

Introduction

League after league the earth lies flat, heaves a little, is flat again. Only in the south, where a group of fists and fingers are thrust up through the soil, is the endless expanse interrupted. These fists and fingers are the Marabar Hills, containing the extraordinary caves.

E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (1924)¹

The uncanny Indian landscape of Forster's novel is marked by detached hands that assert a terrifying hold on the British characters. These hands beckon with the promise of authenticity, of experiencing the "real" India: "Fists and fingers thrust above the advancing soil . . . their skin, finer than any covering acquired by the animals, smoother than windless water, more voluptuous than love" (125). But then they grab. They suffocate Mrs. Moore when she visits the Marabar Caves; she feels that some "vile naked thing struck her face and settled on her mouth like a pad" (147). While this particular "thing" is relatively harmless, as it turns out to be the hand of a "poor little baby, astride its mother's hip" (148), it anticipates the violent grabbing (by who? by what?) of Adela Quested in the caves. Cyril Fielding will later use the image of the detached hand to capture the chaos – or "muddle" – of his experience in India: "[F]atigued by the merciless and enormous day, he lost his usual sane view of human intercourse, and felt that we exist not in ourselves, but in terms of each others' minds – a notion for which logic offers no support and which had attacked him only once before, the evening after the catastrophe, when from the verandah of the club he saw the fists and fingers of the Marabar swell until they included the whole night sky" (250). The memory of these hands recurs in the last pages of the novel, when the exonerated Dr. Aziz is forced to take care of Mrs. Moore's youngest son, Ralph, who is afflicted with bee stings. After the delicate Ralph reproaches Aziz for treating him too roughly, stating that his "hands are unkind," the doctor fires back, "What the devil have my hands to do with you?" (309).

Aziz's question, coupled as it is with the novel's repeated references to severed hands in the Indian landscape, resonates throughout my book. *The Racial Hand in the Victorian Imagination* provides a prehistory to Forster's narrative, arguing that racialized hands were vital to literary portrayals of colonial relationships in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The Marabar Hills are the vestiges of the detached hands that populate fin-de-siècle narratives and that alternately fascinate and unsettle the European characters who interact with them. Indian potters' thumbs, Egyptian mummies' wandering appendages, the severed hands of Congolese laborers – among others – were at the crux of a new language of the body that tried to come to terms with the limits of racial identification. My contention is that these images are an important by-product of the struggle to find traces of race in hands throughout the nineteenth century. While religious, scientific, and literary discourses isolated hands as privileged sites of physiognomic information, they could not find plausible explanations for what these body parts conveyed about ethnicity. As compensation for this absence, which might betray the fact that race was *not* actually inscribed on the body, late-Victorian narratives generated models for how nonwhite hands might offer crucial means of identifying and theorizing racial identity. In creating these models, they removed the hand from a holistic corporeal context and allowed it to circulate independently from the body to which it originally belonged. A strange hybrid of the person and the thing, the severed hand was repurposed as a "human tool" that could be put to use in a number of political, aesthetic, and ideological contexts. The narratives I examine use the severed hand to conceptualize the cycles of domination and resistance that mark imperial relationships. Through their multiple representations, these texts proleptically respond to Aziz's question to his British interlocutor – "What the devil have my hands to do with you?" – with a succinct yet emphatic, "Everything."

In hands we trust

Nineteenth-century journals and manuals are filled with hyperbolic disquisitions on the hand as a site of authenticity. It is the "talisman by which we are to penetrate the arcana of character"; "the summary of the man, his active microcosm"; and "the index of the human soul."² One of the earliest and most influential examples of the primacy placed on the hand – or *humainisme*, as Jacques Derrida terms it³ – is the Scottish anatomist Charles Bell's 1833 Bridgewater treatise, *The Hand, Its Mechanism and Vital Endowments, as Evincing Design*. In explicating the purpose of his

Introduction

3

monograph – commissioned by the Eighth Earl of Bridgewater to demonstrate God’s presence in the natural world – Bell writes, “[W]e shall find how the Hand supplies all instruments, and by its correspondence with the intellect gives [man] universal dominion. It presents the last and best proof of that principle of adaptation, which evinces design in the creation.”⁴ Bell argues that the superiority of the human hand is proof of God’s choice of the human over the animal; he concurs with Galen that “man had hands given to him because he was the wisest creature, [rather] than ascribe his superiority and knowledge to the use of his hands.”⁵ While evolutionists later adopted Bell’s use of the hand as evidence of human superiority, they differed in their views of the adaptive nature of this organ. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Charles Darwin cites Bell’s pronouncement that the “hand supplies all instruments, and by its correspondence with the intellect gives him universal dominion,” but adds that “the hands and arms could hardly have become perfect enough to have manufactured weapons, or to have hurled stones and spears with a true aim, as long as they were habitually used for locomotion and for supporting the whole weight of the body . . . The free use of the arms and hands, partly the cause and partly the result of man’s erect position, appears to have led in an indirect manner to other modifications of structure.”⁶ As Raymond Tallis puts it in his 2003 “humaniste” study, the hand is a “plausible biological starting point for our liberation from biology.”⁷

