Julia Wiedemann (Ed.)

WELCOME TO RETROTOPIA?

Placing Visions of ›Britishness‹ in the Long Twentieth Century

Königshausen & Neumann

Wiedemann (Ed.)

—

Welcome to Retrotopia?

EICHSTÄTTER EUROPASTUDIEN

Band 10

Welcome to Retrotopia?

Placing Visions of ›Britishness‹ in the Long Twentieth Century

Edited by
Julia Wiedemann

Königshausen & Neumann

Gedruckt mit freundlicher Unterstützung
der Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaftlichen Fakultät
der Katholischen Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen
Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet
über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

© 2026
Verlag Königshausen & Neumann GmbH
Leistenstraße 7
D-97082 Würzburg
info@koenigshausen-neumann.de

Umschlag: skh-softics / coverart
Umschlagabbildung: © Karla Belovari-Nikolic

Alle Rechte vorbehalten
Dieses Werk, einschließlich aller seiner Teile, ist urheberrechtlich geschützt.
Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist
ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Das gilt insbesondere
für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und die Einspeicherung
und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

Druck: docupoint, Magdeburg
Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-8260-9525-2
eISBN 978-3-8260-9526-9

www.koenigshausen-neumann.de
www.ebook.de
www.buchhandel.de
www.buchkatalog.de

Contents

PREFACE 7

JULIA WIEDEMANN
Introduction: Welcome to Retrotopia? 9

RICHARD NATE
Retrotopian Traditions 17

ANDREW PICKERING
A Consideration of “Ecotopian” and “Retrotopian”
Elements in William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* 35

ANGELA PACE
Stonehenge in Early Twentieth-Century Travel Literature 53

MARTHA EGAN
Beyond the Poppies: A Look Back at British Narratives
of World War I in Poetry Rooted in Flanders Fields 69

SIOBHAN O’CONNOR
“Run like hell for the future”:
Retro-Dystopia in Hilary Mantel’s Thomas Cromwell Trilogy 93

JULIA WIEDEMANN
Remembering the Past, Forgetting the Future:
Kingsnorth’s Buckmaster Trilogy and the Ecological Crisis 113

DENNIS HENNEBÖHL
Nostalgic Narratives about Britain’s Post-War Decline
in the Netflix Series *The Crown* 129

MERLE TÖNNIES
Documenting Britishness in Decline: Spatial Representations of a
Fragmented Nation in Paul Graham s Photobook *A1* 151

GRISCHKA PETRI
Retrotopian Risks (not only) at British Musesums 165

KATHARINA VOLK
From Liverpool into the World: The Beatles and
New Britishness 181

SINA SCHUHMAIER
Englishness, Nostalgia, and the Lost Futures of British
Popular Music: The Street's "Brexit at Tiffany's" (2022) 197

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS 215

Preface

The following volume is the result of a workshop, which was conducted during the summer term 2024 with students of the MA programme European Studies at the Catholic University of Eichstaett-Ingolstadt. It therefore also contains essays written by students, but also from scholars at different stages in their careers.

This publication which is the tenth addition in the *Eichstätter Europastudien* publication series would not have been possible without the help of several individuals and institutions. I would like to thank the Faculty of Languages and Literatures at the Catholic University of Eichstaett-Ingolstadt for the financial support of this publication. My warm-hearted thanks go to Richard Nate, Martha Egan and Kristina Klocke for carefully reading and correcting (parts of) the manuscript.

Eichstaett, January 2026 Julia Wiedemann

Introduction: Welcome to Retrotopia?

JULIA WIEDEMANN

For the last couple of years, we have experienced a hype for everything vintage: thrift or vintage stores pop up everywhere, people buy their furniture at antique markets, and in 2023, BBC posted that "Vinyl records outsell CDs for first time in decades".[1] While this may tie in with a more sustainable life-style, it is also an expression of a yearning for the past, defeating the notion: "new is always better". Even if it may sound trivial,[2] this interest in all things vintagy can be read as a sign for a widespread nostalgic sentiment. Parties, particularly right-wing parties, often make use of these nostalgic leanings. With their focus on (invented) traditions and a return to imagined pasts,[3] they offer solutions to present problems that – upon checking – often only serve to oppose modernity as such. Instead of orienting themselves towards a future society in the making, nostalgics refer to traditions in order to assure themselves that their individual lives are "connected with the past".[4] "Tradition is", Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw point out, "the enactment and dramatization of continuity; it is the thread which binds our separate lives to the broad canvas of history".[5] However, as reference to the past is "selective" and as "the past is actively organised", it can be used to "speak to current anxieties and tensions".[6]

