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Afterword: Nostalgia and Modernist Anxiety

Elizabeth Outka

Like modernism, nostalgia turns out to be constituted by its very tensions. As the essays in this volume suggest, nostalgia in the early twentieth century was rarely simple or simply one thing, but a rich and varied phenomenon: potentially redemptive and narrow, progressive and conservative, barren, fruitful, dangerous, and liberating. Nostalgic desire had many objects, sometimes for places, both real and imaginary, as the essays in the "Locations" section consider; sometimes for a rural past, as Robert Hemmings observes in Sassoon's use of an idyllic period before the war, and sometimes for a particular urban past, explored by Barry J. Faulk in his essay on music halls. And nostalgia could have more surprising targets, such as for the older metrical forms discussed in Meredith Martin's essay, or even, as Gabrielle McIntire and Marina MacKay argue, the hunger for nostalgia and for modernism itself. And of course, nostalgic longing could be a blend of these and many other desires. Even the form of nostalgia varies, alternatively functioning as a conscious memory, a repressed desire, an unfulfillable longing, an emotion, or some combination. What is clear, though, is that after this collection and other recent work on modernist nostalgia, any idea that British, Irish, and American modernists—and modernist critics—only treat nostalgia with disdain must be discarded.[1] The essays here, taken together, present modernist nostalgia as a changing, slippery concept that demands careful attention and an innovative approach, one that is skeptical and inquisitive, both alert to dangers and open to the possibility that nostalgia in various forms may offer something beneficial to writers and critics alike.

Here at the end of the collection I want to propose going back to the beginning—not to the beginning of nostalgic desire in the modernist era, but to the start of the anxiety *over* nostalgia in the modernist era.

The discomfort has, I want to argue, two distinct periods: the early twentieth-century anxiety that various modernists had toward nostalgia, and the later uneasiness modernist critics have with nostalgia within the modernist period. Most eras, of course, experience at least some form of nostalgic longing, along with a corresponding distrust and uneasiness about such longing. The apprehension that nostalgia may provoke seems to stem in part from the fear of being taken in—the fear of being caught believing in a fairy tale or an illusion, and the corresponding worry that people who succumb to nostalgic longing may be distracted from the pressing problems of the current moment. Yet each era also shapes nostalgia—and the critical reaction to nostalgia—to its own ends, and this collection explores the particularities of one moment in nostalgia's history. Worries over nostalgia in any era are not unfounded, but such worries do take on particular force and immediacy in the early twentieth century, and, in a parallel anxiety, in the critical responses to modernism in the last forty years. Even in this collection, which so evocatively reconsiders relations between nostalgia and modernism, a vein of anxiety over nostalgia can be traced, in both the modernist writers and the modernist critics themselves.[2] I'd like to suggest that this apprehension surrounding nostalgia stems in part in the modernist period from twin sources—the shattering effects of World War I and the rapid rise in consumer culture and corresponding shifts in advertising. The more recent critical fear of nostalgia in modernism that I explore in the second part of this Afterword flows from these sources and also from the urgent need, from the 1980s on, to redeem modernism from critiques that claimed it clung nostalgically to a lost wholeness, and to reject its casting as the anemic second cousin to a more intellectually robust and uncompromising post-modernism. Understanding some of the intense worry over being taken in by nostalgia—both for the modernists and for ourselves—may further clarify nostalgia's protean nature, both as a powerful force and as a troubling obsession.

