Theory and Interpretation of Narrative
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Narrative Middles
Navigating the Nineteenth-Century British Novel

EDITED BY

Caroline Levine
AND Mario Ortiz-Robles
For Eli, Paloma,
and Joe, who came along in the middle
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Not long ago, within the literary academy and without, beginnings and endings were attracting a lot of attention. The very idea of beginning pulled together vexed ideas about origins and originality, birth, precedence, intention, and revolution. Political battles were waged between two ways of imagining beginnings: on the one hand, the quest for origins, the desire to ground the political world in essential truths; on the other, the desire to break from the past in a total way, as in the French revolutionaries’ attempt to start again in the “year zero.” Jacques Derrida pointed to the necessary violence involved in founding institutions and systems of law, while Edward Said affirmed beginnings as the activity of “making or producing difference.” And while beginnings evoked both deep conservatism and exciting innovation, endings seemed inextricable from anxiety and ideology, calling up death and telos, culmination and apocalypse. Frank Kermode understood endings as necessary—but always fictional—consolations for “men in the middest,” while Francis Fukuyama famously announced that we had almost reached the end of history, a point where everyone would agree that liberal democracy was the best and most rational form of government for all.

Critical or triumphant, all of those who wrote about beginnings and endings recognized their immense and mythical power. The Bible begins, “In the beginning . . . ,” and ends with the end of the world. Another long Western
tradition associates beginnings and endings with the pull of home: Odysseus struggles to reach the end of his journey, which is also his point of departure, and so his journey is an attempt to complete a circle. And the Hollywood happy ending, to return to our present, claims narrative priority in a culture for which last frontiers offer endless possibility and closure provides a gratifying correlate to its manifest destiny. In narratives high and low, then, beginnings and endings allow cultures to reflect on birth and death, departure and belonging, origin and fruition, mythic pasts and apocalyptic futures, revolutionary politics and divine eschatology.

The drama of these extremes is clear and inescapable. And yet, in our postmillennial moment, there seems to be a strong sense among academics in the humanities that arguments over origins and culminations have played themselves out, and for the most part we scholars are agreed that beginnings and endings are neither true nor foundational: as fictions fraught with meaning, they play crucial cultural roles, but they no longer seem to be a terribly useful heuristics for those eager to debate politics, philosophy, and the future of the humanities. To be sure, for plenty of voices outside the university, beginnings and endings continue to exert an intense attraction—from debates over intelligent design and Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* to warnings over irreversible climate change, the extinction of species, and the end of fossil fuels, to religious extremists determined to usher in the end of the secular world. But in the day-to-day work of philosophical theory and cultural and historical scholarship, the heated debates over origin and *telos* that raged for several decades are no longer seen as equal to the task of teasing out and coming to terms with the more troubling implications of the millenarian politics and cultural malaise characteristic of the post–Cold War period. Instead, subtler, more fine-grained and gradualist accounts of political and cultural experience are needed in order to address critically the discourse of “crisis” we all too often leave unexamined as a “passing” moment or a “glitch” in our matrix.

If it seems tricky to pinpoint the origins of the end of a debate about endings and origins, this book plans to renounce the task altogether—and on principle. That is, we intend to accept both beginnings and endings as shadowy and overheated and to settle ourselves down instead to the bewildering, massive, deliberately undramatic enterprise of coming to terms with middles. The middle is of course notoriously impossible to sustain—undecided, transitional, vacillating, even cowardly. And yet, the middle is also precisely what we cannot escape, as Frank Kermode makes clear: it is because we live in the “middest,” Kermode claims, because we are born *in medias res* and die *in medias rebus*, that we need the consolatory fictions of endings. J. Hillis Miller argues that beginnings and endings always, in the end, turn out to be middles after
all—citations and repetitions rather than innovations and culminations. And indeed, in the past three decades theorists have actually given us ample reason to turn to the middle: from poststructuralist emphases on undecidability, iterability, and rhizome and trace structures to post-Marxist models of Left politics, the middle, it turns out, has been there all along. Maybe it has been just too vast, omnipresent, and crucial to be recognized as such.

It might seem politically worrying to embrace the middle, since it so clearly lacks drama and conviction—calling to mind such humdrum states as the middle-of-the-road, the middle class, middling quality, and the jadedness of midlife. But could there be such a thing as a radical middle? A liberatory, expansive, ethical middle? A middle filled with significance, energy, vitality, power? Is it possible to mine the idea of the middle for values that go beyond mediocrity and indecision? The middle, after all, gestures to 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. The middle points us to such crucial phenomena as changes and processes, ebbs and flows, hubs and breaks. And, most of all, it points us to the tough, imperfect, anxious, exciting experience of having decidedly left our beginnings behind, while never quite knowing what will happen to us in the end.

For literary critics, middles raise questions of both form and content. The novel, in particular, engages both the formal middle—the bulk of its narrative space—and the problem of middlingness—the middle class, the unheroic, the ordinary. In recent years, the form of the novel has been by and large less interesting to critics than its social content—its engagement of the city and the nation, and its participation in ideologies of empire, class, gender, race, and sexuality. And yet, growing signs of a renewed interest in formalist criticism have been appearing recently. This new wave of formalists are not simply looking backward, trying just to warm over the New Criticism: instead, they aim to show how literary forms matter in the social world, and thus they seek to combine a subtle attentiveness to the workings of aesthetic form with the political and historical impulses of cultural studies.

