

Niklas SALMOSE and Eric SANDBERG (eds.), *Once Upon a Time: Nostalgic Narratives in Transition*, Stockholm: Trolltrumma Academia, 2018, ISBN: 9789198392944, 142 p.

Review by Michel DELVILLE
University of Liège
Liège, Belgium
mdelville@ulg.ac.be

This slim but rich, enticing and elegantly produced volume represents something of a landmark in a hitherto underrepresented subject in academic discourse and public history. Building upon the foundational insights of precursors such as Svetlana Boym (*The Future of Nostalgia*, 2001) and Linda Austin (*Nostalgia in Transition, 1780-1917*, 2007), *Once Upon a Time* sets out to grapple with the tensions and complexities of historical and current definitions and applications of nostalgia across the centuries and across different media and cultural representations. The breadth of references and genres covered in the book demonstrates the vast and careful research undertaken by the editors in preparing and coordinating what amounts to a genuinely interdisciplinary and collaborative endeavour. Moving eloquently from the abstract to the specific, and providing examples of theoretical concepts alongside close readings of both canonical and non-canonical texts, the articles gathered by Niklas Salmoose and Eric Sandberg take us with great fluidity and authority from such literary classics of nostalgia as Proust's *In Remembrance of Things Past* and L.P. Hartley's *The Go Between* to considerations of the pastoral and the elegiac, the rhetoric of IKEA advertising campaigns, Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle*, David Cameron's comments on British celebrations of the centenary of World War I or the "nostalgic turn" taken by the film and video game industries. The critical and theoretical sources used by the contributors are equally diversified and draw as much on literary historiography and sociology as on trauma studies, psychoanalysis, cultural studies and affect theory.

In their introduction the editors describe the content of and the context for the volume as follows:

The past has never seemed further away. We live in societies oriented towards the now and tomorrow, in a world obsessed with a complex and protean present seemingly impervious to historical continuity. The many tomorrows inherent in every new technology, product, and digitally mediated event drive us further away from our collective and individual histories. What is the value, then, of the stores of strangers from the past – historical figures, our ancestors, even our younger selves – who lived under conditions so different to our own? What can national or international histories mean in an age in which information, products, pollutants, ideas, and capital move across national and cultural boundaries, and people are pushed and pulled through a dislocated present towards an unknowable future by imperatives of economics and politics? (6)

As Salmose and Sandberg point out, such concerns and paradoxes have been diagnosed, investigated and (re)formulated, often in a pejorative fashion, by such diverse writers as Thomas Pynchon, who writes of the “flaccid swoon of yielding to memory” and Saul Bellow, whose 1964 novel *Herzog* associates “the insidious blight of nostalgia” with “softening, great-rotting emotions, black spots, sweet for one moment but leaving a dangerous acid residue” (7). Fredric Jameson is amongst the critics who share this negative view of nostalgia as a pathological form of ahistorical eclecticism and commodified historicism. Unsurprisingly, Marxist critics such as Terry Eagleton have also dismissed nostalgia as a vehicle for depthless sentimental pastiches devoid of subversive or revolutionary potential. By contrast, Svetlana Boym has conceptualised nostalgia’s potential to encourage political dissent as a kind of “rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress” (7), notably when she opposes the Romantics’ celebration of the affective particularisms of their native landscapes to the Enlightenment’s championing of universal rationalism.

Laura Marcus’s essay on “Nostalgia, Memory and Autobiography” is a perfect opener for the volume, one which returns us to the history of the word “nostalgia” and stresses its migration from medical and psychiatric terminology to everyday discourse. Starting with Johannes Hofer’s 1688 use of the term to describe homesickness (the Greek term literally conveying the “pain” resulting from not being able to “return home”), Marcus pursues its connections to the peculiar kind of melancholy described and analysed in life writing, where nostalgia becomes

associated with a reaction to displacement and what Lisa O’Sullivan describes as the interplay of memory and imagination lying at the root of the “disease” of French nationalism. Another pivotal notion used by Marcus — and one which remains central, albeit implicitly, to the whole book — correlates to Boym’s distinction between “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia, the former “attempt[ing] a transhistorical restoration of the lost home” whereas the latter “thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming — wistfully, ironically, desperately” (18). Pausing with Joyce Carol Oates’ hypothesis that “the art of writing might be defined as the use to which we put homesickness” and pondering the epistemological implications of this “reflective” model (“restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt”), Marcus concludes with Boym that

Nostalgia can be a social disease and a creative emotion, a poison and a cure. The dreams of imagined homelands cannot and should not come to life. They can have a more important impact on improving social and political conditions in the present as ideals, not as fairy tales come true (19).

Lena Ahlin’s chapter on contemporary narratives of transnational adoption also serves to remind us that the birth of modern nostalgia is linked with war and displacement. Ahlin’s examination of adoptee narratives in the broader context of the politics of transnational adoption in Sweden suggests that adoptee narratives are poised between the two paradigms described by Boym, in other words between the *nostos*-oriented restorative longing for origins and the critical thinking that allows retrospection to “[connect] to introspection and progression rather than conservatism” (30).

