CHAPTER 7

ARTISTIC SUBJECTIVITY, NARRATIVE CHOICES, AND THE IMPLIED AUTHOR:

THEIR RELATION AS A FUNCTION OF BODILY BEING

In this chapter, I wish to present my reflections upon the narrative modes used by Borges, Hull, and Kuusisto to tell their various stories. Doing so will help me to pull the threads of the foregoing chapters together in such a way that the authors’ individual artistic subjectivities become evident. Literature may be considered an effective mode of self-examination and self-care. Richard Shusterman, who is a pragmatist philosopher, states:

[T]here is a need to objectify the self in some way in order to examine it. The examining subjectivity (or “I”) must be directed at some representation of the self (or “me”). Verbal descriptions and expressions of that self provide such representations. Without gainsaying the important presence of nameless feelings and non-verbal images that stream through consciousness, it is clear that our most precise, articulate, and examinable representations of the self are expressed in language, and thus formulated in terms of words and meanings that are public and shared. (11)

With specific reference to Borges’s short stories that deal broadly with the experience of disability as well as to Hull’s diaries and Kuusisto’s memoiristic works, Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of “abstract movement” proves to be important. The philosopher explains it as a power that “is not triggered off by any existing object” but as that which outlines “in space a gratuitous intention which has reference to one’s own body, making
an object of it instead of going through it to link up with things by means of it” (Merleau-Ponty 139). We may understand this as the symbolic power that enables the subject to achieve “projection.” It facilitates acts that give meaning to sense-data, and centre “a plurality of experiences round one intelligible core” (Merleau-Ponty 139). This power enables the subject not only to give meaning to his/her perceptual experiences, but also “to objectify the self” (Shusterman 11). Merleau-Ponty describes consciousness as follows, with its projective power in focus: “The essence of consciousness is to provide itself with one or several worlds, to bring into being its own thoughts before itself, as if they were things” (150). Drawing on Shusterman’s thought as expressed in the previous long quote (11), if we consider imaginative – or artistic – projections in language as belonging to this category of representative acts, the portrayal of blind and other disabled characters as well as the exploration of related themes in fictional worlds may be conceived as attempts to personalise them and give “a form to the stuff of experience.” This literary projection also “has reference to one’s own body” (Merleau-Ponty 139), which means that the author engages in self-examination and self-dramatisation in this form. Continuing along this line of thought, if abstract movement in its symbolic and representative capacity is considered to be consciousness itself as Merleau-Ponty does (139), we may conclude that subjectivity and the artistic potential of consciousness are closely allied to each other.

In this regard, Kierkegaard’s authorial method is instructive in understanding the literary practice of the authors under study. Kierkegaard developed his views on Christianity, faith, subjectivity, representation, and so on in opposition to an impersonal Hegelian system. His point is that talking about the system in itself is meaningless; one must think about what it means to the person. We find that the works examined in this
thesis engage in personalising the truth of life in the blind condition by objectifying their experiences through literary representations. These literary acts assume their significance when we recognise that the disabled authors tell stories on their own terms, and do not accept without careful thought societal definitions of lives of the disabled. This narrative dialectic involves a transformation from the empirical author to the implied author.

Kierkegaard’s authorship covers the period from 1843 to 1855, and is divided into two parts – the aesthetic and the religious (Pattison 76). Furthermore, he wrote the works both under his own name, and under a number of pseudonyms. The elements just mentioned are only two among those composing what Kierkegaard “obsessively used to refer to as his ‘indirect communication.’” This “complex” means of representation eventually came to include, Poole states, five elements “cunningly woven together in terms of a known cultural space” (59). In the “Historical Introduction” (ix-xxxix) to their translation of Fear and Trembling and Repetition (1983), the editors Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong explain Kierkegaard’s reasons for using “indirect communication”:

Kierkegaard expressly employed indirect communication in works such as Fear and Trembling and Repetition in order to take himself as author out of the picture and to leave the reader alone with the ideas. The pseudonymity or polyonymity of the various works, Kierkegaard wrote in “A First and Last Declaration,” “has not had an accidental basis in my person … but an essential basis in the production itself, which, for the sake of the lines, of the psychologically varied differences of the individualities, poetically required a disregard for good and evil,
contrition and exuberance, despair and arrogance, suffering and rhapsody, etc., which are limited only ideally by psychological consistency, which no actual factual person dares allow himself or wishes to allow himself in the moral limitations of actuality.” (x)