In 2001, Svetlana Boym diagnosed a "global epidemic of nostalgia".[7] In her influential study, which focused on the role of nostalgia for the former USSR, she stresses that "the alluring object of nostalgia is notoriously

1 Drenon (2023: heading).

2 It is not trivial, however, that second hand clothes are an integral part of global consumerism and even – paradoxically – help support fast fashion, for a detailed study on the interrelationship of the fast fashion industry and second-hand clothes, cf. Brooks (2015).

3 The term "invented traditions" of course goes back to Hobsbawm, cf. Hobsbawm (1983). The idea of imagined pasts is found in discussions of nostalgia, cf. e.g. Chase/Shaw (1989: 11).

4 Chase/Shaw (1989: 11).

5 Chase/Shaw (1989: 11).

6 Chase/Shaw (1989: 14). More generally, Albrecht Koschorke (2022: 29-30) has stressed that cultural narratives are highly selective and thereby reduce the complexity of our reality. Cf. also the role of myths as demonstrated in Lakoff/Johnson (2003: 186) and the term "emplotment" introduced by Hayden White (1973).

7 Boym (2001: xiv).

elusive" and that it is as much a longing for a specific place as it is a "yearning for a different time" in the past.[8] She further argues that "outbreaks of nostalgia often follow revolutions".[9] The Wars in Ukraine and in the Near East, the protests in Iran and the United States, the climate crisis, economic instabilities, and (this is particularly true for Britain) the consequences of Brexit turn the 2020s into tumultuous times. While Boym is aware that "[u]nreflected nostalgia breeds monsters", she is also convinced that nostalgia can be a means to critically discuss the present, the past and the future, thereby finding more sustainable, more inclusive and more humane visions of the future.[10]

Boym's work on nostalgia had an influence on Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "retrotopia" which he introduced in what would become his last book, posthumously published in 2017. The first chapter begins with a discussion of Walter Benjamin's comment on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* – better known as "Angel of History". A century later, Bauman remarks, one sees

> the Angel of History caught in the midst of a U-turn: his face turning from the past to the future, his wings being pushed backwards by the storm blowing this time from the imagined, anticipated and feared in advance Hell of the future towards the Paradise of the past.[11]

Retrotopias, for Bauman, are "visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future".[12] Thus, like nostalgia, retrotopias seem to focus on temporal aspects more than on spatial ones. Even though in his book *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal demonstrates that originally, nostalgia was a medical term which described a pathological longing for home that manifested itself in physical symptoms,[13] Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw stress that today's usage of the word is "metaphorical". Thus, they argue "[t]he home we miss is no longer a geographically defined place but rather a state of mind".[14] According to them, nostalgic sentiments are fostered by "a secular and linear sense of time, an apprehension of the present, and the availability of evidences of the past".[15] To the temporality of nostalgia is added a sense of materiality: according to the two authors, the nos-

8 Boym (2001: xv, xvi).
9 Boym (2001: xvi).
10 Boym (2001: xvi) who distinguishes between "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia, Boym (2001: xviii).
11 Bauman (2020: 2).
12 Bauman (2020: 5).
13 Lowenthal (2015: 46-47).
14 Chase/Shaw (1989: 1).
15 Chase/Shaw (1989: 4).

talgic sentiment is triggered by and aimed at material objects which represent past times but are still available in the present. Focusing on nostalgic rhetoric, Stuart Tannock argues that "key tropes […] are the notion of a Golden Age and a subsequent Fall, the story of the Homecoming, and the pastoral".[16] It can be linked, he continues, to feelings of "loss" and "discontinuity".[17] Nostalgic rhetoric is therefore based on a three-part structure: 1) the prelapsarian world (ideal) 2) the lapse (cut, break) and 3) the postlapsarian world (lack).[18] As becomes obvious, this results in a u-shaped narrative as described by Northrop Frye.

