

An Eighteenth-Century Blind Poet
and the Language of Charity

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God grant us Grace, that we may take due Pains,
To practice what this Exercise contains;
To which, if we apply our best Endeavour,
We shall be happy here, and bless'd for ever.

—Thomas Gills: An Eighteenth-Century Blind Poet
and the Language of Charity

AS THE SCOPE OF HISTORIES of disabilities widens it might be asked what special angle a study of the literary production of a disabled person might bring. To this question, I might give the usual answer that while histories of disabilities attempt to draw charts of the currents of history, the study of the work of disabled writers can give us detailed pictures of individual people caught up in the waves and eddies of the tides of historical change and continuity. But to this I would like to add the suggestion that histories and literary studies can heuristically come together methodologically when focused on narrow issues.

In the final chapter of his excellent *Down and Out on the Streets of London*,¹ Tim Hitchcock explores the technique he has used to create an history out of the lives of individual poor people using novels, poems, paintings, coroners' inquests, pamphlet literature, newspaper accounts, settlement examinations, workhouse reports and legal contracts, and the records of petty sessions and hospitals in order to "create an admittedly constructed, but convincing, vision of the past." The better to explain the strengths and limitations of his technique, Hitchcock extends his metaphor of vision to one of sight:

[223]

The attempt here has been to use each of these sources to form one lens in an insect-like compound eye. The image drawn from poetry is myopic. The scene revealed in novels, full of cataracts. Account books, subject to astigmatism, and court records as distorted as the rest. But together, balanced one against the other, they bring a single image in to a sharper focus; made just a little clearer with the addition of each new source. The images brought together in this way are each distorted, and the single view created by their combination contains all the flaws of each of its components.

Hitchcock's metaphor is both evocative and suggestive, and I find his methodology fitting for the project of variability outlined in the introduction. There is no attempt to trace origins or truths in the sources, but it expects a basic understanding of the situation of those people described derived from a commonly held feeling of embodiment.

In this essay I shall look at the poetry written by a blind man facing destitution, trying his best to make money the only way he can. Like Hitchcock, I shall be presenting evidence from a variety of disparate sources, using all the tricks and partial truths that the construction of a single narrative implies. Nevertheless, I believe I shall present as clearly as possible, a recognizable voice of a blind man faced with his dilemma. With the same assurance as Hitchcock, I think it is possible to conclude with some accuracy that the story of Thomas Gills of St. Edmundsbury demonstrates how much a disabled man wanted to be independent and established a complex relationship with the parish poor law for his income. I shall begin with a brief account of the history of the economic situation in which Gills found himself, before moving on to an account of the way in which he manipulated the publishing world and his readership to his own ends.

As such, this essay could be read as a "history from below,"² and more specifically as part of a subset of the history of poor people, since disabled people were often excluded from work and had to rely upon the poor laws or charities for their income. Added to the poor laws is the contextualization of the literary output of a disabled author over a number of years, which can give a broader picture of his self-presentation and attempts at self-sufficiency in the "economy of makeshifts"³ than is possible using the snapshots of evidence that Hitchcock uses in his brief accounts of poor people. By bringing together the techniques of understanding texts in their contexts, with the context of the poor law, and reading both from the context of a disabled person with an identifiable disability, we can read the overlap of these three contexts with some precision.

[224]

An excellent historiography of the study of the poor in this period comes from Steven King and Alana Tompkins in their Introduction to *The Poor in England 1700–1850*,⁴ where they argue that the “economy of makeshifts” was the chief way in which “poor households cobbled together a wide variety of sources and benefits ranging from ultra-legitimate wage labour to the fragile advantage gained when a landlord withheld foreclosure.”⁵ Working from the wide variety of methods of making an income or staving off the collection of a debt, King and Tompkins demonstrate that “‘the economy of makeshifts’ has become the organizing concept for a number of historians of English welfare . . . [rather than] parish poor relief.”⁶ Their argument rests on the indubitable fact (if there are facts in history) that households could not rely on state poor relief since “Essentially the Poor Law (and indeed other types of welfare) was resourced by a finite line of supply in the face of potentially infinite demand.”⁷ The essays in their collection witness the fact that “a coherent, predictable pattern of relatively reliable relief supplying comprehensive benefits to individuals has not been proved to exist for the whole of England.”⁸

What will become important to the present essay is King and Tompkins’s argument that “the old Poor Law was statutory only in as much as it compelled the propertied to contribute to the maintenance of the poor, it did not proscribe the format of distributions of a sufficiency of its benefits.”⁹ Thus, the essays tell us of poor people’s desperate attempts to “cobble together” a subsistence as best they can, and from wherever they can, since there was no guarantee that they would receive money from the poor law fund.

A dissenting note to the work of these historians is the lawyer Lorie Charlesworth, who argues in *Welfare’s Forgotten Past* that those who contend the “economy of makeshift” have forgotten the effects of the statutory nature of welfare.¹⁰ “The forgotten of [Charlesworth’s] title, is that many scholars are unaware of the extent of the legal foundation that ensured poor law was not simply a local custom, able to mutate over time in response to changing circumstances as other unofficially negotiated ‘social rules.’ Rather it constituted a slowly evolving fixed legal point of reference.” For Charlesworth, welfare was not therefore a matter for local debate, but rather “a complex, nuanced and sophisticated system based upon rights.” What seems to be wanting in this argument, however, is an explanation of the mechanism that rights were implemented on the hard edge of need. A poor person might have a right to relief but how were they to convince those whom the Old Poor Law compelled to benefaction of the reality of their indigence and that they were not simply idle, or a cheat. Whether or not this mechanism was “a complex, nuanced and sophisticated system based upon rights” it seems likely to have been

achieved, as King and Tompkins argue, through “the face-to-face nature of parish government (at least in the rural south and midlands parishes), and supposing that they used local knowledge of people and resources, along with the powers of persuasion, to negotiate welfare deals.”¹¹ And it is at the moment of the face to face where the problem lies since it meant that poor people had to argue again and again for their welfare, which might or might not be granted year by year.

