

## Nostalgia, the Classics, and the Intimations Ode: Wordsworth's Forgotten Education

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Between 1819 and 1824 Wordsworth undertook a translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, which eventually included Books 1 to 3 nearly complete and only two further, unconnected passages: a brief fragment (six lines in English) from Book 4, and a more substantial section (forty-six lines) from the eighth book. Wordsworth left no indication why he singled out the last passage for translation. It contains the scene, well-known though scarcely crucial to the plot of the *Aeneid*, in which King Evander gives Aeneas a tour of his rustic settlement on what will later be the site of Rome.

To the Tarpeian Rock their way they hold  
And to the Capitol now bright with gold,—  
In those far-distant times a spot forlorn  
With bramble choked and rough with savage thorn . . .  
Conversing thus their onward course they bent  
To poor Evander's humble tenement;  
Herds range the Roman Forum; in the street  
Of proud Carinae bellowing herds they meet. . . .<sup>1</sup>

W. Warde Fowler, in his monograph on Book 8, *Aeneas at the Site of Rome*, calls this passage "a fine stroke which must have delighted the Romans of [Virgil's] own day."<sup>2</sup> Yet its appeal to Wordsworth is less obvious. One might think that, logically, the description of these rustic precursors to the glories of Rome would delight especially, or only, those who were familiar with the Capitol, the Forum, and the Carinae in all their glory. But to think thus is to misunderstand the workings of nostalgia. I would define nostalgia as an affection or desire, not for what one remembers, but for what one feels one has forgotten.<sup>3</sup> No detailed reconstruction of the Roman Forum could give the modern reader so intimate a sense of familiarity with it as Virgil's deconstruction. Virgil sug-

gests the grandeur only by negating it (“Herds range the Roman Forum”), relying upon the reader’s knowledge to provide the necessary contrasting image. Hence the modern reader actually derives *more* from this passage than would a Roman with first-hand knowledge of the places mentioned. Familiarity with the great monuments of ancient Rome is so implicitly ascribed to the reader that we unconsciously assume it, and although we could not therefore draw an accurate map of the Forum, knowledge of it comes to seem rather like something forgotten than like something never known.

There is nothing logical, of course, in the feeling of having forgotten something one never really knew, but the nostalgic appeal of this scene from Virgil does not depend on logic. Coleridge (whom Keats memorably accused of being “incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge”) might have questioned Wordsworth’s apparent preference for this passage, just as he criticized a remarkably similar instance of paradoxical nostalgia, the *Intimations Ode*. In chapter 22 of *Biographia Literaria*, which enumerates some “characteristic defects of Wordsworth’s poetry,” Coleridge aims his final and bitterest attack against the passage of the *Ode* which apostrophizes a young boy as “Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!” because the child, according to Wordsworth, still remembers his pre-natal state. Coleridge objects that a memory which never enters the consciousness is no memory: “Children at this age give us no such information of themselves; and at what time were we dipt in the Lethe, which has produced such utter oblivion of a state so godlike? . . . But if this be too wild and exorbitant to be suspected as having been the poet’s meaning; if these mysterious gifts, faculties, and operations, are *not* accompanied with consciousness; who *else* is conscious of them? or how can it be called the child, if it be no part of the child’s conscious being?”<sup>4</sup>

Coleridge’s objections are certainly rational: the *Ode* is in many ways logically untenable. Wordsworth admitted that he did “not profess to give a literal representation of the state of the affections and of the moral being in childhood”; the child’s recollection of pre-existence, then, is not to be taken literally. The false attribution of such a memory to childhood might nevertheless seem a reasonable poetic license if the point of the poem were to insist upon a prior state of being, but Wordsworth thought it

“right to protest against [the] conclusion . . . that [he] meant to inculcate such a belief.”<sup>5</sup> It seems strange, to say the least, to construct a poem around “intimations of immortality from recollections of early childhood” when neither the recollection nor the immortality recollected is meant to be credible. Yet despite its anomalies the Ode remains captivating and comprehensible because it both describes and conveys nostalgia—the pleasurable impression that something one has never known is in fact merely forgotten.<sup>6</sup>

Nostalgia in this sense is not a Wordsworthian invention but is well-known in a number of contexts. In a relatively bald form, for instance, it is often used by advertisers. (The television campaign that urged viewers to “Come back to Jamaica” was clearly not aimed at native Jamaicans, nor even at those who had ever visited.) In a more complex form the implication of forgotten knowledge is typical not only of Virgil but of what we call “the classics” in general. In the first part of this essay I discuss how this effect is produced in Virgil and Milton, in order to suggest why the strange sense of familiarity described in the Ode seems strangely familiar. In the second section I discuss the nostalgia associated with what is referred to as a classical education, as evidence that the paradox that Wordsworth illuminates is not solely a literary phenomenon.