Zygmunt Bauman takes up this u-shaped form in his depiction of retrotopian visions as being characterised and influenced by three "returns". First, he notices a return to the ideal of small communities or tribes. With regard to individual development, Bauman secondly observes a return to the primacy of nature over nurture, which he also describes as a return to essentialism. And finally, he attests a general abandonment of faith in a civilized society.[19] The discussion of the idea of a return features prominently in Richard Nate's contribution to this volume which serves as a theoretical framework. In his "Retrotopian Traditions", Nate links the idea of a return to Christian traditions, particularly to the notion of a history of salvation. He further contrasts Bauman's definition of retrotopia with utopianism. By referring to German and British examples from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Nate demonstrates that both retrotopian and utopian texts are neither primarily concerned with the past nor the future, but with the present. These texts can therefore be read as expressions of Cultural Criticism.

Even though Nate's contribution shows that retrotopian leanings can be found during the nineteenth century, the main focus of this volume lies on the "long twentieth century". This term goes back to Giovanni Arrighi's study on the history of capitalism, published as *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (1994). In it, Arrighi argues that capitalism has unfolded as a succession of "long centuries", each of which produced a world power in control of a global economy.[20] The emergence of the United States as a world power in the last decades of the nineteenth century – a status they have held well into the 2010s – led to a reduction in power and influence of the British Empire.[21] In recent studies, historians summarise these developments under the term "declinism" and show that from the 1870s onwards "declinist" underpinnings have shaped

16 Tannock (1995: 454).
17 Tannock (1995: 456).
18 Tannock (1995: 456).
19 Cf. Bauman (2020: 9).
20 Arrighi (1994: 214).
21 Arrighi (1994: 59).

accounts of modern Britain.[22] Jim Tomlinson explains that declinist narratives interpret failure in economics not merely as economic problem but as an expression of "political, social and cultural malaise".[23] As can be argued, these declinist narratives feed into retrotopian visions.

This is particularly true for Kingsnorth's Buckmaster trilogy discussed in my contribution to this volume. Kingsnorth's dark and pessimistic outlook on the future of humanity is paired with an idealisation of a mythical past that invokes Bauman's three returns. Particularly the first novel *The Wake* (2014) can also be read as a Brexit-novel. It can be argued that an increase in nostalgic, retrotopian narratives of Britishness are fuelled by the discussion of Britain's relationship with the EU. Drawing on Joshua Freedman's temporal status approach which focuses on the idea that groups do not only compare themselves to other groups but also to their former ideas of themselves, Paul Beaumont argues that "one important reason why British identity is often associated with Euroscepticism is because EU membership is especially threatening to Britain's historical narrative of the self".[24] In his article "Brexit, Retrotopia, and the Perils of Post-Colonial Delusions", he shows that "Brexit can […] be understood as a radical attempt to arrest Britain's decline by setting sail for a future based on a nostalgic vision of the past".[25] According to him, there are two major eras which shaped British "self-narratives": World War II and the Empire.[26] While associations with World War II and Britain's victorious position were used as counter-images to Britain's position within the EU by Brexiteers such as former UKIP's and now Reform UK's leader Nigel Farage, Beaumont identifies pride in the former empire as the second key feature in British self-narratives.

Both World War II and the Empire feature prominently in the Netflix-series *The Crown* which is discussed in Dennis Henneböhl's paper in this volume. According to Henneböhl, the series demonstrates how the British monarchy is instrumentalised in Britain's master narrative of nostalgia that emerged during the Brexit referendum. By looking closely at three episodes from different seasons, Henneböhl shows that the series is based on the idea of a decline, particularly with regard to Britain's economy, sovereignty and role as a leading (colonial) world power.

Apart from World War II and the Empire, one could argue, the remembrance of World War I plays a decisive role in British self-narratives of the long twentieth century. In her contribution to this volume entitled "Beyond the Poppies: A Look Back at British Narratives of World War I in

[22] For a short overview, see Tomlinson (2009: 229-232).
[23] Tomlinson (2009: 228).
[24] Beaumont (2017: 3).
[25] Beaumont (2017: 1).
[26] Beaumont (2017: 10).

Poetry Rooted in Flanders Fields", Martha Egan discusses the nostalgic sentiment in two ways. In the first part of the article, Egan concentrates on the narratives of heroism and self-sacrifice as depicted in World War I poetry, thereby evoking mythic English cultural traditions. In the second part, the focus is shifted towards practices of remembering the Great War, in which these idealisations are paired with the idea that the sacrifices of this war still shape British identity. These two nostalgic layers are combined in the symbolic space of Flanders Fields and in the poppy flower, both of which have come to represent Britishness.