Faced with the continual process of asking for money that might be met with denial, poor people typically turned to the “rhetoric of powerlessness” which has been the subject of some debate among historians since the 1990s. At first such pleading was read uncritically, but since Thomas Sokoll’s *Essex Pauper Letters*,¹² their language—the genuine language of the poor—has been more carefully contextualized. Sokoll notes:

The writing is tentative, hesitant, evasive; or, on the other extreme, coarse, rough, rude, clumsily offensive. . . . [But] The pauper letter always derives from the specific circumstances of an individual case.¹³

Here, I would gloss the idea of pleading an individual case as a strategic rather than a passive gesture, and King and Tompkins note that “historians [are] increasingly according agency to the parish poor.”¹⁴ As in the economy of makeshifts, the language of address by the poor to their benefactors comprised many forms.

In the story of Thomas Gills, who as a blind man we might believe to have been an uncontested case for poor law welfare, we find three distinct phases marked by his poetry: the production of a catechism for children which was aimed at the widest possible audience,¹⁵ a moment of temporary remission when he briefly regained his sight and the use of his legs,¹⁶ and a return to publishing his catechism.¹⁷ The first phase suggests that Gills was trying to make as much money as possible from his writing, and while the second phase must have been sheer joy for him, it would have jeopardized his parish welfare, and thus was probably announced as temporary so he could return to his former source of income in the third phase. Thus, we find that his account of his recovery is presented using the “rhetoric of powerlessness” and was published along with an account of what it is like to be blind, “On the Misery of Blindness,” lest his remission raised a question about the genuineness of his disability. The parish records of St. Mary in St. Edmundsbury, Suffolk record his death in January 1716 as “Thomas Gills, A Blind Man,” which tells us that he was finally known by his disability. Nevertheless, the fact that he published his catechism and poems, suggests that he was never certain either that he deserved welfare, or that welfare would be forthcoming. What

emerges from the evidence of the three phases is a constant heart-searching and struggle by Gills to try to make a living for himself so that he did not have to rely entirely upon an income stream that might fail him.

Thomas Gills of St. Edmunds Bury

Nothing is known about the life of Thomas Gills, who called himself “the Blind Man of St. *Edmunds Bury* in *Suffolk*,” except for his six extant publications. In these works, the only biographical information we have about Gills is contained in the “Address to the Charitable Buyer”¹⁸ and in the account of his infirmities in the poems about his remission, relapse, and his life as a blind man. The ecclesiastical history of Bury St. Edmunds and of its poor houses are however both well documented and may account for the way Gills seems to have regarded himself as a blind man within the history of disabled people.

In 1914, when the Diocese of St. Edmundsbury and Ipswich was created, St. James’s was made the cathedral, but the huge edifice was originally the great church of the Abbey of St. Edmundsbury and a seat of immense local power. It was the burial place of King Edmund who was killed by the Danes in 869 and gained a reputation for miracles performed at the shrine of the martyr king. In 945 the abbey was granted jurisdiction over the town free from secular interference, and later, in 1020, Canute granted the abbey freedom from episcopal control. At the same time, the abbey was rebuilt and became a Benedictine Establishment. Its overweening power seems to have been the reason for its twice being attacked and destroyed by the townspeople. The first attack, in 1327, was fifty years before the Great Rising, or Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, when the town took a second opportunity to show their displeasure at the power of the church, where after they displayed the abbot’s head on the town gate. There is also a legend that the Barons met in St. James’s to discuss their Charter of Liberties that would become the Magna Carta. If the currents of history suggest that East Anglia was important in the growing sense of equality that marked the end of Medieval serfdom, maybe Thomas Gills’s sense of himself as deserving of respect both as a blind man and as having a useful role in the economy, is not so surprising.

Whether Gills lived with his family or alone or in a Workhouse is not known, but the town was one of the earliest to set up a house under the Elizabethan Poor Laws.¹⁹ The first workhouse in Bury St. Edmunds was in Whiting Street and dates before 1621 when a house in Churchgate Street was adapted for the purpose. After 1630 Moyse’s Hall, a twelfth century edifice overlooking the

town square was used as a workhouse, a house of correction, and the town gaol. By the early eighteenth-century the town had two workhouses, one in Eastgate Street for the parish of St. James, and one in Schoolhall Street for St. Mary's. By 1747, the town's workhouses catered for 250 poor people. All this suggests that Bury St. Edmunds was well furnished with the mechanisms of Poor Relief. If Gills lived in a workhouse (or even if he lived alone or with family where he would still have received poor rate money) he would not have been required to work: being blind he would have been classed as "Impotent." The fact that he did, and that he was successful, suggests that he at least did not think himself incapable of making a contribution to society.

Gills's enterprise is demonstrated by his choice of publishing his work in London rather than Bury St. Edmunds. Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO) suggests there were only about 150 publications in Bury throughout the century, with most dating from the 1790s, but this is typical of the weakness of basing that database on central libraries. Recent work in Winchester by Norbert Schurer discovered over 2,000 unrecorded publications in a similar provincial town based around a local newspaper publisher, and a similar pattern of publication can be predicted from the extant publications from Bury.

