

## Between the Sheets: Contagion, Touch, and Text

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In 1837, early in the British history of blind literacy, James Gall, Britain's first printer of raised-print books, observed:

If there are advantages possessed by those who see over the Blind in reading, it must be confessed at the same time, that the Blind possess other advantages, which those who read with their eyes cannot have. They need no candle. They can read by night as well as by day. Even in bed, when sickness would prevent him from sitting up, the Blind person can take his Bible to bed with him, and read with his book beneath the bed-clothes.<sup>1</sup>

As awareness of the advent of a raised-print book culture grew, interest in the bedtime reading of blind people kept pace. An 1882 essay praised the reading of books by touch in terms not dissimilar to Gall's:

What a blessing a new book must be, which they can take with them into their quiet room, and even into bed with them, to while away the hours of the night [...]! They need to pay no gas-bills, and even the electric light is of no concern to them. This is one of the compensations of their condition.<sup>2</sup>

At a point in the century when the reading of books by touch had lost its novelty, enthusiasm for the ease with which blind people could read in bed endured. Given the enormous practical and philosophical effects of blind people's literacy, saving on a gas bill might well be perceived as a minor if not inconsequential benefit of a revolutionary development. After all, the publication of raised-print books and the proliferation of skills used to read them changed the experience of visual disability, improving

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<sup>1</sup> James Gall, *An Account of the Recent Discoveries Which Have Been Made for Facilitating the Education of the Blind* (Edinburgh: Gall, 1837), p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> Bishop Clark, 'Books for the Blind', in *Wayside Gleanings for Leisure Moments* (Cambridge: Wilson, 1882), pp. 130–32 (p. 131).

the cultural, social, and educational lives of many of Britain's blind people, a population estimated at different points in the century at about thirty thousand.<sup>3</sup> The new literacy of blind people played a key role both in public discussions of blind people's welfare and in the founding of special schools where, as Jan Eric Olsén shows in his piece within this forum, the pedagogical potential of the touching of objects was an enduring concern.<sup>4</sup> Changing both the realities and perception of blindness and blind people, finger reading also prompted questions about the functioning and relative value of the senses. It was, for example, a catalyst for a reconsideration of the lowly status of touch in a hierarchically conceived human sensorium.<sup>5</sup> While finger reading forcefully demonstrated the sophistication and information-gathering utility of touch, the adaptation of print materials for blind people's use invited a rethinking of book design and of the relationship between the book and the reader's body. In what follows, I examine accounts of finger reading in bed and I connect seemingly unwarranted interest in blind people's bedtime reading with the physiology of finger reading, a practice that prompted practitioners and observers alike to think carefully about both the benefits and the risks associated with a newly primary role for touch in reading.

Blind people's nocturnal reading opportunities mattered to contemporary commentators in part because many of those commentators understood the primary benefit of reading in bed as something other than physical comfort. For John Alston, director of the Glasgow Asylum for the Blind and the printer of Britain's first complete raised-print Bible, the ability to read in bed gave blind people a spiritual advantage over the sighted. In an 1842 report, Alston described literate blind people as 'having these advantages over the seeing, that, in the darkest hour of the night, they can finger over the pages of their Bibles, and hold communion with their God'.<sup>6</sup> He encouraged reading of this kind at the Glasgow Asylum, where, he was pleased to announce, the students 'each have their

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<sup>3</sup> Census records dating from both 1851 and 1881 number the blind people living in the United Kingdom at close to thirty thousand. The same estimate appears regularly in publications on blind education and welfare from mid-century on.

<sup>4</sup> See Jan Eric Olsén, 'Models for the Blind', in this issue of *19*.

<sup>5</sup> See Vanessa Warne, "'So that the sense of touch may supply the want of sight": Blind Reading in Nineteenth-Century Britain', in *Media, Technology, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century: Image, Sound, Touch*, ed. by Colette Colligan and Margaret Linley (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 43–64.

