

Caroline Levine and Mario Ortiz-Robles, ed. *Narrative Middles: Navigating the Nineteenth-Century Narrative*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2011.

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Victorian novels are long. It follows then, that most of the time spent reading Victorian novels will be time spent in the middle—somewhere after the beginning, somewhere before the end. But, as Caroline Levine and Mario Ortiz-Robles ask in their introduction to *Narrative Middles*, “what exactly is the middle of the sprawling nineteenth-century novel *for*? How does it work?” (18). Since it is the seemingly endless middle that was the target of the Jamesian accusation of formlessness in the nineteenth-century novel, this question can be understood as a formal one. We are used to reading the middle of novels as “poor in form ... but exceptionally rich in content” (7). The wager of this collection—and it is a successful one—is that these middles have their own formal structure, and their own important roles to play in the experience of the novel.

Narrative Middles is a timely collection, coming at a moment when a good deal of Victorian criticism has been turning to a consideration of the distinctive phenomenologies of novel-reading built on experiences of delay, repetition, expectation, and non-narrative description. These essays all some show of the renewed interest in

historically-inflected formalism in Victorian studies in recent years. If *how* people read novels becomes a clearer focus of the criticism of the period, then we would require some critical methods that address the vast majority of words that people were reading. Going beyond the specifics of the Victorian novel, though, the editors place the collection in the context of a larger turn away from the grand pronouncements of the previous century: “in our postmillennial moment, there seems to be a strong sense among academics that arguments over origins and culminations have played themselves out” (2). *Narrative Middles*, then, would seem an attempt to describe a theoretical practice for those who no longer believe in the rise of the novel or the death of the author, the beginning of the human or the end of history.

Given the theoretical ground to cover here, and the fact that this is a collection of essays, it should not be a surprise to find that the operating definition of “middle” is a broadly inclusive one. The introduction lists a “rich and various range of meanings, including *continuity, development, center, hub, digression, transition, deviation, disjunction, rupture, crisis, turning point, crossing, intersection, node, meantime, error, wandering, and interruption*” (3). The danger here, as is often the case when a work champions the value of a new term in the discipline, is that it can be difficult to figure out what is *not* a middle. The essays in the volume do offer a bit more clarity about what the term means. Thematically, the essays are divided into three sets of three. Part I is about novelistic “centers”: those characters or concerns around which a novel distributes its focus. Part II is concerned with the theme of “repetition” in novels: something which seems to work against the diachronic teleologies of narrative and personal development. Finally, Part III considers formal “suspensions”: the means by which a conclusion is both

promised and delayed. Judging by these categories, to write about the middle would be to interrogate the space *between* the characters, descriptions, and affective readerly reactions which usually provide the content of summaries.

This account might sound similar to structuralist and post-structuralist traditions of relational meaning and absent centers of meaning. Indeed, of the three parts, Part I shows the clearest influence of this line of thought, as each essay in its way points to an implied center that is actually the result of a set of structural relationships that surround it. So Alex Woloch's essay on Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* offers the relative descriptions of Elinor and Marianne as emblematic of a socio-economic world—a middle-class world—in which a person's status can only be understood in relation to the people around them. Hilary Schor's essay on George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* investigates the epistemological disorientation produced by the novel's two narratives, a reading experience that is itself representative of the novel's central moral lesson: that “we think we are at the center, but we are wrong” (73). Kent Puckett suggests that these concerns align with Henry James's own concerns about the form of novel and point-of-view, suggesting that an absent middle that is everywhere referred to is, in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), the center of both character and novel.

Appropriately enough, it is the middle Part—on repetition—that has the most to offer to literary critics looking for new avenues into familiar subjects. In different ways, all three essays here—Amanda Claybaugh on Anne Brontë, Amanpal Garcha on William Makepeace Thackeray's *Pendennis*, and Suzanne Daly on Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*—investigate the question of how everyday work and labor can be integrated into a form which postulates development and change. The utility of this approach can be

seen by the fact that, in Claybaugh and Garcha's essays at least, it offers a reading of works that flutter around the periphery of Victorian studies—seemingly important, rarely read. Brontë's work remains in print, but that is no doubt due to the company she kept. *Pendennis*, meanwhile, has suffered an odd critical fate: recognized at once as one of Thackeray's major works, and a central example of the British *Bildungsroman*, it is nonetheless out of print at Penguin, Oxford, and Broadview. Referenced and cited, the work is rarely *read*—new readers would be unable to get their hands on it. (*Dombey* is the exception here, since no Dickens novel ends up being completely ignored, but it is certainly not among his most attended-to works.) The essays that make up this book's middle third, then, offer a sort of out-of-focus version of the discipline's preoccupations. While none of the works discussed in the first part seem to require a new novelistic lens to determine its place, the exciting prospect of the concentration on "repetition" in these works by Brontë and Thackeray is that this trope might offer a means of reading that will allow us to place these works in a more meaningful critical context. It should be noted here that even in this context of everyday work, the notion of "middle age" remains absent, as it does throughout the book. Claybaugh and Garcha's essays on labor and repetition tend to hold it against some more essential *Bildungsroman* fulfillment: marriage for the women, vocation for the man. The persistence of the nineteenth-century mythology of youth is evident in the fact that even in a book on middles, the middle period of life—that period in which most of the novelists and critics find themselves—is nowhere to be found.

Part III moves to a consideration of the middle as part of a larger novel-narrative strategy of *suspensions*. Amy King, reading the Victorian novel in light of the descriptive

practices of nineteenth-century natural theology, focuses on lingering acts of non-narrative description as essential to the art of novelists such as Gilbert White and Mary Mitford. Levine, looking at Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (the *locus classicus* of Victorian suspense) shows how in the novel suspense is not only a targeted affect, but also a theme within the novel itself. The final essay, by Ortiz-Robles, considers the odd temporal dynamics of late-Victorian utopian fiction, such as William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, in which the time between now and the utopian future is so often skipped. It is in this elided middle, Ortiz-Robles argues, that the reader's imagination is engaged, and the vague relationship between a utopian state and the present (neither fully realist, nor fully yet of the revolutionary avant-garde) is possible.

The essays in the collection are consistently strong, and should be of interest to students of novel narrative outside of the British nineteenth century. But for those particularly interested in the fields of nineteenth-century studies and narrative theory, the book will perhaps be even more valuable as a sort of meta-critical lay of the land. The majority of the critics in this collection have produced compelling—and much-discussed—works over the past decade. And so, while the essays here display a shared interest in the space between the easily extractable plot-points and characters of a novel, they also show offer a sense of how these concerns connect much of the recent work in the field of Victorian studies (the essays by Woloch, Garcha, and Levine in particular). The work thus has the edifying effect of not only telling us something about the novels it examines, but also about the through-lines in a good deal of the more interesting criticism current in the field.

Narrative Middles is a particularly welcome collection because it so clearly points to a gathering series of concerns in Victorian studies, one that many might have had a hard time quite putting their finger on. Like some other collections, such as Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca L. Walkowitz's *The Turn to Ethics* (Routledge 2000), it is a book whose title will likely be cited as much as its contents as a sign of the current directions of the field.

Biographical Notice:

Jesse Rosenthal is an assistant professor of English at Johns Hopkins University. He is currently working on a book about the joint development of Victorian ideas of moral intuition and the experience of novel-reading.