Proof of human exceptionalism, the hand also offered privileged information about human character and identity. The nineteenth century experienced a proliferation of methods for using hands as transcripts of the self and its secrets. These included various modes of palmistry, or chiromancy; chirognomy, a discipline based on interpreting the forms of the hand and fingers; and fingerprinting. While some of these methods – particularly chiromancy and chirognomy – were often met with skepticism, they persisted as means of understanding the self throughout the century. These multiple forms of reading the hand rivaled the popular practice of facial physiognomy, creating an implicit connection between faces and hands. In the words of an 1892 article on palmistry from the *Saturday Review*, “Since nearly as many qualities have been attributed to the hand as to the face, it might almost be called a face without eyes.”⁸

Unlike the face, however, the hand supposedly could not lie. Sharrona Pearl argues that in the nineteenth century, physiognomy was as much a means of reading others as it was of manipulating features to convey something about the self: “As Victorians became physiognomically literate, the purview of physiognomy shifted from a mechanism to get information

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

to a means of self-consciously giving information . . . physiognomy itself entails performance and self-presentation.”⁹ Victorian discussions on hand reading consistently draw on the distinction between the dishonesty of the face and the necessary honesty of the hand. An 1873 article on palmistry from *Saint Pauls Magazine*, for example, assures its readers, “A clever hypocrite will deceive even the keenest physiognomist by facial tricks and impostures; but the hands, if not uncontrollable, are, at least, generally uncontrolled.” The article goes on to encourage observing politicians’ hands in the House of Commons since no useful information can be gleaned from their faces: “They never wince. But watch their hands! the fingers wrap themselves round each other; they twist and twine: or else, the hands are clenched tightly, as may be seen by the white look about the knuckles.”¹⁰ Even in the absence of outright deception or secrecy, the face is subject to temporal or accidental circumstances that cause it to alter. The hand, in contrast, bears permanent signs. This is one of the ways in which Casimir Stanislas D’Arpentigny, whose *La Science de la main* (*The Science of the Hand*, 1857) generated a decades-long craze for chir-ogonomy, justifies his theory: he writes that “the hand has its physiognomy like the face, with this difference, that . . . it has all the permanence of a material symbol.”¹¹ The persistence of digital marks and patterns would become a fundamental principle of fingerprinting as defined by its originator Francis Galton:

The pattern grows simultaneously with the finger, and its proportions vary with its fatness, leanness, usage, gouty deformation, or age. But, though the pattern as a whole may become considerably altered in length or breadth, the number of ridges, their embranchments, and other minutiae remain unchanged. So it is with the pattern on a piece of lace. The piece as a whole may be stretched in this way, or shrunk in that, and its outline altogether altered; nevertheless every one of the component threads, and every knot in every thread, can easily be traced and identified in both.¹²

Galton’s depiction of the various distortions that the hand can withstand resonates throughout his writings, which vividly depict the harm that may come to the hand without compromising its markings: “My assistant happened to burn his finger rather sharply; the daily prints he took of it, illustrated the progress of healing in an interesting manner; finally the ridges were wholly restored.”¹³ Writing in 1900, E. R. Henry, another developer of fingerprinting, went further in his depictions of manual violence by arguing that “skin diseases and injuries” will only temporarily efface prints, and that “[t]he absence of even more than two digits does not

Introduction

5

prevent classification.”¹⁴ In *The Origin of Finger-Printing* (1916), William James Herschel tells of a man in Bengal who tried to conceal his identity by cutting the “joints of his fingers” and repudiating his fingerprints; the High Court soon detected his deception and delivered “the necessary consequence to the offender for his perjury.”¹⁵ Even when parts of it are missing, the hand never deceives.