Exemplarily, Egan thus shows that narratives are not only temporal events that refer to a specific time, but that these narratives are also "emplaced", to borrow a term introduced by Edward S. Casey.[27] The link between collective memories and places was originally discussed by Maurice Halbwachs and had an impact on Pierre Nora's notion of "sites of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*)which describe both physical places and objects which function as containers of memory. Other scholars stressed the fact that our ideas of both physical places and sites of memory change. This finds particular expression in Henri Lefebvre's notion of the production of space and in Edward Soja's concept of the "thirdspace" as a "real-and-imagined place". These theoretical approaches particularly feed into Angela Pace's contribution to this volume. By referring to these spatial theories, Pace demonstrates that ever since the Middle Ages, Stonehenge has been 'produced' as socio-cultural entity. In her article "Stonehenge in Early Twentieth-Century Travel Literature", she focuses on the two travelogues *Round about Wiltshire* (1907) by historian Arthur Granville Bradley and *Afoot in England* (1909) by naturalist William Henry Hudson. While Pace shows that these texts evoke Stonehenge as a monument of an idealised past, she also links them to the debate of preservationism in which the maintenance of monuments was considered to contribute to the creation and safeguarding of Britishness.

Even though this book is very much based on the assumption that there is an increase in retrotopian and nostalgic narratives, it also contains articles, which deal with texts that are highly ambivalent. One case in point is Andrew Pickering's reading of William Morris's *News from Nowhere*. For Pickering, Morris's novel, commonly defined as 'utopian', is retrotopian in so far as it rejects the inequalities and pollution of modern, industrialised England and advocates a return to traditions. However, Pickering also stresses that as the novel is ecotopian, it it very much drawn towards modern solutions. Therefore, Pickering concludes, *News from Nowhere* (1890) combines forward- and backward-looking tendencies.

[27] E.g. Casey (1997).

Another example is Siobhan O'Connor's contribution to this volume. In her article, she concentrates on what she has termed retro-dystopia. For her, retro-dystopias make evident what Bauman has called the 'liquid modern' era and they project back into the past contemporary fears and grievances. As she further argues, in the early twenty-first century, the reign of Henry VIII has become of particular interest for many writers. Concentrating on Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell trilogy, O'Connor shows that in depicting the horrors of the past, hope for the future can be restored.

While narratives are often linked to the written (or spoken) word, they of course also find expression in visual media. Apart from Hennebühl's contribution mentioned above, there are two other articles in this volume which concentrate on the visual. In her contribution, Merle Tönnies argues that Paul Graham's photobook *A1 – The Great North Road* (1983/2021) questions ideas of cohesiveness and of progress. Instead, she points out, the photos are permeated by a sense of fragmentation and isolation. Referring to Barthe's differentiation between coded and non-coded iconic messages, she stresses that the sense of a Britishness in decline is stimulated without having to closely read the photographs. Focusing on British Museums, Grischka Petri points to an intricate ambivalence: while museums invite and foster a critical discussion of the past, they are at the same time themselves part of history. This latter fact may lead to what Petri has termed "retrotopian risks".

Popular music has not only played an important role in discussions of both Englishness and Britishness, but it often also brims with nostalgic sentiments. In this volume, this is demonstrated in the contributions by Katharina Volk and Sina Schuhmaier. Volk focuses on Beatles songs and argues that songs like "Yellow Submarine" and "Penny Lane" are full of retrotopian leanings. However, as she shows by referring to "All You Need Is Love", in their songs, the Beatles combine nostalgic longings and progressive ideals. In her contribution, Sina Schuhmaier discusses The Street's 2022-song "Brexit at Tiffany's". As it was written in a time where hopes for a better future had become futile, Schuhmaier argues that "Brexit at Tiffany's" searches for the past of popular music in order to regain former visions for the future.

As can be seen from this overview, not all of the papers discuss narratives dedicated to an uncritical reverence for nostalgia and / or retrotopia. Rather, some of them question all too simple idealisations of the past. While it is obvious that negotiations of national identities – in the UK, but also in other countries all over the world – have increasingly become tinted by nostalgic and retrotopian imaginations, there are still visions which employ the utopian mode. Both Jim Tomlinson and Paul Beaumont suggest that declinism and comparisons with the past should be turned into positive actions. In the words of Beaumont: "if a nation is just a series of stories we

tell about ourselves, why not make those stories good ones?".[28] For Bauman, the only way to avoid the retrotopian appeal is to come into dialogue as "[m]ore than at any other time, we – human inhabitants of the Earth – are in the either/or situation: we face joining either hands, or common graves."[29]

References

Arrighi, Giovanni (1994). *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*. London / New York: Verso.