Thomas Baily and William Thompson worked between two printing houses in Stamford, Lincolnshire and Bury St. Edmunds. A single copy of a newspaper, the *Suffolk Mercury or Bury Post*, can be found on ECCO.²⁰ Dating from Monday, October 11, 1731, the header notes that it is "Vol. 22 No. 41." The format of three sides of international news gleaned from other newspapers and one side of local information such as advertisements, accidental deaths and drownings, the Bill of Mortality and the prices of grain and drugs, is usual for a local weekly newspaper. The identifying number "41" confirms this since Monday, October 11 was in the forty-first week of the year. This would further suggest that the newspaper began in 1709, twenty-two years before 1731, giving us the volume number at one per year. Although this dates the newspaper's foundation two years after Gills's first catechism (1707), it would be hard to argue that Baily and Thompson started their publishing house in Bury St. Edmunds with the publication of so huge an undertaking: a local newspaper more usually followed a series of smaller publication ventures.²¹

Only eleven other works of these publishers are available on ECCO and all are the sort of small undertaking typical of a local publishing house. There are four reprints of Ned Ward's comic writings,²² three sermons by local ministers,²³ two political pamphlets on local issues (Navigation to the sea from the Norfolk

towns of Lyn, Wisbeech, Spalding and Boston;²⁴ and Land Tax, published from Stamford²⁵) and one collection of (three very short) novels.²⁶ ECCO dates the earliest publication by Baily and Thompson, Ned Ward's *A Satyr against Wine*, to 1712. Since the first edition, from Bragg in London, is dated 1705,²⁷ Baily and Thompson's may be earlier than the recorded date. Only further work in local libraries could turn up a fuller list of publications.

The advertisements in Baily and Thompson's existing books show a much wider range of books and pamphlets both published by themselves and by others.²⁸ One title they advertise in one of two versions of Ned Ward's *Honesty in Distress: but Reliev'd by No Party* (1721?)²⁹ is particularly interesting. *The Weekly Exercise: Or, Plain and Easie Instructions for Youth*³⁰ may be a version of Gills's catechism. Baily and Thompson's title appears to be derived from what is probably the most enduring of the lines of Gills's work, the last quatrain:

God grant us Grace, that we may take due Pains,
To practice what this *Exercise* contains;
To which, if we apply our best Endeavour,
We shall be happy here, and bless'd for ever.³¹

Likewise, Gills's preface "to the Charitable Buyer" explains the easy nature of the verse:

My Stile is low, so should it be,
To suit a Child's Capacity.³²

The long explanatory subtitle of *The Weekly Exercise* follows the subject matter of Gills's catechism: "Shewing First, The many Obligations Men are under to serve God. And, Secondly, How they may do it in the best Manner: Particularly, How they of the Church of England ought to behave themselves, whose Service and Prayers are herein fully Explain'd, and prov'd to be warrantable and Orthodox, by Quotations and Cases from Scripture, and the Examples of the Apostles themselves, and Rendered easie and intelligible to the meanest Capacities."³³ Furthermore, *The Weekly Exercise* is advertised to be sold at "Price Two-Pence, or 12s. a Hundred to those that are Charitably disposed to give them away" the same pricing structure of J. Downing's "Second Edition Enlarged" of Gills' catechism, printed in London in 1716.

Baily and Thompson sold another moral piece, by the seventeenth-century poet Henry Peacham,³⁴ *The Worth of a Penny*,³⁵ which was probably reprinted from a 1703 edition that was originally published in London by Samuel Keble. The

piece is of the same type as Gills's catechism and aimed at improving the morals of ordinary people, so we might ask why Gills did not choose the local publisher for the works that are associated with his name.

I would argue that the answer lies in Baily and Thompson's list: everything they published was either previously published elsewhere by dead authors or by the wealthy, such as the satirical poem, *Lincolnshire* (1720) that was "Printed for the Author;"³⁶ or ministers of religion,³⁷ or people with a political axe to grind who wanted the widest audience for their ideas and had someone to foot the bill for printing. In this they were typical of local publishers who were only interested in selling popular items, or pieces that cost them nothing but the time of setting the type. But there is no evidence they paid anything to writers. For Thomas Gills to make money out of his writing he did not fit with the economic model underpinning local publishers: he had to turn to London where publishers were becoming used to paying for copy.

In this essay there is no need for me to rehearse the argument of Brean Hammond's *Hackney for Bread*,³⁸ which charts the rise of the professional writer in London between 1670 and 1740. What I wish to add to Hammond's magisterial work is that an insignificant blind and lame poet should be added to the list of imaginative professional writers who attempted to make money from his writing.

Instructions for Children

The first edition of Gills's catechism *Instructions for Children in Verse* (1707) is noted to have been published in London but no publisher is named. From the start Gills is forthright in his economic intention for the piece when he tells his reader that

my Condition is as low,
 Poor, Blind and Lame, and being so.
 I can no better Way descry
 Than this to get a penny by.
 Then pray dislike not what I do,
 To help my self and others too:
 And if you Buy this Book of me,
 You do Two Acts of Charity:
 To Children good Advice you give,
 And grant me wherewithal to Live. ³⁹

We have explored the second act of charity in some detail, although it might now be argued that granting Gills the “wherewithal to Live” is a disguise for the hard economic facts of his enterprise. The first act of charity, giving children good advice, would have been equally fraught with difficulty, but once again Gills was remarkably successful.

Gills writes following the headings “Duty to God, and first of Prayer,” “Of Respect to the Name of God,” “Of Keeping the Lord’s Day,” “Duty to Parents,” “Duty to Relations and others,” “Of Stealing,” “Of Lying,” “Duty to Old People,” “Duty to Poor People,” and ends with the quatrain quoted in the title of this essay. His explanations are certainly fitted to a child, and the jingling verse would suggest a child learning by rote the importance of prayer, the way to follow five of the Ten Commandments and to perform three social duties. Gills begins:

Q. From whence, dear Child, does all that’s Good proceed

A. All Good from God Almighty comes indeed:

We can no Gift, nor Grace, nor Blessing have,

But what we from his Goodness must receive.

Q. And how should we God’s Blessings seek to gain?

A. By Prayer we must those Gifts of God obtain.⁴⁰

I have located six other catechisms written for children that were published in the first ten years of the eighteenth century but none is so easy to follow and all have a subtext that highlights the version of Christianity held by the author. What is so powerful about Gills’s simple language for children is that it does not fixate on a particular issue which defines a sect or group of Christians, but gives a simple lesson fitted to the mind of a child.

