

Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962) insists we read over the shoulder of its narrator, the misanthropic literary scholar, ping-pong aficionado, and (perhaps) King of Zembla, Charles Kinbote. Taking possession of the late poet John Shade's final work in the form of an index card manuscript, Kinbote appoints himself the poem's editor. Nabokov's novel presents itself as Kinbote's Foreword, his edition of *Pale Fire: A Poem in Four Cantos*, a Commentary, and an Index. This Commentary gets longer, wilder and woollier as Kinbote grinds axes, settles scores and gradually inserts himself and his elaborate delusions into the poem. Could he really be the exiled monarch? And was the unfortunate Shade caught in this mysterious country's political cross-fire? It's difficult to prise apart the layers: where does Shade's poem end and Kinbote's fairy-tale begin? What really happens in the novel? What is fantasy and what merely fiction?

The following images are an extract from a book-length re-working, *Reading/Handling/Editing: Pale Fire* (2021), which gives the plot another, more material twist. Kinbote's story becomes obscured by yet another presence: not so much an unreliable narrator as an unreliable reader. Where Kinbote is given to erudite if prolix digressions, this reader is ham-fisted and oddly literal, struggling not only with the book's narrative complexities and metafictional games, but its physical challenges. This is a reader who takes Kinbote at his word, 'cutting out and clipping together' Shade's poem as prompted in the Foreword, and then following the Commentary doggedly, apparently unsure whether Keats is more or less real than the Kingdom of Zembla and finding the Internet no help. An easily-distracted reader, too, attention flitting between snacks, SMS conversations and the novel itself, as the page vies with the smartphone screen.

The result is a tangle of footnotes and hands, index cards and index fingers. These reading hands are not well-behaved and inconspicuous aids, but make their way from the margins to the centre, clumsily sharpening pencils, peeling bananas and spilling drinks: *mise-en-page* gives way to mess on the page. It's possible, still – just about – to read the novel, even as it becomes increasingly difficult to follow. But strange things seem to be happening, confusing the narrative and the scene of reading, blurring what's in the text and what's on the page.

Reading has always involved touching as much as seeing, of course. Books and hands have a complex, entangled history. The former is a device specifically designed for the latter, after all, 'sized for our bodies – generally made to be toted... to be manipulated with the fingers'.¹ Some of the earliest names for the book register this fact: *pugillare* – a portable notebook or wax tablet in ancient Rome – means 'hand-holdable', and derives from the Latin word for 'fist'.² In Ancient Greek ἐγχειρίδιον (*enchiridion*) literally translates as 'in the hand' or 'ready to hand', and was the name for a book of practical advice.³ The English terms 'handbook' and 'manual' still carry some of the same connotations, linking a book's usefulness with its capacity to be reached for and held easily: 'handy' in both senses. We could go further and say that the book is something

'ready to hand' in a more fundamental, philosophical sense. According to Heidegger, our Being-in-the-World is constituted in relation to a whole network of everyday things that – like the book – are graspable, usable and 'manipulable'. *Zuhandenheit*, or 'readiness-to-hand' is his term for this ontological category, which indexes our own 'primordial' mode of existence.⁴

Yet despite this innate hands-on quality of the book, the act of reading is usually conceptualised in quite different, disembodied terms. A whole set of discourses around reading make clear that if you're focusing on touch, you're doing it wrong. Georges Poulet's *Phenomenology of Reading*, for instance,

4. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: SUNY Press, 1967), p. 98.

5. Georges Poulet, 'Phenomenology of Reading', *New Literary History*, 1:1 (1969), 53–68 (p. 54).

1. Gillian Silverman, 'Touch', in *Further Reading*, ed. by Matthew Rubery and Leah Price (Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 191–205 (p. 191).

2. *Latdict* <latin-dictionary.net/definition/32245/pugillaris-pugillaris-pugillare> [accessed 15 July 2023].

3. *Epictetus: The Discourses and Manual, Together with Fragments of His Writings*, Translated and with Introduction and Notes, by P.E. Matheson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916), p. 263. Matheson notes that *Enchiridion* has two potential meanings: a 'handy book', or a 'handy-dagger'.

describes a process of immersion in the text in which the tangible page effectively disappears:

Where is that book I held in my hands? It is still there, and at the same time it is there no longer, it is nowhere... For the book is no longer a material reality. It has become a series of words, of images, of ideas which in their turn begin to exist.

