INTRODUCTION

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Just over half a century ago, Marxist critic Georg Lukács proposed that Walter Scott — writing more than a century earlier — was responsible for a new kind of historical narrative: readers, by identifying with everyday kinds of fictional characters, ‘could re-experience the social and human motives which led men [and women] to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality’.¹ That argument, according to which fiction does much more than remember cultural history through telling tales, because in addition it conveys a sense of thought and feeling, should at least have ensured Scott a renewed place in Romantic studies. If Wordsworth and Coleridge’s Lyrical Ballads synthesized older (even ancient) poetry of feeling with narrative storytelling to make something bold and experimental, Scott did something similar with historical fiction in the form of the long narrative poem and in prose. All three of these first-generation Romantics believed in the power of remembering, during which the imagination could re-create feelings from the past, to improve their own and a future world.² Wordsworth added that such recreated feeling, based in intense personal experience, ‘does itself actually exist in the mind’. Scott’s achievement, according to Lukács, was to recover socially embedded feeling from beyond the boundaries of personal experience because located in the deeper past, but still in such a way that individuals could experience it in their minds. Through a figurative form of time travel, then, people could relate more sympathetically to one another and establish a better society, responding to understanding produced by feelings as well as by thought. Whether or not Scott is accepted as a mainstream Romantic, it would be difficult to imagine a writer more concerned about community. Furthermore, literature for him is the medium through which this process of remembering can go on in ways that look forward as well as to the past.

[for the full article see The Yearbook of English Studies 47 (2017) in hard copy or on JSTOR, or contact the author.]

¹ Georg Lukács, The Historical Novel, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 42. The use of the masculine pronoun in the quoted passage from the Mitchells’ translation will be objectionable to some readers, so the feminine is included.


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