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0521854407 - Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel

John J. Su

Excerpt

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*Introduction: nostalgia, ethics, and contemporary
Anglophone literature*

NOSTALGIA

The longing to return to a lost homeland becomes a central feature of the Western literary tradition long before the term “nostalgia” was coined to describe it.¹ Homer’s first image of Odysseus is of him sitting alone on the island of Ogygia, weeping, pining for his beloved Ithaca. Despite offers by the goddess Calypso to take him as a spouse and grant him immortality, Odysseus desires nothing more than to return to the place of his birth – even after Calypso foretells of the hardships he must bear before reaching his home. This first “narrative of return” establishes a pattern that continues to compel writers even now in the twenty-first century. In the past century, some of the most distinguished Anglophone writers from across the globe have rewritten the Homeric tale, including the expatriate Irishman James Joyce, the St. Lucian Derek Walcott, and the American Charles Frazier. Long after it has become cliché to say that “you can’t go home again” – long after it has become widely recognized that nostalgic homelands frequently exist only in the imagination – literary texts continue to depict characters defined by their longing to return.

Although twentieth-century literary texts share the Homeric preoccupation with lost homelands, they are produced in environments in which nostalgia is subject to stark criticism. Perhaps the most widely cited academic study of nostalgia, Susan Stewart’s *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, characterizes it as a “social disease.”² What began in the seventeenth century as a physiological disease had become in the twentieth century a social ailment that leads to an obsession with kitsch and heritage in its most benign forms and fascism in its most extreme versions. Nothing in *The Odyssey* suggests that Odysseus should be faulted for his longing to return to his homeland; to the contrary, his crew criticize the inadequacy of his longing as he

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carries on the island of Circe. But in the contemporary Western world, a diagnosis of nostalgia typically earns a writer or scholar condemnation; to be nostalgic is to be “out of touch,” reactionary, even xenophobic. As Jackson Lears notes, nostalgia continues to be “the *bête noire* of every forward-looking intellectual, right, left, or center.”³ Unlike nostalgia in the Homeric world, which drives Odysseus to remember his past despite the lures of Calypso, nostalgia in the twentieth century is characterized as a form of amnesia. Thus, despite the surging interest in topics relating to memory within the humanities over the past two decades, the analysis of nostalgia has largely been neglected. To the extent that it enters such discussions, it typically functions as a foil. “Memory” signifies intimate personal experience, which often counters institutional histories; “nostalgia” signifies inauthentic or commodified experiences inculcated by capitalist or nationalist interests. Indeed, cultural critics like bell hooks have insisted that the study of memory demands a rigorous rejection of nostalgia, calling for a “politicization of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as it once was, a kind of useless act, from that remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present.”⁴

Such dismissals of nostalgia, however, risk occluding crucial aspects of contemporary Anglophone literature. Memory and nostalgia are intertwined, for example, in one of the most widely studied works written in recent decades, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). Early in the novel, the protagonist Sethe discovers that even the plantation on which she was a slave evokes a certain nostalgia: “and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too.”⁵ Sethe’s reflections demonstrate the sentimentality and selectivity characteristic of nostalgia; later in the same passage, she notes that she can remember the sycamore trees around the plantation, not the lynched children hanging from them. As will become apparent in Chapter 1 of this study, Sethe experiences nostalgia throughout the novel, particularly for the gatherings of African Americans that occurred at the Clearing. Yet, there is no indication in the novel that Sethe should be condemned for these longings or that they are even avoidable. They constitute significant parts of her memory and experience. Who she is, how she acts, and the claims she makes upon readers cannot be understood without reference to her nostalgia.

