

*Victorian Transformations: Genre, Nationalism and Desire in Nineteenth-Century Literature* edited by Bianca Tredennick. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011. xv, 197 pp + 4 b/w illus. ISBN 978-1-4094-1187-1. £55.

In her introduction to *Victorian Transformations: Genre, Nationalism and Desire in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, editor Bianca Tredennick indicates that “there is no collection or monograph that treats transformation as *itself* an issue and that seeks to explore the various ways in which nineteenth-century Britain conceived of, responded to, and created change.” To address such a subject in its totality would be a Sisyphean task: the topic is a vital one to the Victorian era and its ramifications are far-reaching, as the diversity of the essays collected here demonstrates. Hence, while the contributions by no means provide the final word on the theme, they indicate some valuable paths of future inquiry into this protean concept.

The broad scope of materials informing the first essay speaks to the collection’s overarching integration of diverse parts. Traversing many decades of science, philosophy, and literature, Ian Duncan’s “We Were Never Human: Monstrous Forms of Nineteenth-Century Fiction” gradually sets up Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) as the definitive nineteenth-century “monster novel,” a post-Enlightenment creation “characterized by a grotesque or monstrous deformation of realist norms of human nature.” In contrast to the “spatially-based formalist aesthetic of fiction” promulgated by Henry James and his followers, Duncan proposes that the “large loose baggy monsters” are actually sublime in the Burkean sense, written at a time when human nature could no longer be assumed to be unitary and stable. The essay is initially tough going, but Duncan succeeds in synthesizing a wide array of resources in his discussion of Hugo’s novel, and his interest in its transnational influence on English readers and writers is well placed.

Brian Cooney’s “Violence, Terror, and the Transformation of Genre in *Mary Barton*” is less successful overall, despite its careful readings and intelligent analyses. Cooney attempts to explain the change in form of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) from factory novel to domestic melodrama as not accidental but necessary, “structurally determined by John Barton’s terrorist act, an act that substitutes itself for the burgeoning class consciousness of the strike.” Cooney’s Marxist analysis, however, leads him to conclude that Gaskell “fails to come to a radical solution, ending instead with a gesture at Christian charity and mutual recognition.” While this statement is not exactly wrong, it reveals Cooney’s bias as much as it does that of Gaskell: the “failure” is precisely the novel’s point. Yet the argument has many merits, attuned as it is to Gaskell’s valorization of the individual as the source of action among a largely passive and ineffective crowd.