BOOK REVIEW

Second Sight in the Nineteenth Century: Prophecy, Imagination and Nationhood, by Elsa Richardson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). 260 pp. Hardback £79.99.

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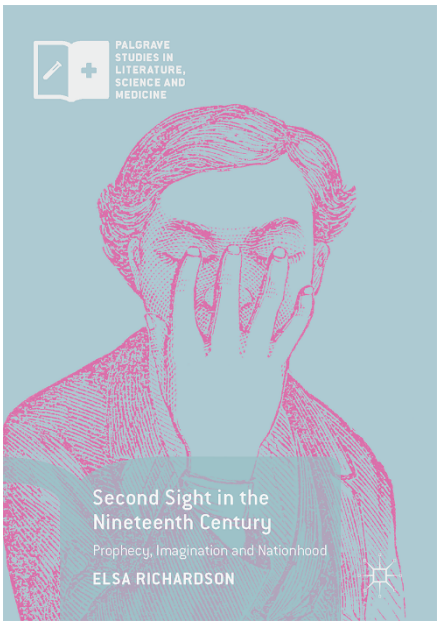

Second sight is the stuff of Gothic tales, often associated with witchcraft, the Highlands, rural landscapes, and premonitions of death. Elsa Richardson's *Second Sight in the Nineteenth Century* reconsiders our understanding of second sight today by looking at the way it was shaped by nineteenth-century scientific discourse. As the subtitle of her book suggests, Richardson sets out to reassert the specificity of second sight 'as a peculiarly Scottish faculty' while tending to the way it impacted on both scientific and creative engagements with the perception of reality (p. 5). Richardson argues that second sight bears subversive potential and, thereby, rehabilitates 'this folkloric figure as a valuable subject for historians of science, psychology and popular culture' (p. 11). Richardson is wary to enhance the complexity of her topic; while appropriated by Lowlanders and Englishmen as an object suitable for empiric observation, second sight also seems to be elusive, unreliable, and subversive. The study offers an extraordinarily rich and compelling exploration of diverse supernatural manifestations. By observing the reception and representation of these manifestations in scientific discourse, Richardson enables the reader to reconsider the nineteenth-century interest in the other-worldly as a politically inscribed practice both denoting a form of appropriation of Northern Britain and informing the social division of society.

Offering a postcolonial reading of second sight, Richardson presents a subversive counter-narrative to the dominant culture that allows for alternative models of historiography refusing linear chronology (p. 251). Following the

example of Matthew Wickman and Silke Stroh,[1] Richardson uses postcolonial theories as a paradigmatic framework to scrutinise the place given to Highland territories in the newly-unified Great Britain (p. 5). As such, this work follows the lines of study opened up by recent scholarship,[2] which takes an interdisciplinary interest in various branches of the Victorian supernatural rather than occupying a solely literary or social perspective (p. 3). Moving beyond a 'natural' and 'supernatural' dichotomy, Richardson advocates for a new approach to second sight that recognises the apartness of this faculty within the Victorian supernatural. Reading second sight as an 'invented tradition', one that is geographically and politically inscribed, Richardson's book stands out from much of the leading work on the Victorian supernatural (p. 5).

Richardson's book underlines the interaction between the literary reception of second sight and its constant reshaping by scientific discourse. Her work participates in the ongoing research on the mutual influence of scientific and literary advances in the nineteenth century such as Lawrence Frank's *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence* (2003), which aims to unveil how authors 'responded explicitly and implicitly to the scientific controversies of the day'.[3] Richardson's style is, throughout, remarkably didactic in its distinction between the different sciences. Her text is peppered with analyses of works of fiction featuring second sight, such as Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), thereby re-contextualising these works within the dominant scientific investigations of the supernatural. To this end, Richardson focuses on fiction writers indulging in more or less scientific activities such as Walter Scott, Catherine Crowe, or William Sharp, offering a panorama of 'eminent' figures related to the study of folklore and second sight. In this regard, Richardson's wonderful use of anecdotes and her skills in storytelling are impressive. Her work rehabilitates historic figures often obliviated such as Ada Goodrich Freer, who was considered a fraud and dismissed altogether by the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Richardson's reading of these figures sheds light on their inscription in the complexities of second sight.