The Presbyterian Catechism of the Reverend Assembly of (Westminster) Divines,⁴¹ claimed it was “all fitted both for Brevity and Clearness to this their Form of Sound Words of the benefit of Christians in General, and of Youth and Children, in Understanding in particular.”⁴² It was not. The first question and answer was:

Q. What is the chief end of Man?

A. Mans chief end is to glorifie GOD *a*, and to enjoy Him for ever *b*.

Each footnote mark indicated a passage in the Bible which supposedly glossed the statement. Thus, footnote *a* to 1 Corinthians 10:31 explained to a child the process of glorifying God: “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.” Likewise footnote *b* explained enjoying God: “Whom

have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.”⁴³ If the first footnote suggests that we eat, drink and be merry to glorify God, then all well and good, but the second footnote seems wildly at odds with the answer to the question.

Likewise, Josiah Woodward’s Anglican Catechism,⁴⁴ which claimed it “explain[ed] the Substance of the Christian Religion Suited to the Understanding of Children and the Meanest Capacities,”⁴⁵ is carefully glossed, though it does not print out the verses in the bible to which his questions and answers refer. His first questions are quite different from the presbyterians but would be equally baffling to a child.

Q. What is Man?

A. A Reasonable Creature, consisting of Soul and Body.

Q. What is a Creature?

A. A Being Created of God.

Q. What is it to be Created?

A. To be produced out of nothing.⁴⁶

The misprinted question mark at the end of the third answer is perhaps a foretaste of what is to come, as children are questioned on Man’s Corruption, Redemption, the Covenant of Grace, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, of a Christian Life, of Christian Hope and lastly of Everlasting Punishment, where “Eternity” is explained as “A Duration without end.”⁴⁷ With its explanations of “Some Terms,” and prayers, the catechism also comes in at three times the length of Gills’s.

I have chosen to excerpt the Westminster Divines’ and Woodward’s catechisms not as extreme examples but examples of the six extreme positions on Christianity that the other catechisms display. All of the others privilege an aspect of Christianity that the author believes to be the most important. For Richard Kidder,⁴⁸ who ended his life as Anglican Bishop of Bath and Wells, the most important thing was not to exclude those who tended to Nonconformist beliefs from the Anglican communion, while at the same time avoiding Roman Catholic doctrine. Thus, his catechism follows a carefully worded route through the elements of Anglican-based church worship that represents a believer’s life: baptism, the creed, the commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. He is careful for the child to define only two sacraments, Baptism and Holy Communion,⁴⁹ as the requirements for the deliverance from sin and the hope of heaven.

Thomas Cooke,⁵⁰ another Anglican who wrote his for Merchant Taylor's School, also follows the pattern of church worship: baptism, the creed, the commandments and the Lord's Prayer, and the two sacraments. However, the catechism is more thorough and his answers longer, concentrating on the difference between the earthly body represented by the father's name and the spiritual body represented by the Christian name. At 60 pages this catechism would represent a great task of rote learning albeit that the questions might act as prompts.

The pattern is followed in a similar way by Peter Hewit,⁵¹ a third Anglican, although the balance of his catechism is dramatically different. Chancellor of St. Fin Barre's Cathedral in Cork, Hewit was in charge of theological education of a small congregation scattered throughout a large diocese that was largely Roman Catholic. He follows through the exegesis of baptism, the creed, the commandments and the Lord's Prayer as a preparation for confirmation of young adults, and without an exploration of sacraments. His position is explained at the beginning with an exposition of the nature of catechism itself, and the whole is concluded by an exhortation to families to pray together morning and evening, with examples of long prayers to be said by the father and by the children. His congregation will more usually pray at home than in church.

Writing his catechism from the nonconformist (Particular Baptist) standpoint, Benjamin Keach,⁵² is openly controversial and calls out replies such as those we have already seen. *The Child's Instructor* was written in 1664 and became instantly famous when its author was pilloried for its schismatical and seditious attack on child baptism.

Gills's catechism is not directed to a distinct market, or a particular age group. The argument of the first part of this essay would suggest that he was writing for commercial rather than doctrinal reasons. To make money to support himself as a blind man, his work does not exclude any potential buyer. Thus, his first reminder to his readers is that he is not ordained, so his work cannot cause controversy:

'Twas from another hand I took
The Subject of this little Book;
For I myself am no Divine,
The Verse and Rhime is only mine.⁵³

And nor does it. Throughout, Gills's charming rhymes exhorts children to the proper deportment during prayers, rather than what to pray:

Q. What manner do you think you ought to pray in?
A. I ought to Kneel while I my Prayers am saying;

On both my Knees, (for one will not suffice)
 And towards Heaven lift up my Hands and Eyes;
 I must Kneel upright too, not lean or loll
 Against a Stool, or Chair, or Bed, or Wall;
 Nor must I Laugh, or Look another Way,
 Nor with my Toys, or with my Fingers play,
 Nor stop to speak to others while I pray.⁵⁴

Here we read that even in admonition, Gills's touch is light, as he is also in remembering that children will copy the bad examples of their elders. On the subject of taking the Lord's Name in vain he writes:

Q. And yet some People counted Good no doubt,
 You hear for every trifling Cause cry out,
 And often say, O Jesus! Or O God.
 A. Yes, I hear, and think 'tis very odd
 That such as they should be so much to blame,
 And learn us little ones to do the same;
 For what ill Words we hear old Folks repeat,
 We Children are too apt to imitate.
 And thus God's Name is with Contempt abus'd,
 Which in a Holy Manner should be us'd.⁵⁵

Like a truly professional writer for children, Gills makes sure throughout the catechism that his words are not just for the children but for their parents as well. Thus, when he admonishes a child to go to Sunday School, he reminds the parents of their duty also:

My Parents, or my Friends, must careful be
 To make me do my Duty punctually;
 And what may make me good they often ought
 To teach, or send me where I may be taught:
 For if these Things they take no Care to do,
 And I prove Wicked, they are Guilty too;
 Because my Parents know, or should know, what
 Is most for my own Good if I do not.⁵⁶

To be sure, Gills uses the trick of the all-seeing God to ensure good behavior of the perfect child:

And what my Parents bid me I must do,
 Not only in their sight, but Absence too;
 Or else by cheating them I give Offence
 To God, who sees my Disobedience.⁵⁷

