

## Blindness, Prick Writing, and Canonical Waste Paper: Reimagining Dickens in *Harriet and Letitia*

Lillian Nayder

When Dr Samuel Gridley Howe wrote to Charles Dickens in 1868, after the novelist's second American tour, he described to Dickens the deprivations of the blind by noting their loss of *taste* rather than their loss of vision. 'They have had lugubrious food enough', Howe said of the pupils at the Perkins Institution in Boston, which he directed. The problem wasn't that the blind were starving, to use Howe's metaphor, but that their diet was melancholy. They had been fed on struggle and confinement while existing in what he called their 'dark chambers'. Howe's solution was both gustatory *and* tactile: the blind would be enlightened and cheered by developing a taste for Dickens, whose work they would consume by feeling his words on the page. 'They want something to gladden their hearts', Howe explained. 'They want some books which will give pleasure and joy [...]. Your books do this, and I want the blind to have one of them at their fingers' ends.'<sup>1</sup>

Dickens eagerly complied with Howe's request, arranging to have an edition of 250 copies of *The Old Curiosity Shop* 'printed in raised letters for the use of the blind' at a cost to him of \$1700 (*Letters*, XII, 113). Yet as was often the case with Dickens, his act of generosity was qualified by conditions attached to it — no less significant because unstated. To understand those conditions, we need to consider the choices he made in producing his embossed edition and identify their politics, which bear on the position of the disabled in the nineteenth century.

In producing his edition for blind readers, Dickens had to choose, most obviously, from among his many works. In selecting *The Old Curiosity*

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr Samuel Gridley Howe to Charles Dickens (23 February 1868), quoted in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Madeline House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson, Pilgrim edn, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–2002), XII: 1868–1870, ed. by Graham Storey (2002), p. 56, n. 3. Edward E. Allen provides the text of Howe's letter in 'At Their Fingers' Ends: New Light on Dickens's Generous Gift to the Blind', *Dickensian*, 22 (1926), 104–05 (p. 105).

*Shop* (1840–41) instead of one of his more recent novels, Dickens privileged a particular subgenre for a specific, disabled audience, meeting what he understood to be their unique needs; he provided them with the sentimental fiction that would help to ‘humanize’ them. As Heather Tilley argues, ‘sentimental fiction was expected to exert a moralizing influence over pupils.’<sup>2</sup> Dickens selected the novel he did because of certain ‘suppositions about the pedagogic function of sentimental literature [...] as well as the more implicit assumption that visual impairment was accompanied by emotional (and by extension moral) deficiencies’ (Tilley, p. 226). Not only did Little Nell’s virtues provide a pattern for disabled pupils of whom great patience and fortitude were required. The blind needed to read such works as *The Old Curiosity Shop* to develop the human sympathy that was thought to depend on the faculty of vision — on *seeing* or watching others — and that came readily to the sighted but not to the visually impaired.

The correcting or ‘normalizing’ impulse behind Dickens’s choice of *The Old Curiosity Shop* as a text for blind readers also informed his choice of the embossed system of writing that would *put* that text ‘at their fingers’ ends’. While Dickens chose the sentimental over the satiric, he also chose an embossed roman alphabet for his text rather than an arbitrary system — the system developed by Howe himself. Blind advocates for visually impaired readers in the Victorian period argued for the use of an embossed print system best suited to tactile comprehension — by the late 1860s in England, Braille’s arbitrary system had been identified as the system of choice. Thomas Rhodes Armitage, the blind physician who established, in 1868, the British and Foreign Blind Association (today’s Royal National Institute of Blind People), makes the argument most forcefully in *The Education and Employment of the Blind* (1871). Armitage found it ‘self evident that the proper persons to decide upon the best methods of instruction by touch, are those who have to rely upon this sense, viz. the blind themselves’.<sup>3</sup> ‘Inventors of [embossed] systems and managers of [blind] institutions generally have their eyesight’, Armitage writes, ‘and misled by this sense, they cannot understand or enter into the real wants of the blind [...]. The question must not be settled *for* the blind, but *by the blind themselves*’ (pp. 12–13, emphasis in original).

