

Action Without Hope: Victorian Literature after Climate Collapse by Nathan K. Hensley. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2025. x, 359 pp. + 8 colour plates, 34 halftones. ISBN 978-0226838069. \$35.00.

There is nothing revolutionary about Nathan K. Hensley's *Action Without Hope* – and that is just one of the many counterintuitive strengths of this impressive book. While it has become commonplace to valorize works of literature (and of scholarship) by labelling them major, ambitious, or groundbreaking, Hensley's study defiantly insists on the significance of apparently minor, humble, and inconsequential efforts. *Action without Hope* takes as its central subject the nagging feeling that such efforts are not enough, that thinking and writing are useless in an age of socioeconomic upheaval and ecological collapse. But rather than harping on the need for fresh methods to meet our unprecedented situation, Hensley turns to the Victorian era to show that we are not so unique – and by the same token, we are not so alone. Both the intuition of global cataclysm and an attendant sense of powerlessness date back to at least the early 1800s, when industrial hunger for fossil fuels first began to reconfigure the world. *Action without Hope* revisits writers and artists from the nineteenth century to convene a transhistorical community of thinkers who knew they were caught within destructive systems far too large to escape, but who quietly laboured in search of meaning and possibility all the same.

Hensley's methods beautifully mirror his broader claims. The principal authors discussed in his study include Emily Brontë, George Eliot, and Christina Rossetti, all of whom are outsized figures in nineteenth-century letters. But *Action without Hope* is not interested in their moments of greatness or the ways they changed the literary landscape. Even when it deals with these authors' most canonical works, Hensley's book focuses on their depiction of actions and feelings doomed to remain inchoate, stifled, or abortive. His chapter on *Middlemarch* (1871-72), for example, lingers over the frustrated sobs that punctuate the most important episodes in the life of Dorothea Brooke. Rather than reading her frustrations as evidence of the social circumstances that constrained women in 1830s England, Hensley understands *Middlemarch* as making a larger point about how frustration is inevitable if we understand consequential action in the all-or-nothing terms imposed by classical liberalism. Instead of damning the society that limits Dorothea, in other words, he questions – and sees *Middlemarch* as questioning – the politics of frustration itself, asking what we miss when we accept simplistic notions of freedom and agency that ignore the knotty, limiting interdependence of the systems that govern us.

The book's chapters follow a sort of looping, spiralling timeline that em-