Bauman, Zygmunt (2020). *Retrotopia*. Malden: polity.

Beaumont, Paul (2017). "Brexit, Retrotopia, and the Perils of Post-Colonial Delusions", *Global Affairs* 3 (4-5), 379-390. https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2018.1478674.

Boym, Svetlana (2001). *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.

Brooks, Andrew (2015). *Clothing Poverty: The Hidden World of Fast Fashion and Second-Hand Clothes*. London: Zed Books.

Casey, Edward S. (1997).

Chase, Malcolm / Shaw, Christopher (1989). "The Dimensions of Nostalgia", in: Chase, Malcolm / Shaw, Christopher (eds.). *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*. Manchester / New York: Manchester University Press, 1-17.

Drenon, Brandon (2023). "Vynil records outsell CDs for first time in decades", BBC, 13 March 2023, online. https://www.bbc.com/news/64919126. Last accessed 20 May 2025.

Hobsbawm, Eric (1983). "Introduction: Inventing Traditions", in: Hobsbawm, Eric / Ranger, Terence (eds.). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge [a.o.]: Cambridge University Press, 1-14.

Koschorke, Albrecht (2022). *Wahrheit und Erfindung: Grundzüge einer Allgemeinen Erzähltheorie*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer.

Lakoff, George / Johnson, Mark (2003). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago / London: The University of Chicago Press.

Lowenthal, David (2015). *The Past is a Foreign Country – Revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sarbin, Theodore R. (1997). "The Poetics of Identity", *Theory & Psychology* 7 (1), 67-82.

[28] Beaumont (2017: 14).

[29] Bauman (2020: 167).

Shaw, Kristian (2021). *Brexlit. British Literature and the European Project*. London [a.o.]: Bloomsbury.
Tannock, Stuart (1995). "Nostalgia Critique", *Cultural Studies* 9 (3), 453-464.
Tomlinson, Jim (2009). "Thrice Denied: 'Declinism' as a Recurrent Theme in British History in the Long Twentieth Century", *Twentieth Century British History* 20 (2), 227-251. doi:10.1093/tcbh/hwp019.
White, Hayden (1973). *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Retrotopian Traditions

RICHARD NATE

In *Retrotopia* (2017), British philosopher Zygmunt Bauman commented on current attempts to react on political and cultural crises by seeking solace in the past rather than in the future. He defined retrotopias as "visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past".[1] Although it was not Bauman's aim to give a comprehensive account of retrotopian thinking, his term invites for a reflection on the ways in which the past has been idealised at different times. Significantly, Bauman's term is derived from another one which has often been associated with hope in the future, namely utopia. Although it is still debated what brought Thomas More to publish his *Utopia* in 1516, the term is usually taken to refer to a social reality considered as ideal. When utopian literature began to flourish in the early seventeenth century, it was mostly associated with descriptions of far away places rather than with visions of the future. The Scientific Revolution, however, also fuelled a more positive outlook on future developments. An ideal society depicted in Francis Bacon's *Nova Atlantis* (1627) was closely linked to the author's project of an *Instauratio Magna*, a reform programme geared to improve the living conditions of human beings through science and technology. During the seventeenth century, Bacon's ideas were adopted in various circles, including early Puritan reformers as well as experimental philosophers of the Restoration period.[2] Viewed in this light, it seems reasonable to ask whether a "temporalisation" of utopian thought, which Reinhart Koselleck located only in the late eighteenth century,[3] began much earlier, namely at the beginning of the Scientific Revolution.