Modernist nostalgia

After World War I, the Edwardian era famously became the site of nostalgic longing. As historian Samuel Hynes points out, "Men and women after the war looked back at their own pasts as one might look across a great chasm to a remote, peaceable place on the other side" (xi). The past became a convenient object of desire, something just out of reach but still vivid in the imagination. As Hynes and many others have pointed out, this sense of discontinuity became part of the myth of the war, and the idea that the previous era was a peaceable time does not stand up to historic scrutiny. Despite the fact that we can debunk the myth of a peaceable kingdom, it matters that people *felt* an outpouring of nostalgia for the pre-war era as an imagined place of safety and comfort. As several of these essays note, the traumatic experience of war could produce a nostalgia bordering on pathology, as we find, for example, in the amnesiac hero of *The Return of the Soldier*, as addressed in Bernard Schweizer's essay. Nostalgia could also serve as an antidote to trauma, as explored by Hemmings in his discussion of Sassoon. Both Sassoon and West knew, however, that soldiers often struggled with the guilt that such nostalgia might bring, threatening as it did to obscure the darker realities of the war. Nostalgia in the era became double edged: both a welcomed if imagined escape from war's trauma, offering a sense of hope that another reality was possible, but also a threat to the memory of war, a forgetting that might even lead to further traumas.

The threat that after the war, people might forget or cover over its hard truths, produced an equally famous backlash against nostalgia, and indeed against any abstract concept that promised some idyllic picture of tranquility. Blending with the rebellion against everything Victorian already present in the pre-war era, this backlash encompassed many popular sites of nostalgic longing: the idea of a beautiful rural England that offered an escape from the war seemed to many of the war poets a false façade fronting a treacherous world; the higher class image of a civilized, gentile country estate faced cries that this very economic hierarchy had helped fuel the war. The shifts in gender roles fostered by the war disrupted nostalgic images of a domestic scene, where a benign maternal figure gently nurtured her family before a well-tended fire. Ironically, the war made such nostalgic scenes both more powerful and more elusive, and simultaneously produced for many veterans and writers a rage against these nostalgic pictures and the longing they might evoke.

As we can see in these essays, the critiques by modernist writers of nostalgic images assumed several forms. First, after an evocation of the image, a subsequent denial that the original image was true or was ever true; Maren Linett's essay suggests how this critique works in Elizabeth Bowen's myth of the mother–son dyad and its eventual destruction. Second, again after the evocation of the image, the often stark realization that such a picture is no longer available and never would be again, as Patricia Rae explores in Orwell's novel on fishing, and Bernard Schweizer investigates in Rebecca West's nostalgia and anti-nostalgia.

Third, a more ambiguous nostalgia that sought both to admire a particular aspect of the past while staying alert to its problems, as Sarah Edwards observes in the work of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf. Underlying all these reactions is the pervasive wish on the part of the writer to avoid being taken in—to avoid placing faith in a mirage that threatens to obscure harsher truths or that lulls one into a dangerous forgetting of the darker realities learned in the war.

Nostalgic desire—and the fear of nostalgic desire—were fueled not only by the war, but also by a less well-known revolutionary force emerging around the same time: the rapid rise in the selling of nostalgic images in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Marketers, architects, and writers were evoking nostalgic desire and selling nostalgic images in novels, advertisements, and housing and community design, as I have discussed elsewhere at greater length.[3] Around the turn of the century, advertisements shifted from selling particular items to selling particular lifestyles, often (though certainly not solely) built around images of domestic tranquility or rural ease. The Garden City Movement and the model towns at Bournville and Port Sunlight reproduced (in part) older village models. The popular Ideal Home Show showcased the newest home improvements alongside carefully crafted recreations of old villages. *Country Life* magazine leapt into prominence, and rural scenes of all types were for sale in ways not previously seen in Britain. Understandably, this multi-faceted selling of the "Olde England" aesthetic could unsettle writers and the general public. H. G. Wells, in his novel *Tono Bungay*, offers a devastating critique of the polymorphous marketing that was happy to build any kind of narrative, including appeals to nostalgic images of rural England, to sell products. And as Patricia Rae notes in her essay on Orwell, this nostalgic selling not only hid the environmental degradation of the countryside, but hid the commercial culture's complicity in that damage as well. Pairing nostalgia, already a dubious enterprise, with the equally suspicious consumer culture, only increased the sense in the early twentieth century that nostalgia was at best a distraction and at worst a dangerous mask for serious problems.