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This insight leads me to challenge the predominant characterization of nostalgia and the ways in which this characterization has influenced the study of contemporary Anglophone literature. Drawing upon a diverse array of authors including Chinua Achebe, Kazuo Ishiguro, Paule Marshall, Ian McEwan, N. Scott Momaday, Toni Morrison, V. S. Naipaul, Jean Rhys, Joan Riley, Leslie Marmon Silko, Wole Soyinka, and Evelyn Waugh, *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* examines how loss and yearning have shaped the ethical visions of literary texts in recent decades. Despite deep cultural differences, the novelists in this study share a sense that the economic, social, and political forces associated with late modernity have evoked widespread nostalgia within the communities in which they write. Whether these authors embrace or reject the nostalgia surrounding them, they all consciously exploit nostalgia's tendency to interweave imagination, longing, and memory in their efforts to envision resolutions to the social dilemmas of fragmentation and displacement described in their novels. My study thus questions the tendency by many scholars to downplay or repudiate the presence of nostalgia in contemporary Anglophone literature. In these novels, fantasies of lost or imagined homelands do not serve to lament or restore through language a purported premodern purity; rather, they provide a means of establishing ethical ideals that can be shared by diverse groups who have in common only a longing for a past that never was.

From the outset, it should be clear that this study makes no claims to analyze all forms of nostalgia, nor will it claim that nostalgia is necessarily ethical. Such a claim, of course, would be foolish. The longing to return to a lost place frequently conceals feelings of fear and anxiety, and nostalgia has been repeatedly exploited for commercial and nationalistic purposes. But the prevalence of nostalgia in contemporary societies across the globe demands greater attention. Indeed, a growing number of cultural critics argue that nostalgia is one of the defining features of the postwar era. Stuart Hall, for example, asks, "Who has not known, at this moment, the surge of an overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for 'times past'?"⁶ The success of political movements in utilizing nostalgic constructions, from ultranationalism in Eastern Europe to the neoconservative "return to family values" in the United States, suggests that they are meeting some kind of need, albeit in an exploitative fashion. My own sense is that even the most ideologically compromised forms of longing express in attenuated fashion a genuine human need, and so I would like to ask the somewhat perverse question: can nostalgia ever assist ethics?

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The analysis proposed here will require rethinking common biases against nostalgia in order to see its full range of complexity. Ever since the term entered the Western lexicon in 1688, nostalgia has provided a means of expressing resistance for individuals who otherwise lacked the power to change their circumstances more directly. The first nostalgics were the ill-trained and poorly fed military conscripts of seventeenth-century Europe, taken far from their homes and forced to fight battles in which they had little or no personal stake. Nostalgia provided not only a means of expressing resentment; more importantly, as an illness, nostalgia provided in some cases the only legal way for a soldier to be granted leave from military service. According to Marcel Rinehard, even after the French Minister of War ordered the suppression of leaves for convalescence in 1793, nostalgia was still exempted.⁷ This example points to the fact that nostalgia is an historical phenomenon that arises in response to a set of specific cultural, political, and economic forces. In particular, nostalgia responds to the new ideas of time and space introduced by modernity; according to Svetlana Boym, “nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires [. . .] to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition.”⁸ Boym’s characterization encourages a fundamental reassessment of nostalgia as a mode of interpreting experience rather than a pathology. To view one’s surroundings nostalgically means to interpret the present in relation to an inaccessible or lost past. Thus, to “indulge” in nostalgia need not imply an effort to escape present circumstances or to deceive oneself about the past; rather, it can represent the conscious decision to reject the logic of modernity and what Boym refers to as the “tunnel vision” of so-called progressive ideologies. It is here that nostalgia assumes an ethical dimension for Boym and Lears: no longer a disease, nostalgia represents in the late twentieth century an existential life choice for individuals who admire ideals associated with premodern societies.

This study will ultimately suggest a somewhat different role for nostalgia in contemporary literature, arguing that it facilitates an exploration of ethical ideals in the face of disappointing circumstances. But even at this point, it should be clear why I depart from Stewart’s *On Longing*. My study aspires to provide both a theoretical investigation into the uses of nostalgia and a contribution to literary history that identifies crucial features of the various threads that constitute contemporary Anglophone literature. Stewart’s psychoanalytic focus leads to a dehistoricized characterization of nostalgia as “sadness without an object [. . .] the desire for

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desire.”⁹ This focus certainly illuminates the function of nostalgia in literature and culture at certain moments in time, particularly the late nineteenth century; however, her transhistorical claims overlook how the forms nostalgia takes shift in response to changing historical factors. Nostalgics pine for very specific and concrete objects throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the homelands from which they were separated. Likewise, expressions of nostalgia in post-World War II novels are consistently portrayed as motivated by a longing for very definite objects, even if nostalgic characters and their authors do not always articulate their images of longed-for homelands in precise or consistent terms. Narrative provides the space to work out and revise these images as characters become more able to recognize their disappointments and frustrations with their present lives. Nostalgia, in other words, encourages an imaginative exploration of how present systems of social relations fail to address human needs, and the specific objects of nostalgia – lost or imagined homelands – represent efforts to articulate alternatives.

