality of his novel. After all, fairy tale was a genre in vogue and when Jicks alludes to "Bluebeard" (129) Collins draws attention to the likeness and anticipates the machinations of Nugent as a Bluebeard-like villain, out to trap the

heroine. Barbara Fars Leavy, writing of *The New Magdalen* states that, by 1873, Collins, "still found in folk and fairy tales paradigms for the symbolic exploration of his society" (Leavy 209). On the other hand, in reclaiming Nugent's character in the epilogue, Collins departs from the fairy-tale pattern of strong contrasts and reverts to his own characteristic position of moderation. He writes:

I have tried to present human nature in its inherent inconsistencies and self-contradictions--in its intricate mixture of good and evil, of great and small--as I see it in the world about me. (dedication)

Notice that in characterisation Collins' emphasis is on inconsistency, not regularity, and that inconsistency is shown not to be deviant but "normal" to the individual. Such realism, Collins anticipates, may be misunderstood. Similarly, the combination of realism and fairytale was unconventional but consistent with Collins' practice of blending fact and fiction.

Though in the pitying eyes of the narrator Lucilla is different by reason of her blindness, she is shown to accept her condition as "normal," part of her selfhood. To justify her view of herself Collins shows her embracing opportunities to perform the domestic duties conventionally assigned to women and exercising "public offices of benevolence," consistent with Sarah Ellis' published views of women's practical domestic intelligence (quoted Guy 495-501). In her essay, "Invite No Dangerous Publicity," Catherine Peters treats Lucilla's acceptance of renewed blindness as symbolic of her acceptance of her role as a woman, a "relative" creature dependent on a male figure (Peters 12). But blind Lucilla is consistently depicted as a competent manager and assertive--"heroic" by Ellis' standard--and there is no denigration of domesticity implied in Lucilla's round of duties. By contrast, Mrs Finch is shown to be

incapable of managing either her household or herself. She is represented as half-dressed, “wet”, and dysfunctional (11) without any sense of priorities. For instance, baby is everything to her (397) and time is measured in terms of confinements (67). Collins is equally dismissive of the bombastic little Reverend Finch, frequently claiming for himself (but not delivering) the managerial roles assumed by his sex. That is, by these contrasts, Collins satirises domestic stereotypes and associates strength of character with individual competence, not with any gendered role. So, while Lucilla is different by reason of blindness, Collins leaves her, by story’s end, blind again but settled happily in commonplace domesticity. This is no contrived ending, loosely attached. Collins is showing that the blind have much in common with the sighted.

Importantly Collins demonstrates that blindness is not all dependence; it is a source of power too. Paradoxically, Lucilla’s dependence allows her to dictate the actions of those on whom she depends. (In *Hide and Seek* also, Mrs Blyth’s invalidism is shown to empower her by freeing her from conventional demands.) Moreover, the exact orderliness, in Lucilla’s little autonomous world, that gives her independence, gives her also the confidence to exert control. This is understood from Madam Pratolungo’s early description of Lucilla’s apartment in a divided house. The front of the house hides internal chaos while an older, artistic “establishment” at the back is well managed by a blind girl. The house becomes a metaphor for divided values: illusions against substance.

Sighted, Lucilla becomes a victim: disorientated, duped and depressed. Her control is lost. Readers need not doubt Lucilla’s word as she describes sight as “the enthusiasm of the moment” (220). Her fictional representation may be compared with a more recent case of restored sight.

Gregory's⁷ patient:

was first delighted with seeing, but soon encountered intolerable stresses and difficulties, found the 'gift' transformed to a curse, became deeply depressed, and soon after died. (Sacks, *Anthropologist* 151)

Sacks, who reports Gregory's study, adds:

Almost all the earlier patients indeed, after their initial euphoria, were overwhelmed by the enormous difficulties of adapting to a new sense. (151)

Lucilla's restored blindness restores the lessons of habit and provides a happy ending for it restores her sense of self-control and with it the identity she has constructed for herself. She looks back "with horror at what I suffered when I had my sight--my effort is to forget that miserable time" (418). So, at story's end Lucilla is contentedly herself again, competently living a conventional domestic life like the rest of her community. Her home is her haven. And Oscar, damaged by his trial experience, then by robbers and again by disfigurement, likewise seeks a haven in the relative isolation of Browndown.

Collins plays down the romance of the ending: it was a dull wedding but a happy couple (423) and Collins leaves no doubt that Lucilla remains the bossy person she was at the start--and Oscar happily compliant. This reversal of gender stereotypes is consistent with Collins' writing elsewhere, in stories as different as *The Dead Secret* and *Armada* or *The Law and the Lady* and *Man and Wife*.

While he was writing *Poor Miss Finch* Collins checked the legal requirements for the London marriage sequence (*Letters* 350). Such accuracy of detail brings credibility to the story line and is an example of what the *Saturday Review* dismisses as "the minutiae of everyday life" ("Unsigned Review" 195). But, Collins' substantial realism resides in his

⁷ Richard Gregory is an experimental psychologist. In 1963 he published a case study of S.B. demonstrating that "The newly sighted, who have previously depended on senses other than vision, are baffled by the very concept of 'appearance,' which, being optical, has no analogue in the other senses." (Sacks, *Anthropologist* 128)

representations of blindness, which, quite unlike popular (mis)conceptions of the condition, are perceptive and draw upon informed accounts. Neither pity nor curiosity colours Collins' portrait of Lucilla. As she is shown to joke, the epithet "poor," in the case of blind Miss Finch, is inappropriate. Lucilla, in love, describes herself as the "happiest woman in England" (65) and is positive in her declaration that blindness is not the terrible affliction sighted people think (222). From the start (13) Collins alerts readers to the irony in the popular perception of blindness through his title. His heroine is "Lucilla"--light--and she is given a strong and forthright character to match her Roman name and stoic antecedent, Lucilius.⁸

Unlike associationists, who saw single senses working independently and amassing impressions in the mind, in *Poor Miss Finch*, as in *Hide and Seek*, Collins' depiction of disability suggests that he is convinced of the interconnectedness in the brain of sensory receptions so that if part of the sensory system is removed or inoperable the whole complex does not fail. In *Madonna* the language functions of the brain continued to operate in the absence of hearing--just differently--and, in *Poor Miss Finch*, touch, hearing and smell function in place of sight. Sensitivity to echoes and air waves, for instance, substitutes for visual perception of direction. In recent times Oliver Sacks has reported that "in blind people who read Braille the reading finger has an exceptionally large representation in the tactile parts of the cerebral cortex" (Sacks, *Anthropologist* 140). That is, brain space has adapted to accommodate increased touch sense. While writing a century before Sacks and his knowledge of the cerebral cortex, such a correspondence in observation suggests the accuracy of Collins' portrait.

