THE PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY – REVISITED

David Lowenthal
Benefits and burdens of the past

Only a good-for-nothing is not interested in his past. Sigmund Freud

Dwell on the past and you’ll lose an eye; forget the past and you’ll lose both eyes. Russian proverb

The future is dark, the present burdensome; only the past, dead and finished, bears contemplation. Those who look upon it have survived it; they are its products and its victors. Geoffrey Elton, 1967

We want to live in history, where all our ancestors and all our brethren live and die in common ... But we also desire to escape from history ... We want to be chained in history but we also want to be unlinked Alan Liu, 2008

Is the past a burden and a trap? Or an anchor and a springboard? Penelope Green, 2010

Why do we need the past? What do we want it for? What risks does regard for it entail? Does fondness for things past match the yearnings of nostalgia and time-travel fiction? How we engage with our heritage is more consequential, yet the dilemmas that ensue have much in common with those revealed in previous chapters. Here I survey attitudes towards the past in general, the benefits it supplies, the burdens it entails, and the traits that make it desirable or reprehensible.

We live in the present and see only what currently exists. What is to come is of obvious moment; we are programmed to care about the future we’ll inhabit. But why be concerned with things over and done with? Modernity threatens to strip the past of two hallowed values: enlightenment and empowerment. Yet bygone times command attention and affection as strongly as ever. An anthropologist finds ‘perduuring belief in both the importance and knowability of the past’ from the traces it has left – human remains, documents, artefacts, psychic memories, genetic mutations.

The past was once an indispensable guide. Only by studying former lives and learning history could people understand present selves and circumstances and prepare for times to come. The past was a fount of precepts for further use. Faith in its guidance rested on

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3 Alan Liu, ‘Escaping history’, in Local Transcendence (Chicago, 2008), 258.
4 Penelope Green, ‘In a crumbling estate, creativity and history meet’, NYT, 21 July 2010.
three assumptions: that the past was knowable and the future ordained; that change was gradual, cyclical, or inconsequential; and that human nature was the same in all times and places.

Because these certitudes are no more, the past has lost much of its pedagogic function. Fears of repeating former errors remain widespread, but past knowledge now foretells little about the future. Faith in a knowable past is likewise in tatters. Although research continually throws new light on history, the actual past eludes us: all we have is partial accounts of it, based on all-too-fallible memories, and fragments of its much-altered residues – topics reviewed in part III. And the pasts constructed as proxies for that lost realm are anything but fixed and solid: they vary from viewer to viewer and year to year, as recent events crowd our chronological canvas, and later perspectives supersede earlier.

The past was once of special import to those privileged by antiquity and precedence. Ancient lineage and hallowed tradition conferred power, property, and prestige. But today’s professedly egalitarian societies no longer license past-based privilege, save for indigenous ‘first’ peoples. The rise of the proletariat and the waning of social hierarchy extinguish prerogatives of lineage. ‘Ancestors are to be counted as a valuable asset’, exclaims a pioneering Western heroine, ‘but not as working capital’. The past as a fount of profit and power, like the pedagogic past, is becoming passé.

Yet loss of the past’s exemplary guidance and patronage of privilege has not diminished attachments to it. Many seem more than ever devoted to some past, of individual or family, community or creed, village or nation. Past-based passions embrace every aspect of existence: natural objects and living beings, artefacts and archives, folkways and philosophies. And they spur campaigns to salvage rare or representative specimens of past forms and features against accelerating decay and disappearance.

Reactions to the past are innately contrarian. Avowals of admiration or disdain conceal their opposites; reverence for tradition incites iconoclasm; nostalgic retrieval foments modernist clean sweeps. Revolutionaries exorcise recent evils with primordial exemplars and end by reviving what they first rejected. Once averted to extirpate anciens régimes, Russians and Chinese later waxed wistful for pre-Revolutionary customs and artefacts – succeeded in turn by Stalinist and Maoist nostalgia.\(^7\) Diktats for and against the past reflect vested interests; antiquity bolsters some claims, innovation others. Renaissance chroniclers denigrated the recent past to exalt present patrons, whereas antiquarians magnified past feats to present detriment. While museum curators safeguard outmoded relics, sanitary engineers discard antiquated fittings.

With these caveats, I turn first to the past’s felt merits.

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\(^6\) Harold Bell Wright, *The Winning of Barbara Worth* (Chicago, 1911), 131.

Benefits

The past for Poets; the Present for Pigs. Samuel Palmer, 1862

It is a universal article of faith that the past was golden. Men were more manly, women were faithful, ministers were godly, society was harmonious, whereas in the present day ... the wrong people have all the luck and nobody has good manners.

Hilary Mantel, 2009

Growing up here, you can’t help being obsessed with the past. Nothing ever dies in this town. It’s like a bottle of wine, it just gets older and better.

Jamie Westendorff, Charleston, South Carolina, c. 1997

The time I would really beg for ... would be time in the past, time in which to comfort, to complete and to repair – time wasted before I knew how quickly it would slip by.

Iris Origo, 1970

The past’s desiderata far exceed nostalgia. ‘The most Polite part of Mankind’, wrote architect–playwright John Vanbrugh three centuries ago, agree ‘in the Value they have ever set upon the Remains of distant times’. Today the plebs share the penchant of the polite. A taste so widespread may be a necessity. But why is the past necessary? And what qualities make it so?

Reasons advanced for admiring the past are usually imprecise; its desirability is simply taken for granted. The ‘charm of the past is that it is the past’, says Oscar Wilde’s Henry Wotton. Victorians prized the past less for specific traits than for general ambience. Today we are likewise all-embracing: almost anything old, olde, or old-fashioned may be desirable. ‘I love anything old, it’s so proper’, says a barrister of his clothes. Many who wear vintage, asserts a vendor, ‘want to look back to another era altogether’. So eclectic a past includes whatever is wanted. The newest things soon seem ‘immemorial’, like Andrew Meikle’s threshing machine (1784) within a few years of its appearance in England. ‘Remember’, says a stroller on a street lined with fitness studios, ‘when all this was yoga centers?’

Equally ineffable is the medley of beloved national pasts. British heritage embodies ‘certain sights and sounds ... a morning mist on the Tweed at Dryburgh where the magic of Turner and the romance of Scott both come fleetingly to life ... a celebration of the

10 Quoted in Tony Horwitz, Confederates in the Attic (Pantheon, 1998), 61.
11 Iris Origo, Images and Shadows (Boston: Godine, 1999), 258.
Eucharist in a quiet Norfolk church with the medieval glass filtering colours. And in a prime minister’s pastoral idyll, ‘long shadows on county [cricket] grounds, warm beer . . . and, as George Orwell said, “old maids cycling to holy communion through the morning mist”, and Shakespeare. The authors of England’s 1983 National Heritage Act ‘could no more define [it] than we could define, say, beauty or art . . . So we decided to let the national heritage define itself. It was not just the Tower of London but agricultural vestiges visible only in air photos, ‘not only the duke’s castle and possessions but . . . the duke himself’. Ensuing decades make it still more miscellaneous. After the first dozen icons of Englishness – Stonehenge, the King James Bible, the Spitfire, the anthem ‘Jerusalem’, Hans Holbein’s Henry VIII, Punch and Judy, Antony Gormley’s Angel of the North, the Routemaster bus, SS Empire Windrush, a cup of tea, the FA Cup, Alice in Wonderland – others enthroned by a 2006 online survey included Morris dancing, pubs, Big Ben, cricket, the St George flag, HMS Victory, the Domesday Book, Hadrian’s Wall, Blackpool Tower, Pride and Prejudice, The Origin of Species, the Globe Theatre, and Constable’s Hay Wain. Respondents in 2008 added fish and chips, Dr Who, the Glastonbury Festival, black cabs, Land Rovers, chicken tikka masala, and queuing.

Americans are little less besotted by their indiscriminate collective legacy. American Heritage magazine celebrates 4,000 places and 140,000 artefacts, from flags and muskets to naval paintings, swords, quilts, uniforms, and spittoons. A typical issue featured the Civil Rights movement, Mark Twain’s board games, Abraham Lincoln, the 1876 Battle of Little Big Horn, the Pony Express, Benjamin Franklin, Satchel Paige, the Second World War, the Mexican War, and historical sites in Colorado; the sixtieth anniversary issue added Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and FDR to Emanuel Leutze’s iconic 1851 painting Washington Crossing the Delaware.

Treasured pasts transcend national legacies. Childhood memories, chats with grandma, seaside souvenirs, family photographs, family trees, old trees, old money are prized everywhere. The World Soundscape Project has recorded a vanishing sonic legacy that includes the ring of cash registers, washboard scrubbing, butter-churning, razor stropping, a hissing kerosene lamp, the squeak of leather saddlebags, hand coffee-grinders, milk cans rattling on horse-drawn vehicles, heavy doors clanked shut and bolted, school hand bells, rocking-chairs on wooden floors.

What endears depends on who and where one is. Some live in patently ancient countries, others in lands with newer lineaments. The latter seek out the former:

Americans come to Europe to feel at home in time. Or they dwell on other aspects of heritage, antiques or arrowheads or ancestral locales. ‘Where newness and brevity of tenure are the common substance of life’, Henry James wrote of nineteenth-century New England, ‘the fact of one’s ancestors having lived for a hundred and seventy years in a single spot . . . become[s] an element of one’s morality’.21

Massive migration and the loss of tangible relics intensify appetites for ancestors. ‘The more the ancient landmarks are destroyed, the more many of us hunger for a firm anchorage in time and place’, held England’s Herald of Arms half a century ago. ‘Through genealogy the transient flat-dweller of the cities can join himself to the peasant rooted in ancestral soil’, for his lineage stems from that older world. ‘Cut off from his roots by profound changes in ways of living, by migration from home and by loss of contact with his kindred, modern man seeks . . . to reconstruct human links.’22

The rising appeal of roots is phenomenal. ‘In the early 1960s there would be a handful of people looking through the census returns at the Public Record Office’, recalled the then Rouge Dragon Pursuivant. ‘Now they’ve got a special search room with 100 microfilm readers, and in the summer there’s a big queue.’ Today the queue is much longer. Most want to know more about their ancestors; family-tree websites promise access to billions of records.23 Who Do You Think You Are, You Don’t Know You’re Born, Faces of America, and Ancestors in the Attic are among TV’s most popular series. The English National Trust’s 4.2 million members evince ‘unprecedented appetite for [the] cultural and natural heritage; . . . all looking for our enduring roots’. Genetic tracing potentially back to ‘Mitochondrial Eve’ and ‘Y-Chromosomal Adam’ makes personal archaeology the world’s fastest-growing hobby, myriad DNA kits at the ready.24

‘Not long ago genealogy was a hobby for aristocrats, maiden aunts, and eccentrics’, noted a 1988 survey, and ‘most Europeans would have stared blankly if asked to give their great-grandmother’s name’. With humble origins newly chic, all forebears become ancestral worthies.25 ‘When I was a boy at Harrow School in the 1920s’, the architectural historian Sir John Summerson told me sixty years later, ‘I did all I could to prevent anyone finding out my grandfather was a common labourer. Today I’d make sure everyone knew.’ No longer content with ‘simple, honest, law-abiding’ forebears, many roots-seekers now relish ancestral rogues.26 Jonathan Raban relates his Anglican vicar father’s switch from genteel to rougher roots. His 1950s ‘antique truffle hunt [for] an unbroken arc of . . . Anglo-Saxons in mead halls’ down through army officers and minor gentry gave way in the 1980s to digging up ‘our criminal past’. Ancestors ‘engaged in

21 Henry James, Hawthorne (Macmillan, 1879), 14.
smuggling, privateering and the slave trade’, showed that ‘rapine, plunder, fiddling the books and dealing under the counter ran in our blood’. Convict forebears who once disgraced Australian descendants now lend them racy chic.27

Access to ancestors fosters visceral connection with previously unknown or shadowy pasts, although often, as with Sebastian Coe’s discovery of slavery and illegitimacy, an emotional rollercoaster. Scores of Internet firms – ‘23andMe’, ‘Mygenome’, ‘Mycellf’ – promote identity quests. These purely mitochondrial and y-chromosomal ancestries are misleadingly fragmentary, however, for they identify only two of a thousand forebears ten generations back.28 But those bereft of ancestry – ‘branches without roots’, like many descendants of slaves – feel that ‘even knowing some tiny part of your history is better than knowing zero’.29 Biology certifies desirable identities. Awareness of genetic relationship ‘not only tells us who we really are’, claims a genealogical determinist, but ‘requires that one actively embrace’ that knowledge, ‘transforming ancestry into identity’.30

