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NOSTALGIA: THE ABDICATION OF MEMORY

Memory or Nostalgia?

If the idea of progress has the curious effect of weakening the inclination to make intelligent provision for the future, nostalgia, its ideological twin, undermines the ability to make intelligent use of the past. Seemingly at odds, these attitudes have a good deal in common. For those nourished on the gospel of progress, idealization of the past appears to exhaust the alternatives to a tiresome and increasingly unconvincing idealization of the future.

Just as we should reject the thoughtless equation of progress and hope, so we need to distinguish between nostalgia and the reassuring memory of happy times, which serves to link the present to the past and to provide a sense of continuity. The emotional appeal of happy memories does not depend on disparagement of the present, the hallmark of the nostalgic

attitude. Nostalgia appeals to the feeling that the past offered delights no longer obtainable. Nostalgic representations of the past evoke a time irretrievably lost and for that reason timeless and unchanging. Strictly speaking, nostalgia does not entail the exercise of memory at all, since the past it idealizes stands outside time, frozen in unchanging perfection. Memory too may idealize the past, but not in order to condemn the present. It draws hope and comfort from the past in order to enrich the present and to face what comes with good cheer. It sees past, present, and future as continuous. It is less concerned with loss than with our continuing indebtedness to a past the formative influence of which lives on in our patterns of speech, our gestures, our standards of honor, our expectations, our basic disposition toward the world around us.

The barrier that divides the past from the present, as it appears to the nostalgic sensibility, is the experience of disillusionment, which makes it impossible to recapture the innocence of earlier days. From this point of view, the relation of past to present is defined above all by the contrast between simplicity and sophistication. Nostalgia finds its purest literary expression in the convention of the pastoral, with its praise of simple country pleasures. The charm of pastoralism lies, of course, not in the accurate observation of country life but in the dream of childlike simplicity and security. Pastoral evokes a world without work, marriage, or political intrigue—the carefree world of childhood, in effect. Since it makes no claim to depict rural life as it is, it can hardly be faulted for its lack of realism. "It would be tedious," C. S. Lewis says, to explain to those who object that "real country people are not more happy or more virtuous than anyone else" the many good reasons "that have led humanity to symbolize by rural scenes and occupations a region in the mind which does exist and which should be visited often." Lewis's defense of pastoralism recalls Karl Mannheim's defense of utopia: without ideal images of a better world, whether it is located in the past or in the future, our own world would no longer contain either "meaning of life," in Mannheim's words.

*The Pastoral Sensibility Historicized
and Popularized*

Although the pastoral convention always drew on images of a golden age, it did little to shape perceptions of history, precisely because it did not pretend to locate the Arcadian idyll anywhere else than in the imagination. In "A Discourse on Pastoral Poetry," Alexander Pope urged that it be kept as artificial and fanciful as possible. The contrast between town and country, moreover—even if anyone took it to refer to actual social conditions—was spatial rather than temporal; and it was only when the contrast began to be historicized, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that nostalgia began to color the way men and women thought about the historical past.

Before that time, historical speculation was dominated, to be sure, by conceptual schemes (classical or Christian) that tended to equate historical change with degeneration, as we have seen; yet it would be a mistake to call them nostalgic. Neither the Christian call to repentance nor the republican appeal to former glory encouraged people to seek refuge from the present in thoughts of the past; nor did the austere ideal of personal conduct shared by both these traditions have much in common with a cult of idyllic simplicity that took for granted the impossibility of its attainment. Christian and republican views of history implied a program of moral renovation. Imaginary visits to Arcadia, on the other hand, left the visitor refreshed but otherwise unchanged, resigned to the weary world as it was and by no means completely dissatisfied, indeed, with a world the sophistication of which alone made it possible to appreciate untutored simplicity. The celebration of rustic felicity was never intended for rustics. It could be savored only by people of refinement who did not seriously propose, after all, to exchange the advantages of breeding and worldly experience for a life close to nature, no matter how lyrically they sang nature's praises. Nostalgia, in its pastoral form at least, was a luxury only the favored could afford to indulge, just as their spiritual descendants indulge a taste for handmade goods in a world dominated by machine production.

The transformation of historical consciousness in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries not only historicized nostalgia but democratized it as well. The pastoral convention declined with the decline of aristocracy, but the pastoral mood became far more pervasive than before, now that the town-country contrast appeared to define successive stages of historical development.* Urbanization reflected the growth of commerce, more efficient systems of production and distribution, rising standards of comfort, a rapid increase in the circulation of knowledge—progress, in short, the other side of which appeared to lie in the loss of an earlier simplicity. Since progress affected everybody, drawing people to the city in larger and larger numbers, it created a broad new audience for a metropolitan literature more explicitly retrospective than pastoralism, one that concerned itself not with an imaginary rural retreat but with an actual historical process (as people had come to think of it), the eradication of unspoiled nature by the irresistible forces of progressive change.

It is the assumption that those forces were irresistible that links nineteenth-century agrarian nostalgia to the pastoral tradition and explains why a lament for the vanishing countryside could so easily coexist with the celebration of historical progress, just as the praise of pastoral scenes had coexisted with an appreciation of the fashionable refinements of the court. For middle-class metropolitan readers, the charm of the old agrarian order lay principally in the unlikelihood that any part of it would survive the onslaught of industrialism. The pastoral legacy, transferred now to the pseudo-debate between advocates of progress and those who

*The pastoral genre played off idyllic images of country life not so much against the city as against the court—a further indication that it was addressed to a sophisticated, aristocratic audience. It was against the artifice, intrigue, affectation, and insincerity of the court that the artless love play of shepherds and milkmaids appeared so engaging by contrast. When the country came to be seen from the point of view of the city as such, nostalgic depictions of country life began to pay more attention to the social conditions said to be characteristic of the village and the countryside—the absence of envy and resentment, the reciprocal solicitude of rich and poor, the organic solidarity of neighbors. "In country towns," wrote an Englishwoman in 1868, "the gentry and the poor are far less separate than in great cities, and the local interest and local work serve to unite class and class. . . . A small sphere throws men of different classes closely together, and creates a bond of fellowship utterly unknown to the inhabitants of a great city."

idealized the rural past, made it impossible for either side to see, as Raymond Williams notes in his study of this debate, that a "rural economy simply had to persist," in one or another form, even in the "developed metropolitan countries." The long literary controversy between town and country was a pseudo-debate because both sides agreed on the central premise, as Williams puts it, that "the rural experience, the working country, had gone; that in Britain it was only a marginal thing, and that as time went by this would be so everywhere." Williams himself accepted this assumption, he says, "for much longer than now seems possible," until he finally came to understand that the "common idea of a lost rural world" not only rested on a hopelessly abstract view of historical processes but implied an equally misleading view of the future, "in which work on the land will have to become more rather than less important and central." But this kind of common sense unfortunately played no part either in the literature of lost country life or in the ostensibly opposing literature of progress and development.*

*In *The Country and the City* (1973), Williams rejected both the "retrospective radicalism" that idealized a lost golden age of English agriculture and the socialism of "certain metropolitan intellectuals," with its celebration of capitalism as a progressive force (hence the necessary preparation for socialism), its ridicule of the "idioty of rural life" (as Marx called it), and its assumption of a unilinear global progress toward a culmination foreshadowed by the megapolitan civilization of the industrialized nations. "Between the simple backward look and the simple progressive thrust there is room for long argument but none for enlightenment. We must begin differently," Williams argued—with history, which dissolves the notion of "traditional society" common to both the idyllic and the progressive interpretations of the rural past.

Reviewers praised Williams's book but paid no attention to its contention that agriculture would have to become more important in the future and that the split between the country and the city could be overcome only by resisting both of the stereotypes that dominated the old debate. Instead they saw Williams as another uprooted intellectual unsuccessfully attempting to recover his rural past—a "transitional man," according to Allan Goldstein, who knew the "agony of separation from roots, the conflict of values, the hesitant (and certainly guilt-provoking) adoption of urban ways, the sense of loss of the past." Marshall Berman found the book "incisive and luminous," "admirably honest and courageous," "full of insight and beauty." It had "emotional unity and momentum," according to Berman. As this kind of praise indicates, however, Berman judged the book in purely aesthetic terms and lost sight of its argument. He trivialized the issues at stake by reducing them to personal issues. Williams could not

*Images of Childhood:
From Gratitude to Pathos*

The Romantic movement, the first outcry of protest against the new age, captured its sense of historical dislocation in images contrasting the countryside and the city, innocence and experience, the vanishing world of "springing pastures" and "feeding kine," in the words of Matthew Arnold's "Scholar Gypsy," and the metropolis with "its sick hurry, its divided aims, its heads o'erraxed, its palsied hearts"—"this strange disease of modern life." In an "age of change," as John Stuart Mill called it in his 1831 essay "The Spirit of the Age," the "idea of comparing one's own age with former ages" had for the first time become an inescapable mental habit; Mill referred to it as the "dominant idea" of the nineteenth century. For some, the "spirit of the age" was altogether odious; for others, "a subject of exultation"; but the important point, as Mill noted with great insight, was that the issue should be joined in these terms at all. "The 'spirit of the age,'" he added, "is . . . a novel expression, no more than fifty years old."

