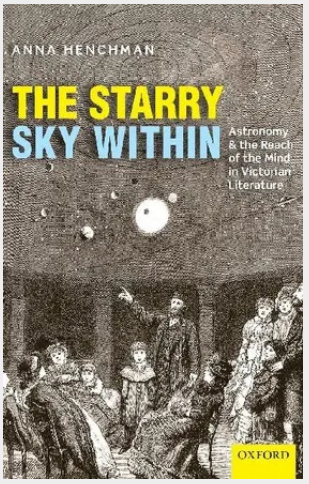
Henchman

Starry Sky Within

Astronomy and the Reach of the Mind in Victorian Literature



Tracing unexplored connections between nineteenth-century astronomy and literature, The Starry Sky Within offers a new understanding of literary point of view as essentially multiple, mobile, and comparative. Nineteenth-century astronomy revealed a cosmos of celestial systems in constant motion. Stars, comets, planets, and moons coursed through space in complex and changing relation. As the skies were in motion, so too was the human subject. Astronomers showed that human beings never perceive the world from a stable position. The mobility of our bodies in space and the very structure of stereoscopic vision mean that point of view is neither singular nor stable. We always see the world as an amalgam of fractured perspectives. In this innovative study, Henchman shows that the reconceptualization of the skies gave poets and novelists new spaces in which to indulge their longing to escape the limitations of individual perspective. She links astronomy and optics to the form of the multiplot novel, with its many centers of consciousness, complex systems of relation, and criss-crossing points of view. Accounts of a world and a subject both in relative motion shaped the form of grand-scale narratives such as Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Bleak House, and Daniel Deronda. De Quincey, Tennyson, and Eliot befriended leading astronomers and visited observatories, while Hardy learned about astronomy from the vast popular literature of the day. These writers use cosmic distances to dislodge their readers from the earth, setting human perception against views from high above and then telescoping back to earth again. What results is a new perception of the mobility of point of view in both literature and science.

The Starry Sky Within is an innovative study of previously unexplored connections between nineteenth-century astronomy and British literature. Nineteenth-century astronomers revealed a staggeringly mobile world extending far beyond the scope of human vision and Henchman examines how this discovery inspired the novelists of the day.

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