

The Good Body

The Good Body:
Normalizing Visions in Nineteenth-Century
American Literature and Culture, 1836-1867

By

William M. Etter

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For Tracy, Charlie, and Henry

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CHAPTER ONE

“THE GOOD BODY”

The brief quotation I have chosen for the title of this study appears in Horace Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden*. In a conversation with Traubel about social and economic reforms in the United States, Whitman proclaimed: "It strikes me again, as it always has struck me, that the whole business finally comes back to the good body...I agree with the scientists, that a beautiful, competent, sufficing, body is the prime force making towards the virtues in civilization, life, history" (2: 88). By "The good body" Whitman meant a particular vision of the "normal" body, the body producing "The feeling of health" celebrated in the opening lines of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, a body constituted jointly in the art, culture, and politics of the United States. Viewed by over 100,000 people when it traveled to major U.S. Northern and Southern cities in the 1850s, Hiram Powers' famous sculpture "The Greek Slave" (1843)—a testament to classical ideals of democracy, racial purity, and traditional feminine virtues—was coopted by antebellum health reformers and physicians like Daniel Jacques in his book *Hints Towards Physical Perfection* (1859). Jacques seized upon its idealized neoclassical depiction of feminine beauty as a means of instructing Americans on the practical importance of maintaining good health and underscoring the role of the healthy citizen in the constitution of a healthy nation. Dr. Richard Trall, one of the developers of the century's popular "water cure," "counseled young men to examine 'Power's Greek Slave, or his statue of Eve, to learn the outline of a good vital organization' and behold 'the *normal* female form'" (qtd. in Aspiz 219, italics in original). Presumably by learning about such "normal" forms through art the young man would be better equipped to select an appropriate mate with whom to reproduce a healthy American citizenry for the future.

Trall's statement and the texts I discuss in this book indicate that physical "normality" was frequently discussed, invoked, worried over, and celebrated in the national literature of the antebellum and Civil War eras. Then, as now, such "normality" was often assumed to be a naturally occurring status, transparently "obvious," a "given" condition of identity

which might simply be assumed and therefore did not require discussion.¹ Just as often, however, the discursive productions of the early to mid-nineteenth century United States kept “the exigency of normality” (to borrow a phrase from Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*) always before the public eye. Indeed, as recent scholars of gender, race, sexuality, and human physical differences have taught us, the concept of the “normal” as a social and epistemological category of identity must be continually reiterated and reinforced, largely through discursive means, if it is to exist as a dominant cultural paradigm. The examination and critique of such “ideological abstractions” in their historical and cultural manifestations is a crucial concern of Disability Studies and its emerging sub-field currently called “normalcy studies.” Viewed in this scholarly light, it is not surprising at all to discover prominent texts of the antebellum and Civil War periods—Emerson’s essays or proslavery writings, for example—alluding frequently to the characteristics and celebrating the advantages of “normal” bodies.

This book argues that American culture of the antebellum and Civil War eras was influenced, informed, and in some respects even characterized by a dichotomy between bodies imagined as physically “normal” and bodies imagined as physically “abnormal.” These cultural constructions and the thematic focus, the politics, and the aesthetics of nineteenth-century American literature were mutually influential. The “normal” body of either gender was symbolically constructed in a process of “normalizing” in which dominant discourses—philosophic, scientific, literary, racial, nationalistic, historical—determined what sorts of bodies society would consider legitimate, healthy, and useful and, by opposition, what sorts would be denied these classifications. The “normal” body was an artifice that existed within, and derived its value from, the social realm, economic realities, and politics. Typically, the invocation of this figure constituted an assertion regarding what all American bodies should be able to do, how they should appear to the scrutiny of fellow American “experts” (such as health reformers, Emerson’s “Genius,” proslavery scientists, Civil War era physicians), and why the nation needed them. Pathologization, normalization’s necessary counterpart, appeared in texts of the period through dynamic and troublesome figures, characters with bodies that deviated from established societal norms. These aberrant

¹ Georges Canguilhem in his now classic work *Le normal et le pathologique* (1978) makes the claim (seemingly influenced by Heidegger) that the body as “abnormal” only historically makes itself apparent when it fails or disrupts “normal” life. The condition of “normality” in Canguilhem’s view is thus typically a condition of invisibility.

figures served as both enabling images for the reinforcement of existing ideologies and structures of power and as “stumbling block[s] to cultural definitions and artistic figurations” of America and American bodies dominant at this historical moment (Mitchell and Snyder 2). Out of these contradictory manifestations there emerged literary works which anxiously attempted to enforce physical normality as their culture understood it, reject abnormality in its diverse and idiosyncratic manifestations, or, in rarer instances, subvert paradigms of normality enforced as part of the nation’s dominant political and social ideologies.

Rosemarie Garland Thomson, a scholar of literature and Disability Studies, has challenged the socio-political investments of the normative subject produced by these discourses. She calls “normal” embodiment a “subject position of cultural self...the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings” rather than misfits, freaks, monstrosities, or other socially abjected figures (8). As the language of Thomson’s statement implies, studies of “normal” and “abnormal” bodies in literature have been informed by the important work of critical race, gender, and gay and lesbian studies. Studying the history of “the body” as a genealogy of representations, the maintenance of institutions of power as intimately related to modes of defining “the body,” and the constitution of physical “normality” as dependent for the determination of its conceptual, legal, and social boundaries upon the imagination of bodies deemed “aberrant,” these fields of inquiry have provided crucial theoretical grounds upon which the literary history of the United States may justifiably be given additional detail and political import. A central premise of this book—that a critical examination of physical “normality” as a socially and discursively constituted phenomenon is crucial to a fuller understanding of nineteenth-century American literature, culture, and history—emerges out of the valuable work performed by recent scholars of race, gender, and popular culture. Ronald Judy in *[Dis]Forming the American Canon*, Eric Sundquist, in *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, Lucy Maddox and Calvin Martin with respect to uniquely Native-American understandings of literature and history, and David Reynolds in *Beneath the American Renaissance* have all contended that essential subtexts and cultural contexts of “classic” as well as non-canonical American literature have all too often been granted insufficient weight due to a critical myopia fostered by tradition, prejudice, and disciplinary boundaries.