---

<sup>2</sup> Heather Tilley, ‘The Sentimental Touch: Dickens’s *Old Curiosity Shop* and the Feeling Reader’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 16 (2011), 226–41 (p. 226).

<sup>3</sup> T. R. Armitage, *The Education and Employment of the Blind* (London: Hardwicke, 1871), p. iii.

Armitage conducted a two-year study among strictly tactile readers who knew at least three different systems of embossed print. He and his colleagues and ‘witnesses’ concluded that the use of Braille was optimal, owing to the ease with which that dotted system could be read by touch. In bringing out his embossed edition of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, however, which he did on the eve of the formal investigation that would endorse Braille from among competing relief systems, Dickens opted to use the ‘master language’ best suited to seeing readers — the roman alphabet preferred by sighted teachers, relatives, and guardians of the blind. He chose Howe’s variation on the roman alphabet, in which only small letters were used — a type ‘so small’, Armitage explained, ‘that probably not one blind adult in fifty can learn to read it with any degree of comfort’ (p. 12).

It was only shortly before Dickens’s death in June 1870 that the British and Foreign Blind Association began to promote Braille as the format best suited to tactile reading. Nonetheless, in May 1870, Dickens published an article in *All the Year Round* that outlined the investigation then underway and that advocated for the leadership of ‘the sightless’ in the matter, and he knew that he had a choice among systems when he published *The Old Curiosity Shop* in 1868.<sup>4</sup> In ‘Books for the Blind’, an article that appeared as early as 1853 in *Household Words*, it was noted that ‘a blind man may be taught to read’: ‘But now comes the difficulty [...]. In what language shall the printing be effected? [...] In what character, alphabet, symbol, or cipher, shall the teaching be rendered?’<sup>5</sup>

Articles that Dickens published in the 1850s distinguished among embossed systems of print for tactile reading and consistently argued in favour of roman type. ‘Books for the Blind’ compared at least a dozen tangible systems. These included the ‘String Alphabet’ developed at the Edinburgh Blind Asylum; the roman prick writing of George Gibson, to which I’ll return; the embossed and inked typing of roman letters at Manchester’s Blind Asylum; the triangular alphabet of James Gall; Alexander Hay’s ‘alphabet of twenty-six arbitrary characters’; the shorthand systems created by Lucas and Frere; and Moon’s alphabet, ‘founded upon, but greatly differing from, the ordinary Roman’ (p. 424). Of the five systems in which the New Testament had been embossed, the article noted, four were ‘in arbitrary characters’; of the nineteen systems that resulted from an 1832 challenge issued in Edinburgh, sixteen ‘were in purely

---

<sup>4</sup> ‘Blind Leaders of the Blind’, *All the Year Round*, 7 May 1870, pp. 550–52 (p. 551).

<sup>5</sup> [George Dodd], ‘Books for the Blind’, *Household Words*, 2 July 1853, pp. 421–25 (p. 423).

arbitrary character' (p. 424). Confronted with such ratios, the article acknowledged that systems diverging from the roman might place strictly 'feeling readers' at an advantage — that the ease with which certain forms of embossed print 'could be [...] felt and read by blind persons' might be 'a circumstance [...] so important as to neutralize all objections on other grounds' (p. 423). Nonetheless, *Household Words* articles treated the needs and ways of the sighted as paramount, praising embossed roman systems (particularly Howe's) because the texts they produced were 'readable by all who can see' — 'by ordinary persons' ([Dodd], pp. 422, 425). Howe's system privileged the sighted over the blind yet Dickens and his contributors generally treated its use less as a choice than as something simply given. Arguing for what is 'ordinary' — for that to which we are 'accustomed' — Dickens identifies a custom so customary as to seem natural, obscuring the very act of choice.<sup>6</sup> As Harriet Martineau puts it in 'Blindness', 'embossed printing is tried on various plans, each of which has some merit [...]: but we feel no doubt about sticking to the ordinary alphabet' (p. 425).