Broadly speaking, recent work that brings together formalist readings of the novel with sociopolitical history falls into three camps. The first group has the longest tradition of linking aesthetic forms to social content, and that is the Marxist model of form as ideology. From as far back as Georg Lukács to recent works by Fredric Jameson, Franco Moretti, and Garrett Stewart, Marxist-formalist critics have read the forms of literature as struggling to contain or suppress social clashes and contradictions. Ultimately, these struggles always fail, which means that the novel form is best understood as an attempt
to impose a false and impossible coherence on the materials of the social world. This model of reading tends to understand the middle as the site of revealing textual eruptions, conflicts, absences, and fissures, while endings then close down such contradictory energies in favor of strained ideological conclusions. One brilliantly innovative Marxist mode of reading the novel’s middle can be found in Elaine Freedgood’s *Ideas in Things*, which focuses on the objects that appear, without much attention, in the bulky interior of the Victorian triple-decker. These things matter not because the novel privileges them, but precisely because they had real histories of production, circulation, and consumption beyond the pages of the text. This is “not the history that the novel narrates, but the history that the novel secretes: the history it hides and emits.” Thus the object, though only mentioned in passing in the novel’s middle, can be read as a site where the realist novel “stockpiles” historical information, compressing into a single thing a vast and terrifying story of world trade, genocide, and enslavement.

Where the Marxist tradition has apprehended form as a strategy for containing political instabilities, a second group of critics has been inclined to understand literary forms as more straightforward indexes—manifestations or enactments—of sociocultural realities. For example, in their groundbreaking book *The Victorian Serial*, Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund argue that the serial publication of the novel—with its extended length and multiple interruptions—embodied certain basic values at the heart of nineteenth-century British culture. “The assumption of continuing growth and the confidence that an investment (whether in time or money) in the present would reap greater rewards in the future were shared features of middle-class capitalism and serial reading.” Here the forms of the middle reflect and convey the beliefs of a dominant culture. Two other influential scholars of print culture, Leah Price and John Plotz, have focused on portable pieces of the novelistic middle—the extract and the quotation—as bearers of cultural values outside of the context of the novel proper. And in quite a different example, Ronald R. Thomas argues that detective fiction adopted devices for isolating identities that reflected the anxieties and aspirations of new, modern, bureaucratic societies “preoccupied with systematically bringing under control the potentially anarchic forces unleashed by democratic reform, urban growth, national expansion, and imperial engagement.” It is no accident, Thomas argues, that a genre consumed with finding clues to pinning down identity comes into being at the same moment as the modern English police force and the science of criminology. For this second group of scholars, then, the forms of the novel’s middle are capable of revealing the intellectual, social, and political dynamics of its cultures.
These first two cohorts have recently come under fire from a third and increasingly vocal collection of scholars. In the eyes of these critics, the notion that literary forms unconsciously reveal political and social struggle has come to seem condescending and untrue: they urge us instead to see writers as deliberately deploying literary forms to engage in self-conscious political and social projects. Susan J. Wolfson led the way in 1999 when she argued that Romantic writers were hardly unconscious purveyors of a “romantic ideology” that masked political struggle in unified “organic forms”: instead, they were themselves fully aware of the constructedness of literary unities and deliberately drew on formal strategies to investigate problems of “subjectivity, cultural ideology, and social circumstance.” Thus their works “reflect on rather than conceal their constructedness (not only aesthetic, but social and ideological).” As for Foucauldian readings, which “see all aesthetic form as only subordinate to an all-determining social form,” these, Wolfson argued, overlook the ways that literary forms “may resist, revise, or reform a prevailing social context.” Similarly, in Disorienting Fiction, James Buzard argues that the shift in the novel “from a loosely assembled entertainment” to a genre in the middle of the nineteenth century that had “aspirations to total formal integration” was not so much the sign of a middle class trying to repress conflicts and contradictions as it was a “self-conscious questioning” by writers eager to capture and convey their nation as a “culture.” Likewise intent on moving away from critical assumptions about the naïveté of literary writers, John Kucich makes the case that Victorian realism was a “complex, highly self-conscious” project that “made a sophisticated awareness of scientific epistemology the basis for formal ordering.” The scholarly object for this third group is to understand nineteenth-century writers less as dupes or instruments of political and social formations than as thinkers aware of the ways that aesthetic forms can mold and intervene in the social world. The form of the novelistic middle, in this third model, is poised to emerge less as a process of repression or reflection than as a matter of conscious engagement.

While the contributors to this volume draw from all three of these socially conscious formalisms, it seems telling that they are all quite vigorous about emphasizing the notion of form as a deliberate and self-conscious enterprise. The middle emerges, throughout this volume, as a responsive and knowing formal engagement with the social world. It is this third model, then, that is found most clearly at the heart of this volume, and it is the one that may well represent the most powerful version of “neoformalism” in novel studies today.

