10.2478/ewcp-2022-0010

Campus/Academic Novels and "Built-In" Nostalgia

CORINA SELEJAN
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania

Abstract
The present article traces nostalgia across various campus and academic novels published during the last three decades and identifies different kinds of nostalgia – writerly and readerly nostalgia, vicarious nostalgia, ersatz nostalgia – not in the systematic manner of a classification but guided by the novels themselves. The readings are informed by theories stemming from different backgrounds – the social sciences, cultural and literary studies, psychology and cognitive science – in an attempt to create a productive dialogue, one that emphasizes the creative potential of nostalgia.

Keywords: readerly and writerly nostalgia, vicarious nostalgia, ersatz nostalgia, triggers of nostalgia, university/campus/academic fiction, campus architecture.

In his 1987 essay entitled "Campus Fictions," Malcolm Bradbury claims that "the capacity for nostalgia" (51) displayed by university novels written before World War II made them successful both in print and on the screen (as adaptations of such novels as *Brideshead Revisited* for instance). He goes on to distinguish between these "university novels" and post-war "campus novels" of the type written by himself, which are purportedly "much less concerned

with nostalgia or social recollection, more with intellectual and social change" (51). While there is truth in this claim, campus fiction demonstrably incorporates a built-in nostalgic element, as it conjures representations of that period in a person's life which is most productive of nostalgic feeling, i.e. one's youth. Contemporary academic fiction in turn is coerced into (frequently vicarious) nostalgia by the current precariousness of faculty employment and by the crisis of higher education at large, a situation that has only been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These are all evident reasons for the genre's propensity towards nostalgia, yet the novels to be discussed in this article evince various kinds of nostalgia, triggered by diverse factors. The first distinction that needs to be made is between "writerly" and "readerly" nostalgia, or between nostalgia as something intrinsic or inherent to the text and nostalgia as the reader's affective response to that text. As will be shown in the following, campus and academic novels are prone to both.

In her book *Faculty Towers*, Elaine Showalter claims that "academic novels are rarely in synch with their decade of publication; most reflect the preceding decade's issues, crises, and changes" (12-3). She goes on to argue that the post-war development of the academic novel marks a move "from hope to endurance to anticipation to cynicism and around to hope again" (13). In the seventeen years since the publication of *Faculty Towers*, it seems the general mood in academia has moved on from hope to despair. Nonetheless, a certain cyclicity of nostalgia is reflected in campus and academic novels: every change, every new trend in academia comes with its latent, built-in obsolescence as well as the potential for a future revival (not unlike the ever more accelerated releases of new technology we are witnessing at present). Unsurprisingly, writerly and readerly nostalgia are also rarely in synch, as the reading of a book can take place decades after its having been written. Consequently, the reader frequently engages in a kind of telescopic or vicarious nostalgia, one that is "divorced from any actual experience" of the past that makes the object of the fictional work (Sayers 1).

One of academic fiction's most recent instantiations, Joshua Cohen's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Netanyahus: An Account of a Minor and Ultimately Even Negligible Episode in the History of a Very Famous Family* (2021) is at first sight anything but nostalgic, as it professes to critique current politics (particularly Trump, via Ben-Zion and Benjamin Netanyahu) by facetiously rewriting history and blending fiction and non-fiction in the process. The novel's factual figures are the Netanyahu family and Harold Bloom; the latter, however, has been fictionally refashioned into Ruben Blum, as the novel's afterword, playfully entitled "Credits & Extra Credit," declares. For all its current political relevance and seeming resistance to nostalgia, however, the novel cannot escape it, albeit evincing a self-conscious, uneasy and ambiguous kind of nostalgia. The novel harks back to the winter of 1959-1960 and revolves around an episode involving the meeting between the homodiegetic narrator Ruben Blum and Ben-Zion Netanyahu's family. Seen from Cohen's authorial perspective, this fictional reworking of an episode that Harold Bloom (to whom the novel is dedicated) allegedly related to Cohen (according to the afterword), the story reads like an enactment of a professedly vicarious nostalgia, or what Arjun Appadurai calls "ersatz nostalgia – nostalgia without memory" (82). The academia of the late 1950s as portrayed by Cohen is somewhat redolent of Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), with discernible parallels between Dr. Morse and Professor Welch on the one hand, and Ruben Blum and Jim Dixon on the other. The self-conscious quality of the novel's nostalgia (and Cohen's ambivalence towards it) is made manifest in one of Blum's frequent humorous vignettes:

> Our house – like so many in our neighborhood, a Dutch Colonial, or, as it should perhaps more accurately be called, a Dutch Colonial Revival, because it dated from just after the Civil War when people were feeling nostalgic – was old and drafty and crumbling. I'd initially been in love with its clapboarded and shuttered austerity, but after a year of coming and going I'd become suspicious of its double-identity. Look at a Dutch Colonial from the front, it looks like a house. Look at a Dutch Colonial from the side, it looks like a

