

More than Meets the Eye: Blindness as Alterity in a Japanese Guide-Dog Narrative

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The more sickly man...will if he belongs to a warlike and restless race perhaps have more inducement to stay by himself and thereby acquire more repose and wisdom, the one-eyed will have one stronger eye, the blind will see more deeply within themselves and in any event possess sharper hearing. To this extent the celebrated struggle for existence does not seem to me to be the only theory by which the progress or strengthening of a man or a race can be explained.

—Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human*

I. Introduction

There is a thorn in the paw of Nietzsche's aphorism: disability must be exceptional to serve as a baseline for progress. Like many apologists after him, Nietzsche (in this instance) is guilty of the sort of tokenism that continues to haunt disability discourse today (cf. Lawson). His comparatives—"stronger," "more deeply," "sharper"—read like the laundry list of a model minority sympathizer. Despite a gallant attempt to "deploy the power of difference against cultures that would make outcasts of disabled people" (Mitchell and Snyder 67), Nietzsche risks polishing the master's tools in the process. Nevertheless, his critique illuminates a sobering phenomenon: not only are disabled people relegated to the margins; they are also encouraged to embody their marginality as an identity. Only then can they be welcomed back to the fold as exemplars of perseverance. Disability becomes "integral" insofar as it is assimilated into "a norm that supports the perception of disability as an alien or exceptional condition" (Stiker xi). In the absence of viable disability models, the "allowance" of disabled people into able-bodied contexts offsets the need for social change. Symbols and representations of disability undergo constant reformation, sometimes even decay (Miles 616). Nietzsche's philosophical enterprise is ill

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equipped to address the social realities of this reformation (cf. Mitchell and Snyder 89).

Existing exit strategies from this quagmire leave much to be desired. Governmental solutions rest solely on a medical model of disability, which “emphasizes individual incapacity and medical authority, leaving little room for the expertise derived from a disabled person’s embodied experience” (Stevens 161). Few places have held to the medical model more explicitly than modern Japan, where the first major step in this direction was the 1949 Law for the Welfare of Physically Disabled Persons. Enacted for the sole benefit of WWII veterans, it came in direct response to demand from the disabled sector, and not out of any apparent interest in the establishment of support networks at a time when disabled people felt physically and emotionally dependent on blood relatives (Hayashi and Okuhira 392-393), and were barred from achieving “full independence” (ibid. 423). The law’s well-meaning provisions only fueled demand for direct channels of assistance. Legislators responded in the 1960s by providing “residential institutions.” These, too, backfired, resulting in “a life of segregation and obedience, without privacy” (ibid. 393-394). Disabled people had merely been shifted from one mode of confinement to another, pulled away from potential outreach into sometimes unsanitary, neglectful conditions (ibid. 857-859).

Despite continued welfare attention, if not also because of it, critics such as Hiroe Yōda remain wary of the advances made in the name of disability rights, claiming that Japan’s social welfare system is myopically focused on “rehabilitation” over “reintegration,” exhibits over-reliance on medical models, and continues to leave disabled people in dependent positions (qtd. in Stevens 16-17). One problem rampant in, although by no means unique to, Japan is that “people with physical disabilities are seen to require concessions no more onerous than wheelchair ramps, guide dogs, Braille signage and so on” (ibid. 75). Such narrow-mindedness carries a torch of outdated thinking, and means that thousands of disabled people in Japan remain woefully under-recognized.

Another, less obvious, problematic of the Nietzschean stance on disability is that only humans are privy to its transformative powers. In order to unpack this segregation, I offer the case of Quill, a guide dog whose staunch determination brought Japan to its knees in ways not witnessed since the loyal dog, Hachikō, became a patriotic martyr after waiting at a Tokyo train station for nine years for his dead master’s return (Skabelund 89). I aim to show that the guide dog is a placeholder “for the ways in which disability becomes understood (and often feared) as a potential identity for everyone” (McHugh 31) and, like Hachikō, offsets deeply rooted discriminations. Quill’s touching story shows how disability itself can

function as a “narrative prosthesis.” This term comes from the book of the same name by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, who use it to describe the literary device by which disability becomes a stepping-stone toward grander moral conclusions that ultimately apply only to those considered “whole.” By this process, “disabled characters have been consistently received by readers and viewers as isolated cases” (Mitchell and Snyder 29). Therein lies the central danger of disability tales: they are empathic black holes that affect minimal, fleeting change in the everyday.