In turning to the vast and sprawling middle of the nineteenth-century novel, in particular, this volume has two principal objectives. The first is to contribute to a long-standing gap in narrative theory. Theorists of narrative
have made much of beginnings and endings, but it is in the vast, bulky middle of the nineteenth-century multiplot novel that narrative theory is inclined to let us down. It is not that theorists have overlooked the middle: it is that they have too often cast the middle in functionalist terms, as *on the way* to an ending that will bestow it, retrospectively, with meaning. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes makes the famous case that the classic nineteenth-century novel manipulates us into a desire for ideological endings by mobilizing “an organized set of stoppages” on the way to an inevitable closure, one that resolves contradictions and represses possibilities. Peter Brooks, in a more psychoanalytic vein, argues that “we would do best to speak of the *anticipation of retrospection* as our chief tool in making sense of narrative, the master trope of its strange logic. We have no doubt foregone eternal narrative ends... yet we still read in a spirit of confidence, and also a state of dependence, that what remains to be read will restructure provisional meanings of the already read.” And it is not only Marxist and psychoanalytic traditions of reading narrative that have tended to stress endings as the ultimate sites of narrative significance, the points where the text has been heading all along. D. A. Miller’s remarkable Foucauldian analysis of the Victorian novel suggests that the novel’s linear, cumulative time disciplines dispersals and deviations in order to bring every detail into line with its own ultimate evaluative judgments: “The moral lesson George Eliot seeks to impose,” for example, “depends on our ability to correlate the end of a character’s career with what was there in germ at the beginning.” Even narratology, which has offered so many refined instruments for the analysis of the middle of novels—from modes of focalization and diegesis to duration and anachrony—has rarely turned its attention to the middle *as such*, to middleness itself as a quality of narrative. In her study of closure, Marianna Torgovnick suggests that sheer length is a problem for the middle: it is too massive and full to remain in the memory beyond the most climactic events. But Catherine Gallagher points out that length is itself a formal element—“one of the most prominent generic features of the novel”—and yet one to which neither narratology nor other formalist accounts of literature have paid any sustained attention. Nicholas Dames argues that this is a mistake indeed, since nineteenth-century theories of the novel form treated it less as an *object* than as a temporal *process*: they imagined “novelistic form as produced by reading in time, by rhythms of attention and inattention, slow comprehension and rapid skipping-ahead, buildups and discharges of affect.” Henry James and Percy Lubbock would later come to reject this theorization of the novel, redefining the very critical category of form as spatial design, and privileging such formal devices as “point of view” and the symmetry of parts. The Jamesian conception of form has prevailed ever since, but Dames argues that understanding
the novel as a static artifact has prompted critics to neglect the time-bound activity of reading that was so important to nineteenth-century thinkers. This volume proposes, then, that nineteenth-century novelists, dwelling lengthily and lovingly on the middle, were absorbed in the experience of middleness *per se*. Spending hundreds of pages *in medias res*, absorbed in complex processes of *Bildung* and characterization, carefully deploying suspenseful cliffhangers and ironic interruptions, managing mistakes and crises, interludes, digressions, and transitions, the nineteenth-century novel offers narrative theory the opportunity to theorize the middle.

Our second objective is methodological in a broader sense. If for too long the techniques of formalist analysis have remained separate from the sociopolitical approaches that are the mainstay of cultural studies, this volume suggests that narrative middles are an ideal site for the convergence of formalist and historicist methods. The middle of the nineteenth-century novel, after all, has long seemed poor in form—a large, loose, baggy monster—but exceptionally rich in content, conveying political and social conflicts and norms, from ideologies of gender, race, and sexuality to institutional reform and imperial expansion. By attending to the middle of the nineteenth-century novel in terms of *both* form and content, we hope to challenge and to nuance the traditional categories we employ in reading narrative and to bridge the gap between intrinsic and extrinsic criticism, historicist and formalist models of reading. All of the contributions collected here address relations between the operations of the narrative middle, on the one hand, and sociocultural events and processes, on the other—including capitalism, middle-class identity, subject formation, gender norms, labor practices, scientific knowledge, and revolutionary terrorism. And all suggest that the workings of narrative form are bound up with the workings of the social, just as the social comes to be articulated and known through the practices of narrative form.

But why, if the goal is to generate a new set of theoretical, generalizable understandings of narrative middles, should this collection restrict its focus specifically to the nineteenth-century British novel? The most important reason lies precisely in our desire to capture the difficulty—and the interest—of joining sociohistorical and formal concerns. The world of nineteenth-century Britain focuses our attention on three crucial *social* middles: first, the middle class, which achieved political hegemony through industrial capitalism rather than revolutionary action; second, the centrist reform program pursued through institutional mediation in a purposefully ongoing process that stubbornly held to the middle, refusing both dramatic beginnings and resolved endings; and third, the hub of empire, as London marked the metropolitan center of an empire that stretched across the world. The novel’s form, an aes-
thetic compromise between imaginative vision and historical discourse (Lukács famously called it the “epic of a world abandoned by God”), accords in its British variant a corresponding priority to the middleness of the world it inhabits by avoiding rhetorical excess and dramatic extremes.

For Franco Moretti, the nineteenth-century English novel is a terrible disappointment compared with its Continental counterparts: “the awful Victorian plot” is also “the worst novel of the West,” because, Moretti insists, its middle involves no real possibility of change. Its heroes are always already innocent, and the narrative offers no searching uncertainties about value or social stability, always ending on the side of a naïve justice. He prefers the willingness of the Continental novel to face up to the question of failure—the inevitable loss of illusions, the inability to realize a resolution between the free self and the demands of socialization—confronting the contradictions of modernity rather than evading or misrepresenting them. For Moretti, that is, the problem with the English novel is that nothing really unsettles the middle: no tension, no insecurity, no possibility of the radically new. In an essay called “Serious Century,” Moretti goes so far as to claim that the middle of the nineteenth-century novel is little but “filler.” We tend to associate narrative progress with a logic of “turning points,” but he claims that these turn out to be surprisingly infrequent in the nineteenth-century novel, which follows instead the rhythms of everyday life and the value it places on repetitive patterns of conduct such as manners that provide a blueprint for a programmatically uneventful sense of normalcy. The nineteenth-century novel, Moretti argues, has collapsed adventure into everyday banality, the better to represent a social world in which work has given a new regularity to bourgeois life and impersonal style has become the mark of its seriousness of purpose. The middle, in other words, is the cultural repository of a serious century for which the reality principle has become a cultural value about which beginnings and endings have little to teach us.

