

Idealizing or Critical? Nostalgia for the Edwardian Golden Age

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Abstract: The myth of the Golden Age found in 20th-century British prose fiction and, particularly, in accounts of the Edwardian decade, seems from the current perspective to be a nostalgically envisioned idyllic haven. Suggestive of peace, innocence, and prosperity, the myth of the Golden Age features in literary renditions of a pre-WWI world, with the works of Kenneth Grahame being a notable example. In stories aimed at younger readers, and in adult fiction too, war – and particularly WWI – constitutes a caesura at which the playful *agon* of the Edwardian Golden Age transforms into a life-and-death struggle; by the same token, it dramatically severs the nostalgically recalled visions of peace and security. In the paper, I first focus on defining the mythical and the nostalgic. I argue that, exposed through the workings of nostalgia, the notion of war becomes a pivot upon which the myth of the golden-age of Edwardian England is constructed and preserved in the collective memory. Furthermore, I argue that British literature includes literary examples which, paradoxically, both re-enforce and yet simultaneously challenge the golden-age traits of the Edwardian decade. In Kenneth Grahame's *The Golden Age* and *Dream Days* the golden past is perpetuated and firmly cemented, whereas in Siegfried Sassoon's autobiographical fiction as well as L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* the initial reminiscences of an idyllic pre-WWI countryside are subsequently questioned. In these texts, the retrospective viewpoint helps investigate the links between myth and nostalgia, which ultimately culminates in a critical message: while deploying the "gilded" images and established rhetoric Sassoon and Hartley challenge the myth of the Golden Age and expose the reality of the Edwardian era.

Keywords: the Edwardian era, the Golden Age, Arcadia, *reflective* nostalgia, pastoral convention

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If juxtaposed between the preceding Victorian epoch and the subsequent period of modernism, the Edwardian era appears to be of rather less importance

as it designates, strictly speaking, a span of merely a decade.¹ Nonetheless, the short reign of king Edward VII (1901–1910), with its innovative turn of mind,² pioneering artistic currents, and novel aesthetics (Hatt, O’Neill 2010; Stephenson 2013), has come to be considered not only the threshold of a new age, but also a period significant in its own right. The fact that, historically, it immediately preceded WWI is perhaps the principal factor which has contributed to the creation of a caesura in the minds of future generations; they have grown to associate the pre-WWI period in English history with an all-pervasive idyllicism, idyllicism that has irrevocably vanished (Hynes 2011, 4–5; Hatt, O’Neill 2010, 1). In her study of the Edwardian period, Morna O’Neill observes that the nostalgia for the golden past was initially “crafted by the Edwardians themselves [as they managed to] (...) project a sense of what might be lost to themselves and to future generations” (O’Neill in Hatt, O’Neill 2010, 1); allegedly, the nostalgic tinge continues in the portrayals of the epoch, which in fact demonstrates the persistence of the myth in the public sphere (O’Neill in Hatt, O’Neill 2010, 1).³ In this paper it is argued that the mythical image of the Edwardian period, still in vogue in contemporary accounts (Carle et al. 2018, 4), has been a nostalgia-driven construct re-enforcing both the relational conceptualizations of the decade, on the one hand, and its distinct separateness established within literary and cultural history, on the other; in both cases, nostalgic implications seem to have contributed to the perpetuations of the myth in public discourse (O’Neill in Hatt, O’Neill 2010, 2).

As implied, the dominant image of the first decade of 20th-century Britain most commonly held by Europeans is that romanticized by the myth of the Golden Age. As a “mode of thought” (Walker in Herman et al. 2008, 330), myth appears a familiar concept in academic discussions, both past and more recent, with the latter having formulated several, rather unfavourable, critiques: in “Myth Today” Barthes explicates the manner in which myth supports ideologies by maintaining the symbolic order of conventions and institutions (2000, 239–252), while Lyotard

1 The exact dating is contested as some scholars expand the timespan and periodize the Edwardian era as existing from the 1890s to 1910, or even to 1914 – see the discussion in Carle et al. 2019, 1–2.

