

Alex Dumont, Book Review: Chris R. Vanden Bossche. *Reform Acts: Chartism, Social Agency, and the Victorian Novel*. Baltimore, Maryland, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 254 pp.; \$49.95 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-4214-1208-5

The identification of the Victorian with an ardor for reform and a concomitant rejection—albeit an occasionally ambivalent one—of revolution is by now familiar. Chris R. Vanden Bossche's *Reform Acts: Chartism, Social Agency, and the Victorian Novel*, though, provides a new view of Victorian reform by examining the ways in which Chartism, often associated by both 19th and 21st century critics with the revolutionary energies that the Victorian political sphere sought to excise, in fact took up the rhetoric of reform in order to claim agency for the working class. The book also traces the ways in which the rhetoric of Chartism, as well as competing political rhetoric, emerges in the Victorian novel, imagining the literary and the political as analogous and intersecting fields of discourse.

It was, in Vanden Bossche's reading, almost impossible for Chartism not to imagine itself as a type of reform. Reform for Victorians is not simply one possible action among many, but *the* means by which the social sphere is shaped. "Victorians," Vanden Bossche writes, "thought about agency... as reform" (2). This agency, *Reform Acts* argues, was explicitly defined as political. "Social agency" becomes the capacity to form the social sphere by means of participating in, and reforming, the political. *Reform Acts* considers the ways in which Chartism, by describing itself within the terms of the Victorian political sphere even, or especially, when it positioned itself as opposing existing political structures, sought to claim this social agency for working class men.

The book, however, is not so much a study of the discourse of Chartism as it is an examination of how this discourse interacted with other ways of defining social and political agency. The book describes the competition between Chartist and parliamentary discourse to determine which class was best suited to represent the interests of the nation as a whole, and what form such representation should take. It is, consequently, not only an examination of the tensions (between moral and physical force, between agency as a result of or precursor to political power) latent within Chartist discourse. *Reform Acts* also analyzes the ways in which Chartist discourse's conflict with parliamentary discourse shaped the rhetoric of each, and of the political sphere more broadly.

Victorian novels, in turn, "imagined alternative social agents and forms of action through dialogic use of parliamentary and Chartist discourse" (13). *Reform Acts* contends that the novels it examines engage with Chartist and parliamentary discourse primarily via their transformations of the marriage plot. Vanden Bossche argues that Victorian political novels, "envisioned new social agents by revising the national marriage plot of the national tale and the historical novel, transforming it from a narrative of conflict and resolution between nations and cultures into a narrative of conflict and resolution between classes" (13). These novels oppose outmoded kinship marriages, associated with coercion, rigid hierarchy, and a rejection of individual agency, to companionate marriages, in which the individual agency of both partners is nurtured, and a kind of egalitarian self-culture can take place. They allegorize such marriages as models of class conflict and the resolution thereof, imagining a reformation of the relations between classes that would result in a unified and harmonious political sphere.

The book is divided into three sections, each concerned with a question facing the Chartist movement at a particular moment in its history. Part one details debates about moral v. physical force from 1838-1842, during the first phase of Chartism; part two discusses Chartism's turn to land reform after the rejection of the first and second Chartist petitions; and part three traces Chartism's "social turn," and the move away from Chartism towards trade unions and workers' cooperatives (128). Each section begins with an account of the historical and rhetorical contexts in which these questions arose, and then turns to a discussion of the ways in which the Novel takes up these discourses. Of particular interest are *Reform Acts*' discussions of novels not traditionally associated

with Chartism—e.g. Disraeli's *Coningsby* or Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*—and its demonstration of the ways these novels share not just the rhetoric of Chartism per se, but also of conversations about it. Vanden Bossche also traces the emergence of parliamentary and Chartist discourse in both canonical and non-canonical works, bringing into fruitful conversation texts which are not often read together. Finally, *Reform Acts*' discussion of novels which do explicitly engage Chartism often provides helpfully specific readings of the ways political discourse inflects the literary, and vice versa. In particular, its analyses of the problems of self-culture in Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, and of the limitations of sympathy and the possibilities of cooperation in Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South* illuminate the language of the Novel by revealing the specific political resonances of such terms. One sometimes wishes that *Reform Acts* attended more closely to the particular contours of literary form, and to the transformations that take place when moving from one sphere of discourse to another, but its readings provide scholars of the Victorian novel with many potential directions for future considerations of the literary per se.

Vanden Bossche's contention that "public discourse defined social agency in political terms" allows him to state that, although *Reform Acts* examines the ways in which Victorians imagined groups of individuals to be capable of effecting broad social change, it nevertheless "focuses on the political rather than the social and economic" (3,4). But the social as such is everywhere present in the book, as it was in Victorian politics. It is, in fact, its exclusion from the political that renders it politically potent. The social as an alternative to the political becomes, as Vanden Bossche himself points out, an important aspect of the way in which agency for working class men could be imagined in the face of Parliament's repeated rejection of Chartist petitions. *Reform Acts*, then, is less about the political as opposed to the social, or even the social as the political, as it is about the ways in which social agency is both imagined through the political, and constructed as an alternative space from which the political might be critiqued. But although the book describes the movement from the former to the latter position as Chartism's attempts to gain a more purely political form power failed, its readings sometimes feel constrained by its attempt to delimit its discussions to the political realm, even as these discussions recognize the insistent pressure of the social.

What I take Vanden Bossche to mean, then, when he declares *Reform Acts* to be concerned with the political rather than the social, is that the book is concerned less with the material conditions under which novels, petitions, and laws are produced, and more with the language that constructs these objects and is in turn constructed by them. It is a way of declaring not just that the book is primarily concerned with discourse, but that this discourse should be taken seriously—read "justly," as Vanden Bossche, quoting Sharon Marcus, argues (4). The "political" emerges here as a sphere of letters, and of talk; a place where a rhetorical battle is waged both over who can be a speaking actor and over the meanings of the words these actors use. It is in these words themselves, *Reform Acts* suggests, and not just in the world to which they refer, that Victorians saw social and political power.

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