<sup>6</sup> John Alston, *Statements of the Education, Employments, and Internal Arrangements, Adopted at the Asylum for the Blind, Glasgow* (Glasgow: Smith, 1842), p. 9.

own book' which they read 'in the evenings, instead of being congregated together, and instructed orally by their teacher, as was the practice before the introduction of this system of printing' (p. 21). Eager to see the Bible-reading practices of blind people made private and independent, Alston rejects the social experience of listening in favour of reading by touch. The idea of blind reading having spiritual advantages in addition to practical ones was reiterated by numerous commentators on blind education, prominent among them a contributor to *Golden Hours: A Magazine for Sunday Reading* who went so far as to suggest that sighted people ought to learn to finger read:

My advice to everyone is, to learn to read in embossed characters whether blind or not; keep the Book by the bedside, and read during sleepless hours; there is no fear of taking cold, for the letters can be felt under the bedclothes. This occupation of mind may shorten many weary hours of sickness at a future day, besides preparing you to do good to others.<sup>7</sup>

In pursuit of spiritual edification and in preparation for an uncertain future, the sighted reader is encouraged to increase his or her opportunity for religious study by adopting, by choice rather than necessity, the touch-based reading practices of blind people. Pairing religious commitment with an appetite for the comfort of convenient night-time reading, the passage assigns reading by touch a spiritual utility that extends beyond and exists apart from visual impairment.

While spiritual edification is an important theme in nineteenth-century accounts, the pleasure readers found in raised-print books gets at least as much press. An 1889 issue of *Chambers's Journal* features a sighted reporter's account of a conversation with a blind street-merchant:

It would be difficult to conceive, one would think, of an advantage a blind person has over one gifted with sight; but my humble friend claimed such a one, laughingly telling me he could read in bed in the dark; and even on very cold nights could place his book under the bedclothes, and in luxurious comfort pursue his nocturnal studies to his heart's content.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 'Teaching the Blind to Read', *Golden Hours*, March 1886, p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> 'A Blind Street-Merchant', *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Art*, 23 February 1889, pp. 123–24 (p. 124).

In 1876 *All the Year Round* shared with its readers a particularly compelling iteration of the oft-repeated claim that ‘the one great advantage that blind people have over others is, that they can read comfortably in bed’:

‘You,’ says a studious damsel, ‘are uncomfortable when you read in bed — you know you are. You are obliged to hold the book up till you are tired, and then have to twist yourself about to get the light, and catch cold in your shoulders. If it is night-time you must be very naughty to light a candle, which is sure to gutter down and set the house on fire. Now when I take a book to bed, I bury myself under the clothes, book and all, and read away as fast — as fast — till I go fast asleep.’<sup>9</sup>

While the student’s characterization of sighted people’s reading in bed as uncomfortable, if not dangerous, argues for the supremacy of blind over sighted reading practices, her language and syntax hint at a perceived risk of readerly pleasure unrelated to house fires. As Thomas Lacquer has argued, the relationship between reading and masturbation has a cultural history, one in which nineteenth-century publication and reading practices contributed to the pathologization of what Lacquer terms ‘solitary sex’.<sup>10</sup> Relying as it does on touch instead of sight and involving unusually intimate contact between body and book, finger reading is an overdetermined site for the construction of reading as masturbatory. With its characterization of night-time readers as naughty, with its suggestive description of quickly moving hands, and with its discussion, not to mention syntactical evocation, of repetitive action that ends in sleep, this particular description of finger reading foregrounds the auto-erotic quality of reading by touch and, in doing so, lends the pleasures of blind readers a moral complexity absent from contemporaneous accounts of bedtime Bible reading.

Reporting the statement of a female student, the passage also invites consideration of the gender politics of finger reading. As critics such as Martha Stoddard Holmes and Elizabeth Gitter have demonstrated, nineteenth-century engagements with the sexuality of visually disabled women were both commonplace and complex.<sup>11</sup> In the case of the promi-

<sup>9</sup> ‘Blind Guy Fawkes’, *All The Year Round*, 25 November 1876, pp. 256–57.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas W. Lacqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Martha Stoddard Holmes, *Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Elisabeth G. Gitter, ‘The

ment literary examples of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's Nydia, Charles Dickens's Bertha Plummer, and Wilkie Collins's Lucilla Finch, all three blind women are characterized by romantic, if not explicitly erotic, longing. Significantly, however, of the three, only Collins's highly unconventional Lucilla is able to extend the pleasure she regularly experiences in her sense of touch to a consummated sexual relationship. It is perhaps no coincidence that Lucilla is also the only one of the three to be depicted as a reader of raised-print text. As Lillian Nayder shows in her article within this forum, Dickens, despite his very thorough acquaintance with raised-print reading and printing, makes no mention of blind literacy in *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1846).<sup>12</sup> Bulwer-Lytton, while he allows Nydia to anachronistically author a letter on a wax tablet, does not grant her a similarly anachronistic opportunity to read text by touch. Suggesting a connection between women's raised-print reading and the representation of an active versus unfulfilled female sexuality, both the blind student's suggestive statement and this sampling of the literary record identify women's reading of raised-print texts with sexuality in ways that do not appear to have a parallel in depictions of blind men.