> barn. This bothered me. It made me uncertain as to whether we were humans or animals. (45-6)

This excerpt illustrates some of the many layers and kinds of nostalgia that the novel grapples with, however reluctantly or ironically. The protagonist's nostalgia for the City – Blum is what Svetlana Boym would call a nostalgic "metrophiliac" (17) – is played off against the architectural nostalgia of upstate New York. However, both types of nostalgia are dressed in irony, a move that makes nostalgia "palatable": "invoked but, at the same time, undercut, put into perspective, seen for exactly what it is – a comment on the present as much as on the past" (Hutcheon and Valdés 23). The nostalgic post-Civil War moment mentioned in the excerpt above can be read as a nod to the post-pandemic moment of the novel's publication, just like the joke regarding Judy Blum's nose job as potentially causing infertility (82) can be interpreted as an allusion to the vaccine controversy. Nostalgia seems to reflexively fold in upon itself repeatedly, creating layer upon layer of simulacra, so much so that "suspicion" becomes the only possible response. Blum's attempt at providing the reader with Corbin University's history in a nutshell illustrates the tension between indulging in nostalgia and being suspicious of its object: after all, in the late 1950s, "the sum total of students of color [at Corbin] was zero" (18), no matter how genially the story is told. The prevailing impression of *ersatz* nostalgia is further strengthened by the second half of the afterword, which at times sounds like a name-dropping frenzy, busy as it is recounting Bloom's many acquaintances, as well as literary and extra-literary opinions. One question worth asking is whether the interest in this novel is not fueled to a rather uncomfortable extent by the celebrity status of the political and literary figures it makes use of in order to allude to the political context of its publication (Trump and the pandemic) and to what extent it owes its Pulitzer Prize award to its artistic value. In an interview for the *Paris Review*, Cohen admits that the atypical (for his standards) gentleness of this novel's narrator stems from the death of Bloom and of many others of his

generation, as well as from Cohen's "own sense of getting older, and probably from this past year of plague and lockdown" ("The Covering Cherub"). Obliqueness via history could be seen as an appropriate response to the period of the pandemic as well as recent U.S. politics, yet the expectations of readers of the academic genre are arguably thwarted, since they may have been looking forward to an academic novel that engages more directly with the pandemic and its aftermath in academic life. Moreover, since the academic novel has been constantly belittled as a coterie genre, academic fiction scholars have been anticipating an award-winning exemplar that would make for a reading experience as riveting as previous Pulitzer winners, e.g. Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) or Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016).

At the opposite end of the stylistic spectrum from Cohen's novel are two academic novels from both sides of the Atlantic, Powers' *Galatea 2.2* (1995) and Andrew Crumey's *Mr Mee* (2000). Both novels are very complex in terms of both ideational content and style and they both tackle the Internet and new media, i.e. things that are crucial to the pandemic and the way it transformed learning, teaching and even our being in the world. In this sense, Powers' novel reads uncannily prescient if not prophetic, given that almost three decades have passed since its publication, three decades in which the Internet has come to be a pervasive phenomenon in all aspects of life and society:

> People who used the web turned *strange*. . . . The web was a neighborhood more efficiently *lonely* than the one it replaced. Its solitude was bigger and faster. When relentless intelligence finally completed its program, when the terminal drop box brought the last barefoot, abused child on line and everyone could at last say anything instantly to everyone else in existence, it seemed to me we'd still have nothing to say to each other and many more ways not to say it. (*Galatea* 9, my emphasis)

In addition to this accurate description of how the Internet would change (indeed has changed) social interaction, *Galatea 2.2* relentlessly anticipates a readerly nostalgia for the fictional present,

from a distant future that lies outside of the novel's fictional scope. The object of this imaginative exercise, this forward-looking nostalgia mostly relates to the way technology will have changed the world. The following example refers to the introduction of access cards that allow university staff to enter a building: "Anyone reading this by accident or nostalgia a hundred years from now will have to take my word for the novelty" (7). As it turns out, this way of gaining access into a building is widely spread less than three decades after the publication of Powers' novel, but it is mostly perceived as an instrument of surveillance, alienation and of reducing employees to mere numbers.