2 The wording is meant to connote the seminal work by Samuel Hynes, *Edwardian Turn of Mind*, which mainly focuses on social concerns, while not excluding remarks on the image of “The Edwardian Garden Party” – see Chapter 1.

3 The scholar mentions *Mary Poppins* (1964), *A Room with a View* (1985), and *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* (1977) as “intensely nostalgic,” post-Edwardian examples of the myth (O’Neill in Hatt, O’Neill 2010, 1).

views myths as participating, and indeed cementing, the grand metanarratives of modernity⁴ (1998, 30), that is narratives promoting a doctrine of the constant progress of civilisation which, he argues, is bound to restrict and delimit the postmodern mind. Since modern myths “have the goal of legitimating social and political institutions and practices, laws, ethics, ways of thinking” (1992, 18), Lyotard fundamentally objects to the mythical mode of thought. Both scholars thus differentiate between the conventional understanding of myth as “a fable” (*sensu* Lyotard 1992, 18)⁵ – a reading consistent with the etymology of the Greek *mythos* denoting any plot or story whether fictionalized or not⁶ (Abrams 1999, 170) – and the postmodern stance which focuses on the mythical emplotment of a narrative that features a particular idea supporting “the project of modernity” (Lyotard 1992, 18).⁷ To a certain extent, my approach combines the two standpoints: while it draws on the conventional depictions of the Golden Age in Edwardian and neo-Edwardian literature (*sensu* Edwards in Carle et al. 2019, 16), it also inquires into the mythical emplotments which, I argue, legitimize, or alternatively undermine, certain established ideas concerning British society at the cusp of the twentieth century. With this discrimination in mind, the present paper is aimed, first, at investigating the conventional *topoi* in the image of the golden-age Edwardian Britain, and, second, at exposing the critical potential discernible in the modern revisions of the myth. My personal concern is the interlinking of myth and nostalgia in several literary portrayals of the “gilded” epoch, which, I feel, re-enforces the critical deployments of the myth.

As indicated above, theorising about myth is hardly a recent phenomenon within academia. Allegedly, the first formal inquiries into the nature of myths date back as far as pre-Socratic times (Segal in Herman et al. 2008, 330; Czeremski 2009, 16–25), and since then the theory of myth has evolved within

4 Metanarratives “have marked modernity: the progressive emancipation of reason and freedom, the progressive or catastrophic emancipation of labor, the enrichment of all humanity through the progress of capitalist technoscience, and even – if we include Christianity (...) – the salvation of creatures through the conversion of souls to the Christian narrative of martyred love” (Lyotard 1992, 17–18).

5 Lyotard argues that the traditional, mythical fables “looked for legitimacy (...) in an original founding act” (1992, 18).

6 On the semantic opposition between *mythos* and *logos* in Greek philosophy, see Czeremski 2009, 16–25. Originally, the verb *mytheomai*, along with its noun derivative, i.e., *mythos*, signified “to speak the truth,” whereas *legein*, together with *logos*, meant “to speak untruth.” On the shift within the semantic field of *mythos*, see Fig. 1 in Czeremski 2009, 25.

7 According to Lyotard, the project of modernity was annihilated by WW II, and particularly by the atrocities that occurred at Auschwitz (Lyotard 1998, 29–31).