Connecting the chapters is 'the presence of myths, customs and lore, harvested from marginalised communities and put to work in the forming of elite knowledge at the metropole' (p. 5). Richardson's book outlines the malleability

[1] Matthew Wickman, *The Ruins of Experience: Scotland's 'Romantick' Highlands and the Birth of the Modern Witness,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Silke Stroh, *Uneasy Subjects: Postcolonialism and Scottish Gaelic Poetry*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011).

[2] See Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy: 1870-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Christine Ferguson, *Language, Science and Popular Fiction in the Victorian Fin-de-Siècle: The Brutal Tongue* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Sarah Wilburn, *Possessed Victorians: Extra Spheres in Nineteenth-Century Mystical Writings* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); and Jill Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channelling, the Occult, and Communications Technologies, 1859-1919* (Ithaca: Cornwell University Press, 2010).

[3] Lawrence Frank, *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence: The Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens and Doyle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 3.

of second sight to fit the discourse and aims of several scientific investigative cultures (p. 3). The first chapter introduces the scope of Richardson's study and her methodology. Brought to the foreground is the way second sight inscribes itself in the history of vision and the way it questions the nature of perception and reality altogether. Conflating present and future, second sight offers an alternative historiography which 'refuses linear formations of time' (p. 8).

Focusing on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Chapter Two delineates the establishment of second sight as an object of study for scientists, travel writers, and novelists alike. It establishes a set of dichotomies that run through the entire book: the spoken versus the written word; unknowing Highlanders versus elite Lowlanders and Englishmen. Richardson rightly recalls that, in the context of the Enlightenment, the illiterate Highlander was a problematic figure, raising 'not only the question of what constitutes history or what is the proper subject of the historian, but also who is qualified to write it' (p. 25). Turning to *Waverley*, Richardson convincingly shows how the novel diffuses the disruptive quality of second sight and transforms it into a signifier of a lost past (p. 30). Second sight is shown to be associated with a sense of place, the fruit of the northern landscapes appropriated by antiquarians, travel writers, and readers, the inspiration of Romantic creativity. The study of Robert Kirk's *Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* (1691) offers insight in Neo-Platonism and its influence on the perception of the world, second sight providing an entry point into the fairy world. Ultimately, Richardson points to the ambiguity of the reception of second sight that 'at the same moment as it is identified as a discrete subject its imminent dissolution is predicted, as if the reticent seer cannot be captured by the full glare of an inquisitive gaze' (p. 46).

In Chapter Three, Richardson turns to mesmerism and phrenology as a new language through which to understand second sight. Richardson thus contrasts her work with A.J.L. Busst,[4] claiming that second sight was not wholly assimilated by mesmeric discourse but that it retained its association with romantic figures (p. 52). Taking Catherine Crowe's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) and *Night Side of Nature, or Ghosts and Ghost-Seers* (1848) as her starting point, Richardson demonstrates that 'second sight emerged as a key point around which new theories of perception and "visual disturbance" coalesced' (p. 62). Crowe called forth new theories of perception that shifted from the supernatural to the preternatural and focused on inner vision 'as both a creative resource and a force capable of shaping exterior reality' (p. 65). Interestingly, Richardson qualifies the common encoding of feminine nature as passive. Using Crowe's work, she argues that '[r]ather than implying a lack of action or willpower, to exist in a passive or "negative" state is to be receptive to knowledge unavailable to the waking mind'

[4] A.J.L. Busst, 'Scottish Second Sight: The Rise and Fall of a European Myth', *European Romantic Review,* 5.2 (Winter, 1995), pp. 149-77.

(p. 84). The chapter also presents the reader with an echo chamber of scientific debates, ventriloquising efforts to distinguish mesmerism as a serious scientific field distinct from popular culture. Phrenology and determinism, too, informed the meaning of second sight, which was thought of as an inherited trait or racial heritage (p. 76). As the chapter deftly demonstrates, the attempt to keep a clear separation between scientific enquiry and supernatural performance is impossible, pointing to more complex relations and cultural hybridity (p. 90).

