

Gretchen Braun, *Narrating Trauma: Victorian Novels and Modern Stress Disorders*. Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2022. 238 pp. ISBN 978-0-8142-1484-8.

The origins of trauma theory and psychoanalysis as they appear in nineteenth-century British literature are frequently attributed to Charles Dickens's experience of a terrible train accident, in which two of the train's three carriages fell from a bridge. Dickens, who had been seated in a first-class carriage, was able to make his escape, assisting his rumoured lover, Ellen Ternan, and her mother from the carriage too, before heroically assisting with emergency care of the injured as well as returning to his own seat to collect the novel manuscript on which he had been working (*Our Mutual Friend* [1865]). But just a few days later, Dickens began to experience strange symptoms, noting especially that he would begin to shake whenever he recalled the horrific scenes of the accident. (See Jill Matus, "Trauma, Memory and the Railway Disaster: The Dickensian Connection," *Victorian Studies* 43.3 (2001): 413-36, for a detailed description of this event and its impact on early ideas about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD].)

His experience is one we would now readily recognise as PTSD, and through which it is often useful to frame other traumatic experiences as they appear in nineteenth-century literature. Gretchen Braun's new study, *Narrating Trauma: Victorian Novels and Modern Stress Disorders*, investigates and evaluates this connection in detail, exploring the manifestation of "psychic shock" (38) as a result of external incidents – some obvious like train accidents, loss of a loved one, or the experience of war, and others more insidious, like the impacts of the rapidly changing social and physical environment through the process of industrialisation and urbanisation. Neurasthenia, hysteria, nervous exhaustion, nerves, Braun observes, are all the result of the "strains modern socioeconomic systems" like these "placed upon the embodied mind" (2). Indeed, she argues, "prior to the Freudian shift and devastating effects of modern mechanised warfare, there was instead a significant, even dominant, conception of psychic injury as the result of decentralised environmental and cultural factors" (21). Here, "psychic injury was [...] a maladaptive but not unexpected somatic, affective, and intellectual reaction to socioeconomic changes and technological advancements attendant on modern capitalism" (21).

Crucially, Braun does not see a simple analogy between Victorian ideas about shock and the impacts of trauma in the contemporary period, because they are, she says, "intimately bound to their own cultural location" (3). Rather, Braun's argument is that the identification of so-called "nervous disorders" provided "nineteenth-century laypeople, as well as physicians, with language to describe affective, emotional, and physiological experiences of overwhelming loss or threat, and as such, offering contemporary scholars a prehistory of PTSD within Victorian cultural contexts" (3-4). Braun's study is framed by two key considerations: first, that understanding Victorian trauma is aided by recognising the Victorian language for "mental pain" (1), and second, that this understanding can inform our contemporary conceptualisation of trauma.

Braun makes this argument across five chapters, each of which frames nineteenth-century novels within models of trauma theory of the period as well as of the present day. An initial theoretical and contextual chapter makes an especially valuable contribution to medical humanities and trauma studies across the past two hundred years, consolidating, connecting, and synthesising the evolution of this field. The authors under close discussion include Charlotte Brontë, Emily Jolly, Wilkie Collins, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and Thomas Hardy. Braun is particularly interested in the ways in which these authors articulate

“distinctly classed and gendered experiences” (4) of trauma. In this sense, however, Braun differentiates her study from that of prominent feminist and psychoanalytic scholars, like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Elaine Showalter, or Lynda Nead, since *Narrating Trauma* focuses on “nervous disorder, a borderline ailment between reason and unreason” rather than “the more debilitating forms of psychosis that commonly precipitated institutionalisation” (5) and which formed the backbone of those earlier studies. Trauma, Braun makes clear, complicates the linear, progressive narratives of the female *Bildungsroman* or the marriage plot, as well as the story of the ambitious man “in a complex and threatening world” (200). Attention to the sensation fiction of the mid-late nineteenth century helps us to see these as works of insecurity and instability, and as mutually reinforcing interactions between the social and the individual in this respect.

Braun’s conclusion reminds the reader of the resonances between the Victorian period and our own, so that “these stories of characters seeking a meaningful path forward through a field of diffuse threat may strike contemporary readers as oddly familiar” (206). In this sense, *Narrating Trauma* establishes its timeliness and relevance – understanding the past, and the ways those before us responded to stress and change, is not only strangely familiar, but strangely reassuring, too.

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