Although *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* calls for a significant rethinking of scholarly attitudes toward nostalgia, this study recognizes that the conventional opposition between memory and nostalgia has played a central role in establishing the legitimacy of contemporary Anglophone literature generally, and ethnic/minority literatures more specifically. Since the early 1980s, a number of excellent articles and books have asserted the importance of studying these literatures in large part by claiming that they make available particular kinds of experience that readers would otherwise be unable to access. Satya Mohanty offers one of the most eloquent formulations of this argument. Drawing on the tradition of philosophical realism, he argues that a genuinely multicultural curriculum is essential to gaining greater knowledge of others and ourselves. “Since our deeper ethical and aesthetic concepts are necessarily theory-laden, ideological, and culturally inflected,” Mohanty writes, “the realist can argue that the best form of inquiry into the nature of value, aesthetic or ethical, will need to be comparative and cross-cultural.”¹⁰ The scholarly focus on acts of memory or recollection within literary texts has been important in this regard, and fine work has been done exploring how novels such as *Beloved* reclaim and represent experiences that have been actively or passively forgotten. If “memory” becomes the term to describe these unrecognized experiences or perceptions of the world, then “nostalgia” signifies false appropriations of these experiences or efforts to recast

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such experiences within Anglo-American or European cultural narratives. As Renato Rosaldo notes, Western nations have historically concealed their oppression of other populations by appropriating their experiences and representing them in sentimentalized terms. The transformation of former Southern plantations into tourist attractions and the creation of popular fables of the noble but vanishing Native American represent but two examples in the United States of what Rosaldo terms “imperialist nostalgia.” Such representations of the past do not question mainstream versions of history – as acts of memory can – but legitimize them by “conceal[ing] complicity with often brutal domination.”¹¹

The desire by many scholars of literary and cultural studies to distinguish rigidly between “genuine” and “inauthentic” representations of experience, however, is complicated by the fact that so many contemporary novels characterize representations of the past as inevitably partial, incomplete, and often actively revisionary. In the case of *Beloved*, for example, Morrison claims that the Middle Passage represents a defining experience for African-American communities generations after the slave trade and slavery itself were outlawed. The only character to have any personal memories of the transatlantic journey, however, is Beloved, who functions simultaneously as the ghost of Sethe’s murdered daughter and as an embodiment of the former slave community’s collective trauma. The challenge facing Morrison’s fictional community, then, is the same that she herself faces as a writer at the end of the twentieth century: to establish a sense of coherence out of a set of unfathomable experiences without recourse to personal witnesses.¹² And to the extent that narrative reconstructions are motivated by the desire, in Kathleen Brogan’s words, “to re-create ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and to press this new version of the past into the service of the present,” the notion of authentic experience becomes difficult to maintain.¹³ Sethe’s recollections of Sweet Home, cited earlier, hardly seem “authentic” even to her; yet, the ethnic identities envisioned by the novel are shaped by these and other similar images of the past – images that are sentimental, selective, and not entirely accurate.

While neither Brogan’s distinction between Morrison’s “recuperative desire” and “nostalgia” nor other similar attempts to distinguish rigidly between authentic and inauthentic memories may be sustainable,¹⁴ her impressive book, *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*, identifies two theoretical problems that will face this study. First, if *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* is to build on the work of Brogan, Mohanty, and others, then it will need to make a

case for how “inauthentic” experiences of the past associated with nostalgia contribute useful knowledge that can be employed by both characters and readers to redefine present identities and values. Second, it will need to show how the authors in this study use nostalgia in their literary texts without endorsing essentialism. As Brogan suggests, reconstructions of the past can efface historical knowledge not only when they are used to conceal the experiences of particular populations but also when they oversimplify or essentialize the material they depict. Drawing on the work of Michael Fischer, Werner Sollors, and other theorists of ethnicity, Brogan argues that the development of greater historical consciousness is crucial to the formation of healthy ethnic identities. Essentialistic portrayals of identity – which she links to nostalgia – inhibit such consciousness, promoting static and homogeneous identities that never existed historically. Such reconstructions are detrimental to ethnic communities because the assertion of a timeless and unchanging essence dramatically limits the ability of individual members or groups to feel comfortable redefining ethnic identities in the face of changing social circumstances.