In the novel, anticipated nostalgia also refers to antiquated architecture: "The cityscape was something an American postprimitive might do, a nostalgic century from now. C. and I lived it in advance retrospective. . . . the present was far stranger than it let on" (98). With this description, Powers self-consciously illustrates the postmodern "nostalgia mode" that colonizes architecture, characterized by a "complacent eclecticism . . . which randomly and without principle but with gusto cannibalizes all the architectural styles of the past and combines them in overstimulating ensembles," a "well-nigh libidinal historicism" (Jameson 18-9). The building where the protagonist works illustrates Powers' point even further: "The Center's architecture laid irony upon irony. It was a postmodern rehash of Flemish Renaissance" (5). In its insistence on both irony and nostalgia, this description is redolent of Hutcheon and Valdés's views on both, which has already been alluded to with regard to Cohen's novel: "The knowingness of irony may be not so much a defense against the power of nostalgia as the way in which nostalgia is made palatable today: invoked but, at the same time, undercut, put into perspective, seen exactly for what it is – a comment on the present as much as on the past" (Hutcheon and Valdés 23). However, when it comes to his own memories of the town of U., where he returns after more than a decade, the protagonist's nostalgia is anything but affectless and superficial:

> U. was the place where I first saw how paint might encode politics, first heard how a sonata layered itself like a living hierarchy, first felt sentences cadence into engagement. . . . I betrayed my beloved physics in this town, shacked up with literature. My little brother called me here to tell me Dad was dead. I tied my life to C.'s in this town. (*Galatea* 4)

As this excerpt from the novel's second page intimates, *Galatea 2.2* is a self-consciously nostalgic account of Powers' most significant loves (for C., A., his father, Professor Taylor and Helen), but also a retrospective of his career as a novelist. *Galatea 2.2* is Powers' – the author's – fifth published novel, as well as Richard Powers the protagonist's fifth novel. Thus, the novel under scrutiny is not only overtly autobiographical, but it also reads like a metafictional account of itself, as it narrates the events that brought it into being and comments on itself in the process. Professor Taylor – whose real-world counterpart would be Robert Schneider, the teacher who made the author change his major from physics to literature (Dewey) – is constantly remembered throughout the novel: "After my mother, the man had taught me how to read. Taylor *was* reading for me. Through Taylor, I discovered how a book both mirrored and elicited the mind's unreal ability to turn inward upon itself" (*Galatea* 141). Powers the protagonist's one-year writer-in-residence stint at U. results in his involvement in an A.I. project. The project's eighth implementation is a machine that possesses self-awareness and can read and interpret works of literature. He baptizes it Helen. Powers the author avails himself of this science-fiction element to question and dissect concepts like (self)consciousness, cognition, knowledge, memory and love: "That would be consciousness. The memory of memory" (177). Memory in particular is interrogated in *Galatea 2.2*. Professor Taylor, for instance, is described as "the man who thought only memory stood between us and randomness" (204). Powers' novel is a deeply nostalgic work that unexpectedly couples autobiography with science fiction, i.e. a backward looking impetus with a forward-looking drive, with nostalgia caught in between the two and working in both directions.

Published five years later across the Atlantic, Crumey's *Mr Mee* (2000) is also a novel of many layers that spans the Two Cultures divide. Like Powers, Crumey is a reformed scientist, a former theoretical physicist who veered towards a literary career. *Mr Mee* consists of three intertwining plotlines, which are organized in alternating chapters. One revolves around the eponymous protagonist, an octogenarian living in present-day Scotland who is an avid reader of eighteenth-century philosophy. The second plotline introduced by the novel is set in eighteenth-century France and centers on copyists Minard and Ferrand, two characters harking back to Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. Finally, the third story's protagonist is present-day Dr. Petrie, a British literary scholar specializing in eighteenth-century French literature. Mr Mee's story is narrated through his own letters to a lifelong friend who turns out to have been dead for more than eight years, a fact that has not deterred Mr Mee from continuing to write to him. Dr. Petrie's story is also a first-person account, a memoir written shortly before his death, while he is hospitalized with colon cancer. Ferrand and Minard's story is a third-person narrative emulating Flaubert's style.

The novel is a complex metafiction packed with literary and philosophical ideas, but also, crucially, with scientific ideas pertaining to information technology. The internet in particular is taken apart as Mr Mee, a man of leisure and a man of letters who spends most of his time reading in his library, starts using a computer. His (debatably successful) attempts to make sense of the internet as a technology and to use it effectively result in a deconstruction and defamiliarization of the concept of the World Wide Web for the benefit of the reader. Mr Mee's journey towards technological (and sexual) enlightenment makes for most of the novel's intoxicating humor. Nonetheless, this journey ends back where it started: "I had merely been distracted by irrelevant web pages, search engines, and bedroom tutorials; while libraries and antiquarian bookshops still had their uses after all" (319). Disappointed by the internet and the spoof articles it so freely doles out, Mr Mee returns to "[his] first and truest friends . . . [his]