The literary guide dog fulfills both practical and abstract functions. From a practical standpoint, the guide dog sheds light on a unique dependency. Abstractly, the animal’s very presence bolsters human superiority by manifesting the power and ingenuity of guide dog training. As it stands, the guide dog is a living badge of honor, an advertiser of its own purpose that holds the norms behind its institution. In order to better situate those norms, I begin by sketching the metanarrative of blindness that surrounds Quill’s biography. I then offer some theoretical ruminations as a means of activating the story in a broader intellectual field. By the end, I aim to show that the guide dog—despite being a fully cognizant actor in all of this—comes to be treated as an expendable variable of emotional transference, by means of which those who produce disability narratives in the popular arena are able to capitalize on animal utility.

II. A Brief History of Visual Impairment in Japan

The name Shoko Asahara will forever be synonymous with doom. After his followers coordinated the infamous Tokyo subway nerve gas attacks in March of 1995, the leader of Japan’s Aum Shinrikyo cult was immortalized on the 3 April 1995 cover of *Time* magazine (“Cult”). The implications of Asahara’s intimately cropped headshot were clear: he was looking at the reader, and by extension the world, challenging all who would underestimate the import of his actions. Yet, nowhere in the issue’s four cover stories (by David Van Biema, James Walsh, Bruce W. Nelan, and Ian Buruma)—nor even in Haruki Murakami’s 2001 editorial tour de force, “Underground”—was there any mention of a glaring fact: Asahara is blind. Even as ink was being spilt over the cult leader’s psychological past, no one thought to examine the relationship between his physical body and the society from which he had felt ever-excluded.

A lone voice from the academic sector has attempted to articulate such a theory. Although in his article, “Reconsidering Japanese Religious History: The Aum Incident and Blind Culture in Modern Japan,” Hirose paints a picture no less troubled than any found in mass media copy, his emphasis on Asahara’s blindness (the result of childhood glaucoma) inflects the *Time* cover rather differently.

Whereas before one might have seen confrontation, now there is invitation, even a shade of sympathy, reflected in that gaze. Hirose is clear about Asahara's motivations. As a victim of discrimination, Asahara was forced into a life of limited options. Over the years, this isolation fueled his hatred of the society that shunned him, to the point where violence against able-bodied citizens was, in light of his esoteric worldviews, a tactical endpoint. "There is a tacit rule," writes Hirose, "that the blind who receive special education should not do anything that will be a nuisance to 'normal' people. Asahara violated this rule drastically." Appearing in print eight years after the event in question, Hirose's corrective is well timed, bobbing quietly in the wake of a media storm that might otherwise have drowned it.

Let us return to the *Time* cover and its verbose tagline, which reads: "A poison-gas attack triggers fears about extremists using homemade weapons of mass death." Note the word "extremists," of which the Latin root *extremus* refers to "outermost" and places Asahara at a far remove from society proper. Thus cordoned (because, of course, no morally upright nation can be seen as fostering such animosity), Asahara's "outsiderness" as a blind man might only have encouraged those wanting to see his abnormality as innate. Hirose's point is nonetheless profound: acknowledged or not, in the Asahara case blindness is no longer a disability but an alterity—a notion our aphoristic Nietzsche would likely have embraced. This drastic recalibration is embedded not merely in Asahara's confrontational posture, but in the tragic behavior that spun from his mind into unforgettable denouement.

Asahara's eyes cannot have gone entirely unnoticed. The initial silence on the topic of his blindness indicates not ignorance, but a willful parry of the topic altogether. An open engagement of Asahara as a disabled person might very well have set unwanted sympathy in motion. The media needed a focal point for misdirection, and the insane outsider angle fit the bill—this, despite the fact that Asahara was proven by expert evaluators to be sound of mind. Continued controversy around blindness further betrays a linguistic sore spot. Not only is there a language of disability, but there is also a language that surrounds disability. The proliferation of Japanese terms for blindness, for example, indicates a historical grappling with its designation. In her historical overview of disability in Japan, Stevens stresses that, despite the "merit in making linguistic changes, clearly the path taken needs to avoid the twin evils of using old terms that exclude groups of people and creating new terms which in reality merely perpetuate the status quo" (60). Indeed, acceptance of, and sensitivity toward, disability in daily conversation does not translate into blanket acceptance; no matter how understanding a society may be on the whole, the shame experienced by families with disabled children can be devastating (Lock "Genomics" 191; cf. Lock "Encounters" 1993).

