

Heather Tilley, *Blindness and Writing: From Wordsworth to Gissing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 219. £75. ISBN 9781107194212.

Blindness and Writing: From Wordsworth to Gissing opens with a discussion of John Thomas Smith's etching of a blind man, published in 1817. The cross-hatching of the image makes the placard the man wears illegible to the viewer, breaking down the distinction between blind subject and sighted viewer. It is in this liminal space, where the separation between blindness and sight breaks down, that Tilley situates her book, building on recent studies on the material conditions of blindness to examine the way in which blindness assumed new meanings through its relationship to literacy in the nineteenth century.

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which examines the central role played by the figure of the blind person in Enlightenment philosophy; offers a reappraisal of William Wordsworth as a 'blind' poet (he contracted chronic trachoma, in 1805, leaving him sensitive to light), arguing for the blind Beggar of Book VII of *The Prelude* (1850) as a reflection of the speaker's own poetic self; investigates the technological development of embossed writing systems, including braille; and recovers a 'category of life stories' (12) produced by blind people, including Edmund White, a railway guard who wrote poetry to supplement his income after witnessing a traumatic accident (108).

Chapter 5, which begins the second part of the book, investigates the relationship between writers' experience of blindness and renderings of blindness in the *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman*. The chapter reassesses two of the most famous blind characters in Victorian literature, Edward Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Romney Leigh in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), revealing how Brontë and Barrett Browning's personal understanding of cataract and trachoma feed into their representations of blindness, signalling a pervasive concern, in Brontë's case, with the way in which books have a material existence, contingent upon an embodied reader and writer (138).

Chapter 6 traces the shift from metaphoric to material registers of blindness in Charles Dickens's work, exploring the author's encounter with the blind, deaf and mute Laura Bridgman as recounted in *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842); the description of David Copperfield as blind in the 1849-50 novel of the same name; and Esther Summerson's near-blinding in *Bleak House* (1851-2). Reading Esther as a figuration of Dickens's authorial self, Tilley maintains that her temporary blindness followed by sight restoration is a revealing portrait of the author as blind (173), arguing that such an act of authorial blindness makes explicit Dickens's anxiety that writing as a material form is an arbitrary system whose meaning is circumscribed by the limits of the bodies that produce and consume it (173).

Chapter 7 examines gendered constructions of blindness in Frances Browne's fictional autobiography, *My Share of the World* (1861) and Wilkie Collins's *Poor Miss Finch* (1872). Browne lost her sight as a child, and the protagonist's loss of vision metaphorically associates blindness with the end of writing. Collins's *Poor Miss Finch*, by contrast, returns its heroine to blindness, rewriting the paradigm connecting writing and blindness in a way unavailable to a blind female author like Browne (183).

The final, rather short, chapter examines George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), which codes blindness as tragedy. An epilogue to the chapter uses Gissing's novel to reassert the central claims of the book, suggesting that Gissing closes down the possibilities for blindness as a condition for knowing and writing the world (217).

Given Tilley's claim that *Blindness and Writing* seeks to address the exclusion of blind people's writing and experience from literate culture it seems odd that the blind writers on which she focuses are excluded from the book's title, reinforcing both canonical and popular writing and the primacy of visual-based culture, a bias reflected in the structure of the

book itself: the second section is devoted entirely to canonical and popular writing. Only one chapter in the first half of the book focuses on the autobiographical writings of blind authors such as Edmund White, whilst Wordsworth warrants a chapter of his own, albeit oddly placed in the first section. *Blindness and Writing* deliberately undermines, in this way, the findings of its Epilogue, itself acting as a negation of the phenomenology of blind literary culture it has sought to foreground. Moreover, Tilley's phenomenological readings often remain metaphorical, confirming her acknowledgement early in the book that there can be no clear distinction between the two. Still, *Blindness and Writing* is an energised and persuasive call for nineteenth-century disability to be grounded in its material and embodied context, as well as a timely challenge to current cultural assumptions about bodies and ability.

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