

decisively in this fashion; this is especially true for his readings of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Emma*, *Oliver Twist* (1837–39), and *Dracula* (1897). At other times it makes him over-value endings as the key to a novel's priorities. There is a symptomatic over-use of words like "ultimately" and, to a lesser degree, "at the end" ("*David Copperfield ultimately succumbs to an Austenian narrative model*" is a typical sentence) that bespeaks a certain fetishization of novelistic endings in the pursuit of categorical neatness (89). These moments of interpretive tendentiousness can constrain the impact of a text that otherwise is defined by its considerable intelligence and panache.

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Blindness and Writing: From Wordsworth to Gissing, by Heather Tilley; pp. xiii + 272. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018, £75.00, \$99.99.

In the nineteenth century, blindness assumed new meanings as the number of people with visual impairments increased, and new technologies, especially those in book printing, arose to meet this need. Almost twenty years after Mary Klages's *Woeful Afflictions: Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America* (1999), which examined blindness in nineteenth-century American literature and culture, Heather Tilley's *Blindness and Writing: From Wordsworth to Gissing* examines both the material and metaphorical implications of blindness on the other side of the Atlantic. Her analysis is set against the backdrop of an increase in the number of blind people in the nineteenth century, only one in twelve of whom were born blind, through causes varying from industrial accident and poor working conditions, to smallpox, scarlet fever, and ophthalmia, an infectious disease that travelled to England from Egypt via the Napoleonic Wars. Tilley's careful analysis undermines common misconceptions about blindness as a disability, including the idea that blindness means a lifetime of complete darkness; instead, she demonstrates a continuum of visual impairment in the nineteenth century, from myopia to cataracts, and shows the ebb and flow of vision throughout individual lifetimes. In response to the increasing number of people with visual impairments, nineteenth-century inventors developed new technologies aimed at increasing literacy, from William Moon's embossed type to braille.

Tilley analyzes visual impairment in the nineteenth century through what she calls a phenomenological approach, which shifts our attention from an idealized, metaphorical understanding of blindness to one that is attentive to the material circumstances of disability. She proceeds to analyze blindness and writing in two parts, which are organized roughly chronologically. Part 1, "Blind People's Writing Practices," traces the intertwined narratives of visual impairment and writing, including chapters on William Wordsworth, the development of raised print systems, and memoirs by the blind. In her work on blind memoir, Tilley uncovers a networked community of visually impaired writers, including William Hanks Levy, John Bird, and Hippolyte van Landeghem, who used writing to make money and advocate for the blind community. In part 2, "Literary Blindness," Tilley

turns to several canonical examples. Her chapter on *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Aurora Leigh* (1856) challenges the critical chestnut that blinding is a form of symbolic castration, reading blindness in the context of biographical material from Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). She then moves to Charles Dickens, reading his encounter with Laura Bridgman, a young deaf and blind girl whom the novelist met on his 1842 tour of North America, as well as his depiction of Esther Summerson's brief and often overlooked loss of sight in *Bleak House* (1852–53). Her choice to focus in this chapter on *David Copperfield* (1849–50), whose protagonist she reads metaphorically as a “blind” writer, is puzzling, given that there is no dearth of characters with visual impairments in Dickens, and that her stated intention in the book is to recover the material circumstances of blindness in a critical tradition that often reads disability only metaphorically (13). By contrast, Tilley achieves such a materially grounded reading of blindness and writing in her fascinating recovery of Frances Browne, who lost her sight after contracting smallpox as an infant and was contemporarily known as “The Blind Poetess of Ulster.” Tilley offers a reading of Browne's little-known novel, *My Share of the World* (1861), alongside Wilkie Collins's *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), which is now a central text in Victorian disability studies. Interestingly, Browne's novel contains a tragic blind heroine, while Collins, the sighted novelist, offers a more positive representation of a blind heroine. The book concludes with a reading of George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891).