Since the publication of Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (1954), utopian thought has been associated with the expectation of better times to come.[4] Ultimately, the idea is derived from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians where faith, hope and charity are described as principle Christian virtues. It is also true, however, that the Christian tradition has often linked future expectations with visions of an ideal past. The Garden of Eden as depicted in the third chapter of *Genesis* was generally interpreted as an

---

1 Bauman (2017: 5).

2 Cf. Thomas (1987).

3 Koselleck (1985: 1).

4 Bloch (1985).

ideal beginning of human history. It is not by accident that John Milton, who based his epic *Paradise Lost* (1667) on this idea, was a Puritan, since it was mostly in Protestant circles that a return to an uncorrupted beginning of religious faith was propagated. In contrast to Catholics, who would regard the Church as a sacred body founded by Christ himself, Protestants held that the modern ecclesiastical tradition represented a departure from the original truth and argued for a return to past values. It is in this context that Martin Luther's concentration on the four *soli* (*Solus Christus*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola scriptura*) must be seen. A common denominator among the several sects that sprang up during the seventeenth century – ranging from the German Rosicrucians to the English Levellers, Diggers and Fifth Monarchy Men – was the aim to restore Christianity to its original state. This again was seen as a precondition for Christ's second coming which would bring about the millennium and ultimately the Heavenly Jerusalem as described in the Book of Revelation.

In the early modern period, the idea of a return to religious purity also triggered speculations about humanity's prelapsarian state.[5] As Robert South declared in a sermon from 1663, Adam had been a perfect philosopher before he fell from grace. According to South, he had been able to write "the Nature of things upon their Names […] view Essences in themselves, and read Forms without the comments of their respective Properties".[6] Since the names Adam had given to God's creatures were believed to be perfect, authors speculated, whether remnants of Adam's primordial language could possibly be found underneath the surface of existing languages.[7] The German mystic Jacob Böhme, whose writings were first published in England, elaborated on this idea in his *Aurora* (1612).[8] Although Royal Society members were eager to demarcate their scientific endeavours from a philosophical hermeticism that Böhme represented, they would not dispense with thoughts of regaining primodial purity altogether. Notably, in promoting his model of a scientific plain style, Thomas Sprat spoke of a "return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many *things*, almost in an equal number of *words*".[9]

Francis Bacon himself was eager to show that his scientific programme was in line with biblical lore. He referred to the book of Daniel to prove that his great instauration was "destined by fate, that is, by Divine Providence".[10] Arguing that scientists were acting in God's will when attempting to restore humanity to its original state, became a popular rhetorical device

---

[5] See Picciotto (2010) for a detailed account.
[6] South (1663: 11).
[7] On the idea of an Adamic language, see Eco (1993: 21 ff.).
[8] Cf. Böhme (1656). On Böhme's reception in England see Nate (1995).
[9] Sprat (1667: 113). Emphasis in the original.
[10] Bacon (1858-1874: IV, 92).

in the decades which followed. Thus, Royal Society member John Wilkins presented the artificial language outlined in his *Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668) as a path to restoring religious harmony and universal understanding that had been lost in the confusion of tongues at Babel.[11]

Northrop Frye has pointed to the role that the idea of a return to a perfect beginning has played in the Christian tradition. As he argued in *The Great Code* (1982), providential history is based on the idea that humanity started from a perfect state, fell from grace because of Adam's sin, and since then has awaited to be restored to its original position. As Frye explained,

> the narrative structure […] is roughly U-shaped, the apostasy being followed by a descent into disaster and bondage, which in turn is followed by repentance, then by a rise through deliverance to a point more or less on the level from which the descent began. […] The entire Bible, viewed as a "divine comedy", is contained within a U-shaped story […], one in which man […] loses the tree and water of life at the beginning of Genesis and gets them back at the end of Revelation.[12]

The fact that this pattern even recurs in philosophies which define themselves as atheist or agnostic, proves how deeply it is embedded in the Western tradition. Although Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels would denounce religion as "opiate of the people", their historical materialism still reflects Northrop Frye's U-shaped pattern. According to an orthodox Marxist reading, humanity lived in a classless community, until the invention of private property initiated a series of class struggles. It is held that with the overcoming of capitalism, a communism without private property will become possible again. Like in providential history, there is a promise that once the source of all evil is abolished, the path to an original state of peace and harmony will be open.

The examples presented so far illustrate that promises of a brighter future often rely on references to the past. To inspire hope, this past need not be clearly defined. It seems that the vaguer it is kept, the more effective it is as a rhetorical device. It is telling in this respect that in the early modern period, religious views of an ideal beginning often merged with concepts inherited from classical antiquity – that of a Golden Age as described by Hesiod or Plato's mythical Atlantis. In other cases, concrete historical periods are perceived as "good old days" and assume a retrotopian quality – be it the Middle Ages, Victorianism, the German *Kaiserreich* or Tsarist Russia. In any case, it seems important not to confuse retrotopian visions with a more sober kind of historiography. Although there are modes of history writing which betray a retrotopian quality, retrotopias are products of the

---

11 Wilkins (1668: n.d.).

12 Frye (1982: 169).

imagination more than anything else. Their main concern is the present, not the past.