Roberta Rubenstein’s notion that literary narratives use nostalgia to “fix” the past provides at least a partial answer to the second theoretical problem. Focusing on contemporary American women writers, Rubenstein argues that nostalgia does not necessarily lead to regressive attitudes but can in certain instances enable characters and readers alike to revise their perceptions of the past in two complementary senses. “To ‘fix’ something is to *secure* it more firmly in the imagination and also to *correct* – as in *revise* or *repair* – it,” Rubenstein argues.¹⁵ To take her own analysis of Morrison’s fiction as an example, Rubenstein argues that novels such as *Jazz* imaginatively reconstruct and thereby “secure” collective histories that have been lost to contemporary African Americans; at the same time, Morrison’s narratives open up new interpretations of these histories and thereby enable characters and readers to “revise” their own longings in ways that enable more healthy relationships. The apparently stable or fixed pasts produced by the characters’ nostalgic longings are thus not in fact essentialistic because the narratives in which they appear demonstrate a self-conscious awareness that the past is continually revised in the very process of telling. Hence, Morrison and her contemporaries create narratives that endorse a kind of constructivism that sees the past as produced and reproduced through subsequent retellings.

The notion of “fixing” the past does not directly address the first theoretical problem Brogan presents, however, and it is this sense that

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nostalgic thinking endorses conservative social systems rather than envisioning alternatives that motivates a strong critique from certain strands of feminism. Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, for example, assert that nostalgia supports patriarchy; within literary texts, the presence of nostalgia represents “a retreat to the past in the face of what a number of writers – most of them male – perceive to be the degeneracy of American culture brought about by the rise of feminist authority.”¹⁶ More directly challenging the claims of this study, Lynne Huffer asserts in *Maternal Pasts, Feminist Futures: Nostalgia, Ethics, and the Question of Difference* that the articulation of ethical models of human relationships demands the rejection of nostalgia. Nostalgia hinders ethics because it prevents individuals from exploring new kinds of relationships that are unburdened by the history of gender exploitation. “Because nostalgia is necessarily static and unchanging in its attempt to retrieve a lost utopian space,” Huffer argues, “its structure upholds the status quo.”¹⁷ Huffer’s argument suggests that even if nostalgic thinking does not necessarily endorse essentialism, it cannot help to envision genuine solutions to cultural crises because it presupposes that solutions can be found in existing or past societies. Since patriarchy is an undeniable historical reality, the longing to restore an idealized past will only reassert sexist social relations.

Arguments that nostalgia necessarily inculcates amnesia or reactionary politics will be countered by reading the novels this study discusses. Huffer, however, points to what may be the most serious critique of nostalgia in contemporary Anglophone literature: the possibility that nostalgia inhibits characters, authors, and readers from gaining greater knowledge about the worlds they inhabit. If this is the case, then the very utopian premise on which many forms of nostalgia are predicated becomes questionable. Most often, nostalgics are faulted for imagining a utopian world that never existed and that could never exist in the future. These critiques, in other words, do not necessarily question whether or not it would be preferable to live in such worlds; rather, they question their authenticity and the feasibility of achieving them. Huffer, in contrast, argues that nostalgia leads individuals to imagine worlds that are not, in fact, utopian. The worlds of nostalgia, on this understanding, are simply present ones dressed in slightly different terms. The fundamental social relations and the values associated with them are actually depressingly familiar. The real danger of nostalgic narratives is that they offer readers the illusion of utopian idealism without providing knowledge of legitimate alternatives to present circumstances.