#### DEAR CLASSICAL RECOLLECTIONS OF CHILDHOOD

According to Macaulay, the most affecting parts of Milton are those that from a logical standpoint should be the least notable, because they convey no definite meaning.

[W]e may remark, that scarcely any passages in the poems of Milton are more generally known or more frequently repeated than those which are little more than muster-rolls of names. They are not always more appropriate or more melodious than other names. But they are charmed names. Every one of them is the first link in a long chain of associated ideas. Like the dwelling-place of our infancy revisited in manhood, like the song of our country heard in a strange land, they produce upon us an effect wholly independent of their intrinsic value. One transports us back to a remote period of history. Another places us among the novel scenes and manners of a distant region. A third evokes all the dear classical recollections of childhood, the school-room, the dog-eared Virgil, the holiday, and the prize.<sup>7</sup>

Macaulay’s third example may be the most useful in helping explain the nameless affection he feels for Milton’s learned lists.

The passing reference to Virgil, although no doubt it is meant to include all school-room authors, is well-chosen: “the dog-eared Livy” would convey nothing of the same effect. Virgil’s ability to provide readers with memories of Rome (memories that are now forgotten) gives a double sense to the phrase “the dear classical recollections of childhood.” Not only does the adult Macaulay recollect his childhood as a dear classical period of his life, but he assigns to that period the recollection of classical antiquity. Coleridge might counter that a schoolboy, upon questioning, would reveal no conscious memory of classical times, but the feeling remains nonetheless. If Macaulay feels he has forgotten what Rome was like, then it follows he must at one time have remembered it; naturally enough, he assigns such memories to his schooldays.<sup>8</sup>

Hence the Virgil is “dog-eared”: we get no sense of the child discovering the *Aeneid* for the first time, but rather an implication that Virgil constitutes one of “Those shadowy recollections” that haunt Wordsworth’s child-seer (Ode 150). Virgil’s nostalgic evocation of Rome through reference to its predecessor, although it is particularly acute in Book 8—“the most Roman of all the books”<sup>9</sup>—is by no means limited to the brief passage Wordsworth chose to translate. Aeneas’s visit to the site of Rome merely encapsulates the method of the epic as a whole: reaching back to a precursor state (Troy, Pallanteum) in order to embrace the current state, which appears all the more sublime for being shown only in outline, through the coloring-in of the negative space that surrounds it. Aside from some prophetic glimpses, the *Aeneid* describes not classical Rome but archaic Rome; yet this indirection is precisely what makes the Augustan age seem so familiar and provides Macaulay with his classical recollections. If Virgil limits himself to describing the pre-history of Rome, that is because every schoolboy, surely, remembers what Rome was like in its heyday.

The temporal depth Virgil thus exploits is what makes him a “classic,” according to T. S. Eliot’s essay, “What is a Classic?” Virgil is Eliot’s prime example because he possesses the one all-important characteristic, “maturity,” which Eliot defines as a sense of the difference between past and present, both literarily and historically. Virgil is a classic whereas Homer is not, because Virgil “is aware of his predecessors” (notably Homer) and because the

Roman empire in general maturely defined itself against earlier civilizations: "This is a consciousness which the Romans had, and which the Greeks . . . could not possess."<sup>10</sup> Eliot concludes, "it is this development of one literature, or one civilization, in relation to another, which gives a particular significance to the subject of Virgil's epic"; in other words, Virgil makes the "unique destiny" of Rome seem timeless—or classic—because he defines it by what it is not, or by what it is no longer (19, 29).