Once the pastoral vision came to be associated with an actual period of historical time—with the allegedly flourishing or at least familiar and manageable agrarian society that was beginning to be destroyed by industrialization—claim to have reestablished a connection with the land, Berman insisted, just because he now lived on a farm. "Even if his farm and his work on it are real, there is something unreal about what it means to him. . . . It can never be his life." His allusions to his own experience did not "quite ring true." After all, he had left the north of England by choice—not because he was dispossessed by grasping landlords or capitalists but because he needed to go to the city if he was to get an education and to make a career as a writer. "For a man dispossessed, Williams has done pretty well for himself"—a Cambridge professorship, a series of highly acclaimed books. "The knot that bound him to the land, and to his past, has been cut and he himself has helped to cut it. To believe that he can tie it again now . . . is to create yet another form of pastoral—and another mystification. Like the rest of us, Williams must live with his nostalgic yearning; the green fields of his childhood . . . are forever beyond his reach." Thus Berman forced the discussion back into the very categories from which Williams had tried to rescue it.

trialism—it was probably inevitable that those living in Mill's "age of transition" should discover in their own recollections of childhood the most compelling image of lost innocence. The nineteenth century "shifted onto the child . . . the obscure tradition of pastoral," as William Empson has observed. Rousseau had already "laid down" the "incontrovertible rule that the first impulses of nature are always right; there is no original sin in the human heart." In *Emile*, he struck a note that was to be sounded again and again. "Love childhood, indulge its games, its pleasures, and its lovable nature. Who has not looked back with regret on an age when laughter is always on the lips and when the spirit is always at peace?" Childhood provided Rousseau, Wordsworth, Blake, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Dickens, Hardy, Lewis Carroll, and innumerable lesser talents with a haunting vocabulary of loss that could be exploited for social criticism as well as for poetry and fiction or, trivialized and sentimentalized, for pious moralizing about the happy fate of those who die young.

Literary exploration of childhood, ranging from Wordsworth's solemn rapture to the sentimentalism of J. M. Barrie, helps to clarify the distinction between nostalgia and a more active type of remembrance that seeks to grasp the past's formative influence on the present. Samuel Taylor Coleridge contrasted the healing power of a "joyful and tender" memory with the dismissive attitude to the past that leads men to "laugh at the falsehoods that were imposed on themselves during their childhood"; but his remarkably astute analysis of the difference between them applies with equal force to the nostalgic attitude, another way of dismissing the past. Those who remember childhood only as a time when they were "imposed on," Coleridge wrote—and also those who remember it, we might add, as a time of blissful innocence untroubled by self-conscious reflection—

are not good and wise enough to contemplate the Past in the Present, and so to produce by a virtuous and thoughtful sensibility that continuity in their self-consciousness, which nature has made the law of their animal life. Ingratitude, sensuality, and hardness of heart all flow from this source. Men are ungrateful to others only when they have ceased to look back on their former selves with joy and tenderness. They exist in frag-

ments, annihilated as to the Past, they are dead to the future, or seek the proofs of it everywhere, only not (where alone they can be found) in themselves.

Writing in 1809, Coleridge singled out Wordsworth as the poet who had "expressed and illustrated this sentiment with equal firmness of thought and feeling." Wordsworth himself spoke of his work as an attempt to explore the "fructifying," "vivifying," or "renovating virtue" of memory.* Especially in *The Prelude*, he treated the immediacy of the child's experience of "fear and love" as the ground and basis of later experience, the source of mature insight; and it does not seem utterly implausible to suppose that rigorous, unsentimental attention to childhood memories served something of the same end in Wordsworth's Romanticism—notwithstanding all the obvious differences between the two traditions—that a celebration of founding fathers served in classical republicanism, opening thought to a sense of the gravity and joy of existence, more specifically to an awareness of its origins and its indebtedness to the past, and thus reawakening the capacity for devotion.[†]

*A demonstration of Wordsworth's fascination with memory would require a book in its own right. For our purposes, it is enough to note that the very structure of *The Prelude*—its plot, if you will—illustrates the triumph of early memories over the political "idolatry" to which Wordsworth succumbed in his enthusiasm for the French revolution as well as their capacity to sustain hope in the midst of the "melancholy waste of hopes o'erthrown" by the revolution's failure. Coleridge had urged Wordsworth to write a narrative poem "addressed to those, who, in consequence of the complete failure of the French Revolution, have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness, disguising the same under the soft titles of domestic attachment and contempt for visionary *philosophes*." That Wordsworth's response should have been a work that celebrates the restorative force of memory seems to me to indicate a deepening of political understanding rather than a retreat from it, as so many have argued, or the assertion of an uncritical loyalty to Britain.

†This supposition gains support from Wordsworth's repeated identification of memory with "virtue." Thus he speaks of Sicily, where Coleridge was living at the time Wordsworth composed one of the many drafts of *The Prelude*, as a land strewn "with the wreck of loftier years" but "lost" to the "reanimating influence" of "memory"—"to virtue lost and hope." Here "virtue" retains its explicitly political connotations, as

Even when he spoke of the "paradise where I was reared" and contrasted the "race of real children" brought up close to nature with those brought up in "the perpetual whirl / of trivial objects," the dominant emotion in Wordsworth's early work was gratitude, not regret for innocence no longer accessible. It was an emotion, however—this "grateful acknowledgment" of "what was given me"—that Wordsworth found hard to sustain in verse; and it began to pass over, in the poem that eventually established itself as the popular favorite, *Intimations of Immortality*, into an elegiac mood that most of his admirers found more congenial, as it turned out—more familiar and hence reassuring, notwithstanding its evocation of loss—than the strenuous mood of *The Prelude*.

*Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?*

Though Wordsworth continued to insist,

*We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind,*

the immortality ode conveyed the death of childhood more vividly than it conveyed the consolations available to a mature and "philosophic mind."⁸ It was not altogether surprising, then, that the nineteenth cen-

well as its broader connotations (which seldom fail to accompany Wordsworth's use of the word) of vitality, animating force, and even virility. Elsewhere Wordsworth describes the inspiration the child draws from nature—more precisely, the memory of this inspiration—as a "breeze, that gently moved / With quickening virtue, but is now become / A tempest, a redundant energy, / Vexing its own creation." In still another suggestive passage, he characterizes the infant's sense of security, in its mother's arms, as a "virtue which irradiates and exalts" his surroundings and serves to "connect him with the world." It is the buried memory of primeval experiences of this kind that makes of "simple childhood something of the base" on which the "greatness" of man comes to rest.

⁸ As Philip Davis observes, nineteenth-century readers paid more attention to the end of one stanza, in which the poet addresses the little child:

tury chose to idolize Wordsworth as the poet of "rapture now forever flown." Victorian writers, less and less interested in his conception of childhood memories as the "hiding-places of man's power," much less in his "vigorous inquisition" of those memories, turned the child, no longer "the Father of the Man," into a passive, incorruptible victim of adult domination. Wordsworth's subject, in *The Prelude* at least, was the means

*Whereby this infant sensibility,
Great birthright of our being, was in me
Augmented and sustained.*

For the Romantic poets in general, innocence was "valuable for what it might become," as Peter Coveney aptly puts it. With the Victorians, however, the emphasis shifted "toward the state of innocence itself, not as a resilient expression of man's potential integrity, but as something statically juxtaposed to experience, and not so much static as actually in retreat."

This retreat found its definitive symbol in the deathbed scene, increasingly obligatory in novels aspiring to any sort of popularity, in which a child neglected, oppressed, or shamefully deserted by those who should have served as its protectors expires without a word of reproach—itsself the ultimate reproach, this wordless acquiescence, both to adults directly responsible for such tragedies and to those who merely look on in sorrow. In the world of Victorian and post-Victorian melodrama, innocence had only one role: to die as heartrendingly as possible. Mrs. Henry Wood perfected the formula in *East Lynne* (1861), the most widely sold English

*Full soon thy soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!*

than to the beginning of the next:

*O Joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive.*

novel of the century: "Don't cry, papa. I am not afraid to go. Jesus is coming for me." But it was Marie Corelli, in *The Mighty Atom* (1896), who most fully revealed its significance when she asked "whether for many a child it would not have been happiest never to have grown up at all." She advised her readers not to "grieve for the fair legions of beloved children who have passed away in their childhood," since "we know, even without the aid of Gospel comfort, that it is 'far better' with them so." The idea that children are better off dead casts an unexpectedly lurid light on the nineteenth-century cult of childhood, which held children up to adoration but denied them any compellingly imagined possibility of development, in which early experience would continue to inform adult perceptions. An impoverished view of adulthood, this ostensibly sympathetic view of childhood also falsified the very thing it purported to celebrate, attributing to children Peter Pan's wish "always to be a boy and have fun," a wish that only jaded, embittered adults could have conceived.

