

H-France Forum

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Thomas Dodman, *What Nostalgia Was: War, Empire, and the Time of a Deadly Emotion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. xi + 275 pp. Notes, archival sources and index. \$35 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-226-49294-0.

Review Essay by Nicholas White, University of Cambridge

On opening this recent addition to the series of Chicago Studies in Practices of Meaning, a cynic might well harbor the suspicion - based on this book's subtitle - that this will be yet onemore contribution to the current faddishness with regard to the history of the emotions (about which so many scholars seem, well, so emotional, not least in the UK). In fact, though, this is one of the most remarkable volumes I have read in over a quarter of a century of reviewing books (for scholarly journals and for the *TLS*). I come to it, as will become apparent in my conclusion, from the disciplinary perspective of historicist literary criticism in nineteenth-century studies, and am struck by the potential critical sympathy between my field and the kind of acculturated history which historians such as Dodman now write.

The seven chapters at the book's core, not exclusively but primarily based on French material, take us from the late seventeenth to the late nineteenth centuries (to be more precise, from 1688 to 1884), and in so doing take us on a remarkable intellectual voyage from Chapter one ("Nostalgia in 1688") to Chapter seven ("*Ubi bene, ibi patria*: Nostalgia Fin de Siècle"), from the invention of this new diagnosis in 1688 by a nineteen-year-old medical student from Mulhouse, Johannes Hofer, in his *Dissertatio medica de nostalgia, oder Heimwehe*, to the 1884 of Greenwich Mean Time, the imperial race for Africa, the Parisian *Salon des artistes indépendants*, and the world's first steel-frame skyscraper in Chicago. Dodman thus identifies 1884 as a year with "as strong a claim as any other to being the one when the world—or at least large chunks of the North Atlantic world—first became 'modern'" (p.190). "We have," Dodman quips, "been modern nostalgics ever since," and in this gesture towards the modern and contemporary may lie much of the book's wider interest beyond university libraries and lecture halls. In a truly impressive display of scholarly knowledge and archival research, the book therefore pivots around the revolutionary end of another *fin de siècle*, namely 1789, located between these two periods of centurial closure that bookend the project. The very notion of revolution is, in some sense at least, to be seen, we might note, as the most anti-nostalgic of concepts, even if its effervescent present is never without its own past.

Following the focus on Hofer, Chapter two, "The Reasons of a Passion," broadens the focus to the transnational networks of scientific knowledge in eighteenth-century Europe (stretching across the water to Philadelphia) to show how nostalgia became a staple feature of Western medical nosology, particularly with regard to the plight of soldiers. Indeed, as we see in Chapter three, "The Lost *Pays* of the *Patrie*," soldiers in Napoleon's armies far from home (especially "citizen-soldier" conscripts) were diagnosed, from Valmy to Waterloo and Egypt to Haiti, and treated for the first war neurosis. In Chapter four, "Mothers and Sons in the Time of Napoleonic War," Dodman moves into ethnographic mode, using the soldiers' own narratives of illness to depict the condition from their perspective.

Chapter five, “Golden Age,” then shows how this medicalization was gradually transformed from a medical term to a broader cultural concept that embraced the Romantic masochism in the aesthetic pleasure of suffering, and became the regular fare into “a ‘normal’ piece of people’s emotional lives” (pp.10-11). The key shift, though, Dodman argues persuasively, occurred in the French colonies where concerns about *métissage* and “an overly successful acclimatization” (p.173) shaped the view that moderate homesickness (*la nostalgie africaine*) might be salutary, as Dodman shows in Chapter six, “Nostalgia in the Tropics” and Chapter seven, “*Ubi bene, ibi patria*: Nostalgia Fin de Siècle”. It was, he shows, the acceleration of European imperialism and the triumph of “scientific” racism in the second half of the century that disarmed nostalgia’s claim to act as a viable medical diagnosis.

All of this, then, produces, as Dodman explains, a two-century history of medicalization and then *demedicalization*: “To most people, the word itself had come to mean something quite different by the turn of the twentieth century: no longer a pathological form for homesickness but an innocuous, even comforting longing for the past” (p.3). In this trajectory from the pathological to the quotidian, Dodman compares nostalgia to melancholy and hysteria.

The book is framed by an Introduction on “Nostalgia as a Historical Problem” and an Afterword on “Nostalgia in History.” In this introduction Dodman defines nostalgia as “the disposition to desire that which we no longer have (or have never really had)” (p.2). As useful as we may find the sixty pages of notes, four-page list of archival sources and thirteen-page index, the sheer richness and range of this volume (which it would be unfair to expect of a first book, and yet is a delight to uncover) means that it would have been useful if the publisher had wanted to include a proper, categorized bibliography too. Still, Dodman himself signposts our ways through his project with impeccable clarity.

