BOOK REVIEW

Blindness and Writing: From Wordsworth to Gissing, by Heather Tilley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). 294 pp. Hardback, £75.00. Paperback, £22.99.

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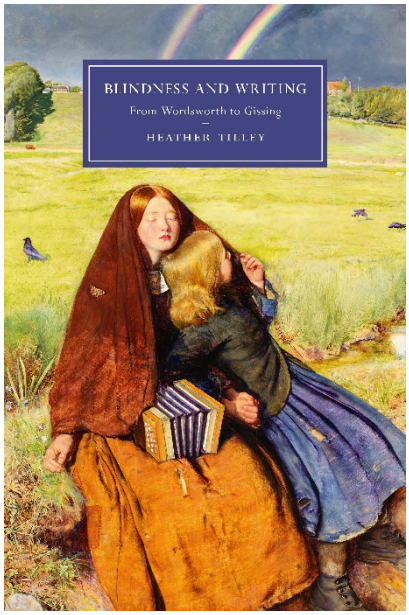

In her 1999 book, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism*, Nancy Armstrong made the, now well-known, argument that the Victorians equated seeing with knowing. Armstrong's work helped to shape what has become the critical consensus in the field of Victorian visual studies over the last twenty years: that the Victorians conceptualised knowledge and knowledge-production through the framework of vision, and that this in turn shaped literary production. Perhaps this consensus reflects our own modern biases. In common parlance, 'to see' is to experience, to know, to understand. If seeing and knowing were intertwined for the Victorians, they remain intertwined for Victorian literary critics. Heather Tilley's illuminating new book, *Blindness and Writing: From Wordsworth to Gissing,* seeks to destabilise the critical paradigm that associates seeing with knowing by demonstrating how blind and visually-impaired people's writing and reading practices informed nineteenth-century literary production. Through a disability studies framework that recuperates the material and corporeal experience of blindness and visual impairment in nineteenth-century Britain, Tilley demonstrates how blindness 'challenge[d] the emphasis on vision's superiority, in turn opening out a wider sensory environment for literary culture, both imaginatively and materially' (p. 5). Tilley offers fresh readings of the theme and trope of blindness in canonical literary works by sighted authors, from Charlotte Brontë to Charles Dickens to Wilkie Collins, by situating them in a broader archive of materials related to blindness, from ophthalmological texts to nineteenth-century raised print systems to autobiographical writings by blind and visually-impaired authors.

Tilley's archival historicism is in service of a cultural phenomenological approach, which she calls 're-reading blindness phenomenologically' (p. 11). Her analysis of literary representations of blindness is grounded in her account of

blindness and visual impairment as material, embodied, and historical lived experiences. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's model of haptic visuality, Tilley argues that a phenomenological disability studies framework avoids the relegation of blindness to the realm of metaphor and offers greater historical and material specificity. It is an ethical stance, 'invit[ing] investigation into visual impairment that does not turn upon the blind person's otherness' (p. 33), and it underwrites Tilley's political project to recuperate the minoritised lived experience of nineteenth-century blind people. In this regard, Tilley's work not only enriches critical accounts of blindness and visual impairment as theme and trope in nineteenth-century literature, but also supplies a necessary pre-history for disability scholars who work on constructions of blindness in more contemporary contexts.

Blindness and Writing is divided into two parts. Part One, 'Blind People's Reading Practices', addresses the relationship between reading, writing, and visual impairment across a variety of nineteenth-century texts and media, primarily those created by and for blind and visually-impaired readers. Chapter One traces modern philosophical debates about the relationship between seeing and knowing that centre on the figure of a hypothetical blind man. It considers the philosophical legacy of what was known as 'Molyneux's problem', named after the scientist and philosopher William Molyneux and his influential discussion of whether a blind man restored to sight could visually recognise the differences between objects he previously had known only through touch. The subsequent chapters explore how blindness intersects with the material culture of writing. Chapter Two provides a fascinating discussion of the 'tension between idealized and embodied states of blindness' (p. 40) in the poetry of William Wordsworth. Wordsworth suffered from ophthalmia (now called chronic trachoma), a condition that caused episodic visual impairment and disrupted his writing practice, forcing him to rely on (often female) amanuenses in order to write. While blindness served as a Romantic trope for the poetic ideals of imagination and creativity, Wordsworth's poetry nonetheless registers his anxiety about blindness as 'a physical state that disrupts the ability to produce and consume texts' (p. 43). Of all the literary case studies included in *Blindness and Writing,* Tilley's discussion of Wordsworth most persuasively demonstrates how nineteenth-century reading and writing were practiced not only through sight, but also through networks of sound and touch. Chapter Three explores the development of raised print systems for blind readers, foregrounding the debates between blind and sighted people over what and how blind people should read. In Chapter Four, Tilley reads the genre of blind biographical writing by blind authors to explore the voices and perspectives of blind people in the nineteenth century. She discovers a network of blind authors who were determined to articulate the experience of blindness on their own terms.