⁸ Perhaps Collins was borrowing the name from Dufau's *Souvenire et impressions d'une jeune aveugle-nee* that appeared in Paris in 1850 and which records how blind Lucy tries to work out what it is to see. Or, perhaps both writers were symbolically linking blindness with the darkness of the winter solstice that occurs on St Lucy's day.

In Collins' day Spencer was asserting that there was a direct relationship between the sensitivity of the touch sense and intelligence (Kearns 123) and Lucilla appears to agree. She describes touch as "the intelligent sense" (220). It was argued that, because tactile sense organs are associated with external parts of the body and because the critical parts of ears and eyes are internal, touch must therefore be of primary importance (Bell 342). Touch, making direct contact with physical things, anchors Lucilla firmly in her world. She pities her friends who rely on sight and cannot operate in the dark (89) and she questions the value of their sight that is so easily deceived (221). But she finds her own touch sense trustworthy. And her sense of hearing is also acute.

She knew when the spoon into which [Oscar's medicine] was to be measured was full, by the sound which the liquid made in falling into it. When he was able to sit up in bed, and when she was standing at the pillow-side, she could tell him how near his head was to hers, by the change which he produced, when he bent forward or when he drew back, in the action of the air on her face. In the same way, she knew as well as he knew, when the sun was out and when it was behind a cloud -- judging by the differing effect of the air, at such times, on her forehead and on her cheeks. (88)

Her sensibilities are refined to interpret reactions:

'Why did you tremble,' she asked, 'when you took me by the arm? Why are you trembling now?' Her delicate sense of touch was not to be deceived. I vainly denied that anything had happened: my hand had betrayed me. (94)

Touch tells Lucilla of a change in Oscar, but not what that change is. His face tells her that he has something on his mind and reassurances do not convince her otherwise:

'No,' she said, 'it's not all.' She touched his heart. 'Why is it beating so fast?' She took his hand in hers. 'Why has it turned so cold? I must know. I *will* know!' (122)

The combination of factors explains how Lucilla reads emotional states. But, competent as she is, she is unable to explain the tingle that identifies Oscar (but not his twin) when their hands touch: "Something in me answers to one of them and not the other" (417). That "something" does

not fail her. Lucilla cannot respond to Nugent as to Oscar (337, 403, 404). Believing Nugent to be Oscar, she regrets the loss of the super-fine feeling that thrilled her with pleasure when Oscar touched her and tells Madam Pratolungo:

'I told you I was used to being blind. I said I only wanted to recover my sight, to see Oscar. And when I did see him--what happened? The disappointment was so dreadful, I wished myself blind again.' (413)

Trusting untrained sight, instead of relying on familiar touch, causes Lucilla distress and allows Nugent to persevere in his deception.

'I have so little feeling for him, that I sometimes find it hard to persuade myself that he really is Oscar... Think what I must suffer, feeling towards him as I feel now!' (416)

Yet, with failed sight, at the touch of Oscar's hand:

the life flowed back into her face; her lovely smile just trembled on her parted lips; her breath came faint and quick and fluttering. In soft tones of ecstasy, with her lips on his cheek, she murmured the delicious words: 'Oh, Oscar! I know you once more!' (417)

Herself again, because blind again, Lucilla's energy "flow[s] back" and she reacts passionately with a reflex response consistent with Combe's phrenology (Shuttleworth, "Psychological Definition" 137). It seems that the "feeling" of touch, the most solid and direct of the senses, is not restricted to skin surface contact⁹. Unexplained connections inform the mind and the sexual body too. Though in Lucilla's case there is no hint of

⁹ Wilson's article explains that a sensation triggered by the touch of a finger is not confined to the nerves situated in the skin of the finger (175). Simple life forms have complex nervous reactions:

We may not dogmatise regarding the nerve-functions, or "irritability"... of an amoeba; but this much we may affirm with safety, that the soft tissue of the structureless and nerveless body is sensitive, and that its sensitiveness may be, and is, excited in a general manner by the contact of the outer world and its belongings. (Wilson 177)

Lucilla's delicately sensitive hand is essentially feminine according to phrenological classification. Although phrenology was already largely discredited by the 1870s, the link with psychology, it seems, continued to have relevance:

nervous ramifications distributed to the surface of the body being covered only by a thin layer of cuticle or scarf skin, are easily excited by impressions from without, and as readily transmit their excitement to the central organs, thus occasioning a prompt and vivid flow of ideas. ("The Hand Phrenologically Considered" 254)

mesmerism, her reaction remains “electric” and remarkably like Collins’ experience when, in 1852:

I gave V-- my hand, without saying anything. Almost immediately afterwards I felt the magnetic influence communicating itself from her to me. The sensation was precisely like that produced by a mild shock from a galvanic battery--*i.e.* a slight feeling of *tingling* in the hand... (“Magnetic Evenings” letter 4, para13).

When Lucilla meets Oscar she is first attracted by his voice (19). What is surprising is that immediately she is anxious to know what he looks like. Without vision, she is nevertheless conditioned by the sighted culture to be interested in a man’s appearance and anxiously presses Madam Pratolungo for a description of the new tenant at Browndown. Madam Pratolungo chiefly describes Oscar ‘s colouring -- bright chestnut hair and fair, creamy complexion (39). Here Collins invites the question how it is that a blind person can have any understanding of colour. He provides the answer: Lucilla associates qualities heard with qualities seen and concludes, “ ‘He *must* be beautiful with that voice!’ ” (21). This is another example of interconnectedness within the sensory complex and is also Collins’ reminder that beauty is not only appreciated visually. Despite her reduced range of senses, Lucilla’s mind nevertheless is shown to have a vital concept of beauty that has adjusted to her life’s circumstances. She finds touch “exquisite” (417) and her tactile sense perceives the difference between gold and silver in the delicate craftsmanship of Oscar’s “work.”¹⁰

Furthermore, Lucilla’s instant attraction to Oscar’s voice at first meeting is consistent with Guillie’s advice, in 1819, that “first impressions with the blind are all in all” (quoted “Blind People” 433n)¹¹--as Mr Sebright is made to confirm in his advice that Oscar be seen first when

¹⁰ There is precedent for Lucilla’s discernment of metals in the famous story of the blind mathematician, Saunderson’s detection of a counterfeit Roman coin.