Eliot's strict criteria exclude not only Homer but Milton; Virgil in fact turns out to be not just the prime but the *only* true exemplar of the "classic." Yet the double time-frame that Eliot singles out as Virgil's most significant feature is not limited to Virgil. Wordsworth uses analogous techniques, as I shall argue, and so does Milton. It was in order to elucidate Milton that Macaulay invoked Virgil, and specifically to help explain the uncanny familiarity of Milton's "muster-rolls of names." Macaulay refers to passages such as the famous first description of Paradise:

Not that faire field  
Of *Enna* . . .  
    . . . nor that sweet Grove  
Of *Daphne* by *Orontes*, and th'inspir'd  
*Castalian* Spring, might with this Paradise  
Of *Eden* strive; nor that *Nyseian* Ile  
Girt with the River *Triton*, where old *Cham*,  
Whom Gentiles *Ammon* call and *Lybian Jove*,  
Hid *Amalthea* and her Florid Son  
Young *Bacchus* from his Stepdame *Rhea's* eye;  
Nor where *Abassin* Kings thir issue Guard,  
Mount *Amara*, though this by som suppos'd  
True Paradise under the *Ethiop* Line.<sup>11</sup>

Macaulay explains the nostalgic familiarity of these "charmed names" by suggesting that each "is the first link in a long chain of associated ideas." But do "*Nyseian*" and "old *Cham*" really call up a chain of associations? Even if we could grant that Macaulay was as learned as Milton, his analysis does not explain why the lay-reader, who knows nothing of "old *Cham*," can nevertheless agree that this list seems "charmed."<sup>12</sup>

Most of us have no previous knowledge of the figures and places Milton refers to, but Milton attributes such knowledge to us by his "not," which implies perfect familiarity—as if the reader had probably pictured Eden as resembling "that *Nyseian* Ile" and needed to be corrected.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, Milton's characteristic

description-by-negation is an exact counterpart to Virgil's: the reader seems to have associations with the "River *Triton*" (though even Macaulay might be hard put to name *what* associations) just as a modern reader feels oddly familiar with the grandeur of the Forum. But in fact the analogy is less exact and more complex than it appears. What Milton here describes by negatives—the equivalent to Virgil's Forum—is Eden. Whereas Virgil depicted what his original readers would have known well by referring to its humble precursor, Milton evokes that which we cannot know (Paradise or Satan or Hell) by dismissing his recondite allusions as insufficient. Thus both sides of Milton's comparison are defined negatively, with the result that his Eden is even more sublime than Virgil's Rome, and his arcane names even more familiar.

This familiarity attaches not only to names that are explicitly negated, however, but to all metaphors or allusions in the poem, thanks to Milton's time-scheme. *Paradise Lost* is set at the most remote possible time from the present and in a mostly prelapsarian state that is scarcely conceivable to our fallen minds. Hence every illustrative allusion necessarily refers to something closer to us than the world of the poem is, and therefore implicitly more familiar; likewise, every metaphor, no matter how exalted, carries the implicit qualification of comparing great things to small. If by reaching back to a time when herds ranged the Roman Forum, Virgil provided the reader with an irrecoverable memory of the Forum, Milton does the same with all of human history. Thus when Satan flying through the infernal landscape is compared to a fleet "Close sailing from *Bengala*, or the Iles / Of *Ternate* or *Tidore*" (2.638-9), the reader receives these names as proximate points of reference, familiar landmarks. Exotic as they are, the allusions are nevertheless accommodations, like anachronistic references which a speaker might use to put an audience at ease—and which tend to get an appreciative nod even from those who do not actually recognize the cultural reference.

The same effect of familiarity applies also to metaphors that do not contain allusions to outlandish places or characters, like the one describing Satan in Eden, so often imitated by the Romantics.

As one who long in populous City pent,  
Where Houses thick and Sewers annoy the Aire,  
Forth issuing on a Summers Morn to breathe  
Among the pleasant Villages and Farnes

Adjoynd, from each thing met conceaves delight,  
 The smell of Grain, or tedded Grass, or Kine,  
 Or Dairie, each rural sight, each rural sound.  
 (9.445-51)

In the *Aeneid* this metaphor would seem appealing because of the homely familiarity of what it describes, a walk in the suburbs. But this effect is doubled in *Paradise Lost* because we know that “populous cities” do not yet exist, that “kine” still range the places that will someday be populous. Cities and farms both exist in Aeneas’s world, but here the poet has had to go outside the world of his poem to find a parallel with which we can sympathize. Once again the image of a city is made to seem familiar to us (even though we know very little of its topography) by negation. It is negated in the first place by being introduced only to be abandoned in favor of the country (a gentler form of the usual “not”), and in the second place, like almost all the metaphors in the poem, by its temporal impossibility: “Satan was like a city-dweller (if there had been such things as cities).” Milton’s metaleptic method thus ascribes to us a knowledge not only of proper names but of the whole of the post-lapsarian world, however much of it we may seem to have forgotten.