This indirect means of philosophical examination reveals a rich and varied aesthetic of the novel, which is devoted to the representation of consciousness (Fludernik 19-20).¹ Kierkegaard’s intention “to take himself as author out of the picture and to leave the reader alone with the ideas” may be compared with Borges’s authorial method. Laraway reminds us, “If nothing else, we should have learned from the canonical Borges that the particulars of an author's life are not sufficient to explain the meaning of the texts that bear his name. Empirical causes and literary effects may in fact be correlated, but the nature of their relationship is anything but clear” (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror” 308). Hence, we should be careful not to simplistically regard the author’s works as autobiographical and, therefore, as being directly connected to and reflective of their author’s life condition. Commenting on Kierkegaard’s famous work Fear and Trembling, Ronald M. Green recalls the words of the Hongs in the “Historical Introduction” cited above: “The ordinary cautions against using the facts of an author’s life to interpret his writings have special relevance to a writer like Kierkegaard. As the Hongs observe, ‘no writer has so painstakingly tried to preclude his readers’ collapsing writer and works together and thereby transmogrifying the works into autobiography or memoir’” (274). What is interesting here, besides the fact that we are cautioned against

¹. Besides discussing literary works while dealing with philosophical problems, Kierkegaard has also written a few pseudonymous novelistic works. He discusses ancient Greek drama, modern theatre, and the novelistic art to explain the human condition in the modern age, and the existence of the modern subject.
using biographical information about an author to interpret his writings, is that both
Kierkegaard and Borges thought about this issue, and considered it necessary to deal
with it. While the former creates pseudonymous authors in order to distance himself
from his readers, the pseudonyms may be regarded as alter egos of their creator. As he
clarifies in the foregoing long quote, the pseudonymous authors present in their works
“psychologically varied . . . individualities.” In light of this representational technique,
I suggest that Borges creates alter egos in the form of first-person narrators with the
objective of carrying out intricate forms of self-examination in diverse fictional worlds.
This stance on subjectivity provides the key to dealing with plurality and change in self
and world.

7.1. Subjectivity through the Alter Ego, Voice, and Perspective in Borges

Authorial voice may be inflected, then, through the creation of alter egos or
authorial doubles, and not solely through the employment of a point of view. Laraway
foregrounds “the impressive array of voices found in Borges's mature verse” in order to
show the “plasticity” of “the first-person voice” there (“The Blind Spot in the Mirror”
319). The multiple voices point to the proliferation of identities that are assumed in
Borges’s poetry. Concerned as we are with his short stories, we may in turn say that he
creates a number of alter egos and doubles with the purpose of exploring his blindness
and subjectivity. In this regard, we should not underestimate the importance of the role
played by the narrator in the short stories that feature Borges’s alter egos. As Gregory
Currie reminds us, it is the narrating agent who provides the reader with all the
“information about the story, the one whose choice of words and their order sets the
emotional and evaluative tone of the work and the episodes it contains” (339). Thus, the
narrator’s technique, the tropes and language he uses, and the thoughts he foregrounds not only build the story, but also constitute an exploration of subjectivity. It is noteworthy that many of Borges’s narrators bear his name.

We find the quest motif in short stories such as “Tlön,” “The Library of Babel,” “The Secret Miracle,” and “The Immortal,” which present meandering narratives where the characters search for various things. Instead of moving directly to the referent, such narratives self-consciously wend their ways through books and time. For example, in the first-mentioned short story, Borges the narrator and his friend, Bioy Casares, look for a country that exists only in an encyclopaedia, and not in the world of the story. The second short story deals with the search for meaning in books. The quests in both stories can be taken as a metaphor for language’s search for meanings or referents. Further, narration in these short stories is in actuality more about the narrator than it is about what is narrated, that is, about the ideal realms “of Uqbar and Tlön and Orbis Tertius” (71) in the former narrative, or about the library in the latter. The encyclopaedic article on Uqbar in “Tlön” is about a country that exists in a book (or in the mind) rather than in the geographic world. At the opening of the story, the narrator discusses with his friend the compositional aspects of “a first-person novel” whose narrator is unreliable. This is because he presents a “horrifying or banal truth” (68) in a veiled manner. The foregoing turns out to be a self-conscious description of “Tlön” because the narrative, in taking the reader through a maze of ideas, hides the truth (until the postscript) about the power of simplistic, idealistic creeds to devastate the world. As discussed in Chapter 2 (64-5), the librarian (narrator) in “The Library of Babel” realises that meaning exists in the readers’ selves rather than in texts. All this shows that a connection exists between narrative meandering and self-reflexivity. These are
metaphors for the difficulty (or lack) of reference. Such a narrative is, then, about itself rather than about its referent. This connects with the psychological response of withdrawal from the external world that a person experiences while undergoing the loss of sight late in life, which is impelled by the problem of reference. The provisional character of knowledge also acts as a link in the self-reflexive narrative. This is the basic difference between mirror epistemology and aesthetic self-reflexivity. This also forms the aesthetic of blindness in that these are reflections on what constitutes a narrative.