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This objection is particularly important to keep in mind because all the authors explored in subsequent chapters use nostalgia to articulate their disappointment with the present. One of the central claims of this study, however, is that more utopian visions of community in their literary texts are possible *only* through nostalgic evocations of lost or nonexistent communities. This issue is most explicitly addressed in Chapter 2, which explores how the nostalgia of Antoinette Mason, the Creole protagonist of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, provides the means for Rhys to explore and ultimately articulate a vision of community prohibited by colonial ideologies of racial difference. Antoinette can understand her own longing for intimacy with a black girl named Tia only retrospectively, many years later when she is herself the victim of Rochester's need for racial purity. The implication of Rhys's novel and the others in this study is that human longing can frequently be articulated in precise terms only after the fact and in the face of disappointment. And this claim points toward an answer to the first theoretical problem Brogan presents, how "inauthentic" experiences can serve as sources of knowledge. Nostalgia provides a mode of imagining more fully what has been and continues to be absent. To the extent that it enables individuals or literary characters to articulate in clearer and more precise terms unacknowledged disappointments and frustration with present circumstances, nostalgia does provide useful knowledge about the world.

The theoretical problems this study will face, as much as the resolutions I have begun to trace out here, help to situate the novels discussed in subsequent chapters within a larger literary history. If nostalgia is an historical phenomenon that arises out of and responds to different crises over time and space, its literary use and representation should also be seen as historically inflected. Indeed, the presence and perceived function of nostalgia in Anglophone novels shifts dramatically from Victorian to modern to contemporary eras. The nineteenth-century novel gives nostalgia a distinct cultural purpose for the first time, according to Nicholas Dames; within the fictional worlds of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and their contemporaries, nostalgia enables "the amelioration or cancellation of the past."¹⁸ That is, Victorian literature anticipates the so-called "crisis of memory" that preoccupies literature throughout the twentieth century, but the threat memory represents is very different. Victorian novelists are concerned with an excess of memory, not its lack. Dames compellingly explores how Victorian novels work to eliminate excessive and chaotic reminiscences by promoting a certain kind of life: "a life no longer burdened by the past, a life lived as a coherent tale, summarizable,

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pointed, and finally moralizable.”¹⁹ This particular form of nostalgia arises in an environment in which amnesia is not a threat, as it will be with the authors in this study. All the authors examined here insist that the cultures in which they write are dominated by amnesia, and nostalgia in their literary texts refocuses attention on what has been forgotten. Indeed, it is emblematic of this shift that the word “amnesia” is not coined until late in the nineteenth century. Excessive remembrance represents a greater threat to Victorian novelists because it complicates efforts to isolate coherent moral lessons from the past and also because it encourages individuals to dwell excessively on the past rather than plan for the future. Nostalgia enables a kind of constructive forgetting and stabilization of the past that is particularly suitable for narratives whose focus is establishing readily recognizable models of moral behavior that can be imitated by readers and applied to future situations. Put more epigrammatically, nostalgia in Victorian fiction and culture does not represent an obsession with the past but, according to Dames, the means of liberating oneself from it.

While the differences between the uses of nostalgia in high modernist and contemporary literary texts will become more fully apparent in Chapter 4 comparison of Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, some key distinctions can be highlighted here with reference to a statement made by Ishiguro in an interview with Brian Shaffer:

I do understand why people are against nostalgia, particularly in places like Britain and France, because nostalgia is seen here as a bad political force to the extent that it’s applied to a nation’s memory. [. . .] And I would go along with that to a large extent; I accept why nostalgia has a bad name in general, at least on the political and historical level. But the pure emotion of nostalgia is actually quite a valuable thing that we all feel at times. [. . .] It’s something that anchors us emotionally to a sense that things should and can be repaired. We can feel our way towards a better world because we’ve had an experience of it; we carry some sort of distant memory of that world somewhere even though it is a flawed memory, a flawed vision.²⁰

The first and most obvious thing to note about this statement is the explicit endorsement of a kind of sentimentality from which high modernism sought to distinguish itself. This is not to say that nostalgia is absent from the works of high modernism; Robert Alter, Ian Baucom, and Jeffrey Perl have made compelling cases for discerning a profoundly nostalgic strain within modernist writings in Britain and continental Europe. Modernist nostalgia is nonetheless frequently concealed by the more obvious rhetoric of iconoclasm. Even that most tradition-obsessed