precious jewels . . . [his] beloved Hume" (323) and his life reverts back to the tranquility and routine which had been disrupted by the arrival of the new computer. The novel's epilogue, which at times reads like a pro/con debate with regard to internet (albeit one set in 1914, presciently anticipating the future of technology), strengthens the sense of nostalgia as a "longing towards slower, steadier and more ontologically secure rhythms" (Sayers 25) that the novel conveys. Minard's great-great-grandson, an electrical engineer who installs a théâtrophone in Marcel Proust's flat in 1914, is an advocate of the new technology: "Will people even need to leave their own armchair? . . . Will people still bother to read? . . . just think of all the extra time which people will have" (328-9). He emerges as the kind of philistine who would appall devoted scholars like Mr Mee. The engineer also lists his opponents' counterarguments, which are made to sound equally prescient: "That would be a terribly dull kind of society . . . People will become lazy, isolated, they will no longer seek friendship, they will forget how to conduct a conversation" (328). This can be correlated to the excerpt from Powers' novel above, where "strange" and "lonely" are the adjectives used to characterize the internet's effects on humans. The engineer's great-great-grandfather Minard is described as the misguided and ultimately incompetent inventor of a would-be "inference machine" (252), i.e. a "computing engine" (271), a kind of ur-computer like the one built by Charles Babbage less than a century later. Minard's descendant (who turns out to be Mr. Mee's father, whom Mr. Mee has never met) is overly confident in the benefits of technology and proclaims on the novel's last page: ". . . we are all of us, in this young century, on the verge of limitless peace and prosperity, thanks to the miracles of science, and to methods of communication which can bring an entire planet within the palm of a person's hand" (344). However, history is about to prove him wrong, as World War I would break out only a month after he wrote these words in a letter to a friend.

It is significant that Crumey's novel was published in 2000, the year many had been apprehensive about as a potential technological apocalypse. More than two decades and a pandemic

later, Crumey's problematization of technology's alienating and isolating effects is more relevant than ever. One of the beneficial effects of the pandemic was the opportunity it provided for many (though not all) to slow down and take stock. The taken-for-granted and often squandered opportunities to actually be with other people have been re-evaluated by many, as has the ultimate goal and value of being stuck on a treadmill. All our automated and conventional reactions in/to life have come under scrutiny. Nostalgia in Crumey's novel also relates to a time before invention morphed into convention, to a time before life stopped being examined. In his memoir, which interrogates life, love, memory, the memoir itself and its relationship to fiction, Dr. Petrie dwells on his infatuation with Louisa Lawson, one of his students. In the process, his longing for what Stuart Tannock calls "a prelapsarian world" (456) emerges out of mundane details related for instance to buying curtains, making the decisions involved therein, and a retrospective thereof: "[the curtains] had moved from the problematic realm of Recognition into the comfortable domain of Memory" (134). He longs for the time before his wife Ellen "began reducing [him] to the sort of man she could confidently marry" (75) and develops an infatuation with a student he sees seldom enough to permanently preserve the freshness of the first impression. Habit and comfort are seen as lies, as blindness: "the first impression is the truth, and all that follows is the excuse of memory" (133). Dr. Petrie describes the life of an academic as "glid[ing] like a coffin into the securely tenured entombment of academic life" (220).

The very inclusion of Ferrand and Minard's story in the novel and the fictional return to the eighteenth century it entails can also be seen as symptoms of writerly nostalgia. Given the historical acceleration of late modernity, Ferrand and Minard's slower rhythms of life in Montmorency can be read as "a form of reaction to the velocity and vertigo of modern temporality" (Pickering and Keightley 922-3). The style of the chapters that revert to eighteenth-century France elicits readerly nostalgia, as the reader enjoys the comic relief and the ostensibly realist third-person

narrative, the dialogue and the free indirect speech that pervade these chapters:

> Within three or four weeks of first meeting one another, each knew no more or less about his companion's life than was already apparent after that first conversation on a bench. They knew their similarities to be so profound that any attempt at exploration would simply be a form of introspection, a habit with whose dangers they were well acquainted. (31)

By interlacing the three plotlines, Crumey's novel seems to reproduce the very fragmentation brought about by late modernity that it also bemoans. However, by the end of the novel, all the narrative strings have been pulled together and, in spite of its formal fragmentariness, the novel conveys the sense of a deeper continuity at work underneath the apparent discontinuities of the contemporary world. Nostalgia's potential for establishing continuity has been recognized by many scholars, whether they come from the social sciences, literary studies or cognitive psychology (Pickering and Keightley 919-20; Sayers 25; Routledge 76-8). What is remarkable in Crumey's novel is the interplay between continuity and discontinuity and the way in which various kinds of nostalgia inform each other.

Christine Brooke-Rose's novel *Textermination* (1991) wears its concern on its sleeve. It anticipates the end of reading as an everyday activity, and the end of certain kinds of engagement with books. The novel presents an MLA-like conference attended by fictional characters of all times and cultures, as well as academics, all brought together by their anxiety that reading might die out. Fictional characters are more or less pleading with readers (Brooke-Rose's readers) for their lives, implying that only by reading does a text come alive, a tenet of reader response theory. At some point, a fictional Pope Hadrian VII protests:

> . . . for we [i.e. fictional characters] are not read, and when read, we are read badly, we are not lived *as we used to be*, we are not identified with and fantasised, we are rapidly forgotten. Those of us