Remarking on the “unclear distinction” that exists between the author and the protagonist in much of Borges’s writing, Hagberg observes that “[Borges] has repeatedly called attention to the autobiographical content of his writing” (135). It is worth considering in this respect the short story “The Maker.” Here Borges presents a dramatisation of the self as the poet who gradually becomes blind and discovers creativity. Significantly, this poet’s name is never mentioned, but only suggested as Homer. Here the narrator turns to what Currie terms “the key to understanding what theorists of narrative call point of view narration”: imitation, “in more or less the ordinary, current sense” (331), with special focus on “fleeting and internalised movements of the body and mind which mirror the responses of a person before us or in our thoughts” (332). The narrator draws experiences from Borges’s life, and through imitation, narrates the life of the poet as he grows blind. I offer here a couple of examples from “The Maker” where the narrator imitates “aspects of that character’s response to the world” (Currie 337). Describing the disposition of the character who lives in the ancient Mediterranean world, the narrator says that one of the impressions the man takes in is “the sky-vault filled with stars that were also gods” (292). Thus, the
celestial bodies that are to be seen in the sky are for him living gods. As he undergoes sight loss, “the night lost its peopling stars, the earth became uncertain under his feet” (292). These words reproduce the sensitive, widely-travelled man’s style of thinking. As Williamson elucidates, a crucial episode in the narrative is fashioned from Borges’s personal experience. The biographer writes that Borges describes a “transcendent episode when he first sensed the magic power of his father’s dagger and his subsequent failure to realize that power in his writing” (Williamson 343). As mentioned in Chapter 2 – see footnote 32 (39), Borges wrote the short story when he was in despair (Williamson 338). The poet’s despair in the story mirrors Borges’s state of mind. Further, when the former comes to realise his poetic power, the author’s “failure to realise that power in his writing” is reversed.

Sexuality, an important facet of corporeality, does not receive much attention in Borges’s work. We get only glimpses of sexual relationships in some of his short stories, and it forms the main theme of just two narratives: “Emma Zunz” (1948) and “Ulrikke” (1975), which are cited by E. D. Carter Jr. as the only short stories to contain rounded portrayals of women characters. Daniel Balderston writes about the suppression of homosexuality in Borges’s writings. This may well be the case, but what is clear in Borges is his almost total avoidance of treating any sexual relationship in a complete manner.

Coming to the question of narration in the short stories I have written about in Chapter 3, it may be dealt with by examining the issues of narrative mediation and narrative agency. This matter assumes significance when we deal with the articulation of the subjectivities of the disabled characters in the short stories. In “The End,” we find

an attempt by the impersonal narrator – this type of narrator is common in traditional narratives – to articulate the thoughts and feelings of the characters. Phrases and sentences like the following indicate his intent: “[T]he ordinary things that now would always be just these ordinary things,” “He looked down without pity at his great useless body” (168), and “[T]here was neither destination nor destiny on earth for him, and he had killed a man” (170). We must note the ambiguity in the foregoing quotes. The narrator may thus try very hard to express the inner being of another person, but this is not possible due to epistemological limitations and language barriers. The narrative desire to express and the impossibility of its fulfilment give rise to narrative tensions, which become apparent in ellipses, ambiguities, and gaps in the short story. In “The Maker,” the narrator tries very earnestly to understand the “soul” of the maker. Words and expressions like “impressions,” “vivid,” “sensitive,” “keen, curious,” “gazed,” “sensed,” “sought,” “understood,” indicate his intention. At the end of the narrative, however, he confesses, “These things we know, but not those that he felt as he descended into his last darkness” (293). This statement is an explicit recognition of the fact that it is not possible for an impersonal narrator to grasp fully the self of another. Thus it is that the narrator of “The End” compares Recabarren to animals, not comprehending the man’s attitude of acceptance towards his paralysis. Similarly the phrase, “the thick bars at his window” (168), seems to imply that the paralysed man is in a prison. However, as I have argued above, Recabarren knows his self, and has accepted life with disability.

In “Funes, His Memory,” we have a narrator-character who tells the story of Funes, a young man who is paralysed and who has a remarkable memory, in his own words half a century after his encounter with him. The narrator declares that his
“dialogue [with Funes] half a century ago” (134) is the only justification for the short story to exist. Despite the central importance of that dialogue to the narrative, he does not “attempt to reproduce the words of it, which” according to him, “are now forever irrecoverable” (134) presumably due to the lapse of such a long period of time, as a result of which he has forgotten them. As he states below, this narrative choice to employ “indirect discourse [which] is distant and weak” sacrifices “the effectiveness of my tale.” This decision of the narrator to “summarize, faithfully, the many things Ireneo told me” (134) is significant because, as a result of it, Funes cannot narrate his version of the story and his understanding of paralysis. We can sense this narrative tension in the following passage: “It was shortly afterward that he learned he was crippled; of that fact he hardly took notice. He reasoned (or felt) that immobility was a small price to pay. Now his perception and his memory were perfect” (135). The expression “he reasoned (or felt)” is interesting for a couple of reasons: first, the narrator is not sure of Funes’s state of mind regarding his paralysis; secondly, it points to his blinkered opinion that the man “was not very good at thinking” (137). The narrator’s failure to grasp Funes’s self may be seen in his assertion that “Funes either could not or would not understand me” (136).