In many significant instances, the cultural work of constructing the “normal” body was performed within nineteenth-century American literature. The texts discussed in this book were selected for study because

they are particularly fruitful sites for witnessing the processes by which bodies were differentiated along axes of “normality” and “abnormality” in this period. Furthermore, by referencing healthy, whole bodies as well as diseased, damaged, and disabled ones, these American works engaged some of the most critical issues of their times. Though Whitman was referring to specific political and economic reforms when he mentioned “the whole business” of the body in his letter to Horace Traubel, the “whole business” for him and his contemporaries encompassed popular health reform movements, the violence of slavery, the trauma of the Civil War, and United States imperialism. In American literature, all of these concerns might be imagined in relation to normative visions of the “American body.” A substantial number of the texts of this period, therefore, engage in what Michel Foucault has aptly termed “anatomo-politics” or “bio-politics”; that is, they engage dominant cultural concerns of their society by reference to bodily concerns, assuming the latter significantly influence a nation’s politics and history.

One of the crucial questions pursued throughout this book is derived from the challenge Foucault posed to historians in a 1975 interview: “One needs to study what kind of body the current society needs” when examining a given population (*Body/Power* 58). From a normalizing perspective the question becomes: what kinds of conventional bodies must exist (or must be believed to exist) for certain social and political institutions to exist and maintain power? How is “value” assigned to some bodies and aberrance to others within a polity in order to conserve existing hegemonic structures? If, as Gilles Deleuze argues in *Difference and Repetition* that “A scar is the sign not of a past wound, but of ‘the present fact of having been wounded,’” it is incumbent upon the scholar to determine what elements of a given “present” are served by the production and reception of physiological “signs” like health or racial whiteness and scars or various other presumed deviations from bodily normality (77). While a number of similarities and emerging conventions can be traced through the cultural formulations of early and mid-nineteenth century America, physical “normality” and “abnormality” were not always imagined in the same way, even within this relatively short period of history. The type of normal “body” Emerson envisioned as necessary for a proper society in antebellum America was strikingly different from the type of “body” envisioned by writers of the Civil War and postbellum periods. In the former case physical abnormality could be more easily rejected as useless or vulgar or deployed as a sign of immorality than in the latter periods, when attempts were understandably made to incorporate figures of damaged and disabled bodies more explicitly into the nation and

its dominant ideologies. Both understandings served ideological functions within the respective authors’ nations at their respective times. Physical “normality” and “abnormality” were symbolic, cultural constructions always in some state of flux.

The development and parameters of dominant visions of “normality” in this period remains a vigorously debated topic among scholars. Many identify the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a crucial historical moment in the constitution of our modern Western concept of the “normal” body, though they often differ in their attribution of the historical causes of this development. For some, the contemporaneous rise of industrial capitalism and statistics is a crucial factor shaping the emergence of the “normal” body (see, for example, the work of Lennard J. Davis) while for others modern medicine’s increasing emphasis on categorizing and quantifying health and deviations from conditions of health should be implicated (see, for example, the work of Georges Canguilhem). For still other scholars (such as Erving Goffman), the modern “tendency of large-scale bureaucratic organizations, such as the nation state, to treat all members in some respects as equal” could be recognized as exercising a determinative influence over the modern concept of physical “normality” (Goffman 7). The collection of texts considered in my book admit the possibility of all these positions, but I typically assume that the visions of “normality” in early to mid-nineteenth century America had historical roots, rhetorical permutations, and cultural parameters linked in large part to discourses and practices of Euro-American nationalism. The aesthetic-socio-political realm—the realm of cultural productions that spoke publicly on “the race,” the individual citizen, and American “civilization”—helped determine the healthy/non-healthy, normal/abnormal oppositions that were then applied to the body as such. When “biological concepts” were employed with greater frequency and currency in this period, “these concepts were arranged in a space whose profound structure responded to the healthy/morbid opposition...[the] *bipolarity of the normal and the pathological*” (Foucault, *Birth* 35, italics in original). The nineteenth-century American “body” was a product of the binary structures that overlay it, structures politics, institutions, and artistic works invented and managed, rather than any biological reality alone. These influences operated on the surface of organic matter and at times even determined the perception of corporeal or “organic matter” itself. The field of Disability Studies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has often provided us with powerful analytical approaches for considering the representation of “normal” and “abnormal” bodies; as such, it offers crucial interpretive paradigms for the

texts covered in this book. Ato Quayson has recently assessed the target of these approaches in his study of representations of disability in European, American, and African sources and emphasizes, “the reality of people with disability is overlaid with the suppositions and implicit social attitudes of a nondisabled world, making their ‘reality’...a product of excessive interpretation....Literature does not merely reflect any already socially interpreted reality, but adds another tier of interpretation” (14).