Visual impairment has a checkered past in Japan. During the Tokugawa period, blind people were typically associated with, if not coerced into, the arts, primarily as itinerant minstrels known as *biwa-hōshi* (Stevens 27; Namase). As such, they took on circumscribed value,¹ especially among the feudal lords who exploited them as clandestine messengers thought able to communicate with the dead. Blind artists contributed greatly to Japan's aesthetic evolution—as keepers of oral traditions, accompanists on the theatrical stage, religionists, and the like—and bolstered the creature comforts of nobility, who also retained them as masseuses and entertainers (Groemer 349). Significantly, *biwa-hōshi* were not handed their social status by a higher power, but forged status for themselves through a clever personal mythology (Miles 612; cf. Matisoff). Their status became so great that so-called “blind guilds” (*tōdō-za*) prevented blind artists from falling into the “special status” category of outcasts until those safety nets came undone in 1871 (Groemer 373). Furthermore, blind female spirit mediums, or *itako*, of the northeastern provinces were believed to possess inherent shamanistic ability. Fears of proximity to death relegated *itako* to the margins, flagging them as social pariahs, while also cloaking them in relative safety. The *itako* also gained viable social status, if only locally, because of their supposed ability to see in ways that the sighted could not, all of which served to reinscribe the notion of blindness as a gateway condition. The “otherness” of the impairment was enough to validate what might very well have been charlatan acts (Miles 614; cf. Blacker 141; Wright 162).

In 1872, the Meiji government established a compulsory educational system that excluded blind people, clinching their status as keepers of an oral historico-cultural archive, and as acupuncturists and Chinese herbalists, professions in which Asahara would someday be so begrudgingly trained.² Only when the Fundamental Law of Education was passed in 1947 did education for blind children become compulsory. Under the new law, blind children were placed in special classrooms, isolated from their able-bodied counterparts (Stevens 110). Children in such institutions were ranked according to the severity of their impairments, resulting in an arbitrary hierarchy of disabilities. The “least impaired” among them became favorites of teachers and staff. These children “then adopted an ‘elite’ attitude, and considered themselves superior to residents with more severe impairments” (Hayashi and Okuhira 395). Asahara was, depending on one's point of view, either a victim or beneficiary of this system; one diagnosis was all it took to shuffle the young Asahara into a school system for the blind. Thus severed from social networks at an impressionable age, might he have succumbed to this “elitism” as well? Reports of

¹ Some even received financial assistance by virtue of their condition alone (Namase 196).

² This, in fact, led Asahara to his first run-in with the law, when he was arrested for manufacturing and distributing illegal herbal concoctions. It was during his imprisonment that his esoteric religious interests began to foment.

his excessive bullying at the time would seem to suggest that he had. Either way, feelings of superiority were specific to the institutional environments that fostered them, and in no way equipped students with the armor necessary to fend off the far more “specific norms of communication and consciousness” being anchored and reproduced in such schools (Whyte and Muyinda 294).

As recently as the early 1980s, “Japanese society did not perceive the confining of disabled persons in institutions for life as a human-rights violation” (Hayashi and Okuhira 391). Neither did this confining stop at the institutional level, for many in Asahara’s position were “funnelled without distinction into low-paying jobs, instead of being encouraged to seek further training to reach their full employment potential” (Stevens 81). Thus underwritten, Asahara’s marginality as a human being only deepened with time. Ongoing discrimination against the blind has since led to the formation of local clubs providing networks of helpers for various activities, but it is unlikely that such networks were available to Asahara. His solution was to create his own.

Following social integration in the 1970s alongside a nascent Disability Rights Movement, the 1980s saw an increase in the number of disabled people transitioning into independent living situations. The number of, and attention paid to, personal attendants also grew (Hayashi and Okuhira 401-403). This led to the formation of the Japan Council on Independent-Living Centers in 1991, and, with the help of advocates from the United States, a rise in the presence of guide dogs. Lack of funding, resources, and qualified trainers prevented such a luxury from becoming widely available. Times of crisis have been the greatest mirrors for the inadequacies of this legislation. Instigated, in part, by an inability to accommodate the blind in the wake of 3/11, October of that same year (2011) saw an unprecedented change in the welfare service system for the blind, including nationwide standardization of safety escorts trained to assist in daily tasks (“Voice”), as well as a marked rise in the use and availability of guide dogs.