Disability theorists note, however, that the 'ordinary' or 'normal' is not simply a given but a construct that helps 'create the "problem" of the disabled', that makes ideological differences out of physical differences, and that reinforces the social status quo.<sup>7</sup> Because embossed roman type made tactile reading very difficult, it encouraged the subordination of blind pupils to sighted teachers, undermining their autonomy. It reinforced the idea of the blind as dependent or helpless creatures indebted to the sighted for enlightenment — an idea neatly captured in Dickens's representations of Howe's prized pupil, Laura Bridgman, in *American Notes*: 'her poor white hand peeping through a chink in the wall [of her 'marble cell'], beckoning to some good man for help'.<sup>8</sup> Using *Household Words* to advocate for the uniform adoption of Howe's system by all teachers of the blind ([Dodd], pp. 424–25), Dickens sought to keep tactile readers from learning (and inventors from developing) a written language for the blind that was empowering to them yet unknown and threatening to the sighted. His opposition to arbitrary systems of tactile writing and his advocacy

---

<sup>6</sup> [Harriet Martineau], 'Blindness', *Household Words*, 17 June 1854, pp. 421–25 (p. 425).

<sup>7</sup> Lennard J. Davis, 'Constructing Normalcy', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. by Lennard J. Davis, 3rd edn (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 3–19 (pp. 3, 17).

<sup>8</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, ed. by John S. Whitley and Arnold Goldman (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 81.

for embossed roman type bring to mind American resistance to the use of sign language in deaf communities in the late 1800s and the campaign to replace manualism with oralism (the exclusive use of lip reading and speech) — a campaign driven by growing perceptions of the deaf as an ‘ethnic’ minority with its own foreign language and culture.<sup>9</sup>

Dickens had a personal stake in deciding what was best for tactile readers and, more generally, for the blind — one that went beyond his friendship with Howe, his visits to Perkins, and his support for benevolent schemes. In 1848, when his youngest brother Augustus married Harriet Lovell, he became one of Harriet’s trustees, responsible for managing her separate settlement. Dickens remained Harriet’s trustee when she went blind several years later and retained that role after Augustus deserted her in 1857, leaving England for the US with Bertha Phillips. Following Harriet’s desertion, Dickens saw her with some regularity; after Dickens’s younger sister Letitia was widowed in 1861, she and Harriet formed their own household, living together for more than two decades and visiting Dickens as a pair in the 1860s. During that decade, Harriet wrote to Dickens about her trust; since he destroyed her letters along with most he received, we do not know if she dictated them to a sighted person or used a device for tangible writing. In the ‘unbalanced conversation’ that Dickens has bequeathed to us,<sup>10</sup> the loss of Harriet’s voice is all the more regrettable because of the lack of archival evidence that historians of disability face, a challenge with which both Jan Eric Olsén and I grapple in this special forum, though we do so in different ways.

Dickens’s extant references to Harriet are fairly scarce — invitations that include her in his surviving letters to Letitia and public references to Harriet as the *real* Mrs Augustus Dickens after he was accused of slighting his youngest brother’s widow on his second American tour. Despite the loss of their correspondence, we can infer that Dickens’s dealings with Harriet were sometimes fraught: from his references, in letters to his solicitor, to Harriet’s evident desire to manage her money herself after Augustus left her; and from Dickens’s decision to omit Harriet’s companion Letitia from his will, though she was his sole surviving sibling. Dickens’s treatment of Letitia suggests his hostility towards female friendships and allegiances that threatened to compromise his authority. Indeed, Letitia’s

---

<sup>9</sup> See Douglas Baynton, “‘A Silent Exile on This Earth’: The Metaphorical Construction of Deafness in the Nineteenth Century”, in *Disability Studies Reader*, ed. by Davis, pp. 33–51.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Flanders Darby, ‘Dickens and Women’s Stories: 1845–1848 (Part Two)’, *Dickens Quarterly*, 17 (2000), 127–38 (p. 135).

omission from Dickens's will was likely the consequence of her decision to remain a friend of the novelist's estranged wife Catherine during the twelve-year separation of the Dickenses, despite her brother's wishes that she steer clear of her sister-in-law.<sup>11</sup>

My own interest in Harriet and Letitia — the working title of my novel-in-progress — grew out of Letitia's absence from Dickens's will, my attempts to understand the meaning of that absence, and my discovery of the correspondence that revealed the friendship of Letitia and Catherine in the 1860s. I came to realize, too, that in that same decade, Letitia and Harriet established their own household together. Having written *The Other Dickens*, my biography of Catherine, I decided to focus on these two other women, even more peripheral in Dickens's orbit than his wife, and bring them to the centre of the story. Because the archival material relating to them proved so scant, the biography I had considered writing became my novel — one narrated, in part, by Harriet, an author within the narrative.