When nineteenth-century American literary texts communicated socially constructed visions of the “normal” body, this body was an ideological entity that simultaneously represented physical and spiritual health and social and national value in specific geographic and cultural contexts. For proslavery writers, for example, physical “normality” as either an ideal or an experiential condition could only be understood within the parameters of the *white* body. Emerson’s antebellum writings, on the other hand, appear in a rhetorical context in which some forms of the American ideal of individualism imagined independence as a function of work, responsibility for one’s health, and the development of intellectual self-reliance. Perhaps paradoxically, the conflict in the United States between the positive valence granted to individualism and individual freedoms and the cultural anxiety produced by deviations from physical norms meant the latter were often seen as static qualities that isolated one from society due to an inability or unwillingness to conform. The radical uniqueness of physical abnormality interrupted the assumption of a democratic baseline from which all American citizens began their participation in the socio-political life of the nation. Fully in keeping with this particular ideological view Emerson repeatedly refers to physical abnormality, deformity, and disability literally and metaphorically as a means of identifying personal qualities which signified dependence and deviance rather than the promise of American individualism and ideal of self-sufficiency which were part and parcel of all “normal” (white) Americans’ lives. While Emerson’s vision of normality was concerned primarily with intellectual development, health reform, and industrial labor, proslavery writings emerged in many cases from a very different psychological and ideological climate—the immediate racial antagonism of Southern society—and sought to establish categorical racial hierarchies via a discourse of physical normality and abnormality.

Scholars in Disability Studies probe the relationship between particular types of bodies and the particular societies in which these bodies and their representations circulate. Their valuable work in the humanities cautions us to avoid collapsing all discussions of physical normality and differences into one intellectual category or “monolithic grouping” and speaking about

these physical conditions without carefully historicizing our claims.² While this book aims to contribute to the histories of American bodies that lead to present-day understandings of such embodied concerns as race, disability, and citizenship, it primarily describes antebellum and Civil War era conceptions of “the body.” In many cases readers may either infer or be pointed to parallels between the periods of the texts discussed and late-twentieth and twenty-first century ideologies that indicate broader historical and cultural trends. In these instances this study may also help identify some flaws, gaps, and inconsistencies in the oppressive processes of nineteenth-century normalization in order to inspire the discernment of areas where the subversion of these processes might be achieved in our own time. Nonetheless, the normalizing visions of bodies identified in this book must ultimately be understood as historically specific phenomena.

From Ralph Waldo Emerson’s recognition of humanity’s inescapably embodied condition and the importance of health in the spiritual evolution of U.S. citizens, to proslavery writers’ arguments that race could be fixed in permanent, physiological facts, to Civil War artists who struggled to negotiate the ever-present fact of permanent disability, to Francis Parkman’s attempt to ground national history in damaged bodies of the past, the reader confronts a belief in the human body as a site of “incontestable reality” in both material and moral terms. Similarly, popular instructional books on the human body like William Alcott’s *The House I Live in* (1837) and Worthington Hooker’s *Human Physiology* (1855) contended that biological investigation made humans appreciate the many incomprehensible elements of the human body which in turn revealed the greatness of the Creator. Said the latter, “The mechanics and the chemistry of the cells, who can understand them? From the inscrutable movements of this hidden power...we get a higher idea of Omnipotence than we can get from the grandest and most terrific exhibitions of mere force” (qtd. in Rosenberg 189). The physiological body and the body with its mind and heart reaching towards spiritual transcendence were held in suspension, both operating within the same fleshly entity and within the cultural visions of nineteenth-century Americans. The “normal” body—Whitman’s “good body” (like the “bodies” positively portrayed in the

² On this score, see Paul Longmore’s 1987 review of recent histories of disability first published in *Reviews in American History* and reissued in revised form in *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*. David Mitchell and Sharon Synder warn scholars to appreciate that “Disability identity as it pilots across cultural boundaries still runs aground on the straits of distinct racial and cultural histories” (176).

writings of Emerson and Thoreau)—possesses good physical health as well as good morals.

In studying physically normal-abnormal dyads as they are manifested in American literature—informed by nineteenth-century culture and politics—we can supplement our understanding of how the American social order was constituted and maintained in these various historical moments. Some years after her classic *Purity and Danger* was published in 1966 the anthropologist Mary Douglas interpreted her book as a study of the “nonfit.” “Since no scheme of classification can cover the infinite variety of experience there will always be elements that do not fit,” Douglas explains, “Then it is a matter of cultural idiosyncrasy as to which elements escape through the meshes of the classifications, and of cultural bias as to whether they are noticed at all, and whether, if they are noticed as anomalous, this provokes any special interest, either of approval or distaste” (126). The terms “cultural idiosyncrasy,” “cultural bias,” and “interest” in Douglas’ statement bespeak an understanding of physical “normality” as socially contrived and offers one model of reading appearances of the corporeal body in literature; this model uses the subject of physical normality as a means of illuminating the public culture of which it is one crucial element. For instance, in the context of Emerson’s essays those who are unfit (or in Douglas’ terminology “nonfit”) can simply be individuals with physical traits that do not fit into conventional views of normality, but they are also those people who do not possess the “fitness” of body the Emerson of the 1830s and 1840s imagines to be crucial to a healthy nation and the spiritual reform of Americans, a vision mirrored in the theories, texts, and terminology of antebellum health reform movements.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas, literary critic Joan Burbick, and historian Douglas Baynton—to name just a few contemporary scholars whose work is particularly germane to the study of the relationship between bodies deemed “normal” and “abnormal” and the socio-political spheres they inhabit—all argue that a complex appreciation of historical crises which pose challenges to established conceptions of social and national identity can be attained by examining the ways in which the physical body appears in cultural works produced at these moments of crisis.³ More specifically, the differentiation of some bodies from others

³ Mary Douglas. *Thought Styles*. London: SAGE Publications, 1996. Joan Burbick. *Healing the Republic: The Language of Health and the Culture of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Douglas C. Baynton. “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History.” *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*. Eds. Paul K.

according to perceptions of “fitness,” the control of bodies’ representations, and the attempt to ground citizenship or social worth in the material corpus are some of the crucial means by which both political figures and literary authors have negotiated the vicissitudes of dramatic historical changes. The rise of industrialism, increased foreign immigration, economic depressions, continued regional conflict leading to civil war, the extension of Anglo-Americans farther into the West, and slavery created moments of historical crises throughout the first half of the nineteenth century in the United States registered in “classic” and non-canonical American literature. At the same time these works are saturated with the figures of “normal” and “abnormal” bodies, the depictions of which are inextricably intertwined with their authors’ understanding of these historical events.