The discipline of guide dog training was introduced to Japan in 1938, but it was not until 1967 that the Japanese Guide Dog Association (JGDA) was established at the behest of the Ministry of Welfare. Another important step came in 1973, when Japanese National Railways instituted its Service Standards for Passengers, which allowed the visually impaired to be accompanied by their guide dogs on trains. In 2002, the Law Concerning Service Dogs for People with Disabilities was passed by the national Diet in order to give guide dog owners greater access to public facilities and transportation (Zhong 7). In spite of these advances, stress levels of those with guide dogs have been shown to be higher than those without (Matsunaka and Koda 303). Many establishments, restaurants in particular, exercise their right to refuse

service to any customer accompanied by an animal on grounds of sanitation. As Sadakazu Shimojiyu, head of the Kansai Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (est. 1980), observes, “Up to now, we have been promoting guide dogs to blind people. From now on, we need to promote understanding of guide dogs among seeing people” (qtd. in “Guide Dogs”; cf. Milan). Steps in this direction have taken many forms, notably as a Tokyo discrimination awareness rally held in honor of International Guide Dog Day in April of 2012.

Surge of interest in guide dogs as a Japanese cultural phenomenon in the last decade can be traced to a single book and its adapted film, both of which pose the question: Can affinity for animals be conflated with affinity for the disabled? In the following section, I give a close reading of this quintessential guide-dog narrative. My purpose in doing so is to prove that, contrary to the Asahara narrative, the presence of a guide dog lends specific and undeniable visuality to the condition of blindness even as it provides the same function of displacement. The guide dog compensates for impairment, and, therefore, takes on the possibility of sight through substitution. More importantly, the guide dog opens up a line of communication between (1) user and dog, (2) dog and society, (3) society and user. This triangle would seem to enable re-integration of the blind into the social matrix, with the dog acting as a mediator between worlds. Unfortunately, such has not been the case.

III. Quill in Context

On 8 July 1998, just three years following the Aum Incident, Isamu and Mitsuko Nii of Kyoto bade farewell to a special companion. Quill, a Labrador retriever guide dog who had captured many hearts throughout his twelve years of life, died in the quiet comfort of his foster family’s home. His death was such a blow that, five years later, a book of letters honoring the faithful dog was published in his remembrance (Ishiguro *Letters to Quill*). What was it about this one canine that put a finger on the pulse of the national ethos? Our first clue can be found in the mounting proliferation of dogs in the mainstream Japanese literary market. Since becoming something of a posthumous celebrity, Quill has sparked an interest in marginalized canines—service dogs, disabled dogs, neglected and abused dogs—as role models of moral virtue.

At the time of Quill’s death, less than 1000 guide dogs were actively registered in Japan, with nearly 5000 hopeful users on the waiting list for a canine assistant (Ishiguro *Life of a Guide Dog* 7). The statistic fares little better today, and is one contributing factor to the paltry 30-percent employment rate of Japan’s 350,000 blind. This segregation conforms to the strictures of times past, in spite of a legislative crawl toward progress. And so, when Quill’s story was told in Ishiguro’s docu-novel *Quill: The Life of a Guide Dog* in 2001, it touched a raw nerve.

Ishiguro's book—a *mélange* of interviews, photographs (courtesy of Ryōhei Akimoto), and dramatization—presents Quill as a hero. Yet, what is, on the surface, a touching story of dedication harbors dire messages along with the good, questioning notions of purity, human-animal relations, and public perceptions of the blind in tandem.

June 25, 1986. Quill is born in Tokyo. Like Japan's bubble economy, the young Quill is preparing for a period of intense growth and sudden downfall. For now, his destiny is unknown. His original owner harbors dreams of breeding Labs of “guide dog caliber,” and consults Kyoto-based guide dog handler Satoru Tawada, the man responsible for breeding Quill's mother—a common house pet—with a guide dog of reputable pedigree. In so informing us, the book makes it a point to stress that Quill and his siblings have “guide dog blood” (*mōdōken ni tekishiteiru kettō*) in their veins (*ibid.* 22),³ thus weaving a eugenic thread throughout the narrative.

Purebreds are preferred for service work, as they tend to act more predictably during training. Purity is thus transformed via the canine body from an ideal to a norm: in order for a blind person to function in society, s/he must put trust in the vessel of purity which society has provided for that purpose. This has the hypocritical effect of reinforcing the impurity of the impairment. Only after much imploring does Tawada agree to take one puppy for training, and sends over a colleague to evaluate the litter's behavioral cues. Successful guide dogs display certain personality traits early on, and it is these Tawada and his associates look for in any potential guide dog. Docility matters above all, for it conveys a dog who will not let the everyday world distract the task at hand (*ibid.* 27). Quill is immediately singled out for his quiet attitude, for never developing “the competitive streak of his siblings” (*ibid.* 17).

