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TWILIGHT HISTORIES: THE WAVERLEY NOVELS AND GEORGE ELIOT'S FICTIONS OF THE RECENT PAST

Camilla Cassidy

Scott's fascination with transitional moments is well-documented, not least by himself. In his introduction to *The Fortunes of Nigel* (1822), he writes:

Lady Mary Wortley Montague has said, with equal truth and taste, that the most romantic region of every country is that where the mountains unite themselves with the plains or lowlands. For similar reasons, it may be in like manner said, that the most picturesque period of history is that when the ancient rough and wild manners of a barbarous age are just becoming innovated upon ... The strong contrast produced by the opposition of ancient manners to those which are gradually subduing them, affords the light and shadows demanded for the effect of a fictitious narrative.¹

Pin-pointing moments or events which precipitate decisive change, then, is central to the historical novel from its inception, or at least from Scott's first foray in the form. One striking manifestation of this is the "'Tis sixty years since" time frame, established in *Waverley* (1814) and continued over the course of his following two novels. As Scott describes in the introduction to *The Antiquary* (1816), these form a trilogy bringing together a historical scope with an autobiographical timeframe: "WAVERLEY embraced the age of our fathers, GUY MANNERING that of our own youth, and the ANTIQUARY refers to the last ten years of the eighteenth century."² This continuous movement from what is recognisably framed as "historical" into recent, and therefore directly knowable, events places the development of the historical novel in a trajectory of innovation

¹ Walter Scott, "Introduction to *The Fortunes of Nigel*," [1831], in *Introductions and Notes from the Magnum Opus: Ivanhoe to Castle Dangerous* ed. J.H. Alexander et al. [EEWN, vol. 25b], (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 168.

² Walter Scott, "Advertisement," *The Antiquary* (1816), ed. David Hewitt [EEWN, vol. 3] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 4.

or “becoming innovated upon” close to that described in *The Fortunes of Nigel* and pitches its subject in the midst of this complex transition.

This slippage between what is understood to be historical and what personally recalled, connects the timeframe of individual lives with a wider, longer perspective. In doing so, Scott’s novels suggest a fertile overlap between individual memory and historical record. This blurring between historical narrative and events almost, if not quite, recoverable by memory became a prominent aspect of the later nineteenth-century novel. George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and William Makepeace Thackeray to name only a few prominent examples, all gravitated towards this slight—sometimes autobiographical, sometimes slightly more remote—retrospect. “I cannot write books handling the topics of the day” Charlotte Brontë wrote to her publisher in 1852 “it is no use trying.”³

The alternative was a Scott-like slip into the past. This striking trend, though a prominent feature of a great deal of nineteenth-century fiction—seen, to take two prominent and diverse examples, in both *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860)—is seldom discussed at any great length, which is, in itself, quite striking. As John Bowen has put it, “by rights, the historical novel should be one of the glories of the Victorian Age.” That this is not seen to be the case reveals a surprising critical blind spot and a tendency to focus on those attempts which, again in Bowen’s words, “can only be judged to fail.”⁴ Unambiguously historical novels, by contrast, are widely discussed and almost unanimously panned. Calling someone an ‘imitator of Scott’ in the later nineteenth-century has become shorthand for not being up to much.⁵

In this article, I consider what purpose this timescale, which settles on a period between history and memory, served in Scott’s novels and in what ways—and why—it seeped to such an extent into later nineteenth-century fiction. This close connection with Scott’s first historical novels reveals an almost entirely neglected strain in the Victorian realist novel, indebted to—if not entirely identifiable with—Scott’s version of historical fiction. This proliferation of what Kathleen Tillotson termed “novels of the recent past”

³ Charlotte Brontë to George Smith, 30 October 1852, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Margaret Smith, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995-2004), III: 75.

⁴ John Bowen, “The Historical Novel,” in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 245-259 (245-246).

⁵ For a particularly forthright dismissal of Victorian historical fiction see: John Maynard, “Broad Canvas, Narrow Perspective: the Problem of the English Historical Novel in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 237-65.

represents a reworking of an approach which can be closely identified with Scott's legacy.⁶

My argument here is distinct from Lukács's idea that the later nineteenth-century built on the legacy of Scott's historical fiction in order to forge a new type of novel which historicised the present. Instead it focuses on a particular type of liminal retrospect and suggests that the historical novel has a more amorphous reach than is usually discussed. As such, I am principally interested in the use made of this implied narrative perspective in the later nineteenth century, in part because this subtler strain of historical fiction—seldom if ever acknowledged as such—engages in interesting and various ways with wider stories of cultural transformation and grapples illuminatingly with what John Stuart Mill—among many others—identified as an “age of transition.”⁷ It is more than hair-splitting to insist on this connection, because a reluctance to identify Eliot (for example) with Scott's historical fiction has led to a rich seam of historicism in her fiction being all but ignored.