> who have the good fortune to be read by teachers, scholars and students are not read *as we used to be read*, but analysed as schemata, structures, functions within structures, logical and mathematical formulae, aporia, psychic movements, social significances and so forth. (25-26, my emphasis)

The entire novel actually reads like a facetious, but also desperate and nostalgic attempt to preserve reading as such. The humanities are in crisis – they have been for decades – and this prompts the nostalgic return to the way things *used to be*. This excerpt is illustrative of the memory bias involved in recalling past experiences; to quote (comedy writer) Robert Orben, "Nostalgia is like a grammar lesson: you find the present tense, but the past perfect" (qtd. in Leboe and Ansons 606). Experiments conducted by psychologists like Jason P. Leboe and Tamara L. Ansons have indeed shown that "negative memories fade faster than positive memories," an occurrence called "fading affect bias" (607). This is especially true of autobiographical events: we tend to remember positive events rather than negative ones. When it comes to the triggers of nostalgia, various experiments have been conducted in cognitive science, one of which has revealed that the most important cause triggering nostalgia in everyday life is negative affect, i.e. a dissatisfaction with the present, which accounts for 38% of cases, followed by social interactions (24%) and sensory inputs (19%) (Wildschut et al. 981). Brooke-Rose's novel seems to illustrate the first of the causes.

A further example of nostalgia triggered by negative affect is found in Hanno Hackmann, the protagonist of Dietrich Schwanitz's *Der Campus* (1998), who argues that the university *per se* is gone, that it no longer exists:

> The university that used to exist, was committed to truth. It was the institution that, amidst the roar of social interests and pursuits/ambitions, was supposed to represent the truth. What has remained of all this you can see in me. Yes, take a good look at me! Then you will see what the university has become: a heap of

> rubble, a ruin, a wreck, to the further de-composition of which everyone who feels like it helps themselves. (382-3)[1]

Hackmann laments the politicization of the university and the inflationary morality promoted by leftist academics, much in the same vein as Philip Roth deplores the "piety" or "purity binge," the "ecstasy of sanctimony" (2) that destroys Coleman Silk and Faunia Farley in *The Human Stain* (2000). Nostalgia for a by-gone era is implicit in the relentless repetition, at the beginning of the novel, of references to the summer of 1998, when America indulged once more in puritanism, "its oldest communal passion" (2). At this point, the politics of nostalgia should be mentioned. Nostalgia's association with conservatism and regression is by now a critical truism which is being challenged by several scholars (Pickering and Keightley 920-1; Sayers 6). Boym's distinction between "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia, between an uncritical nostalgia that seeks to restore the past exactly as it was and a kind of nostalgia that "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (xviii) is one such endeavor. Another is Pickering and Keightley's assertion that nostalgia is both "melancholic and utopian," that "a distinction between the desire to return to an earlier state or idealized past, and the desire not to return but to recognize aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future" needs to be made (921).

Social interactions are certainly an important trigger of nostalgia, as the international seminar that resulted in the publication of this issue attests. When David Lodge's characters Morris Zapp, Hilary and Philip Swallow meet again in *Small World* (1984), they inevitably start reminiscing about the past and their stories are tinged with nostalgia. Philip even confesses to having gone on living in Euphoria, California, albeit in his head, after having returned to England. He goes to great lengths in staging the narration of his love story with Joy Simpson, as Morris notices when he returns to the room: ". . . he was conscious that the furniture and lighting had been rearranged in his absence" (67). The

intertextually charged, low-burning gas fire is a must in creating the right atmosphere for indulging in nostalgic reminiscing. So are the vivid details related to the persons Philip met on the plane that almost crashed, as Morris points out: "Solidity of specification . . . contributes to the reality effect" (68). As studies into the cognitive roots of nostalgia show, "the most potent nostalgic experiences occur in response to recollections that possess a vivid, story-like quality" (Leboe and Ansons 607) or, in other words, nostalgia "might actually originate from an affective response to the act of remembering itself" (608). What Philip wants to communicate most to Morris is that for him "intensity of experience" (Lodge 68) is key to being happy and in this he is much like Crumey's character Dr. Petrie. Philip tells the story of his affair against an elaborate set-up and with carefully chosen (if not downright rehearsed) words – like Jane Austen's Mr. Collins, he confesses to actually having written down the story when Morris compliments him on a "very fancy metaphor" (72).

It is a well-known fact that appealing to the senses is crucial to memory and to reviving past experiences (Hutcheon and Valdés 20). Speaking of 'fancy' metaphors, Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005) is dappled with vivid language and sensorially rich imagery:

> Summer left Wellington abruptly and slammed the door on the way out. The shudder sent the leaves to the ground all at once, and Zora Belsey had that strange, late-September feeling that somewhere in a small classroom with small chairs an elementary school teacher was waiting for her. It seemed wrong that she should be walking towards town without a shiny tie and a pleated skirt, without a selection of scented erasers. (129)

This image provides an example of what Iris Murdoch meant by "mental events" (50), as she calls them in her essay on aesthetic experience entitled "Nostalgia for the Particular" (1952). It is in these particulars, in the "quasi-physical character" (51) of these mental events that clear, impressive, vivid metaphors originate.