But it must be argued that he has a keen understanding of human nature, and how the child is father to the man:

Now if I do not practice this whilst Young,
 Can I who had my own Will all along
 Deny it when my Passions grow more strong?⁵⁸

Perhaps the strongest section of the verse is when Gills puts a beautifully constructed list of those things that make children most obnoxious to their parents into the mouth of the child:

Why then if I love Idleness and Play,
 And will not Learn to Work, nor Read, nor Pray,
 Or if I Stamp, or Cry, or take it Ill,
 And Fret because I cannot have my Will;
 Or if I be addicted to tell Lies,
 Speak Naughty Words, or call ill Names likewise;
 If I be Dainty, and refuse to Eat
 Without my Sawce, or choicest Bits of Meat;
 Or if though Pride I Envy and Repine
 At others better cloath'd, and dress'd more fine,
 Or those Despise whose Cloaths are worse than mine;
 If I be Peevish, Quarrelsome, or Loud,
 Inquisitive, Affected, Vain, or Proud;
 If any one of these ill Inclinations,
 And such like Humours, Faults, and Naughty Passions,
 My careful Parents never should neglect me,
 But contradict my Humour, and correct me,
 For whilst these Humours I in others see,
 I find how odious they would look in me,
 And how mischievous their Effects would be.⁵⁹

This is not to say that Gills does not bring treatment of those with his own disability into the list of good behaviors that he heaps upon the child, and in a most Old Testament cycle of revenge:

Q. And don't you think 'tis likewise very bad
 To mock at Folks Deform'd, or Fools, or Mad?
 A. Tis ill to scoff at Peoples Misery,
 And if I do so God may angry be,
 And with the like Affliction punish me;
 I ought to have Compassion on their Woe,
 And give God Thanks because I am not so.⁶⁰

But it is no surprise that Gills's humor gives specific praise to that reply in the voice of the questioner, which brings us back to the topic of this essay:

Q. You say well Child, now tell me One Thing More
 Concerning your Behaviour to the Poor?
 A. The Poor I must relieve if I be able,
 With Money, or with something from the Table;
 For what I give the Poor I lend the Lord;
 But if I can no other Alms afford,
 I'll pray for them, and pity their Distress,
 And always speak to them with Tenderness;
 For whosoever does the Poor contemn,
 His Maker does reproach in scorning them.⁶¹

Gills is here reminding the buyer of his pamphlet of their duty to pay their poor rate at the same time that they conclude their reading of the pamphlet they have bought from him to subsidize his poor rate payment. Furthermore, by putting the idea of giving to the poor into the minds of the children who are to be catechized by his words, he will put the idea back into the minds of their parents as the children remind their parents of the lesson.

That Gills's was a successful strategy is demonstrated in three ways. First, *Instructions for children* was reprinted in 1709 exactly as it appeared in 1707, as though it had not been reset, which suggests that it might have in continual production over three years. Publishers did not keep plates made up as they had limited sets of fonts. Second, a companion volume which gives similar advice to older children, *Advice to Youth: or Instructions for Young Men and Maids* was published at the same time as the second edition, also in London, and also in the form of a dialogue. Third, Joseph Downing, who published the Woodward catechism we explored above, republished Gills's *Instructions* twice, in 1712 and 1716, with different titles. The later edition is the version which sold at "2d each or 12s per hundred." This was no small achievement. Downing has 812 titles to his name on

the ECCO database, and was a major publisher for the Society for the Reformation of Manners, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge and the Charity School movement. Gills did not live to reap the benefit of the final success of his little book as he died in January 1716.⁶² As I noted above he was buried at St. Mary's church and entered as "A Blind Man" in the burial record.

From this we see Thomas Gills as a self-publicist of his poverty, but at the same time as an entrepreneur who went to some lengths to finance himself. In the economy of makeshifts within which he most probably lived, Gills comes across as remarkably driven by a desire for independence.

The Recovery and Blindness Poems

Gills's publications of 1710 demonstrate the precarious nature of living on charity, and the fact of there being two complementary poems becomes the more telling when we read his poem "Upon the Recovery of his Sight and the Second loss thereof" counterbalanced by the second in the same pamphlet, "On the Misery of Blindness." "Upon the Recovery" hints that Gills suffered from cortical strokes from which it is typical to have a series of partial recoveries of sight and the use of limbs followed by relapse. The second reminds his readers what it means to be blind, if only for intermittent periods. It confirms that he really knows what blindness is and that he is not feigning to cheat the Poor Law system—or them.

Gills is repetitively careful to make sure that his readers understand his self-identification as a blind man. Thus, "Upon the Recovery" begins with lines reminding his readers that he had been blind before recounting the miracle of his return to sight:

Long had I languish'd in continual Night,
 Long mourn'd the grievous loss of strength and sight,
 Long had I sought to have the cause remov'd,
 In vain Advices, Means and Medicines prov'd.
 When lo, the Almighty looking with Compassion
 Upon my Darkness, Grief and Desolation,
 Was pleas'd of his meer bounty to restore
 Part of that Sight and Strength I had before.⁶³

When we get to the second page of the pamphlet, and presumably after the reader has bought the poem, Gills gives details of the return of his sight:

[237]

gradually and slowly came my Sight,
 At first confusedly I saw Day-light,
 And knew when it was Gloomy, and when Bright.
 Then Humane Bodies when approaching near,
 Strange moving Forms like Shadows did appear.
 Next distinguished Colours near the Eye,
 And various Objects I discern'd when nigh,
 Which afterwards at distance I discry.⁶⁴

In the event, Gills's recovery was so enabling that he managed to walk alone to other towns, something that must have been difficult for his friends, let alone the Overseers of the Poor to accept.