Eagerly adopted, these biologically certified identities are variously desirable. ‘I’m born of Songhai – queen, artist, warrior and wise’, exults an African American. ‘I’ve never felt more Irish’, crowls an Irish-American testee; ‘my next tattoo is going to incorporate the Red Hand of Ulster in honor of my O’Neill kin’. Others glory in descent from famed ancestors, ‘ascrib[ing] greatness to themselves because it’s inscribed in their genes’.31

Many fondly boast royal antecedents, unaware that practically everyone is ‘descended from one royal personage or another’. The African-American producer of ‘Faces in America’ is chuffed to find that ‘we are all mulattos’.32 Going way way back, suggested an astronomer, we might ‘get in touch with our cosmic roots’. Since most atoms in our bodies stem from ancient supernovae, ‘we are, in a very real sense, children of the stars’.33

Many lovers of the past focus on its physical or spiritual retention, seeking enclaves for anachronistic remnants and traditions. Lacking roots of their own, newcomers to old villages spearhead militant defence of ancient landmarks against bulldozers usually manned by unsentimental old-timers. Others adopt yesteryear’s forms and styles in

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revival architecture and reproduction furniture, or connect with remoter antiquity at archaeological digs. Colonial American sites attract a hundred million visitors a year, drawn by nostalgia for organic community, artisanal relics and recipes, and intimacy with nature and neighbours.\(^{34}\)

Below I group past fulfilments under the terms familiarity; guidance; communion; affirmation; identity; possession; enhancement; and escape. No boundaries delimit these desiderata, and their benefits often dovetail. A sense of identity also enriches; familiarity provides guidance. Revival-style building simultaneously justifies the present and suggests a refuge from it. Tradition sanctified such 1970s innovations as pedestrian shopping enclaves, high-rise condos, ‘heritage’ villages, gated communities (said to derive from Puritan settlements), Southern plantations, Western missions, pioneer encampments. Yet, like Disney’s Celebration and the Prince of Wales’s Poundbury, retro heritage also panders to dreams of escape from the soulless stress of modern milieus.

### Familiarity

Attachment to the past is inescapable. Dependence on recognition is universal. Concern with what has been is built into our bones and embedded in our genes. Sheer survival calls for facility of habit and faculty of memory; without them we could neither learn nor long endure. Habit lets us repeat actions without conscious effort; memory recalls known features, negotiates familiar routes, and harks back to familiar experience. Recall and repetition dominate daily life.

The past renders the present recognizable. Its traces on the ground and in our minds let us make sense of current scenes. Without past experience, no sight or sound would mean anything; we perceive only what we are accustomed to. Features and patterns become such because we share their history. Every object, every grouping, every view is made intelligible by previous encounters, tales heard, texts read, pictures seen. Habitation unveils what lies around us. ‘If you saw a slab of chocolate for the first time, you might think it was for mending shoes, lighting the fire, or building houses.’\(^{35}\) Perceived identity stems from past acts and involvements. In Hannah Arendt’s words, ‘the reality and reliability of the human world rest primarily on the fact that we are surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they were produced’.\(^{36}\)

Things that lack familiar elements or configurations remain incomprehensible. On C. S. Lewis’s fictional planet a newcomer at first perceives ‘nothing but colours – colours that refused to form themselves into things’, because ‘he knew nothing yet well enough to see it’.\(^{37}\) No terrestrial scene, however, is totally novel except to a newborn infant: a lifelong urbanite dropped into a tropical jungle would still find day predictably alternating with night, rain with sunshine; would recognize trees, sky, earth, and water, and respond

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\(^{37}\) C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938; Scribner, 2003), 43.
to up and down, back and forth much as on city streets. Every earthly locale connects at least marginally with everybody’s experienced past.

Not only is the past recalled in what we see; it is incarnate in what we create. Familiarity endears surroundings; hence we keep memorabilia and favour new things whose decor evokes the old. Electric fireplaces simulate Victorian coal or Tudor burning-log effects; plastic cabinets and vinyl-tile floors come with a wood-grain look; leaded lights painted on windows feign ancient cosiness; electric fixtures recall candles. Such embrace of the past is often subconscious. Designers intend the anachronism of concrete hearth logs or candle-drip light bulbs, non-functional spokes on car wheels, analogue features on digital devices, book-like Kindles – ‘you just make it look like what was there before’ – but for customers these skeuomorphs (material metaphors) seldom evoke memories of the prototypes that lend them familiar charm.\(^{38}\) Obsolete artefacts live on unobserved in parlance: newsmen make up pages ‘on the stone’ though that technology is long defunct; horsepower applied to steam engines continues in cars; we still ‘dial’ numbers on cell phones; tarmac-flattening machines are ‘steamrollers’, graphite sticks ‘lead pencils’, computer printouts ‘manuscripts’. Few users are aware of computer ‘worms’ and ‘viruses’ biological antecedents.

Surrogate and second-hand experiences further infuse present perception: we conceive of things not only as currently seen but as heard and read about before. My image of London is a composite of personal exploration, recent media, and historical vignettes from Hogarth and Turner, Pepys and Dickens. Despite the initial novelty of the English scene, the American Charles Eliot Norton felt on arrival that an ‘old world look’ gave ‘those old world things . . . a deeper familiarity than the very things that have lain before our eyes since we were born’.\(^{39}\) Past imprints that suffuse a place occlude first-hand impressions. Constable’s Suffolk has become ‘the countryside’ for us all, even if we have a quite different landscape outside our windows, notes an art historian. ‘We have grown up . . . with jigsaws and illustrated biscuit tins showing that little boy on a pony beside the river with the mill in the distance . . . England was like that, [and] we convince ourselves that his country is . . . still surviving today’.\(^{40}\) Hardy’s Wessex, Wordsworth’s Lake District, Samuel Palmer’s North Downs, ‘ghost features kept in existence by nostalgia’, take over the actual landscapes, imposing ‘a vanished past over a palpable present’. Monet so ‘shaped our notion of the Ile de France’ as to remain its ‘complete, definitive and everlasting’ rendition.\(^{41}\)

Not just habituation leaves such impressions enduring. Hindsight makes better sense of past scenes than the incoherent present; yesterday’s comprehensible perceptions outlast today’s kaleidoscopic images. But the past we depend on to fathom the present is mostly recent; it relies mainly on our own few earthly years. The farther back in time,

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the fewer the surviving traces, the more they have altered, and the less they anchor contemporary reality.

Familiarity thrives on continuity in our selves and surroundings. Habit and memory are effective and efficient only if things around us are stable enough to recognize and act on with expectable results. Rare cataclysms aside, most aspects of the natural scene – skies, seas, terrain, plants, animals – commonly endure little altered, changing slowly enough to remain indubitably themselves. Thus, the ‘ancient permanence’ of his Dorset Egdon Heath as ‘it always had been’ comforted Thomas Hardy:

Ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil had worn the same antique brown dress [varied only by] an aged highway, and a still more aged barrow ... themselves almost crystallized to natural products by long continuance ... To know that everything around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as unaltered as the stars overhead, gave ballast to the mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepressible New.42

Even urban routes and facades generally persist in identifiable form. Nowadays, however, novelty in things built and made comes on apace. And longevity and emigration leave ever fewer in the locales, let alone the houses, of birth or youth. With so much perforce left behind, what surrounds us in later life is seldom what we grew up with. But biology ill equips us to cope with continually unfamiliar scenes. Stranded by swift and massive displacement and seeking anchorage in some familiar sanctuary, we cling to whatever survives from or reminds us of the past. We indulge habit and memory not simply out of nostalgic yearning, but from a vital need for security in perilously novel milieus.

In short, attachment to the past is both innate and essential. Amnesiacs unable to recognize or retrieve memories, residents of realms transformed beyond recognition, and refugees ejected from life-long locales are grievously bereft of cherished linkages – cherished because familiar, and familiar because cherished. And those dispossessed seek out substitute pasts.

Guidance

Faith that past instructs present dates to the dawn of history and animates much of it. For Greeks history was useful because the rhythm of its changes promised ongoing repetition. Study of the past might foretell, though not forestall, the future. Past example showed sufferers how to bear cruel fate.43

The timeless truths of medieval and Renaissance historians taught morals, manners, prudence, patriotism, statecraft, virtue, piety. Classical sources illumined present concerns. A Carolingian historian summarized the Roman emperors’ deeds so that Charles II

42 Thomas Hardy, The Return of the Native (1878; London, 1912), 6–7.
of France might ‘readily observe from their actions what you should imitate or what you should avoid’.\textsuperscript{44} Knowing the classical past enhanced humanist confidence in the relevance of its lessons. In early-modern England ‘knowledge of history helped one to rise in the world, and knowledge of God’s providence in history solaced adversity’.\textsuperscript{45} Such guidance was morally elevating. Like pilgrimages to sacred sites, the study of history improved character and inspired fealty.

The past’s exemplary power and purpose remained an Enlightenment certitude:

The usefulness of history . . . is a truth too generally receiv’d to stand in need of proof . . . The theatre of the world supplies only a limited number of scenes, which follow one another in perpetual succession. In seeing the same mistakes to be regularly follow’d by the same misfortunes, ‘tis reasonable to imagine, that if the former had been known, the latter would have been avoided.\textsuperscript{46} Knowing the follies of the past, one might predict and perhaps avert those to come. Scholars who found history exemplary likened all past and present. ‘Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange’, stated David Hume. ‘Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature.’\textsuperscript{47}

This authoritative aim suffused Western thought well into the nineteenth century. But the kind of guidance the past provided was now quite different. Earlier scholars had assumed that classical models exemplified eternal virtues: they saw antiquity’s honour, patriotism, stoicism, and tribulations mirrored in their own times. But even in the seventeenth century, some were showing pasts unlike one another, undermining history’s utility as guide; viewing the past historically scuttled its timeless truths.\textsuperscript{48} Growing distance from antiquity and awareness of its diversity severely tempered its authority. For Victorians history ceased to provide explicit precedents or moral exemplars. Instead, parallels with past circumstances alternated with past–present contrasts as instructive lessons. History was about change as well as stasis.

Despite postmodern scepticism, the past is still invoked as cautionary lesson, on the hoary maxim that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.\textsuperscript{49} Popular history continues to deploy past wisdom for present perplexities. The advice of legendary heroes is eagerly solicited; pundits ever asked what Lincoln or Washington or Henry Ford would do today. ‘How to be boss – learn from a past master’ extols management maxims of Moses, Elizabeth I, Attila the Hun, and Machiavelli. Jesus is consulted on everything from

\textsuperscript{44} Lupus of Ferrières to Charles the Bold (844), quoted in Rosamond McKitterick, History and Memory in the Carolingian World (Cambridge, 2004), 275–6.
\textsuperscript{47} David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748), in The Philosophical Works (repr. edn 1886; Aalen: Scientia, 1964), 4: 3–135 at 68.
\textsuperscript{49} George Santayana, The Life of Reason or the Phases of Human Progress (London, 1905), 1: 284.
the rectitude of invading Iraq to Sarah Palin’s presidential candidacy.50 Popular films depicted modern Chinese going back to gain insights from historical figures, until in 2011 the government, vexed that this implied a superior past, banned time travel for fomenting fatalism, feudalism, and reincarnation.51

Even a postmodernist contends that history provides ‘moral lessons’. Not the old lessons, however. ‘The past really is sometimes, past’, warns an anthropologist; ‘after a while it runs out of lessons to teach us’. Yet to ‘effectively inhabit’ the present one must ‘learn how the past made it what it is’, holds a littérateur.52 If no longer a model, it remains a guide; if it cannot tell us what we should do, it tells us what we might do; ominous or auspicious, it prefigures the present.

Communion

Empathy with precursors reanimates exemplary pasts. Archetypal is communion of the living with the dead in the eucharistic consumption of Christ’s body and blood. Communion expressed in re-enactment is popular in secular like sacred ceremony, as detailed in Chapter 11.