cross-disciplinary research in the following fields: the social sciences (W. H. R. Rivers 1912), psychology (C. G. Jung 1998; Durand 1986; Walker 2001), anthropology (E. B. Taylor [1871] in Leopold 1980), as well as literary and comparative religious studies (Frazer [1890] 2012; Northrop Frye 1961). The interdisciplinary interests place myth close to nostalgia which, likewise, has attracted scholars from the same range of disciplines: the phenomenon has been a research subject of anthropology (Lowenthal 2015), psychology (Starobinski 1966; Rosen 1975; Sedikides, Wildschut 2004), history (Illbruck 2012; Dodman 2018), philosophy (Kant 1798, Lyotard 1992), and, finally, media and literary studies (Boym 2001, Clewell 2013, Wojciechowska 2021); apparently, the only field of research external to the study of myth is medicine, within which the disease of nostalgia was first investigated (Illbruck 2012, 101–125; Dodman 2018, 16–42). The reason behind such a distribution of interests is probably the anchoring of myth in the supernatural; in modern theorizing, scholars located myths on the axis opposite to science (Eliade 1968, Frazer [1890] 2012, Taylor [1871] in Leopold 1980),⁸ or read them as demythologized narratives with symbolic suggestions regarding the place of humanity in the world (Bultman in Herman et al. 2008, 333). As Maciej Czeremski posits, the original Greek lexeme denoting truthful speech, i.e., *mythos*, has been revalued in European culture, with its semantic field linked more closely with untruthful narration (2009, 16–25); indeed, in popular discourse, *mythos* has acquired a particularly negative connotation by connoting false, or even deceptive, speech (Czeremski 2009, 15). The large variety of conjectures about the function and meaning of myths notwithstanding, the saliency of the imaginary element has been convincingly argued as their unifying feature (Walker in Herman et al. 2008, 329), a feature which links myths to nostalgia; as Svetlana Boym asserts, nostalgia may designate “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (Boym 2001, XIII).

Like myth, nostalgia is a term frequently debated; while generally associated with a universal longing (Boym 2001, XIII), it has been proven to designate much more than mere sentiments or over-sentimentality. In her provocative *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Svetlana Boym brilliantly demonstrated that there are several, otherwise distinct understandings of the phenomenon, with universal longing being a popular, albeit extremely narrow, reading. As I have argued elsewhere,

8 Taylor and Frazer read myths as an entirely primitive, or a prescientific, explanation of the world (Herman et al. 2008, 333).

nostalgia may be conceptualized as a “structure of feeling” (Wojciechowska 2021, 390–391),⁹ although a much more compelling connotation involves “a structure of thought.”¹⁰ While the former indicates a site occupied by feelings and emotions (Shaw and Chase 1989, 2), the latter appears as a mode of perception which operates through images and text-internal tensions that help express constructive critiques of contemporary anxieties. The nostalgic tensions between the past and the present, alongside those focusing on the opposition between the distant and the intimate, the private and the public, as well as the remembered and the forgotten, each in turn facilitates a productive dialogue, a dialogue that thematizes the yet-unquestioned order by suggesting novel directions; as Steven Spender most crucially observes, “(...) in some ways, though not in all, nostalgia has been one of the most productive and even progressive forces in modern literature” (Spender 1963, 212).

Although nostalgia’s etymology suggests ancient origins, it is a distinctly modern phenomenon, a phenomenon first recorded in Johannes Hofer’s medical treatise, *Dissertatio medica de Nostalgia, oder Heimwehe* (1688); according to Dodman, “nostalgia came into being upon the rapidly expanding and ever-more-gruesome battlefields of eighteenth-century Europe” (2018, 45). I concur with the view that the constructive potential of nostalgia may be credited to its war-time origins; historians maintain that the experience of a total war may have pre-conditioned the emergence of nostalgia in the medical discourse of the Enlightenment (Dodman 2018, 71–74; Illbruck 2012, 29–34). Interestingly, however, Dodman seems to be correct in observing that the new levels of violence observed on the battlefields during the Napoleonic wars did not, in fact, provoke a surge in nostalgia among the soldiers involved in the fighting; rather than a reaction to trauma, the original nostalgia was alleged to be symptomatic of an on-going transformation with regard to military life and also the increase in forced relocations experienced at that time by thousands of displaced individuals, soldiers included (2018, 73). Similarly, Illbruck claims that the sweeping changes observed in the organization of military life, changes that soon

9 Likewise, myth also partakes in emotions as it is sometimes categorized as an emotional “mode of thought” (Walker in Herman et al. 2005, 330).