Then cou'd I walk th' adjacent Fields alone,
 And sometimes ramble to a Neighbouring Town.
 Oh ! what delight I took to tread the Fields,
 And view the Beauties Spring and Summer yields.⁶⁵

Thus, Gills tells his readers that although he could move about unaided, between himself and the "Beauties . . . A subtle Vail of Dimness interpos'd:" he can see but only partially. Furthermore, at the bottom of the second page, he reminds his readers of

the Fleeting state of Worldly Joys,
 Which each Mischance or Malady destroys.⁶⁶

Whence, he relapses once again into being crippled and "stone blind":

My Head and Eye were seized with grievous pain
 The Cause, Defluptions and an Inflammation,
 Th' Effect, of Sight a Second Deprivation.⁶⁷

From which after some time and treatment, sight returns once more:

Thou now hast given me a breathing space,
 And made my Sickness, Pains and Sorrows cease;
 Thou hast restor'd me some small light
 Enough with care to guide my steps aright.⁶⁸

Faced with this cycle of illnesses, Gills resigns himself to the decline in his health, but like the child whom he catechized, he promises God:

Thy Holy Will be always done on me;
I'll strive to be content whate'er it be.⁶⁹

Thus he declares of himself:

He is not wholly vanquish'd in the Field,
Who tho' he falls o'erpowered, yet ne'er will yield.⁷⁰

Nevertheless, even though he declares himself a wounded soldier on the battlefield of life, his final call to his reader reminds them to value their senses.

You who enjoy Health, hearing, Speech and Sight,
Oh! Prize and use those benefits aright;
Inestimable is their worth, and no Man
Ought to esteem them less for being Common;⁷¹

Gills's tone in this poem must be understood in the same way as the rhetoric of powerlessness⁷² adopted by paupers in their begging letters to overseers, and therefore ought to be read with some caution. Gills is positioning himself as the fit beneficiary of charity, and specifically as a writer whose poems are worthy to be bought for charity even if they are not a great species of writing. With this in mind, if we read the balance between the joy of his returned sight with the redoubled sadness of his "second loss" alongside the admonition to his readers to value their sight, it becomes more clear that the poem is less a fountain of sorrow than a strategy for inducing charity, and thus it concludes with the lines:

READER, if in these following Lines you find
Nought worth your Time or Money, please to know
The Author is Unlearned, Lame and Blind;
And'tis no wonder if his Verse be so.
Yet wholly lost you Money will not be,
Because bestowed on one in Poverty.⁷³

Continuing the rhetoric of powerlessness, Gills completes his 1710 pamphlet with "On the Misery of Blindness." Poems evoking what it is like living as a blind person would become a typical vehicle for deriving charity employed by blind writers during the eighteenth century (the example from Priscilla Pointon in this volume is another). The model for such verses is Milton's *On his Blindness*,⁷⁴ but where Milton fondly asks "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?" and answers himself, "They also serve who only stand and wait," Gills's independence underlying

the rhetoric of powerlessness cannot allow himself to regard himself as “waiting” and his discomfort with his situation has to be given voice. Thus, he describes his day-to-day existence as “tiresome idleness,” and while even this has to be qualified, he ends the poem with a conventional Christian acceptance of his earthly life.

His only comfort is, (and sure 'tis better,
Than all the World's delights can give, and greater,)
That if he does his Cross with patience bear,
Make Heaven his only hope, his aim, his care,
And uses pious Thoughts, and frequent Prayer, . . .
Then will his Miseries end and Joys begin.
From his dark Cage his Spirit takes its flight,
To boundless Regions of Eternal Light,
Where in Immensive Joy and Pleasure he
Shall Everlasting Glorious Objects see.⁷⁵

It is just possible that being blind on earth will ensure his place in heaven.

The publication gives no assignment of where it was printed, so it may be the work of Baily and Thompson. The ECCO copy suggests it was a quick job carried off on cheap paper scraps. It may have brought him little or no monetary reward, but it was possibly his most important publication as it established his condition in the face of charges that he might have feigned his blindness. In turn then, we might look upon his catechism as an attempt to be economically self-sufficient in order that he did not have to face repeated and impertinent questioning about the state of his health.

Conclusion

Whatever was Gills's fate, the value of work like his was recognized at least in Bury St. Edmunds. In 1786, Edmund Gillingwater, keeper of the Work-Houses in Harleston in Suffolk noted with sadness: “the almost universal neglect of moral instruction of the poor is the source of those numerous and enormous vices, which are now become both the disgrace and terror of mankind.”⁷⁶ His suggestion for the cure of such vices might have been Gills's catechism:

Let us but look into our work-houses, for instance, on the Lord's Day,
and see how it is observed.—How seldom shall we find there, that
the poor are constantly and regularly brought to Divine service. How
seldom are they catechized and otherwise instructed in the principles

of Christianity. How seldom are they informed of their dependence on their Creator, and their indispensable duty towards him.⁷⁷

Notes

1. Tim Hitchcock, *Down and Out on the Streets of London* (London: Humbledon, 2005). The author graciously granted me access to this text using the original word documents, which do not, of course, bear the same paginations as the published version, so I will not give any.
2. A term which may be dated from as early as A.L. Morton, *A People's History of Britain*, (London: Gollancz, 1938).
3. See Olwen Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth Century France 1750–1789* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974).
4. Steven King and Alana Tompkins, eds. *The Poor in England 1700–1850*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).
5. King and Tompkins, *The Poor in England*, 8.
6. King and Tompkins, *The Poor in England*, 1.
7. King and Tompkins, *The Poor in England*, 9.
8. King and Tompkins, *The Poor in England*, 10.
9. King and Tompkins, *The Poor in England*, 11.
10. Lorie Charlesworth, *Welfare's forgotten past: a socio-legal history of the poor law*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) [Kindle edition used which has no text-to-voice page numbers].
11. King and Tompkins, *The Poor in England*, 7.
12. Thomas Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters 1731–1837*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001)
13. Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters*, 7.
14. King and Tompkins, *The Poor in England*, 7.
15. Thomas Gills, *Instructions for Children, in Verse* (London, 1707), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale (CW3324642157); Thomas Gills, *Advice to Youth: or Instructions for Young Men and Maids* (London, 1708/9?), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale (CW3312252458); Thomas Gills, *Instructions for Children, in Verse* (London, 1709), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale (CW3312804968).
16. Thomas Gills, *Upon the Recovery of his Sight and the Second Loss Thereof* (London? 1710?), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale (CW3311512092).
17. Thomas Gills, *Useful and Delightful Instructions by way of Dialogue between the Master & his Scholar, Containing the Duty of Children* (London: J. Downing, 1712), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale (CW3311512077); Thomas Gills, *Useful and Delightful Instructions by way of Dialogue between the Master & his Scholar, Containing the Duty of Children, The Second Edition Enlarg'd* (London: J. Downing, 1716), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale (CW3310481438). These are both largely identical to *Instructions for Children*. The enlargement of the second edition consists only of better printing of the same text over seven more pages and two new short speeches to be said before public examination.