And yet, Moretti exposes something particular about the English novel’s middle that engages the attention of our own volume. Moretti’s favored Continental narratives are precisely those that avoid the marriage plot. Balzac and Stendhal give us heroes who refuse to marry willingly and for love because such a reconciliation with the social would imply an unshaken faith in the normalizing values of bourgeois society. They must reject marriage as an illusion, a ruse, a trap, a loss of the mobile energy of youth—an attempt to compel the hero to sacrifice his freedom to the engulfing and deadening processes of socialization. For the novel to stay faithful to modernity’s contradictions, according to Moretti, two poles—self-determination and socialization—must remain opposed, straining against one another. But if the hero represents self-determination, it is the marriageable woman who stands in for the normalizing
forces of socialization. Implicitly, in other words, to attach oneself to a wife is to lose one’s freedom and energy. Women must be kept at bay for the sake of the historical dialectic. But it is in precisely this context that the English novel might begin to look more interesting than Moretti gives it credit for. By persistently intertwining marriage and Bildung, the British novel makes the question of femininity crucial to the question of modern subjectivity. Far from imagining the solitary, questing, masculine self as the prototype of modernity, the British novel puts at its center two people, to be precise, two different people, whose difference depends precisely on the binary division of gender. And while it may be true that the British novel tends to opt for happy endings, unlike its Continental cousins, and while it is all too obvious that the marriage plot adopts a heteronormativity that brings with it a trail of pernicious political consequences, it is one achievement of the British novel that it never forgets femininity—and never lets us forget it. Indeed, the middle of the nineteenth-century English novel works hard to theorize the gender of modernity—and it does so with an eye to its failures as well as its successes.

In our attempt to fulfill these theoretical and methodological objectives, we have grouped the essays in this collection under three conceptual rubrics: centers, repetitions, and suspensions. These categories pertain not only to salient formal characteristics of narrative middles; they are also, in keeping with the general aims of the volume, discursive patterns that help us to situate the social and cultural importance of middles. The first major question that gathers together the essays in this volume, then, is the question of the novel’s center. Is there a midpoint, a heart of the novel, that holds everything together? The novelistic center appears as a site of interrogation or negotiation where the very centrality of the center is simultaneously foresworn and recuperated by formal strategies that make visible, in its absence or its problematization, the enduring importance of the center to nineteenth-century culture. When W. B. Yeats famously describes radical change as coming at a moment when the “center cannot hold,” he is referring to the classic notion that “things” (order, life, totality) are held in place as though balanced on a central support. But one need not have the image of a gyre in mind to understand that meaning tends to gather around the center, whether this be on account of the cyclical nature of the seasons, an established human history of centrally governed social formations, or the body’s tendency to position itself in the world following the dictates of the central nervous system. Writing during a period of cultural upheaval and political uncertainly, Yeats might well have felt that things were falling apart all around him, but the displacement of the center, or, rather, of centrality, as the fundamental organizing principle of thought was already underway in British culture in the nineteenth century. Darwin’s theory of
evolution and Marx’s conceptualization of historical materialism are two mid-
century instances of a more general tendency that was pushing human agency
away from the center of explanation. It is not the case that the nineteenth-
century novel stages a Copernican revolution in displacing centrality as much
as it makes visible centrality’s waning power as well as the strategies devised to
come to terms with its diminishing returns.

On a formal level, the postponement of semantic clarity towards the
moment of novelistic closure is very often accompanied by false or partial
resolutions that, by appearing at the very center of the action, anticipate the
end and, in so doing, retrospectively reaffirm the importance of centrality.
John Harmon’s soliloquy in the middle of Dickens’s Our Mutual Friend or
the interrupted wedding scene in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre suggest them-
selves as explanatory centers that yet have to be rehearsed, repeated, or recov-
ered before they attain their full narrative value. Then there is free indirect
discourse, the realist novel’s greatest contribution to mimetic representation,
which charts a moving center of novelistic consciousness as the perspective
shifts from one character to the next without thereby privileging a disembod-
ied narrator that would come to occupy the absent center. The plasticity of free
indirect discourse comes to symbolize this displacement as it itself becomes the
most active site or vehicle of stylistic experimentation in the realist novel. The
use of multiple narrators in Wilkie Collins, the hybrid form Dickens adopts
in Bleak House, narrative interruptions in George Eliot, and Thackeray’s med-
dling narrators are all formal innovations that, for all their inventiveness, also
illustrate the centrifugal forces at work in the middle as narrative authority is
multiplied, curtailed, and undermined by experiments in focalization.