When an American subject in this period was determined to be physically “abnormal,” the degree to which identity was tied to the physical body became even more salient because of the limitations that were imposed on the types of identities that could be claimed by such individuals. These limitations, at least in part, also contributed to the constitution of “normality” in American literature and culture. Recent scholars in a variety of disciplines have noted that the differentiation between the “normal” and “abnormal” bodies within American society of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—in effect the symbolic, political, and scientific control of these bodies—typically worked to conserve existing power structures and social hierarchies at moments of historical crises. Because “Democracy was a troublesome question for a nation of anonymous and disparate groups of people,” Joan Burbick observes, “there was a strong tendency to somatize these political conflicts and to ground the reality of these divisions in the flesh....to avoid the dynamic conflicts of democratic nationhood” (303). The strategic turn to images of abnormal bodies allowed authors of the period to negotiate those historical moments “When categories of citizenship were questioned, challenged, and disrupted” by using the textual construction of physical normality and abnormality or “disability...to clarify and define who deserved, and who was deservedly excluded from, citizenship” (Baynton 33). It is clear, however, that such negotiations neither lacked ambivalence nor were entirely successful, for political and social ideologies could not help but be thrust into uncertainty and confusion when the physical body, a crucial locus of selfhood as the period

understood it, was itself called into question by the figures of “deviant” or “extraordinary” bodies.

Developments in scholarship on physical “normality” demonstrate that, while the figure of the “normal” body seems entirely self-sufficient, it is really a product of the “veiled” fact that it is a “figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up [its] boundaries,” others which are marginalized because of distinct physical or cognitive deficiency (Thomson 8). In *Enforcing Normality: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* Lennard J. Davis argues that “the concept of disability regulates the bodies of those who are ‘normal’....Normalcy and disability are part of the same system” (2). Bodies are normalized within a system of signification that works by non-identification; this system requires an “abject” zone to circumscribe a zone of normality. As a result, this zone of abjection is “inside” normality, its “threatening spectre” even as it appears to be a zone where “the normal” is nowhere to be found (Butler, *Bodies* 3). Yet this understanding of the dependency of the concept of physical “normality” on physical abnormality is not an invention of recent theory. Writers discussed in this book—Emerson, apologists for slavery, “normal” viewers of Civil War veterans—self-consciously deployed physically aberrant beings as a means of discussing the general, “normal” American populace and delineating the boundaries of normality. Therefore, while contemporary theorists have developed important models for understanding physical difference, nineteenth-century American writers and readers had their own ideological traditions and conceptual tools for understanding physical abnormality as a symbolically charged presence. Writers of this period, historian Douglas C. Baynton points out, could demonstrate a keen awareness of “the cultural power of [physical] disability to discredit” (45). Abnormal bodies may be marginalized in certain texts, but they are certainly not marginal to these texts’ primary concerns.

Lennard Davis has suggested that the “normal body” in nineteenth-century America ostensibly referred to an “average” of physical well-being which actually demanded American citizens “uphold...some impossible standard to which all bodies must adhere” (“Crips” 504). While visions of the “normal” body as either an ideal, the pole of a binary, or an average were fictions, all were seen as quite real possibilities in antebellum and Civil War era American literature as the concept of “normality” remained perpetually unsettled. Physical “normality,” like “whiteness” or “masculinity” at this same time, posed as an unmarked, self-evident category of identity while it was, in reality, a hypostatization that needed to be consistently maintained. Conceptual crises regarding “normality” emerged, for instance, when texts confronted the lived

experiences of individuals with disabled or abnormal bodies or when a writer's normalizing fictions could not be sustained with ideological coherence or stability and began fracturing under their own weight. Such conflicts underscore the crucial fact that even though the dominant vision of the corporeal body which emerged from nineteenth-century American literary culture was a normalizing, racist, and exclusive one, the history of this vision was not teleological. African-American slave narratives, the memoirs and pension applications of Civil War veterans, and historical instances of Native-American resistance to United States imperialism provide numerous examples of bodies conventionally deemed "abnormal" which were nevertheless valuable, powerful, historically valid, and politically challenging.