Anachronistic rapport used to be literally evoked: ‘Alexander walked in the footsteps of Miltiades’, and Caesar ‘took Alexander as his prototype’.53 Renaissance and Enlightenment worthies engaged in intimate converse with classical poets and philosophers. Petrarch felt himself among Roman authors as he read them: ‘It is with these men that I live at such times and not with the thievish company of today’, he ‘told’ Livy.54 Exiled Machiavelli relished the past’s immediacy. He spent evenings in ‘the ancient courts of ancient men, where, being lovingly received I . . . speak with them . . . and they courteously answer me. For hours . . . I give myself completely over to the ancients’.55 A later Vatican curator talked to his classical statues ‘as if they were living’, reported John Evelyn, ‘kissing & embracing them’.56

This love was at best symbolically requited. Intimate converse with ancient Romans was incompatible with their historical distance, of which the ancients’ failure to respond kept humanists poignantly aware. Their felt empathy with great classical authors was not reciprocated. The beloved ancients ‘maintained a marble or a bronze repose that could break hearts’, in Thomas Greene’s phrase. ‘The pathos of this incomplete embrace’ left humanist adoration unrequited.57

Eighteenth-century philosophes wrapped themselves in the togas of Cicero and Lucretius to re-enact ancient converse. ‘Continuously preoccupied with Rome and Athens’, wrote Rousseau while reading Plutarch, ‘living . . . with their great men, . . . I pictured

myself as a Greek or a Roman. The philosopher Baron d’Holbach was days on end enthralled by ‘the ever-charming conversation of Horace, Virgil, Homer and all our noble friends of the Elysian fields’. Ancient heroes permeated Enlightenment consciousness. ‘He has all the eloquence of Cicero, the benevolence of Pliny, and the wisdom of Agrippa’, wrote Frederick the Great in 1740 after meeting Voltaire, who retorted that Frederick ‘talked in as friendly a manner to me as Scipio to Terence’. Napoleon identified first with Alexander, then with Charlemagne – not that he was like Charlemagne or that ‘My situation is like Charlemagne’s’, but quite simply: “I am he.”

In Anne-Louis Girodet’s 1801 canvas, ghosts of Ossian’s characters welcome Napoleon and other French heroes in an Elysium, spirits of dead ‘in inspirational and amicable cohabitation with the living’. At Victor Hugo’s 1850s seances, his guest-list included Cain, Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, Sappho, Socrates, Jesus, Judas, Mohammed, Joan of Arc, Luther, Galileo, Molière, the Marquis de Sade, . . . Mozart, Walter Scott, some angels, Androcles’ Lion, Balaam’s Ass . . . The language was mid-nineteenth-century French, though . . . Hannibal spoke in Latin, and Androcles’ Lion . . . a few words of lion language. Hugo was pleased to find that all the great minds of the past spoke more or less like himself.

Fantasized communion lingered into modernity. Bartold Georg Niebuhr meant his history of Rome to shed such a light that the Romans would stand before his readers’ eyes, ‘distinct, intelligible, familiar as contemporaries, with their institutions and the vicissitudes of their destiny, living and moving.’ Colloquies among classical heroes animate Walter Savage Landor’s Imaginary Conversations (1824–36): ‘To-day there came to visit us . . . Thucydides . . . Sophocles left me about an hour ago . . . Euripedes was with us at the time.’ His ‘conversations’ involved figures who could never have met, conflating centuries in the fashion Gibbon had mocked. ‘How much instruction has been conveyed to us in the form of conversations at banquets, by Plato and Xenophon and Plutarch’, exclaims Thomas Love Peacock’s Dr Opimiam. Fancying himself an ancient, many a Victorian had an insistent ‘urge to buttonhole one of those old Greeks and Romans and tell him what the future had in store’. But retrospective prophecy did not spare them humanist pathos; as Hazlitt wistfully put it, ‘We are always talking of the Greeks and Romans; – they never said any thing of us.

61 Mann, ‘Freud and the future’, 424.
64 Bartold Georg Niebuhr, The History of Rome (1811–12; Cambridge, 1831), 1: 5.
66 Thomas Love Peacock, Gryll Grange (London, 1861), 168.
Communing with great figures from the past remains a popular lure. PBS’s *Meeting of Minds* (1977–81) welcomed the ‘historically illiterate’ to hear the bygone famed – Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Cleopatra, Aquinas, Luther, Bacon, Shakespeare (and some of his characters), Voltaire, Marie Antoinette, Tom Paine, Jefferson, Karl Marx, Florence Nightingale – talk with producer Steve Allen ‘in their own words’ (mostly). ‘Newton, Cromwell, Byron, Milton, Tennyson, Pepys, Darwin: You ought to try living with them some time’, tempts American students to come to Cambridge. ‘Sit under the same apple tree that gave Sir Isaac Newton a headache – and the world the theory of gravitation. Stroll through the courts, quads, and pathways that inspired Milton, Pepys and Tennyson.’69 Hearing late twentieth-century Virginians talking as though Thomas Jefferson might, at any moment, train his telescope on them from Monticello, a British historian realized that, for Americans, long-dead precursors were their heirs’ and successors’ still living property.70

A few moderns still claim actual contact with precursors. Wilmarth Lewis, who spent most of his life immortalizing Horace Walpole, at times felt literally in touch with him.71 But such empathy is much rarer nowadays. Few are steeped enough in the classics to claim Horace or Livy or Homer as intimates. And historical relativism distances even the most admired exemplars. Only reincarnates and unschooled naives now achieve whole-hearted communion with folk from any past.

Affirmation

More than rapport, the present seeks reaffirmation. The past endorses present views and acts, showing their descent from or likeness to former ones. Previous usage sanctions today’s. Precedent legitimates current practice as traditional: ‘This is how it’s always been done.’ What has been should continue to be or become again.

Validation often dates from time immemorial. Traditionalists presume that things are or should be the way they always have been. Oral transmission readjusts the past to fit its idealized fixity. Literate peoples less easily sustain that fiction, for written records reveal pasts unlike the present; archives expose traditions eroded by time and corrupted by novelty, anything but faithfully adhered to. Yet societies nonetheless invoke supposedly timeless values and unbroken lineages. French rulers recurrently identify with the Gallic hero Vercingetorix, Napoleon to stress continuity with ancient Rome, Pétain to legitimize the Vichy regime, Mitterrand to proclaim French parentage of the European Union. Glorifying in, yet greater than, previous Caesars, Mussolini favoured a celestial trinity: ‘Homer, the divine in Art, Jesus, the divine in Life, and Mussolini, the divine in Action’.72 Whig historians claimed Victorian Britain as the heir of legal and political forms essentially faithful to medieval origins. Fundamentalist Christians cite biblical authority

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for perdurable creeds and values. Modern Greeks look back to Hellenic precursors for
grandeur not only Greek but globally classical.73

Recovering lost or subverted institutions legitimates the present order against subse-
quent mishap or corruption. Renaissance humanists looked behind dark ages of evil and
oblivion to descry classical glories. Revolutionary innovators, noted Marx, evoke ancient
exemplars:

In creating something that has never yet existed, . . . they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the
past . . . and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene
of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language. Thus Luther donned
the mask of Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman
republic and the Roman empire.74

So did the Pre-Raphaelites invoke ‘pure’ Gothic, Tea Party libertarians the Founding
Fathers. Whig historians’ claims of unbroken continuity alternated with adjurations to
restore traditions interrupted by ‘foreign’ innovations.75

Endlessly salutary, Founding Fathers remain uplift fixtures. ‘His humanness will fit you
like a glove’, the History Channel touted its Benjamin Franklin. ‘You’ll be reminded of the
best that’s in you . . . The man who inspired a revolution in 1776, will leave you inspired –
in 2004 – by your own personal revolution.’ More mundane, or earthy, is the Elvis Presley
link promised purchasers of ‘a few precious drops of Elvis’s perspiration . . . Elvis poured
out his soul for you, and NOW you can let his PERSPIRATION be your INSPIRATION.76

A past improved on betokens advance from dear but dread times. Those who sur-
mount a deprived youth enjoy looking back to measure their progress, like The Five Little
Peppers whose ‘dear old things’ at the beloved little house in Badgertown confirm their
rise from rags to riches.77 We cherish the bad old days as proof of our improvement,
conserving its remnants as evidence ‘that life was really awful for our ancestors’, hence a
lot better for us.78 But improvers, no less than traditionalists, revere organic roots. The
former reject ‘the narrative of nostalgia [that] looks longingly to a past presumed to be
simpler and better than . . . the present’; the latter regret ‘the narrative of progress . . . that
has removed us from it’.79 Moderns for whom antiquity or childhood validates either
tradition or progress neither envy the past’s felicities nor scorn its deficiencies; instead,
they identify with people of the past.

73 P. B. M. Blaas, Continuity and Anachronism (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978); J. W. Burrow, A Liberal Descent:
Victorian Historians and the English Past (Cambridge, 1981); Herbert Butterfield, The Whig Interpretation
of History (London, 1931); Yannis Hamilakis, The Nation and Its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and
and Roger Cardinal, eds., Cultures of Collecting (Reaktion, 1994), 49–67 at 56.
77 Margaret Sidney, Five Little Peppers Midway (Boston, 1890), 148; Betty Levin, ‘Peppers’ progress’, Horn
79 Richard Handler and Eric Gable, The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial
Williamsburg (Duke, 1997), 99, 130.
In short, the past is a route to self-realization; through it we become more our
selves, better selves, reinvigorated by our appreciation of it. The healing power of
popular history – especially film – makes the past ‘a source of reflection and recupera-
tion about ways of perception, habits of thought and ways of being that, could we but
recover them and hold them in memory, might help us to become the kind of people
we have always wished to be’.80

Identity

The past is integral to our sense of self, ‘I was’ requisite to being sure that ‘I am’. Ancient
Greeks equated individual existence with what was memorable; Renaissance humanists
found the past essential to personality. Rousseau’s Confessions and Wordsworth’s lyrics
inaugurated modern consciousness of cumulative identity. Even painful memories
remain essential emotional history. Constructing a coherent self-narrative, as discussed
in Chapter 7, is widely held crucial to personal integrity and psychic well-being.

Many maintain touch with their past in natal or long-inhabited locales. Places need not
be magnificent to be memorable. The genius of the place is identifiable ‘more by the
tenacity of its users than by its architecture’, wrote an English architect-planner. ‘It may
even be ugly, will generally be shabby, will invariably be overcrowded . . . Civic societies
passionately defend its every cobblestone’, but they guard ‘more than bricks and mortar;
it is the need for . . . rootedness’.81 In London’s mundane Kentish Town, a chronicler
time and again noticed how important to residents were memories of their physical
habitat.82 Helen Santmyer’s childhood Ohio town, ‘shabby, worn, and unpicturesque’,
was cherished nonetheless.

The unfastidious heart makes up its magpie hoard, heedless of the protesting intelligence. Valen-
tines in a drugstore window, the smell of roasting coffee, sawdust on the butcher’s floor—these are
as good to have known and remembered . . . as fair streets and singing towers and classic arcades.83

As Adam Nicolson writes of his childhood Sissinghurst, ‘a place consists of everything that
has happened there; it is a reservoir of memories and . . . a menu of possibilities . . . Any
place that people have loved is . . . drenched both in belonging and in longing to belong’.84

Some need the tangible feel of native soil; for others the faintest emanations suffice.
The endurance even of unseen relics can sustain identity. ‘Many symbolic and historic
locations in a city are rarely visited by its inhabitants’, noted planner Kevin Lynch,
but ‘the survival of these unvisited, hearsay settings conveys a sense of security and
continuity’.85 Those bereft of ancestral locales forge identities through other pasts. ‘Of all
the bewildering things about a new country, the absence of human landmarks’ struck

80 David Harlan quoted in Robert A. Rosenstone, ‘The reel Joan of Arc: reflections on the theory and practice
84 Adam Nicolson, Sissinghurst (Harper, 2008), 73.
Willa Cather as ‘the most depressing and disheartening’. Lack of links in new lands leads many emigrants to romanticize remote homelands. Emotional ties with Wallace Stegner’s ancestral but never-visited Norway mitigated his history-starved boyhood on a New World frontier prairie.

Portable emblems lend needed continuity. For exiled Jews after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple it was the Torah, Heinrich Heine’s ‘portable Fatherland’. Forced out of their ancient homeland, the East African Masai ‘took with them the names of their hills, plains and rivers and gave them to the hills, plains and rivers in the new country, carrying their cut roots with them as a medicine’. Many who sunder home ties furnish new landscapes with replicas of scenes left behind. Azoreans in Toronto reproduced the flagstoned patios, wine cellars, and household saints of their island homes; English suburb and High Street features embellish towns in Australia and Ontario, Benares and Barbados. An Indian’s homesickness in London is solaced by familiar street furniture – the imperial British having previously brought it to India to palliate their own homesickness.