¹¹ Dr Guillie’s “An Essay on the Instruction, etc, of the Blind” was one of the sources for the article that observes the tendency for a new student to a blind school, in short time, to single out a fellow pupil to become a special companion.

Lucilla's bandages are removed. But Collins' representation seems to connect Lucilla's love at first meeting with the workings of her unconscious mind and his account of Lucilla's romance is sequentially convincing. First, her ploys to meet and impress the stranger suggest more than curiosity is involved (16-18). Then she becomes physically agitated at the sound of the stranger's step and "involuntarily" reacts (19). Moreover, Madam Pratolungo's commentary imposes a romantic interpretation on the scene, setting readers to notice that Lucilla's interest is "breathless" (20), that she stands "lost in herself, like a person wrapped in ecstasy" (20) and readers are told that Lucilla's thirst for information about the stranger is reflected in "a passionate impatience in her tone" (21). Then, in chapter five, readers learn that Lucilla had already been making enquiries and knew much about the stranger before she engineered the encounter. The extent of her enquiries and her unwillingness to hear any adverse speculation about the newcomer bear out Madam Pratolungo's words that "Mr Dubourg was the hero of her romance" (15). Finally Lucilla is reported as acting out the conventions of a love story: she can do nothing but think of him, his voice, her happiness, and bursts out, "Is this love?" (26-27).

Lucilla's sequence of actions along with the remarks of Zillah and Madam Pratolungo suggest that Lucilla has already formed a desire for a sexual partner and that her mental picture of a suitable partner is satisfied in the beauty of Oscar's voice. Next her passion is aroused at his touch. Subsequently the sight of the handsome, non-disfigured Nugent, though it is the visual "image" she had conceived of a lover, does not satisfy her desire that is based on the now familiar tactile reality of Oscar's presence. Ironically, Collins who had long been accused of indelicacy, in *Poor Miss Finch* is reticent about discussing overtly the sexual attraction between Lucilla and Oscar .

Love for Oscar gives Lucilla motivation to proceed to operation. But her courage is shown to take a series of blows. Loss of self-confidence, the effort of concentration and memory are part of the mental strain compounding the shock of the operation. Added to these, anxiety about her pending marriage leaves Lucilla gloomy and despondent, physically debilitated and depressed. So, without any moral linkage, Collins' story again suggests that a definite connection exists between emotional and physical well-being.¹² It was observable, as "Blind People" reports (432) that the onset of blindness often resulted in depression that distorted thoughts and affected every part of the victim's being. Collins counters any assumption that gaining sight after a lifetime of blindness will have the opposite effect to confirm that upheaval of the sensory system either way is dislocating.

As von Senden's catalogue of cases¹³ shows, during the 1870s medical science witnessed a number of studies of restored sight (von Senden 326). Collins' novel of 1871 anticipates that surge of interest. The English specialist, Mr Sebright, entreats Grosse, " 'As my senior, as a visitor to England, as a master in our art,' " to examine Lucilla first (193). The humour of exaggerated formal courtesies doesn't hide the fact that by the 1870s Germany had surpassed France as the "medical mecca." German medicine was highly organised, with research-orientated universities and hospitals, outstanding scientists, postgraduate programmes and devotion to scholarship (Bliss 75). German, not English or French, by the second half of the nineteenth century had become the first language of advanced medicine (Bliss 76). Realistically, Collins made Lucilla's specialist a

¹² Emotional strain has an impact on the twins also. See, for instance, Nugent when he realises he is his brother's rival (142).

¹³ In 1932 Marius von Senden published his work on the perception of space and shape after operation to give sight after early blindness. It was based on analysis of the collected data from the cases reported to that date.

German. Yet D.E. Williams, reviewing the novel, was unimpressed by Grosse's characterisation and wrote, "Abstract... from Herr Grosse.... his love of lunch, his Anglo-German oaths and his general shabbiness and fatness,... we have left us the sorriest residue" (Williams 193). This estimate failed to recognise what the *Saturday Review* fairly acknowledged, that "In the first place, *Poor Miss Finch* is a surgical and medical novel" ("Unsigned Review" 196).

Grosse is caricatured as squat, shabby and shaggy, a glutton, impatient to eat (191), showy and ostentatious (198), and one who could shed a sentimental tear (303). "Excepting the business of his profession...[Grosse] did everything by impulse, and nothing by rule" (230-31). Collins' qualification, "Excepting the business of his profession," is important. The professional behaviour of the doctor is quite different from the appearance he presents. The surgeon is confident because he has experienced success (201). Serious about his work, he speaks with authority (203) and claims medical freedom of action (247)--though here he is manipulated by Nugent (246). He teases away Lucilla's nervousness (194) and manages her with fire and humour. "Grosse used to swear at her, in a compound bad language of his own, with a tremendous aspiration at the beginning of it, which always set matters to right by making her laugh" (234). He could be gruff and tender (361,362). "Grosse managed her to perfection. The tact of this rough, ugly, eccentric old man was the most perfect tact" (301-302). Collins shows how Grosse's surgical expertise is matched by his understanding of his patient's personality.

Even though Grosse's caricature amuses, nothing in the fictional comedy conflicts with the medical professionalism his characterisation also depicts. Grosse's concern is always for his patient. He fears emotional upset will impede Lucilla's recovery and so he insists that she not be

informed of the errors when she hears that Nugent is the disfigured twin or when she has mistaken the twins' identities (257, 260). To the same end he willingly engages the duplicitous Nugent to help with Lucilla's convalescence (295). Later, realising "that the deception was... producing the worst possible effect on her mind" (355), he orders Nugent away and gives an ultimatum (365). He explains his position at length:

'In the case of Miss Finch, my business is not with your family complications. My business is to secure the recovery of the young lady's sight. If I find her health improving, I don't inquire how or why. No matter what private and personal frauds you may be practising upon her, I have nothing to say to them-- more, I am ready to take advantage of them myself --so long as their influence is directly beneficial in keeping her morally and physically in the condition in which I wish her to be. But, the instant I discover that this domestic conspiracy of yours--this personation of your brother which once quieted and comforted her--is unfavourably affecting her health of body and her peace of mind, I interfere between you in the character of her medical attendant, and stop it on medical grounds. You are producing in my patient a conflict of feeling, which--in a nervous temperament like hers--cannot go on without serious injury to her health. And serious injury to her health means serious injury to her eyes. I won't have that--I tell you plainly to pack up and go.' (365)

The change of register indicates the importance of this speech. Standard English is uncharacteristic of Grosse in humorous role. At this point Collins is making a serious observation and his pronouncement is an interesting reflection of the status of medicine and bears out Susan Faye Cannon's statement that in the late nineteenth century science was perceived as the "norm of truth" (2).