10 See the differentiation between the structure of feeling vs. the structure of thought as discussed in Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* on pp. 24–25. Since the scholar applies both concepts to the pastoral convention of which the nostalgic backward glance also partakes, I wish to expand Marx’s categories by applying them to nostalgia as well.

impacted upon the lives of civilians, might have provoked nostalgia as a response (2012, 36). Considered in this way, the early modern origins of nostalgia connote change and transformation as a consequence of war. A natural reaction to the experience of crisis, nostalgia thus figures prominently in both pre-WWI and post-WWI British literature, and even today it shapes the image of the Edwardian period in public discourse.

Therefore, I feel the paradigms of nostalgia in early-20th-century literature mainly evince two divergent patterns of thought: either they re-iterate a set of ideal images of the past – amongst them those perpetuated within the pastoral convention – or else they re-negotiate the pre-established norms and boundaries by becoming a “bulwark against any unquestioned acceptance of the present social order (...) by giving rise to new directions for change” (Clewell 2013, 3). Rather characteristically, if the former applies certain *topoi* entrenched within both the pastoral convention and the myth of the Golden Age (Alpers 1996, 30–32), the latter engages the reader in a process of discovery, namely uncovering a range of implications which suggest inferences other than those “gilded” suppositions that persist in the public sphere; the mythical, on the other hand, suggests a certain degree of unreality involved in both the idealising and the critical approaches, so that nostalgia may either imperceptibly intensify the ideal or negotiate the legitimacy of such an ideal with respect to the Edwardian past.

Kenneth Grahame’s *The Golden Age* (1895) and its sequel, *Dream Days* (1898), constitute particular examples of the idealising, and indeed even escapist, nostalgia for the Edwardian times – provided that, as agreed upon within academia, the Edwardian era spans the years 1895–1914 (Carle et al. 2018, 2). The temporal setting in both parts of the collection embraces a remembered past spanning the last few years of Queen Victoria’s reign, which, as Carle et al., after Jonathan Rose, argue, expresses the new spirit of the “long Edwardian era” of 1895–1914 rather than the late-Victorian mentality (Carle et al. 2018, 2; Rose 1986). Paradoxically, the historical setting of Grahame’s narratives also acquires a distinct, atemporal quality by virtue of the trope of summertime leisure, which corresponds with the classical depictions of the mythical Golden Age: the Hesiodic portrayal of the Five Ages in *Works and Days* and *Theogony* features the initial stage as a time in which the golden race of heroes is believed to have lived without noticing the passage of time or their advancing years (Gwiazda 2002, 78); the implied *stasis* of the Golden Age thus collides with the process of gradual deterioration epitomised by the four subsequent

ages. The Hesiodic emphasis upon the impossibility of a return to the mythical space is, in fact, the predominant notion in Grahame's *The Golden Age*, which opens with the statement: "Looking back to those days of old, ere the gate shut to behind me, I can see now (...)" (2005, 1). The interlacement of the spatial with the temporal in the metaphorical act of closing a gate on leaving childhood behind in the first few lines of the Prologue sets the tone for the entire collection, which reads as a re-enactment of a mythical space-time that exclusively belongs to the past. In the next few sections of *The Golden Age*, the nostalgia-driven tension between the past and the present is never explored in a critical manner since the first-person, adult narrator is reminiscing about his boyhood, his attention exclusively linked to the past; the present eludes him completely. The protagonist thus recalls a peaceful childhood unalloyed by the strife and contention inherent in adult life, which bestows the "gilded" quality upon his recollections. Considered in the broader, historical context of the Boer Wars that were being fought during the years in which the books were published, both *The Golden Age* and *Dream Days* certainly should be understood as escapist, which only re-enforces the Hesiodic reading of the myth rather than its wider known, cyclic version created by Virgil¹¹ (Ryberg 1958, 130): such golden bliss is apparently never to return.