For Poulet, reading has nothing to do with interaction with a mere 'paper object' or even the physical realm; its location is instead the reader's 'innermost self'.⁵

There is a central paradox at work here, as Gillian Silverman points out: while hands are indispensable to reading, they are at the same time disavowed. In fact, 'books have long been accompanied by proscriptions

against touching, or at least touching too much'.⁶ A whole set of strictures has come to surround the handling of books, largely codified in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when advice manuals geared towards the young began to carry exacting guidelines on how to sit, which fingers to use, and even where to put them: 'Always hold a small book in the left hand,' prescribes the *Journal of Education for Home and School* in 1883, 'the thumb and little finger upon the pages, and the three fingers upon the back of the cover'.⁷

This desire to control and limit touch is due in part, as Silverman argues, to a wider cultural privileging of vision, the sense most associated with rationalism and cognition. Tactile reading becomes the province

of 'subordinated children and blind people'.⁸ But it also reflects anxieties about the potentially transgressive sensuality of touch itself. Fears of 'too much fondling' – unseemly contact between body and book – led to the rejection of early precursors of braille, and even today, learning to read means socializing children out of their bodily engagements with the book and into a purely visual relationship with text.⁹ To practice literacy in the modern era is therefore to 'disguise and repudiate the body'.¹⁰

For pre-modern readers, however, things were different, as historians of the book have noted. Leah Price contrasts

'the sensory deprivation of the post-1850 public library' with the 'medieval scriptorium, where books were voiced, stroked, smelled, and gazed at'.¹¹ William Sherman argues that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries 'reading was a self consciously embodied practice, no less a manual art than writing or printing'. So, while present-day readers might seldom even notice their own hands unless dealing with a particularly fiddly or large book, readers in the early modern periods 'picked up their books with an acute awareness of the symbolic and instrumental power of the hand'.¹²

Going further back still, Peter Stallybrass discusses how the codex book became distinguished from the scroll primarily in terms of its manipulability, the ease of flipping back and forth. Early Christian Saints are often depicted brandishing the holy book partly closed, but with fingers inserted to keep their place, demonstrating a particular, hands-on way of reading and using the scriptures, which would have been impossible with a long, continuous scroll. The codex is visually represented as 'indexical' in the sense that it uses fingers (or else 'prosthetic fingers' in the form of bookmarks) 'to take the reader easily from place to place'.¹³ This is because, as Stallybrass argues, the Christian bible was not read from start to finish but discontinuously. Readers moved back and forth between Old and New Testaments, or used the book selectively and cyclically, according to the rhythms