Part I opens with Alex Woloch’s essay on Sense and Sensibility. In a novel
that centers on two co-protagonists—Elinor and Marianne—Austen questions
the possibility of character centrality itself: who can be said to occupy the
center of a double plot? Woloch’s response is that Austen carefully crafts a
“character structure” in which identities emerge only through comparisons and
juxtapositions. (Of the two sisters, Marianne has “the advantage of height,”
but as Woloch asks, “how tall does that make either sister?”) And this is not
only a formal structuring principle for the narrative: it is a brilliant enactment
of a specific social condition—the condition of being middle-class. The middle
class, after all, “does not have an intrinsic social, or circumstantial, identity,
but emerges only contingently, in negative relation to both the landed arist-
cracy and the unpropertied working class.” In a world where social identity
emerges only through comparison, Austen stages the insecure social status of
her characters by deliberately choosing a character-pair, rather than a single
protagonist, to organize her novel. “Locked together in continual juxta-

position, Marianne and Elinor embody the essentially contingent identity of those many individuals—then or now—who are unable to define themselves through a fixed or stable economic ground.” And thus Austen joins narrative form to economic conditions in a way that never simply objectifies social relations: “Both the responses to and the condition of socioeconomic insecurity emerge only in relation to the narrative form.”

*Sense and Sensibility* is not, of course, the only nineteenth-century plot organized around two main characters. Hilary Schor’s essay shows that George Eliot deliberately troubles all settled sense of middles and centers through her famous double-plot structure in *Daniel Deronda*. She asks not only: who is at the center of the story? But also: where is its temporal middle? What is the central crisis of the narrative? Schor organizes her essay around a startling variety of meanings for middles—from meantime to mixture to meddling to crossing to disruption—and shows us how Eliot self-consciously engages them all, and all in the interest of affirming the humbling, interesting, disorienting experience of living in the middle. The question of the middle, Schor argues, is a question of knowledge. As the two plots meet and cross, and as the novel moves forward and backward to fill in two asymmetrical backstories and to project two different but intertwining futures, both readers and characters struggle to piece together the middle in disrupted and fragmentary moments, our grasp of narrative chronology always pointedly mixed-up and crisscrossed. Schor argues that this disorienting middle has ethical, epistemological, and political implications. To grasp their own roles in the midst of events, the characters must recognize the limits of their knowledge. What is it, then, to learn to live in the middle? It is an awe-inspiring experience, an experience of humbling ignorance. Indeed, as Gwendolyn recognizes the limits of her knowledge, she also comes to apprehend her own marginality, her movement away from the center: to know oneself in the narrative middle is to know that one is not at the center of the plot. Readers, trained by conventional novels, might well prefer the masterful and knowing satisfactions of closural endings and new beginnings. But Eliot deliberately deprives her heroine of both: what Gwendolyn discovers in the middle is her own ignorance and what she looks forward to, at the end, is no choice, no culmination, no new beginning, but only the “continuing middle.” It may be a mistake to think of this as an unhappy ending. Schor suggests, if we think of marriage for women as typically coming too soon and repentance too late: the chance for women to live in the continuing middle is a chance to catch up with the knowledge permitted to them.

While Austen and Eliot deliberately unsettle the work of locating the novelistic center, Henry James makes the remarkable decision to drop it out
altogether. Writing self-consciously in response to the English novel, James has been included as often in the British tradition as in the American one. Kent Puckett concentrates on the fact that the crucial, central event of *The Princess Casamassima*—Hyacinth Robinson’s vow to participate in revolutionary violence, which precisely bisects his life—takes place in the unrepresented time *between* the two volumes of the New York Edition of the novel. Puckett argues that James had long been troubled by the problem of crafting a balanced novelistic whole, where the hermeneutic center—the novel’s center of consciousness—would converge with the material center—the literal formal middle of the novel. Characters in James, as in *Daniel Deronda*, typically come to their knowledge either too early or too late, and the novel often reaches its own central crisis equally lopsidedly, leaving both the content and the form of the novel off-kilter. But in *The Princess Casamassima*, James purposefully took on the task of joining the formal, temporal middle with the psychic center of consciousness, inviting us to read always in two directions—backward from the vow to Hyacinth’s childhood and complex social past, and forward to the fulfillment of the promise he makes to commit revolutionary violence. The vow in the missing middle of the novel precisely marks the point between the two, the moment that bisects the before and the after and makes it possible to read backward to causes and forward to effects. And so, Puckett argues, James dramatizes what Freud would come to call *Nachträglichkeit*—“afterwardsness”—“a position where if we would read for significance we would need to decide but cannot finally decide between reading forward or backward, from trauma to symptom or from symptom to trauma.” It is this movement both backward and forward that makes psychoanalysis possible at all: “the fact that present and past are understood as parts of a greater analyzable whole.” It is the same movement that allows James to construct his novel as an “organic whole,” organized around a central point. And thus it is the middle, and emphatically not the end, that permits both novelistic form and meaning itself to take shape.

If centers organize the novelistic middle, creating coherence and order, repetitions might seem to act as a drag on narrative, unnecessarily elongating the text—making too much of the middle. And yet, narrative cannot do without repetition. Narrative theory has insisted on this point at least since Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who argued that there can be no narrative without a subject who appears again and again, marking the passage of time for us through successive appearances. And the nineteenth-century English novel allows us to reconceptualize this property of narrative not only as a formal fact but also as a fact of social life. Repetition allows Victorian writers to reflect, and reflect on, the problem of mundane contemporary existence: such as the ordinary sameness that characterizes daily life, or the recurrent habits and manners that
allow us to identify distinct social groups, or the dreary mechanical routines of factory labor. But how can the novel, in particular, embrace repetition without losing its energy, its excitement, its readability? It is “the essential nature of work to be perpetual, repetitive, habitual,” writes Elaine Scarry, and this is crucially at odds with narrative’s reliance on action, adventure, event.23