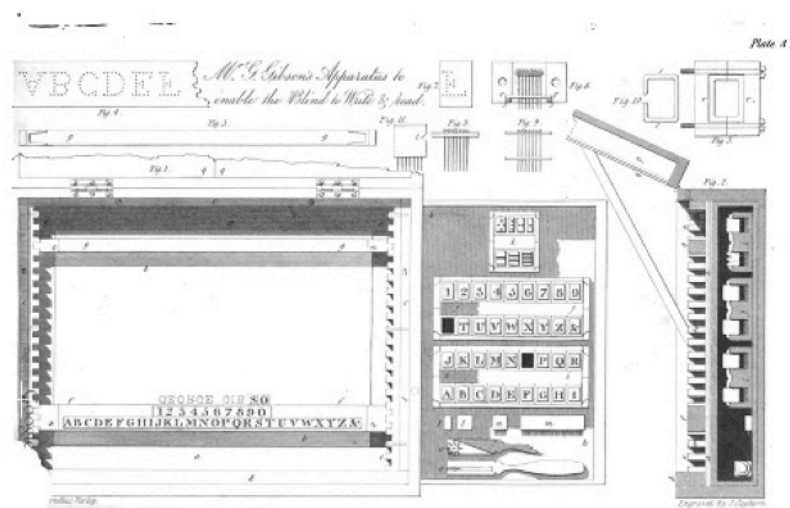
Considering the difficulties that embossed roman type posed to tactile readers, it may seem odd that I've chosen a variant of it for the use of my blind heroine. But my choice was largely driven by the material object enabling Harriet to write — an object that, in Olsén's terms, fills a gap in the archive by opening the door to the imaginary: that is, to the historical imagination. The item is not found among those few extant and suggestive possessions still associated with Harriet: the book of signatures she gathered from famous authors and actors over the years, for example; or the photograph album auctioned by Sotheby's in which she figured, which has since disappeared into a private collection. Nonetheless, the object, though fictive in its connection with her, quite literally gives her a voice.

In the novel, Harriet relies on a typograph created by George Gibson of Birmingham to communicate in writing — a device that works by means of pins embedded on the bottom of wooden blocks, each pin-formed roman letter the upside-down version of the raised letter on the top of the block. The writer begins at the bottom left of a rectangular wooden frame and, moving to the right along the guide bars, and from the bottom line to the top, presses the blocks into place, puncturing the paper that lines the typograph and producing a page of writing that can

---

<sup>11</sup> Lillian Nayder, "The Omission of His Only Sister's Name": Letitia Austin and the Legacies of Charles Dickens', *Dickens Quarterly*, 28 (2011), 251–60.

be read in the usual way — from left to right, top to bottom — on the reverse side (*Fig. 1*).



*Fig. 1: 'Mr. G. Gibson's Apparatus to Enable the Blind to Write and Read', Transactions of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, 45 (1827), Plate 4.*

As the process is described in the *Transactions of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce* (1827), 'the points [...] penetrate the paper' and 'form on the underside a visible, and, at the same time, a tangible representation [...] by means of the burs or prominences, wherever the points have passed through.'<sup>12</sup> My choice of this device and writing process was spurred by one of Gibson's selling points:

An objection may be made to the cost of the paper, as it can be written in this way only on one side, and the characters must be at least as large as full-sized printing capitals; but this objection [...] is by no means so great as it seems to be, because waste writing paper, such as had been written over

<sup>12</sup> 'Preface', *Transactions of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce*, 45 (1827), v–xxvii (p. xxii).