*The American West,
Childhood of the Nation*

Jeremy Bentham, that indefatigable advocate of improvement, noted with approval that in his day the "wisdom of our ancestors" had become a "sarcastic jibe of hatred and insult," the world having learned the folly of idolizing the "wisdom of untaught inexperienced generations." A writer in *Household Words*, a magazine edited for a time by Charles Dickens, made the same point in the course of a diatribe against the worship of the past. "The older the world grows the more experience it acquires," and the "genuine good old times" were nineteenth-century times, not the days of yore. But these writers missed the point: a belief that the world had grown wiser did not prevent the modern world from looking back on less enlightened ages with fond regret. Idealization of the past had come to rest not on respect for ancestral wisdom but on the assimilation of the past to images of childlike innocence. The more emphatically the modern age insisted on its own wisdom, experience, and maturity, the more appealing allegedly simple, unsophisticated times appeared in retrospect. Progress implied nostalgia as its mirror image.

In the United States, this curious conjunction of "improvement" and regret gave the national imagination its distinctive flavor and furnished themes to which interpreters of American life returned again and again, with obsessive interest. As the most rapidly developing nation in the world, clearly destined for riches and power, America had the heaviest investment in the ideology of progress. Not only the country's material wealth but its commitment to the democratization of opportunity, required by theories of progress in order to become fully convincing, made it easy not only for Americans themselves but for foreign observers to see America as the wave of the future; yet Americans were notoriously given to recurrent fits of melancholy, evoked by the suggestion that some primal innocence, some "original relation to the universe," in Emerson's phrase, had been lost in the headlong rush for gold. Many observers were struck by a persistent streak of sadness in the American character, immediately recognizable, for example, in Abraham Lincoln, whose saturnine temperament as much as his racy humor, loose-knit frame, and shambling gait seemed to make him a fitting embodiment and symbol of his people.

American nostalgia, like the vision of irresistible and unlimited American expansion, centered on the West, the rapid settlement of which appeared to dramatize the march of civilization. "Westward the course of empire takes its way." According to a widely accepted way of looking at westward expansion, the rapid succession of historical stages, from the most primitive to the most advanced, recapitulated developments that elsewhere took centuries to complete. But the conquest and settlement of the continent made Americans deeply uneasy, even as it made them insufferably boastful and self-satisfied. The legend of Daniel Boone, the first of a series of explorers to be canonized in his own lifetime, illustrates this ambivalence. Timothy Flint, an early biographer, attributed to Boone the recognition that "this great [Ohio] valley must soon become the abode of millions of freemen; and his heart swelled with joy" at the thought, according to Flint. Yet Flint also told how Boone had been driven out of Kentucky "by the restless spirit . . . of civilization and physical improvement" and how, even in Missouri, "American enterprise seemed doomed to follow him, and to thwart all his schemes of backwoods retirement."

Evidently Boone had no great love for the civilization that pursued him so relentlessly, the expansion of which his own efforts had done so much to bring about. "I had not been two years [in Missouri] before a d—d

Yankee came, and settled down *within an hundred miles of me!*" Other commentators filled in this portrait of Boone as a fugitive from the future. "As civilization advanced," wrote a reporter for the *New York American*, "so he, from time to time, retreated." A writer in the *North American Review* pictured him "happier in his log-cabin . . . than he would have been amid the greatest profusion of modern luxuries." Another biographer, however, implied a more approving view of progress in Boone's conception of himself—as apocryphal, no doubt, as all the other attitudes and sayings attributed to Boone—as a "creature of Providence, ordained by Heaven . . . to advance the civilization . . . of his country."

The novels of James Fenimore Cooper showed how the solitary hunter, unencumbered by social responsibilities, utterly self-sufficient, uncultivated but endowed with a spontaneous appreciation of natural beauty, could become the central figure in the great American romance of the West. As the heir to a landed fortune and baronial status, Cooper believed in the importance of law, order, and refinement; he could glorify Natty Bumppo and his faithful Indian companion Chingachgook (forerunner of Queequeg, Nigger Jim, and Tonto) only because they stood outside the pale of respectable society altogether and posed no threat to the social hierarchy. Cooper's sympathetic treatment of hunters and Indians, as Henry Nash Smith has pointed out, did not extend to yeoman farmers like Ishmael Bush, who stood on the lowest level of civilized society yet refused to defer to their betters. Clothed in the "coarsest vestments of a husbandman," Bush inspired apprehension and contempt. The farmer's hunger for land, as Cooper saw it, jeopardized the gentry's social and political ascendancy and embittered relations with the Indians, precluding peaceful settlement of Indian claims.

In the politics of the Jacksonian era, it was the genteel classes that opposed Jackson's policy of Indian removal and championed the rights of Indians, at the same time that they pressed for a national policy of economic development, promoted the growth of commerce and industry, and ridiculed the austere and to their mind regressive ideal, so dear to the Jacksonians, of a virtuous republic of small farmers. It should not surprise us, in view of the pastoral conventions that continued to inform the nineteenth-century celebration of untutored simplicity, that the nostalgic myth of the West was largely the creation of genteel writers like Cooper, Washington Irving, and Francis Parkman. Like the eighteenth-

century myth of the noble savage, the romance of the wilderness appealed most of all to those farthest removed from frontier conditions, who took it for granted that the frontier was "essentially evanescent," in Irving's words, and for that reason would come to "seem like the fictions of chivalry or fairy tale."

Only a safe distance made it possible to idealize Indians or to portray them as philosophical critics of civilization. On his way to Oregon in 1839, Thomas J. Farnham interviewed a Dartmouth-educated Indian who told him that westward extension of agriculture would destroy the "single-minded honesty, the hospitality, honor and the purity of the natural state." This sounds more like the genteel primitivism of the comfortable classes, a primitivism more sophisticated than anything that could have been acquired even at Dartmouth, than the bitter resentment of white encroachment experienced by Indians—a resentment, of course, that periodically drove nature's noblemen to nasty, bloody reprisals. "As soon as you thrust the ploughshare under the earth, it reems with worms and useless weeds. It increases population to an unnatural extent—creates the necessity of penal enactments—spreads over the human face a mask of deception and selfishness—and substitutes villainy, love of wealth and power, and the slaughter of millions" for the Arcadian conditions that formerly prevailed.

Richard Slotkin, a student of the frontier myth, notes that Kit Carson's biographers gave him a "civilized man's sympathy for Indians." In life a brawling adventurer and gold seeker, Carson, like Boone, became a legendary figure with the attributes of a Leatherstocking—"one of the best of those noble and original characters who have sprung up on and beyond our frontier," according to one biographer, "retreating with it to the West, and drawing from association with uncultivated nature, not the rudeness and sensualism of the savage, but genuine simplicity and truthfulness of disposition, and generosity, bravery, and single-heartedness, to a degree rarely found in society." Charles Webber, a prolific author educated at Princeton Theological Seminary, resorted to the same kind of language in describing Texas cattlemen: "With them the primitive virtues of a heroic manhood are all-sufficient, and they care nothing for reverence, forms, duties, &c., as civilization has them, but respect each other's rights, and recognize the awful presence of a benignant God in the still grandeur of mountain, forest, valley, plain, and river."

A writer in the *Democratic Review* compared Webber's *Old Hick*, *The Guide*, to Melville's *Typee* and *Omoo*, adding, however, that Webber's novel contained "more of earnestness and poetry." Melville's South Sea stories, with their repeated insistence that "the Polynesian savage, surrounded by all the luxurious provisions of nature, enjoyed an infinitely happier, though certainly a less intellectual existence than the self-complacent European," appealed to the same sophisticated primitivism that found expression in the more lyrical versions of the Western myth. That even such an original writer as Melville—a writer, moreover, temperamentally disposed to stress the darker side of things—found it difficult to write about the South Seas without invoking the conventions of pastoralism shows just how tenacious those conventions were, especially at a time when American authors still found it necessary to employ the ornate, euphemistic, and windy style deemed suitable for the well-bred man of letters.