Studying physical "normality" and "abnormality" in literature can not only deepen our understanding of American cultural productions of the nineteenth century and their relationship to moments of major historical crisis, it can prompt us to re-examine historical assumptions about the history of physical difference in the United States. Scholars conventionally divide this history into three phases aligned with three "models" of social perceptions of disabled people: the moral model (which understands physical abnormality as the punishment for spiritual transgression or, less often, as a wondrous deviation from the ordinary with potential spiritual implications), the medical model (which understands physical abnormality scientifically as a deviance to be "corrected"), and the minority model (which understands physical abnormality as largely a socio-political condition that renders individuals members of an oppressed class). Additionally, some scholars imagine the models to follow the order listed here in a definitive chronology, and some even assume one model leaves off when another commences. The cultural history of "normal" and "abnormal" bodies in nineteenth-century America the present study offers when taken as a whole, however, encourages the reader to consider the interactions, interchanges, interruptions, and confusing amalgamations of the moral and medical models in nineteenth-century America. (The minority model, as the term is commonly used, is not in my assessment effectively applicable to the United States until after the period of the texts covered in this book.) Wounded and dying patients in Civil War hospitals can represent such abstract moral qualities as patriotism, a Christian acceptance of suffering, or pity to caretaking observers like Walt Whitman and Louisa May Alcott. At the same time, these disabled soldiers were placed into the dependent, passive role in paternalistic relationships between themselves and their government and themselves and their doctors, relationships which determined how veterans would be "cared

for” in postbellum America. Furthermore, photographs of permanently impaired soldiers from the Civil War era suggest that even as these men’s bodies were presented as “extraordinary” in a public medium that participated in the construction of disability as a category indicative of the wondrous, the bizarre, or the horrific, the general acceptance of photography as a technology of realism and its increasing use by physicians also made it a tool of more modern, medicalized approaches to physical difference.

Of course, examining abnormal bodies in literary contexts or from a social constructivist perspective does not mean one must believe the body’s physical reality to be nonexistent or irrelevant, as my discussions of the fleshly manipulations of antebellum health reform, Southern slavery, and Civil War carnage make abundantly clear. However, as Mary Douglas reminds us in *Natural Symbols*, “The social body constrains the way in which the physical body is perceived, and the physical experience of the body, which itself is always mediated and modified through the social categories with which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the other” (qtd. in Williams and Bendelow 26-7). A mode of critical inquiry following these avenues characterizes a good deal of this book. My consideration of the dynamic interaction between Civil War veterans and their society, for instance, illuminates some of the ways the national government’s policies towards disabled soldiers did not simply mediate or modify how Americans perceived these individuals. They also helped cast the relationship between the State and all of its citizens in the postbellum era, a relationship that, for Americans with disabilities in particular, arguably remains a prominent feature of federal social policy today. At the same time the “bodily experiences” of disabled veterans could greatly impact the representational circumstances in which their bodies were presented and viewed publicly and thus whether or not these bodies could be marshaled to “reinforce” or undermine the “particular view of society” held by the victorious North after a physically destructive civil conflict.

It is quite understandable, then, that canonical and non-canonical literary works of the period should discuss physical normality so pervasively even as saliently “abnormal” bodies pass through its pages, for the latter help define by opposition the terribly nebulous category of “the normal” while serving as figures upon which national, cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical problems can be deferred and represented. In William Alcott’s popular textbook *The House I Live In, or The Human Body*, antebellum narratives defending or attacking the slave regime, Walt Whitman’s war poetry, and Francis Parkman’s history of Jesuits in early

North America, images of damaged, wounded, or ill bodies are an essential component of these texts’ narrative structures, artistic projects, socio-cultural influences, and moral conclusions. In this book I aim to do more than simply hunt out references to “abnormal” bodies previously ignored in scholarship on these texts, “recover” them, and in doing so claim to “restore” a “minority” presence to the canon. Indeed, the contemporary scholars referenced thus far—Judy, Sundquist, Maddox, Reynolds—are admirable because they do not limit themselves to a project that would not offer any substantial guidance for re-imagining American literature and history. These authors have a great deal to teach us because they implicate African-American, Native-American, female, and popular perspectives, traditions, and historical existences in the formation of nineteenth-century American culture. As the chapters that follow demonstrate, a critical position modeled on those recently constructed by scholars in Disability Studies provides us with a powerful means of making sense of texts and historical trends we encounter in this period. It also encourages us to rethink the way literature of the United States, “classic” or otherwise, functioned in the period in which it was produced: the political ends it served or hoped to serve, the cultural discourses to which it responded, and the conception of the “American” it helped shape.

Disability Studies in the humanities, like gender and critical race studies before it, is emerging as a field that can offer valuable insights beyond the seemingly limited scope indicated in its name. Lennard Davis’ superbly concise definition, expressed in a 1999 article published in *American Literary History*, implicitly envisions the field in this broad manner. Davis’ definition also reflects much of the methodology and many of the aims of my own study: “Disability studies interrogates the formation of bodies, the signification of bodies, and the national interests in producing templates for bodies and souls” (“Crips” 510). The participation of nineteenth-century literary works in the process of “normalization” typically takes a more complex form than simply the advocacy of excluding those bodies deemed “abnormal” or “unfit.” The stigmatization of bodies, sociologist Erving Goffman reminds us, “arise[s]...where there is some expectation on all sides that those in a given category should not only support a particular norm but also realize it” (6). Many texts and writers of the period followed one or both of these major avenues to promote an appreciation for the “normal” American body. In the chapters that follow I identify the drive to “support” and “realize” normality in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essays and Whitman’s wartime poetry, for instance. In general, these authors do not allow the socially/physically abject to speak for themselves or grant them a unique

critical position by virtue of being considered “outside the norm” (though Whitman grants himself this power). In subsequent chapters I discuss the ways in which bodies that were more difficult to “realize” as normal—such as wounded Civil War veterans, martyred Jesuits, and Francis Parkman’s own debilitated frame—could nevertheless be folded into discourses which “supported” ideologies of normality. A third option—subversion of dominant paradigms of normality in a literary context—will be examined most explicitly as part of my discussion of slave narratives’ resistance to hegemonic discourses about the African-American body. Like W.E.B. DuBois a half century later, slave narrators, and to an extent Parkman, appreciate that physical abnormality can “bequeath...a social awareness” that fully understands yet remains radically distinct from dominant cultural views (Mitchell and Snyder 165). Indeed, it is those narrative moments when “normality” is not (re)assigned and abnormality remains “uncorrected” that can be especially fruitful grounds for literary and historical interrogation; these textual instances may also provide alternative visions of how physical difference can be understood as a necessary element of American culture without devaluing it or willing its destruction.