Interestingly, the nostalgic depictions of an ideal, Edwardian past recalled by Grahame's unnamed protagonist are imbued with various elements of both the myth of the Golden Age – such as the leisurely summertime or the timeless quality of his boyhood – and Arcadian motifs. Opened with a clear suggestion of the Hesiodic degenerative sequence of ages – particularized as a fall from the ideal stage of Edwardian childhood – the Prologue closes on a Virgilian note as the protagonist wistfully observes:

The Olympians are all past and gone. Somehow the sun does not seem to shine so brightly as it used: the trackless meadows of old time have shrunk and dwindled away to a few poor acres. (...) *Et in Arcadia ego* – I certainly did once inhabit Arcady. (Grahame 2005: 5)

11 As the national poet and a eulogist of *pax Romana*, Virgil re-shaped the myth of the Golden Age by conferring a cyclic quality on Hesiod's linear story, thus suggesting a prospective return to the ideal, golden period when Octavianus Augustus ruled the Roman empire – on the Virgilian expansion of the myth, see Ryberg 1958: 130.

The combination of the temporal with the spatial in the opening sentence of the Prologue is upheld in the metaphorical image of the “meadows of old time” that closes this section; while the continual reference to the awe-inspiring adults as “the Olympians” suggests the Olympian genealogies as described in Hesiod’s *Theogony* (vv. 881–962), the phrase “*Et in Arcadia ego*”¹² evokes Virgil since, as Bruno Snell brilliantly demonstrates, literary Arcadia is a Virgilian construct (1976, 14–43). Though mistakenly connoted as inseparable by the wider public, Arcadia and the Golden Age are, in fact, distinct notions not only by virtue of their separate literary backgrounds, but also due to their divergent conceptualizations, namely spatial for Arcadia and temporal for the Golden Age: whereas Hesiod’s initial depiction of the Golden Age suggests a topographical perfection as imagined within a legendary period of the heroic times, Virgil’s portrayal of Arcadia re-directs the focus towards space; literary scholars are familiar with the fact that Virgil¹³ indeed combined the traits of his native Mantua, Italy, with the Greek Arcadia, together with figments of his imagination that reflect a landscape only existing in a poetic mind (Wojciechowska 2017, 36). By combining the Golden Age with Arcadia in his nostalgic descriptions of the Edwardian era, Kenneth Grahame merged the two distinct, literary traditions, that is the Golden Age and Arcadia, and created a literary vision of the countryside in Edward VII’s reign, which can be interpreted as both classically idyllic and historically contextualized; however unreal the depiction, it became a permanent feature in British literature and influenced both children’s stories, e.g., Edith Nesbith’s Bastable stories (Gavin, Humphries 2009, 12) and adult fiction, e.g., A. S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book* (Carle et al. 2018, 29); as a matter of fact, the motifs of both an everlasting summer and a golden afternoon in the English countryside have regularly figured in the literature of the age ever since. Evasive about imperialist and domestic policies alike, Grahame’s collection perpetuates a golden-age portrayal of the Edwardian era that may only be categorized as escapist literature.

The categorization is decidedly different in the case of the neo-Edwardian *The Go-Between* (1953) by L.P. Hartley; framed through a nostalgic construct, Hartley’s portrait of the Edwardians proves to be far from ideal, although initially the

12 Since the focus of this article is elsewhere, there is no space for a discussion on the incorrect use of the phrase *et in Arcadia ego* by Kenneth Grahame in the quotation above. More on the phrase “*Et in Arcadia ego*,” in Bloch in Garber 1976, 3–4; Wojciechowska 2017, 59.

13 Cf. *Eclogue VIII* by Virgil. See also Marinelli 1971, 43; Wojciechowska 2017, 36–37.

adults also acquire mythical proportions in the eyes of the child protagonist, Leo. As in Grahame's *The Golden Age*, the first-person narrator presents the recalled Edwardian world as ruled by the progress of a sun that never sets, a summer that never ends, and initial success and prosperity. Likewise, the Prologue to *The Go-Between* is replete with golden-age *topoi* which shed "an almost mystical appeal" (Hartley 1997, 7) on Leo's recollections of the year 1900; the adolescent boy is literally waiting for "the dawn of the Golden Age" (Hartley 1997, 8).