The absolute veracity of the hand betrays its owner through forced confession and exposure. Mark Twain captures this idea in his novel *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) when the character Tom, after witnessing an act of palm-reading, exclaims, “Caesar’s ghost! . . . Why, a man’s own hand is his deadliest enemy! Just think of that – a man’s own hand keeps a record of the deepest and fatalest secrets of his life, and is treacherously ready to expose him to any black-magic stranger that comes along. But what do you let a person look at your hand for, with that awful thing printed in it?”¹⁶ Fittingly, Tom’s own identity as a black man and a criminal will be betrayed through fingerprinting. Wilson, the unlikely detective of this story, borrows heavily from Galton’s *Finger Prints* in explaining how Tom’s “true” identity revealed itself:

Every human being carries with him from his cradle to his grave certain physical marks which do not change their character, and by which he can always be identified – and that without shade of doubt or question. These marks are his signature, his physiological autograph, so to speak, and this autograph can not be counterfeited, nor can he disguise it or hide it away, nor can it become illegible by the wear and mutations of time. This signature is not his face – age can change that beyond recognition; it is not his hair, for that can fall out; it is not his height, for duplicates of that exist; it is not his form, for duplicates of that exist also, whereas this signature [the marks on his fingers] is each man’s very own – there is no duplicate of it among the swarming populations of the globe! (158)

The passage illustrates Ronald Thomas’s claim that “the fingerprint represents nineteenth-century criminology’s ultimate achievement in transforming the body into a text.”¹⁷ This textuality is inseparable from the coupling of persistence and veracity associated with the hand by the second half of the century. It is also evident in the less rigidly scientific practice of palmistry, which would extract from the hand what the mind would or could not provide. The title character of Oscar Wilde’s “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime” (1891) speculates about the possible horrors of chiromancy: “How mad and monstrous it all seemed! Could it be that written on his hand, in characters that he could not read himself, but that another could decipher, was some fearful secret of sin, some blood-red sign of crime?”¹⁸

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[More information](#)

In his characteristic love of paradox, Wilde at once upholds and parodies this fear, as Lord Arthur is compelled to fulfill the fate inscribed on his palm: he murders the chiromantist who foretold that he was destined to commit murder.¹⁹

There is a tension – or friction, perhaps – between the two forms of proof offered by the hand: first, its function as evidence of human superiority; and second, its ability to betray the self and transform it into a passive text. As the nineteenth century progressed, methods for reading the hand reconciled this tension by assuming that the most legible hands were those that were detached – literally or figuratively – from the acting body. This separation illustrates Katherine Rowe's claim that images of disembodied hands are linked to problems of human agency: "When Western literature addresses questions of agency with critical or skeptical intent, it frequently turns to a peculiar trope: the figure of a severed or disembodied hand."²⁰ Her thesis applies to Victorian methods of hand reading, which drew a direct relationship between the legibility of the hand and the evacuation of its agency. The shift to the hand as fragment, reaching its pinnacle at the *fin de siècle*, is most apparent when compared to Charles Bell's insistently holistic treatment of the hand in his 1833 treatise. In seeking to demonstrate that "man . . . is in the centre of a magnificent system," he emphasizes, "The hand is not a thing appended, or put on, like an additional movement in a watch; but a thousand intricate relations must be established throughout the body in connection with it – such as nerves of motion and nerves of sensation."²¹ Strikingly, Bell excludes illustrations of hands from his book, a peculiar omission in a work dealing so closely with anatomy. Ludmilla Jordanova proposes, "Perhaps Bell's reluctance to provide a lifelike image of the human hand was connected with a refusal to see it as a fragment. If the treatise has any message it is that webs of relationships exist between parts of the body and between human beings and God."²² This plenitude afforded the hand its authority and, more importantly, affirmed human agency: "[T]he Hand supplies all instruments, and by its correspondence with the intellect gives him universal dominion."²³ Bell's theory contrasts substantially with the methods of hand reading that proliferated in the second half of the century and that explored what could be revealed through manual detachment, when the mind or body could not defend the hand that was betraying it.

The practice of fingerprinting asserted that hands could be read in the absence of the body. Rowe compares this aspect of the discipline to physical mutilation when she writes that "fingerprints signify a curious