In a primitive state of society, the enjoyments of life, though few and simple, are spread over a great extent, and are unalloyed: but Civilization, for every advantage she imparts, holds a hundred evils in reserve;—the heart-burnings, the jealousies, the social rivalries, the family dissensions, and the thousand self-inflicted discomforts of refined life, which make up in units the swelling aggregate of human misery, are unknown among these unsophisticated people.*

An unsentimental literary treatment of the West—of the confrontation between savagery and civilization, the progress of "improvement," and its devastating impact on earlier ways of life—demanded an imaginative suspension of the self-consciously cultivated point of view and the development of a vernacular style, the "nervous lofty language" of *Moby Dick*

*Melville's list of civilized "discomforts" clearly derived from the pastoral tradition. Snobbery, social climbing, ostentation, backbiting slander, envy, suspicion, vanity, possessiveness, ambition, and the obsession with appearances were the classic targets of pastoral satire—the classic vices of court life, later generalized to urban civilization as a whole.

or the colloquial rhetoric of *Huckleberry Finn*, that would make it possible to understand the frontier not as an "evanescent" stage of social development but as an object of continuing fascination. These two books alone, among nineteenth-century novels, managed to escape the conventions of the wilderness myth by taking the myth itself as in some sense their subject: the energizing vision of escape to a realm of complete freedom, the megalomaniacal fantasy of self-sufficiency underlying it, its inevitable defeat, and the moral havoc released by its attempted realization.

Even *Huckleberry Finn* conceded more to the Western myth than Twain probably intended. As Slotkin says, it implied that the only alternative to a competitive, commercial society lay "in the personalities of young women, children, and childlike nonwhite races." Notwithstanding Twain's scorn for Cooper's "literary offenses" in sentimentalizing the frontier, *Huckleberry Finn* reproduced the central action if not the diction of the Leatherstocking novels: the flight of innocence in the face of civilization. That Twain was not altogether satisfied with Huck's final decision to "light out for the territory" may be indicated by his decision to undertake a sequel, *Among the Indians*, in which a realistic account of the Indian Territory would deflate the image of the noble savage and underline the impossibility of escape. That the sequel was never completed, or even fairly begun, indicates that a fully developed treatment of the Western theme, one that would explore the significance of the West not merely as a place but as a national memory, continued to elude Twain's grasp.

From Solitary Hunter to He-man

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, idyllic images of the West began to give way to a new set of images that reflected the nation's growing preoccupation with overseas expansion. The solitary fugitive from civilization no longer stood at the center of attention. Now it was the gunfighter, too busy with bad Indians and cattle thieves to commune with nature, who served as the hero of Western romance. He still shared with his predecessor the "primitive virtues of a heroic manhood," to recall Charles Webber's phrase, but it was no longer a "compliment," as Washington Irving had said in his account of Rocky Mountain trappers,

"to persuade [a Westerner] that you have mistaken him for an Indian brave." For the Western hero in the age of American imperialism, the only good Indian was a dead Indian.*

Theodore Roosevelt's *Winning of the West*, published in the 1880s, illustrates the assimilation of the Western myth to expansionist ideology. True to its title, this bloodcurdling account of expansion in the old Southwest focused entirely on the warfare by means of which the wilderness was wrested from its original inhabitants. The issues that were beginning to enlist the interest of professional historians and cultural critics—the influence of the frontier on American character, its contributions to the growth of democratic institutions, the legacy of the pioneering mentality—interested Roosevelt not at all. Neither was he impressed by the image of the noble red man or the myth of the hunter's symbiotic union with nature. For Roosevelt as for Parkman, Owen Wister, and other exponents of the patrician ideology of martial prowess and overseas expansion, exposure to the hardships of the frontier was meant to provide a corrective to the demoralizing effects of comfort and overrefinement, a salutary taste of danger that would restore the fighting qualities requisite for statesmanship, diplomacy, and war. The fear of racial decadence haunted men like Roosevelt. The "Teutonic" element seemed to be losing its grip on leadership. Its absorption in business, its fastidious retreat from politics, its declining birthrate, above all its disinclination to go to war, as Roosevelt saw it, all betrayed a loss of manhood. Men with "small feet and receding chins" would prove no match for the cruder, more prolific peoples that were pouring into the country. *The Winning of the West* was a call to arms—a reminder that Scotch-Irish settlers had prevailed in fierce struggles against the Indians and could serve as an inspiration to those who faced a similar challenge to the continuing ascendancy of the old stock.

Owen Wister's enormously popular novel *The Virginian* helped to give

*There is a sense, of course, in which this phrase, without its brutality, also describes the position of Cooper and others among the early romancers of the West. As Slotkin points out, "Cooper never loves his Indians so much as when he is watching them disappear."

the new type of Western hero his distinctive characteristics—a touchy sensitivity to insult ("When you call me that, *smile!*"), a chivalrous regard for women masked by tongue-tied shyness, a proficiency with the pistol that spoke louder than words, a love of law and order combined with a willingness to fight outlaws by adopting their own methods. The genre of the "Western" dates from this turn-of-the-century transformation of the Boone-Bumppo archetype into the he-man. The formula established at the outset remained essentially unchanged in hundreds of novels, radio serials, movies, and comic strips. More unambiguously than Boone the advance agent of civilization, the gunfighter still rides off into the sunset when his work is done, unable to bear the constraints that come in the wake of his triumphs; but although he remains a loner, for whom marriage and a cottage covered with morning glories would be unthinkable, he serves only the settlers who stay behind, not the higher calling of nature. If he takes on the qualities of an outlaw, it is only to bring outlaws to book.

Transposed to the urban wilderness, this new-model Western hero becomes a tough cop sometimes forced to operate outside the law in order to circumvent the slow-moving machinery of formal justice, even to adopt criminal disguise in order to penetrate the secrets of the underworld. As a defender of freedom in foreign wars, he has to contend not only against the enemy, for whom he learns a grudging respect, but against military and civilian bureaucracies and against misguided peace lovers, ungrateful beneficiaries of his prowess, who weaken America's will to fight. No longer even-tempered by virtue of an intuitive appreciation of natural beauty, he becomes, in his latest incarnation as Rambo, a creature of pure rage, more savage in his righteous strength than the savages he pursues. In politics—for it is hardly to be expected that imagery so deeply embedded in popular culture would fail to shape perceptions of political leaders, even their own perceptions of themselves—some of his characteristics can be discerned in half-mythical figures like Joseph McCarthy, whose supporters excused his rough methods in the struggle against subversion on the grounds that it was dirty work but someone had to do it, and of course in the more genial person of Ronald Reagan, himself a veteran of the screen and therefore an ideal choice for the real-life reenactment of a role that sums up the chauvinistic, self-righteous, expansionist implications of Western mythology.

The close identification of Western themes with expansionism, in the twentieth century, did not completely extinguish the pastoral image of the West, often invoked by anti-imperialists against the glorification of conquest and hyper-masculinity. The legacy of Daniel Boone, Natty Bumppo, and Huck Finn lived on in American politics, in attenuated form, in the environmentalist movement's fixation on the preservation of wilderness (as opposed to a sensible balance, say, between industry and agriculture, or a more flexible technology); in the romantic cult of "third world" peoples, including the American Indian, as a counterweight to industrial technology; in young radicals' identification with Holden Caulfield, James Dean, Bob Dylan, and other self-conceived fugitives from adult repression, modern Huckleberry Finns; and in the continuing belief that women, children, and "people of color" (an old, condescending, and discredited expression oddly revived by the left in recent years) remain uncompromised by the exercise of power and therefore pure in heart. That images derived (however distantly) from a common source can be claimed by anti-expansionists and expansionists alike underscores the ambiguity that was always inherent in the westward movement, alternately conceived as the wave of the future and as a journey into the past.

*The Village Idyll:
The View from "Pittsburgh"*

As a source of fresh images, however, the Western theme had already exhausted itself by the time of World War I, as is indicated by its formulaic repetition. The nostalgic imagination had to seize on other images, notably that of the elm-shaded small town. Mark Twain once said, during a visit to India, "All the *me* in me is in a little Missouri village half-way around the world." Like so many of Twain's sayings, this was ambiguous. Did it mean that he'd left his heart in Hannibal, or that Hannibal was the prelude to the rest of his life, the hiding place of his power as a man and writer, the "background"—as Sherwood Anderson later wrote on the last page of *Winesburg, Ohio*, where his protagonist, Chicago-

bound, watches Winesburg recede into the distance—"on which to paint the dreams of his manhood"? Was Hannibal a memory or merely an imaginative refuge from adulthood? Twain's books wavered between these two approaches; but *Tom Sawyer*, the most popular by all odds, was clearly written in the idyllic mode, and its commercial success practically guaranteed that as the unspoiled wilderness began to lose its imaginative resonance, the small town would replace it as the most evocative symbol of lost childhood.