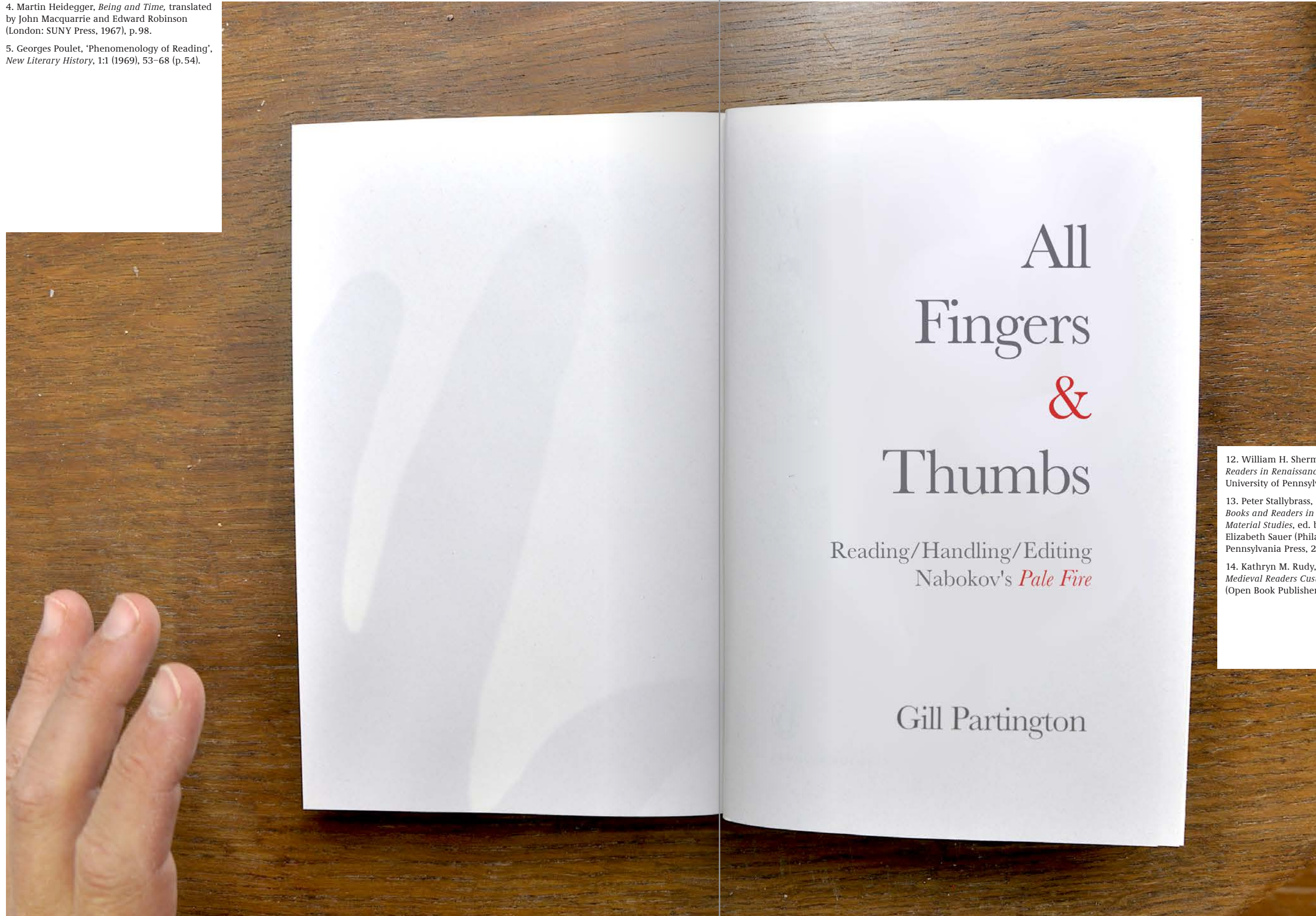
of the liturgical year. Early Christianity distinguished itself from Judaism not only through its beliefs but through its media, using book rather than scroll. The early codex book was a tool with affordances that had far-reaching religious and societal implications, therefore, and its central and defining logic was this interaction between hand and book.

Religious reading practices in the medieval period could be highly tactile for other reasons.

Kathryn Rudy shows how late-medieval readers interacted with manuscripts in physical ways, not just touching but rubbing their books. One prayerbook owner for instance – probably an Augustinian nun from a convent near Tiernan in the Netherlands – handled a particular prayer text 'so voraciously that she rubbed the words away through use. Indeed, she employed her manuscript so heavily that she left her dark, shiny black fingerprints on nearly every folio'.¹⁴ Such marks and dirt reveal not only which parts of the book were read, but how, since the patterns of abrasion indicate that 'such touching must have taken place ritually'.¹⁵ Bishop Richard de Bury, in his fourteenth-century text *Philobiblon*, may have

bemoaned readers whose 'nails are stuffed with fetid filth as black as jet', with which they marked the page, but for historians of reading these traces of touch – smudges, stains, fingermarks – are valuable evidence.¹⁶

Such visceral and visual traces of the hand become rarer in the era of the printed book. We find occasional inky smudges left by careless printers; one eighteenth-



6. Silverman, 'Touch', p. 192.

7. Duane Doty, 'How to Treat Books', *Journal of Education for Home and School* 5 (1883–84): 291. Quoted in Gillian Silverman, 'Reading in the Flesh: Anthropodermic Biblioegy and the Haptic Response', *Book History*, 24:2 (2021), 451–75 (p. 19).