The monotony of modern labor may seem impossible to capture in the novel without succumbing to a tedium that threatens to eradicate narrative interest altogether. Indeed, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* never actually allows us inside the factory to see the workers at the machines, and Victorian poetry—Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Cry of the Children,” or Thomas Hood’s “Song of the Shirt”—seems far more intent on capturing the monotony of industrial work, and far more capable than the novel, too, given its formal properties of rhythm and rhyme. And yet, Victorian novelists often embraced repetition, sometimes even purposefully stalling narrative flow, and found that this was no barrier to popularity with audiences. Thackeray, for example, chooses to represent journalistic work not as the breathless quest for change and novelty that it so often seemed in a rapidly modernizing social landscape, but rather as routinized, habitual hackwork that could emerge for readers as a reassuringly familiar, unchanging, and stable fact of life. Similarly, Dickens and Trollope show characters comfortably repeating a recognizable set of virtues, manners, and behaviors, thereby signaling class identity as legible, stable, and predictable both on and off the page. And most intriguingly, the nineteenth-century British novel often critically engages the intrinsic repetitiveness of the narrative middle—making use of it, displaying it, amplifying it—in order to focus readers’ attention on the structures and meanings of repetition in the social world.

The three essays in Part II examine the repetition of formal and cultural motifs in the middle of narrative as one of its constituent characteristics. Amanda Claybaugh reads the extraordinarily insistent repetition of Anne Brontë’s narratives as part of a project to represent precisely the dreary repetitiveness of humdrum life: the realities of both governessing and marriage. Everyday life for women is a monotonous round of sameness. And yet, in order to bring the hard truths of women’s lives into the domain of fiction, Anne Brontë twice comes to a narrative impasse: both of her novels—*Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*—reach points where they simply cannot move forward unless they break from the representation of unremitting repetitiveness. In order to resolve her narrative difficulties, Brontë imports conventional plots into the middles of both of her novels: the courtship plot in *Agnes Grey* and the temperance plot in *Tenant*. It is true, Claybaugh argues, that these plots are familiar templates associated with dominant nineteenth-century ideologies.” But, she argues, novelists sometimes used imported plots less as ways to
support certain social projects than as formal resources, modes of emplotment necessary to narrative itself. Form, that is, might trump ideology. “What Anne Brontë’s middles suggest, then, is that plots need to be understood as recognizable forms, ones that can be emptied of their substantive content and replaced with content of a quite different kind.”

In her reading of *Dombey and Son*, Suzanne Daly focuses on a sector of the labor force in which repetition is the very essence of the form of labor performed: the clerks whose task is to copy documents. Starting from the observation that it is specifically two clerks who move closely around the plotted and the moral centers of the novel—the good Walter and the sinister Carker—Daly asks why clerks matter so much to the novel’s middle, and why one must withdraw altogether. Turning to contextual evidence, Daly shows that Victorian culture was anxious about the class of clerks, understanding them as social climbers and interlopers, aspiring above their station. Clerks in Dickens—we might think not only of Carker but also of Uriah Heep—are typically tainted by sly ambition, deceit, and corruption. In order to allow Walter *both* to climb the social and the financial ladder *and* to remain a wholesome moral center for the novel, Dickens seems to have no choice but to drop him out of the middle of the novel, to allow his social ascent to take place in an unrepresented elsewhere. “To be dead to the world for thirty chapters is in this context to be cleansed of the taint of clerkship and social climbing that would otherwise cling to the character.” Daly suggests that the narrative middle and the middle class exist in a strained relationship that is bound up with the relationship between plot and character: the plotted middle depends on the unruly and immoral actions of the slick and slippery Carker for its dynamic interest, while the middle class, in order to emerge as a reliable moral and social center, must be repetitive and predictable, like the static, and mostly absent, character Walter. Class, it turns out in Daly’s reading, is precisely an effect of the repetition of certain recognizable attributes. Using the stable repetition of character to redeem the instability of plot, Dickens offers up an eventful novelistic middle with the redemptive hero nowhere to be found.

Amanpal Garcha considers the repetitive routines of journalistic work in his reading of Thackeray’s *Pendennis*. On the surface, journalism would seem to be opposed to humdrum repetition, since it prizes the sensationalist novelty of the “news.” And yet, according to Garcha, Thackeray describes journalism in long dilatory passages to still narrative flow, emphasizing stasis, repetition, and generality, appealing in worldly, sophisticated tones to the reader’s knowledge of the world. Garcha shows how Thackeray pits the content of Pen’s writing against the form of his career, the humdrum, tedious experience of the hack writer, who is forced to churn out the impression of constant
change while caught in precisely the opposite—a repetitive cycle of sameness. Curiously, the novel privileges the dreary repetitiveness over the excitement of journalism, and Garcha argues that this is no accident: in a capitalist context characterized by bewilderingly rapid change, “routine implies a reassuring, if dull, repetition of acts and consistency of identity.” Purposefully destroying narrative desire “secure[s] the narrator’s melancholy identity as a man whose experience provides him with a clear, unaffected view of otherwise exciting and emotionally rich events,” and thus the novel’s antiplot middle achieves an effect of truthfulness precisely by distancing the narrator from the eventful world represented. Despite its baggy, repetitive digressiveness, *Pendennis* was popular with Victorian readers, and this essay suggests that the pleasures that these passages afforded had everything to do with the increasingly alienated nature of middle-class labor: “The large amount of plotless text . . . allowed readers to indulge in a . . . potent and immediate fantasy of escaping such alienating labor altogether and sharing the Thackerayan narrator’s position beyond work, experience, and desire.”