In the short story “Hakim, the Masked Dyer of Merv,” the impersonal narrator cites a number of sources of information about Hakim, the Veiled Prophet of Khorasan (40), throughout the narrative. By employing this narrative strategy, he makes explicit the process of research, gathering of information, and writing. Some of the sources he cites are genuine, while others are imaginary. This shows that he blends fact and fiction, and thus fictionalises a person who once existed. The narrative also makes explicit the inherent mediation involved in the telling of the story of Hakim, the dyer of Merv,
because of the fact that we have access to innumerable sources about his life, but no access whatever to the person himself. He is thus reduced to a sign (42-4).

We can discern a shift in the paradigm of narration in “The Other” and “August 25, 1983.” Here the characters who are blind, “auctorial doubles” as mentioned above (104), themselves narrate their stories. Thus, in the former, the narrator-character is able to access the depths of his being, and talk about the state of his mind. Pertinent here is his reference to his sanity and his statement: “I know that it was almost horrific while it lasted—and it grew worse yet through the sleepless nights that followed” (411). Similarly in the latter, the narrator-character says, “I experienced, as I had at other times in the past, the resignation and relief we are made to feel by those places most familiar to us” (489). In the former, the narrator is blind, and the two selves part from each other (417). However, in the latter, the narrator is sighted, and the two selves merge into one (493). But the two short stories are, it must be noted, dream narratives referring to Jorge Luis Borges (412-489). Thus, when the older selves tell their younger selves in the respective short stories what it is like to be blind (417-491), we may understand their statements as the articulation of a desire to tell what life with a disability is, and as the fulfilment of the need to tell their stories on their own terms. This narrative freedom enjoyed by the narrator-character enables the reader to sympathise with him.

7.2. Reflecting on Experience: Narrative Form in Diary and Memoir

Drawing upon Fludernik’s narratological model based on the concept of experientiality, we may describe the entries constituting Hull’s diaries as “conversational storytelling.” Fludernik writes on the significance of this conception: “The narrativity which can be observed to emerge from spontaneous conversational
storytelling is a holistic or organic as well as dialectically constituted phenomenon” (11). Since Hull records his experiences and dreams as diaristic entries, these incorporate spontaneity and, therefore, may be understood to be “holistic or organic” in composition. Further, we have seen that he wishes to explain his life in the blind condition to his sighted friends so that it might become possible for them to understand him (On Sight xi). This aspect demonstrates that the diaries are “dialectically constituted” phenomena.

The relatively small temporal gap existing between the narrating self and the experiencing self in the two diaries is important because it is the former that analyses the experiences that the latter has had in the recent past. The narrating and reflecting self records the narrative-reflective sections sometimes on the same day, but mostly a day after, or a few days after, and rarely even months or a few years after the experiences. This leads to a uniquely short-term retrospective element being written into the entries. As mentioned in Chapter 6 (197), the narrating self in Kuusisto’s first memoir Planet of the Blind and in Part One of Eavesdropping, “Sweet Longings” (3-60), are two selves (separated more or less by eight years) of the older artist that describe and analyse experiences undergone by him as a child, and later as a young man who is a student and then teacher. The difference between Hull’s and Kuusisto’s works lies in the narrative aspect. While the former gives an ongoing commentary on the evolution in his selfhood, the latter looks back at his younger selves – some in his remote past (childhood and adolescence), and some in the recent past, as the memoirist who writes. This is to say that the gap between the writing (reflecting) self and the experiencing self (or selves) is wider in Kuusisto than it is in Hull.
Writing on biographical narratives “about psychological problems like addiction,” Gosselin says, “Telling a story is necessarily selective, as an author must decide which elements to include and which to exclude. Nevertheless, a causal explanation should suggest the complex interaction of multiple relevant factors rather than over-simplistically suggesting that one factor is more relevant than others” (140). The significant point here is that the memoir acquires a circumscribed focus due to the selective way in which the author must pick out “elements” or events and other details relevant to the focus of the story he is telling. However, the narrative “should suggest the complex interaction of multiple relevant factors” in presenting the designated themes of the story. Explaining how he came to write Eavesdropping, the collection of essays on the role of listening (or eavesdropping) in his life, Stephen Kuusisto clarifies that it was in response to a troubling question posed by a newly-blind person about blindness and travelling. However, the essays themselves do more than just providing answers to that question. They elaborate its implications, which the memoirist formulates as questions. In the connected narrative essays, Kuusisto describes his experiences from childhood onwards, dwelling on events involving his insubstantial sight of things and fleshing out the world through sounds, music, touch, and art (not least the art of writing). While he struggles with his disability over a long period of time due to his denial of blindness and societal rejection, he leads a life of solitude. This encourages the development of an artistically inclined mind in Kuusisto.