In the first place Grosse asserts the authority of medical science and declares his right to dictate--even in domestic matters--as medical supervisor. "On medical grounds" he assumes the right to interfere and issues his orders. Most importantly, he sets up his patient's recovery as the single justification for his conduct, which has included complicity in the fraud Nugent is perpetrating. That is, he narrows his commitment to truth by making medicine his ethical standard. For him, the anticipated recovery of Lucilla's sight authenticates his actions. Truth is no longer an

abstract philosophical absolute but, from the perspective of the medical man, it relies absolutely on his subjective judgment of what is best for his patient. But the twists and turns in Collins' plot demonstrate at what cost such a single-track goal is pursued. Readers are led to see that Grosse's medical specialisation has resulted in his loss of overall perspective and he finds himself conniving in Nugent's deception and encouraging others to condone the intrigue. Collins uses Grosse's speech, with its insistence on medical authority, to question the restrictive one-sidedness of his moral standard and the public's growing trust in science.

In one respect Grosse's personal characteristics match his medical practice. He is described as short-sighted and impulsive (194) and although his "vision" for Lucilla's future extends beyond surgery and convalescence to retraining, it falls short of calculating the long range impact of new sight on Lucilla's psyche. There Sebright is shown to be true to his name. For all his business-like manner and professional restraint,¹⁴ he calculates the chances and the long term costs of surgery:

'... believing as I do that the sacrifice demanded of her would end in failure, I think it most undesirable to expose our patient to the moral consequences of a disappointment which must seriously try her. She has been resigned from childhood to her blindness. As an honest man, who feels bound to speak out and to speak strongly, I advise you not further to disturb that resignation. I declare it to be, in my opinion, certainly useless, and possibly dangerous, to allow her to be operated on for the restoration of her sight.' (200)

His words will apply equally to the failure of surgery or to the dislocation in Lucilla's personality should sight be gained.

As he does with the doctors, Collins gives to Madam Pratolungo comic and serious roles. On the one hand he jokes by exploiting the French

¹⁴Tabitha Sparks emphasises that Grosse's image reflects a national bias--as Madam Pratolungo's representation is also seen to do. However, Sebright, too, can be seen humorously as a caricature of the stiff English man so that, I suggest, Collins is making fun of the bias represented in stereotypical characterisations generally. At the same time he is distinguishing two types of doctors--the surgeon and the psychologist, each with different skills.

stereotype, making her highly strung and a flirt ((83) but feeling her age (90) and debunks republicanism by making her form of political idealism ludicrous (236). On the other hand he uses her misjudgments to advance the plot and his study of mind. Lucilla gets things wrong because she cannot see. Madam Pratolungo gets things wrong because she sees mistakenly. And Madam Pratolungo's observation is often wrong, especially when she attributes to others her own thoughts and reads events as she would wish them to be as, for instance, when she fails to "read" Nugent's questions concerning the love affair between Oscar and Lucilla (150). Her wishful misinterpretation is one of the ways in which Collins questions whether it is possible, without personal distortion, to know and record what is in another person's mind. The clever thing is that although Madam Pratolungo's account of events is interpreted with hindsight--as readers are reminded (e.g.151)--Collins still manages so to control the timing of the account that the pace of events is constantly changing, suspended, for instance, as Lucilla delays her marriage, or frenetic as events seem to fall together fortuitously.

Collins also uses his narrator to express social values. In the chapter titled "Blind Love," when Lucilla seeks out the as-yet unknown Oscar for the second time in one day, Collins comes close to lecturing his readers:

Modesty (I am not speaking of Decency, mind) is a virtue of purely artificial growth; ... the successful cultivation of it depends in the first instance, not on the influence of the tongue, but on the influence of the eye. (59)

Lucilla is surprised, not abashed, by her companion's protest at her improprieties. Yet, here still, Collins is in keeping with expert opinion. Guillie had said that, untrained, a blind person "has no idea of decorum, of social propriety, or of modesty" ("Blind People" 32n). No amount of training could alter the fact that, just as an image on paper is not the person portrayed, "appearance" is a construct without substance. Lucilla's

blindness (and her new untrained sight) is used to point out the doubtful value of some artificially constructed social "virtues." For some readers such criticism might have seemed immoral and so Collins leads them to modify that perception by first allowing them to share Madam Pratolungo's view of Lucilla's conduct.

Early in their acquaintance, Madam Pratolungo learns that "Blindness is never bashful" (59). A specially telling example is that where, offended with Madam Pratolungo, Lucilla insists on making a public display of her affection for Oscar (174-76). Here Lucilla's imperiousness is the result of unselfconsciousness; not any indifference to the embarrassment of Oscar. (At the same time Oscar's embarrassment is probably excessive because of his added self-consciousness since his court appearance.) Although the narrator can express her knowledge "that modesty is essentially the growth of our consciousness of the eyes of others judging us" (59), she herself can never shake her conditioned training that will "see" Lucilla's directness as unsophisticated and the "primitive innocence of a child" (60). Yet readers are led to recognise that Lucilla's directness is truthful. Her "plain words" evade the coquetry Madam Pratolungo would advise and show up the inherent falsity of conventional feminine role play. There are repeated instances where Lucilla's unawareness (not disregard) of the judgmental observation of others causes her to behave "naturally" and in response to her feelings, rather than in accordance with social proprieties. For instance, when Oscar is convalescent:

she took him into his own drawing room, as if it was he that was blind, and she who had the use of her eyes. Who could resist such a nurse as this? Is it wonderful that I heard a sound suspiciously like the sound of a kiss, on that first day of convalescence, when I happened for a moment to be out of the room? I strongly suspected her of leading the way in that also. She was so wonderfully composed when I came back -- and he was so wonderfully flurried.