Just as repetitions threaten to quell narrative excitement, so too do pauses and delays, moments where the novel suspends its action. Here, too, the Victorian novel, surprisingly, seems to have embraced rather than avoided such suspensions. Chapter seventeen of *Adam Bede* is a classic example: “In which the story pauses a little.” And as *Adam Bede* suggests, such stoppages may be crucial to the act of reflecting on narrative action, and thus may be essential to the ethical project of the novel. For at least the past three decades, it has been common critical practice to suggest that the nineteenth-century novel educates, instructs, or disciplines its readers by providing models of conduct or coercive strategies of containment that produce responsible citizens and well-adapted subjects. Often premised on a representational logic of outcomes, these models forget, or fail to account for, the crucial importance of the middle to the work of formation, such as it is, that the novel, by its own admission, performs. Emma Bovary, to be sure, never paid close attention to the ending of the novels she avidly read, or, if she did, she must have taken it as the price to be paid for what really mattered to her, which was all in breaking the monotony of provincial life, of suspending the natural order of narrative progression. This negative example (and a French one, at that) shows that the cultural work of the novel often takes place through an engagement with the amorphous middle. Critical thinking, spiritual inspiration, and political action result not from dramatic resolutions nor game-changing events; they are the product of narrative suspensions where readers are left to ponder the implications of the forces acting on characters or in situations that remain unformed, suspended in the very process of becoming. Latency and dilation, delays and protraction,
suspense itself as the formalization of the lingering middle, contribute to a readerly musing or deliberation that is productive of ethical thought. Narrative suspensions are difficult to quantify, or even isolate, insofar as they signify an absence of form as such, or suggest form as incomplete or interminable, and therefore demand an active engagement that is also a necessary suspension of judgment. The suspended middle, whether composed of endlessly detailed descriptions of the natural world, rapidly accelerating sensations, or dense historical reconstructions, creates the conditions of possibility for the production of active subjects rather than the passive subjects of a discipline perhaps too rapidly associated with novelistic mechanisms of visibility that are, in any case, inoperative or suspended in the stops and starts constitutive of the middle. The state of uncertainty or undecidability to which the suspended middle gives rise thus calls for an ethics of accountability that turns less on decisive events than on what Eliot calls the “incalculably diffusive” effects of the “unhistoric acts” performed in everyday life.

The final section of this volume considers the ethics of narrative suspensions. Amy King points out that narrative theory tends to overlook long descriptive passages as inconsequential obstructions that impede the forward-moving patterns of plotted unfolding. And yet, King argues, protracted descriptions of natural and social environments had a significant theological value in the early nineteenth century, and they became crucial to the novelistic realism that would dominate the Victorian period. Drawing from the tradition of natural theology, which understood God’s work as perceptible in the smallest details of the natural world, writers such as Gilbert White and Mary Russell Mitford wrote extensive descriptions of their local environments as acts of reverence. Enormously popular and influential, these writers tapped into a readerly pleasure that favored the accumulation of detail rather than the teleological momentum of plot. Lingering lovingly on the most minute observations, they also presumed an ethical value in the dilation and protraction of stilled observation, which refuses to subordinate “insignificant” details to larger patterns of meaning and value. Nineteenth-century realist novels clearly drew on this tradition of protracted local detail and description, and took for granted that their readers took as much pleasure in the accumulation of minute description as they did in the forward movement of plot. And so it may be necessary, King argues, to think of realism not as a secular enterprise, but as an ethical, ecological project that respected the local detail and extended description of the novelistic middle as a worthy end in itself.

If some nineteenth-century novelists engaged in a deliberate resistance to the headlong, future-oriented pleasures of plotted narrative, others seemed to thrive on it. Suspense was a staple of the nineteenth-century novel, and it has
long been understood to depend on long-deferred endings. But the next essay in the volume suggests that the anxious and exciting delays of the suspenseful middle were actually far more important to the ethics of nineteenth-century novels than their endings. Focusing on Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White,* Caroline Levine argues that for nineteenth-century novelists, the suspensions of the narrative middle enjoyed a power and meaning of their own. In *The Woman in White,* characters respond in a range of widely different ways to the text’s suspenseful delays and withholdings—some are passionately engaged in the pursuit of truth, others completely indifferent to the emergence of a mystery. By modeling an array of reactions to suspenseful delays, Collins makes suspense the *content* as well as the form of the narrative. The charming central characters of the text—Walter and especially Marian—suggest that the most appealing response to suspense is a range of active and affectively intense responses, “including hope, desire, skepticism, distrust, suspicion, anxiety, longing, superstition, dread, uneasiness, tension, prediction, calculation, speculation, curiosity, and conjecture.” Unlike the Fairlie clan, who find mysteries unbearable, uninteresting, or just plain inconvenient, Walter and Marian teach us to take the experience of the uncertain middle seriously not only as pleasurable and epistemologically productive but also as ethically responsible. And Collins is not the only nineteenth-century novelist to value the suspenseful middle. *The Woman in White,* Levine argues, is “one particularly self-conscious and brilliant instance among many of Victorian narrative middles that are more inclined to invite an active, engaged, critical thinking than a helpless, thoughtless submission.”