Quill bears a streak of a different kind in the form of a dark spot on his side, a genetic defect that belies his sub-pure lineage. Rather than be seen as such, the spot is claimed as a good omen, “a message to the world that he was destined to touch people's lives” (*ibid.* 197). The blemish at once valorizes and objectifies his potential, and performs just the sort of exceptionalism Nietzsche proposes in this paper's epigraph. As the tainted runt of the litter, his reserved nature is configured as destiny. It is significant that Quill is so marked, as if he would have to be in order to serve with such devotion and continue to inspire others, even after his retirement (see Fig. 1). Quill's blemish is explicitly remarked upon when the 43-day-old puppy is welcomed into the Niis' lives. At first, the spot confuses Mitsuko, who assumes someone must have deliberately put it there (*ibid.* 58).

³ All translations from the Japanese are my own.



Fig. 1 Quill is handed off to the Niis. Note the telltale birthmark on his side (photo by Ryōhei Akimoto, used by kind permission of Bungei Shunjū).

As Quill's designated "puppy walkers," Mitsuko and her husband are tasked with acclimating him to the wider world. So begins Ishiguro's perhaps unwitting attempt to inculcate readers in the text's anthropocentric concerns. For while there is some stress on the dog's movement from home to home, the focus is on the emotional well-being of his caretakers. In this vein, the Niis are described as a couple whose "former pet collie had been like a child to them, and her death had left a gaping hole in their lives" (ibid. 51). Say the Niis, "We knew the dog would be heading off for training just when we were beginning to bond. But we also felt it would be easier knowing the dog was going on to bigger and better things than having to lose a dog we had lived with for much longer" (ibid. 51). That the Niis see a causal relationship between "bigger and better things" and an animal's utility is understandable, given that Quill is being groomed as prosthesis for a human need. There is also a sense that they are doing something positive for the nation. In a telling aside, they make it a point to talk about the two guide dogs they have raised in the past. They are proudest of the second, because she and her user together climbed Mts. Fuji and Hakusan and even completed the formidable Kannon 100 Circuit. The patriotic fervor of such pride is as blatant as it is briefly noted. So deep is their faith in Quill that when the time comes to relinquish him to the training center, "Their hearts were close to bursting as they thought back on what a rambunctious, but intelligent puppy he had been" (ibid. 77). This blend of childlike and sagacious qualities is soon to be put to the test.

Trainer Tawada is known as "The Magician" and is thought to be "more canine than human," making him something of a dog whisperer (ibid. 62). His status as such pegs him as an outsider, as someone, like the feared itako, who shuttles between

reality and a world incomprehensible to the rest of us. Tawada recalls Quill as being “unremarkable” when he was first brought to the training facility, even as he praises the dog’s incredible obedience, which “set him apart from the rest. He never let his personality get in the way” (ibid. 94). Tawada notes the initial difficulties of training Quill, stubborn from the first: “He might have been a puppy, but he behaved more like a middle-aged man!” (ibid. 86). Clearly, Quill is being held to the same standards to which he will one day accede in the name of human independence. In anticipation of criticism, Tawada is clear about the dogs’ enjoyment, saying, “Dogs love to work, so they find the guide dog training, and by extension being loyal to their user, rather fun” (ibid. 85).



Enter Mitsuru Watanabe, a native of nearby Kameoka who, since losing his sight at age 42, is vehemently against the idea of keeping, and relying on, a dog. Despite his anxieties, after a period of intense mutual training, Watanabe is able to live independently again. “He’s more than a dog,” says the convert, “he’s a real companion” (ibid. 138; see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 Watanabe and Quill share a moment, birthmark and all (photo by Ryōhei Akimoto, used by kind permission of Bungei Shunjū).

After two blissful years, tragedy strikes: Watanabe’s kidneys begin to fail, leaving Quill stuck in the training center kennel. For three more years the dog wallows in depression, after which a tearful reunion leads to a final walk together (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Quill and Watanabe share one last walk (photo by Ryōhei Akimoto, used by kind permission of Bungei Shunjū).