7.3. The Aesthetic Dialectic in Kuusisto’s Memoirs

In Chapter 6, I wrote briefly about a crucial difference in Kuusisto’s artistic approaches in the two memoirs. We will explore in greater detail the dialectical

3. I have discussed this point in Chapter 6 (198-99).
movement – mentioned in passing earlier (199) – in his life and art in the present chapter. Although the memoirist writes in the preface to Eavesdropping that in Planet of the Blind he describes how as a child he listens to teachers, and develops “an auditory version of what was happening around me,” and also learns “by necessity how to hear both for content and splendour” (xi), certain crucial auditory experiences are not mentioned in that memoir; or if they are, they do not receive much attention. Kuusisto writes:

I remember Helsinki’s open-air fish market, where I ran through the crowds of winter shoppers. The green and gold of vegetables and fruits, and the icy chill of the butchers’ stalls where the walls were blood-red—all of it drew me on and on. I could run in abandon bouncing off strangers, wild to elude my mother and absorb the colors. The market became my customs house between the ocean of blindness and the land of seeing. (Planet of the Blind 12)

Living in the “customs house” between the two worlds of blindness and sight, excluded from the one for his severely imperfect vision and not wanting to be in the other due to shame, the small boy is “inordinately active” (Planet of the Blind 11). He eludes his mother and runs “in abandon” because he thirsts to “absorb the colours.” At the time of writing Planet of the Blind, the memoirist remembers the inexpressible yearning to be a part of the sighted world that the boy feels. However, he recalls neither the experience of listening to the sad, dark singing of the old, carpet-beating women “on the shore of the frozen [Baltic] sea” (Eavesdropping 3) in Helsinki, nor “the polyphony of hungry

4. Curiously enough, Kuusisto (like Hull) also uses the ocean as a symbol of blindness, and the land as that of sight.
birds” (*Eavesdropping* 4) near the south harbour of the Finnish capital, nor even “the chance music of the city” (*Eavesdropping* 5), all of which he narrates in an essay entitled “Harbor Songs” (3-6) in *Eavesdropping*.

Further, in the former memoir, he writes about an experience he has around the age of five in the hospital: “After the surgery I have bandages on my eyes for several months, and that is when I learn to hear. I spend whole afternoons listening. I can hear the wooden gears of the railroad clock that hangs on the far wall” (*Planet of the Blind* 17). We find two interesting aspects in his remembrance. First, he states that “I learn to hear” when he is required to “have bandages on my eyes for several months,” but when we read the latter work, we learn that “By the age of four I’d found the intricacies of listening were inexhaustible” (*Eavesdropping* 6). Secondly, the sentence ending the above quote (*Planet of the Blind* 17) suggests that the boy “can hear the wooden gears of the railroad clock” when he is recovering from the operation (perhaps at his home). While this may well be true, he fails to mention his adventure with the grandfather clock (*Eavesdropping* 23) which he has in his grandmother’s old Victorian house. He narrates this adventure, which takes place before the operation, in the essay entitled “House Music” (*Eavesdropping* 18-26). In the second work, he writes about the connection between his eye surgery and hearing the clock as follows: “It seemed like one minute I was listening to the gears of a clock and then I was in a hospital bed” (*Eavesdropping* 27). These words suggest a subtle difference in the ways that the memory is recalled and narrated in both books. We may explain this shift in the mode
and content of remembrance concerning the same chain of experiences in two books which are separated by a few years\(^5\) by citing Hull:

> Many adults, when trying to remember their childhood, search for visual images of the sort that they would now be able to collect if they were in those places . . . The point is, however, that to the young child things did not look like that, and thus could not be stored in a form which the adult can recollect or can recognise as being similar to more recently stored images. Now and again, back and beyond the occasional visual inspiration, lies something deeper which can be called body memory. This is not so much memory of what things looked like, but recollection of how things felt. (\textit{Touching the Rock} 137-38; \textit{On Sight} 123)

Since this “body memory” can be described as “recollection of how things felt,” I suggest that Kuusisto, on embracing his blind self and growing to think and feel as a complete blind person, begins to recall memories of childhood occurrences in accordance with body memory.