In a week from his convalescence, Lucilla completed the cure of the patient. In other words, she received from Oscar an offer of marriage. I have not the slightest doubt, in my own mind, that he required assistance in

bringing this delicate matter to a climax--and that Lucilla helped him (89).

In this sequence Collins' questioning playfulness assures readers that his narrator's suspicions are well founded. And there is a nice twist in the narrative: "blind" because absent from the room, Madam Pratolungo comes uncharacteristically to a right conclusion--"right" so far as unreliable perception permits true deduction--to show that the artist, the social scientist, the empiricist and the individual need to face the fact that vision is an imperfect tool.

Madam Pratolungo's interpretations of Lucilla's conduct are not generally reliable. In the crucial scene when, with new sight, Lucilla identifies Nugent as Oscar, Madam Pratolungo's interpretation of events is shown to be astray. She is excited and pleased for Lucilla when she reports:

The life, the new life of sight, was in her eyes. It transformed her face: it irradiated her beauty with an awful and unearthly light. She saw! she saw! (255)

The description is coloured by her preconceptions, most notably that seeing is a blessing. The excessive language, overtly suggesting that an instant miracle has occurred, actually implies the opposite result. The unreliability of Madam Pratolungo's point of view is highlighted by its juxtaposition with quite different observations so that the reader is drawn into correcting Madam Pratolungo's mistaken belief that new sight automatically brings recognition and understanding. First her report tells how Lucilla had groped her way into the room with outstretched arms, quite uncharacteristically disorientated. She had staggered in and then halted at the door "swaying to and fro, giddy under the broad stare of daylight" (255). Ahlmann, von Senden reports, had confirmed that the blind direct their walking by tensions equal on both sides of the body, a

method quite different¹⁵ from that used by sighted persons who can know that a certain number of steps will bring them to their goal (von Senden 39). Lucilla gains sight, but she is not shown to have gained visual perception -- as her instability demonstrates.

Moreover, her identifications are made on the basis of deduction; they are not made with visual recognition. Madam Pratolungo records, "She looked at the rector--then at Mrs Finch, who had followed her husband" (255), and describes how Lucilla "paused bewildered and put her hands to her eyes" (255). With her eyes covered, Lucilla makes the logical guess: two shapes would be man and wife. She has relied on her blind person's understanding of the *arrangement* of things in space.

Her motive is to find Oscar. She turns her head to find him. That is, she re-orientates her body as she would do when blind. It is not, as Madam Pratolungo vainly suggests, to look at her, for, with informed vision, Lucilla would move her eyes, not her head. Further, when Lucilla locates a single figure she laughs before uttering a scream of triumph. Again her powers of deduction, not her eyesight, tell her that this is the man she is expecting and she congratulates her intelligence. So little does she perceive by sight that she "struck against him violently," again "incapable of measuring her distance" (256). She is totally unprepared for the possibility of perceiving objects out of arm's reach. The difficulty of gaining visual knowledge is shown to persist: months later Lucilla's journal records, "To-day's experience has informed me that I make slow progress in teaching myself to judge correctly of distances"(333).

To confirm how little visual perception Lucilla has, Collins has the narrator describe how Grosse "approached her in silence. She heard him,

¹⁵The part that the cerebellum plays in co-ordinating the movements of the eyes and the muscles that control locomotion was under investigation with experimentation on animals. Observation of people experiencing difficulty in walking when judgment of distance by the eye is impaired was part of the same study. (Ackroyd,"How an Animal Walks" 342)

before he could take her by surprise" (256). She tries to locate the source of the sound. As she does so she encounters Oscar's face. "Encountered" suggests an element of chance, not purposive looking. But there is nothing chancy in the way Collins has set up this encounter. The movements and positioning of the characters have been blocked out with theatrical direction so that the long-expected identification of Nugent as Oscar still comes as a shock. As the scene is set, Oscar is further from the door than Nugent and on the left so that he is partially obscured as the door is flung open (255). When he is seen, it is against the bright light flooding the windows where, on Grosse's instruction, the shutters have all been opened (248). Lucilla "saw the blue-black hue of [Oscar's face] in full light" (256).

Berkeley insisted that colour (not outness) was the proper and only object of vision ("Berkeley and Idealism" 824). Von Senden, Gregory and Hull all agree that brightness is the primary experience and colour the first learned and remembered knowledge acquired with new sight (e.g. von Senden 148-150). However, taking their cue from colour, not the shape of objects, the newly sighted often make false identifications. In the tension of the moment, Lucilla recoils from her imagined horror of dark colours. This detail is credible for Collins sets it in the appropriate context. The shock of contrast against brightness would cause physical distress and confirm the mental prejudice that she has formed, a prejudice she shares with Cheselden's patient.

In 1728 an English surgeon, William Cheselden, had "couched" the cataracted lens of a thirteen-year-old boy, born blind (Sacks, *Anthropologist* 110). His observations continued to be of interest to philosophers and psychologists aiming to establish whether or not there was a connection between the visual and tactile senses. Cheselden, for

instance, had assumed that “appearance” and “reality” for the newly sighted would be the same and it was many months before it became clear that the patient was still learning to *interpret* light and colour and movement (Sacks 130). The boy’s first impression had been visual sensation without understanding. (Catherine Peters, in an editor’s explanatory note (425) has identified Carpenter’s reference to Cheselden’s report and Collins’ knowledge of Carpenter’s work so that Carpenter seems a *likely* source of information for Collins to use. However, many references to Cheselden’s work were circulating so that Collins’ actual source remains uncertain.)

As an artist, a member of an artistic family, and as an art critic, Collins would understand as well as any scientist that when the crystalline lens of the eye was blurred there was an effect on the perception of colour: “the *strong* blues presented by nature in daylight appear bluer than they are, and the *weak* blues ... much weaker than they are” (Ackroyd, “Eye and Its Use” 110). It was argued, for example, that the painter, Mulready, suffering such a visual defect in old age, overcompensated in using his pigments, thus making his pictures seem too cold (Ackroyd 111).