However "poor" and "shabby," the small town of *Tom Sawyer* was "bright and fresh and brimming with life"—"dreamy, reposeful, and inviting." Dreamy the image of small-town childhood remained in all its subsequent evocations, dimly seen through the Indian summer haze of burning leaves, twilight evenings on the front porch, deeply shaded streets on a summer afternoon, or gently falling snow. From the early novels of Booth Tarkington and Zona Gale right down to the latest television commercials, village life retained its timeless appeal, and even its debunkers found it impossible to maintain a consistently satirical tone. The same Anderson whose *Winesburg* helped to set the fashion for unsparing exploration of the small town's seamy underside later wrote *Home Town*, which held up "thinking small" as an alternative to the "false bigness" of 1940—"men speaking at meetings, trying to move masses of other men, getting a big feeling in that way." The small town looked more attractive to Anderson now that the "big world outside" was "so filled with confusion." Sinclair Lewis, the daddy of debunkers, celebrated homespun horse sense in his novel of the mid-thirties, *It Can't Happen Here*, in which a country editor deflates an aspiring dictator.

Even Theodore Dreiser found the small-town myth intermittently appealing, reaffirming it in his attempt to disavow it. Having "seen Pittsburgh," he explained, he could no longer weave village "charms and sentiments" into an "elegy or an epic." A visit to his fiancée's Missouri homestead reawakened memories of his own boyhood in Indiana and "enaptured" him with the "spirit of rural America, its idealism, its dreams," its belief in "love and marriage and duty and other things which the idealistic American still clings to." But a writer who had lived in the larger world, Dreiser argued, could not hope to memorialize the American village.

In fact, of course, it was precisely the disillusioning view from "Pitts-

burgh" that commended an elegiac treatment of small-town themes to writers less wholeheartedly committed to literary realism (although they too, many of them, could write realistically about small towns, even bitingly, whenever they chose). Dreiser may have rejected the elegiac mode for himself, but he shared the emotions and, more important, the preconceptions underlying it. In their apparent rejection of nostalgia, his observations on this point represent a classic statement of the nostalgic attitude.

The very soil smacked of American idealism and faith, a fixity in sentimentality and purely imaginative American tradition, in which I, alas! could not share. . . . I had seen Lithuanians and Hungarians in their "courts and hovels," I had seen the girls of [Pittsburgh] walking the streets at night. This profound faith in God, in goodness, in virtue and duty that I saw here [in rural Missouri] in no wise squared with the craft, the cruelty, the brutality and envy that I saw everywhere else. [Small-town people] were gracious and God-fearing, but to me they seemed asleep. They did not know life—could not. . . . They were as if suspended in dreams, lotus eaters.*

*Compare Wordsworth's sharply contrasting account of his residence in London, which exposed him to the same depravity and squalor that horrified Dreiser but left his youthful ideals intact. If anything, those ideals shone more brightly, Wordsworth says, when set off "by this portentous gloom."

*Neither vice nor guilt,
Debasement undergone by body or mind,
Nor all the misery forced upon my sight,
Misery not lightly passed, but sometimes scanned
Most feelingly, could overthrow my trust
In what we may become; induce belief
That I was ignorant, had been falsely taught,
A solitary, who with vain conceits
Had been inspired, and walked about in dreams.*

Dreiser's experience of the city made the world of his boyhood seem like a dream. Wordsworth's account, on the other hand, stressed the continuity of his experience and the moral and imaginative sustenance he continued to draw from "early feelings."

Confronted again with the world he had left, Dreiser endowed it with the dreamlike quality of suspended animation, notwithstanding his awareness that the impression of immobility may have derived not from actual events but from the "fixedness" of a "purely imaginative" tradition. In the American imagination, the small town never changes: it dreams on, in a world where everything else has changed, and for that reason an observer uprooted from those scenes, himself completely and irrevocably changed by acquaintance with the larger world, can no longer take part in its life or share its ideals. Note the crucial assumption that "idealism and faith" flourish only in a state of innocence. It is this assumption, so radically at odds with the view that childhood experience is the basis of mature conviction, that unavoidably gives rise to the nostalgic attitude in the first place. If a belief "in goodness, in virtue and duty" cannot survive exposure to experience, the past can be seen only as a lost Eden, where illusions alone sustain the capacity for belief—a lovely dream that had to die. In the words of Thomas Wolfe, another novelist torn between elegy and satire, equally unable to imagine any escape from this choice, you can't go home again.

The view from "Pittsburgh" precludes an imaginative reconstruction of the spiritual journey that began in Hannibal, Terre Haute, or Clyde, Ohio. The self-exiled son of the Middle Border can no longer recognize himself in memories of boyhood; he revisits them as a total stranger; and the literary convention that requires an outside observer of the village, at once protagonist and interpreter, as the central point of reference in its story, emphasizes the discontinuity between village and city, childhood and maturity. As Anthony Channell Hilfer notes in his study of the village theme, "The village, in order to be appreciated, had to be seen from the outside. After all, one of its virtues was its supposed lack of self-consciousness." Hence the need for a "narrator or spokesman who speaks from outside the village perspective." An apparent exception, the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, proves the rule, according to Hilfer. For all his rustic pose and speech, the Stage Manager is one of us, the knowing urban audience; and his title, indeed, reminds us even more effectively than the device of the outside observer that the American village is an illusion stage-managed for the entertainment of sophisticated city slickers, object of a wistful yearning that can easily edge over into mockery but has little in common with the imaginative reinterpretation of past events.

Wilder's famous play—a triumph of sorts, in its absolute exclusion of any feeling except that of nostalgia—illustrates another convention of the small-town genre, the exclusion of incident. Nothing happens in our town. The play's three acts are entitled "Daily Life," "Love and Marriage," and "Death." Static, timeless, universal, the small town has no history. Accordingly the story of the small town can never become a story in the strict sense (unless it is the story of exile and aborted return). It has no plot, no conflicts, no resolution, no characters, and certainly no character development. Those things are ruled out by the dreamlike atmosphere of nostalgic reminiscence. Even "reminiscence" is too active a term to catch the mood evoked by this genre. Memory calls up actions and events; it seeks to reconstruct what happened. A world where nothing happens—where people are born, fall in love, marry, and die—cannot serve as a source of memories, loving, painful, or otherwise. Anyone who has ever come to a small town as a stranger, even if he has lived in similar towns before, knows that such towns are not interchangeable and that what the outsider finds hardest to penetrate, when he comes to a new place, are not its customs but its memories, its lore, its highly particularized narrative history, its hotly contested accounts of that history, its feuds and factions, its smoldering enmities and apparently irrational alliances. These are what unavoidably exclude the outsider and unite the insiders in spite of the most bitter disagreements. It isn't his alien manners but his lack of access to a common fund of memories that marks him as an outsider.

But the central significance of memory is just what is missing, most of the time, in the romance of the village, which in its insistence on the timeless recurrence of birth, marriage, and death has more in common with sociology than with historical narrative. Wilder's subheadings recall those of *Middletown*: "Getting a Living," "Making a Home," "Training the Young," "Engaging in Religious Practices," and so on. Sociological studies of the small town—an important genre in their own right—provide a kind of counterpoint and critique of the small-town romance, one that inverts its judgments but presents a similarly static view of the subject matter.

The only form of conflict, still unproductive of dramatic incident, that is allowed to enter the small-town story, in the words of a study of magazine fiction in the 1930s, is the "typical conflict . . . between the essential

goodness of small-town types as opposed to a metropolitan moneyed elite; unpretentiousness against pretentiousness, and littleness versus power." Conflict within the village itself plays no part in nostalgic romance; the village stands united—"one big family," in words used both by Tarkington and by Anderson and doubtless by many others—against the outside world. Zona Gale, perhaps the first to use the cloying term "togetherness" in speaking of village life, drew on images of solidarity firmly established by the turn of the century. Anderson likened villagers in his first novel, *Poor White*, to the "members of a great family," in a passage that also insisted on the timeless quality of village life that Wilder sought to capture in *Our Town*. A "kind of invisible roof" sheltered the inhabitants, according to Anderson. "Beneath the roof boys and girls were born, grew up, quarreled, fought, and formed friendships with their fellows, were introduced into the mysteries of love, married and became the fathers and mothers of children, grew old, sickened, and died." Sociologists objected to this theme of solidarity and "togetherness" more strenuously than to any other feature of the small-town myth; they uncovered sharp class divisions and showed that small-town politics were usually dominated by a handful of wealthy families. Studies of "social stratification," however, did not alter the impression of immobility. If anything, the static concept of "stratification" and the sociological division of small-town society into upper, middle, and lower classes reinforced this impression and precluded any discussion of the shifting relations among these social groupings. Whether it was perceived as united or as badly divided, the small town remained changeless, its story—alternately imagined as sociological and satirical or as pastoral and elegiac—essentially a record of vital statistics.