Introduction

7

kind of involuntary agency: action necessarily *amputated* from intention.”²⁴ It is in large part the detachability of fingerprints, the fact that they are not subject to the protestations or prevarications of their owners, that led Galton to write that “when they are properly made, they are incomparably the most sure and unchanging of all forms of signature.”²⁵ Later on in his book, he emphasizes the connection between detachment and identity through a particularly morbid example: “We read of the dead body of Jezebel being devoured by the dogs of Jezreel, so that no man might say, ‘This is Jezebel,’ and that the dogs left only her skull, the palms of her hands, and the soles of her feet; but the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet are the very remains by which a corpse might be most surely identified, if impressions of them, made during life, were available.”²⁶ Given the primacy he places on the solitary hand in the rest of his manual, it may be *because* these body parts have been detached from Jezebel that they are the most effective markers of her identity. Taken alone, the prints of the hands provide information from which the rest of the body might only distract. Galton gradually abstracts the body from his discussion as he dissects fingers into increasingly smaller components through magnifications, classifications, and visual arrangements of prints that make them unrecognizable as human parts (see Figure 1). Sharrona Pearl writes that this mode of identifying and representing the self differed greatly from the individuations of facial physiognomy: “Through fingerprinting, Galton realized his goal of identification without individuality. Fingerprinting enabled large-scale and efficient classification of individuals while at the same time removing all question of character from this external sign. . . . The self was sidelined as the internal and external were flattened into two-dimensional fingerprint representations.”²⁷

Chirognomy and palmistry both mark important trends in the passage from holistic to fractional models defining the hand’s relationship to the rest of the body and to notions of human agency and identity. Unlike fingerprinting, these disciplines focused on hands as crucial markers of character, not just sites of identification. And yet, they did so in ways that often isolated the hand from the self. D’Arpentigny based his system of chirognomy, first formulated in 1839, on the significance of the shapes of fingers and palms in determining types of individuals. He categorized hands into seven types – “elementary,” “necessary,” “artistic,” “useful,” “philosophical,” “physical,” and “mixed” – each of which corresponded to designations in intellect, character, industry, and national temperament. The “necessary” hand, for instance, was marked by “spatulous”

8 The Racial Hand in the Victorian Imagination

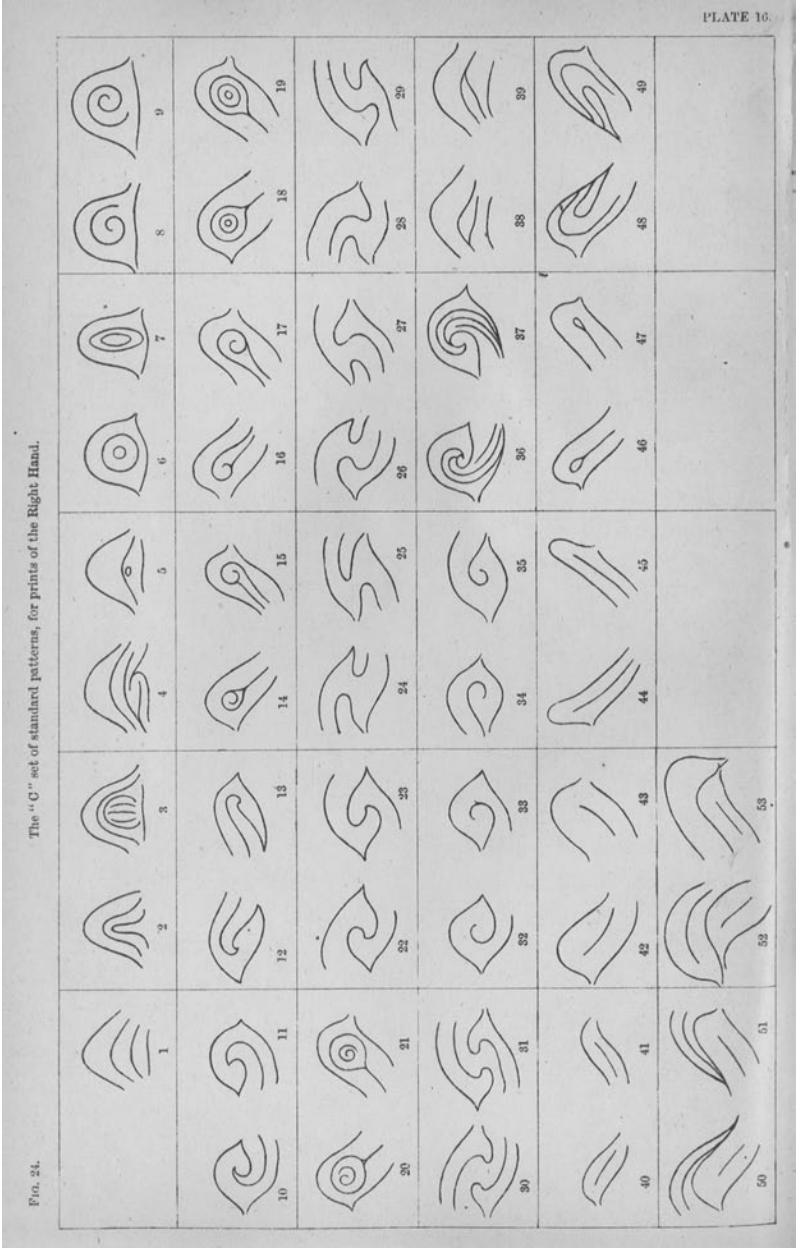


Figure 1 Illustration from Francis Galton's *Finger Prints*
(London: Macmillan, 1892), n.p.
Courtesy of Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, ME.