The decision to devote a majority of this book to a discussion of the ideological processes of “normalization” rather than counter-narratives to it is based on the assumption that the discourse of normalization (unfortunately) exercised a dominant influence over Americans’ understanding of bodies in the nineteenth century. Consequently, an examination of physical abnormality in this literature hinges upon an understanding of normality as a mutually constitutive element of abnormality. This contemporary theoretical project, recently named “Normalcy studies” and aptly summed up by Elizabeth Grosz as the goal of “understanding the psychologies and the body-images of ‘normal’ subjects” as a means of critically “attesting to what is and is not tolerable or incorporable into normality,” may find ample ground for investigation in the texts—“classic” and popular—of nineteenth-century America (56). As is clear from my analyses of slave narratives and the experiences of disabled soldiers, one cannot fully appreciate the complexity and effectiveness of critiques of normalization without first establishing the parameters of the object of these critiques. Because abnormal bodies participate in the formation of the boundaries of normality itself and remain at the edges of the majority culture, they are crucial in the constitution of “the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition” (Grosz 57). In the United States of the period covered in this book these “modes of self-definition” were

themselves continually in the unstable process of formulation. Normalizing visions of idealized bodies like those of Emerson’s “self-reliant” thinker, proslavery writers’ “pure,” “white” American, and Civil War and postbellum visions of the “citizen” were all created, in part, by the textual constructions of these figures in relation to aberrant bodies, but the latter might appear in a myriad of forms depending upon the ideological uses to which they were put.

These historical ambivalences played a crucial part in my decision to use the terms “normal” and “normality,” and “disability,” and “abnormality” as broad, in some cases interchangeable, designations. The distinction proposed by contemporary scholars between “impairment” (a physical condition) and “disability” (a social role) can be useful when studying nineteenth-century American literature, but these terms appear quite frequently in texts of this period (as well as those of the late eighteenth century) referring to a huge range of physical anomalies. To complicate matters further, after the Civil War the term “disability” could indicate a specific category within the bureaucracy of the pension system, but it was also used haphazardly in public and private documents. Because these terms had no rigorously limited meanings in the texts I discuss, I do not use them in a manner that follows rigid present-day definitions. In addition to avoiding some misleading overlap between contemporary terminology (which now would be associated with specific political movements and historical modes of consciousness) and those of the texts under discussion, this decision carries the advantage of allowing the concept of physical abnormality fluidity so that it may shift meanings within shifting contexts as well as highlighting the thoroughly contrived basis of what is not, and never was, a “natural” or “preexistent” reality, however much some nineteenth-century American writers may have acted as though it were.

In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault differentiates between a “history of mentalities,” the modes of perceiving bodies and a “history of bodies” in their materiality, implicitly warning scholars to avoid engaging in only one of these projects to the exclusion of the other. In the following chapters I attempt to write a history of mentalities with respect to such issues as racist defenses of slavery by Southern physicians or Francis Parkman’s devaluation of Native Americans’ “savage” bodies. A history of bodies is also juxtaposed with this history of mentalities at some points, as when I discuss the violent and visceral experiences of Jesuit missionaries in the Canadian wilderness of Parkman’s historical works and Parkman’s own physical disabilities. In addition to examining physical normality in American literature with respect to these two distinct historical modes, however, this book aims to

recognize moments when these “histories” intersect and influence one another. The reader will find the material experience of bodies affected by the attitudes taken towards them in my discussions of the slave regime’s application of an ideology of “reading” black bodies to the practical surveillance and damaging of black flesh. At other times the shaping of the history of mentalities” of the body by the material events of bodily existence—recognizable, for example, in shifting national ideologies and public policy in response to the fact of Civil War casualties—are the focus of my analysis.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s antebellum essays and addresses imagine an American transcendentalism that encourages spiritual evolution in conjunction with physical health and purity. Thoroughly influenced by European Romanticism, essays like *Nature*, “The Poet,” “The American Scholar,” “Self-Reliance,” and the later “Thoreau” may also productively be juxtaposed with antebellum discourses of illness, health, and health and social reform. Pedagogical texts like William Alcott’s *The House I Live In; or The Human Body* (1837), writings and scientific findings by physicians, pseudoscientific tracts on physiognomy, and manuals teaching the maintenance of personal health constructed popular dichotomous visions of normal and extraordinary or abnormal bodies in relation to the social and economic elements of America their authors believed required reform. Similarly, the historical contextualization in conjunction with careful readings of Emerson’s most famous texts as well as those typically given less scholarly attention like “Man the Reformer” demonstrate that this collection of work constructs a normalizing vision of the body advanced as necessary for the attainment of spiritual growth, virtuous truth, and a strong nation. The rare individual who possesses a healthy body along with an advanced intellectual and moral capacity to conceptualize the essential relationship between spirit, mind, and body—what Emerson calls “Genius”—is the crucial agent of socio-political reform in these texts as well as the figure of Emerson’s ideal American citizen. This normalizing vision becomes troubling, however, when one appreciates the extent to which it participates in negative social perceptions of physical difference and depends upon the exclusion of supposedly defective or ill bodies from the promise of spiritual transcendence and full participation in the life of the United States.