Tillotson suggests two possible reasons for mid-Victorian novelists' temporal focus on the recent past: in Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë, she comments,

the past, being past can be possessed, hovered and brooded over, with the story-teller's supposed omniscience, and ... the past, being not the present, is stable, untouchable by the winds and waves which rock the present (Tillotson, 94).

“Novels of the recent past” are here perhaps imagined by Tillotson as containable, even comforting, distanced in focus from, so relatively undisturbed by, turbulent contemporaneity. This, though, is not what Eliot does when she echoes Scott's sense of retrospect in *Adam Bede* (1859), a novel which is a great deal more complex and dynamic in its engagement with passing time and novelistic recuperation than Tillotson's account allows.

Alongside his explanation of *Waverley*'s much-discussed name—an “uncontaminated name” fit for a “wavering” non-hero—Scott also pauses to draw our attention to his subtitle, writing:

But my second or supplemental title was a matter of much more difficult election, since that, short as it is, may be held as pledging

⁶ Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 92.

⁷ John Stuart Mill, “The Spirit of the Age,” (1834), in *Mill: Texts and Commentaries*, ed. Alan Ryan (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 3-40 (5).

the author to some special mode of laying his scene, drawing his characters, and managing his adventures.⁸

Waverley, we are told, will be “neither a romance of chivalry, nor a tale of modern manners” (4). This raises the familiar preoccupation with the distinction and interaction between romance and novel but, in the context of later nineteenth-century experiments with the form, it also suggests (as this article will begin to unpick) the extent to which this timescale shaped the development of the Victorian novel as it experimented with and reworked Scott’s legacy. This was a carefully chosen time lapse—a “difficult election”—with very particular implications.

Scott’s “sixty-year” retrospect resembles what Eric Hobsbawm calls a “twilight zone” of time where memory and history mingle and interact. “For all of us,” Hobsbawm says,

there is a twilight zone between history and memory; between the past and a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as a remembered part of, or background to, one’s own life. For individual human beings this zone stretches from the point where living family traditions and memories begin—say, from the earliest family photo which the oldest living family member can identify or explicate—to the end of infancy, when public and private destinies are recognized as inseparable and as mutually defining one another (‘I met him shortly before the end of the war’; ‘Kennedy must have died in 1963, because it was when I was still in Boston’). The length of this zone may vary, and so will the obscurity and fuzziness that characterizes it. But there is always such a no-man’s land of time. It is by far the hardest part of history for historians, or for anyone else, to grasp.⁹

As Hobsbawm puts it, “this is true not only of individuals, but of societies” (*ibid.*). This possibility—that a society has a threshold of memory just as an individual does—makes it peculiarly suggestive for the historical novel, a form which accommodates the perspective of individuals within wider sweeps of change. In this connection, Scott’s sixty-year time lapse combines interestingly with his use of “mediocre” heroes, both bringing the personal and psychological into direct relation with the historical.

The prevalence of this “twilight” in the nineteenth-century novel owes something, at least, to a wider narrative or, as Laura Brown puts it a

⁸ Walter Scott, *Waverley* [; or, *Tis Sixty Years Since*] [EEWN, vol. 1], ed. Peter Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 3. Subsequent in-text references to this edition.

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875-1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 3.

“cultural fable”, of crisis and transformation.¹⁰ Peter Fritzsche’s *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* attributes this mood of sudden epochal change to the fact that it was an age overshadowed by the French Revolution, creating a “new historical mindedness”. “The world” Fritzsche says:

appeared to them more restless than it had in the past, which was as much due to thinking about events in terms of revolution as it was due to the revolutionary nature of events themselves. This rather drastic dimension to social description is perhaps the most fundamental outcome of the French Revolution. Thus the Industrial Revolution of the early nineteenth century was as much a category of analysis distinctive to the period as it was an unmistakable material process shaping the period.¹¹

The French Revolution, he argues, initiated a state of mind which was more alert to similar patterns of upheaval and, as such, created a sort of template for comprehending and representing the industrial transformation of Britain later in the century. Romantic-era traumas continued to reverberate in the later nineteenth century, creating a narrative of continuous transition which shaped subsequent modes of thinking. The forms of literary representation which emerged to capture this in-between, transitional experience took on renewed relevance as this sense of crisis continued to reverberate.