Watanabe dies one week later. Due to the strength of their relationship, Tawada foresees only difficulty in trying to pair Quill with another “user” (as the Japanese parlance would have it). He finally decides to retire Quill from service and tout him instead as a social welfare ambassador. In this capacity, Quill averages ten demonstrations a year. Children are blindfolded at these events and led through an obstacle course, giving them firsthand experience of placing trust in an animal. In a nation where the blind continue to live in the shadows, Quill brings valuable learning moments to light and earns due media attention. When the Niis catch wind of this, they begin following him around, if only to glimpse that memorable canine who brought so much joy to their lives. They notice he is getting sluggish in his ways and ask the training center if he might spend his remaining days at their home. Tawada agrees to this unorthodox request. As Quill lies dying, Isamu tells the dog, “And

when you get to Heaven, you tell them loud and clear that your name is Quill Nii!” (ibid. 193). He is their kin after all (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 The Niis lay their hands on Quill. The birthmark is re-inscribed (photo by Ryōhei Akimoto, used by kind permission of Bungei Shunjū).

Quill is, above all, a narrative of disability. Does it concede to the usual protocol of such stories? McHugh, for one, claims “guide-dog fictions directly confront the negative image of a blind man led astray by (and consequently like) a dog” (32). In this respect, the book succeeds bittersweetly. On the one hand, Watanabe’s total turnaround from curmudgeon to humanitarian speaks of something transformative in the human-dog relationship and echoes Michalko’s assertion that the quality of a blind person’s life is only as good as the individual makes it out to be. Quill is a narrative of personal triumph in the absence of foreseeable hope through which its canine protagonist acts as a stepping-stone toward breakthrough. Such is the power of biography to challenge the ableist paradigm (cf. Titchkosky).

That said, Siebers, invoking the feminist-queer concept of “masquerade,” is critical of the need for overt visual markers of “disability” (102). In the same way that heterosexuality may be compulsory, so too does able-bodiedness function in Quill as the unwavering norm to which both Watanabe and Quill must bow if they are to navigate the social landscape as fluidly as they do. Despite the communicative potential for masquerade, it comes with a price:

Many representations of people with disabilities...use narrative structures that masquerade disability to benefit the able-bodied public and to reinforce the ideology of ability. Human-interest stories display voyeuristically the physical or mental disability of their heroes, making the defect emphatically present, often exaggerating it, and then wiping it away by reporting how it

has been overcome, how the heroes are ‘normal,’ despite the powerful odds against them. (Siebers 111)

Quill functions in his eponymous tale in precisely this way—which is to say, as the surrogate hero in place of his feeble user. Neither Quill’s nor Watanabe’s portrayal is so productive after all—in reinforcing one another, each serves to solidify a normativity that transcends them both. The most useful guide dog is one who assesses the situation and looks for differences—in height between walking surfaces, for example—in order to avoid danger. In Watanabe’s own words, “Quill has reminded me of how a person should walk” (Ishiguro *Life of a Guide Dog* 197). In this way, Quill is a blank slate for the decidedly anthropocentric cast of his employ. The novel’s patriotic subtext bolsters the connection between such thinking and a broader nation-centered consciousness: by mediating between Watanabe’s formerly sheltered life and newfound compassion, guide dogs like Quill are empowering Japan’s population, one citizen at a time.

The fact that Quill’s entire life was so well documented in still images—portraying even those most intimate moments of birth and death—gives his tale a voyeuristic quality that is difficult to shake and makes Quill’s characteristic mark that much louder. It ensures that his impurity is never in question, that his uncompromising loyalty may be emphasized as a matter of national character over breeding. Along these lines, in his Afterword to the text, Ishiguro puts out a call for financial and volunteer resources, framing the guide dog shortage as a question of human labor, while also implicitly claiming it as a chance for Japan to “catch up” to the West in its personal and technological attention to disabilities of all kinds.

In a time when skin color is still hegemonized as a marker of racial and ethnic identity, disability can be about nothing more than looking. Consequently, the visuality of disability frames the condition as a question in need of answering: “What do we ‘see’ when we experience someone using a wheelchair or someone who is blind or when someone tells us they have a learning disability?” ask Titchkosky and Michalko. “Typically, what we ‘see,’ is a problem. But what sort of a problem and thus what sort of a solution do we perceive?” (136). In light of these questions, Akimoto’s accompanying photographs—and, by extension, director Yōichi Sai’s 2004 screen adaptation—have clearly made a bigger impact than the text. The “adorability factor” of the film goads attention away from the text’s ideological pitfalls and provides an escapist promise of humanity’s inherent goodness. Simultaneously assuaging and embodying fears of impermanence, the dog becomes a mechanism of levity against the anxieties of a nation still recovering from a string of earthquakes, tsunamis, and nuclear meltdowns.