Perhaps it was a desire to forestall the association of finger reading with sexual touching, and with auto-erotic touching in particular, that prompted some commentators to associate the beds of blind people with sickness instead of pleasure. In 1873 William Moon, a visually disabled printer and inventor of a raised-print script system bearing his name, published *Light for the Blind*, a book promoting the spread of blind literacy. In it, Moon draws on the records of Home Teaching Societies, sharing the following report from a teacher about a student:

An aged woman, whom I taught [...] 5 years ago, to read, has since become paralyzed, and confined to her bed. She says she is thankful to the Society which taught her to read with her fingers, as she can now lie on her bed and read the Word of God for herself.<sup>13</sup>

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Blind Daughter in Charles Dickens's *Cricket on the Hearth*, *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 39 (1999), 675-89.

<sup>12</sup> See Lillian Nayder, 'Blindness, Prick Writing, and Canonical Waste Paper: Reimagining Dickens in *Harriet and Letitia*', in this issue of 19.

<sup>13</sup> William Moon, *Light for the Blind: A History of the Origin and Success of Moon's System of Reading* (London: Longmans, 1873), p. 126.

Another report describes a workhouse inmate who is comforted by books read in his sickbed:

Being now in a deep consumption, he blesses God for the comfortable corner assigned to him, where he can read his books in peace [...]. He told me he could not sleep half-an-hour at a time through the night; so he gets his book, and it gives him something good to think about. (p. 129)

Of another, a woman who died ‘from cholera, after two day’s illness’, a Society teacher notes that she had, ‘when ill, and not able to sleep, [...] spent most of the night in reading’ (p. 129). Moon also shares his first-hand experience with a woman who read raised-print books on her deathbed. He writes:

We visited a poor blind woman at the point of death, who had been dismissed from the Hospital as incurable [...]. We found her lying on a bed of rags upon the floor; two of our embossed books were by her side, which she had been reading. (p. 25)

*Light for the Blind* is intended as a celebration of finger reading but the scene Moon describes — of an incurable reader, on a deathbed of rags, finger reading borrowed books — is an unsettling one. One might be excused for wondering what happened to these books when their unfortunate reader died.

The circulation of raised-print books between readers, some of whom might be seriously ill, was a practice that troubled Émile Javal, a Parisian ophthalmologist who had lost his sight to glaucoma. In a chapter on ‘Hygiene and Health’, in the 1904 English translation of his book *Entre Aveugles* (1903), Javal warned about the threat that finger reading borrowed books posed to readers’ health. Believing that ‘a Braille book is more liable than an ordinary book to carry contagion’ and conscious that raised-print material can ‘be read in bed, even under the bedclothes, by one who is suffering a contagious disease’, Javal questioned the cleanliness of reading material ‘that is constantly handled in reading, and is afterwards read in the same way by others who are healthy’. He urged both individual readers and institutions to take note of what he termed ‘a danger, a real danger’ to the health of blind people.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Émile Javal, *The Blind Man’s World: An English Version of ‘Entre Aveugles’*, trans. by W. Ernest Thomson (London: Pulman, 1904), p. 29.

Of course, concerns about the hygiene of books were not unique to blind readers. As Pamela Gilbert observes, fears that circulating library books for the sighted could carry contagious disease led to the installation in the 1880s of elaborate regimes of book disinfection that involved carbolic acid, steam, book stoves, and the careful tracking of the health of borrowers.<sup>15</sup> Fears of infectious library books led to the temporary closure of some public libraries, to the installation of hand-washing stations at the entrance of library reading rooms, and even, in some cases, to the burning of books. These practices were eventually abandoned, a development Andrew McClary attributes to declines in infectious disease rates and to changing views on the role of paper in the transmission of germs.<sup>16</sup>

Blind readers appear to have shared in what has been termed the ‘great book scare’; like sighted readers, their fear of contaminated books demonstrates heightened concern about contagion in a new era of germ theory and about the implications of the advent of free public libraries for the social status quo. But Javal’s warnings also mean something particular in the context of the history of visual disability. Expressions of concern about a dangerously intimate interaction between blind people and their books marks a turning point in raised-print culture, the arrival of an era in which the primary concern of a writer on blindness is neither the illiteracy of many blind people nor the lack of raised-print material for blind people to read, both of which were issues at the century’s end, but is instead the unhygienic habits of individual readers within a community of blind people whose literacy and access to books are taken as a given.