The idea that colour sensations could give a visual awareness of space had been investigated by Ware (in London in 1800 and 1801) and by Home (in London, 1806). Von Senden concludes that these cases provided too little reliable information to be useful (75-77) and von Senden likewise has reservations about Cheselden’s account of his patient’s complaint of light “touching” his eye because it was written from memory well after the operation (17). But von Senden readily accepts and explains the expression patients, such as Cheselden’s boy, used:

it is only because things had no spatial remoteness to (newly sighted persons) prior to operation, that at first they are unable to visualise distance after it... and it is for this reason only that some of them believe that visual objects must be in contact with their eyes. (280-81)

With respect to distance and direction the sighted Lucilla experiences difficulties she never had when blind. Collins provides opportunities to observe the contrast. To entertain the invalid:

she would first provide herself with one of the nosegays always placed by her own hands at Oscar's bedside; and would then tell me to take up my position noiselessly in any part of the room that I pleased, and say 'Lucilla.' The instant the words were out of my mouth, the nosegay flew from her hand, and hit me on the face. She never once missed her aim, on any one of the occasions when this experiment was tried. (88)

Similarly, "The sound of Nugent's voice helped her to calculate her distance from him without assistance" (158). But, with new sight, Lucilla loses her bet that she can walk towards Madam Pratolungo at the other end of the room (297). Like Cheselden's boy, she assumes what she sees is where she is:

'I saw her here,' she said, pointing down to the spot on which she was standing; and appealing piteously to Grosse. 'I see her now--and I don't know where she is! She is so near, I feel as if she touched my eyes--and yet' (she advanced another step, and clutched with her hands at the empty air) --'and yet, I can't get near enough to take hold of her. Oh! what does it mean? what does it mean?' (297-98)

Readers, echoing Lucilla's question, could conclude that perception of distance is not solely dependent on the visual sense but that it requires a trained mind to bring the eye into focus. Collins represents the opinion that the active power to discriminate distance is within the individual, but not simply in the eye, and accords with physiological knowledge that--as with touch (described above)--the sensory impulse passes from the sense organ to the nerve centre of the brain where it is interpreted and reflected .

Locke had argued that because the sight sense was faulty, vision needed to be educated to distinguish shapes like cube and globe ("Blind People". 410n). In 1858 T. Nunneley reported the case of a nine-year-old boy's experience of trying to use his new sight to distinguish shape (von Senden 328-29).

In an object where the angles were not very distinct, he made constant

mistakes in the shape, first saying that it was square, then that it was round (quoted von Senden 47).

Von Senden explains that the child was intent on identifying the object, not its shape, which continued to be understood in terms of tactile impression and was distinguished by edges or their absence (46-47). So it is with Lucilla. When Grosse tests Lucilla's visual perception of shape she shuts her eyes to make recognition. Like Nunneley's patient, she cannot visually distinguish square from round. Grosse, understanding Lucilla's frustration at failing the lesson with paper and pen-wiper (301) continues her training with book and saucer. She fares little better with actual shape though she congratulates herself on having a sense of *relative sizes* (334). Her experience with shapes is like that of Helmholtz, who recorded his memory of the occasion when, as a child of two, he realised the scale of everything. In Helmholtz' case he preserved a lifelong interest in the science of visual perception of space and came to describe perceptions as "unconscious inferences" (Gregory, *Concepts* xx) available from sensory and brain stored memory. He theorised that active hypotheses, created on the basis of past experience, inform our perceptions. In Collins' story the emphasis on learning to see is consistent with such a theory of mind action.

Just as Lucilla's preference for long arms (220) is borrowed (possibly from Diderot,¹⁶ or from Du Puisseauux more directly), so her confusion of cat and dog (333) is probably adapted from Cheselden's account. Yet it is wrong to think that Collins simply copies "catchy" anecdotes. He records the cat/dog confusion in a journal entry, free from Madam Pratolungo's prejudices and misconceptions. To give the passage authority, the information is set down in the context of Lucilla's extended and difficult period of re-learning and records her slipping into old habits. Readers are

¹⁶ Collins' library contained Diderot's *Works and Memoirs* in 22 volumes. (*Catalogue* 12)

shown her making unflattering self-assessments of her incompetence with her new seeing-sense (333). Her moods and reactions, detailed in the diary extracts, reproduce details from recorded cases and are evidence of Collins' thorough research.

Frantz, in *Philosophical Transactions* of 1841, reported on an operation in London in 1840 to give sight to an eighteen year old male. When blind, the young man reported that only the memory of his parents' touch and voices returned to him in his dreams but that once he had seen them, then visual memory returned in his dreams also. Whether Collins was aware of this case or not I have not determined (though it was mentioned in the *Quarterly Review's* "Blind People" in 1865). But Lucilla is angry when she protests, "I am never blind in my dreams!" Her dream is a nightmarish prevision, an insight into a threatening future :

'I dreamt that I was standing, in my wedding dress before the altar of a strange church; ...I felt his blue hand put the ring on my finger... I married Nugent Dubourg willingly-- married him without a thought of my engagement to Oscar.' (170-71)

Here Lucilla foresees a future, tricked by Nugent and her own colour prejudice. Only familiar contact with Oscar can restore her equanimity.

The dream can be read as the construct of her alert imagination, as a warning from her unconscious mind that has surfaced to solve a problem puzzling her conscious mind, or as an uncanny prophecy foreboding coming events. Or, it may be taken as another representation of the intuitiveness that attracted Lucilla to Oscar and repelled her from Nugent from the start, and a variation of her "visionary" or "electric" power that transcends mere sight. Collins' representation is non-committal and readers are left to puzzle over phenomena presently unexplained by science.

Similarly, when Oscar's epilepsy is first apparent, Lucilla is also shown

in a possibly prophetic role. She interprets the series of events leading to his injury fatalistically (96) and her language is full of foreboding (97).¹⁷ Yet, in the same speech, Lucilla is shown to use the familiar image of a chain to describe cause and effect. She traces the series of events to date and adds:

‘Do you see those events (leading to Oscar’s injury) linked together in one chain? I believe the fit will be followed by some next event springing out of it.’ (97)

Is Collins using Lucilla’s super-sensitivity to exploit suspense or recognise the “scientific” principle of contingencies, a principle that acknowledges that in the world there are forces and energies determining general laws and probabilities that none escape? Christopher Kent notices that Collins “to an unusual degree among Victorian novelists” emphasised “the extent to which reality was a construct under significant change, a change that entailed a redefinition of the boundaries of probability and possibility” (Kent 53). I shall return to this feature later.