Bringing us to the *fin de siècle,* Mario Ortiz-Robles addresses the curious latency of the middle in Victorian utopian novels, a genre that enjoyed a remarkable popularity at the end of the nineteenth century. Unlike early modern utopian fictions, which are premised on the accidental discovery of a previously unknown, geographically remote society, late Victorian utopian fiction usually involves time travel into the future and an evolved version of contemporary society. This creates a narrative paradox: on the one hand, the middle in these utopian novels is suspended between a future that is fully realized and an unpromising present for which the future remains uncertain; that is, there is no middle. On the other, the structural suspension of the middle accounts for a characteristic feature of the genre: long expository passages that describe the functioning of the new society and provide, in retrospect, a historical account of how it came to pass; that is, there is nothing but middle. Through a reading of William Morris’s *News from Nowhere,* this essay examines the narrative temporality of late Victorian utopian fiction in the context of the radical reconceptualization of time that resulted from the cultural assimilation
of Marx’s historical materialism as a new science of history and Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection as a new scale of human temporality. The latency of the middle in late-Victorian utopian fiction allows Ortiz-Robles to consider the extent to which utopia’s promise of ethical and political transformation is enacted when the reader is enjoined to actively create a middle that the narrative does not openly provide.

When teaching the middle of the bulky nineteenth-century novel, many scholars these days turn to the great mountain of historical information to fill the middle lectures. But important though it is, contextual material may also mask some problems of specifically narrative interest: what exactly is the middle of the sprawling nineteenth-century novel for? How does it work? And are we missing something important when we suggest to our classes that the world outside of the text was filled with excitement, while the novel simply bided its time, waiting to come to a proper and satisfying end? Read together, these essays gesture to a new set of classroom questions that go well beyond the texts under examination here: that is, to a pedagogy of the middle. Woloch, Schor, and Daly, for example, invite us to think about the temporal middle—midway through the story, midway through the plot—and its relation to the characterological middle: which person or persons are at the center of the novel’s consciousness, its heart? Or to put this another way, how should we think about the relationship between the “center” and the “middle”? Claybaugh and Garcha ask us how the realist novel, with its insistence on representing the ordinary experience of the everyday, incorporated work into narrative. How does the middle of the novel convey the repetitive routines of modern labor? Similarly interested in the intersection of social pressures and narrative forms, Woloch and Daly suggest that narrative middles were crucial places for nineteenth-century Britain to work out questions of class: always a relational term, class requires contrast to take shape, and where better than in the middle of the story, where multiple characters vie for power and centrality? Garcha, King, and Ortiz-Robles all contend that Victorian readers enjoyed a leisurely, dilatory, plotless middle much more than we have ever recognized, and that the growing audience for the novel did not actually demand the forward-looking pleasures of suspense. Garcha and Ortiz-Robles argue that the slow middle was a reassuring suspension of lived experience, whereas King suggests that the novel’s long descriptive pauses registered a profound reverence for the things of the world. Together, they ask what unacknowledged pleasures and values the long middle offered its first readers. By contrast, Levine asks whether the more conventional readerly pleasures of suspense offered something more serious than scholars have typically recognized, and her essay and King’s converge in a sense that the middle—whether plotless or plotted—was
a site of ethical and epistemological value. What does one appreciate in the middle? What are the functions of delays, gaps, and interruptions in plotted unfolding? How can we talk about length as an experience of reading, of time, of continuity? Schor and Levine examine the ways that readers and characters yearn for knowledge in the middle of the novel: what kind of knowledge do we learn to seek, and what can we know in *medias res*? And Puckett and Ortiz-Robles turn our attention to the problem of promising: how should we think about the middle as a space of anticipation or latency, where the past informs a future that has not yet come to pass? What and how does the middle ask us to look forward? Does the middle inform both the before and the after? The essays that follow show just how fruitful such questions can be. Indeed, the various contributions to *Narrative Middles* perform exemplary readings that, in their scope as well as their specificity, offer models of interpretive practice and interrogation for the classroom.

If beginnings and endings matter because they establish and enact hierarchies, this volume invites critical attention to the more commonplace processes of the middle: these are more ordinary, yes, bulkier and more humdrum, but valuable and always necessary—indeed, inescapable. By merging formalist analysis with an attention to the social, political, and cultural problems of the British nineteenth century, the essays collected here allow the middle to take shape, perhaps for the first time, as a genuine sociopolitical and literary event worthy of both historical and narratological attention. And by bringing formalist and historicist methods together, this volume suggests a new direction for nineteenth-century literary studies—a direction that might occupy us for a long while in the dilatory, baggy, bewildering, and ongoing scholarly middle.

Notes


3. One important exception is Brian Richardson, who, in a fascinating recent collection of essays, argues that although critics have repeatedly acknowledged the importance of narrative beginnings, few have actually paid attention to their complexity and richness. The articles included here focus especially on fictions of beginning. *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).


7. D. A. Miller famously argues, too, that the sheer quantity of paper that makes up the massive form of *Bleak House*, as well as insistence that we move backward and forward, linking events and characters, “train us . . . in the sensibility for inhabiting the new bureaucratic, administrative structures.” *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 88–89.


17. Brian Richardson’s collection, *Narrative Dynamics*, was part of the inspiration for this volume. While Richardson does not articulate his concerns in terms specifically of the “narrative middle,” he suggests that new accounts of temporality have been emerging, and his notion of narrative dynamics differentiates the beginning and the end from the “movement and shaping of the plot”—and so seems to invite an attention to the middle. *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frame* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002), 2.


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