Social Memory and Nineteenth-Century British Historical Fiction

Abstract
This dissertation examines the representation of social memory in British historical fiction from 1810 to 1880. I argue that social memory is crucial to the analysis of historical fiction during this period because it affords us an opportunity to see how authors in the nineteenth century viewed the social dimensions of memory as constructed by communities that envision their pasts in relation to prevailing ideologies and dominant authorities. Specifically, literary representations of social memory are important in understanding how communities come together to achieve common goals or resist dominant authorities through their sense of a common past in one of the most popular genres of nineteenth-century literature, the historical novel. The significance of social memory for the study of nineteenth-century British historical novels centers in the fact that it reveals the processes by which kinship or kindred groups and other social groups can be formed and by which historical consciousness is developed and communicated among those groups within the novel and to the reader. Social memory is defined here as a shared vision of the past, its narratives, and its symbols that embodies the cultural and communal influences on an individual's and broader groups contemporary identity. Social memory can represent a positive, unifying force in an individual's life and a community's day-to-day lived experiences, a force that can be used to achieve common purposes or resist common foes. The activation of social memory, though, offers a paradox: on the one hand, individuals are united by a powerful sense of togetherness as understood by their relationship to the past and its significance to their present, lived experience; yet, on the other hand, individuals may resist this totalizing or homogenizing sense of the past when it threatens the uniqueness of individual subjectivity, specific characteristics of group culture, or forecloses on the possibilities of social action by those on the margins. This dissertation looks at how social memory is represented in non-canonical and canonical historical novels by Sir Walter Scott, Anthony Trollope, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, George Eliot, and Philip Meadows Taylor.

Keyword
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But quite soon a different reading of this now canonized set of writers chose to recontextualize those texts in order to focus on Britain's relation to its own history and sense of cultural identity. To conclude, recent essays devoted to British fiction have come to acknowledge the complex and subtle interaction of formal experimentation with the renewal of fiction's political and ethical agenda in a British culture that is ever more global and constantly queering its own sense of collective memory. Blair, Emily, Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth–Century Domestic Novel, New York: State U of New York P, 2007. Briganti, Chiara and Kathy Mezei, Domestic Modernism, the Interwar Novel, and E. H. Young, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. The genre of nineteenth-century historical fiction includes novels and romances written about the distant past, about the recent past, or about the time period contemporary with an author's experience. Nineteenth-century novelists, including Sir Walter Scott, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, George Eliot, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Dickens, and Benito Pérez Galdós, wrote historical fiction in order to demonstrate similarities between the past and the present, to initiate social reform, to change readers' views about historical persons or events, and to supplement and encourage the formal study of history. Most critics agree that Sir Walter Scott became "the father of the historical novel" in 1814 when he wrote Waverly, a novel about life in the Scottish borderlands. This dissertation examines the representation of social memory in British historical fiction from 1810 to 1880. The significance of social memory for the study of nineteenth-century British historical novels centers in the fact that it reveals the processes by which kinship or kindred groups and other social groups can be formed and by which historical consciousness is developed and communicated among those groups within the novel and to the reader. Social memory is defined here as a shared vision of the past, its narratives, and its symbols that embodies the cultural and communal influences on an individual's and broader groups contemporary identity.