Susan Stewart has described the incorporation of this new idea of history into a realist aesthetic, suggesting that the “confidence in the circularity of history and the complete vision of closure is broken with the advent of the industrial revolution, the advent of a new kind of realism and a novel kind of ‘psychological’ literature.”¹² This ‘psychological’ dimension is facilitated in part by the time frame described in this article because it introduced the possibility of remembering – or forgetting – something that happened within our reach (as Hobsbawm suggests) and within the contexts of our own lives. It creates one avenue for psychologising historical subjects and registering the rift between past and present which became a recurrent theme—often dismissed as sentimentally nostalgic—in the Victorian novel.

This approach is especially evident in *Adam Bede*, George Eliot’s first full-length novel, published in 1859 and set in 1799, which takes a precise sixty-year retrospect. It also devotes an introductory passage and a

¹⁰ Laura Brown, *Fables of Modernity: Literature and Culture in the English Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 202.

¹² Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 4.

substantial “pause” in the narrative to a discussion of her realist aesthetic and the moral position it implies, related explicitly to its historical setting. These similarities are not slender or peripheral but suggest a central role for Scott’s version of historical fiction in the development of the Victorian novel. Eliot describes her idea of realist fiction in terms that are strikingly similar to Scott’s rationale for his timescales, writing: “sixty years ago—it is a long time, so no wonder things have changed—all clergymen were not zealous.”¹³ In doing so, Eliot equates the sixty-year time-lapse with a particular sympathy for the individual, the ordinary and the provincial. She reworks the narrative perspective Scott develops in *Waverley* in such a way that his approach to historical fiction becomes a recognisable, embedded strand in her novels. These close parallels are instructive because they point to Scott’s more diffuse influence later in the century, rather than limiting his impact – as is often the case – to imitators like Edward Bulwer Lytton or Thomas Ainsworth. It suggests that he was instrumental in establishing a hugely influential mode of narrative which, by bringing memory and history together, accomplished an integration of historical ‘information’ into fiction and the remembering individual, represented perhaps by the reader, within a story of mass historical transformations.

In Eliot, this narrative manoeuvre closely corresponds with the image of home—an apprehension of uprootedness dependent on its converse, a feeling of security and stasis. This literal but precarious at-homeness corresponds to and interacts with a liminal historical setting, and in doing so it incorporates Scott’s narrative point of view into the texture of the novel. The emotional tug of an unreachable home, or one in the process of slipping away, encapsulates or replicates the slippage of time, giving it a precisely psychological dimension by pinning it to a place. The “twilight” of Scott’s novels found a new, or slightly different, expression in the homesickness—the nostalgia—of Eliot’s “novels of the recent past”. Scott’s much discussed use of landscape to articulate historical transformation, then, is—in a different way—also central to Eliot’s fiction.¹⁴ Eliot’s Loamshire and her statically portrayed provincial settings, implicitly play into this pattern as seen, for instance, in this characteristic reflection from *The Mill on the Floss* (1860):

The wood I walk in on this mild May day, with the young yellow-brown foliage of the oaks between me and the blue sky, the white

¹³ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Carol A. Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 159. Subsequent in-text references to this edition.

¹⁴ Cf. Franco Moretti’s comment that when *Waverley* travels first into Scotland and then into the highlands, “his movement in space is also, and in fact above all, ... movement in *time*”: Moretti, *An Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1999), 41.

star-flowers and the blue-eyed speedwell and the ground ivy at my feet, what grove of tropic palms, what strange ferns or splendid broad-petalled blossoms, could ever thrill such deep and delicate fibres within me as this home scene?¹⁵

Eliot's representation of places are explicitly formulated around the emotional pull of home, allowing her to draw out an implicit undercurrent in Scott's work—blending history and memory—by transforming this dynamic, as I show, into something more closely and unambiguously akin to homesickness.

In her 1856 review-essay "The Natural History of German Life," Eliot provides a commentary of sorts on the sixty year (or approximately sixty year) retrospect which she so frequently adopts in her fiction. In praising two ethnographic studies of German life by Wilhelm H. Von Riehl, his *Die Bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (1851) and *Land und Leute* (1853), she comments: "In order to appreciate what Riehl says of the German peasantry" she says "we must remember what the tenant-farmers and small proprietors were in England half a century ago."¹⁶ The period which elapsed within this "gap" witnessed the sort of transformation which Scott identifies in moving between England and Scotland or what, in *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot calls "the changes that widen the years" (*Mill*, 103). The identification of this watershed moment in "The Natural History of German Life" adds weight to the idea that Eliot's repeated adoption of Scott's "'Tis sixty years since" is a significant aspect of her work and not, as Tillotson suggests of Thackeray and Bronte, a way of avoiding the turbulence of the present moment in favour of a relatively smooth and simple retrospect.