8. Silverman, 'Reading in the Flesh', p. 455.

9. Silverman, 'Touch', p. 192.

10. Carolyn Marvin, 'The Body of the Text: Literacy's Corporeal Constant', *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80, no. 2 (1994), 129–49 (p. 132).

11. Leah Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 31.

12. William H. Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 48.

13. Peter Stallybrass, 'Books and Scrolls', in *Books and Readers in Early Modern England: Material Studies*, ed. by Jennifer Andersen and Elizabeth Sauer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 42–79 (p. 43).

14. Kathryn M. Rudy, *Pietly in Pieces: How Medieval Readers Customized Their Manuscripts* (Open Book Publishers, 2016), p. 94.

15. Kathryn Rudy, 'Touching the Book Again: The Passional of Abbess Kunigunde of Bohemia', in: *Codex Und Material*, ed. by Patrizia Carmassi and Gia Toussaint (Wolffenbütteler Mittelalter-Studien 34, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2018), pp. 247–57 (p. 247).

16. Richard de Bury, *The Love of Books: The Philobiblon of Richard de Bury*, translated by Ernest Chester Thomas (The De La More Press, 1903), p. 105.

century copy of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* has a colourful fingerprint left by the paper-marbler in the margins of its famous marbled leaf.¹⁷ The early modern book is full of hand marks of a different kind, however, which William Sherman calls 'manicules'. These pointing fingers drawn in the margin by early modern book-owners are ostensibly functional, gesturing towards a particular section of the text, marking it out for special attention and perhaps commentary. They are part of a whole vocabulary of marginalia in the period with which readers energetically annotated, wrote on and intervened in their books. The pointing finger seems a simple device, but is semiotically complex, as Sherman observes. It is a 'symbol', a sign whose meaning is established through convention, like a pilcrow (a paragraph mark) or a punctuation mark. But it is also simultaneously an 'icon' (a sign that looks like the thing it signifies, as with the pointing finger of computer cursor), and an 'index' (having an actual or physical connection to the thing it signifies, like a fingerprint). The manicule is both the image of a hand, *and* its physical trace, in other words.¹⁸

These pointing hands are also surprisingly varied and sometimes even downright strange, in ways that go beyond their mere function as textual markers. Some have comically long,

40 curving fingers and ornate, ostentatious cuffs. Some book-owners evidently took pleasure in such illustrations, personalising them to an extent that they became as individual as a fingerprint, a way, perhaps, of putting their own hands in their books. The printed manicule was a more neatly standardised affair, but even this could have its quirks. One of its strangest manifestations is the Great Bible of 1539, which includes, as its prologue states, 'many handes both in the mergent... and also in the text'.¹⁹ The planned annotations and glosses which these hands were intended to highlight appear to have been blocked by the authorities at a late date, however. Printing went ahead without them, but the manicules themselves remained, scattered in the margins, 'pointless without their matching annotations'.²⁰ The book's prologue attempts to mitigate the situation, instructing the reader to ignore the hands and above all not to speculate as to their significance. All of which of course makes them more noticeable: they are hands pointing only to themselves.

If the pre-modern book is strewn with images of pointing, gesturing digits, they are by no means confined to the margins. Giambattista's sixteenth century handbook on Cryptography *De occultis literarum notis* (On the Secret Symbols of Letters), used rotating dials or 'volvelles' to innovate a sophisticated code system.²¹ The spinning pointers or 'indexes' at the centre of these dials take the form of index fingers. Della Porta adopted not only the visual convention of the manicule, but gave them the appearance of the divine hand of God, emerging from a cloud as if to decree which cipher symbol is chosen.