Introduction

9

fingers, indexes of “corporeal agitation, locomotion, and manual occupation – a love for the industrial and mechanical arts, and for the physical benefit which science confers; it is also indicative of constancy in pursuit and in affection, but it admits of no feeling for the higher philosophical and metaphysical sciences – no love for spiritual poetry, nor for anything connected with the world of speculation.”²⁸ Ostensibly, D’Arpentigny intended his system as a means of self-analysis as much as a method for categorizing others; the first words of his discussion in *The Science of Hand* are “Know thyself,” and he goes on to describe his methods as capable of revealing the “secrets of our inclinations and of our mental capacities.”²⁹ Like Bell, he appears to take a holistic approach to the hand, insisting on the significance and necessity of its various forms; to believe otherwise would be to have a “very weak idea of the provision of the Omnipotent Creator, of His justice and of His power.”³⁰ The focus on self-knowledge and holistic design dissipates, however, with the manual’s intently taxonomical structure, which persistently divides hands and fingers into subcategories and features illustrations of hands cut off at the wrist.

Nineteenth-century palmistry also alternates between treating the hand as an inclusive extension of the self and a detachable appendage ready to betray secrets of the self. Although palmistry had been practiced for centuries, it was repopularized by the French chiromantist Adolphe Desbarrolles in his 1859 treatise, *Les Mystères de la main*. He begins with the premise that “IN NATURE, EVERYTHING HOLDS TOGETHER, EVERYTHING HARMONIZES” and then identifies the hand as the body part in which this harmony can be identified most readily.³¹ His system consists of reading the lines of both the left and right hands to determine past events, present character, and future possibilities. Despite the fact that, unlike fingerprinting, palmistry assumes a direct interaction between the interpreter and his or her subject, Desbarrolles’s first example involves detaching clients’ hands from the rest of their bodies. He tells of an encounter he had with a man wearing a large coat that concealed most of his features:

He extended his left hand, and I told him right away, “You are in the military.”

“It’s possible,” he answered, “but please elaborate.”

I added, “I intentionally told you from the very beginning that you were in the military.”

I saw, from your hand, that you had received a wound, but not from the war.”

“Why not from the war?” he asked, surprised.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

“Because,” I answered, “a wound inflicted during the war would have been favorable to your promotion, and this one disrupted your career.”³²

Stunned, the man confesses that Desbarrolles has divined his past; his injury was the result of a freak accident that left his arm paralyzed. Although the palm reader and his client are in the same room and converse directly, the man’s hand acts independently to reveal what he himself can or will not tell. When the man shows his other hand, the one that is paralyzed and that he describes as “dead,” Desbarrolles notices that injury has cleared it of identifying lines so that “it was completely smooth.” As in the examples in which hand injury and self-inflicted amputation do not interfere with the hand’s capacity to convey information about itself, however, Desbarrolles uses it to further his analysis: he realizes that the absence of lines signals that the “nerves corresponding to the brain had ceased to function.”³³ This reading further confirms the manual severance that is so crucial to his model of chiromancy.

Desbarrolles’s interaction with his client anticipates Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories. The episode could very well be excerpted from one of the many narratives in which the detective looks to the hand for information about a client or suspected criminal; as Holmes tells Watson in “The Adventure of the Creeping Man” (1923), “Always look at the hands first.”³⁴ This form of analysis entails figurative or literal detachments as Holmes treats the hand as an appendage ready to betray its owner by the marks it leaves behind. Even though Holmes does not make use of palmistry himself, palmists often adopt his methods. This was the case with the celebrity palm reader Cheiro (aka Count Louis Hamon, né William John Warner), whose practice was informed by actual and fictional detective work. He presents the following story in his 1912 memoirs:

A mysterious murder was committed in the East End, and a blood-stained hand mark on the paint of a door called my study into question. An examination of the lines of the hands of the murdered man told me, from similar marks in the blood-stained impression, that the crime was undoubtedly done by a relation, and this clue led to the arrest and subsequent confession of one of the dead man’s relatives, who up to then had been the least suspected.³⁵

Cheiro was adamant about the close relationship between palmistry and fingerprint analysis, despite the fact that the first was often viewed as suspiciously mystical and the second as rigorously scientific. He writes,