Rather surprisingly, settings (such as campuses) are *not* frequent triggers of nostalgia (1%), according to Tim Wildschut et al. They are, however, its third most prevalent object, with 10% and 19% of all respondents respectively, depending on which of the two experimental studies one deems to be more relevant (Wildschut et al. 978). The two studies conducted by Wildschut et al. differ mainly in their sample: the first one had a sample consisting of U.S. nationals of all ages, whereas the participants in the second study were British undergraduates (979). Azar Nafisi's memories of Iran (and of Tehran in particular) as reflected in *Reading* Lolita *in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003) revolve around the University of Tehran: "It was the navel, the immovable center to which all political and social activities were tied. When in the U.S. we read or heard about the turmoil in Iran, the University of Tehran seemed to be the scene of the most important battles. All groups used the university to make their statements" (88-89). Nafisi's feelings towards the University of Tehran are ambiguous, mixed and highly self-conscious: she constantly factors in potential memory biases. When she describes the actual buildings and the architecture of the campus, she is aware of the fact that "[m]emory has given them gargantuan proportions they probably didn't have in reality, but those expansive buildings of the thirties had a strange feel about them. They were made for crowds: you never felt quite at home" (92). In this novel, the object of nostalgic recollection is not the campus, but Nafisi's living room, where she holds a private, clandéstine literature class for seven of her best female students while Iran is in the throes of a totalitarian Islamic regime:

> When my students came into that room, they took off more than their scarves and robes. Gradually, each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self. Our world in that living room with its window framing my beloved Elburz Mountains became our sanctuary, our self-contained universe, mocking the reality of black-scarved, timid faces in the city that sprawled below. (6)

She further describes that room as "a place of transgression" and "a wonderland" (8), while allowing for memory bias once more: "That room, which I never paid much attention to at that time, has gained a different status in my mind's eye now that it has become the precious object of memory" (7). Nafisi illustrates the claim made by cognitivists that "nostalgic experiences represent a distortion of both the past and the present" (Leboe and Ansons 596), i.e. that the past is always sentimentalized and the present is always found to be impoverished and emaciated (Davis qtd. in Gabriel 121). In diasporic narratives like this novel, remoteness in time entails remoteness in space, so nostalgic recollection feels two- instead of one-dimensional and is reminiscent of older meanings the concept of nostalgia used to incorporate, such as homesickness (Pickering and Keightley 921-2; Wildschut et al. 975). Perhaps this is why Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* (1957), Patrick McGuiness's *The Last Hundred Days* (2011), André Aciman's *Harvard Square* (2013) feel doubly nostalgic, as compared to the other campus novels already mentioned here. Aciman's novel opens with his protagonist's visit to Harvard together with his son as part of the college selection process. The son's dismissive reaction to Harvard University is explainable to the father in the following terms: "Everything he sees is steeped in a stagnant vat of nostalgia, and for all its rosy cheeks, the past always gives off that off-putting, musty scent of old pipes and mildewed rooms that haven't been aired in years" (4-5). This serves to confirm the fact that, in most cases, the self is the protagonist of nostalgic reminiscence. Cognitive studies partly corroborate this (Wildschut et al. 976; Routledge 17) – and I say only "partly" because "organizational nostalgia" has also been shown to exist and indeed to be a pervasive phenomenon (Gabriel 119); yet the more recent studies on nostalgia focus on the individual.

In the essay mentioned at the beginning of this article, Bradbury concedes the fact that "the term [university novel] annoys", as few non-popular writers "like to have [their] novels labelled by their settings" ("Campus Fictions" 50). One year later,

in an article entitled "If Your Books Are Funny, Please Tell Me Where" (1988), his sarcasm reaches mordant heights:

> I have to tell you that the phrase "campus novel" causes me some anxiety and has even brought me out in large red blemishes. It is said, I think, that Thomas Mann had similar problems when people described his "Zauberberg" – or "The Magic Flute," as we call it here – as a "hospital novel," and that Franz Kafka turned into something totally different from his so-called normal self when he was asked to compare his work in the field of the "castle novel" with that of P. G. Wodehouse.