Nostalgia Named as Such: The Twenties

Notwithstanding its long career in literature and popular culture, nostalgia was not always known by that name. Until the twentieth century, the term was confined to medical usage and referred strictly to a condition of acute homesickness recognizable as such by well-defined physical symptoms: loss of appetite, irregular breathing and sighing, gastroenteritis.

Johannes Hofer, a German physician, coined the term in 1678 when he found these symptoms highly developed among Swiss mountaineers removed to the lowlands. Well into the nineteenth century, Switzerland "continued to be recognized by all as the classic land of nostalgia," according to a survey of the medical literature; but the list of sufferers was gradually broadened to include students, soldiers, and domestic servants, groups uprooted from home and exposed to a type of suffering often likened to lovesickness. Psychological disorders were added to the list of symptoms; an 1879 treatise spoke of "ennui, eventually giving way to profound melancholia; an unnatural reserve and silence; complete indifference to the immediate surroundings; vague feelings of unrest; . . . tears; . . . an overwhelming desire to return home." Some authorities attributed to the Celts, as well as to the Swiss, an unusual propensity to nostalgia; the English, on the other hand, were judged too cosmopolitan to suffer in this way from residence away from home. In general, nostalgia appeared to be an affliction of naive, unsophisticated, unlettered peoples, and a few doctors argued for universal education as the only effective means of prevention.

Just when "nostalgia" lost its medical associations and came to refer to a sentimental view of the past is difficult to determine, but the new and broader usage was firmly established by the 1920s. The writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald, to cite only one of the more obvious sources, indicate that the feelings formerly associated with pastoralism, the celebration of the American West, and the myth of the small town were now assimilated quite self-consciously to the phenomenon of nostalgia. Fitzgerald refers to the hour of seven o'clock, the "soft and romantic time before supper," as a "nostalgic hour." Several times he mentions his "vast nostalgia," as a boy growing up in St. Paul, for the East, calling it the "country of my nostalgia." These passages, which identify nostalgia with the promise of romantic excitement, might seem to evoke expectation more than regret, except that Fitzgerald clearly believed—and this belief provides a recurrent theme, indeed the central theme in his work—that experience seldom lives up to its promise, that happiness never lasts, and that repeated disillusionments eventually erode the capacity for wonder (most movingly described in the closing pages of *The Great Gatsby*) and lead to "emotional bankruptcy." Fitzgerald's view of nostalgia is far from simple, and I can hardly do justice to it here, but it is enough for our present purposes

to note that he employs the term to speak of lost innocence—more precisely, of lost hopes and of the collapse of the very capacity for hope.

For those who lived through the cataclysm of the First World War, disillusionment was a collective experience—not just a function of the passage from youth to adulthood but of historical events that made the prewar world appear innocent and remote. For the first time, a whole period of historical time began to take on the qualities formerly associated with childhood. Since those who experienced the war most directly as soldiers, ambulance drivers, and military prisoners were literally children before the war, it was natural for them to play off postwar disillusionment against idyllic images of prewar childhood. The fortuitous effect of chronology strengthened the tendency to equate personal and collective history and thus to make the historical past an object of what was now called nostalgia. For the generation born around 1900, the century's youth, prematurely cut off by the war, coincided with their own, and it was easy to see the history of the twentieth century as the life history of their own generation.

It is no accident that the concept of the generation first began to influence historical and sociological consciousness in the same decade, the twenties, in which people began to speak so widely of nostalgia. Karl Mannheim published his influential essay, "The Problem of Generations," in 1927. As Robert Wohl shows in *The Generation of 1914*, those who were young at the time of World War I identified themselves self-consciously as a generation marked by history, one formed by the shared experience of this catastrophic event, and many of them projected their experience backward and reinterpreted all of history as a conflict of generations. In the United States, the war helped to crystallize the rebellion of "Young America," which had already begun to emerge in the prewar writings of critics like Randolph Bourne and Van Wyck Brooks. After the war, generational images of revolt became popularized in the so-called revolution in manners and morals led by "flaming youth."

The principal spokesman for this youth movement in the twenties, of course, was Fitzgerald, whose characterizations of the "jazz age" not only gave it a spurious unity but connected the history of his own generation with the twentieth-century history of the whole country. Here again, Brooks had anticipated this kind of thinking in the title of his literary manifesto of 1915, *America's Coming-of-Age*, but it was Fitzgerald, more

than any other writer, especially in stories and articles looking back on the jazz age after it was over, who imposed on popular culture his image of America in the twenties as a society undergoing a kind of protracted adolescence and painfully plunged into maturity by the Depression of 1929.

Writers in the twenties, including Fitzgerald himself, looked back on the prewar years as the period of lost youth, but in the Depression decade, the twenties themselves became an object of nostalgia. The decade of the twenties, according to Fitzgerald's valedictory account, was a time characterized by the "pathos of adolescence." It was therefore impossible to look back on the twenties without a mixture of yearning and embarrassment. As he wrote in *Scribner's*, in 1931,

Now once more the belt is tight, and we summon the proper expression of horror as we look back at our wasted youth. Sometimes, though, there is a ghostly rumble among the drums, an asthmatic whisper in the trombones that swings me back into the early twenties when we drank wood alcohol and every day in every way grew better and better, and there was a first abortive shortening of the skirts, and girls all looked alike in sweater dresses, and people you didn't want to know said "Yes, we have no bananas," and it seemed only a question of a few years before the older people would step aside and let the world be run by those who saw things as they were—and it all seems rosy and romantic to us who were young then, because we will never feel quite so intensely about our surroundings any more.

This idealization of the twenties, even more than the twenties' own idealization of the prewar era as an age of innocence, marks a turning point in the history of nostalgia. For the first time, nostalgic sentiment—only recently named as such—directed itself not to generic images of childhood or to cultural symbols of childhood like the West or the small town but to a specific and carefully particularized period of historical time, a single decade at that. Those who lived during the twenties thought of themselves, at the time, as a bitterly disillusioned and cynical generation: but now, almost overnight, disillusionment and cynicism took on the

"rosy romance" formerly directed to far more distant and immobilized images of the past. This instantaneous idealization of the jazz age suggests a shortening of historical attention, an inability to recall events beyond a single lifetime, which may help to explain another curious feature of the twentieth-century historical imagination: the growing inclination, among journalists, commentators on cultural trends, and even professional historians, to think of ten-year periods as the standard unit of historical time.

In the twenties and thirties, works of popular history began to focus on particular decades. Examples of this new genre included Meade Minnigerode's *Fabulous Forties*, Thomas Beer's *Mauve Decade*, Lewis Mumford's *Brown Decades*, and Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday*, a history of the postwar decade that appeared in 1951 and contributed to the romance of the twenties. Mumford's study of the post-Civil War era, the best of these books, sheds light on the close connection between the new preoccupation with decades and the concept of generations. It opens with a riot of imagery in which the predominant color of the period is linked to the progression of seasons. "The Civil War shook down the blossoms and blasted the promise of spring. The colors of American civilization abruptly changed. By the time the war was over, browns had spread everywhere: mediocre drabs, dingy chocolate browns, sooty browns that merged into black. Autumn had come." Mumford goes on to draw certain parallels between the "brown decades" and the 1920s. In both cases, a disastrous war had cut off promising movements of cultural renewal and left people cynical and world-weary. After the Civil War, as in the twenties, the "younger generation had aged; and during the decade that followed the war, cynicism and disillusion were uppermost." It is for this reason, Mumford argues, that the "generation which struggled or flourished after the Civil War now has a claim upon our interest."

History as a Progression of Cultural Styles

History had come to be seen as a succession of decades and also as a succession of generations, each replacing the last at approximately ten-year intervals. This way of thinking about the past had the effect of reducing history to fluctuations in public taste, to a progression of cultural fashions in which the daring advances achieved by one generation become the accepted norms of the next, only to be discarded in their turn by a new set of styles. The concept of the decade may have commended itself, as the basic unit of historical time, for the same reason the annual model change commended itself to Detroit: it was guaranteed not to last. Every ten years it had to be traded in for a new model, and this rapid turnover gave employment to scholars and journalists specializing in the detection and analysis of cultural trends.

As the communications industry expanded its influence over both scholarship and popular taste, the closely related concepts of decades and generations came more and more fully under the sway of fashion. Thus in 1950, *Life* magazine—a publication best understood not as a news magazine but as a fashion magazine, one of the first to show how news could be sold as a form of fashion—published a mid-century issue reviewing the entire period since 1900. Two long editorials, one by the historian Allan Nevins, the other by the cartoonist Bill Mauldin, exploited the generational theme. In "The Audacious Americans," Nevins wrote, "Bold experimentalism gave us five decades of dazzling achievement. That was our adolescence; now we have come to responsible maturity." From now on, the country would have to rely less on amateurism and experimentation and more on professionally organized expertise. Mauldin's editorial, which brought the issue to a close, defended the younger generation—the "scared rabbit generation"—against the charge that it was obsessed with security. The editorial ended with a cartoon bearing the caption, "Every generation has its doubts about the 'younger generation.'" The one thing that is certain in a world of flux, in other words, is that today's styles, today's attitudes, today's ideas will be outmoded tomorrow and that the older generation will regret their passing without being able to do anything about it.