Keepsakes substitute for surrendered sites. Loading jalopies for the trek to California, Steinbeck’s uprooted Okies are told there is no room for such souvenirs as old hats and china dogs, but cannot bear to leave them behind – ‘How will we know it’s us without our past?’ The elderly need mementoes and memories to assuage the loss of long-loved places. Hoarding visual reminders, some are harder hit by the loss of family photos than of money or jewellery. Keepsakes anchor precious memories. Jean Paul’s schoolteacher devoted an hour daily to recalling his childhood. He kept things from each stage of youth – a taffeta baby bonnet, a gold sequined whip, a tin finger ring, a box with old booklets, a grandfather clock, a perch for finches – and on his deathbed surrounded himself with these souvenirs.

In China, reminders of vanished sites and structures are apt to be poetic rather than pictorial, the past treasured less in things than in words. Revering ancestral memory and calligraphy, the Chinese traditionally held the past’s material traces in small regard. Memory of art, not its physical persistence, suffused consciousness and spurred new creations. China lacks such ruins as the Roman Forum or Angkor Wat, not for want of skills ‘but because of a different attitude about how to achieve an enduring monument’. Ancient cities became sites of heritage through ‘a past of words, not of stones’. Suzhou’s Tang dynasty Maple Bridge is famed as a locus, not for its looks. No poem describes the stones forming the span: what mattered was their literary associations. The city’s essential legacy was ‘a past of the mind’. Memory is prized less in perishable monuments than

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86 Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1913; Houghton Mifflin, 1941), 19.
90 John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (Heinemann, 1939), 76, 79.
91 Jean Paul Friedrich [Richter], *Leben des vernügten Schulmeisterlein Maria Wuz in Auenthal* (1790; Munich: Goldmann, 1966).
in imperishable words that recall a vanished past. Only lately has wholesale demolition sparked efforts to salvage venerated sites and replicate structures, just as wealthy Chinese pay astronomical sums to repatriate ancient treasures. Sales in China’s art auctions rose ten-fold between 2003 and 2012.

Prized pasts legitimate tribes and nations. ‘A collectivity has its roots in the past’, wrote Simone Weil. ‘We possess no other life, no other living sap, than the treasures stored up from the past and digested, assimilated, and created afresh by us.’ Rootless groups are like orphaned children. In Iceland family and communal lore make the past all-pervasive, equating history with identity. Parallels between personal and national identity, a powerful stimulus to nineteenth-century nationalism, likened family icons and heirlooms to national monuments. ‘Antiquity stands . . . revealed before our eyes’ exulted Danish archaeologist Jens Worsaae.

We see our forefathers . . . We hold in our hands the swords with which they made the Danish name respected and feared . . . The remains of antiquity thus bind us more firmly to our native land; hills and vales, fields and meadows become connected with us . . . Their barrows and antiquities constantly remind us that our forefathers lived in this country, from time immemorial.

Reverence for the collective patrimony suffused nineteenth-century French identity. Clovis, Charlemagne, Joan of Arc, pilgrimages, and cathedrals figured like stained glass in fictive reconstructions. Bygone spirituality, chivalry, and troubadour traditions embodied pre-industrial, faith-based folkways against urbanization, migration, dialect degeneration. Pilgrims and primitifs preserved relics, mounted neo-medieval festivals, embellished today with yesteryear. ‘The men of these ancient times are really our fathers’, declared medievalist Gaston Paris. ‘Nothing touches me more than knowing what my faraway ancestors were like.’

The recovery of things past allays present loss. Subjugated peoples enshrine historical comforts. The neglect of Welsh history ‘hath eclipsed our Power, and corrupted our Language, and almost blotted us out of the Books of Records’, lamented a chronicler; to

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97 Max Dvořák, Katechismus der Denkmalpflege (Vienna, 1916).


Figure 5 Securing a national symbol: Market Square, Old Town, Warsaw, after Nazi destruction, 1944

Figure 6 Securing a national symbol: Market Square, Old Town, Warsaw, after Polish reconstruction, 1970
mitigate these calamities, scribes and antiquaries salvaged and magnified family lore – giving rise to Vanbrugh’s portrayal of Wales as ‘a realm where every Man is born a Gentleman, and a Genealogist’. Nineteenth-century Irish glorified iconic artefacts – cross, harp, brooch, round tower – against English aspersions of primitive savagery. Governor-General Lord Durham’s 1839 slur that French Canadians were ‘a people with no history, and no literature’ roused Québécois militancy. Twentieth-century Turks reconfigured their Ottoman past to reflect their title to present greatness. Beleaguered states guard unto death legacies that embody their communal spirit. Rather than see their city destroyed, Carthaginians beseeched Roman conquerors to kill them all. Hence iconoclasts – Saracen, Tudor, Communard, Nazi, Taliban – uproot tangible emblems of foes’ identity. The Nazis sacked historic Warsaw to cripple the will of the Poles, who quickly rebuilt the old centre (Figs. 5 and 6). ‘It was our duty to resuscitate it.’ ‘We wanted the Warsaw of our day and that of the future to continue the ancient tradition.’ Many states today nationalize their tangible past, outlawing pillage or excavation by foreign archaeologists and demanding the return of antiquities previously taken as booty, sold, or stolen. ‘Whatever is Greek, wherever in the world’, asserts a Greek culture minister, ‘we want it back’. ‘Whoever took our stuff’, echoes a Peruvian culture minister, ‘we want it back because it is here where it belongs.’

Like pilfered antiquities, lost or stolen identities are coveted by those deprived of them. Yearning for ancient connections marks current retrievals of long-hidden Jewish ancestry by Africans, as Israel’s lost tribes, and by Latin Americans, as descendants of conversos expelled from Iberia in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Many reconvert to Judaism. Myriad clues manifest the ‘inescapable’ ancestral pull. There were the grandparents who wouldn’t eat pork, the fragments of a Jewish tongue from medieval Spain that spiced up the language, and puzzling family rituals such as the lighting of candles on Friday nights. ‘The Jewish spark was never quenched, and . . . they are taking back the Jewish identity that was so brutally stolen from their forefathers.’ They felt history coursing through their veins as they . . . put together pieces of a puzzle that pointed to a Jewish ancestry.

100 Thomas Jones, The British Language in Its Lustre (1688; Scolar Press 1972); John Vanbrugh, Aesop (1697), in CW, 2: 1–65 at 33.
Even lacking clues to any linkage, ‘many Jews by choice are descendants of Jews’, drawn by ‘subconscious historical memory’, contends an advocate.106 ‘It was like our souls had memory’, said a Colombian evangelical pastor who led dozens of his flock back to Judaism.107

Possession

Proclaiming ownership greatly augments the past’s benefits. Possession enhances self-possession. ‘Everyone loves his country, his manners, his language, his wife, his children, not because they are the best in the world’, held Herder, ‘but because they are absolutely his own, and loves himself and his labors in them’. Posthumous control over children, memory, fame feeds craving for virtual immortality.108

Whether personal goal or collective cause, possessing the past is self-interested. ‘When the child begins to say, “Mine!” it is to state that it is not yours’. What’s mine is thereby endereared. Similarly selfish is the collective legacy. ‘All heritage is someone’s heritage and therefore logically not someone else’s.’ And because it is ours, adds a philosopher, ‘stories of our past’ carry more weight ‘than stories of other people’s pasts’.109 As Yigael Yadin exhorted Israeli army recruits at the fabled Dead Sea fortress of Masada, ‘When Napoleon stood among his troops next to the pyramids of Egypt, he declared: “Four thousand years of history look down upon you.” But what would he not have given to be able to say: “Four thousand years of your own history look down upon you.”’110 The prior ‘Minoan’ past contrived for Cretans by Arthur Evans enabled them to view Hellenes ‘from a position of superiority, as the direct descendants and thus rightful owners of the past’.111 Such claims – usually invented or exaggerated, as discussed in Chapter 12 – buttress ruling elites everywhere.112

Ownership links heirloom possessors to original makers and intervening owners, augmenting self-worth. An American in John Cheever’s story gloats over his inherited antique lowboy ‘as a kind of family crest . . . that would vouch for the richness of his past

and authenticate his descent from the most aristocratic of the seventeenth-century settlers. Others’ legacies incite covetous lust. Collectors annex exotic relics without compunction and soon convince themselves they are rightfully their own. From the ruins of Palmyra, Robert Wood ‘carried off the marbles wherever it was possible’, complaining that ‘the avarice or superstition of the inhabitants made that task difficult – sometimes impracticable’. Taking fragments of Melrose Abbey for his own ‘Gothic shrine’, Walter Scott exulted in ‘that glorious old pile [as] a famous place for antiquarian plunder. [With] rich bits of old-time sculpture for the architect, and old-time story for the poet, there is as rare picking in it as in a Stilton cheese, and in the same taste, – the mouldier the better’. Digging for antiquities at Saqqara in the 1870s, Amelia Edwards felt remorse at being a party to plunder, but soon became quite hardened to such sights, and learned to rummage among dusty sepulchres with no more compunction than would have befitted a gang of professional body-snatchers … So infectious is the universal callousness, and so overmastering is the passion for relic-hunting, that I do not doubt we should again do the same things under the same circumstances.

A psychiatrist termed the craving for relics ‘a passion so violent that it is inferior to love or ambition only in the pettiness of its aims’. Accumulation afflicts us all. ‘Life is about acquiring STUFF, acquiring more STUFF, … storing STUFF, acquiring even more STUFF’, notes a journalist, ‘and then you die with STUFF all’. As Sartre’s Antoine Roquentin asserts, ‘You don’t put your past in your pocket; you have to have a house. The past is a landlord’s luxury.’ Cumulation nourishes the collector’s sense of self. “I am what I own”, whether cattle or coin, concubines or Canalettos, has been the guiding principle of the technically ignorant throughout the ages. And of the knowledgeable as well. ‘A man’s Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his’, wrote William James, including ‘his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account’.

Historians commonly deny the charge that their expertise entitles them to own the past. Yet they not uncommonly covet the archives they research, though few match the callous greed of a Connecticut chronicler who culled what he wanted from his town’s oldest newspapers and then burned the rest. ‘The history of the Town of Bethel is my own

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115 Quoted in Washington Irving, Abbotsford and Newstead Abbey (London, 1835), 54. Scott’s rape of Melrose incurred John Ruskin’s rebuke that he loved Gothic only because it was old, dark, picturesque, and ruinous (Modern Painters (1856), pt. IV, ch. 16, para 22 (New York, 1886), 3:265).
116 Amelia Edwards, A Thousand Miles up the Nile (1877; London: Century, 1982), 51.
118 Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea (1938; New York: New Directions, 1959), 91.
120 William James, The Principles of Psychology (New York, 1890), 1: 291.
personal business’, he rebuked residents seeking data for the bicentenary. ‘It’s all mine now. Why should I tell you or anybody else? A man has a right to what is his.’

Having a piece of the past fructifies connection with it. ‘My own fierce joy on acquiring a Roman coin at the age of 15, and my frenzied researches into the dim, fourth-century emperor portrayed on it’, recalled Auberon Waugh, ‘served a far more useful purpose than it would in the county museum’. Honorary curator of one such museum, John Fowles defended public access to Dorset’s fossiliferous cliffs against ‘vigilante fossil wardens. What [people] pick up and take home and think about from time to time is a little bit of the poetry of evolution.’ The 2013 Grand National Relic Shootout at Virginia’s Flowerdew Hundred Plantation, one of many advertised on television’s ‘Dig Wars’, netted nine thousand pre-1865 artefacts, rewarding fascination with the (lucrative) past. Avowedly salted sites, such as Paul’s Famous Fossil Dig at Wisconsin Dells, ‘where artifacts from all over the world can be unearthed for free’, likewise reward acquisitive curiosity.

Far from being free, much of the past is in costly conflict, its treasured remains contested by rival states, tribes, creeds, and kinfolk. Paris auctions of Hopi masks in 2013 violated tribal sanctity. Yet even those spiritually attached to their past may choose to sell it. Defying national heritage diktats, Tuscan tomb-robbers claim communion with and sanction from Etruscan forebears who tell them when and where to dig. They then market their finds to Swiss dealers. Tombaroli skills, along with proceeds from smuggled antiquities, are passed on to communal and family descendants.

Newly cherished is our specific genetic legacy. Genes accrue the awe once accorded immortal souls, An invisible yet real substance, the genome – like the True Cross – can replicate without being depleted. The Human Genome Project is both Scripture and Holy Grail; finding DNA in E.T.’s dying hero was likened to finding the King James Bible in a Martian spaceship.