The Intimations Ode reverses the direction of Milton’s metaphor, describing a journey away from the open fields and shores and into the “Shades of the prison house” (67). But Wordsworth duplicates Milton’s method of converting something unknown into something apparently unconscious by means of an overarching time-scheme. The first four sections of the Ode, which date from 1802, seek to give an oblique impression of a time of glory, whether by outright negation—“there hath past away a glory from the earth”—or by the implicit negation of the interrogative with which the fourth section ends:—“Where is it now, the glory and the dream?” (18, 57). But these relatively simple forms of suggestion by negation do little to evoke the sense that Wordsworth wishes to convey, until the second part of the poem, composed in 1804, overleaps the visionary period of early childhood and goes straight to the origins—to “Our birth” and the place “elsewhere” whence we come (58, 60). The lost time of “glory” becomes no longer an object of direct investigation but something assumed, to be referred to casually, almost parenthetically: “Though nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower” (178-79).

The earlier part of the poem already contained an inkling of these tactics, in its most Miltonic lines: “—But there’s a Tree, of many, one, / A single Field which I have looked upon, / Both of them speak of something that is gone” (51-53). At first glance these lines seem to be the opposite of a Miltonic muster-roll, since instead of a list of alternative proper names they refer to solitary, generic objects: “a Tree,” “a single Field.” But Wordsworth’s lines employ the same arch allusiveness as Milton’s “that fair field of Enna” or “that Nyseian Ile,” and the effect is the same. Wordsworth’s indicators are insufficient yet implicitly familiar parallels to what is “gone,” with the effect that the glorious state to which they refer is obliquely shaded in, while the “Tree” and the “Field” (helped no doubt by the specific allusion to Milton’s Eden) seem strangely recognizable.

Wordsworth’s Ode thus shares with the epics the capability of making the unknown seem merely forgotten, but it goes even a step beyond its precursors. In the *Aeneid* the effect is almost accidental: what evokes a sense of nostalgia in the modern reader would likely have evoked a sense of sublimity in Virgil’s original audience. In *Paradise Lost* metalepsis is essential to Milton’s method, and the nostalgic familiarity with all of fallen history that results implicates the reader into the Fall and reminds us of our own separation from Eden. But in Wordsworth the sense of having forgotten is not only part of the method but the very subject of the poem. Wordsworth bestows his “song of thanks and praise” upon the “Fallings from us, vanishings” (141, 144)—that is, upon the very sensation of forgetting, rather than upon the actual glory he (and we too, if the poem’s time-scheme has been effective) feels he has forgotten. The poem rejoices in “what remains behind” (181), a phrase with two opposing senses: Wordsworth takes pleasure not only in the remaining recollections of an earlier life, but also in all that has been left irrecoverably “behind,” the forgotten past. In the Intimations Ode, then, nostalgia is not merely the result but the overriding theme. Wordsworth chooses to make childhood the object of his particular nostalgia, with the same double effect we have already noted: like the Roman Forum or Milton’s arcana, childhood by following on an earlier state comes to seem both glorious and strangely familiar.

This may seem a complex or obscure phenomenon, but in fact it is exactly the effect we associate with literary *classics*, or what



Hollywood accurately if redundantly dubs the “timeless classic”: august works which nevertheless seem to belong to everyone, even to those who have never read them. Mark Twain defined the classic as “a book which people praise but don’t read,” but popular usage suggests a somewhat more subtle distinction: a work the apparent familiarity of which is not logically explicable. The *Intimations Ode* became an instant classic partly because it deals explicitly with the state of being a classic. Wordsworth’s childhood resembles not only Milton’s Eden or Virgil’s Rome, but *Paradise Lost* or the *Aeneid*—or *Moby Dick*, or anything else that people seem to have just forgotten even though in fact they have never experienced it at all.

The state the Ode describes, moreover, though paradoxical, is not obscure, nor is it associated only with literature. Wordsworth’s childhood, all-knowing and irrecoverable, has many analogues that help to give the Ode a continuing appeal. One of the closest parallels (ironically, given the Ode’s distrust of institutional instruction) can be found in the type of education that Wordsworth and many of his contemporaries received, an education which if not sentimental could be called “nostalgic.”

#### NOSTALGIC EDUCATION

One of the most instructive conversations about the nature and aims of a classical education in nineteenth-century England takes place between Tom Tulliver and Philip Wakem in *The Mill on the Floss*:

“[Latin]’s part of the education of a gentleman,” said Philip. “All gentlemen learn the same things.”