18. Gills, *Instructions for Children*, 2. It is to the 1707 edition to which I make all references to Gills catechism throughout this essay.
19. Strangely the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) dates the word “workhouse” only to 1652 with reference to the Poor Laws, although many town histories record such places from the early seventeenth century.
20. *Suffolk mercury: or, Bury post* (Bury St. Edmunds: Baily and Thompson, Monday 11 October 1731), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale (CB3326829097). There are no copies recorded in the Burney Collection.
21. This was also the publication pattern for Thomas Gent, who published the blind poet, John Maxwell’s poems in York.
22. Edward Ward, *Honesty in distress: but reliev’d by no party. A tragedy, as it is acted on the stage of the world. Act I. Scene the palace. Honesty alone. Honesty and a courtier. Honesty and a lady. Honesty and a footman. Honesty alone. Act II. Scene Westminster-Hall, with the court sitting. Honesty among the lawyers. The lawyers speeches concerning honesty. Honesty and . . . Act III. Scene . . . Honesty begging along the city . . . draper. A precise apothecary and his man. Honesty and an ale-house keeper. Honesty and a grocer. Honesty and a hosier. Honesty and the merchants. Honesty starved to death. To which is added, a satyr against the corrupt use of money* (Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk: Baily and Thompson, 1721?), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale (CB3331342863).
 Edward Ward, *The rise and fall of madam Coming-Sir: or, An Unfortunate slip from the tavern-bar, Into the Surgeon’s Powdering-Tub* (Stamford, Lincolnshire and St. Edmond’s Bury: Thompson and Bailey, 1720?), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale (CW3309954349).
 Edward Ward, *A satyr against wine. With a poem, in praise of small beer. Written by a gentleman in a fever, occasion’d by hard drinking*. The second edition (St. Edmunds Bury, Suffolk and Stamford, Lincolnshire: Thompson and Baily, 1712?), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale (CW33330865852).
23. Francis Harvey, *The dangers and mischiefs of instability in matters of religion consider’d. A sermon preach’d at the Arch-Deacon’s visitation, at Sudbury, on Thursday, April 20, 1721. A.M. rector of lawshall in Suffolk; and chaplain to the Right Honourable the Earl of Bristol. Printed at the request of the clergy* (Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk: Baily and Thompson, 1721), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale (CW3326679938).
 Thomas Birch, *The unreasonableness of revenue, and the great duty of Christian-charity; consider’d. In two sermons: Preach’d at Botesdale-chapel in Suffolk, August 21 and 28. 1720. A.B. lecturer of the said chapel* (Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk: Baily and Thompson, 1720?), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CB3326543246).
 Francis Peck, *Ad magistratum: a sermon preached before the mayor and aldermen of Stamford in the County of Lincoln, in the Parish-Church of the Blessed Virgin; at the Inauguration of a new Mayor, Oct. 6. 1720. A. B. Curate of King’s-Cliffe, in the County of Northampton. Published to prevent Misrepresentations* (Stamford, Lincolnshire and Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk: Thompson and Baily, 1720?), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CW3322788913).
24. Charles Kinderley, *The present state of the navigation of the towns of Lyn, Wisbeech, Spalding, and Boston. The rivers that pass through those places, and the countries that border thereupon, truly, faithfully, and impartially represented* (Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk: Baily and Thompson, 1721), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CW3306552396).

25. *Proposals for taking off the land-tax: likewise ways and means for easing the nation of all the other taxes; to the great advancement of trade, and Benefit of the Nation in General. Being a project for raising above three millions per annum. Humbly submitted to the consideration of the Honourable House of Commons* (Stamford: Baily and Thompson, 1713), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CW3306540868).
26. *Three delightful novels, displaying the stratagems of love and gallantry. Novel I. The lucky misfortune. . . . Novel II. The noble recompence. . . . Novel III. The loves of Edgar, King of England.* (Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk: Baily and Thompson, 1720?), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CW3313826242).
27. Edward Ward, *A satyr against wine. With a poem in praise of small beer. Written by a gentleman in a fever, occasion'd by hard drinking.* (London: Bragg, 1705), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CW3310733701).
28. There are nineteen titles.
29. The publication date of 1721 (which is given for both, although the advertisements differ in each) is probably inaccurate. Of the other works advertised all are by Ward and all were originally published in the first ten years of the eighteenth century. The only other work which might give us a clearer date of publication is Francis Peck, *An Exercise upon the Creation*. The first edition of this was published in 1716, on his graduation to BA from St. John's College, Cambridge and ordination (ODNB). The British Library Catalogue gives the date of 1717, but the copy is lost. The advertisement offers "The Second Edition Corrected."
30. No copies have been found.
31. Gills, *Instructions for children*, 15. Emphasis added.
32. Gills, *Instructions for children*, 2.
33. Ward, *Honesty in Distress*, unpag.
34. Henry Peacham, (1578-1644?) Peacham is best known as the author of *The Compleat Gentleman* (London: 1634).
35. Henry Peacham, *The worth of a penny: or, a caution to keep money. With the causes of the scarcity, and misery of the want thereof, consider'd under the following Heads, viz. the . . . Causes why Men are without Money, and are Three . . . I. Excess in Diet, Drinking, and Apparel. II. Gaming, and Recreations. III. Idleness and Improvidence, either in themselves, or their Servants. IV. The Character of a dejected Spirit for want of Money. V. The Misery of the Want of Money. VI. It compelleth to offend against Body and Soul. VII. The Vertue of Frugality, and the Definition of it. VIII. The Derivative of the Word Penny, and the Value of is. IX. The many good Uses that a Penny may be put to. X. Cautions to save Money in Diet, Apparel, and Recreations. XI. The English, of all Nations in Lurope, the most prosue in their Expences. XII. Of good Husbandy in Apparel. XIII. Many excellent Examples of Moderation in it. XIV. Of Recreation, and the Benefits that are received by it. XV. Four excellent Cautions to be observ'd in Play, &c.* (St. Edmund's Bury: Baily and Thompson, 1725?), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CW3305452375).
36. Gentleman in Lincolnshire, *Lincolnshire. A poem* (Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, 1720), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CW3309769436).