Hands even developed their own systems of signification in the early modern period. John Bulwer's *Chirologia* (1644) was one of several attempts to make the

hand itself speak. Subtitled 'the Natural Language of the Hand', Bulwer's book features diagrams of hands in all manner of different gestures and shapes, each of which has its own meaning.²²

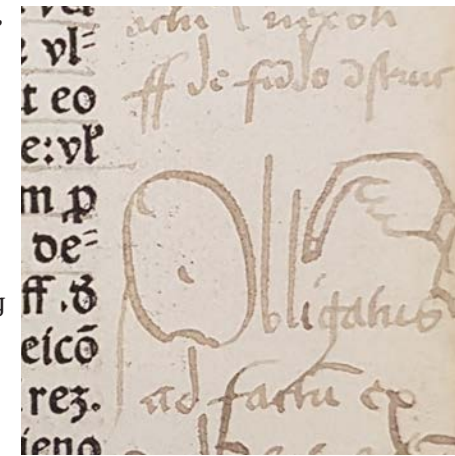
Hands on the page can perform other functions, too, besides simply pointing or gesticulating. In 1892, Dean and Son published its 'Surprise Model Pictures' series, large-format, colour-printed picture books for children depicting exciting outings to the seaside, picnics in the countryside and so on.²³ Each double-page spread features thumbs in the outer margins, demonstrating exactly how to hold the book. These are not restrictions or prohibitions, however, but operating instructions, since the books are actually

complicated feats of pop-up engineering, involving hidden strings and folds which require a particular kind of manipulation. 'Before opening each page place thumbs where marked, hold firmly and open wide', readers are told. It's only when the pages are gripped taut at their outer edges that the scenes spring to life, with flat objects miraculously transformed into 3D.

The Victorian era may well have frowned on too much touching, codifying and disciplining reading practices, but it was also the period in which a commercial market for children's books emerged. Dean and Son were at the forefront of this new field, innovating with pull-tabs, flaps and strings to create hybrid book-objects that specifically invited the use of the hands. Touch was not so much

proscribed as consigned to this marginal realm of the 'movable book' or 'toy book'. These were novelties, as much plaything as text. And as Susan Stewart writes, in the context of another kind of novelty, the miniature book: 'it is the hand that has produced these volumes and the hand that has consumed them – they are an affront to reason and its principal sense: the eye.'²⁴

Dean and Son's placement of thumbs in the margin oddly foreshadow some more famous and iconic hands produced some seventy years later. *The Medium is the Massage*, published in 1967 by graphic designer Quentin Fiore in collaboration with media theorist Marshall McLuhan, is an experiment of a different order to the moveable book, using striking



Manicule detail from Justinian I, *Institutiones*, Paris, 1499, Cardiff University Special Collections, GW4 Treasures. Creative Commons (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode).

22. John Bulwer, *Chirologia; or, The Natural Language of the Hand. Composed of the Speaking Motions, and Discoursing Gestures thereof. Whereunto is added Chironomia; Or, the Art of Manual Rhetoric* (London: Thomas Harper, 1644).

23. *Seaside Fun: with Surprise Model Pictures* (London: Dean & Son, [1892?]).



24. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), p. 40.

25. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).



Detail of volvelle from Giambattista Della Porta, *De occultis literarum notis*, 1593. Yale University Library digital collections.

juxtapositions of image and text to reflect on the nature of the printed page itself.²⁵ One double page spread is blank,

except for the thumbs which intrude at either side, holding the book open. Unlike visual instructions or manicules, these perform no apparent function. They don't point us to the text but draw attention instead to the surface of the page, its convention and its artifice. What exactly are we looking at? An actual page of the book or merely a photograph of one? Is this the real thing or its image, viewed at one remove? The title along the top edge – 'The Book' – reinforces this knowing, self-reflexive questioning. Yet for all the distancing and layers of illusion, there's a strange frisson in taking hold of this book, an oddly intimate sensation of touching not just the page, but the hands of another reader. Placing our thumbs on theirs creates an uncanny doubling. We become acutely conscious of our own hands.