As the essays in the collection point out, of course, reactions to nostalgia were decidedly mixed; while some modernists embraced nostalgia (though often later rejecting it violently, as Elizabeth Bowen does), almost every essay in this category still suggests a hesitant, or anxious, or qualified embrace, and often with excellent reasons. A key exception to such anxiety, however, runs through several of the essays: the power conferred by self-consciously constructed nostalgia. In some respects, of course, nostalgia like everything else is always a construction. But the nostalgia that seems to inspire particularly acute anxiety is the kind that seems to be out of the control of the viewer, one that evokes what is seen as a pure or true past image that is at the same time demonstrably and forever out of reach: the past we find in Schweizer's article on Rebecca West, or the myth of maternal plenitude that Linett explores in Elizabeth Bowen. Nostalgia potentially becomes more useful, more powerful, and less dangerous, when it is wielded not as an overpowering longing but as a self-aware construction, capable of change. Here we find Eve Sorum's concept of Auden's protean nostalgia, Forster's complex development of nostalgia in defense of art, as outlined in John Su's essay, and the nostalgic *désistance* of James Joyce in Christy Burns' analysis. For these authors, nostalgia becomes a tool, something to be created, dismantled, reconfigured, and rebuilt. Such construction might encompass an author's own personal formation of nostalgic images for his or her own consumption, or the creation—and by extension the evocation—of nostalgic desire in other readers or viewers through a shaping of particular scenes or images. So for example, as Robert Hemmings notes, Siegfried Sassoon could recreate and reconstruct in memory scenes of rural ease that were in part based on his own pre-war experiences, but that were envisioned in his present to combat traumatic memories. Such scenes did predictably produce anxiety that the nostalgia would hide the "true" memories, but were nevertheless connected to Sassoon's (partial) recovery. Modernist nostalgia that was less for individual use, and more for general consumption within a particular art work, is perhaps rendered less dangerous (or at least, less a cause of anxiety) by another unique trait: it could also—powerfully—invite its own critique without negating the longing itself. The nostalgia we find in Auden or Joyce or Woolf simultaneously suggests or refers to or plays with nostalgic images or longing, and also, by highlighting its constructed, malleable quality, invites readers to analyze its construction without necessarily dismissing it as fraud. Joyce, for example, as Burns' essay suggests, plays with various types of nostalgia in relation to mourning, suggesting through its multiple uses its protean and constructed quality. Likewise, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* surely invites readers both to appreciate, nostalgically, the lost era of "The Window" section while always maintaining a critical stance towards this very past.

In highlighting such a constructed nostalgia, these writers were in fact paralleling developments in consumer culture, developments that sought to disarm anxiety over nostalgia by simultaneously evoking it while maintaining a critical or ironic distance. The marketing of nostalgia in this era—from model towns to new homes designed to look old to shifts in advertising and store design—offered an enticing paradox, both a dash of nostalgic flavor shorn of the dirt or work that might go into, say, a rural retreat, *and* the latest, most up-to-date products. It was a nostalgia that might be constructed and changed and self-fashioned by the viewer or buyer, taken seriously yet always subject to change or critique. Indeed, for the marketing strategy to work, buyers had to see the nostalgic aura as something they wanted, but also see it as something constructed and thus available for purchase. Such selling is problematic in a range of ways—it's right of course to be anxious or disdainful of nostalgia in many cases—but the power of these sorts of constructions should not be overlooked, either in the writers or in the marketing. Understanding such constructions in turn offers a way for modernist critics to approach nostalgia, for, as I turn to next, anxiety over nostalgia also has a distinctive history in modernist criticism.