The germ-plasm notion of identity that defined and exalted nationhood from 1800 on became racist anathema in the post-Nazi world, but remains potent in popular consciousness. Half a century after Hitler’s Blut und Boden ideology, an official German spokesman insisted that all that really mattered were ‘aspects of culture you are born with’, an English writer extolled the ‘mystical, atavistic’ rural Arcadia embedded ‘in our genetic memory bank’, and Americans were charged with having ‘a misanthropic gene’ ingrained in their DNA code.

Ancestor-hunting genetic tool-kits reinforce the mystique of inherited ethnic and national traits. Despite stressing that ‘race’ is a myth and that we are all mixed, geneticists

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reinforce stereotypes of genetic determinism. Aimed at distinguishing origins of and regional differences among manifold components of early Britons, the People of the British Isles project excludes recent migrant strains on the implicit assumption that ‘the history and heritage of Britain belongs to . . . British people of native descent and that other people – ‘ethnic minorities’ – have their own equally valid but different heritages’. In short, culture is a biologically inherited group possession. Hence ‘the ancient and early history of Britain is naturally only of interest to those of native descent . . . a heritage that belongs to them. Other people have their own stories and heritages’, but we have no interest in theirs, nor they in ours. Commonality and ownership derive from a group’s genetic ancestry.\textsuperscript{129}

Yet the legacy that moulds us is not only our own but the whole of the past, exotic as well as domestic, alien along with familiar. Awareness of legacies and histories beyond the confines of our own kinfolk, our own community, our own country, enlarges empathetic understanding. Through foreign pasts we view our own past – indeed, our own being – in comparative context. We learn that how we used to be, and became what we are, were contingent on myriad external happenstances. Ecumenical concern with the memories and relics of others mitigates the narrow chauvinism that typically adulates – or execrates – our own heritage.

Indeed, awareness of the past as realms distinct from the present promotes comparative stock-taking. Having conquered almost the whole of the world then known to them, ancient Romans were said to have found distinctive differences not in geography but in history, notably in admired Greek precursors. In a sense, the past was their only foreign country. Romans were the first avid collectors of another culture, whose relics served as poetic metaphors and material insignia of their own power and connoisseurship.\textsuperscript{130} Renaissance humanists augmented the Roman tradition of collecting with Roman reliquary and literary riches. Subsequent European booty from the Levant, the Far East, and pre-Columbian America brought manifold pasts into patrons’ and then public view, educating and enlivening the Western present.\textsuperscript{131}

The popularity of museums and historical sites, of biography and autobiography, of historical romance and sagas of former lives, betokens growing interest in pasts beyond our own purlieus. Other’s relics and ruins lubricate cultural tourism, far-flung pasts illumining awareness of our own. Indeed, just as our own past is never solely our own, so in myriad ways do we share the pasts of others. But such pasts must be seen to belong to somebody, suggests a Haitian anthropologist; they cannot be unclaimed or forsaken. ‘History did not need to be mine in order to engage me. It just needed to relate to someone, anyone. It could not just be The Past. It had to be someone’s past.’\textsuperscript{132} But whether someone’s past can also be everyone’s remains, as discussed in Chapter 12, highly problematic.

\textsuperscript{130} Alexandra Bounia, The Nature of Classical Collecting (Ashgate, 2004), 58–64, 310–12.
\textsuperscript{131} Susan Pearce and Rosemary Flanders, eds., The Collector’s Voice, vol. 3: Imperial Voices (Ashgate, 2002).
\textsuperscript{132} Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History (Beacon, 1997), 142.
Enhancement

Boundless time enriches thin quotidian life. ‘The present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else’, held Virginia Woolf.\textsuperscript{133} The past lengthens life’s reach by linking us with scenes, events, and people former to ourselves, as well as to our prior selves. William Morris likened ancient buildings to family heirlooms, both keys to personal memories vital for passionate engagement with life.\textsuperscript{134} We transcend the brevity of our own span and gain surrogate longevity by reading history, inhabiting an old house, communing with antiquities, wandering in an ancient city.

Stretching present feelings back in time also augments the immediate moment. Benjamin Constant’s lovers strengthen mutual devotion in asserting they have \textit{always} loved each other.\textsuperscript{135} Projecting present experience back magnifies it; recalling the past absorbs it into a magnified present. The contemplation of her cherished antiques assures Henry James’s Mrs Gereth to feel that everything was in the air – every history of every find, every circumstance of every struggle . . . The old golds and brasses, old ivories and bronzes, the fresh old tapestries and deep old damasks threw out a radiance in which the poor woman saw in solution all her old loves and patiences, all her old tricks and triumphs.\textsuperscript{136}

Treasuring his recollections, Proust’s Marcel likens himself ‘to an abandoned quarry . . . from which memory, selecting here and there, can, like some Greek sculptor, extract innumerable different statues’.\textsuperscript{137}

Past treasures enrich literally as well. Preservatives made mummies merchandise; Chinese bronzes, made potent by age, ward off evil spirits. Antiques become investments, ancient creations modern riches. From Troy to the \textit{Titanic} divers rifle shipwrecks. \textit{The Da Vinci Code}’s hidden cache made Rennes-le-Château a two-million-dollar bonanza, hundreds of thousands of tourists viewing medieval sites while munching Crusty Christ and Papal Pepperoni pizzas.\textsuperscript{138} Past profits dominate heritage television: five antiques shows – \textit{Flog It!}, \textit{Cash in the Attic}, \textit{Bargain Hunt}, \textit{Antiques Road Show}, and \textit{Car Booty} – accounted for 61 per cent of Britain’s 13,000 heritage programmes’ nine million annual viewing hours in 2005–6.\textsuperscript{139}

The Old World’s uplifting past became a stock trope among New World visitors who at home felt nothing but the present. ‘The soil of American perception is a poor barren

\begin{thebibliography}{99}

\bibitem{133} Virginia Woolf, \textit{Moments of Being} (Chatto & Windus, 1976), 98.
\bibitem{136} Henry James, \textit{The Spoils of Poynton} (1897; Penguin, 1963), 43.
\end{thebibliography}
artificial deposit’, exclaims Henry James’s expatriate artist in Florence. ‘Our silent past, our deafening present [are] void of all that nourishes and prompts and inspires.’ For John Ruskin, landscape came to life only amid ancient architecture, which ‘we may live without, but we cannot remember without’. He thought America a cultural void, its denizens blind to the past. ‘The charm of romantic association can be felt only by the European. It rises . . . out of the contrast of the beautiful past with the frightful and monotonous present; and it depends . . . on the existence of ruins and traditions, on the remains of architecture, the traces of battlefields, and the precursorship of eventful history. The instinct to which it appeals can hardly be felt in America.’

In fact, some Americans felt they alone truly savoured Olde England. So indifferent to antiquity seemed the English that Nathaniel Hawthorne proposed exiling them ‘to some convenient wilderness’ and replacing them with awestruck Yankees. Henry James adored English palimpsests dense with pastness, even the socially regressive squire and parson and ancient almshouses and asylums ‘so quaint and venerable that they almost make . . . poverty delectable . . . Written in the hedgerows and in the verdant acres . . . imperturbable British Toryism’ deepens the very colour of the air. Unlike American soil, ‘not humanized enough’ to interest Oliver Wendell Holmes, ‘in England so much of it has been trodden by feet’ as to thoroughly civilize it. Even ghosts ‘took their place by the family hearth’, wrote Hawthorne while American consul at Liverpool, ‘making this life now passing more dense . . . by adding all the substance of their own to it’. A day in a thirteenth-century English house, his own tread hollowing the floors and his own touch polishing the oak, let James share its six living centuries. Deploiring the dearth of ancestral homes in America, Charles Eliot Norton likened their merits to time-enhanced tones of antique instruments. ‘As the vibrations of the music constrain the fibres of the violin till, year by year, it gives forth a fuller and deeper tone, so the vibrations of life as generations go by shape the walls of a home . . . The older it is the sweeter and richer garden does it become.’

The English continue to exalt their past, alike for tourists and themselves. England’s ‘quiet villages, peaceful homes and pleasing prospects’ are praised for ‘the stamp of centuries of . . . builders, farmers, gardeners, the village blacksmith, the rich wool merchant, the parson, the squire and the yeoman’. Adam Nicolson felt Sissinghurst’s past ‘everywhere around me, co-existent with present and future, soaked into this soil, . . .

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143 Henry James, ‘In Warwickshire’ (1877), in English Hours (Heinemann, 1905), 197–223 at 210.
144 Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr, Our Hundred Days in Europe (Boston, 1887), 288–9.
145 Nathaniel Hawthorne, Doctor Grimshawe’s Secret (Houghton Mifflin, 1883), 230.
146 Henry James, ‘Abbeys and castles’ (1877), in English Hours, 225–43 at 235.
in a bobbled scurf of things, the embedded quirk, the wrinkle in a face’. He saw fellow
grandees, likewise bereft of National-Trusted ancestral domains, as ‘inheritance consult-
ants, . . . experts in buried meaning, in the unfolding of the past into the management of
the future.’

And these patricians ascribed supreme worth to their familial ‘order in
time’, as their chronicler recounts.

The walls of their houses were adorned with ancestral paintings; the pages of Burke and
Debrett catalogued and chronicled their forebears; their homes were usually in the style of an
earlier period. They planted trees that only their descendants would see in full splendour;
they granted building leases for ninety-nine years in the confident hope that their grandchildren
would enjoy the reversion; and they entailed their estates so as to safeguard them for as long as
possible.

The enveloping past most enriches those ancestrally familiar. Australian Aborigines
‘feel the spirits of generations of the dead in the surrounding land’ as European settlers
cannot. The saturations of time made rooted Gaelic Ireland far more cherished than the
English Pale, perched in a thin and isolated present that disregarded the Celtic past.
‘Those O’Connells, O’Connors, O’Callaghans, O’Donoghues . . . were one . . . with the
very landscape itself’, wrote their chronicler.

To run off the family names . . . was to call to vision certain districts – hills, rivers and plains; . . .
torecollect the place-names in certain regions was to remember the ancient tribes and their
memorable deeds. How different it was with the [English] Planters. . . . For them, all that Gaelic
background of myth, literature and history had no existence . . . The landscape they looked upon
was indeed but rocks and stones and trees.

Family history similarly suffuses rural Normandy; every field and path recalling some
event. Lacking such memories, newcomers inhabit merely a meagre, monochrome
present.

Escape

Rather than enhance the here and now, the past may replace the intolerable present
altogether. When ‘we cannot bear to face today’s news’, suggests a reporter, ‘we want to
believe the past is another, more respectable country’. What we miss today we find in
yesterday – a time for which we have no responsibility and when no one can answer back.
‘The way out is back.’ The true faith of the twentieth century was not modernism, exulted
California mystic Terence McKenna, but ‘nostalgia for the archaic’ pervading ‘body
piercing, abstract expressionism, surrealism, jazz, rock-n-roll, and catastrophe theory’.
Cavemanforum.com rejects couch-potato modernity for Stone Age hunter-gatherer

149 Nicolson, Sissinghurst, 328, 318, 161.
150 David Cannadine, The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy (Yale, 1990), 24.
151 Howard Morphy, ‘Landscape and the reproduction of the ancestral past’, in Eric Hirsch and Michael
O’Hanlon, eds., The Anthropology of Landscape (Clarendon Press, 1995), 184–209 at 185–6; Daniel
barefoot sprinting, berries and raw meat, and a Paleo domestic lifestyle. To escape the tyranny of today’s lock-step, high-tech world and regain a sense of purpose, weekend warriors re-enact medieval revels or Civil War encampments (Chapter 11). SF nostalgists rhapsodize ‘reconstructing the old cultures, the old languages, even the old troubles’ against today’s oppressive regimens.

Preference for the past is age-old. ‘Many would have thought it a happiness to have had their lot of life in . . . ages past’, noted Sir Thomas Browne in the seventeenth century, and ‘he that hath . . . rightly calculated the degenerate state of this age, is not likely to envy those that shall live in the next’. Reading the Greek classics while composing Lohengrin in dreary Dresden, Richard Wagner felt himself ‘more truly at home in ancient Athens than in any conditions which the modern world has to offer’. Some would decamp permanently to the past. Revulsion against the present grew apace after the Second World War. ‘Never before’, wrote a novelist, ‘have I heard so many people wish that they lived “at the turn of the century,” or “when life was simpler,” or “worth living,” or simply “in the good old days.”’