37. Francis Peck bought the living of Goadby Marwood in Leicestershire for £400 in 1723, which suggests he was independently wealthy. He was the son of a merchant in Stamford, and educated at Charterhouse before Cambridge.
38. Brean S. Hammond, *Professional imaginative writing in England, 1670-1740: 'hackney for bread'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).
39. Gills, *Instructions for children*, 2.
40. Gills, *Instructions for children*, 3.
41. The Westminster Assembly was set up by the Long Parliament to restructure the Church of England along Presbyterian lines and met between 1643 and 1649.
42. Westminster Assembly, *The shorter catechism, composed by the Reverend Assembly of Divines. With the proofs thereof, out of the scriptures, in words at length. Which are either some of the former quoted places, or others gathered from their other Writings: All fitted both for Brevity and Clearness to this their Form of sound Words. For the Benefit of Christians in General, and of Youth and Children, in Understanding in particular, that they may with more ease acquaint themselves with the Truth, according to the Scriptures, and with the Scriptures themselves* (Edinburgh: John Reid, 1702), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CW3321606620), unpag.
43. Westminster Assembly, *The Shorter Catechism*, 1702, unpag.
44. Josiah Woodward, *A short catechism, explaining the substance of the Christian religion suited to the understanding of children, and the meanest capacities* (London: J. Downing, 1709), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CW3323333701).
45. Josiah Woodward, *A Short Catechism*, title page.
46. Josiah Woodward, *A Short Catechism*, 7.
47. Josiah Woodward, *A Short Catechism*, 32.
48. Richard Kidder, *An help to the smallest children's more easie understanding the church-catechism. By way of question and answer. Drawn up for the use of a certain parish in London by the rector thereof* (London: H. Hills, 1709), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CB3329893928).
49. Roman Catholics number seven sacraments.
50. Thomas Cooke, *A brief but plain explication of the church-catechism. Designed for the use of the scholars in Merchant-Taylors-School, and of the Children Educated in Christ's-Hospital, those particularly which are brought up in the Grammar-School thereunto belonging* (London: J. Wale, 1706), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CW3323387679).
51. Peter Hewit, *A brief and plain explication of the catechism of the Church of England; In sundry short and familiar questions and answers, composed for the use and benefit of families: that hereby parents of children, &c. may be directed how to instruct those that are committed to their charge and trust, in the right understanding of the true grounds and principles of the Christian faith and practice. To which is annexed, an exhortation to family devotion* (London: Awnsham and John Churchill, 1704), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CB3326642102).
52. Benjamin Keach, *The child's delight: or instructions for children and youth. Wherein all the chief principles of the Christian religions are clearly (though briefly) opened. Necessary to Establish young People in God's Truth, in opposition to Error in these perilous Times. Together With many other things,*

both Pleasant and Useful, for the Christian Education of Youth; with Letters to Parents. Adorned with several Copper Cuts, teaching to Spell, Read, and cast Accompts. With a short Dictionary interpreting hard Words and Names. Likewise, a Form for a Bond, Bill, or Receipt; And a Table showing the Interest of any Sums, &c. Fitted for the use of Schools, and useful for all Families, The Third Edition (London: William and Joseph Marshall, 1704?), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CW3321382880).

53. Gills, *Instructions for Children*, 2.
54. Gills, *Instructions for Children*, 7–8.
55. Gills, *Instructions for Children*, 9.
56. Gills, *Instructions for Children*, 10.
57. Gills, *Instructions for Children*, 11.
58. Gills, *Instructions for Children*, 11.
59. Gills, *Instructions for Children*, 12.
60. Gills, *Instructions for Children*, 15.
61. Gills, *Instructions for Children*, 16.
62. Since the New Style calendar, which began the year on January 1, did not come into general usage until 1751, it is not certain whether Gills died in what we would now call January 1717, from which we might deduce that he did benefit from the second publication by Downing.
63. Gills, *Upon the Recovery*, 1–2.
64. Gills, *Upon the Recovery*, 2.
65. Gills, *Upon the Recovery*, 2.
66. Gills, *Upon the Recovery*, 2.
67. Gills, *Upon the Recovery*, 3.
68. Gills, *Upon the Recovery*, 4.
69. Gills, *Upon the Recovery*, 4.
70. Gills, *Upon the Recovery*, 4.
71. Gills, *Upon the Recovery*, 4.
72. See King and Tompkins, *The Poor in England*, p.7.
73. Gills, *Upon the Recovery*, 1.
74. John Milton, *Poems &c upon severall occasions in English and Latin*, (London: Thomas Dring, 1673), 59.
75. Gills, *Upon the Recovery*, 7.
76. Edmund Gillingwater, *An essay on parish work-houses: containing observations on the present state of English work-houses; with some regulations proposed for their improvement. By Edmund Gillingwater, Overseer of the Poor, at Harleston, Norfolk* (Bury St. Edmund's: J. Rackham, 1786), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, (CW3304658747).
77. Gillingwater, *Essay on Work-Houses*, 2–3.

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