“What! do you think Sir John Crake, the master of the harriers, knows Latin?” said Tom, who had often thought he should like to resemble Sir John Crake.

“He learned it when he was a boy, of course,” said Philip. “But I daresay he’s forgotten it.”

“Oh, well, I can do that, then,” said Tom, not with any epigrammatic intention, but with serious satisfaction at the idea that, as far as Latin was concerned, there was no hindrance to his resembling Sir John Crake.<sup>14</sup>

Tom’s intention may not be epigrammatic, but his pronunciation is more accurate than he knows. Eliot’s insistent repetition of the full name “Sir John Crake” seems to be an echo of Milton’s “Sir John Cheke,” whose soul is invoked in Sonnet 11 as an antidote against a degenerate age that hates “learning worse than toad or asp.” Yet Tom Tulliver is not, by the standards of his own

age, degenerate. It may not be quite accurate to say that Victorian schoolboys were taught Latin specifically in order to forget it, but such nevertheless was the acknowledged and indeed expected result.

Nor does this apply only to the master of the harriers. "It is no disgrace to a gentleman who has been engaged during near thirty years in political life," writes Macaulay in 1831, "that he has forgotten his Greek and Latin" (12.321).<sup>15</sup> The subject of this observation is John Wilson Croker, whose edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* Macaulay lambastes for its numerous scholarly errors; a gentleman is under no disgrace for forgetting, so long as he does not set up as a linguist. Knowledge of the classics, in fact, seems to be the exclusive domain of childhood: Macaulay pointedly invokes as his authority against the errors of Croker, not a scholar, but a schoolchild. Had Mr. Croker been "a schoolboy under our care," he would have been punished for his ignorance, since he repeatedly mistakes what "a forward boy at any school in England" would know (12.321, 315). Yet in spite of these deficiencies Macaulay still refers to Croker's having forgotten "*his* Greek and Latin"; although he has forgotten it, it remains an inalienable possession and the mark of his being a "gentleman."<sup>16</sup>

As readers today we have lost the intimate familiarity with two great bodies of writing which used to be assumed appurtenances of literacy. The first and perhaps more important of these is the Bible—more important because it was as familiar to women and to those who could not afford expensive schooling as to men with a classical education. But this knowledge is by no means inaccessible to us today: not only are there many people for whom Bible-reading remains a daily or weekly activity, but anyone wishing to become as familiar with Scripture as, let us say, Christina Rossetti could do so by intense study. The same is not true of the other great corpus, classical literature. A reader or critic who chooses to master Latin and Greek can never exactly recapture the special relation to those languages and their literature that is implied by Macaulay's criticisms, the sense of an utter familiarity with them as a schoolboy, which seems only to grow greater as actual knowledge disappears. It is not the nineteenth century's cultivated knowledge of the classics that we lack today; it is their cultivated ignorance. It would not be true to say that Croker forgot more Latin and Greek than we will ever know; but it would be true to

say that he forgot more than *he* ever knew.

Such are the benefits of a classical education. The nineteenth century did not invent overeducation, nor has overeducation ceased to exist. But the nineteenth century was probably the period of the greatest dissociation between what was crammed into a schoolboy and what he might actually need to know upon leaving school. Had Croker lived a century earlier, his "thirty years in political life" might still have involved some Latin, at least for ceremonial functions; had he lived a hundred years later, his education would have consisted of something more than forced gobbets of Latin and Greek. But presumably Croker, like many educated men of his time, went from a diet of pure classics to none at all.<sup>17</sup> For such men therefore, classical antiquity and one's own childhood were inevitably linked, with a dual result. In the first place, childhood and schooldays tended, in retrospect, to derive classic grandeur, a glory and a dream (as reflected in that nineteenth-century genre, the schoolboy novel). In return, Latin and Greek, like childhood, remained possessions even to those who entirely forgot them; the classics were indeed "classic," since they were familiar without being known.