Since the release of Sai's film, the guide dog has become the symbol par excellence of the Disability Rights Movement in Japan and has furthered the latter's goal of independent living. In a thesis on the same, Zhong divides the human characters of *Quill* into three groups: elites (i.e., trainers), visually impaired persons, and the general public (13-14). As I have shown above, the expertise of *Quill*'s trainers is portrayed as something other than human, requiring a certain crossing over (see next section) in order to flourish. Tawada is one who inhabits two worlds, and neither of them fully. This is not to say that book and film have had no positive ramifications. The great success of the film in particular garnered Tawada and the JGDA much in the way of media coverage, resulting in a surge of public donations, as well as visits from celebrities and members of the Japanese royal family (ibid. 31-32). The film was also instrumental in demystifying for the general public the relationship between humans and guide dogs and the latter's exact role in that relationship.

Yet, even the rainbow bears a scar. In the same way that Hachikō, once a valuable embodiment of national character in a time of great uncertainty, "has become a nostalgic symbol that promotes local commerce" (Ambros 190), so too has *Quill* engendered just enough sympathy for the blind among those touched by his story to feel that adequate attention has been paid. With confirmation and mental cataloging of that sympathy comes greater distance from it. Equally problematic is the fact that the book's construction as a documentarian (read: visual) object marks it as a product for the sighted alone. It, too, must abide by hegemonic rules of publishing, marketing, and distribution, such that the end effect flips by as ephemerally as *Quill*'s life on the printed page. The matter-of-fact slant of such narratives' pedantry affirms their celerity of purpose.

IV. *Quill* in Theory

Foucault famously posited that "[a] normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life" (144). Disability is an especially effective means by which to corroborate the implications of Foucault's thinking on this point. The divisiveness of biopower creates and upholds human subjects. The dark side to this telos is that biopower makes impairments seem natural against the "juridico-discursive" norms in which they are situated (see Tremain 10). In other words, if one can imagine that individuality, per se, is constructed by the social norms of which it is composed, then one can also imagine that disability, insofar as it "belongs" to the individual it "afflicts," can be a norm unto itself. It bears noting that the vast majority of people with disabilities or impairments are not born with them. Those who develop disabilities later in life necessarily envision themselves before and after those turning points, thereby emphasizing that "becoming disabled not only alters

our physical state, but may also alter our conception of time and life course progression” (Iwakuma 223). This is why narration of disability tends to be so transparent. To wit: that *Quill* was written for a general audience lends it a kind of authority, a simple wisdom through which its cookie-cutter morals bake up all the sweeter.

Troubling is the skeletal outline of justice presented in *Quill*. For even as the book shores up latent concerns about the segregation of disability, it cannot withstand the flood of denial that keeps it from standing tall. As an educational ambassador, *Quill* is an illusory subject of justice, if only because as an animal he cannot be a “framer of contracts” (cf. Nussbaum 335). That is, he cannot define the parameters of his legal and social stations in life. Although dogs and cats have, in Japan, become increasingly accepted as full-fledged family members, the bonds of the family unit no longer carry the same precontractual weight they once did (ibid. 105-106). It is for this reason that *Quill*’s “true” family is to be found neither in the company of his birth mother nor even of Watanabe, but rather with the elderly couple who introduced him to the world and who stayed with him as he slipped over into the next. *Quill* can be no arbiter of social change because his legal status is forever ambiguous.

Still, change exists all around him. Wherever *Quill* goes, he makes an unforgettable impression, although it is more akin to what Deleuze would call “impersonal singularity” (qtd. in Overboe 120-121), whereby forces that exist outside the body precede the self while also being integral to the self. In this vein, Overboe moves beyond the pathological model of impairment into a nuanced understanding that privileges generative life force over personhood and representation, thus rendering the disabled body not as an “individual afflicted with impairments” but rather as a matrix of “singularities that affirm the impersonal life” (ibid. 125). Normality is the construction from which the individual may be freed. As an example of impersonal singularity, *Quill* reminds us that the disabled body is not “an entity that inhibits life” but rather one that “provides the vitality and is the basis for a life expressed” (ibid. 124). Yet again, the animal is sublimated by deference to a stubborn universalism.

