

REVIEWS

The Victorians and the Visual Imagination by Kate Flint. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. xvi, 427 pp. + 68 illus. ISBN 0-521-77026-2. \$74.95.

A crescendo midway through Tennyson's *In Memoriam* helps define what Kate Flint's *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* is, and is not, about:

O life as futile, then, as frail!
O for thy voice to soothe and bless!
Behind the veil, behind the veil. (lvi)

Flint nowhere quotes these anguished lines, nor should she necessarily have done so. Tennyson's elegy is an extensive gloss on the Victorian theme of religious uncertainty, the yearning to pierce the obscuring veil of the senses--spiritual cataracts, as it were. Flint concentrates instead on the secular equivalent of that broad theme: Victorians in the physical act of looking (activity) and the mental one of seeing (understanding)--or, more important, *not* seeing--and the consequent necessity of resorting to the visual imagination, what Wordsworth called "the inward eye."

Consciousness of the act and the result of vision, Flint argues, was a defining characteristic of Victorian culture. An interesting case could be made for the centrality of "the dialogue between visibility and invisibility" in other past cultures (166)--think, for example, of the role both religious art and superstition played in the Middle Ages. But then one considers the crucial distinction between the natural forms that have always attracted the human gaze and the cultural forms that proliferated in Victorian society. It was the latter that, along with Romantic doctrine, were largely responsible for "the Victorians' increasing awareness of the instability of the visual, and their problematisation of what they saw" (37).

Flint begins, aptly enough, with Henry Garland's painting *Looking for the Mail Packet* (1861), which is used both on the book's wrapper and as its frontispiece. The John Bull-like central figure, wielding his spyglass, and the two women with him are indeed symbolic of her theme, dramatizing as they do, according to Flint's minute explication, "different ways of looking" (xiii). Everywhere one looked in Victorian England, it seemed there were challenges "to the adequacy of representation, to the sufficiency of the visible," new images to be interpreted (25). The pictorial content of everyday existence enlarged at an unprecedented rate. In the middle-class household, the engravings on the walls and the books of prints on library tables were supplemented by a wealth of bric-a-brac, illustrated books and periodicals, and recently invented family entertainments such as stereoscopes with their three-dimensional effects, and magic lanterns, the forerunners of home movies and, still later, of videos. Their public counterparts made looking a fully communal activity: commercial and then institutional natural history and science museums,