In her essay, Eliot relates an anecdote about a young soldier serving abroad who cries for home because he cannot adapt to his changed circumstances. She writes:

Some years ago, a peasant youth, out of the poorest and remotest region of the Westerwald, was enlisted as a recruit, at Weilburg in Nassau. The lad having never in his life slept in a bed, when he had to get into one for the first time began to cry like a child; and he deserted twice because he could not reconcile himself to sleeping in a bed, and to the 'fine' life of the barracks: he was homesick at the thought of his accustomed poverty and his thatched hut. A strong contrast, this, with the feeling of the poor in towns, who would be far from deserting because their condition was too much improved! ("Natural History," 279).

¹⁵ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 36. Subsequent in-text references to this edition.

¹⁶ George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," *Westminster Review*, 66 (July 1856), 51-79, here and in in-text references from *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 266-299 (273).

This story bears a striking resemblance to the case studies used to illustrate early medical writing on nostalgia as a potentially fatal psychosomatic disorder which particularly afflicted young people displaced from rural regions. In the dissertation in which the term was coined, its author, Johannes Hofer, relates two case studies: a young soldier who becomes inconsolably sad before falling ill and a girl who is struck down with nostalgia in hospital and will only repeat “*Ich will heim*.”¹⁷ While many other correlations of method and subject matter between “The Natural History of German Life” and Eliot’s novels are well-documented, this overlooked nod to *das Heimweh* is a small detail with, I would argue, far-reaching consequences.

Eliot explicitly links this homesickness with historical transformation when she goes on to describe the landscape changing around the homesick soldier rather than him moving through it:

Political vicissitudes have added their influence to that of economical changes in disturbing that dim instinct, that reverence for traditional custom, which is the peasant’s principle of action. He is in the midst of novelties for which he knows no reason—changes in political geography, changes of the government to which he owes fealty, changes in bureaucratic management and police regulations. He finds himself in a new element before an apparatus for breathing in it is developed in him (“Natural History,” 281-282).

Here Eliot’s brief description of nostalgia entangles homesickness for a place with dynamics of historical change. This literal nostalgia for an actual place and experienced as a physical illness is embedded within something more recognisable as our modern nostalgia; a sense of regret that a modern sensibility does not allow us to experience this kind of traumatic uprooting.

The extent to which this period of living memory informed Eliot’s ideas about historical transition is further hinted when she writes, following the comparison already quoted, that:

In order to appreciate what Riehl says of the German peasantry we must remember what the tenant-farmers and small proprietors were in England half a century ago, when ... the daughters even of substantial farmers ... instead of carrying on sentimental correspondence, ... were spinning their future table-linen, and looking after every saving of butter and eggs that might enable them to add to the little stock of plate and china which they were laying in against their marriage (“Natural History,” 273).

¹⁷ Johannes Hofer, “Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia by Johannes Hofer, 1688,” trans. Caroline Kiser Anspach, *Institute of the History of Medicine, Bulletin*, 2 (1934), 376-391 (383).

The Tullivers, the Dodsons and the Poysers are included within this idea of the historically precarious “peasant,” and it was these people, Eliot thinks, who had been susceptible to *das Heimweh*, an illness which, as she remarks, was predicated on an attachment to place. Mrs Tulliver and her sisters perfectly embody the role of the farmer’s daughters who weave their own linen and save up for crockery. After it becomes clear, for example, that the family will be sold up, Mrs Tulliver retreats to the cupboard where she stores these precious remnants of her former life and laments the loss of just these emotionally redolent objects which Eliot, with ambiguous irony pitched between sympathy and metropolitan amusement, describes as “teraphim.” Mrs Tulliver’s rootedness—her at-home-ness—depends on these trinkets and the customs of which they form a tangible part. In “The Natural History of German Life,” Eliot tells us, these are the last people remaining who could experience homesickness in the same way as the German soldier she describes, and she situates this experience on the same cusp of living memory to which Scott was drawn. When, for instance, we are presented with the portrait of Edward Waverley and Fergus Mac-Ivor, an image which forms a literal souvenir, we see a conscious move from past to present through a style of portraiture in which the Highland chiefs “do *all but* walk out of the painting” (*Waverley*, 361; my emphasis). This phrase contains the idea of vitality and its immediate denial, capturing a precise moment when a way of life shifts into obsolescence.