The next three chapters zoom in on specific cases of nostalgia as a form of spatial as well as temporal displacement. Agata Handley’s essay on Tony Harrison’s poetry takes a psychoanalytical approach to mourning as a necessary process of self-definition against loss. Handley argues, via Borges, that one of the positive, life-asserting dimensions of nostalgia may lie in its capacity to be experienced not only as consolation but also as “the continuing working of the self through art” (42). In Harrison’s *The School of Eloquence*, mourning thus transcends the traditional parameters of the elegiac mode insofar as the poet understands elegy as “an ongoing

project of *Trauerarbeit*” which enables the speaker to develop, transform and restore his sense of self while exploiting the experience of loss for artistic purposes. In Elin Käck’s “Americans in Europe: A Poetics of ‘Solidified Nostalgia’”, such a process of “generative nostalgia” (51) becomes translated into terms which relate to how nostalgia affects the representation of Europe in American literary and filmic culture. Käck’s readings of Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s 1984 poem “Plan du centre de Paris à vol d’oiseau” and Woody Allen’s 2011 *Midnight in Paris* concentrate on how literature and the arts “play a constitutive role in the production of place, and in particular of the marketable tourist destination” (58). Käck concludes that “America itself is built around the notion of leaving Europe behind, celebrating progress over history” and that “Americans perform nostalgia differently from Europeans.” While the latter ground nostalgia “in a canon of national literature and art”, the former “adher[e] to an ephemeral popular culture of youth that was closely associated with the precocious development of fast capitalism” (59). Käck’s analysis of the commodification of nostalgia into landmarks and memorabilia bearing the mark of mass tourism contrasts with Maria Freij’s close exploration of “metanostalgia” in Lars Gustafsson’s poem “Austin, Texas”, which uncovers the author’s self-reflexive uses of the pastoral mode.

Suspicion and self-reflexivity loom large in the recent critical discourse about nostalgia. David Rennie’s and Laurie Slegtenhorst’s contributions to the volume both deal with the aesthetics and politics of historical representation and commemoration. While Slegtenhorst’s chapter examines idealised depictions of heroic resistance in Fred Boot’s 2010 musical *Soldier of Orange*, Rennie’s “Never Such Innocence Again” investigates key nostalgic tropes of World War I remembrance, paying special attention to the nostalgic nationalism and commercial packaging which characterised state-sponsored centenary celebrations worldwide. Rennie’s preoccupations with how “the shock value of the war is diluted... [and] its cultural legacy exploited to galvanise feelings of nationalistic resurgence at a time of global instability” (96) echo Boym’s definition of nostalgia as a Janus-faced category necessarily enmeshed in private and public discourse. Considering Walter Benjamin’s description of the bourgeois home in nineteenth century Paris as “a miniature theatre and museum that privatises nostalgia while at the same time replicating its public structure, the national and private homes thus becoming intertwined”, Boym writes:

Public nostalgia acquires distinct styles, from the empire style favored by Napoleon to the new historical styles – neo-Gothic, neo-Byzantine, and so on – as the cycles of revolutionary change are accompanied by restorations that end up with a recovery of a grand style.

Nostalgia as a historical emotion came of age at the time of Romanticism and is coeval with the birth of mass culture. It began with the early-nineteenth century memory boom that turned the salon culture of educated urban dwellers and landowners into a ritual commemoration of lost youth, lost springs, lost dances, lost chances (12-13).

Such arguments once again call for a political reading of the aesthetics of nostalgia, one which is also displayed and practiced in the last two chapters of the book, which are offered by the editors themselves and address more general aspects of critical and theoretical studies in nostalgia. Sandberg addresses “the presentness of the past” as “a central feature of modernity” in literary and filmic production, building his analysis on a recognition of the ubiquity of “nostalgic turns” in a cultural environment saturated with nostalgic intertextuality, whether it be in terms of form or content. Sanders’ corpus includes rewritings and remakes of classic texts alongside non-canonical examples taken from popular culture (e.g., the Victorian nostalgia evidenced in *Harry Potter* and the public school genre in general).

Salmose’s concluding chapter wraps up some of the discussions related to a phenomenon which has been seen as a “social disease” (Susan Stewart), “a falsifying component of historicism” (Fredric Jameson), “a literary style during the Romantic era” (Aaron Santesso), “a late nineteenth century way of understanding socio-psychological repression” (Georg Simmel), an “immigrant psychosis” (Isaac Frost), “a variant of depression” (Harvey A. Kaplan), and “part of a Freudian concept of regression” (Edward S. Casey). Notwithstanding such various perspectives and definitions, Salmose insists that nostalgia remains “primarily a distinct transhistorical human experience” (127) which “stimulates the subject to experience the past and its reflection simultaneously” (134). In the course of his readings of George Lucas’ 1973 *American Graffiti* and Peter Bogdanovich’s 1971 *The Last Picture Show* Salmose draws an important distinction between texts which contain explicit nostalgic content and texts which are “aesthetically nostalgic”, i.e. which “yield (...) another kind of artistic nostalgia, more elusive and personal, related to the very

experience of nostalgia through art where art triggers nostalgic sensations in the reader, viewer, or listener” (129). Here, Salmose is pointing to a more open experience which is anchored in our own personal experience of the text and calls for a detailed analysis of specific tropes and stylistic patterns governing the “nostalgic stylistic landscape” (137).

One of the lessons to be drawn from Salmose’s and Sandberg’s book is that nostalgia can and should be understood not merely as a state of mind but also as a compositional technique in its own right. Hence the importance of Fred Davis’s work on the relevance of nostalgia to aesthetics as well as his insistence that nostalgia is “not only a feeling or mood that is somehow magically evoked by the art object but also a distinctive aesthetic modality” (130). *Once Upon a Time* does a wonderful job of exploring the uses, voluntary or not, of the emotional power of images and narratives of nostalgia as compositional devices, offering a wide methodology for understanding temporal and spatial stresses, erasures and displacements. Because of its sheer range of references and its capacity to engage in a critical reflection on nostalgia as a representational category, rather than merely the expression of ideas and feelings, this volume makes a vital contribution not only to what some will see as the emerging field of “nostalgia studies” but also to our understanding of the frictions and contradictions of modernity in its past and current temporal and spatial articulations.