Perhaps some of this aversion to the term "university/campus novel" can be explained by Bradbury's disdain for the campuses that feature in most of his academic novels: according to him, redbrick universities are "frequently converted lunatic asylums or extended public lavatories," whereas the 'new' universities are "1960's architectural wonders built in green fields by Finnish architects driven mad by the remarkable plastic properties of concrete" ("If Your Books"). *The History Man* (1975) includes a description of the latter style of campus, designed by "that notable Finnish architect Jop Kaakinen" (37), a campus that is a reflection of Howard Kirk's self-image as a history-transforming individual. Bradbury's views on new campuses have rippled across time and space and find at least one echo in Schwanitz's *Der Campus*, which features a similar campus, described by nouns like "lovelessness," "dreariness," "ugliness" and "randomness" (36-39). This is reminiscent of Ian Carter's claim that Oxbridge settings are flaunted by academic novelists like "status symbols" and that "new buildings are at best tolerated, at worst excoriated" (45). In Juliet Lapidos' recent novel *Talent* (2019), the Collegiate campus is an "aspirational, neo-Gothic campus, designed to make ignorant Americans think the university dates back to the Middle Ages, and visitors from Oxford or Cambridge think, *Haven't I seen this somewhere before?*" (4). The novel takes issue with the fact that university campuses do all in their power to cater to ersatz nostalgia by fashioning inauthentic imitations of iconic, ancient university

campuses from across the pond. Elsewhere, the text elaborates on this by comparing the two library buildings, Golden Memorial and New Campus (which bring to mind Thornfield Library and its Annex in James Hynes's *The Lecturer's Tale* (2001)):

> The promotional brochure that Collegiate sent to newly admitted students had a picture of Golden Memorial Library on the cover. Golden was meant to resemble a Gothic cathedral, which it more or less did. Construction crews must have exhausted New England's quarries to assemble its granite and limestone façade; must have wondered if they were, in fact, building some sort of church when they erected the portentous entrance hall, with its sixty-foot vaulted ceiling, and the fifteen-story tower destined to hold books – millions upon millions of books acquired as part of a literary arms race with the nation's competing research universities.
>
> Below Golden was New Campus, an underground library that Collegiate never featured in its advertising materials. Whereas Golden was lousy with stained glass and gargoyles and marble reliefs and chandeliers, New Campus had buzzy fluorescent lights, cubicles shaped like swastikas – if you took the bird's-eye view – white plaster walls and poster reproductions of forgotten midcentury pop art. . . . To move from Golden, built in the 1920s, to New Campus, built in the 1970s, was to witness the devolution of American architecture.
>
> Yet there was something *comforting* about New Campus. . . . New Campus did not demand anything of its visitors, like Golden did. Golden expected heady gratitude. New Campus accepted wallowing. (Lapidos 31-32, my emphasis)

The underwhelmed, seemingly detached, critical tone in which Golden Memorial is discussed might suggest the utter absence of nostalgic emotion; however, a closer look reveals a budding nostalgia for New Campus and, in particular, for the comfort it provides. The novel also comments on the increasing virtualization of learning and writing: "The desk was a mahogany behemoth out of place in our digital age, with its stacked drawers, shelves, and nooks meant to hold the *debris* of an intensely *physical* time" (15,

my emphasis). The time of physicality is seen as having generated debris, as the analog is everywhere replaced by the digital.

In the already mentioned article on organizational nostalgia, the "physical *buildings*" (Gabriel 126) are mentioned first in connection to collective nostalgia and are thereby accorded the highest importance as an object of nostalgia. By contrast (and predictably), in studies of private, individual nostalgia, persons (33%/28%) and momentous events (21%/34%) take precedence over setting (Wildschut et al. 978). In Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, the students attending the class in the narrator's living room are dwelled on first and at length: it is Manna, Mahshid, Yassi, Azin, Mitra, Sanaz and Nassrin that make the object of Nafisi's fondest recollections. They are only rivalled by the books they discuss during that class. Still, the most vivid images are those of the seven young women shedding "their mandatory veils and robes and burst[ing] into color" (5-6). Grudin's *Book: A Novel* (1992) foregrounds a book as both the trigger and object of nostalgia: a nostalgia for a kind of literature that is not being written anymore – a correlative to the nostalgia in Brooke-Rose's *Textermination* for a certain kind of reading. Thus, Adam Snell's *Sovrana Sostrata* awakens in its readers

> a feeling of profound familiarity, a connection restored apparently after so long a loss of touch as to suggest the sudden repetition of some forgotten childhood event. What event? . . . No particular event . . . Something more like an attitude, a way of seeing or focusing the senses . . . An attitude of commitment, of total, abandoned, celebratory engagement with a subject. (55)

This attitude of passionate, focused and exploratory "intensity" (56-57) is the object of nostalgia here – and it emerges as the very opposite of comfort. Nostalgia, we are told by psychologists and cognitivists, "bolsters social bonds, increases self-regard, and generates positive affect" (Wildschut et al. 987), "helps lonely people restore feelings of belongingness" (Routledge 56), "mobilizes the social self by making people prioritize relationship goals" (58), "promotes self-continuity" and "psychological

growth," "motivates exploration and creativity" (83), and "restores meaning" (99). In short, if we are to believe recent findings in psychology, nostalgia comforts us without making us comfortable, which is what good fiction does as well.