To a certain class of gentlemen, then, *all* Latin and Greek authors fell into the category of "great things forgot." But just as "the classics" can refer both to Greek and Latin literature in general and also to certain particularly familiar examples, so certain authors were associated with childhood even more than others because of the nostalgia they evoke, their ability to provide apparent memories of a glorious past. We have already seen that Macaulay placed "dog-eared Virgil" in the schoolroom, and he was not alone in this dear classical recollection. Tennyson too seems to have known Virgil since birth: "I that loved thee since my day began." Thackeray's Henry Esmond begins his own history by comparing himself, aged twelve, to Aeneas encountering Venus in Book 1 of the *Aeneid* ("she had come upon him as a *Dea certè*"). Even the unheroic Charles Bovary is surrounded as a schoolboy (and only as a schoolboy) with Virgilian associations; on his first day at school the other students laugh at him until the voice of the teacher interrupts "like the *Quos ego*" of Neptune calming the winds of Aeolus.<sup>18</sup>

It is not surprising that by the middle of the nineteenth century, Wordsworth had joined Virgil as a schoolboy classic. Thomas

Hughes's *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) is able to refer to Wordsworth obliquely, as someone whose works are always already familiar without being known: "As that venerable and learned poet (whose voluminous works we all think it the correct thing to admire and talk about, but don't read often) most truly says, 'the child is father to the man'; *a fortiori*, therefore, he must be father to the boy."<sup>19</sup> Wordsworth, the poet of shadowy recollection, here serves the same function as Virgil does for the other novelists: he buttresses a depiction of schooldays that is far more exalted than actual memory could justify.

It is significant, moreover, that Hughes alludes specifically to the lines from "My heart leaps up" that serve as epigraph to the *Intimations Ode*, since he (like George Eliot) was fully aware that the chief effect and perhaps the aim of a classical education consisted of a sense of "fallings from us, vanishings." Hughes recognizes that the classics, like Wordsworth's childhood, provided a false but delightful sense of something forgotten. Thus Harry East, Tom Brown's best friend, defends the use of inherited copy-books when doing Latin and Greek assignments, since the work then provides the teachers, who used the same copy-books themselves, "a sort of dreamy pleasure, as if they'd met the thought or expression of it somewhere or another – before they were born, perhaps" (328). The notion that education merely restores a pre-natal knowledge that we have forgotten dates back at least to Plato's *Meno*;<sup>20</sup> but Harry East wryly extends the myth by suggesting that the process of forgetting and restoration is repeated indefinitely during one's education, and that the process, moreover, provides "a sort of dreamy pleasure." In this sense, Wordsworth's visionary "Youth" is not far from Harry East.

I do not mean to suggest that Wordsworth's *Ode* is an allegory of nineteenth-century classical education. Yet the child who emerges "not in utter nakedness" but "apparelled" in the dreamy recollection of some unrecoverable—and in fact unknown—time of glory finds a close parallel in the public-school graduate who has forgotten classical works he never learnt (the child makes up for being a little overdressed, as Oscar Wilde says, by being immensely overeducated).<sup>21</sup> If this analogy applied only to nineteenth-century classical education, it would be of limited interest, since it would not explain the continuing appeal of the *Ode*. My point, however, is that Wordsworth's myth about the recollection

of the loss of a knowledge that we never really had is not as anomalous as it sounds. Our system of education continues to provide the same sort of nostalgia, if not as acute; how many people retain a fondness for France, for instance, from an erroneous recollection of having been able to speak French in high school?

This Wordsworthian nostalgia can attach to anything. With the right spin, as advertisers and fashion designers know, any product can be a "classic," can come to seem like something you once knew. Retro clothing, for instance, appeals to nostalgia, not to memory: students who now sport platform shoes and bell-bottoms were toddlers, or not yet conceived, when these fashions disappeared. But the very fact that platforms are marketed to teenagers as accessories that will allow them to trip down memory lane provides them with an implied recollection—"as if" (in Harry East's words) "they'd met the thought or expression of it somewhere or another—before they were born, perhaps."

Yet there also exist inherent classics, things which seem uncannily familiar, not because of one's education or any outside influence, but because of their nature. I have mentioned a few literary examples, but there are many others, *Hamlet* being perhaps the clearest. Hazlitt, for instance, writes of "Hamlet the Dane, whom we read of in our youth, and whom we may be said almost to remember in our after-years; . . . who lived at the court of Horwendillus five hundred years before we were born, but all whose thoughts we seem to know as well as we do our own."<sup>22</sup> Shakespeare, like Virgil and Milton, creates this extraordinary sense of familiarity by means of an overarching time-scheme, which vividly evokes an older world, the world of old Hamlet and of Yorick. There are few other plays in which one of the most memorable characters dies twenty-three years before the action begins. *Hamlet*, though in fact sketchy on many significant details (Claudius's election, Ophelia's mother), nevertheless makes the whole of Denmark's recent history seem familiar by means of this obliquity, which has cleverly been picked up by such modern variations as *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. (More recent works in which Hamlet or *Hamlet* appears obliquely, as the center that is never shown because it is assumed to be already known, include Paul Rudnick's *I Hate Hamlet* [1992] and Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film, *A Midwinter's Tale*.) If there were no external

evidence of the existence of an ur-*Hamlet*, it would have to be invented, to explain how the actual play came to be one that as Hazlitt says we “seem to know” so well.<sup>23</sup>