Longing for the past was a widespread postwar refrain. From hippie American communes to austerity-rationed Britain to communist-ridden Poland, many were desperate to leave the present. ‘I hate the guts of the modern world’, grumbled Elizabethan scholar A. L. Rowse, ‘everything about it, even its good points’. He reiterated the architect Edwin Lutyens’s moan that ‘the old was good, the new could but be worse’. The plaint continues to resound. ‘The best is all behind us’, laments a British critic. ‘We will never be able to live as marvellously as our ancestors.’ Many dreamt of wishing ‘you were a dead person, from a dead time, because it would be better than living now’. Demonized in the media, today’s drawbacks seem omnipresent. ‘Given all that you hear now in the news’, says a German schoolgirl, ‘I would rather have been on the earth during a former age.’ People long to treat ‘history as though it were geography’, wrote Stephen Spender, ‘themselves as though they could step out of the present into the past of their choice’.

But whatever its allure, the past offers permanent escape only for committed reincarnates. Although his ‘heart and mind were fixated on a shifting and fugitive past’, a recent

155 ‘A letter to a friend on the death of his intimate friend’ (1656), in Miscellaneous Works of Sir Thomas Browne (Cambridge, 1831), 233–70 at 257.
156 Richard Wagner, My Life [1870s] (New York, 1911), 416.
160 Cornelius J. Holtorf, From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: Archaeology as Popular Culture (AltaMira, 2005), 110.
American Historical Association president knew himself doomed ‘to live in the all too obtrusive present’. Most settle for occasional escape. Even if today is tolerable and the past no golden age, immersion in history can alleviate contemporary stress. ‘Come to Williamsburg . . . Spend some time in gaol’, a brochure depicts tourists grinning in eighteenth-century stocks: ‘it will set you free’ – free from workaday cares. ‘Step into our village and watch something magical happen’, offers Historic Naperville, Illinois. ‘Your pulse slows. You breathe . . . easier. The hassles of everyday life are forgotten.’ Cades Cove National Park, in Tennessee’s Great Smoky Mountains, lured visitors to a past century when life ‘proceeded at a pace rarely faster than a walk . . . This allowed time to see and hear the world one lived in. Cowbells in the pasture . . . the wind coming up and the sun going down. A decent “howdy” while walking past a neighbor’s house’, and natural beauty stemming from a deeply felt partnership with nature. (This idyllic community was in fact uprooted to establish the park.)

In disheartened 1970s Britain, some saw the country’s future as an enclave of the past, going from making to curating history. ‘Shudder as we may, perhaps the creation of a living history book in this clutch of islands is not so bad a prospect’, said Labour politician Andrew Faulds. He envisioned Britain as ‘a sort of Switzerland with monuments in place of mountains . . . to provide the haven, heavy with history, for those millions . . . who will come seeking peace in a place away from the pulsating pressures and the grit and grievances of their own industrial societies’. By the late 1980s, groaned heritage critics, Britain had indeed become ‘an escapist theme park that stretches all the way from Dover to John o’ Groats’.

Arcadian longing has classical and Renaissance antecedents, but became de rigueur in the early nineteenth century. As revolutionary change distanced customary tradition, yearning for the past lovingly depicted by novelists and painters, historians and architects suffused European imagination. Poet–historian Robert Southey (1774–1843) ‘found in the past, in the study of huge folios and long dead chroniclers’, the peace denied him in the shifting present. In art and rural scenes many like Walter Pater sought relic epochs sequestered from modern progress. Places that lagged behind the modern maelstrom, half-forgotten enclaves of bygone worlds, kept the flavour of Thomas Hardy’s ‘street for a medievalist to revel in, [where] smells direct from the sixteenth century hung in the air in all their original integrity and without a modern taint’. That taint was hard to avoid

168 Walter Pater, Marius the Epicurean, 2nd edn (London, 1885), 1: 109; Thomas Hardy, A Laodicean (1881; London, 1912), 444.
even in Venice, Ruskin grumbled. ‘Modern work has set its plague spot everywhere – the moment you begin to feel that you have truly escaped to the past, ‘some gaspipe business forces itself upon the eye, and you are thrust into the 19th century; ... your very gondola has become a steamer’.169

Gas pipes and steamers notwithstanding, islands of the past still serve as refuges from modernity. Antiquated Australians conjure up gnarled codgers in Victorian numbers of Punch; ‘these delightful dodos, extinct in England, are still extant in the former colonies’. Singapore preserves Edwardian dress and demeanour in retro-fitted Raffles Hotel. Spa retreats revert to Last Year at Marienbad, Alain Resnais’s 1961 evocation of aristocratic pre-war Europe, itself narrated wholly in the past tense.170

The charm of such anachronistic places – and their fidelity to the past whose aura they convey – requires unawareness. Their denizens are not moderns being quaint, but locals leading normal lives. Were their datedness deliberate, such places would become period stage sets knowingly purveying the past. ‘Fifteen years ago I could go into any muddy village in the Near East and step backward in time’, remarked an art curator in 1970; ‘today, in the tiniest Turkish town, you walk into the local merchant’s and see tacked to the wall a list of Auction prices current issued by Sotheby’s’.171 Forty-five years on, that town may be self-consciously neo-Ottoman.

Even a contrived past, however, may alleviate present dismay. As ‘refuges for those bewildered by the normal pace of change’, a planner suggested retarding certain ‘backward regions’ by banning modern improvements.172 Rest cures in time-frozen Amish or simulated colonial villages might be antidotes to the frenzy of modern life, proposed Alvin Toffler. ‘The communities must be consciously encapsulated ... Men and women who want a slower life, might actually make a career out of “being” Shakespeare or Ben Franklin or Napoleon – not merely acting out their parts on stage, but living, eating, sleeping, as they did.’173

Enclaves that sooth exhausted moderns may enable their descendants’ sheer survival. Like genetic stocks of endangered plants and animals, ‘banks’ of bygone folkways might ‘increase the chances that someone will be there to pick up the pieces in case of massive calamities’. Robert Graves’s fictional Scottish islanders and Catalans reproduce Bronze and early Iron Age life in a new ‘ancient’ community in Crete, sealed off for three generations from the misguided post-apocalyptic world.174

Classical Greece and medieval Britain were the main loci of Victorian imaginative escape, Celtic and medieval times of the French. Today’s escapist pasts are more often

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169 John Ruskin, 14 Sept. 1845, in Ruskin in Italy: Letters to His Parents (Clarendon Press, 1972), 201.
172 Lynch, What Time Is This Place?, 77–8.
grandparental or great-grandparental, ‘far enough away to seem a strange country’, explained American Heritage’s founder-editor, ‘yet close enough ... to bring a tear to the eye’.175 Much historical fiction re-creates eras sixty to a hundred years back, beyond memory’s reach but intimately linked with people and places still held dear. Reconstructed Stonefield, Wisconsin, was set up to remain always seventy-five years old, in a time ‘which hasn’t yet become dim’.176

One lure of that vintage is that it barely antedates ourselves. ‘The time just before our own entrance into the world is bound to be peculiarly fascinating to us; if we could understand it, we might be able to explain our parents, and hence come closer to know[ing] why we are here.’ In contrast, the nearer past can often seem too close for comfort. Parental pasts often still impinge as irksomely admonitory, or embarrass us as out of date, whereas grandparents are supposed to be passé: their world survives less in our mental sets than in their mementoes. That is why it often seems quaintly anachronistic – a touching, unthreatening past beyond our purview. Parents are not ‘quaint; more like so last year’.177

James Laver’s dress-style terms corroborate preference for the not-too-recent past. Clothes a year old are ‘dowdy’, those 10 and 20 years back ‘hideous’ or ‘ridiculous’. Fashions are ‘amusing’ at 30, ‘quaint’ at 50, ‘charming’ at 70, ‘romantic’ at 100, ‘beautiful’ 150 years after their time. Before most old stuff can be properly admired, it has to outlive a ‘black patch of bad taste’ associated with parental times.178 Nostalgia for the ‘90s still elicits hesitant approval at most.

Past benefits vary with epoch, culture, individual, and stage of life. Different pasts – classical or medieval, national, or ethnic – suit different purposes. Once morally edifying, the past has become more a source of sensate pleasure than of educational or ethical instruction. But all the benefits discussed above remain viable in some context. More than for any functional use, we treasure old things, old thoughts, old ways of being for the pastness inherent in them; they reflect ancestral inheritance, recall former friends and occasions, and vivify remembrance.179 Fondness for the past feels innate.

We read history for the same reason we listen to old songs: we all believe in yesterday. That we might not learn anything from them doesn’t alter our taste for old music. Life is a long slide down, and the plateau just passed is easier to love than the one coming up. The long look back is part of the long ride home.180

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Valued attributes

We are divided of course between liking to feel the past strange and liking to feel it familiar.  

Henry James, 1888\(^{181}\)

Just wait until now becomes then. You’ll see how happy we were.

Susan Sontag, 1977\(^{182}\)

People in olden times drank too much, had wild sex, got naked and wrestled in the streets, and on special days dressed up as barnyard animals and summoned the god of hellfire. Now, we sit at work all day looking at stuff on the internet, then go home and look at stuff on the internet. This is called ‘progress’.

Alex von Tunzelmann, 2010\(^{183}\)

The past is obviously much easier to turn into good telly than the present, because the cars were prettier, the clothes were better, there was no boring climate change and we know how everything turned out.

Giles Coren, 2011\(^{184}\)

What traits make the past beneficial? What aspects of bygone times help us confirm and enhance identity, acquire and sustain roots, enrich life and environment, validate a pleasing or escape a repugnant present? Inheritors value the same legacies in various ways. Enumerating the benefits of classical antiquity, George Steiner notes that the Greeks were

to Cicero and his successors . . . the incomparable begetters of philosophy, of the plastic arts, of the cultivation of poetic and speculative speech; . . . to the Florentine Renaissance . . . the abiding model of spiritual, aesthetic, and even political excellence and experience; [to] the Enlightenment . . . the architecture of Monticello and of the porticoes of our public edifices, . . . the canonic source of beauty itself; [to] the modern imagination . . . the archaic, the Dionysian Hellas, with its ecstatic immediacy, [and Freud’s] mapping of the unconscious.\(^{185}\)

This list of particulars is not, however, translatable into general traits – traits that would reckon also with the perceived virtues of Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and every epoch’s later devotees the world over, and with the numbing diversity of individual as well as collective heritages. Perhaps the plethora of historical, cultural, and personal variables nullify any effort to classify the past’s valued traits. But for the sake of discussion I subsume them below under antiquity (being old), continuity (seeming unbroken), accretion (the past as cumulation), sequence (being ordered over time), and termination (being over).

\(^{181}\) Henry James, *The Aspern Papers* (1888; Scribners, 1936), Preface, x.


Antiquity

‘I just love history: it’s . . . it’s so old’, enthuses an American tourist in Olde England. Antiquity roots credentials in the past; ancestral possession makes things our own, valorizing claims to power, prestige, property, propriety. Antecedence lends authority to things that precede us. ‘These trees are older than I am and I can’t help feeling that makes them wiser’, wrote England’s New Forest chronicler. Knossos as reconstructed by Arthur Evans gave Cretans welcome proof of ‘the most ancient social regime of law and order in Europe’.

Those with shallower roots envy Old World ancientness. A Philadelphian in 1837 held it useless to preserve American relics because ‘our antiquities are too modern to excite veneration’. English patina still humbles Americans. ‘Is this college pre-war?’ asks a tourist. ‘Ma’am’, says the Cambridge porter, ‘it’s pre-American’. When a British journalist interviewed on American TV called his monarchy obsolete, Barbara Walters was shocked: ‘Mr Hitchens, how can you say such an awful thing in that lovely old English accent?’ The American who tells his aide, ‘I’m off to Britain on Friday; remind me to turn my watch back 500 years’, terms British fealty to the past ‘a virtually genetic trait’. The absence of such fealty in Australia animated a Slovene migrant to guide me around Victorian neo-Gothic Melbourne. ‘I’m from Europe’, she explained. ‘The Australians are new. Only we Europeans appreciate the past.’

Antiquity comprises at least four distinct notions: precedence (being first); remoteness (being far back in time); primordiality (being the source); and primitiveness (being unspoil by modern ‘progress’). Claims of priority suffuse every realm of life. People fervently insist that their lineages, languages, faiths, fossils, even rivers and rocks are previous to those of others. Why is being first so ardently claimed and, when lacking, invented? ‘First come, first served’ sounds impartially just. It is also a law of nature: like early birds, first-comers feed best. Precedence is legendary in legacies. Double portions were allotted Old Testament firstborn sons; primogeniture gave the eldest all.