In contrast to Grahame's narratives, however, the references to the Boer Wars and social inequalities do appear in Hartley's novel (Hartley 1997, 8; 273), which, with every subsequent page, discards the successive layers of the mythical; with the help of nostalgic explorations, reality gradually replaces the myth as the elderly Leonard explores the insubstantiality of the pastoral landscapes and perfect relationships once forged by his adolescent self. While the Prologue is steeped in diverse elements of the mythical – with the tropes of leisure and idleness in a summery rural space that interlace the Hesiodic legendary past with the Virgilian Arcadia – the main narrative debunks the myth by exposing the illusoriness of the idyll. In his Introduction to the novel, Douglas Brooks-Davis thus explains the processes of de-mythologization:

The older Leo recalls the past as an idyll and, simultaneously, reinterprets it, thereby acknowledging that his early twentieth-century Golden Age was a consciously constructed myth. In doing so he implicitly recognizes that the late Victorian-Edwardian summer was a class myth built on a wilful blindness to social and other realities. (1997, XXII)

Brooks-Davis's explanation is consistent with the findings of other scholars who read the motifs of the country house/seat and the leisurely, Edwardian lifestyle as the "nostalgically projected" images of pastoral England (Wanitzek in Fludernik, Nandi 2014, 252–253), which, however alluring, do not evade criticism in literary works from the cusp of the 20th century (Barnes in Carle et al. 2019, 31–33; Rae in Clewell 2013, 155–157). Consistent with Brooks-Davis's line of argument, O'Brien's adds that "[country] estates seemed to exemplify a golden age with better values and morals, (...) [as] they belonged exclusively to a certain class of people" (2013, 19). It is precisely this alleged moral superiority of the upper-class Edwardians, apparently partaking in the myth of the golden-age

Edwardian era, that the nostalgia-driven narration in *The Go-Between* undermines: as I have argued elsewhere, *The Go-Between* applies nostalgia in a manner that does not preclude critical and provocative undertones in its literary deliberations upon the time remembered (Wojciechowska 2021, 61–62).

The myth-ridden world of the Edwardians is also explored by Siegfried Sassoon in his renowned Sherston trilogy, which begins with the pre-WWI *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, and which is followed by two war-time volumes, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* and *Sherston's Progress: The Memoirs of George Sherston*. As with Leo in *The Go-Between*, the first-person narrator of Sassoon's fictionalised autobiography initially describes the peaceful beauty of the pre-WWI English countryside, before ultimately question the legitimacy of such an idyllic image through a series of pastoral and anti-pastoral juxtapositions. Thus, the initial, idealising paradigm of nostalgia operating in Volume I, suggestively evoking the figure of a fox-hunting man,¹⁴ is imbued with pastoral tropes, amongst which the motif of a retreat into a rural space is perhaps the most pronounced and idealising feature. Consistent with the pattern of an escapist retreat, upon completing his education shortly before WWI, the young Sherston decides to leave London (Sassoon 2001, 82–85) in order to focus upon his horsemanship, as well as to indulge his enthusiasm for riding to hounds, both activities occurring in the English countryside. Considered from the perspective of the pastoral convention, this evasion of his social duties establishes Sherston as a pastoral hero who, in violation of contemporary standards, favours the country over the city by “escaping into a world of innocence and simplicity” (Squires 1974, 200–202). The pastoral reading of Volume I is further strengthened by the competitive nature of the sporting activities George Sherston engages in: both fox hunting and point-to-pointing,¹⁵ particularly when he wins the Colonel's Cup (Sassoon 2001, 212–227), seem Edwardian re-visions of the classical *agon*¹⁶ which constitutes the

14 The figure of a good herdsman belongs to the pastoral repertoire (Alpers 1996: 27). On the symbolic meaning of the foxes in *Idyll I* by Theocritus (vv. 45–55), see Wojciechowska 2017: 60. Both the figure of the groom as represented by Dixon in *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* and the foxes themselves certainly deserve a wider discussion in the context of the novel's pastoralism, which, however, cannot be continued due to a lack of space.

15 Horses which have been hunted regularly throughout the hunting season qualify to race in what is called a point-to-point. The owners and riders must also be affiliated with a hunt – additionally they are amateurs, rather than professionals. I am grateful to Ann Cardwell for this suggestion.

