

REVIEW

Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature by Catherine Maxwell. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2008. 260 pp. ISBN 978-0-7190-7144-7. \$84.95. £55.

“But for my part I say in all sincerity, ‘Better be inconvenienced by visitants from beyond the grave than see none at all.’ The material world is so uninteresting, human life so miserably bounded, circumscribed, cabin’d, cribb’d, confined. I want another domain for the imagination to expatiate in.” Thomas Hardy’s spectral desires and denunciation of the material (cited here in Maxwell’s discussion of a 1901 interview with William Archer) encapsulate what Catherine Maxwell convincingly argues as being the basis for a worthy revision of much Victorian scholarship, which has tended to downplay or ignore the strange influence of the Romantic visionary imagination. Rather than focus predominantly on canonical male poets (as she did in *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* [2001]), Maxwell here treats a range of authors and forms of writing in relation to the strange, uncanny, psychic, spiritual, fragmentary, and symbolic vision beyond the phenomenal realm. In particular, Maxwell includes chapters on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Walter Pater, Vernon Lee, Eugene Lee-Hamilton, Theodore Watts-Dunton, and Thomas Hardy. The Romantic visionary impulse is often represented through images of the female form and face – incomplete, dying, dead, or somehow unfinished. Whereas much scholarship has treated the late Victorians’ obsession with the female body (Bram Dijkstra’s *Idols of Perversity* [1986], Lynne Pearce’s *Woman/Image/Text* [1991], Elisabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body* [1992], Kathy Alexis Psomiades’s *Beauty’s Body* [1997]), Maxwell’s analysis treats the lost, elusive, or fragmented body as a catalyst for imaginative recreation through fantastical, mystical, and sometimes supernatural means.

Not only is Maxwell’s text meticulously researched and clearly written (despite several surprising copy-editing errors), her linking of somewhat disparate details across authors and genres, via the tensions between the seen/unseen and material/spiritual, is most impressive. Indeed, her unique analysis of the elusive fragment, the relationship between the part and the whole, and the importance of form extends Victorian scholarship by more positively acknowledging links to a Romantic heritage. Of particular note is Maxwell’s treatment of Pater (chapter two), often considered to be an empiricist invested in the material realm, and his exploration of the relationship between *ascêsis*, meaning discipline, and surplusage, “denoting the