In early to mid-nineteenth century America visions of physical abnormality also intersected with visions of race in profound ways with respect to African-American slavery. Figuring slaveholders, and white Americans generally, as disembodied and African Americans as thoroughly trapped within the physical determinism of their bodies was a central

component of the white cultural imaginary of Southern slaveholders and their ideology of racial superiority. The conflation of racial blackness with physical abnormality in proslavery writings demonstrates that in order to legitimate and maintain a system of economic and social oppression physical disabilities were employed rhetorically for their capacity to signify negatively while racial blackness and its pejorative connotations was employed to contribute to the pathologization of physical difference in turn. Alternatively, by examining a broad selection of autobiographical narratives by African-American ex-slave women and men we can appreciate the impressive extent to which the master narratives of racism were capably revised and critiqued by African-American authors not only through the voluntary assumption of embodiment in opposition to a self-deconstructing disembodiment but also by a critical reevaluation of the concepts of race and embodiment themselves. Slave narrators like Henry Bibb, Frederick Douglass, Mattie Jackson, Harriet Jacobs, and Solomon Northup recognized the ideological power of bodily representations and ideals in proslavery thought and resisted slavery by textual and practical means that struck at the heart of its thoroughly embodied ideology and cultural formations. In allowing us to consider not only how processes of normalization were constituted with respect to race in antebellum America but also how these processes might be subverted, these authors' works offer provocative models for the empowerment of social and political minorities whose exclusion from American rights and privileges has historically been justified through cultural representations of their physical frailties or aberrances.

Visions of “normal” and “abnormal” bodies in American culture altered significantly as a result of the Civil War. Because soldiers with disabilities are ubiquitous figures in the art and literature of the period, it is necessary to examine a diverse array of artistic works to explore the cultural significance of these figures. Photographs of wounded soldiers displaying prominent injuries are records not only of the physical trauma produced by the war but also national struggles to understand the place of the disabled veteran-citizen in a “United” States and the meaning of the reunified postwar nation itself. Literature of the period registered and attempted to negotiate in their own ways these same dilemmas. Walt Whitman's collection of war poetry, *Drum-Taps*, and Louisa May Alcott's semi-autobiographical *Hospital Sketches* construct images of disabled, ill, and dying soldiers from the perspective of a Civil War nurse. Five years after the war ended, the federal government began publishing its multi-volume work *The Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion* with hundreds of drawings, reproductions of photographs, and

case studies of injured soldiers describing treatments and convalescence, volumes which also contributed to the government's efforts to provide appropriate pensions for the nation's injured heroes. This text also gives us a glimpse into disabled and convalescent soldiers' own attempts to reconstitute a sense of self which derives its value from both the bodily abnormality produced by military service and the unity of nationalism. All of these cultural works document conflicted revisions in American conceptions of the "abnormal" body. New attitudes emerged regarding the relationship between physical abnormality and the State as well as the power of symbolic structures and technology to influence normalized and pathologized conceptions of the body. The disabled Civil War veteran was a crucial figure in the nation's reassessment of the State's relationship with, and obligations towards, its citizens.

In a nation first traumatized by four years of internecine violence then struggling to reconstruct itself, Francis Parkman composed his 1867 historical work *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century*, writing amidst his own experiences with illness, motor impairments, and physical debilities. A multitude of physical disorders throughout his adult life at times left him unable to walk and virtually blind as his worked on this second volume of his seven-part series *France and England in North America*. Concerning missionary work to Canada, *Jesuits* envisions early American history as a grand racial contest between Native Americans and French Jesuits, a conflict in which the physical trials European priests endured at the hands of supposedly barbaric Canadian tribes laid the foundation for the colonization of North America. This text thus offers fertile grounds for studying the intersections of corporeality, physical suffering, nationalism, and historical narrative in the United States at mid-century. Parkman's history depends on the figure of the human body in pain for the construction of its foundational dichotomies of civilization versus savagery and Europeans versus indigenous peoples and for the political project in which it implicitly engages. The historical processes of empire building are presented in *Jesuits* as a narrative of progress in which the inferior, savage bodies of indigenous peoples must be replaced by the wounded yet powerful and resilient bodies of morally upright Europeans in order for North America to be fully "conquered." Though federal policies of removal, Native Americans' participation in the Civil War, the Great Sioux Uprising of 1862, and an increasing military, technological, and commercial Euro-American presence in Western territories are not explicitly referenced in Parkman's book, the text's structure, historiographic method, racist philosophy, and treatment of physical differences offer

support for imperialist ideologies that would continue to be a crucial element of the U.S. presence in the West through the end of the century.

This survey of the material covered in this book may at times lead one to conclude the collection of literary works considered is somewhat disjointed or curious. Connections are drawn between texts of different literary genres (and the visual arts) while interpretations are derived from juxtapositions of authors not commonly read together. Because this book aims to trace processes of “normalization” in specific periods of United States history to enhance our understanding of the relationship between American culture, politics, and corporeal bodies, however, it is necessary to examine a varied collection of works in order to appreciate the complexity, diversity, and historically contingent nature of these processes. In addition, given that the socially constituted nature of physical “normality,” and its counterpart physical “abnormality,” is assumed in my analytical approach to this subject, texts were selected for inclusion because I deem them ideologically significant or culturally illustrative of their times with respect to the issue of physical difference and because I feel they offer especially provocative examples of such social construction. Other important texts of American literature from this period certainly meet these criteria; many, such as Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Oliver Wendell Holmes’ fiction and non-fiction, or S. Weir Mitchell’s writings have been studied handily elsewhere.⁴