In \textit{Planet of the Blind}, Kuusisto describes his loneliness as a small boy in this way: “I stay at the piano for hours . . . Later, alone in the woods, wet elbowed and wet kneed, I catch my trousers on a sunken rock, lean into the ground, press my chin into the moss” (15-6). This picture vividly shows that the boy is forced to spend much time in solitude. This is because neither his parents nor other children give him any company (\textit{Eavesdropping} 10, 15). Writing about his first memoir in the preface to \textit{Eavesdropping}, he summarises it by saying, “In that book I described growing up with a visual impairment in the late fifties and sixties” (ix). This quote points to the main

\(^5\) This gap of eight years or so may be inferred from the date “July 2005” (italics as in the source, \textit{Eavesdropping} xiv) inscribed at the close of the preface.
topic of the memoir, which is (as we have seen in the previous chapter), his life of struggle with the social and personal rejection of blindness as a child and youngster. While the narrative in this memoir gives a poignant sense of the boy’s solitude, *Eavesdropping* contains at least six essays in Part One which deal at length with his loneliness, and the power of listening that he develops in that condition. Again he writes in the preface, “I realise now that I had the good fortune to live my early years in provincial places.” This might seem to be an innocuous statement, but the fact proves to be of the greatest significance to Kuusisto. He explains, “My father was a professor at the University of New Hampshire, and we lived in the woods. We also lived in Helsinki, Finland, when that rare and beautiful city was largely an unknown destination for tourists. I heard reindeer bells and ancient folk songs long before I heard a transistor radio” (*Eavesdropping* xiii). While living in these isolating locales (*Eavesdropping* ix) increases the child’s loneliness, it simultaneously helps him to grow into “a hearing life” (*Eavesdropping* xi).

This change becomes clear when we recognise the important gap perceivable between the subjectivities presented in the two memoirs. In the first book, Kuusisto writes about his discovery as a college student of an interest in bird-watching (which is aroused after he listens to “a recorded bird-watching disk” [*Planet 72*]). Curiously, he does not say in this memoir that he used to listen avidly to various birds as a small boy of seven. He describes this in detail in the essay “Birds” in *Eavesdropping* (10-12):

> I knew the birds from a radio program. I’d wake early on Sundays and listen to a solemn old man guiding listeners through the calls of New Hampshire’s birds. The purple finch sounded more contented than any creature I knew of. He sounded like the world’s fastest wind chimes. The
old man and the purple finch gave me my first lesson in timbre.

“Sounds,” he said, “even bird sounds, have character. . . .” . . . Alone in the woods, I could spend a whole hour listening to a single bird. I had a bed of moss where I’d lie for the concert. . . . My early childhood occurred in the last moments of unmediated listening. (Eavesdropping 10-11)

This passage demonstrates that the boy is well-versed in listening as well as in tracking birds by means of their calls. It is the openness of this careful listening to ambient sounds in nature, and the absence of electronic technology in audition, that the essayist calls “unmediated listening.” Further, in a later essay he writes about how as a teenager he “could identify the call of a purple finch without confusing him with a thrush” (Eavesdropping 58). Despite his long association with birdsong, he writes in Planet of the Blind that he has been a stranger to birds till the discovery of the disk in the college library: “I’m completely jazzed: all my life I’ve been a stranger in this neighbourhood. I’ve never seen a bird. Now, hearing them has made a place in my imagination. . . . I’ve been missing out on something huge. But where are they?” (72). The silence about his childhood interest in birdsong in the context of a re-discovery of “bird-watching” is noteworthy. I suggest that in the interim between the publication of Planet of the Blind in 1998 and that of the essay on birds in Eavesdropping in 2006, Kuusisto recalls his jaunts in the New Hampshire woods in pursuit of the varied song of birds. It seems likely that, during these years, he explores his early childhood experiences from a new standpoint as a conscious blind writer.