16 As a singing contest in the pastoral convention, the Greek *agon* is discussed in Łanowski, Świderkówna 2007: XXVIII–XXIX; several British forms of the *agon* are discussed in Ruszkiewicz 2020, 295–298.

structural pivot of the “pastoral convening” (*sensu* Alpers 1996, 81–86). As suggested in the significant epigraph – “this happy breed of men, this little world,”¹⁷ – Volume I features the Edwardian re-enactment of the Golden Age, a myth mercilessly exploded in Volume 2 and 3. The sudden collapse of the pastoral world in the two subsequent volumes of the trilogy re-creates the intensity of the shock felt, as Paul Fussell words it, by the “gardeners camouflaged as soldiers” in the trenches in Flanders (Fussell 2013, 254).

Considered as a consistent whole, the trilogy can be interpreted as being painfully anti-mythical; by the same token, the nostalgia deployed by Sassoon is ambivalent owing to the antithesis between peace and war, which undercuts the pastoral readings and explodes the mythical golden-age quality of the Edwardian Britain. In fact, through a set of antithetic juxtapositions, Sherston’s nostalgia appears both idealising in Volume I and critical in the war-time narration. Personally, I feel that the initial, pastoral reading, upheld through a series of pastoral vignettes embedded in the mode of a nostalgic reminiscence, is a deliberate decision to expose the fallacy of the idea regarding the invulnerability of the British empire, an idea which prevailed in Edwardian public discourse. Seen in a broader literary context, the Sherston trilogy thus seems a prose re-interpretation of the theme also explored in Philip Larkin’s *MCMXIV*, namely that of the golden-age innocence of the Edwardians. As Paul Fussell observes, this might be a national characteristic since “recourse to the pastoral [and/through nostalgia] is an English mode of both fully gauging the calamities of the Great War and imaginatively protecting oneself against them” (Fussell 2013, 255).

With these few deliberations in mind, I wish to argue that the popular, mythical image of the Edwardian age furnishes a “double vision” of the period, a vision that appears both alluring and – with its excess and snobbery – extremely controversial (Edwards in Carle et al. 2018, 18). The mode of nostalgia enveloping the myth of the “gilded” decade is similarly ambiguous as nostalgia either re-enforces the golden-age idealisation of the Edwardian era, or subverts it by exposing the distortions in the mythical representations. This seems to be a general rule underlying modernist nostalgia since, as Tammy Clewell posits:

17 The citation comes from William Shakespeare’s *Richard II* (Act II, Scene 1, v. 20). More on Siegfried Sassoon’s application of the quotation, see Knox 1983, 144–150.

(...) one of nostalgia's tendencies may be intent on returning to the imaginative terrain of an idealized past, another tendency, much more future-oriented in its aims, consists of exploiting the capacity of nostalgia to expose the mechanized brutalities, social iniquities, dizzying effects of technological change, the spiritual emptiness of the age. (Clewell 2013, 3)

Clewell's stance on nostalgia can be understood as consistent with the contemporary theorising of the phenomenon formulated by Svetlana Boym, who clearly differentiates between the *restorative* and *reflective* variations of nostalgia. According to Boym, *restorative* nostalgia aims at re-establishing a certain past, including a mythical past, by means of one-plot reconstructions, which at times even involves "swapping conspiracy theories" (2001, 41). By contrast, *reflective* nostalgia re-applies the myth of a return home as virtually *re-reflecting* on a *nostos* that recognizes many scenarios, although never a single image, instead negotiating both the road leading to the mythical space called *home* and the destination itself; by maintaining a distance, the *reflective* nostalgic never completes the mythical return (Boym 2001, 7-8), and instead ponders, however critically, upon the dubious qualities of the re-envisioned space. These two divergent patterns apply to the myth of the Edwardian Golden Age, and, in the case of the narratives under consideration, the *reflective* sub-type appears to be the dominant mode, a mode that allows a re-negotiation of the boundaries around the idyllic past.

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