In *Adam Bede*, Hetty Sorrell’s journey “from the familiar to the strange” sees her characterised as representative of “country people” who cannot “believe that those who make a figure in their own parish are not known everywhere else,” are “entirely ignorant of travelling,” and have “never got up in the morning without the certainty of seeing familiar faces” (332). Change of any sort is shocking to her. Like Eliot’s homesick soldier, sleeping in an unfamiliar bed causes Hetty to long for home: “as she lay down ... in the strange hard bed, she felt that her home had been a happy one.” This is a reverie in which the narrator enthusiastically participates, listing the charms Hetty has left behind her and describing the “yearning regret” with which she recalls them. In prison, Hetty sums up her crime and subsequent ordeal with the repeated plaint: “I longed so to go back again.... I thought I’d go home.... I longed so for it, Dinah, I longed so to be safe at home” (406), echoing Hofer’s “country girl” who can only repeat “*Ich will heim.*” Home and homesickness are repeated touchstones in this novel and they hold in tension twin dynamics of temporal and geographical displacement.

Both Sally Shuttleworth and John Goode have argued that *Adam Bede* is premised on a circular conception of time in which nothing really changes. They point to the cycles of the seasons and harvests and suggest that linear, broken narratives only apply to private life, while public history

remains essentially unchanged. The only ruptures in this system, they suggest, occur as breaks in personal timelines, the most striking of which is obviously Hetty's abrupt removal from the community and the country when she is transported for the murder of her baby. These, they think, have no broader resonances in Eliot's conception or representation of historical time. As Goode puts it, "Loamshire is protected from time by the hills that surround it."¹⁸ The sense of continuity which underlies the novel, he argues, is never really disrupted because Eliot "fixes the world she describes through the creation of representative scenes" (*ibid.*, 22). Shuttleworth similarly argues that "for the reader of *Adam Bede*, the idea of temporal progression suggested by the experience of narrative continuity is actually at variance with the relatively static picture of life conveyed" and "George Eliot's realism and confident empiricism are based on a static theory of order that tends to exclude the dimension of change or progress."¹⁹ For this reason, she considers it significant that "Eliot chooses the static mode of pictorial representation to illustrate the goal of her narrative" (*ibid.*, 31).

This representation of a static "home scene," as Eliot terms them elsewhere (*Mill*, 26), can however be more satisfactorily explained with reference to her own description in *Adam Bede* of scenes "to sicken for with a sort of calenture in hot and dusty streets" (75). Eliot's "hot and dusty streets" nod to an imagined metropolitan reader, and the nostalgia she describes—calenture being a variant of the disease experienced specifically by sailors in tropical seas—is felt by the reader, implying a discrepancy between the past described and the perspective of the novel. In this way and in combination with Scott's "sixty years since" time-lapse, they create a sense of historical dynamism within apparently unchanging scenes. As Lukács argues, and Fritzsche confirms, Scott participated in, and helped to develop and define, a cultural narrative of unsettling change which, paradoxically, is pinned to this "relatable," remember-able time scheme. Eliot's novel does something so strikingly similar that it is difficult to imagine it as anything other than a nod to the *Waverley* novels' slippery historicity.

This representation of artificially arrested moments does not suggest a genuine suspension of time; instead the moments imply unlikely and fragile survivals against a background assumption of continual flux. In a historical novel, it is a given that time has already moved on. The current of apparent continuity running through Eliot's novels should be read in

¹⁸ John Goode, "Adam Bede," in *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, ed. Barbara Hardy (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 19-41 (19).

¹⁹ Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 26, 28.

light of this common-sense dramatic irony, which is reinforced, I would argue, by a narrative perspective of nostalgic memory experienced by the characters within the novel and, via the inflection of the novel's point of view, by its readers.

Scott's "twilight" histories, I suggest, had a significant impact on later writers who borrowed and reworked this historical perspective to articulate an experience of rapid and disorientating historical change. Transitional moments are interpreted as cusps which Eliot used, in combination with an emotional tenor something like nostalgia or homesickness, to describe a psychological experience of historical transition and modernisation. Scott's regionalism, his preoccupation with liminal moments, his sentimentality and romanticism, contributed to a reimagining of this time-lapse to play on the intersections between historical transformations and, sometimes sentimental but nonetheless real, fond memories of bygone times and lost places.

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