As I have explained in detail in Chapter 6 and the present chapter, after embracing his blind self, Kuusisto sets out to become “an advanced ear man” and
fashion an aesthetic of audition. Moreover, it is clear that the latter topic forms the major theme of *Eavesdropping*. In a creative frame of mind that makes life ‘with blindness’ yield rich analogies, he composes some exquisite essays that resurrect important memories from his childhood. These may be read in part one of the collection, which is entitled “Sweet Longings” (*Eavesdropping* 3-60). The auditory memoiristic pieces recreate the world of the blind child as he listens and feels his way through a vivid world in solitude. What stands out in “Harbor Songs” is the total sense of being at home in the world of blindness and sounds that he shows as a boy of three or four years: “But what a thrill it was to be a sightless child in a city of sounds” (*Eavesdropping* 6) he states emphatically, narrating his family’s two-year sojourn in Helsinki. In the manner of the blind man in Borges’s “The Maker,” he draws up a tender memory from early in his life: “A little girl whose name I can no longer recall taught me to waltz. I’m sure that her parents must have told her I was blind. She must have been around eight years old. She swayed me back and forth in the light of the birches. The old man played slowly and I felt something of the Zenbody: wherever I was I was there” (*Eavesdropping* 6). While the passage shows the boy’s total presence in the activity of listening and waltzing, the essay “Ice” (*Eavesdropping* 13-4) describes how Kuusisto creates music by making use of unusual things available in his environment. He produces “instantaneous” music with ice (*Eavesdropping* 13-4) that forms “between the trees behind my house” (*Eavesdropping* 13), by plucking “a wire fence in the woods,” by shaking the ice-covered birch trees, and by “tapping” on “large metal drums” placed by his mother in the basement of their house. The memoirist reflects that when a child is lonely, “One simply pushes his or her homemade music and gets through the dark that way” (*Eavesdropping* 14). Again, it is this same loneliness in his grandmother’s
large house that leads to his discovery of the music of rain against windows (Eavesdropping 15), of flying creatures, and of Enrico Caruso’s singing voice in an old victrola (Eavesdropping 16). Thus, the author, on delving into his memory, realises that he as a blind boy did engage in creative play.

In the second essay of Eavesdropping, “Horse” (7-9), Kuusisto relates an adventure he has as a five-year-old boy in a lyrical style. He wanders through the woods, enchanted by “the beams of light or depths of shade that fell between trees,” and meets a horse in a barn full of the smells given forth by “hay and leather and turds” (Eavesdropping 7). The boy wants to touch the fascinating horse. Kuusisto writes, “And so I reached out and there was the great wet fruit of his nose, the velvet bone of his enormous face. And we stood there together for a little while, all alive and all alone.” When the boy touches the horse’s face, the latter accepts the contact. The togetherness of this moment stands in sharp contrast to the solitariness of the “very small boy” (Eavesdropping 8). At a deeper level, then, the child makes an aesthetic journey, discovering unexpected things of beauty. The memoirist composes the essay with these sensuous moments – the misleading visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory – as the basic material.

“The Voice of the Dark” (Eavesdropping 41-5) dwells on misery and death. In it, we read about the blind boy being bullied at school, and his way of “reclaim[ing] the world after these moments by entering a self-made audible environment.” The memoirist foregrounds the theme of death in the music that the boy listens to, namely Hector Berlioz’s “treatment of the death of Ophelia” and what he simultaneously listens to on a talking book, that is, an excerpt from The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain which describes “the drawings of a death-obsessed girl, Emmeline
Grangerford, who in fact dies early from a fever” (*Eavesdropping* 42). These represent the darkness in the boy’s mind, which is generated by his experience of being bullied as well as of solitude, both on account of his blindness. Kuusisto makes this link explicit a few pages later when he underscores the absence of either of his parents when he needs comforting: “I was alone in my suburban bedroom, chewing black licorice, listening to Twain and Berlioz. I could still smell Jerry’s sweat on my torn sleeve: it was an odour like apples and methane” (*Eavesdropping* 44). He finds it difficult to forget the bullying and broods since he is unable to find an outlet for his misery.

“The Sound of My Mother’s Body” (*Eavesdropping* 46-9) demonstrates what the recognition of one’s talent by another, especially that of a sensitive boy by an adult, can do for the confidence of the former. The essay narrates an important episode in the blind boy’s life. He is required to be the chief witness in a case filed by his mother against a supermarket where she suffered a severe injury to her elbow due to a faulty door slamming into her. It so happened that, as she entered the shop and the accident came to pass, “I was just a few steps ahead of her,” recalls the memoirist, “and I heard the sequenced sounds of the door and elbow and then her torso hitting the plate glass. I was fascinated by radio sound effects and knew that the noise of her body hitting the window sounded exactly like a dropped bag of apples. Then there was a gasp—her gasp, different from any cry I’d ever heard” (*Eavesdropping* 47). He proves his ability to stand as a witness in the court by talking to his mother’s lawyer about his skill in listening:

> And then I was in the cold, clear sky of facts, my favourite place. The lawyer was asking me about listening. I told him what I’d heard in the supermarket and what the store manager had said about the door being
broken again. Then the lawyer asked me if I was sure about what I'd heard. I told him how I treated every day like a requiem. “...You can think of a whole day as a kind of musical pattern...” . . . I said that with your eyes closed you could confuse one noise with another unless you really knew the character of a sound. . . . I was flat out happy, talking about the wilderness of noises and the hours in a day.

