Nostalgia and the Victorian Novel

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nostalgia is a central emotion and theme in Victorian fiction. In Charles Dickens’s Little Dorrit (1857), the titular heroine speaks of a longing that pinpoints the dual meaning of nostalgia — a homesickness that causes physical pining and a wistful regret of the past — at the same time capturing the nostalgic mood that pervades so much of Victorian literature that it has become notorious. Amy Dorrit’s confession expresses a desire that is at odds with her family’s wishes to forget the past and to move forward: “For I must now confess to you that I suffer from home-sickness — that I long so ardently and earnestly for home, as sometimes, when no one sees me, to pine for it. […] So dearly do I love the scene of my poverty and your kindness. O so dearly, O so dearly!” (538) The proliferation of nostalgia in the Victorian novel seems, in fact, at odds with the idealisation of progress and self-help, energy and enterprise, that determined the Victorian age. In The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature, Raymond Chapman has already referred to an oscillation between pessimism and futuristic hope (4), suggesting that “the Victorians” looked back to the past in either nostalgia or complacency (7). Considering such famous doubters as Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, J.A. Froude, and Thomas Carlyle’s Teufelsdröckh, critics have dubbed the Victorian age an age of uncertainty and anxiety. Jerome Hamilton Buckley has suggested that the “great polar ideas of the Victorian period” are accordingly the idea of progress and the idea of decadence, “twin aspects of an all-encompassing history” (13).

Anthony Trollope’s The Way We Live Now (1874-75) describes the Victorian age as “a newer and worse sort of world” (64), but nostalgic Victorian fiction is not only particularly prominent, but also particularly versatile — if only because nostalgia permeates the literature, ranging from sentimental fiction to a fictional reworking of evolutionism and ideologies of progress. A similar development can be traced in Victorian poetry. Alfred Tennyson expresses a Utopian excitement in “By An Evolutionist” as he writes about “a glimpse of a height that is higher” (20), even though his main works have ensured him the deserved reputation as a poet of nostalgia. In his In Memoriam (1850), the speaker repeatedly cautions himself not to make “parade of pain” (21.10); yet critics have accused him of “wooing grief” (Manning, 10) and of “wallowing in his depression” (Colley, Tennyson, 63). Encompassing contemporary debates on science and religion, In Memoriam commemorates the death of Tennyson’s friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833, transforming the original loss into a source of poetic inspiration. Tennyson poeticises his “passion of the Past” (“The Ancient Sage”, 219), creating eternal landscapes of memory, nostalgic spaces that contain the past in writing. In the “eternal landscape of the past” (46.8), the “wind / Of memory murmuring the past” (92.7-8) breathes new life. The “days [that] have vanished, tone and tint” (46.5), are painted as receding landscapes: The “past will always win / A
glory from its being far” (24.3-4). The poem seeks the transcendence of transience through the textual containment of recollections, assuring the poetic immortality of the speaker, of the eulogised Arthur, and of the “Present of the Past” (71.3). In Tennyson and the Text, Gerhard Joseph describes Tennyson as “the most persistent nineteenth century poet of melancholy recessional space” (73), hinting at the potential of nostalgia in his poetry. The bulk of Tennyson criticism, however, has chiefly consisted of critical comments on the sentimentality and pathos of his melancholy, nostalgia, or depression, in which he is accused of “wallowing”. This allegation is something he shares with a number of Victorian writers and is linked to the most persistent misunderstandings about nostalgia.

Nostalgia and consequently nostalgic literature are frequently critiqued as affected, sentimental, and a way to falsify the past through strategies of forgetting rather than recollecting. Misused as a term of abuse, the word nostalgia is, in fact, often taken up to describe something it is not. As cultural critics put it, nostalgia is “a topic of embarrassment and a term of abuse. Diatribe upon diatribe denounces it as reactionary, repressive, ridiculous” (Lowenthal, 20). The most persistent allegation perhaps is that nostalgia is both pathetic and pathological — a rather vague criticism that inadvertently pinpoints nostalgia’s etymological origins, even while it further confuses its current meanings. According to the OED, nostalgia has essentially two sets of meaning: firstly, having retained its original pathological connotation, it is a “form of melancholia caused by prolonged absence from one’s home or country; severe homesickness.” Secondly, in its transferred usage, it is defined as “[r]egret or sorrowful longing for the conditions of a past age; regretful or wistful memory or recall of an earlier time.” The history of nostalgia, specifically its inception as a clinical term in the seventeenth century, is inseparable from its subsequent accumulation of meanings, revealing also the origins of the most common misunderstandings about nostalgia.