Critical anxiety, critical nostalgia

Just as modernist writers employed various types of nostalgia aimed at satisfying different kinds of desires, modernist critics often exhibit various forms of anxiety *about* such nostalgia, anxiety that arises from several sources unique to the subject. First, and most overwhelmingly, critics know the later terrifying uses of nostalgia by various fascist regimes after WWI, leading up to and encompassing Nazi Germany. The mixture of nostalgia and politics may produce a version of what Svetlana Boym has called "restorative" nostalgia, a type that attempts a "transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" that promises a return to origins and to an "absolute truth" of a tradition (Boym xviii). One only need recall the Nazi's fervent promotion of the supposedly authentic old-fashioned, quaint country store, one that had been contaminated by foreign corruption, to see the dangers of this type of nostalgia. As critic Robert Hemmings summarizes in his book, *Modern Nostalgia,*

> Dangerous consequences result when nostalgia's contempt for the present is applied to the political realm, as occurred in the modern period. The use of modern technology to impose the pattern of pre-industrial society on modern society produces fascism. . . .While all forms of nostalgia may not be politically conservative, it is certainly true that modernist nostalgia in these terms is rightly descried by critics as reactionary, regressive and dangerously ignoring or distorting the complexities of contemporary life in favour of the imposition of an idealized construction of past order. (10)

In the twentieth century, appeals to nostalgia have been used to justify atrocities and to distort national and political aims. And such nostalgia could also cover over a violent imperial past, as Carey Snyder observes in D. H. Lawrence's uncritical embrace of a primitivism that ignores his own complicity in imperial history. Such efforts have been supported by the new sophistication of marketing, advertising, and propaganda that have developed ever more refined ways of packaging nostalgia. For authors and critics, as John Su notes in *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel*, "A diagnosis of nostalgia typically earns a writer or scholar condemnation; to be nostalgic is to be 'out of touch,' reactionary, even xenophobic" (2). As this collection proves, and as Su himself goes on to argue, nostalgia is now seen as far more complicated, but the complicity of nostalgia and the fascist regimes of the twentieth century will always make discussing nostalgia and modernism a dicey and often anxious endeavor.

Modernist critics have additional reasons to be anxious, however, as nostalgia has proven a particular stumbling block for modernist criticism. On the one hand, nostalgia at first glance seemed antithetical to modernism and the urge to "make it new" and defy tradition. Under this reading, if a writer was nostalgic, he or she was not truly modernist. Such a simplified reading of modernism has been dispelled in recent years, but this underlying critical assumption remains a specter in the criticism. On the other hand, modernist critics have long been fighting accusations that modernist writers were indeed too nostalgic. In the last twenty years, as modernist critics know, we have been revising and reexamining modernism, roughly dating from the first meeting of the Modernist Studies Association conference in 1999. Tired of having the post-modernists use modernism as their whipping boy, modernist critics revolted and reclaimed modernism as an era rich in complications and deserving of close study. Part of what the critics sought to counter were charges that modernism itself was problematically nostalgic, searching for a lost wholeness, as Lyotard famously remarked. All the agony and despair over fragmentation itself implied, Lyotard's argument went, that the modernists dreamed of unity, dreamed of restoring what had been lost. The new modernisms sought to reject this nostalgic label; with some of the same fervor the modernists used to distinguish themselves from the "old-fashioned" Victorians, modernist critics demanded a reappraisal of modernism as radical, new, intimately connected to history and to marketing, and (often) decidedly anti-nostalgic. This new energy lead to many articles and papers exploring the "but what IS modernism?" question, one we continue to ask and to answer. The central claim I am making, though, is that the very revival of modernism was at least in part about defending modernism from charges of nostalgia, charges that only added to the discomfort surrounding nostalgia in the twentieth century.

Now over a decade past the first Modernist Studies Association conference, modernism has been studied from many angles, its definition alternatively expanded and narrowed, its many characteristics reexamined, overturned, and reconfirmed, its central players in a constant state of flux and reappraisal, its boundaries widened and crossed and newly shaped. In fact, this very plasticity should itself be seen as intrinsic to modernism, a movement defined by its movement, by its flux and its slippage among a series of contradictions and oppositions. Having achieved this richness, it is perhaps time for us to take a collective critical breath, to relish this revival and to see that nostalgia too might be a concept rich in contradiction, and not necessarily the death knell of modernism. Modernist nostalgia can indeed be traced to a range of disturbing political manipulations and to a host of commercial imitations; it can also, as we've seen, be linked to progressive and even enlightening plans for radical change, and, as I have argued elsewhere, its commercial manifestations often had much to teach us. While certainly not as flexible or as varied as modernism itself, nostalgia can nevertheless be explored in relationship to modernism by using some of the same variety of approaches we have successfully brought to modernist studies.