Throughout *Blindness and Writing*, Tilley is attentive to the relationship between blindness and literary form, arguing that new technologies, such as embossed print, which aimed to make literature accessible to those with visual impairments, shaped both the experience of blind people as well as larger ideas about language and communication in Victorian culture. Recent work in nineteenth-century disability studies has called for more attention to the lived experience of disability to provide, as Michael Bradshaw and Essaka Joshua put it in their introduction to *Disabling Romanticism: Body, Mind, and Text*, an “ethical and informed context for interpretation” (edited by Michael Bradshaw [Palgrave Macmillan, 2016], 10). Tilley's work demonstrates the potential of such an approach. She rereads *The Prelude* of 1850 against the backdrop of Wordsworth's lived experience of ophthalmia; after contracting the disease in 1805, Wordsworth experienced varying levels of visual impairment throughout his lifetime, relying at times on sighted amanuenses. Tilley's reading of the manuscript history of *The Prelude*—which shows the visually impaired poet moving between direct revision and dictation—sheds new light on the figure of the blind beggar in the poem. It is also fascinating to note that Charlotte Brontë's depiction of Rochester regaining some of his sight may have been influenced by her father's experience with successful cataract surgery.

At times, *Blindness and Writing* casts too broad a net in its engagement with criticism, reviewing the work of theorists from Jacques Lacan to Jacques Derrida. More focused engagement with criticism in Victorian disability studies, such as Martha Stoddard Holmes's work on the autobiographies of blind people in *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (2004), would have been welcome. Tilley is a nimble reader of visual as well as written culture, and her book contains several interesting readings of Victorian engravings and paintings of blind people; here, a fuller written description of these figures in the text would have been helpful to readers with visual impairments, who

are one likely audience for this book. Knowing this to be the case, Cambridge University Press is to be commended for issuing *Blindness and Writing* in braille.

Tilley's work demonstrates that visual impairment is not an interesting side note in Victorian studies, but rather an area of central concern. Blindness cuts to the core of questions about what it means to be literate in the nineteenth century. Was reading necessarily visual, or did reading embossed print through touch still count as reading? Blindness also spurred new innovations in the material history of the book, in a century that began with embossed print and ended with Thomas Edison's talking book. Blindness is central to Victorian ideas about language, communication, and writing, and it is to be hoped that Tilley's book will spur more work in this important field.

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Midway through *Veranilda* (1904), George Gissing's unfinished novel about Rome in the sixth century, we learn about the hero Basil's roots and how poorly his privileged position had prepared him for his beloved Veranilda's disappearance and for the war between the Roman emperor Justinian and the Gothic king Totila. Gissing explains how Basil's "dispirited idleness" is occasioned by want of a bath: "for all the Roman's exercises and amusements were associated with the practice of luxurious bathing, and without that refreshment the gymnasium, the tennis-court, the lounge, no longer charmed as before" ([The Harvester Press, 1987], 153). Once responsible for the cleanliness of the Romans and for promoting social interaction, the bath is now a relic, and vanishing with it is a way of life to which Basil had grown accustomed: "Now, to enter the Thermae was to hear one's footsteps resound in a marble wilderness; to have statues for companions and a sense of ruin for one's solace" (153). Places, as we see here, serve multiple rhetorical functions: the Thermae enables Basil (and Gissing) to reminisce about earlier and better times. Its abandonment leads to the changes in Basil's appearance and colors his current views.

Basil's lament for, and internalization of, such losses—he "thought more than the average Roman about these changes" (153)—likens him to the cast of sensitive and conscientious figures that people Gissing's fiction, characters who, like Edwin Reardon and Henry Ryecroft, have felt the weight of the world on their shoulders. This episode would have been at home in Rebecca Hutcheon's rich and insightful study, *Writing Place: Mimesis, Subjectivity and Imagination in the Works of George Gissing*, which attends to some of the ways in which Gissing resists clear spatial demarcations and which illuminates some of the nuances in his writing. "In Gissing," Hutcheon argues, "sites are subject to shifts and fluxes that challenge the reader's preset expectations" (2). Gissing ruminated on these

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