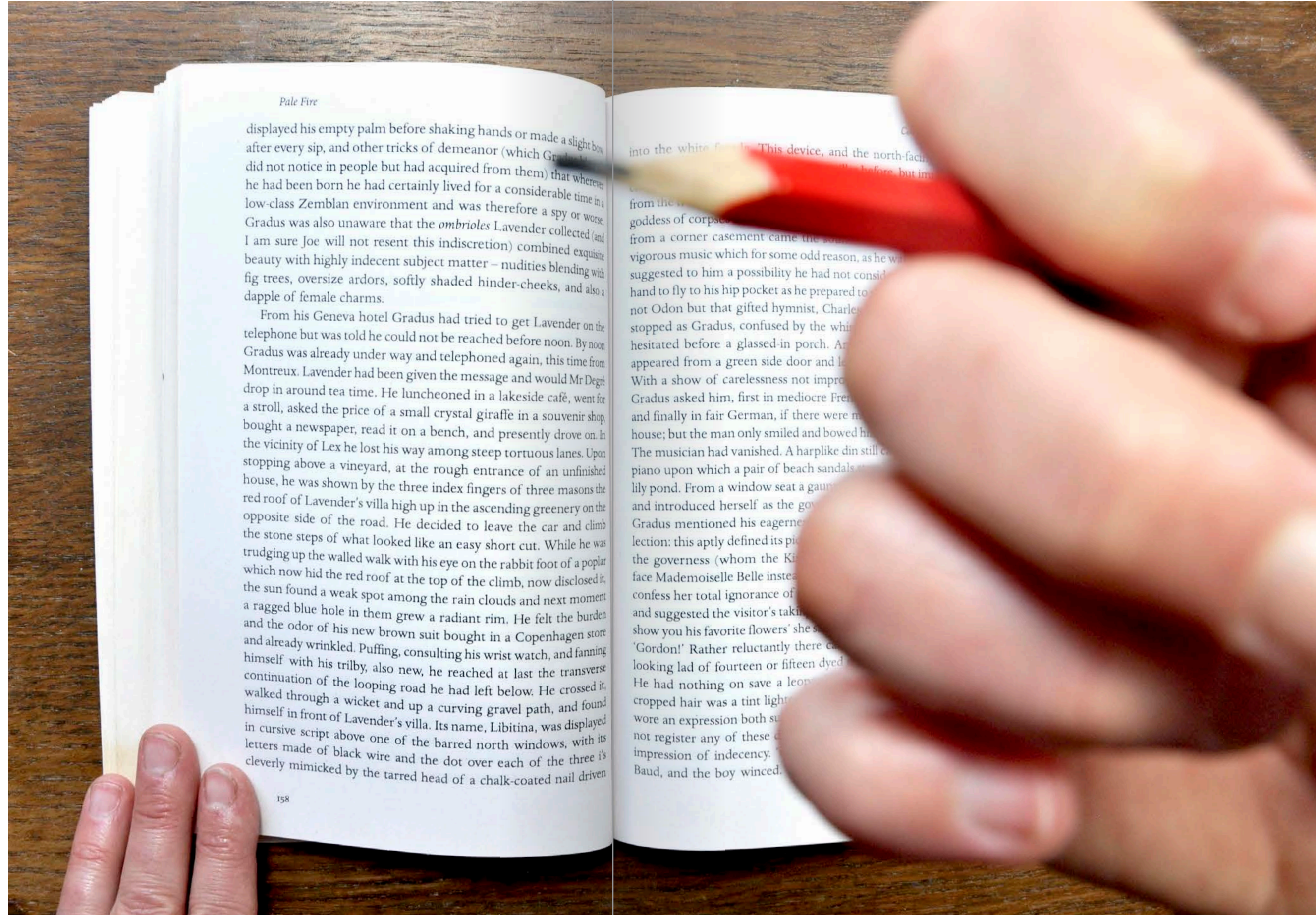
An equally uncanny quality pervades Andrew Norman Wilson's series of photographs, 'Scan-Ops', images of botched Google Books scans with their stray hands intruding into the virtual archive. These rogue fingers point to what's usually safely hidden off-camera, the tedious, low-paid labour involved in digitising books for one of the world's wealthiest corporations. Latex-clad, these aren't the hands of readers exactly, but workers. They have nothing to do with the sensuality of touch or the enjoyment of the book, only the repetitive manual drudgery of turning pages. The garish pink protective gloves they wear are an ironic reminder that these are hands that are supposed to leave no trace, either on the physical book or on the digitised page. They are to remain invisible. But in Wilson's photo series they're accidentally captured in shot by the scanning equipment in a variety of positions, to sometimes surreal effect.

Stranger still are the images in which fingers have been 'edited out' by digital imaging software, which incorporates an algorithm designed to detect and camouflage unwanted elements. The

resulting hands take on the colours and textures of the printed matter they touch, becoming a kind of hybrid – part hand, part book.