The inexplicable familiarity Hazlitt felt with *Hamlet*, Macaulay felt in regards not only to Milton but also to Samuel Johnson, who seems “as familiar to us as . . . those among whom we have been brought up”:

What a singular destiny has been that of this remarkable man! To be regarded in his own age as a classic, and in ours as a companion. To receive from his contemporaries that full homage which men of genius have in general received only from posterity! To be more intimately known to posterity than other men are known to their contemporaries! (2.562)

Macaulay feels he somehow knows the “Great Cham,” just as he felt an inexplicable familiarity with “old *Cham*.”<sup>24</sup> He suggests it as a paradox that someone should “be regarded in his own age as a classic, and in [a later age] as a companion,” but such is the double effect of the classic: to seem at once shrouded in glory and yet utterly familiar. Wordsworth’s Ode captures this paradox perfectly, and its ability to do so is what makes it that apparent oxymoron, the Romantic classic.

To create such a classic cannot have been Wordsworth’s conscious aim, or at least cannot *seem* to have been such. As Frank Kermode writes, “[The classic] would not be read, and so would not be a classic, if we could not in some way believe it to be capable of saying more than its author meant; even, if necessary, that to say more than he meant was what he meant to do.”<sup>25</sup> This description nicely fits both Wordsworth and his impossible child-savant, “Moving about in worlds not realized” (Ode 146). The nostalgia Wordsworth describes and evokes, like the sensation of *déjà vu*, is not the less powerful or recognizable for being illogical. Samuel Johnson writes that “it is not sufficiently considered, that men more frequently require to be reminded than informed.”<sup>26</sup> The Ode, with the spurious memory it provides, apparently fulfills that requirement.

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## NOTES

- 1 Lines 15-18, 33-6 (translating *Aeneid* 8.347-48, 359-61), in William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 2:597-98. All further quotations from Wordsworth refer to this edition. The passage from Book 8 was probably translated before Books 1-3, which date from 1823-24. For an analysis of Wordsworth's methods as a translator, see Bruce E. Graver, "Wordsworth and the Language of Epic: The Translation of the *Aeneid*," *SP* 83 (1986): 261-85.
- 2 W. Warde Fowler, *Aeneas at the Site of Rome: Observations on the Eighth Book of the Aeneid* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1918), 73.
- 3 There exists an extensive literature of nostalgia-criticism. My definition is indebted to that of Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Duke U. Press, 1993), 22-24. This definition of nostalgia, although it has little to do with homesickness (the root meaning of the word), is close to the meaning that the word is given in common usage ("the nostalgic appeal of Babe Ruth Day at Yankee Stadium"). Such nostalgia is a matter, not of memory, but of memorabilia. Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001) appeared too late for me to incorporate her arguments, which overlap with my own. See especially ch. 3, "The Dinosaur: Nostalgia and Popular Culture," which speaks of the "marketing strategy that tricks consumers into missing what they haven't lost" (38).
- 4 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton U. Press, 1983), 2:138-9.
- 5 Wordsworth, *Poems*, 1:979, quoting Christopher Wordsworth's *Memoirs* and the Isabella Fenwick note, respectively. On the relation, or disjunction, between Wordsworth and his speaker in the Ode, see chapter 4 of Leon Waldoff, *Wordsworth in His Major Lyrics: The Art and Psychology of Self-Representation* (U. of Missouri Press, 2001).
- 6 Wordsworth's shadowy nostalgia seems almost indistinguishable from premonition. So as Peter Manning, "Wordsworth's Intimations Ode and Its Epigraphs," *JEGP* 82 (1983): 526-40, points out, it is appropriate that the original epigraph to the Ode was drawn from Virgil's fourth eclogue, even though Virgil places the golden age in the future rather than in the past (528-29). See also Willard Spiegelman, *Wordsworth's Heroes* (U. of California Press, 1985): "Childhood epitomizes the two principal dimensions of [Wordsworth's] poetic temper: the nostalgic and the prophetic" (50).
- 7 Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Milton," in *Complete Writings*, 20 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1899-1900), 11:93-94. All further quotations from Macaulay refer to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
- 8 In "Virginia," one of his *Lays of Ancient Rome*, Macaulay takes this association so far as to make his heroine a schoolgirl—or indeed rather like Shakespeare's "school-boy with his satchel": "With her small tablets in her hand, and her satchel on her arm, / Home she went bounding from the school" (19:252).
- 9 Fowler, *Aeneas at the Site of Rome*, 2.