Not every firstborn legacy is enviable. Old Testament readiness to sacrifice eldest sons won those sons a reward in heaven, but on earth the second-born took over. The first in line have been at grave risk since Jehovah smote the eldest sons of Egypt and took unto himself all Israel’s firstborn. (Spared the trap, the second mouse gets the cheese.) But precedence generally implies superiority and confers supremacy. Matthew’s (20:16) ‘the first shall be last, and the last shall be first’ quixotically inverts near-universal experience.

Priority’s benefits colour every use of first. First fruits, first class, first prize, first violin, first of all, first and foremost, primate, prime minister are expressions so customary we forget their ordinal implications. The first blow is half the battle. Caesar would rather be

187 Peter Tate, The New Forest: 900 Years After (Macdonald & Jane’s, 1979), 14.
188 Stephanos Xanthoudides (1904) quoted in Hamilakis, ‘The colonial, the national, and the local’, 149.
189 Philadelphia Public Ledger (1837) quoted in Michael Kammen, Mystic Chords of Memory (Knopf, 1991), 53.
first in a village than second at Rome.\textsuperscript{191} Metaphors of priority pervade patriotic maxims. ‘First in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen’ was Washington’s archetypal accolade. Where you initially come from, says Oliver Goldsmith’s \textit{Traveller}, is what finally counts: ‘The patriot’s boast, where’er we roam, / His first, best country, ever is at home’.\textsuperscript{192} In myriad \textit{Books of Firsts} precedence is the spur. The first to find a cure or a continent, to detect hidden treasure, to walk on the moon, to cry ‘Bingo!’ inherit fame or fortune; few note who came next. As Alfred Russel Wallace and next-at-the-patent-office telephone and auto-assembly inventors found to their cost, Darwin, Bell, and Ford alone got the kudos. Monuments and memorial albums in American towns commemorate the first couple to marry there, the first child locally born, the first funeral. North America’s initial (1979) World Heritage sites were chosen as primordial: Canada’s L’Anse aux Meadows for the ‘first’ European structures in the New World, Mesa Verde as the ‘earliest’ surviving Indian dwelling.

Precedence evokes pride and proves title. ‘The most important point about English history’, crowed an eminent Victorian, ‘is that the English were the first people who formed for themselves a national character at all’.\textsuperscript{193} A cult of Gaulish antiquity exalts France as ‘the oldest of the mature European nations’. Descent from ‘first peoples’ certifies tribal rights in Anglo-America and the Antipodes. Ethnic French in Manitoba demand autonomy because ‘we were here as a nation before there was a Manitoba’.\textsuperscript{194}

Pre-Trojan origins, held Alfonso de Cartagena at the Council of Basle in 1434, entitled the Spanish monarch to ceremonial precedence over England’s king. Czech, Hungarian, and Balkan students in Vienna each scoured medieval charters to prove their people’s prime antiquity; ‘no nation within the [Habsburg] monarchy wanted to have a younger history than its neighbour’.\textsuperscript{195} Ulster Protestant vie with Catholic antiquity claims: ‘British Israelites’ contend that the prophet Jeremiah carried the Ark of the Covenant to County Antrim and liken the siege of Derry to Jericho and Marathon; Orangemen term seventeenth-century Scots-Irish the rightful heirs of original Britons ousted by Gaelic intruders.\textsuperscript{196} When told that African rock art dated back thirty to forty thousand years, Tanzanian children joyfully hugged the archaeologist for finding their culture older than the British. The British had earlier embraced their own ancient geology, naming the oldest strata then known ‘Silurian’, after a local tribe famed for resisting Roman

\textsuperscript{191} Plutarch, \textit{Parallel Lives: Life of Alexander/Life of Caesar}, c. AD 75 (Harvard, 1919), 469.
\textsuperscript{193} Mandell Creighton, \textit{The English National Character} (London, 1896), 8.
invaders. The 1995 Chinese quarry fossil find of *Eosimias sinensis*, the ‘first’ proto-
human, launched Peking’s proud claim to anthropoid primacy, much as the 1920s
discovery of Peking Man made China the cradle of all humanity.

Claims to priority derogate rivals. Early Christians deployed the Old Testament to
antedate upstart pagans’ claims; ‘the antiquity of these writings ensures their trustworthi-
ness, for they are more ancient than your oldest records’. And Moses surpassed in
antiquity all other gods and oracles by several centuries. Subsequent replacement of
Roman by Judaeo-Christian forebears made the Holy Roman Empire more holy than
Roman. ‘Jerusalem was Israel’s capital a thousand years before the birth of Chris-
tianity’, retorted Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in 1950 when the Vatican rebuked Israel
for declaring Jerusalem its capital. ‘What other nation’, bragged a Japanese educator,
‘can point to an Imperial family of one unbroken lineage reigning over the land for
twenty-five centuries?’ The English preen themselves on royal antiquity: unlike other
lands’ ‘Mickey Mouse leaders, “our” monarchs have biological lines stretching back in
their purity to the dawn of history’. Whereas ‘some guy’ in Spain just ‘set himself up as
King, ours can look right back to Ethelred the Unready’. ‘The most noticeable thing
about our history is that we have more of it than any other country’, says an English
columnist. ‘Rome is older, but Italy is a nineteenth-century upstart. The length of time,
the depth and richness of our island story, gives us . . . pre-eminence.’ Touting Stone-
henge, Dover Castle, and Hadrian’s Wall, English Heritage gloated that ‘it will take
another 3000 years before America can run an ad like this.’ When America is
disparaged as ‘new’, encomiasts retort that the United States is the world’s oldest extant
republic, with the oldest written constitution.

Since in the mists of time men were ruled by gods, ancient priority signalled divine
intercession. A fifteenth-century papal nuncio assured the French they were ‘the first to
be planted on earth by God’. Divine royal attributes promised myriad peoples they were
God’s elect nation. Puritans saw England as a second Israel succoured by Jehovah against

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its foes; that God first revealed His new great age to ‘his English-men’ was the message of Foxe’s Martyrs (1563).205

‘Antique is above ancient, and ancient above old’, judged a French medievalist; he put the old at one hundred, the ancient at two hundred, the antique as more than a thousand years back. The more ancient the more admirable a lineage. Sheer age lends romance to times gone by, and ‘the more remote were these times’, held Chateaubriand, ‘the more magical they appeared’.206 Wordsworth’s ‘secrets older than the flood’ and Shelley’s ‘thrilling secrets of the birth of time’ express fascination with hidden distance.207 Distance purges the past of personal attachments and makes it venerable, lending the remote majesty and dignity. That ‘our ancestors and elders speak to us in the wisdom of thousands of generations’ gives Cree indigeneity a primordial imprimatur. The same mystique promotes tourism. ‘I am ancient’, beckons a Mexican ‘Mayan’ maiden, ‘I was born thousands of years ago’.208

Being ancient makes things precious by proximity to beginnings. After a Knesset hullabaloo over aspersions against King David and the accuracy of Exodus, Israelis bragged that theirs was the only ‘state where events of three thousand years ago can cause such a heated controversy’.209 Defending his choice of the Maison Carré in Nîmes as the model for Virginia’s Capitol in Richmond, Jefferson argued that ‘it has obtained the approbation of fifteen or sixteen centuries, and is, therefore, preferable to any design which might be newly contrived’.210

Divine nature, ancient in preceding history, is much acclaimed as fons et origo. ‘The first men, having the unsullied purity of Nature for their guide’, declared Giorgio Vasari, perfected the arts of design.211 ‘New’ countries like the United States and Australia compensate for civic recency by celebrating primordial nature. Florida’s shores struck Henry James as older than the Nile, previous to any other scene.212 Yellowstone deserved World Heritage status for ‘ancient volcanic remnants . . . going back to Eocene time’.213 Nature’s ancientness solaces Australians for their shallow European past. The


206 J.-B. de la Curne de Ste-Palaye, Dictionnaire des antiquités françaises (c. 1756), quoted in Jacques Le Goff, History and Memory (1977; Columbia, 1992), 25; François-René de Chateaubriand, The Genius of Christianity (1802; Baltimore, 1871), 385.


210 To James Madison, 1 Sept. 1785, in The Writings of Thomas Jefferson (Washington, DC, 1907), 5: 110.


212 Henry James, The American Scene (1907; Indiana, 1968), 462.

1994 find of Jurassic-era pine trees revealed awesome Aussie antiquity. That living fossil, the ginkgo, offers a ‘glimpse of Father Time as a boy’. The common horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*) is ‘Nature’s living ancient monument, whose primeval patina . . . is so much more exciting than the heap of stuff up on [Salisbury] Plain’, Stonehenge, built only yesterday.\(^{214}\) Purveyors of Victorian nostrums cribbed fictitious origins from the timeless wisdom of Mother Nature or of native ancients – ‘Indian root pills’, snake-oil liniment.

Especially worthy are indigenous legacies still rooted in ancestral locales. To be sure, all ancestral roots are ultimately of equal age. Welsh and French, Polish and Romanian heritages hark back to Celtic and Gaulish, Sarmatian and Dacian ‘first nations’. The phrase ‘our ancestors the Gauls’ transmutes primitive ethnicity into French legend. But the charisma of prehistoric occupance endorses Maori, Aboriginal, Native American, Inuit, and other ‘First Nation’ claims. Ancestral occupance makes modern Hopis and Navajos rightful stewards of their tribal lands. This mythic stability ignores the tribal upheavals and environmental changes that have utterly transformed them. Mistaken for unchanged ancestors, Hopis and Navajos are venerated by themselves and others as hoary traditionalists whose ‘customary law dates back to the tribe’s very origin’.\(^{215}\)

Once a stigma of backwardness, indigenous antiquity is now hijacked by post-Columbian newcomers. Traces of extinct Arawaks become Creole heritage emblems in West Indian nations. North Americans discover a usable past in Indian relict landscapes. Midwesterners now can ‘walk out along Main Street and look about and say, “Oh, that’s two thousand years old. That’s as old as the Emperor Augustus.”’\(^{216}\) Aboriginal ‘Dreamtime’ legacies similarly deepen white Australian roots.

Emigrants likewise appropriate mystiques of native antiquity. Relative newcomers to modern Israel, Yemenites are accorded ancestral status. Initially patronized as exotic primitives, they gained acceptance as custodians of ancient Jewish dress and dance. They became seen as the authorized source of basic dance steps ‘directly descended from the most ancient prayer movements’. ‘Israel is a Biblical land, so . . . its dance company should be Yemenite’, argued a dancer. ‘The Yemenites are a Biblical people. We even dressed Biblically in Yemen.’\(^{217}\)

Antiquity varies in age according to ancestry, to materials, to construction, to style, or to traditional usage. An ‘ancient’ stone labyrinth on Stora Makholmen, western Sweden, was revealed in 2001 to have been built by two eleven-year-old boys in the 1970s. By law, Swedish ancient monuments had to be the product of ‘human activity in olden times’. Yet the labyrinth was authentically ancient, archaeologists argued, ‘the latest expression of


thousands of years of tradition’. So it remains displayed as a reflection of ‘customs of old times’. Even material remoteness is, after all, only relative. Household goods that date back a mere two generations are treasured for longevity. A cup’s survival attests care against the tooth of time: ‘My grandmother brought it back from Newfoundland . . . 65–70 years ago. That’s how long I’ve had it, and it’s not even cracked. It’s so old [I’m] proud that I’ve still got it’.219

What’s primitive is admired for innocence and purity uncorrupted by sophistication. It takes many forms: preference for untouched wilderness over human occupance; for pre-industrial Arcadian pastoral scenes over cities and factories; for tribal cultures and folkways over civilized artifice. Green nostalgia in England conjures up warm, wooded, well-watered Neolithic harmony seven millennia back. Americans found divine primordial nature morally superior to degenerate Old World history. ‘What is the echo of roofs that a few centuries since rung with barbaric revels . . . to the silence which has reigned in these dim groves since the first Creation?’220 Most fantasize some equable past, ‘a time when everything about us – body, mind, and behaviour – was in sync with the environment.’221

Convinced that modern technical skills cheapened and corrupted art, eighteenth-century European primitifs abjured architecture after the Doric, literature later than Homer, sculpture beyond Phidias, as mannered, false, ignoble. Pre-Raphaelites expunged subsequent artifice by reverting to the quattrocento’s ‘primitive’ and ‘natural honesty’.222 Modernists exalted archaic art for its elemental unconsciousness. Primeval nature and prehistory inspired artists at odds with high technology. Affinity with contemporary art validated ancient artefacts’ archetypal appeal: displaying them as works of art implies that they are beautiful because primitive.223 So too in the jewellery shop: Garrard, ‘the oldest jeweller in the world’, touted stone arrowheads, blades, awls, and microliths from the Sahara, ‘relics of man’s remotest past’, as ‘mute testimony of the dawn of man’s striving to derive aesthetic pleasure from his own handiwork . . . each painstakingly formed with a lost expertise’. Here converge all the virtues of antiquity: great age, uniqueness, scarcity, ancient irrecoverable skills, and assumptions that primitive man lived in harmony with nature and conjoined utility with beauty.

