

## **Agents of Reform, Agents of Revolution**

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**Abstract:**

What is the difference between reform and revolution? How are cultural values disseminated through a society, and who controls this process? What is the best form of action to effect cultural change? These are some of the questions which Reform Acts asks of the Victorian novel, specifically a group of novels written between the passage of the First (1832) and Second (1867) Reform Acts in England and Wales. Vanden Bossche explores how these narratives engaged with the Chartist movement and how they sought to grant social agency to the working classes.

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Vanden Bossche, Chris R.: *Reform Acts: Chartism, Social Agency, and the Victorian Novel, 1832-1867*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. 264 S., Hardback, \$49.95. ISBN: 978-1-4214-1208-5

This is a fine book, which will prove valuable to readers interested in nineteenth-century English literature, culture, history, and politics. Vanden Bossche has previously published an excellent monograph on Thomas Carlyle, and he brings this knowledge to bear on his present subject instructively and with a light hand. He divides his twelve chapters into three chronological parts. Each part begins with a close analysis of developments in the Chartist movement for political reform, before offering case studies of novels whose narratives engaged with these political developments. The range of authors under consideration is impressive: it includes Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Kingsley, and Elizabeth Gaskell, alongside less-canonical figures like Pierce Egan, Thomas Martin Wheeler, Harrison Ainsworth, and R. S. Surtees. In each part, Vanden Bossche traces the challenges which supporters of the Reform Bills faced as they mounted arguments for extending the right to vote. Specifically, he examines how the reformers and the existing parliamentary parties contested the nature of the social agency that went along with the franchise. This is valuable work, which leads to some very important insights about how those fighting for the right to vote first had to persuade the ruling classes to recognize the working classes as being legitimate agents in any sense. Too often, for example in criticism of Wordsworth and Coleridge, modern expectations of reform and political agency are exacted of authors who were engaged in very different aspects of the debate. *Reform Acts* does an excellent job of tackling and dispelling such anachronisms.

From the outset, Vanden Bossche announces his intention to "conduc[t] a historical analysis of the conceptions of social agency [which] texts employ and produce" (p. 3). In line with this historicist intention, he offers readings which show how Victorian novels both originated in, and sought to influence, political rhetoric about the working classes. His discussions of Victorian debates about the difference between reform and revolution, and between moral versus physical force, are particularly enlightening, and feed well into the case studies of novels. At times, these case studies might have benefitted from a somewhat closer engagement with the language of the novels: there are only six inset quotations in the book, and a few more might have opened up further discussion of how the authors defined social agency and showed it being wielded by both individuals and groups. However, Vanden Bossche offers a series of carefully-argued and thought-provoking interpretations of both more and less well-known novels. Especially when they open up into comparisons between pairs of novels by

Disraeli, Kingsley, and Gaskell, these case studies are first-rate in terms of their persuasiveness and originality. The chapter on Barnaby Rudge is the only one that might have benefitted from a few more of these comparative references, perhaps to Dickens's letters, or forward to his other historical novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. There is no doubt, however, that the book's scope is impressive as it stands.

Especially in the first part, Vanden Bossche supplements his historicist method by treating the novels' marriage plots as an index of their attempts to resolve tensions between political classes. He argues that "[t]hese novels ... revis[ed] the national marriage plot of the national tale' and turned 'a narrative of conflict and resolution between nations and cultures into a narrative of conflict and resolution between classes" (p. 13). Methodologically, this constitutes an interesting extension of work on the national tale undertaken by Katie Trumpener and Ina Ferris. In the process, Vanden Bossche handles the overlapping divisions between Whigs, Tories, Catholics, Protestants, and Chartists with impressive clarity (especially in the chapter on Ainsworth's novel *Guy Fawkes*). However, as Trumpener recognized, in a passage which Vanden Bossche quotes, "culminating acts of union become fraught with unresolved tensions" (p. 165). It would perhaps have helped if *Reform Acts* had included a little more discussion of how the marriage between individuals comes to stand as a metonym for the marriage between classes: what does this tendency for individuals to represent classes say about the agency of individual characters? To what extent can the actions of individuals be read as representing the attitudes of the classes to which they belong? These tensions, of course, do not belong to Vanden Bossche's argument, but to the novels under discussion. Nonetheless, it might have been instructive to tackle them at a little more length in the introduction, perhaps by referring to some recent theoretical works on allegory (for example by Jeremy Tambling and Brenda Machosky).

These suggestions aside, there is a great deal to be learnt from *Reform Acts*, which tells a fascinating story about the history of Chartism and social agency in nineteenth-century England. By fine-tuning our understanding of what it meant to argue for reform at this time—of the delicate balance between interests in parliament and the view of the working classes as being self-interested, irrational agents—Vanden Bossche has no doubt added significantly to future discussions of the Victorian novel. There are two occasions on which the syntax becomes a little confusing (on pp. 141 and 190), and two more on which the referents of pronouns, though implied, are a little unclear (pp. 150 and 188). Other than this, the book is a model of scholarly accuracy, with thoughtful and relevant endnotes, a very helpful list of works cited, and a beautiful design from Johns Hopkins University Press. This reviewer learnt a great deal from the book, and would thoroughly recommend it to others with an interest in this period.