It's a visual reminder that 'to touch something is always also to be touched': it is reciprocal, involving 'a crossing-over', through which the boundaries between self and other are obscured.²⁶ Or, to put things in a more tangible register, paper is porous but so are fingertips, as Matthew McLaughlin observes: 'When we handle pages, they rub off on us, and we rub off on them. If I am eating a tuna sandwich as I read a novel, molecules of the tuna are absorbed by the paper.'²⁷ This talk of sandwiches might take us back to the *Philobiblon* of Richard de Bury, castigating an imagined medieval reader not only for dirty fingernails but for eating and drinking in the library: 'He does not fear to eat fruit or cheese over an open book, or carelessly to carry a cup to and from his mouth; and...he drops into books the fragments that are left'.²⁸ De Bury would, no doubt, be just as scathing about this more recent reader of *Pale Fire*. Here are some equally messy reading hands, eating, drinking, fidgeting and scrolling, and leaving all manner of traces behind. Expressing animation, boredom and bemusement, moving restlessly from touchscreen to the analogue page, they are rarely still, and have their own story to tell. They show that hands do all kinds of things in, with and to books; it's just not often that they're caught in the act.

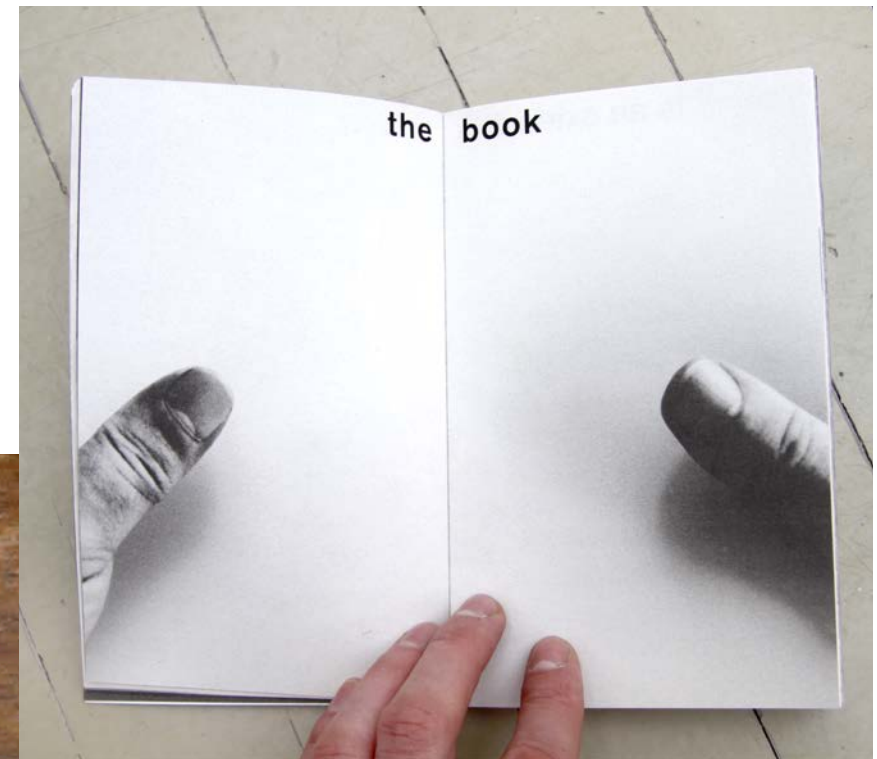
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26. Silverman, 'Touch', p. 190.

27. Thomas McLaughlin, *Reading and the Body* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 23.

28. Richard de Bury, p. 106.



Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore *The Medium is the Message* (Spread from the book, pages 34–5, original photograph by Peter Moore). Creative Commons public domain image.

Andrew Norman Wilson, *Mother Goose's Melody: Or, Sonnets for the Cradle: in Two Parts, Part I Contains the Most Celebrated Songs and Lullabies of the Good Old Nurses, Calculated to Amuse Children and to Excite Them to Sleep; Part II Those of that Sweet Songster and Nurse of Wit and Humour, Master William Shakespeare* - 6. Inkjet print on rag paper.



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