with pen and ink, will answer the purpose of the blind quite as well as any other.<sup>13</sup>

At its most economical, Gibson's device created a doubly written page, the bottom layer of which could be seen but not felt — the so-called 'waste' writing, whether formed in 'pen and ink' or in print — and the second layer, raised or tangible on that same side of the page, the layer produced by the pinpricks that had punctured the sheet from behind. Further complicating the process, the side of the paper actually *composed upon* by the blind author was not the one to be felt or seen in reading the text but the reverse side, since the writing was produced in inverted fashion, the author's front being the reader's back, the text composed from bottom to top, each 'letter in points' the upside-down version of the one actually felt on the block by the author.

For the purposes of neo-Victorian fiction, these complexities, dualities, and inversions provide a wealth of possibilities for depicting authorship, reimagining printed or conventionally written texts, and contesting the authority of the printed word. More specifically, Gibson's device — and Harriet Dickens's use of it in the novel — allows me to give tangible form to the female subtext so often informing Victorian fiction while also inverting the usual relation of text and subtext. Here, the subtext becomes the text, with the printed or published sheet or 'waste paper' with which Harriet lines her typograph becoming, quite literally, the subtext, the base layer of her tangible typography, punctured or impaled from behind by the pinpricks of her roman letters and appearing underneath them. Because Harriet uses the printed or handwritten sheets at her disposal to line her apparatus — including autograph letters from her famous brother-in-law and galley proofs from his periodicals — Dickens's own writings and those he edited and published become subtexts rather than texts, forced into dialogue with Harriet's compositions. She writes over — or, rather, *through* — Dickens's print. In a recently published chapter of my novel, Harriet uses *Household Words* proofs of Wilkie Collins's *Dead Secret* to line her typograph, the tangible letter she writes to Dickens on what is now 'waste paper' revisiting and reworking Collins's novel and its portrait of blindness and gender (*Fig. 2*).<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> 'Types for the Blind', *Transactions of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce*, 45 (1827), 90–96 (p. 92).

<sup>14</sup> Lillian Nayder, 'Tangible Typography (excerpted from *Harriet and Letitia: A Novel*)', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 5 (2012), 179–201.





Fig. 2: Harriet Dickens, tangible letter to Charles Dickens (excerpt), Lillian Nayder, "Tangible Typography (excerpted from *Harriet and Letitia: A Novel*)", *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 5 (2012), 179–201 (p. 188).

Because Harriet's prick writing also recalls the embroidery and needlepoint of sighted Victorian women, it connects her tangible narra-

tives to traditional forms of women's handiwork as well as to the canonical works of Dickens and Collins. Combining women's handiwork with the subversive prick writing of visually disabled people, Harriet's narratives both illustrate and challenge the idealized womanhood imagined by Dickens, with its connection to blindness — to a disabled state that is innocent and largely incapable. Although her tangible writing is not sexualized in quite the same way as the finger reading described by Vanessa Warne in her contribution to this forum, Harriet's narratives reimagine the 'pure' Dickensian disability embodied in the Laura Bridgman of *American Notes*. As Karen Bourrier argues, Dickens represents Howe's famous pupil as 'a paragon of [...] artless innocence' because 'her blindness and deafness supposedly preserve her from [...] dangerous forms of knowledge' — hence Dickens's ambivalence about her learning to read — a corrupting as well as a humanizing endeavour.<sup>15</sup> It is telling, Bourrier notes, that Dickens fails to 'record any of [Bridgman's] written communications', although these were 'taken [...] to be the proof of her humanity and intelligence' (pp. 39–40). Arguing with the novelist over forms and rights of expression — fighting for control of her story as well as her money — Harriet (as I represent her) counters Dickens's equation of disability with a feminized and unknowing dependence. Privileging touch over vision and transforming subtext into text, Harriet's tactile writing challenges the power of Dickens's authorship and his claims about blindness, illuminating the possibilities of disabled expression.

---

<sup>15</sup> Karen Bourrier, 'Reading Laura Bridgman: Literacy and Disability in Dickens's *American Notes*', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 40 (2009), 37–60 (p. 37).