In the case Collins devises, the link between the senses and brain appears to operate through the memory of learned responses. What she has learned by touching Lucilla must re-learn by seeing. There is apparently no immediate or automatic transfer in knowledge gained from one sense to another. Nor will her painful experience of learning to see as an adult be so easy as the learning of a sighted infant. To complicate matters: because Lucilla has a good memory and an especially good qualitative memory (she appreciates features), she learns visual recognitions quickly; but because she is intelligent, she also suffers frustration and the distress of self-doubt in the process (e.g. 329).

It was argued in “Blind People” (448) that the narrowing of the sensory range made the blind capable of high levels of concentration. The article

¹⁷ Madam Pratolungo’s commentary emphasises the tone of Lucilla’s speech when Lucilla is said to shiver, shrink away and huddle in a corner (97).

relied heavily on reports from blind schools in Britain and America as well as Diderot's "Letter on Blindness" (1780) and a medical report by Thomas Bull M.D. (1859). Lucilla's apparent selfishness, described earlier, may be taken as an example of such concentration. But, as the article also pointed out, concentrating meant that the blind tended to have a one-sided way of thinking of things, to be even arrogantly convinced in their own judgment so that they failed to take in "the big picture." With sight, and the consciousness of others looking at her, Lucilla loses that absolute confidence she had in her own judgment (25) and comes to doubt herself (334). This is an extension of the "swop bargain"--between touch and sight--that Grosse describes (404).

With cataracts couched, Lucilla is, realistically, shown to be literally farsighted. (Collins does not give to Lucilla the thick, heavy spectacles, common to cases such as hers at that time, to improve peripheral vision. Presumably this is one minor concession to the literary convention that requires a beautiful heroine.) Her joyful delight in great wide prospects of sky and sea and the movement on an expanse of beach is now understandable (302, 333-34, 338-39) for these sights require no exhausting close focus--unlike painful reading or writing. It would seem that in reverting to blindness the broad view, literally and metaphorically, is what Lucilla must lose. There is reciprocal gain--her happiness (424). Collins had a precedent: Mesmer's patient also, dissatisfied with new sight, eventually went blind again and made a success of her life (von Senden 161).

Just as Lucilla's "view" of herself as a stable personality is constructed in her mind, so too her concept of colour is shown to be the product of mental action, not sight. Indeed, the subject of colour recognition by the blind was a topic of popular interest. Locke's explanation for a blind

person's "perception" of red relied on association with the sound of a trumpet and was well known. "Eye and Ear Impressions" that appeared 1871 (the same year as *Poor Miss Finch*) is further concerned with the connection between painting and music and with the interconnections between the senses generally.

You can't put a smell into words; but a scent will put words into you, or perhaps awaken thoughts you cannot or will not give voice to. Most people know the delicate solicitation with which odour appeals to memory. (Tyrwitt 583)

The author goes on to quote Durandus linking "quality of hue to quality of sound":

'According to Haydn the trombone is deep red, the trumpet scarlet, the clarinet orange, the oboe yellow, the bassoon deep yellow, the flute sky blue, the diapason deep blue, the double diapason purple, the horn violet, the violin pink, the viola rose, the violoncello red, the double bass crimson.' (584)

and applies this scale to the sunrise in "Creation" and, while the author concedes these ideas may be called fanciful, nevertheless he concludes:

No doubt the relations of harmony to colour, and of harmony to emotion, and of colour to emotion, are distinct subjects, and to most people about as easy and interesting as the Chinese metaphysics in 'Pickwick'. Yet if a good colourist of English landscape and an inventive musician could 'combine their information' and analyse it on paper with any clearness, the results would be interesting and suggestive in the highest degree, and would give the fine arts a direct connection with mental science. (586)¹⁸

Littell's Living Age carried an article from the *Medical Times* reporting the case of Mr Thompson, blind from smallpox at twenty months, but earning his living as a dyer:

He could impart all kinds of colours to all kinds of cloth, and, what is still more remarkable, all shades of colours. (Black 529)

Lucilla prides herself on her ability to detect colours--though she is not infallible. Collins' ambivalence suggests that he is being careful about accepting popular accounts. However, in the matter of colour preferences, Collins leaves no doubt. Lucilla's preference is for bright colours and she

¹⁸ ABC's "Catalyst" program (11-4-02) reported on Melbourne University studies designed to identify the distinctive brain function and location in synaesthetes.

dresses and furnishes her apartment accordingly. Frequently she wears white and “nowhere down the whole extent of the place was so much as a single morsel of dark colour to be seen anywhere” (13). Both Grosse and Sebright are made to confirm what case studies had shown, that Lucilla’s antipathy to dark people and dark shades of colour of all kinds is common in the thinking of blind people (223, 299).¹⁹

Theorists such as Herbert Spencer, believing connections constructed by association through, for example, similarity or vividness of sensations, to be the fundamental principle of mental life, would argue that Lucilla needed to make her clothing and household bright and cheerful to construct a favourable image in the eyes of the world--that is, she dressed brightly for the same sort of image-control that Madam Pratolungo consciously contrived when she dressed up to apply for her job or to impress Herr Grosse. Collins emphasises that Lucilla’s colour preference and prejudices are learned and used by her to constitute the sort of *self-identity* she builds for herself.

Although Collins does not attempt to detail theories of colour vision and different spectral wavelengths, he does allow Lucilla sufficient residual vision to detect brightness--day from night (195), consistent with the pupils expanding as brightness fades--and this provides some optical explanation for her preferences: “white” would be brightness and bright colours those that reflected a degree of brightness against “dark” obscurity.

‘Could you see scarlets when you were blind?’

‘Almost,” she answered, ‘if it was bright enough. I used to feel something pass before my eyes when scarlet was shown to me.’(298)

But, in fact, Lucilla’s imagination has conceived a notion of colour closer to scientific truth than a seeing person’s perception of colour.

¹⁹Traditionally white symbolised freedom of the senses and the soul. Collins’ portraiture frees Lucilla from the control of the popular illusions about blindness--a nice modification! It is possible, too, that Collins is suggesting that racial prejudice is the result of mental “blindness.”