The word “nostalgia” was coined in a medical treatise in 1688 by a Swiss physician and at first exclusively used to describe the physical symptoms of homesickness. Suggested alternatives at the time included “nosomanias” and “philopatridomania”. As a seventeenth-century medical term, nostalgia was a disease, frequently conflated or confused with melancholia or hypochondria as well as with lovesickness. Its victims included predominantly soldiers stationed abroad or servants from rural areas that had left their homes. The meaning of nostalgia as a disease and an emotion continued to fluctuate throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In his “Lectures on Medical Jurisprudence,” delivered at the University of London in 1837, for instance, A.T. Thomson described symptoms that were common to melancholia and nostalgia, but cautioned against confusing them. Testifying to the continued association of sickness with a superior sensibility, he moreover emphasised that “it is frequently, although not always, in the highest and most cultivated persons that [nostalgia] displays itself” (883).

In “The Disease of the Soul” (1874), the little-known Pre-Raphaelite poet Arthur O'Shaughnessy uses “nostalgia” to describe a longing for the past, which unites a wistful memory with physical uneasiness: “The nostalgies of dim pasts seize me” (17). Treating nostalgia as an emotional memory, he nonetheless speaks of a disease. Ann C. Colley has suggested that while nostalgic Victorian writers and artists “would not have been considered clinically nostalgic by their contemporaries […], they in some way, mirror the case studies described by physicians” (3). In an eclectic study with the tacky title The Future of Nostalgia, Svetlana Boym has argued that the
Romantic age saw the “transformation [of nostalgia] from a curable disease into an incurable condition” (xviii). What is ignored by recent analyses of nostalgia is the intriguing fact that the usage of nostalgia has essentially remained twofold, testifying to the continuing simultaneity of its sets of meaning, which encompass homesickness, a regretful or wistful memory, and longing for an earlier time. However, in their critical, if not to say suspicious, engagement with the Romantics and their preoccupation with progress, the Victorians tried to contain or domesticate the subversive aspects of nostalgia by depriving it from much of its emotional poignancy and its association with a dissatisfaction with the status quo by turning it into a form of sentimentality, the affected counterpart of sensibility. The suspicious attitude towards nostalgia and also its association with sentimentality and even domesticity can be seen as a Victorian legacy.

The acceleration of change in the nineteenth century naturally created an increase in nostalgic narratives. Victorian ideologies of the home arose predominantly as a counterpoise to the economic anxieties of the marketplace. The “warm, comforting bosom of home” has been called a “refuge from a business world which was risky and perilous, hard-headed and hard-hearted” (Phillips, 97-98). Arguing that domesticity is “essentially a nineteenth-century invention,” John Tosh has recently suggested that there was a “special poignancy in images of returning home — particularly after exile or a lifetime’s wandering”: “Home came to be identified with childhood, innocence and roots – indeed with authenticity itself.” (5) In Sesame and Lilies (1865), John Ruskin famously described “the true nature of home” as

the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. (122)

As the Romantic nostalgia for childhood innocence is turned into an emphatically sentimental idealisation of suffering and dying children in the Victorian novel, nostalgia for the “other” place of poignant yearning is safely contained in Victorian ideologies of domesticity. Nostalgia as the longing for something else is diagnosed as subversive in a society that values progress and self-help, re-appropriating some of its clinical connotations. The Victorian sensation genre uses this newly emphasised pathology of longing to create sensation precisely out of this clash between an indulged emotionalism that will not be contained and a frequently forced optimism. Wilkie Collins’s novels, for instance, introduce new men and, less controversially, women of sensibility whose distresses are dismissed as a pathetic self-indulgence, a clinical condition, or a form of sulky defiance by their more energetic contemporaries. But as an older ideal of sensibility is reaffirmed in Collins’s later novels, nostalgia comes to play a dual role (Wagner, 473-502). In his controversial sensation novel, Man and Wife (1870), nostalgic and nostalgically presented old-fashioned Sir Patrick sarcastically summarises the “cant of the day” that takes “physically-wholesome men for granted, as being morally-wholesome men into the bargain” (69): “I don’t see the sense of crowing over him [the model young Briton] as a superb national production, because he is big and strong, and […] takes a cold shower bath all the year round” (68). In this exposure of Victorian ideologies of energy and enterprise, nostalgia is once more praiseworthy in all its indulgences, while this representation of the nostalgic hero or heroine is also suffused with nostalgia.
References