Finger reading, an activity that brings visually disabled readers into contact with cultural wealth, also brought blind readers into close, albeit mediated, contact with one another. Cognizant that books were moving not only between ill individuals but between the sheets of their sickbeds, that their pages were subject to prolonged touching, and that their bindings rested on the undressed and ailing bodies of readers, Javal speaks for a community of readers who share not just a set of texts and a reading technique but also an unusual level of physical intimacy with their books and, through the circulation of books, with each other. As the combination of community and otherness in Javal’s title, *Entre Aveugles* (Among blind people), suggests, the seemingly hyper-solitary experience of blind literacy celebrated by descriptions of reading in bed was understood by

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<sup>15</sup> Pamela Gilbert, *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women’s Popular Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 56–57.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew McClary, ‘Beware the Deadly Books: A Forgotten Episode in Library History’, *Journal of Library History*, 20 (1985), 427–33.

some observers as troublingly social. The intensely private act of reading between the sheets was construed as threatening, if not to the sexual rectitude of an individual reader, then to the well-being of a wider community unable to trust in each other's knowledge of, or adherence to, new standards of hygiene. In contrast to the pedagogues Jan-Eric Olsén discusses in this forum who feared damage to the tactile nerve from the strain of reading a poorly made raised-print book, for Javal the central issue is not design but the dubious cleanliness of circulating books.

Of course, contagious disease and intimate touching had played a role in the vision loss of large numbers of people. Victorians were well aware that diseases such as smallpox and measles could cause blindness and they were increasingly conscious of the threat to vision posed by the transfer of venereal disease to the eye.<sup>17</sup> Javal, in his medical practice, would have had opportunities to closely observe the disabling effects of contagious illness. Given this context, it is understandable that the pages of a Braille book, not unlike the seats of a public toilet, are imagined as a site for the transmission of disease. It is in this sense that, for blind people, the pleasurable nocturnal reading habits of individuals become a matter not of individual morality but of community health, the primary problem posed by the mix of books, beds, and bodily fluids not being that of illicit pleasure but of contagion. Whereas, as Olsén argues, the nineteenth-century scientific study of touch allowed for a kind of ordering or control of accounts and experiences of touch, and, as Nayder explains, nineteenth-century blind people organized in order to exert control over the selection and installation of a dominant script system, in the case of at least some readers of circulating raised-print books, the primary form of control they sought was aimed at contagion and at the unhygienic habits they associated with this threat.

Linked implicitly with auto-eroticism and explicitly, if not factually, with the spread of contagious disease, the touch-based physiology of finger reading generated a mixed response. While the development of a raised-print book culture configured touch as a kind of cure for the disabling effects of blindness, the celebration of touch in the context of the advent of finger reading was complicated by competing notions of touch as a threat to the vulnerable body of the blind reader. The attribution of blindness to excessive reading was, of course, a commonplace in nineteenth-century Britain. Blind activist and author William Hanks Levy,

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<sup>17</sup> See Mary Wilson Carpenter, *Health, Medicine and Society in Victorian England* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), pp. 128–49.



whose evocative image of the sensory system as a battery is taken up by Olsén, found an equivalent in painful experiences of finger reading, noting that some readers complain that a ‘stinging sensation occurs in the point of the finger, which gradually extends itself up the hand until it reaches the wrist’.<sup>18</sup> Referencing the script system developed by Samuel Gridley Howe that Nayder discusses in this forum, Levy went on to observe that

it is also stated, by a person who was in a school in the United States for some time, that children have been known to read Howe’s type until their fingers bled. This the writer would be disposed to doubt, if he had not himself read the same type until an abrasion of the skin of his finger had taken place. (pp. 124–25)

A provocative image of the breaking down of boundaries between book and body and of reading’s injurious and addictive pleasures, Levy’s anecdote is a useful reminder of how blind literacy, while fostering optimism regarding the capacity of touch to stand in for sight, simultaneously drew attention to the vulnerability of a body that touches, and is touched by, text.

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<sup>18</sup> W. Hanks Levy, *Blindness and the Blind; or, A Treatise on the Science of Typhology* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872), p. 124.