In the context of *Quill*, blindness is not a “secret stigma” (see Inhorn and Bharadwaj 85), but stands out by virtue of its title character’s very presence and, eventually, absence. Watanabe can never overcome his condition; he can only wallow in it. Only once is he photographed in the book, upon being introduced to the training facility grounds, without *Quill* somewhere in frame. His existence is indelibly marked by the dog, whose visual direction becomes part of his non-visual compass. The persistence of their relationship reifies the “normate assumption that

impairment cancels out other qualities, reducing the complex person to a single attribute” (Thomson 12). As the token representative of all blind people, Watanabe is pushed into a metanarrative that oversteps agency in favor of cultural representation (see Bolt 292).

The training of guide dogs ensures they know where they stand in relation to humans and that they belong to a human pack (cf. Knight 7). Quill is never in any doubt as to where he stands among others. Both the book and the film try their best to shift subjective focus by drawing disparate elements together in such a way that blindness itself becomes the central protagonist, rendering the characters whose lives it affects as fleeting signals for its cause. In this manner, author, photographer, and director end up redrawing notions of utility and capability as indicators of social worth. That the film has gained international traction is worrisome in this regard, for the assertion of capability and globalization gives rise to friction on questions of collective action problems, fairness, capacity, and personal life the film is unprepared to address (cf. Nussbaum 307-308).

Narrative forms may offer a field of compromise in which to engage creatively and ethically with animals. Although, as McHugh rightly believes, “stories can (and indeed always) do more than represent selves at the expense of others” (217), when para- and extra-textual forces seem only to conspire against hope, one is challenged to find an antidote. Even if the point of narratology, as McHugh goes on to say, “is not to escape the stories so much as to reckon with the ways in which life continues only ever within them” (ibid. 218), what happens when the blood of a story is letted? Has not the violation of its consumption already compromised its potential for an internal life? Even more pertinent questions might be: How does the story reckon us? If we insist on reading life as literature, what is to stop literature from reading us as itself?

V. Conclusion

In 2011, engineers from Japan’s NSK Corporation unveiled their working prototype of a mechanical guide dog. Attractive in theory, in practice the idea was grossly premature. How can blind users be expected to put their trust in machines? How might societies react to the sight of machine-assisted humans when they have yet to fully grapple with that of animal-assisted humans? Presumably, the technology could potentially subsidize the need for biological guide dogs, but its existence would be enough to reframe guide dogs as far too fallible in proportion to the time and money invested in them. Balancing the ways mobile and virtual technologies abstract the self through such avatars, the constructed canine gives social actors a focal point on which to project an ideal, completed self.

Implications are vivid and far-reaching. For one, robotic assistance affirms the currency of what Sas calls “appearance” in the world (57), which is to say that the degree to which one is noticeable directly correlates to the standards by which one is valued, recognized, and privileged. It is for this reason that “forms of representation matter to the development of theories of species life” (McHugh 218) and why stories like Quill’s, precisely because of their popularity and banal structure, carry so much weight. There is something of a Benjaminian “desire to see more” in the promise of blindness (Sas 61) but it is transferred and romanticized by the sighted, who are the immediate producers and targets of such stories.

Because the disabled are “based in their bodies but not confined to flesh or its past perfect” and are concerned instead with their “future declension” (Miller 283), they have already broken through barriers of communication, waiting for the able-bodied to catch up. That said, “[t]he idea that individuals with physical, sensory or cognitive impairments all together form a class of ‘the disabled’ is a twentieth century invention” (Silvers 23). In the instance of Quill, it may not, as McHugh suggests, behoove us to think of “molecular groupings” over “atomized individuals” (219). Rather, the narrative manifestations of disability are to be taken on their own terms and contextualized accordingly. Like the black-clad manipulators of Japanese puppet theatre, the purpose of guide dogs is often romanticized as disappearance, when in actuality that purpose is to be seen, to make obvious that the sighted are subject to forces of which they may be unaware. The guide dog exists only insofar as it interacts with its surroundings, “a complement to behaviors already in effect” (Atelier Bow-Wow 10). That we are so willing to talk about blindness when its catalyst is a likeable animal, but utterly unwilling to acknowledge its social ramifications when it involves the killing of innocent civilians by a supposedly deranged cult leader, proves that in both instances some fantasy of unblemished humanity reigns supreme. Until we do something to challenge this notion, we remain blind to ourselves, and to the individual animals on whom we depend.

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