(Eavesdropping 48-9)

Both the previous quotes bring out the boy’s precise attention to detail in his awareness of the sequence of noises, including the words spoken by the store manager, as well as his unique artistic inclination in his treatment of every day as a musical composition that is made up of melodic patterns. His mother knows that her son is well-versed in the art of listening, and at the end of the blind boy’s words about his art practised all day, on a daily basis, the lawyer says, “‘You are the finest listener I’ve ever met. I have learned something here.’” When a stranger appreciates his remarkable skill in picking out auditory details, distinguishing among various sounds, and building a world from sounds heard in his environment, the boy feels good about his blind self for more or less the first time. “I was a designated listener” (Eavesdropping 49), writes the essayist. We should note here that this experience does not find a place in the narrative of Planet of the Blind. However, the memoirist finds enough material to compose an essay in Eavesdropping.

“Paradise Lost” (Eavesdropping 50-60) narrates how Kuusisto’s understanding of listening deepens when, as a fourteen-year-old adolescent, he discovers Milton’s great epic bearing the same title. He first listens to Paradise Lost when Mr Mercer, “[a] substitute music teacher” (Eavesdropping 51) who is a Miltonist, recites it in class
because he loves the poem. Kuusisto describes it as “the sound of iniquity” for its concentration on Satan’s story. Sitting alone in his room, he would listen to the audio book of the epic for hours together. Reflecting on that experience, the memoirist writes, “I’d discovered the gift of Milton: the soul’s path is in the ear—not in the mirror” (Eavesdropping 50). As a gift from Milton, he conceives the self as being an entity that is susceptible to understanding through “the ear,” that is, through listening and not through the sight of the self “in the mirror.” This also has important implications for intersubjectivity. When the boy realises that his parents’ relationship is breaking down because they do not understand how to listen to each other (Eavesdropping 57), his newly-gained wisdom from Milton sheds light on the true meaning of listening: “[T]he difference between speaking and being,” the boy understands, is “what listening is, true listening, the lonely but open mind” (Eavesdropping 50). We may understand from the context of the narrative that true listening involves pausing the unceasing expression of one’s own point of view, and keeping the mind open to receive the other’s ideas. Then the teenager declares his inheritance from Milton:

“There’s Braille on the label because this record is for blind people,” I said. “Can you imagine how solitary John Milton must have been in the days when there was no Braille and no blind person could read a book without help? He had to listen to voices. He had to figure out who was telling the truth without seeing their faces.” There was a long silence. I was in the midst of people whose ways were not my own. I was alone with the spirits of Milton and the vanished Mercer. (Eavesdropping 59)

These words to his classmates about blindness, isolation, and literature constitute an identification of the self as a blind person. Like Borges in his essay “Blindness” and the
poem “A Blind Man,” Kuusisto recognises literary kinship with the blind poet of 17th-century England. We may add here that Hull too derives self-constitutive strength from *Paradise Lost*. He memorises Milton, and recites the poem to himself as he waits for sighted people and while walking to work (*On Sight* 160).

We have seen that the texts under study belong to different genres of literature: short stories, diaries, and memoirs. Further, it is clear that these narratives require varying interpretative approaches which are sensitive to their differing aesthetics. I have interpreted the short fiction of Borges on the basis of “cognitive parameters gleaned from realworld experience” (Fludernik 26) of gradually becoming blind. I have also explained that the diary entries recorded by Hull express his being-in-the-world. This is because, in them, he narrates his recent experiences, and reflects on them in such a way that his immediate concerns relating to blindness come to the fore. In the long narrative memoir *Planet of the Blind* and in the essays forming *Eavesdropping*, Kuusisto selectively narrates memories and experiences with a view to emphasising certain themes. This narrative technique distinguishes the memoir from other forms of life writing. In interpreting the diaries and memoirs, I have adopted a phenomenological method that pays attention to sensory life and experientiality.

I will conclude the chapter with a brief note about the findings of the thesis. I set out to study the influence of blindness on the composition of literary narratives, and the artistic subjectivities of three blind authors – Borges, Hull, and Kuusisto. My method in the research project has been shaped by philosophical and narratological questions and concepts. We have managed to uncover interesting patterns in the evolution of the self in blindness. Borges’s ‘fictions’ show a strong awareness of blind experience, and a dialectical movement between the ideal and the experiential. This is emblematic of his
shifting attitudes towards his disability over a long period of time. Hull’s diaries record a transition in his self-conception from one oriented towards sight to that which is comfortable in the blind condition. Kuusisto makes a comparable but long journey from rejecting blindness to embracing his blind self, and beyond to developing a rich aesthetic of listening. In this way, the thesis demonstrates the importance of variable corporeality in writing. This also means, however, that the study is limited in scope. It is restricted to narrative prose works by three blind male authors. Embodied experience is defined not only by disability, but also by gender. This raises further questions for research in the area of feminist literary theory of disability as well as in criticism of poetry by Borges and Kuusisto.