Chapter Four is by far the most powerful of Richardson's book. Focusing on diverse theories of evolution and nascent scientific disciplines, this chapter offers a new perspective on Victorian spiritualism, construing it as 'a network of cultural exchange' (p. 105). Reading spiritualism alongside anthropology enables Richardson to reconsider the relation between Britain and the Empire, as well as the representation of the margins. Key to this chapter is the concept of inheritance, which constructs second sight 'as a unique repository of superstitious belief in an otherwise civilised country' and identifies Highlanders as an 'aboriginal race' (p. 109). Richardson's study reveals that this colonial view 'had material consequences, with marginalised groups in Britain subjected to the kinds of cultural erasures, state sanctioned violence and enforced migration enacted overseas' (p. 119). Turning to Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins's play *The Frozen Deep* (1856), the chapter shows how second sight was used to keep control over the colonial narrative (p. 133). Though read from an evolutionary perspective, the second-sighted seer is thought to be doomed to extinction (p. 121), Richardson insists on the subversive potential of second sight as its 'disruptive historiography' offers 'other ways of imagining the individual in history' (p. 123).

Chapter Five focuses on Andrew Lang, a figure 'usually to be found haunting footnotes', but who is rehabilitated here to reveal the instability of spheres of knowledge developing in the nineteenth century (pp. 153, 155). This focus enables Richardson to tap into 'psycho-folklore' and recast second sight 'as a kind of mental capacity [which] transformed strange tales [...] into data that might provide insight into our "universal" psychology' (p. 163). Framing second sight in the literary debate as in opposition to realism and romance, the chapter brings to the fore adventure novels written by Robert Louis Stevenson or Rudyard Kipling, showing a reinforced sense of place linked to second sight. As Richardson points out, 'Scotland offers more than a setting for wild adventure novels; rather its customs and superstitions provide a way back to a more primal, instinctive consciousness' (p. 174). Thus, Richardson highlights 'an embodied heritage made visible in oral history, bardic traditions and old tales, one that made certain nations peculiarly receptive to the simple pleasures of the adventure novel' (p. 178). She concludes that Lang's multidisciplinary research allowed for an interpretation of 'second sight as simultaneously myth and mythopoetic

technique; literary inspiration and anthropological project; fairy tale and psychological phenomenon' (p. 181).

Inscribed within the context of the Celtic Revival in the *fin de siècle* and the birth of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Chapter Six redefines second sight as an active faculty 'capable of moulding reality' (p. 201). The focus is on two female figures: Ada Goodrich Freer and Fiona McLeod (a feminine persona for the male writer, William Sharp). Contrary to Hilary Grimes, who reads Freer's experience at the haunted house of Ballechin as a metaphor for the 'female haunted mind', using 'the ghost as a haunting and powerful symbol for women's disfranchisement',[5] Richardson chooses not to consider gender implications. Rather, she acknowledges Freer's new perspective on second sight, positing it both as 'an exclusive faculty/hallucination' and as 'a universally available power/delusion' embodying 'Celtic identities' (p. 229). Richardson identifies a new methodology of immersion and proximity, which informs both Freer's investigations for the SPR and McLeod's revivalist works (p. 211). Richardson shows that the revivalist movement gave new metaphoric meaning to second sight, presenting it as 'an ancient mode of perception lost to the modern world' and an altogether different way of thinking (pp. 217-18). For Richardson, Freer's investigation and McLeod's fiction were 'invested in exploring the boundary regions of human consciousness', sharing 'self-knowledge as a common goal' (p. 223).

Richardson's study points to the 'hybridity' of second sight, to 'the way it adapted to meet the demands of very different investigative cultures', while stressing its enduring connection to the Highlands (p. 250). Her book is of importance for nineteenth-century studies, shedding light on the scientific debates of the time from an unusual angle, ultimately offering an alternative perception of history. The book is also of use for neo-Victorian studies, wherein the supernatural forms a key trope identified first by Patricia Pulham and Rosario Arias in *Haunting Spectrality* (2010). One may indeed wonder the extent to which the return of the figure of the seer in contemporary fiction inscribes itself in the continuity of second sight delineated by Richardson.

[5] Hilary Grimes, *The Late Victorian Gothic: Mental Science, the Uncanny, and Scenes of Writing*, (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 90.

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