Particular kinds of anti-nostalgia can hold additional risks for modernism and for scholars of modernism. Critiques that focus on nostalgia as a blind for something else, or as a false imitation, remain essential for exploring the more disturbing political implications of nostalgia. Potentially (though not always) more problematic are critiques that adopt a sour grapes approach, declaring that the objects of nostalgia were never that great, that whatever idealized homey image of maternal comfort or pastoral bliss were imagined, they were false, misremembered, fundamentally fake, or screens to cover up a sinister inequality. This sort of anti-nostalgia can act as a temporary balm for mourning, both for critics and authors: whatever anyone might long for or miss, it can be declared a mirage (and of course, sometimes it *is* a mirage or a cover for troubling ideologies). Elizabeth Bowen, as Maren Linett points out, can ruthlessly destroy the idyllic mother/child dyad, the destruction calling the original dyad itself into question. During and after WWI, debunking became a popular approach and indeed perhaps an appealing option; faced with little hope of addressing nostalgic longing, soldiers and writers could declare such dreams had little substance in reality, potentially assuaging the sense of loss when no other remedy was available. As critics, we are trained to do the same, suspiciously (and often rightly) eying the pastoral scene for signs of oppressive class relations and viewing images of familial bliss with knowing smiles. Despite the need to be alert to nostalgia's problems, the potential danger here is that we will have nothing to lose. Nostalgia can in fact be a sign of loss, a witness, as it were, to something (or someone) missing that is now potentially un-recoverable and forever out of reach. Maintaining nostalgia may thus become an effort to memorialize, to hold and to lament something still valuable and worth mourning. To address these efforts by declaring them unnecessary and misplaced is tempting, but not always the appropriate response. As critics, to see all modernist nostalgia as something dangerous to modernism, something we must erase or declare false before modernism can be accepted or embraced anew, risks missing how nostalgia might suggest the profound and understandable sense of unrecoverable loss experienced in the aftermath of war.[4]

We have to learn to read modernist nostalgia slowly, tracing associations among a variety of actors (to borrow terms from sociologist Bruno Latour[5]). To theorize about nostalgia, we need to network—to see nostalgia not as a preformed thing out there for us to uncover, but as something felt, recorded, constructed, and reconstructed, by authors, marketers, veterans, and critics. At times we can trace associations between certain types of nostalgic longing to a host of disturbing political and social manipulations, and likewise to useful psychological defenses and memorializations. Modernist nostalgia in particular can partake of the new understandings of memory in the twentieth century that arose from Freud, Bergson, William James, and others who saw memory as something always in flux, often hidden, and made up of disjointed yet fluid scraps of experience. Unlike the Victorian approach, outlined by Nicholas Dames, that used nostalgia to reconstruct a more pleasant past and employ a selective forgetting, modernist nostalgia loses some of these boundaries, at times drawing on amnesia, but at other times becoming a calculated, self-conscious stance, or a hapless inability to face the present, or a prescient vision of a better future. Transferring some of the multiplicity we have brought to our notions of modernism, we can approach modernist nostalgia with an open mind (without setting aside our critical faculties). Just as we can leave off hand-wringing over what modernism IS, we can in turn consider nostalgia with curiosity rather than simply suspicion, as indeed this collection does.

Notes

1. This Afterword, like this collection, focuses on nostalgia and modernism in Britain, Ireland, and America. More study is needed on nostalgia and modernism outside of these countries and in a transnational context.
2. In this Afterword, whenever I refer to "modernist critics," I mean critics who write about modernism, not necessarily people who are critical of modernism itself.
3. See Outka, *Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism, and the Commodified Authentic.*
4. Indeed, hungering for a "pure" modernism freed from any taint of nostalgia is itself a nostalgic gesture.
5. Latour uses these terms in describing Actor-Network Theory in his work *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory.*

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