Part Two, 'Literary Blindness', turns from the material conditions of blind reading and writing practices to the theme and metaphor of blindness in canonical literary works. Her readings, all of which are deeply engaging, demonstrate how Victorian writers frequently identified with figures of blindness as part of their

exploration of the materiality of writing. Moreover, for many of these writers, blindness represented positive forms of sensory experience and literary expression. In these instances, blindness was not an abstracted poetic trope, but rather an embodied state of feeling and knowing. Chapter Five considers the relationship between reading, writing, and gender in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857). Tilley's readings of *Jane Eyre* and *Aurora Leigh* turn on her analysis of their authors' personal relationships to blindness and visual impairment. Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre* against the backdrop of caring for her father through his visual impairment and cataract surgery (which she witnessed and described in letters), while *Aurora Leigh* was informed by Barrett Browning's friendship with the blind poet and scholar, Hugh Stuart Boyd. In Chapter Six, Tilley argues that Charles Dickens turned to blindness as a way of exploring writing as a sign system and material practice. The protagonist's metaphorical blindness in *David Copperfield* (1850) foregrounds the writer's mandate to represent what cannot be seen, while Esther Summerson's temporary blindness in *Bleak House* (1853) highlights the uncanny nature of writing as an arbitrary system of visual signs.

The final two chapters of the book concern how fiction both expressed and helped to formulate oculacentric perspectives that viewed sight as a precondition for knowledge, authority, and literary production. Chapter Seven compares *My Share of the World* (1861), a novel by the successful blind writer, Frances Browne, about the suicide of a blind heroine, with *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), the sighted author Wilkie Collins's novel about a blind woman who chooses not to restore her vision. While Collins tries to faithfully represent the embodied experience of his protagonist's blindness, Browne perpetuates stereotypes of blind people's incapacity against the personal testimony of her own experience. In Chapter Eight, Tilley uses George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891) to show how 'writing is tied to the working body of the writer, and in particular to his or her sensory capacity' (p. 208). The novel portrays the blinding of the writer and publisher, Alfred Yule, as a tragic disability under a capitalist labour system. If Collins sought to animate the period's discourses about blind agency, reading, and writing practices in his construction of a blind heroine, Gissing's novel represents what would become the erasure of such discourses from the historical record. Like Browne, Gissing counters the evidence of nineteenth-century blind authorship when he constructs Yule's blindness as incompatible with the material practice of writing or with the capacity for imaginative experience.

Tilley's discussions of *My Share of the World* and *New Grub Street* are exceptions in a book that presents how Victorian writers viewed blindness as productive for writing. Tilley's remarkable close readings leaves you with the sense that nineteenth-century writers conceived of vision not in terms of a strict sighted/blind binary, but as a phenomenological spectrum that encompasses a range of sensory experiences. One of the strengths of *Blindness and Writing* is the way it turns to a form of biographical criticism to generate evidence for sighted Victorian writers' intimate experiences of visual impairment and

blindness. Blindness was neither remote nor abstract; it shaped the Victorian writer's experience of family and community, as well as the public discourse on writing and reading, in which they were active participants. In recuperating the lived experience of blindness in nineteenth-century culture, Tilley positions herself against the work of visual studies scholars such as Jonathan Crary, who she argues is responsible for 'reifying the primacy of the visual in Victorian fiction and poetry' through his analysis of nineteenth-century spectatorship. However, Tilley's work meaningfully complements as well as complicates Crary's formulations. In *Techniques of the Observer* (1992), Crary argued that nineteenth-century optical toys, like the phenakistoscope and stereoscope, exemplified the new approach to vision as an embodied and subjective state. He recognised that, for the Victorians, seeing was *not* knowing; seeing was increasingly constructed as vulnerable not only to delusion and deception, but also to external manipulation and control. *Writing and Blindness* joins more recent works in Victorian visual studies, by scholars such as Srdjan Smajic and Anna Henchman, that consider how the Victorian construction of vision as physiological, embodied, and fragile informed the literary imagination.[1] What makes Tilley's book exemplary among others in this field is its commitment to reconstructing historical sensory and embodied experience, coupled with its deft integration of literary inquiry with cultural phenomenology. Through its interdisciplinary method and challenge to an oculacentric historical record, *Writing and Blindness* persuasively advances and enlarges the scholarly conversation about visual experience in Victorian culture.

Bibliography

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Smajic, Srdjan, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[1] See Srdjan Smajic, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Anna Henchman, *The Starry Sky Within: Astronomy and the Reach of the Mind in Victorian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).