The bulk of this special issue was devoted to a series of pictorial essays, executed with the polish for which *Life* was justly renowned. It is interesting to see which aspects of the fifty-year history of the century the editors chose to emphasize and which they chose to ignore. There was almost nothing about politics or diplomacy, except for a reminder that the cold war confronted Americans with a challenge to which only a mature people could rise. Economic history was reduced to the history of technology, itself treated as another branch of fashion in which yesterday's technology (horsepower) was bound to be superseded, like yesterday's fashions. The same went for yesterday's movie idols (Rudolph Valentino, Clara Bow), yesterday's sports heroes (Red Grange, Jack Dempsey, Bobby Jones), and yesterday's musical comedy—though the 1930s remained the "golden age of popular music." Articles on the New York Armory Show of 1913 and on more recent developments in the art world conveyed the same message: paintings that shocked the "smug and stifling calm" of the Edwardian age had now become part of the accepted modernist canon. An article on American women was illustrated by a series of fashion sketches, decade by decade, and by photographs of movie actresses and models. The history of women was thus derived entirely from changing modes of female beauty.

Articles entitled "Small Town Life" alternated with articles entitled "Acceleration of Science" and "Span of Life Grows Longer." An article called "High Society's High Jinks" depicted the activities of the Four Hundred in the "golden years before the war"—further characterized as a bygone age filled with an "adolescent spirit, boiling with the conflict between youthful naivety and mature sophistication that always marks adolescence in a man or a country. Looking back on that faraway and almost forgotten era, it takes on a soft, golden haze. . . ." Another article featured several pages of color photographs of the Vanderbilt mansions built around the turn of the century—"They Recall the Era of Opulence." Throughout the whole issue—and throughout almost every other issue of *Life* that ever reached the newsstands—a celebration of technological progress, in short, alternated with sentimental retrospect; and it is exactly this counterpoint that seems most clearly to characterize the historical imagination of our time. Looking back on the history of the twentieth century from our own vantage point, we see it as a series of decades and generations, each with its own label: the lost generation, the red generation, the silent generation of the forties and early fifties, the beat

generation, the Age of Aquarius (or was it merely the Pepsi generation?), the me generation, the generation of the yuppies. Once history comes under the dominion of fashion, the past can be revived only in a "soft, golden haze." Thus outdated styles in popular music or dress periodically reappear as part of carefully contrived shifts in public taste. We know that earlier styles were taken seriously in their time, but we have lost the connecting thread between earlier times and our own. "When this older, more distant world is invoked," writes George Trow in an essay on mass communications fittingly entitled "The Context of No Context," it has no substance or meaning.

It is made obvious [by the media] that this world is mystifying and too difficult to be comfortable with. One game-show host asked a question about the First World War and then described the First World War as "certainly a military event of considerable importance." He was assuring his audience that the First World War *was popular in its own day*.

Our collective understanding of the past has faltered at the very moment when our technical ability to re-create the past has reached an unprecedented level of development. Photographs and motion pictures and recordings, new techniques of historical research, the computer's total recall assault us with more information about history—and everything else—than we can assimilate. But this useless documentation no longer has any power to illuminate the present age or even to provide a standard of comparison. The only feeling these mummified images of the past evoke is that the things they refer to must have been interesting or useful once but that we no longer understand the source of their forgotten appeal.

Nostalgia Politicized

Once nostalgia became conscious of itself, the term rapidly entered the vocabulary of political abuse. In societies that clung to the dogma of progress, no other term was more effective in deflating ideological oppo-

nents. Even before the term came into general currency, the style of argument to which it was so well suited had already become fairly familiar, even predictable. In 1914, an editorial writer in the *Nation* chided those who took the position that mass production degraded the working man by reminding them that modern industry led to a "steady shortening of the hours of labor" and created "wider opportunities of pleasure, of spiritual excitement and growth." Criticism of the factory rested on the "old fallacy of the Golden Age," a refusal to understand that "for the great mass, life in the Middle Ages—so often invoked as a standard of comparison—consisted of 'crushing, brutalizing toil.'"

Ten years later, a critic of Lewis Mumford's book on American architecture, *Sticks and Stones*, made the same point when he accused Mumford of seeking to "escape from the consequences of modern life." The establishment of an "urban mechanical civilization" made "all talk of the handicraftsman returning" sentimental and "unveracious." By 1931, Mumford himself could fling the charge of nostalgia against Joseph Wood Krutch and other "mournful and slightly Victorian" critics of modern culture, who found the "soul of man under modernism in a state of uneasiness and exacerbation." These writers suffered, Mumford thought, from "nostalgia for tradition." A year later, John Dewey attacked the "idealizing nostalgia" of those who wished to return to the classical curriculum. Nostalgia had attained the status of a political offense of the first order.

After World War II, criticism of nostalgia figured prominently in the attempt to revive the idea of progress by divesting it of utopian overtones. Those who located the golden age in the past, it was argued, suffered from the same kind of ahistorical thinking that led others to locate it in the future. Change was inevitable and irreversible, and there was no more sense in pining for the past than in hoping that some future utopia would bring the process of change to an end. The attack on nostalgia thus served to deflect attention from more serious issues. Could a belief in progress really be sustained? Was the modern order permanently exempt from the fate of its predecessors? Did the two world wars amount to a European civil war that was destroying European civilization? Would Europe ever be the same again? If the light went out in Europe, would the darkness engulf America as well? Those who raised such questions now exposed themselves to the charge of nostalgia. Almost any criticism of modern society, in fact, could be discredited on these grounds.

Those who deplored nostalgia attributed its appeal to a crisis of nerve, an inability to face up to the realities of modern life. In 1948, Richard Hofstadter introduced his *American Political Tradition*—a book that left a deep imprint on postwar political and cultural debate—with a diatribe against Americans' escapist absorption in the past:

Since Americans have recently found it more comfortable to see where they have been than to think of where they are going, their state of mind has become increasingly passive and spectatorial. Historical novels, fictionalized biographies, collections of pictures and cartoons, books on American regions and rivers, have poured forth to satisfy a ravenous appetite for Americana. This quest for the American past is carried on in a spirit of sentimental appreciation rather than of critical analysis. An awareness of history is always a part of any culturally alert national life; but I believe that what underlies the overpowering nostalgia of the last fifteen years is a keen feeling of insecurity. The two world wars, unstable booms, and the abnormal depression of our time have profoundly shaken national confidence in the future. . . . If the future seems dark, the past by contrast looks rosier than ever; but it is used far less to locate and guide the present than to give reassurance.

Hofstadter had good reason to complain of the "ravenous appetite for Americana." A more discriminating appraisal of the cultural preoccupations of the thirties and early forties, however, might have distinguished between the sentimental Americanism of the Popular Front, say, and the introspective mood of James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, between Margaret Mitchell's sentimentalized version of the old South and the more critical appreciation by Allen Tate; between the celebration of nineteenth-century literary history in the later writings of Van Wyck Brooks and the more astringent but still respectful treatment of the subject by Mumford, Waldo Frank, and F. O. Matthiessen; between the cloying treatment of regional themes by Carl Sandburg and their more probing treatment by Robert Frost; between the lifeless restorations at Williamsburg and the indigenous architectural style developed by Frank Lloyd Wright or Bernard Maybeck; between *Appalachian Spring* and *Okla-*

homa. An aggressive, indiscriminating modernism that dismissed all these works as retrograde and politically reactionary—and most of them were subjected at one time or another to this kind of attack, if not by Hofstadter then by like-minded literary critics in *Partisan Review*—left no alternative to nostalgia except a cosmopolitanism wholly contemptuous of American popular culture.