To shift a gear, we may in conclusion note in “meta” fashion that nostalgia can be a useful way of talking about the relationship between different critical approaches, or of the shifts in the history of critical practice, even in the most self-consciously contemporary of adventures. In recent years few such adventures have been more influential in my field of nineteenth-century literary studies than the brilliant special number in *Representations* 108.1 (2009) on “The Way We Read Now.” Historians too might hopefully find in those pages a useful account of the situation of critical practice in which they also find themselves now (and I am thinking here of the exemplary nature of Dodman’s enterprise, of course). Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus begin their introduction by describing their contributors and editors as “scholars who received doctoral degrees in either English or comparative literature after 1983,” “trained to equate reading with [...] a specific type [of interpretation] that took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter,” i.e. symptomatic reading.[1]

They go on to contrast this with “modes of reading,” generated in the first decade or so of the new millennium,

that attend to the surfaces of texts rather than plumb their depths. Perhaps this is because, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, so much seems to be on the surface. “If everything were transparent, then no ideology would be possible, and no domination either,” wrote Fredric Jameson in 1981,

explaining why interpretation could never operate on the assumption that “the text means just what it says.” The assumption that domination can only do its work when veiled, which may once have sounded almost paranoid, now has a **nostalgic**, even utopian ring to it. (pp.1-2, author’s emphasis)

Intellectual nostalgia somewhere between paranoia and utopia... Their list of modes of surface reading includes: surface as materiality; surface as the intricate verbal structure of literary language; embrace of the surface as an affective and ethical stance; attention to surface as a practice of critical description; surface as the location of patterns that exist within and across texts; and finally, surface as literal meaning. The politics of this return from symptom to surface (as an interrogation of that surface/depth dyad; or rather an attention to symptoms on the surface of culture rather than a scholarly cult of depth) is made clear:

Those of us who cut our intellectual teeth on deconstruction, ideology critique, and the hermeneutics of suspicion have often found those demystifying protocols superfluous in an era when images of torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere were immediately circulated on the internet; the real-time coverage of Hurricane Katrina showed in ways that required little explication the state’s abandonment of its African American citizens; and many people instantly recognized as lies political statements such as “mission accomplished.” (p.2)

In the constructive interplay of symptom and surface in modern scholarly practice, it is hard to think of a better topic that has been lost in plain sight than the subject of nostalgia to which Dodman brilliantly returns.

I recall in conclusion that it has been with a considerable sense of geo-intellectual kinship that I have addressed Dodman’s volume, which shows us better than most how historians can make the journey from history as an academic discipline towards cultural analysis. In so doing, he makes the most of his own intellectual origins, as all first books should do, thus inscribing a transatlantic triangle between the UK, USA and France which I also share and admire, both at the level of scholarly experience and intellectual method. In my case, though, the journey has been from literary culture to history, rather than vice versa.

Indeed, it is worth confessing to the readers of H-France that this reader at least hasn’t given up on the notion that it could still be in the aesthetic (and thus sometimes literary) experience that one might find the keenest and most acute articulation of the pleasures and travails of nostalgia. And in this very persistence, who knows, perhaps I am something of a professional nostalgic? In other words, for all of the references shared between the general field of cultural history and, more specifically, cultural historians of literature (who would recognize Dodman’s methodological references to Benjamin, Foucault, Freud et al. and his epigraphic nods to T.S. Eliot, Rostand, Flaubert, Austen and Byron), and for all the sense we might enjoy of this fusion of fields, there lingers, from the literary perspective, a sense of the particularity of the aesthetic engagement with, say, nostalgia.

Indeed, French literature, medieval and modern, is in some sense framed by the nostalgia of Villon and Proust. At the origins (historical and biographical) of a certain education in French literature – for which others might feel a certain nostalgia - stands, precisely, that most memorable articulation of nostalgia in verse, the refrain of the fifteenth-century poet François Villon: “Où sont les neiges d’antan?” Within the notion of nostalgia as anti-revolution, to which we have already referred, one could imagine nostalgia doing the more or less political work of conservatism, of expressing the wish to retrieve and hold onto that which should not be lost. Dodman, though, is alert to the political complexities of nostalgia. After all, Rousseau (whom he sagely invokes at various points) provides the most nostalgic fantasy of revolution in daydreaming philosophically about humanity before society and civilization. The Romantics and their post-Romantic heirs and antiphons, so influenced by Rousseau, invoke Villon’s refrain often: be they Théodore de Banville’s *Ballade des célébrités du temps jadis* (1856), volume IV, book VII of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1862), or Guy de Maupassant’s *La Chevelure* of... 1884! Indeed, that key term in the lexicon of nostalgia - the English word “yesteryear” - was a neologism borne of the nineteenth-century interest in Villon, coined by Dante Gabriel Rossetti precisely to render in translation Villon’s use of “antan”.

At the birth of twentieth-century literature, which sits just decades beyond the late nineteenth-century historical limit of Dodman’s project, we find two major articulations of literary memory, which point in different aesthetic directions, and in so doing exhibit differing relations to nostalgia. On the one hand, there is a nostalgia of form as well as theme in Alain-Fournier’s *Le Grand Meaulnes* (1913), which bathes in the quintessential singularity of its Romantic nostalgia, a pleasure to be had and recalled; and on the other, the Modernist play of memory in Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27) which points forwards to the radical interrogation of nineteenth-century forms by exploring the madeleine-like triggering of sub-conscious memories in a kind of psychopathology of everyday life.[2] One could, then, imagine a book equally cultural, but more literary, which reads closely those eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic objects which share Dodman’s historical timeframe. To fantasize about such a volume is merely to imagine one of the many forms of influence which this remarkable, ably conceptualized and beautifully written book will no doubt impart in the years to come.

NOTES

[1] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations*, 108.1 (2009), pp. 1-21.

[2] Proust’s famous madeleine is invoked by Dodman on p. 5.

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