It seems that psychology and cognitive science confirm what cultural and literary studies already knew: the fact that nostalgia is not just a backward-looking malaise, but also a creative and productive way in which the past informs the present and the future. The novels referred to in this article illustrate this in very different ways: via ideas as well as style, by reflexively commenting on literature itself as well as architecture, by crossing the divide between the Two Cultures and making sense of how technology changes the present and how the future can be steered towards a critical engagement with technology.[30]

Notes:

[1] My translation. In the original: "Die Universität, die es mal gab, war der Wahrheit verpflichtet. Sie war die Institution, die im großen Getöse gesellschaftlicher Interessen und Strebungen die Wahrheit darstellen sollte. Was davon übriggeblieben ist, können Sie an mir sehen. Ja, sehen Sie mich an! Dann sehen Sie, was aus der Universität geworden ist: ein Trümmerhaufen, eine Ruine, ein Wrack, aus dessen weiterer Demontage sich jeder bedient, der Lust dazu hat. (Schwanitz 382-3)

Works Cited

Aciman, André. *Harvard Square*. New York: Norton, 2014. Print.
Amis, Kingsley. *Lucky Jim.* London: Penguin, 2000. Print.
Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005. Print.
Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic, 2001. Print.
Bradbury, Malcolm. "Campus Fictions." *University Fiction*. Ed. David Bevan. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990. 49-56. Print.

---. "If Your Books Are Funny, Please Tell Me Where." *The New York Times* 17 July 1988. Web. 7 Apr. 2013.
---. *The History Man.* London: Picador, 2000. Print.
Brooke-Rose, Christine. *Textermination*. New York: New Directions, 1992. Print.
Carter, Ian. *Ancient Cultures of Conceit: British University Fiction in the Post-War Years.* London: Routledge, 1990. Print.
Cohen, Joshua. *The Netanyahus: An Account of a Minor and Ultimately Even Negligible Episode in the History of a Very Famous Family*. London: Fitzcarraldo, 2022. Print.
---. "The Covering Cherub: An Interview with Joshua Cohen" by Martin Riker. *The Paris Review* 23 June 2021.Web. 11 Jan. 2022.
Crumey, Andrew. *Mr. Mee.* London: Picador, 2000. Print.
Dewey, Joseph. "Biography of Richard Powers." *Richard Powers*. 2002. Web. 27 Nov. 2021.
Flaubert, Gustave. *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. TransMark Polizzotti. Dalkey Archive P, 2005. Print.
Gabriel, Yiannis. "Organizational Nostalgia – Reflections on 'The Golden Age'." *Emotion in Organizations*. London: Sage, 1993. 118-141.
Grudin, Robert. *Book: A Novel*. New York: Penguin, 1993. Print.
Hutcheon, Linda, and Mario J. Valdés. "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern." *Poligrafias: Revista de Literatura Comparada* 3 (1998-2000): 18-41. Print.
Hynes, James. *The Lecturer's Tale.* New York: Picador, 2001. Print.
Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991. Print.
Lapidos, Juliet. *Talent*. London: Borough P, 2020. Print.
Leboe, Jason P., and Tamara L. Ansons. "On Misattributing Good Remembering to a Happy Past: An Investigation into the Cognitive Roots of Nostalgia." *Emotion* 6.4 (2006): 596-610. Print.
Lodge, David. *Small World*. London: Penguin, 1985. Print.

McGuinness, Patrick. *The Last Hundred Days*. Bridgend: PoetryWales P, 2013. Print.
Murdoch, Iris. "Nostalgia for the Particular." *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature.* Ed. Peter Conradi. New York: Penguin, 1999. 43-58. Print.
Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pnin.* New York: Knopf, 2004. Print.
Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. London: HarperCollins, 2008. Print.
Pickering, Michael, and Emily Keightley. "The Modalities of Nostalgia." *Current Sociology* 54.6 (2006): 919-941. Print.
Powers, Richard. *Galatea 2.2*. London: Abacus, 1996. Print.
---. *The Overstory*. London: Vintage, 2019. Print.
Roth, Philip. *The Human Stain.* London: Vintage, 2005. Print.
Routledge, Clay. *Nostalgia: A Psychological Resource*. New York: Routledge, 2016. Print.
Sayers, Nicola. *The Promise of Nostalgia: Reminiscence, Longing and Hope in Contemporary American Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2020. Print.
Schwanitz, Dietrich. *Der Campus*. Hamburg: Hamburger Abendblatt Bibliothek, 2009. Print.
Showalter, Elaine. *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents.* Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2005. Print.
Smith, Zadie. *On Beauty*. London: Penguin, 2006. Print.
Tannock, Stuart. "Nostalgia Critique." *Cultural Studies* 9.3 (1995): 453-464. Print.
Waugh, Evelyn. *Brideshead Revisited*. New York: Knopf, 1993. Print.
Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. London: Fleet, 2017. Print.
Wildschut, Tim, et al. "Nostalgia: Content, Triggers, Functions." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91.5 (2006): 975-993. Print.