Insights enabling this analytical perspective have come not only from literary studies but from the more interdisciplinary fields of cultural studies, American studies, critical race studies, and Disability Studies. Furthermore, political movements outside academia proper like the Disability Rights Movement have helped make the analysis of the social construction of differently abled bodies in the context of historical events, public policy, and cultural representations not only more common in scholarly projects but mandatory. In our own time, as sexual identities continue to be vilified by being portrayed as physically deviant or carriers of disease, as exclusionary immigration policies continue to be promoted with arguments that health care should be the privilege of the citizens of individual U.S. states (that is to say, arguments that the care of the body is a political and legal but not a human right), and as individuals with disabilities are required to “prove” a history of state discrimination in

⁴ See, respectively, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, Cynthia J. Davis, *Bodily and Narrative Forms: The Influence of Medicine on American Literature, 1845-1915*, and Debra Journet, “Phantom Limbs and ‘Body-Ego’: S. Weir Mitchell’s ‘George Dedlow.’” *Mosaic* 23 (Winter 1990): 87-99.

order to retain existing civil rights and acquire new ones (as occurred most notably in the case of *Garrett v. University of Alabama* argued before the U.S. Supreme Court in 2001) critical reassessments of traditional understandings of physical “normality” in the United States can contribute to reassessments of the relationship between individuals deemed physically “abnormal” and the socio-political context in which they live. By studying the history of the representation of “normality” and “abnormality” in American culture and the various political and conceptual ends served by these representations we are better equipped to recognize all bodies, not merely those deemed “good,” as part of our collective America.

CHAPTER TWO

“A WONDERFUL FITNESS OF BODY AND MIND”: EMERSON’S TRANSCENDENT CORPUS

Ralph Waldo Emerson appears to be one of nineteenth-century America’s most ardent theorists of disembodiment. His descriptions in “The American Scholar” of “Man Thinking,” the “self-relying and self-directed” scholar engaged in solitary “observation,” present a figure who is “the world’s eye” and whose purely intellectual work performed “in utter solitude” achieves universal truths. This portrait might be considered an antebellum manifestation of what the Western philosophical tradition knows as the self-contained Cartesian thinker. With the world about him merely an “externisation” of his soul, the transcendentalist strives for mastery of himself and his world, a condition symbolized by the “transparent eyeball” commanding a privileged subjective view that allows its owner to evolve spiritually even as he divorces himself from the society surrounding him. Shunning that which is particular and temporary—such as his own body, politics, and the mundane operations of life—the Emersonian thinker celebrates that which is eternal, the soul and mind. At least, so Emerson has been perceived by a powerful strain of the critical tradition. Some of the earliest critical approaches to Emerson focused on those elements of his writings that explicitly discussed the soul and mind, constructing an image of Emerson as a theorist of an ideality unadulterated by base physical concerns. Reviewing Emerson’s *Essays: Second Series* in December 1844 Margaret Fuller celebrates her mentor as a tasteful, intellectual writer who offers readers spiritual truths as opposed to the ubiquitous American hacks of the period who wrote purely for material gain and “neglect[ed] the lasting for the transient, as a man neglects to furnish his mind that he may provide the better for the house in which his body is to dwell for a few years” (365). Octavius Brooks Frothingham, whose *Transcendentalism in New England: a History* (1876) appeared near the end of Emerson’s career, identified Emerson as a writer of “pure and perfect idealism” of “absolute and perpetual faith in thoughts...The

first article in Mr. Emerson's faith is the primacy of Mind....When he speaks or writes, the power is that of pure mind" (52, 55, 58). What is particularly noteworthy about Frothingham's discussion is its mutation from a treatment of Emerson's work and the effect it produces on American and European readers to a portrait of Emerson the person; "He is a bodiless idea" Frothingham concludes (58). It is as though Emerson's philosophical adherence to the doctrine of pure mentality facilitated the transfiguration of the man himself, a transformation in which the individual evolved to a degree correspondent to the extent to which the mind was embraced and the body rejected. Emerson, in other words, became "transcendent."

In the last decades of the twentieth century a significant characteristic of the Emersonian critical tradition was not that it was so seduced by the abstract philosophical discussions of the mind in Emerson's writings that it excluded discussions of the body but that the body was invoked to illuminate a mind/spirit and body dichotomy. Jerome Loving, for instance, speculated that a young, grieving Emerson, following a reasonably common practice of his day, may have opened his first wife's coffin some time after her death (as he did with his son Waldo's in 1857). Struck by the horrible decay, Emerson solidly affirmed his belief in the opposition between spirit and mind, and body, with the recognition that while physical particulars "may change—indeed must change...the universal sense of life remains...character," a recognition that, so Loving contends, permanently influenced Emerson's views of nature and the human soul (49). Similarly, in his study of masculine ideologies in the American Renaissance, David Leverenz contended that Emerson, faced with life in an increasingly materialistic world, believed that "mind is the richest liquid asset," and struggled to assert a new form of American "manhood" by reinforcing the split between mind and body as he simultaneously reinforced class distinctions in rapidly industrializing New England (52). "Reconceiv[ing] power as thinking," Emerson encourages the development of a flexible, non-materialistic intelligence to provide a foundation for a new cultural elite while the "perils of the body" in his writing are figured as "dumped on the laboring masses" (52, 62). As we shall see, this latter aspect of Leverenz' argument has merit, but despite these socio-political allusions his discussion runs astray in presenting Emerson's writing as evading historically specific political concerns through the construction of "a free-floating self" that universally validates and empowers the single author's voice (44). In Leverenz' colorful language the ultimate goal expressed in Emerson's writing is for the individual self "To be incessantly reborn from a disembodied cosmic womb-mind" (44). Thus,