Tyndall (in "The Scientific Use of the Imagination") explains that the spectrum contains an infinite number of colours, of which language distinguishes only seven. He explains that colours (like the blueness of the sky or the orange of sunset) are reflected light and that only white is direct light. In science true whiteness is beyond the limits of human vision. Collins shows Lucilla to be bitterly disappointed when she sees her favourite colours. White is brightness diminished fifty thousand times over and scarlet is not half as red as her imagination had made it to be (299). Her reaction to disappointment and confusion is frustration and shame:

'Go on!' she said impatiently. 'Teach me to be something better than an idiot -- or put the bandage on, and blind me again. My eyes are of no use to me!' (300)

Madam Pratolungo has to relocate her pity-- as readers are expected to do:

I had no idea of the pitiably helpless manner in which the restored sense of sight struggles to assert itself, in persons who have been blind for life. (297)

Between 1783 and 1813 in Vienna, Beer reported on fourteen cases of restored sight. He paid special attention to the psychological well-being of his patients. One was a twenty-year-old female whose despondency seems to be a likely prototype for Collins' representation of Lucilla's unhappiness for Beer's observations appear to be duplicated in Lucilla's flushed mortification, impatience and withdrawal. Similarly, too, her pride seems injured when she finds things different from what she has imagined. Beer explained his patient's mood:

Might not the reason for this sudden and striking change of temper, indeed I might say of the whole character, be partly due, perhaps, to the fact that the patients have supposed all objects, which they could only know by feeling when blind, to be quite different from what they subsequently see them to be; and might not also even a sort of injured pride contribute something to this transformation, in that they now suddenly find themselves so far behind other people of their age, even in the most trivial matters of knowledge? (quoted von Senden 161)

Lucilla makes an effort to assert herself. " 'I didn't know it was black,' she

said. 'But I hated the sight of it, for all that' " (300).

It is shown that the "cure" for Lucilla's obsessive reaction to dark colours is experience. The sequence on Ramsgate sands and the encounter with the retired Indian officer and his family lead Lucilla to examine her own reactions and she concludes that she was momentarily startled more "by the unexpected repetition of the blue face in the face of a stranger; than by the ugliness of the complexion itself" (339-40). She goes on to explain:

'I was terribly frightened by my own imagination, *before* I saw him...
After I saw him, I soon got over it.' (341)

The antipathy that will-power failed to overcome (159-61) is first subjected to pitying modification, and finally is overcome by experience (224) and dismissed as an absurd terror (306). Seeing Nugent actually "hid" Oscar from Lucilla. Her sense of sight, which she expects to be able to trust, misleads her into accepting Nugent's impersonation. Blind, Lucilla's reliably trained sense of touch identifies the man she loves so that there is something commonsensical--even pragmatic--in her assessing what she regains with blindness: " 'my love lives in my blindness' " (418).

Collins does not suggest that experience is necessarily only a response to physical events. He shows how closely the life of the mind identifies with the physical body. Lucilla's misconceived abhorrence of dark colours, despite her courage and will power directed at mastering her aversion, has observable physical effect (158-59). Her imagination generates a fear that has physical repercussions, though there is no *actual* reason for fear (341). And without sight, Lucilla has a conception of "colour," not just the degree of brightness, but colour as an idea. Colour exists for her quite independent of the visual sense.

Overlaying the physiological reaction to colour contrasts in terms of brightness are the emotional reactions to the connotations of language

surrounding sighted persons' use of "light" and "dark." Connotations are built up around words that influence the blind into believing they "see" what others see. This linguistic form of associationism Collins understands, for using the imaginative powers of imitative memory to make connections and create symbols is the artist's business. Collins shows that Lucilla has learned to adopt the sinister connotations in familiar metaphors that sighted people employ:

'Something else is coming to darken his life and to darken mine....My life to come never looked so dark to my blind eyes as it looks now.'(97)

And

'I associate light,' she said thoughtfully, 'with all that is beautiful and heavenly -- and dark with all that is vile and horrible and devilish.' (221)

Collins uses such pervasive influence in language when Madam Pratolungo reports her worry over Oscar's whereabouts:

the dark waste of tossing waters seemed to be the fit and dreary type of the dark prospect that was before me. (321)

Collins is well aware how much understanding is suggested by the use of visual metaphors.

Collins draws on old images for his purposes presumably in the expectation that much of a reader's understanding will be learned, as is Lucilla's, from the connotations implicit in the language of a culture. But he also endeavours to use "plain words," precise and not readily subject to unintended meanings or misinterpretation. Nevertheless, attention is drawn to the extent of unavoidable variability of meaning. Madam Pratolungo uses "see" as a mechanical expression.

'I am so glad to see you!' The instant the words passed my lips, I could have cut my tongue out for reminding her in that brutal manner that she was blind.

Lucilla is comfortable about references to seeing and interprets literally:

To my relief, she showed no sign of feeling it as I did. 'May I see you, in *my* way?' she asked gently -- and held up her pretty white hand. ' May I touch

your face?'(14)

Again, Lucilla who values so highly her sense of touch "felt" Oscar in the tingle when their hands touched, "felt" Oscar was fair (74), experiences "feelings" of horror(157) and "felt" Madam Pratolungo to be agitated (241). These variations of language demonstrate the difficulty of recording objectively what has physical and emotional dimension. In a sympathy letter (*Letters* 456) Collins writes, "My vocation in life is to find words for thoughts." He understands that it is the novelist's business to find words that will enable a "blind" reading audience to share the author's "vision."

* * * *

In his representation of blindness Collins gives an informed and naturalistic portrait of blindness outside conventional representations. But his approach does not put readers "off side." Because that picture is contained within the narrative of Madam Pratolungo, her exaggeratedly comic "foreignness" puts a distance between narrator and readers. That separation allows readers to see more clearly in the Frenchwoman faults they would not care to recognise in themselves. That is, in representing the blatant subjective bias of Madam Pratolungo, Collins is also catering for the partiality of his British public with their typical but mistaken concept of blindness that needs reconsideration. Further, Madam Pratolungo's distorted version of events demonstrates how difficult it is to be an objective reporter especially when perception itself is so unreliable. Readers must filter the truth from her account. The eye has its blind spot, literally and figuratively, and eyes do play tricks. Visual impressions do not always match reality -- as Lucilla's experience of sight informs. And appearances do not always register reliable information, as Collins' narrative of deception illustrates.