- 10 T. S. Eliot, *What is a Classic?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945), 14, 19.
- 11 *Paradise Lost* 4.268-82. All quotations from Milton refer to *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).
- 12 On the topic of these names, see Barbara Everett, "The End of the Big Names: Milton's Epic Catalogues," in *English Renaissance Studies: Presented to Dame Helen Gardner*, ed. John Carey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 254-70. On "Old Cham," see note 24 below.
- 13 Milton's negatives, especially in his similes, have been much commented on; see for instance Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (U. of California Press, 1971), 22-37. Speaking of the simile just quoted, Christopher Ricks, in *Milton's Grand Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), writes, "It is, I believe, the very fact that Milton's gaze is *not* directly on Paradise which makes these lines among the most haunting he ever wrote. And the *not* of 'Not that faire field . . .' is itself an opportunity for Milton to release his full feelings while still gaining all the advantages of the oblique" (148-49).
- 14 George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 143-44 (bk. 2, ch. 3).
- 15 Macaulay's essay on Croker's edition of Boswell has been frequently reprinted, for instance in Macaulay, *Critical and Historical Essays*, selected and introduced by Hugh Trevor-Roper (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 70-115.
- 16 Kenneth R. Johnston, "Recollecting Forgetting: Forcing Paradox to the Limit in the 'Intimations Ode,'" *The Wordsworth Circle* 2 (1971): 59-64, quotes as a parallel to the Ode's "paradoxical consolation" two lines from Borges's poem "A Reader": "Having known Latin and forgotten it / remains a possession" (60).
- 17 This is of course a broad generalization. But Richard W. Clancey, *Wordsworth's Classical Undersong: Education, Rhetoric and Poetic Truth* (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's, 2000), points out that almost all grammar schools and public schools shared a nearly identical curriculum at the beginning of the nineteenth century (22). At a typical English grammar school of Wordsworth's day, classics took up "at least 70 per cent of the time and energy of most students," the remainder (at Hawkshead at least) being dedicated mainly to pure mathematics (10).
- 18 "To Virgil," line 19, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 2nd ed. (U. of California Press, 1987), 3:102; William Makepeace Thackeray, *The History of Henry Esmond, Esq.* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 8 (ch. 1, alluding to *Aen.* 1.328); Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, ed. and trans. Paul de Man (New York: Norton, 1965), 3 (ch. 1, alluding to *Aen.* 1.135).
- 19 Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, ed. Andrew Sanders (Oxford U. Press, 1989), 21.
- 20 Wordsworth mentions the Platonic basis for his myth in the Fenwick note. Plato's myth was Christianized by, for example, Milton in "Of Education," who casts education as a recollection of a pre-fallen state: "The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright" (*Riverside Milton*, 980).



- 21 Wilde liked this quip enough to repeat it; it appears in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, chapter 15, and in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, act 2.
- 22 William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, in *Complete Works*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: J. M. Dent, 1930), 4:232. Hazlitt's comments are reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of *Hamlet*, ed. Cyrus Hoy (2nd edn, 1992), 164-69. Note the ambiguity of "read" in the first sentence, which could be either present tense or past.
- 23 Critics including T. S. Eliot and William Empson have insisted that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* can be understood *only* by keeping its predecessor in mind. See the essays by both critics in Hoy's edition, cited in the previous note.
- 24 According to James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934-50), 1:348-49, the nickname "Great Cham" was first applied to Johnson by Tobias Smollett and refers to the monarch of Tartary. This is different from Milton's "Cham" (in *PL* 4.276), another name for Jupiter. So despite the coincidence of Milton's subsequent allusion to Abyssinia, there is no actual connection between Milton's "Cham" and Samuel Johnson.
- 25 Frank Kermode, *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change* (1975; Harvard U. Press, 1983), 80.
- 26 Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, ed. W. J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 3 vols. (Yale U. Press, 1969), 1:14 (*Rambler* no. 2).