Hofstadter's attack on "Americana" was open to the additional objection that it was internally inconsistent—as it had to be, if it was to enable sophisticated observers of the cultural scene to dismiss resistance to change as irrational, to equate loving memory with escapism, and to shore up a faltering faith in the future without explaining why such a faith was justified. Having attributed the "overpowering nostalgia of the last fifteen years" to a crisis of national confidence brought on by two world wars and the Great Depression, Hofstadter reversed himself and explained, "Although the national nostalgia has intensified in the last decade, it is by no means new." The "longing to recapture the past" had a "history of its own," which could be traced all the way back to the Jeffersonian myth of the yeoman farmer, already out of date at the time of its first appearance. A sentimental agrarian myth had distorted political thinking for a hundred and fifty years and prevented Americans from coming to grips with the urban, industrial civilization their country was clearly destined to become. In *The American Political Tradition* as well as in subsequent works, notably *The Age of Reform*, Hofstadter tried to show that American reform movements, far from embracing the future, had invariably tried to restore the conditions of primitive capitalism, clinging to the Jeffersonian vision of a nation of small landholders when in fact the United States, even in the nineteenth century, was rapidly becoming a nation of wage earners. According to Hofstadter and to a whole generation of historians who followed in his footsteps, reform movements were usually led not by men and women confident about the future but by dispossessed patricians suffering from "status anxiety" and eager to recapture their former social standing.

In 1961, Arthur P. Dudden summed up this line of interpretation, now firmly established, in an essay entitled "Nostalgia and the American." Like Hofstadter, Dudden began by linking nostalgia to the declining faith in progress, only to subvert this contention with the quite different contention that Americans had been afflicted with a debilitating nostalgia

all along. But if nostalgia reflected the decline of progressive ideology, why had it flourished when the belief in progress was at its height? If it reflected a widespread resistance to change, why had Americans always welcomed and celebrated change? The incoherence of Dudden's position suggests that the critique of nostalgia, like nostalgia itself, served unwavering emotional needs. Beneath the structure of formal argument, here as in *The American Political Tradition*, we can reconstruct the following chain of associations. Americans in the middle of the twentieth century have taken refuge in nostalgia because they have lost faith in the future. But since closer examination shows that Americans have always pined for a lost golden age, we can dismiss fears about the future as an expression of "romantic pessimism," as Dudden called it. We do not have to consider the case for "pessimism" on its merits. While the future is uncertain today, it has always been uncertain. Without reviving the dogma of progress in its utopian form, we can assume that Americans will continue to manage as they have managed in the past, leaving the dead to bury the dead and the future to take care of itself.

Those who believed that hope always has to rest on the prospect of social improvement thus managed to salvage the appearance if not the substance of hope by deploring the nostalgic habit that allegedly made so many Americans afraid to face the future. By the early sixties, denunciation of nostalgia had become a ritual, performed, like all rituals, with a minimum of critical reflection. A collection of essays published by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in 1963, *The Politics of Hope*, contained an attack on conservatism (originally published in 1955) bearing the predictable title "The Politics of Nostalgia." In his 1965 study, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Hofstadter referred repeatedly to the "nostalgia" of the American right and of the populist tradition from which it supposedly derived. But these skirmishes provided only a foretaste of the more comprehensive campaign that followed.

The "nostalgia wave of the seventies," so called, released an outpouring of analysis, documentation, and denunciation. *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Saturday Review*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and the *New Yorker* all published reports on the "great nostalgia kick." "How much nostalgia can America take?" asked *Time* in 1971. The British journalist Michael Wood, citing the revival of the popular music of the fifties, the commercial appeal of movies about World War II, and the saturation of the airwaves with historical dramas—"Upstairs,

Downstairs," "The Pallisers," "The Forsyte Saga"—declared, "The disease, if it is a disease, has suddenly become universal." The nostalgic "climate," he said, indicated a "general abdication, an actual desertion from the present." Alvin Toffler advanced a similar view in his *Future Shock*. The transition from industrial society to "postindustrial" society, according to Toffler, left people disoriented and confused. Unable to face the future, all too many sought refuge in the past. "Reversionists" like Barry Goldwater and George Wallace "yearned for the simple, ordered society of the small town," while the left developed its own version of the "politics of nostalgia," based on "bucolic romanticism," an "exaggerated veneration of pre-technological societies," and an "exaggerated contempt for science and technology." In Toffler's view, both left and right harbored a "secret passion for the past." A historian, Peter Clecak, claimed in 1983 that the "theme of nostalgia dominated popular culture" in the seventies and early eighties. "Caught in the transition from industrial to post-industrial society, Americans in large numbers felt themselves losing their psychological, social, and moral bearings." They sought solace in a "thoughtless clinging to the social past," even though "such behavior makes adaptation to present realities difficult if not impossible."

The Frozen Past

Even those who took a more sympathetic view of the "nostalgia boom" shared the prevalent confusion of nostalgia with conservatism, the age-old opposition to change. According to Fred Davis, a sociologist at the University of California at San Diego, the "nostalgia wave of the seventies" represented a response to the "massive identity dislocations" of the sixties. "Rarely in history has the common man had his fundamental . . . convictions . . . so challenged, disrupted, and shaken." Nostalgic "reactions" had always followed "periods of severe cultural discontinuity," but they performed a useful purpose by cushioning future shock. "Collective nostalgia acts to restore . . . a sense of sociohistoric continuity," Davis argued. It "allows time for needed change to be assimilated" and provides "meaningful links to the past." "Nostalgic sentiment . . . cultivates a sense of history."

But a sense of history, as we have seen, is exactly what the nostalgic

attitude fails to cultivate. It idealizes the past, but not in order to understand the way in which it unavoidably influences the present and the future. Nor does it unambiguously assert the superiority of bygone days. It contains an admixture of self-congratulation. By exaggerating the naive simplicity of earlier times, it implicitly celebrates the worldly wisdom of later generations. It not only misrepresents the past but diminishes the past. It attempts "less to preserve the past," as Anthony Brandt has observed, "than to restore it, to bring it back in its original state, as if nothing had happened in the interim." Henry Ford's Greenfield Village, the restoration of colonial Williamsburg, and Disneyland's "Main Street, U.S.A." exemplify, in Brandt's view, the passion for "historical authenticity" that seeks to recapture everything except the one thing that matters, the influence of the past on the present. Yet "the past cannot be known except in relation to ourselves." For that reason a real knowledge of the past, in Brandt's words, "requires something more than knowing how people used to make candles or what kind of bed they slept in. It requires a sense of the persistence of the past: the manifold ways in which it penetrates our lives." This persistence, of course, is what the nostalgic attitude denies.

Nostalgia evokes the past only to bury it alive. It shares with the belief in progress, to which it is only superficially opposed, an eagerness to proclaim the death of the past and to deny history's hold over the present. Those who mourn the death of the past and those who acclaim it both take for granted that our age has outgrown its childhood. Both find it difficult to believe that history still haunts our enlightened, disillusioned maturity. Both are governed, in their attitude toward the past, by the prevailing disbelief in ghosts.

Seemingly irreconcilable, the nostalgic attitude and the belief in progress have something else in common: a tendency to represent the past as static and unchanging, in contrast to the dynamism of modern life. We have seen how nostalgia freezes the past in images of timeless, childlike innocence. But the idea of progress, although it perceives ignorance and superstition where nostalgia perceives charming simplicity, encourages an equally lifeless and undifferentiated sense of the past. Notwithstanding its insistence on unending change, the idea of progress makes rapid social change appear to be uniquely a feature of modern life. (The resulting dislocations are then cited as an explanation of modern nostalgia.)

This kind of thinking reduces premodern or "traditional" societies to flatness and immobility.

The impression of a premodern past almost entirely devoid of incident is strengthened by a sociological conception of history that seeks the typical, the average, and the normal as opposed to the idiosyncratic and exceptional. Macaulay, whose name is so closely associated with the Whig view of history as the story of never-ending improvement, once said that the life of a modern nation could be understood only by studying "ordinary men as they appear in their ordinary business and in their ordinary pleasures." Those who wished "to understand the condition of mankind in former ages," according to Macaulay, "must proceed on the same principle," instead of confining their attention to "public transactions, to wars, congresses, and debates." Since it is above all the condition of the masses that furnishes the best index of progress, according to this way of thinking, the long ages in which the masses lived in poverty, illiteracy, and the darkness of superstition, bound to an unchanging round of toil, take on the same timeless appearance, in progressive historiography, that we have already noted in nostalgic representations of the past. The historical record boils down to an uneventful succession of births, marriages, and deaths. The only question it seems to invite is whether the monotony of premodern times was experienced as a comfort or a curse. Did the "immemorially old, clod-like existence" of the premodern masses, as Edward Shils has referred to it, offer the compensatory security of clearly defined social status, reciprocal obligations, and the reassuring knowledge that the future would closely resemble the past?

A conviction that such debates are not only interminable but completely uninformative, and yet that they continue to dominate the historical imagination of our time as well as its politics, has prompted this investigation of the idea of progress and its echo, the homesickness of the "homeless mind." A further exploration of the cultural background of contemporary debate requires an analysis of the long-standing controversy about "modernization" and "community," which has flared up again in recent years. The communitarian critique of modern life recapitulates, in a more explicitly political key, many of the same themes that inform the controversy about progress, only to leave them, once again, unresolved.