Cultural Criticism

It is not hard to find examples which show that idealisations of the past are often motivated by a critique of the present. One can be found in the late fifteenth century when feelings spread that traditional medieval values were about to be lost. Towards the end of his *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485), Thomas Malory blamed his age for having abandoned a traditional code of conduct. In a passage which juxtaposes a chivalric code of courtship and love with contemporary modes of conduct, his cultural criticism becomes obvious:

> Right so fareth love nowadays, soon hot soon cold: this is no stability. But the old love was not so; men and women could love together seven years, and no licours lusts were between them, and then was love, truth, and faithfulness: and lo, in likewise was used love in King Arthur's days.[13]

Ironically, the medieval world depicted in *Le Morte D'Arthur* hardly comes near this characterisation. After all, it is a world of envy and betrayal, ultimately leading to the decline of a kingdom. Nonetheless, the deeds of the knights of the Round Table are obviously intended to illustrate chivalric values whose loss the author regretted. By presenting these values as a norm for the present, *Le Morte D'Arthur* betrays a retrotopian quality.

It was in the Romantic period that idealisations of bygone periods became increasingly popular. It is known that romantic poets were fascinated by the imagination rather than rational reflection. Friedrich von Hardenberg, also known as Novalis, declared that the key to a true understanding of the world lay in tales and poems rather than quantitative analyses. In a similar way, Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in *The Defence of Poetry* (1821) that it was poets rather than philosophers and scientists who constituted the backbones of human society. In this context, Shelley imagined a kind of primordial golden age pervaded by a poetic spirit:

> In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry; and to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression.[14]

Visions of a *Vorzeit* (primordial age) defined by poetry and song had already been expressed by Johann Gottfried Herder. In the preface to his

[13] Malory (1969: II, 426).
[14] Shelley (2000: 792).

Volkslieder (1778/79), he stated that in the beginning of human history even common people (*Volk*) had communicated in poetic language.[15] It does not seem far-fetched to interpret William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789) as a depiction of such a world. Blake's poems present visions of a pastoral paradise in which people live in perfect harmony with nature and children act as true philosophers.

Placing imagination above reflection, Romantic writers felt little need to meticulously define the historical period they regarded as ideal. A popular candidate was the Middle Ages. When Jacob Grimm decided to use small initial letters in all German nouns, he did so because he assumed that the medieval way of writing had been a more natural one, against which the modern capitalisation of nouns appeared but a modern mannerism. The most striking example of medievalism is probably Novalis' posthumously published essay *Christianity or Europe* (1799) which glorifies a vaguely defined medieval period in utopian terms. It is probably no coincidence that its first sentences read like a fairy tale:

> Those were beautiful, magnificent times, when Europe was a Christian land, when *one* Christianity dwelled on this civilized continent, and when *one* common interest joined the most distant provinces of this vast spiritual empire. Without great worldly possessions *one* sovereign governed and unified the great political forces. Immediately under him stood one enormous guild, open to all, executing every wish and zealously striving to consolidate his beneficent power. [...] Childlike faith bound the people to their teachings. How happily everyone could complete their earthly labours, since these holy men had safeguarded them a future life; forgave every sin, explained and erased every blackspot in this life.[16]

It is easy to see that the world depicted in this passage is a poetic vision rather than a historical reconstruction. Theological debates and frictions between church and state which also marked the Middle Ages are deliberately ignored. Dispensing with any concrete data, Novalis' essay imagines a homogenous theocratic society in which conflicts are unknown. Against this ideal, subsequent centuries describe a process of decline. Three causes for this decline are identified: modern mercantilism, the Protestant Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution. Significantly, Novalis' vision culminates in the prediction of a resurrection of the ideal state:

> That the time of the resurrection has come, and that precisely the events that seemed to be directed against its revival and to complete its demise have become the propitious signs of its regeneration – this cannot be denied by the historical mind.[17]

---

15 Herder (1778/79: 313 ff.).
16 Novalis (1996: 61).
17 Novalis (1996: 71).