219 Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, Meaning of Things, 60, 82.
221 Zak, Paleofantasy, 270. No such moment ever existed; we’ve ‘always lurched along in evolutionary time . . . always facing new environments, and always shackled by genes from the past’ (270, 227).
The worth of many things past is weighed by their durability. Endurance shows that a heritage is no ephemeral fancy but a rooted verity. Personal continuity is psychically rewarding, providing certitude and agency; social continuity extends mortal lives into the communal past and future. ‘It’s lasted that long’, Prince Philip defended Britain’s thousand-year-old monarchy, ‘it can’t be all that bad’.224 Nor need it be especially good. Like Thomas Hardy’s Paula Power, we display ‘veneration for things old, not because of any merit in them, but because of their long continuance’.225

225 Thomas Hardy, A Laodicean (London, 1881), 305.
Pride inheres in perpetuity – unbroken connections, permanent traits and institutions. Maintaining such links reaffirms their lasting reliability. Since any breach in a lineage might jeopardize a legacy’s transmission and a people’s loyalty, stewards exalt unbroken linkage. The late Roman Empire deployed names of ancient illustrious families as credentials of imperial continuity. Perpetuation of royal blood from Franks to Valois lent prestige to the French monarchy. Seamless apostolic tradition, ‘neither broken nor interrupted but continuous’, held a Vatican historian, preserved ‘the visible monarchy of the Catholic Church’ forever. Duty to founders ‘whose principles we inherit’ required Americans to leave ‘no gaps in the record’. Proof of continuity is crucial to today’s tribal Indians: to secure federal benefits and claim ancestral lands, tribes must show identity unbroken since European contact – a daunting task, given that tribal identity was long ruthlessly expunged.

Boasts that eighty-seven generations of collective experience sustain two millennia of German history merge longevity with continuity. The French claim to be uniquely unabridged: ‘all other history is mutilated, ours alone complete’, held historian Jules Michelet; ‘Italy lacks the last centuries, the Germans and the English lack the first’.

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227 Cesare Baronio, Annales Ecclesiastici (1588–1607), quoted in Simon Ditchfield, Liturgy, Sanctity and History in Tridentine Italy (Cambridge, 1995), 283.
228 Southern Historical Society (1873) quoted in Kammen, Mystic Chords of Memory, 111.
The Revolution was no breach but a bridge from regal protector of Christendom to champion of secular liberty.229 France remained for Mitterrand culturally peerless. ‘From the time that our ancestors the Gauls, so fond of lively colours and sonorous words, were initiated into ... Greco-Roman culture’, summed up an art historian. ‘Practice of the visual or literary arts has scarcely been interrupted in this country’.230 A Lascaux cave painting in a 1995 France Telecom ad joins persistence to priority: ‘20,000 years ago we were on the cutting edge of communications. And we’ve been there ever since.’ The French got there first and are still the best.

Inconvenient breaches are ignored or passed off as ‘anomalous discontinuities’, such as Czech eras of autocracy, or unnatural parentheses in republican continuity, as in repressive Vichy and fascist Italian regimes. Turning a blind eye to lengthy Byzantine and Ottoman lacunae, Greeks claim unbroken continuity of demotic modern Greek with classical forebears. Whig celebrants of ‘enduring’ Anglo-Saxon virtues resurgent in the seventeenth century minimized lamentable intervening centuries as a now-healed lapse in continuity. The inter-war revival of English folk music, little sung for many centuries, aimed to assert ‘that the vital rhythms of English music had been continuous across the ages’. Since marks of any breach may imperil accustomed loyalties, states like churches become bastions of constancy in the midst of turbulent upheaval.231 The 1941 slaughter of Jews at Jedwabne was termed an aberrant ‘moment’ in long-standing amity said to have made Poland a ‘paradise for Jews’.232 Slavery was ‘a 4,000-year-old African institution that affected us [Americans] a mere couple of hundred years’.233 The reunification of Germany revived ideals of historical continuity that required much forgetting both of Nazism and of East German communism.234

Britons laud their malleably steadfast living history. ‘Almost uniquely among European nations, we are at ease with our past’, boasted a Tory Cabinet minister in 1994. ‘We have not had to tear down our royal palaces or convert them to soulless museums. We have not had to bulldoze our great churches or convert them into warehouses. We have not had some great constitutional rupture in our affairs [like] the French, Germans and Italians . . . Here is a nation proud of its past.’235 Perpetual linkage is the ritual refrain. ‘No existing institution or right or claim can be explained without going back a long way’, Bishop Mandell Creighton averred, ‘no [other] nation has carried its whole past so completely into its present’. Herbert Butterfield felt such continuity comforting. ‘Because we in England have maintained the threads between past and present we do not, like some younger states, have to go hunting for our own personalities.’ English Heritage reasserts this ‘sense of entity and continuity, of evolution as a nation over more than ten centuries’.236

English stability is enshrined in landscapes that bear the stamp, its champions fondly say, of centuries of countrymen and women – even of surviving aboriginal cattle. Hardy’s Casterbridge is haunted by ghosts ‘from the latest far back to those old Roman hosts / Whose remains one yet sees, / Who loved, laughed, and fought, hailed their friends, drank their toasts / At their meeting-times here, just as these!’237 A Tory environment chief lauded stewardship that left much of rural England ‘as she was: changeless in our fast-changing world’.238 Reassurance that ‘some things remain stable, permanent and enduring’, a sociologist contends, is a rural desiderata. Rurality sanctions the status quo. Exalting rustic roots, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin wanted ‘the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the country smithy’ to continue to ring in English ears. He conjured up the last load at night of hay being drawn down a lane as twilight comes on, . . . and above all, most subtle, most penetrating and most moving, the smell of wood smoke coming up in the autumn evening, . . . the wood smoke that our ancestors, tens of thousands of years ago, must have caught on the air when they were coming home from a day’s forage.

These were the ‘eternal values and eternal traditions from which we must never allow ourselves to be separated’. Baldwin’s countryside atavism made him not ‘the man in the street . . . but a man in a field-path, a much simpler person steeped in tradition and impervious to new ideas.’239

Obdurate adhesion to precedent is immortalized in Francis Cornford’s satire of Cambridge academic life, making the past a rock on which all novelty should founder. Any proposed change could be rejected as having been tried and found wanting, needing revisions for which the time was not yet ripe, or exciting demands for further reform. From this it followed that ‘Every public action which is not customary, either is wrong, or, if it is right, is a dangerous precedent. It follows that nothing should ever be done for the first time.’²⁴⁰

The English still cleave to Cornford’s precept. To keep Her Majesty’s Stationery Office just as it is, a Tory MP in 1996 hailed the hoary dictum that ‘if it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change’.²⁴¹ In the Codrington Library of All Souls College, Oxford, I was shown Sir Christopher Codrington’s will. ‘By the by’, asked the librarian, ‘have you used our library before?’ ‘No’, I said, ‘I haven’t.’ ‘Oh, then I’m afraid you can’t use it now.’ (An All Souls Fellow was torn away from afternoon tea to vouch for me.)

The sense of enduring succession is manifest in storied locales. Looking out from a Saxon boundary bank, W. G. Hoskins found it immensely satisfying to know which of these farms is recorded in Domesday Book, and which came . . . in the great colonisation movement of the thirteenth century; to see on the opposite slopes, with its Georgian stucco shining in the afternoon sun, the house of some impoverished squire whose ancestors settled on that hillside in the time of King John . . . ; to know that behind one there lies an ancient estate of a long-vanished abbey where St Boniface had his earliest schooling, and that in front stretches the demesne farm of Anglo-Saxon and Norman kings; to be . . . part of an immense unbroken stream that has flowed over this scene for more than a thousand years.²⁴²

The unbroken stream is a peculiarly English virtue. Community of descent connects earliest folk with later, first with latest artefacts and surviving traces of intervening epochs. British Teutonic settlement became ‘more of a living thing’ to E. A. Freeman when he found ‘that the boundary of the land which Ceawlin won from the Briton abides, after thirteen hundred years, [as] the boundary of his own parish and his own fields’.²⁴³ Hardly another country, claimed a celebrant of British royal tradition in 1937, had so continually adapted its medieval institutions ‘as to avoid their complete overthrow or their entire reconstruction’.²⁴⁴

Rejoicing in our own continuity, we delight in espying it elsewhere. ‘Faces are facts’, declared a 1925 English visitor to St Peter’s in Rome, ‘and the true Middle Ages arrive with . . . the countenances of the princes, prelates, priests and monks of the Church. For these faces do not change . . . There is not one . . . that one has not seen before, in this picture or that’.²⁴⁵ Photo captions assure National Geographic readers that ‘though kingdoms rise and fall, these Kurdish fishermen carry on’ (1938), and that ‘across the gulf of countless generations, the Minoan love of dance still finds

expression in Crete’ (1978). Galilee fishermen are posed in postures evoking Jesus as fisher of men. Continuity is extolled as organic tradition in our own culture but perceived as quaintly changeless abroad.

Accretion

Each year and every generation add their own traces to the scene, giving the past a sense of cumulative creation. Time’s accretions generally surpass its dissolutions. No single member of ‘the obscure generations of my own obscure family . . . has left a token of himself behind’, muses Virginia Woolf’s Orlando in the ancestral hall, ‘yet all, working together with their spades and their needles, their love-making and their child-bearing, have left . . . this vast, yet ordered building’. Residues of successive generations betoken partnership, harmony, and order. Accumulation enriches.

Accretions of enduring occupancy enchant those from lands that lack them. Hawthorne’s American visitor admired an English estate because ‘the life of each successive dweller there was eked out with the lives of all who had hitherto lived there; the past lent ‘length, fulness, body, substance’ In his ancestral London house James’s American enjoys ‘items of duration and evidence, all smoothed with service and charged with accumulated messages; permeated with antiquity, the very air seemed ‘to have filtered through the bed of history’. A single generation may suffice. Back in her birthplace, Santmyer found it ‘immeasurably richer than when I was a child. It is the added years that make it so . . . the town is richer by the life of a generation. Since I last stood here with a sled rope in my hand there has been that accretion: the roofs of the town have sheltered an added half-century . . . Humdrum daily life . . . has given to the scene that weight and density.

Indeed, mere contiguity of two distinct pasts may convey accretion, like the medieval tithe barn athwart Avebury’s prehistoric stone circle (Fig. 10) or the seventeenth-century dwellings hollowed into the west front of Bury St Edmunds medieval abbey church (Fig. 9). A Trevelyan family display at Wallington adds ‘a distinct nineteenth-century chapter to a seventeenth-century house with an eighteenth-century interior’. Roman and medieval walls link on to twentieth-century terraces in many English towns, merging past traces with one another and the present in diachronic proximity (Fig. 11). Sixteen centuries of classical and Gothic adaptation and revival, consciously drawing on the forms and motifs of antiquity, give European landscapes an organic density unmatched in

248 Hawthorne, Doctor Grimshawe’s Secret, 229.
249 Henry James, The Sense of the Past (Scribners, 1917), 64–5.
250 Santmyer, Ohio Town, 309.
lands where an ancient past nakedly jostles a modern present. Thus in Egypt ‘stand pharaonic temples and concrete apartment houses, and nothing links them’, observed a Cairo lecturer. ‘What is missed and missing is the middle distance ... Saladin is juxtaposed to cinemas, and To-day, having no ancestry, is uncertain of itself.’

Continuity expresses the conjunction of various pasts, accretion their continuance into the present. ‘The flitting moment, existing in the antique shell of an age gone by’, felt Hawthorne in Rome, ‘has a fascination which we do not find in either the past or present, taken by themselves’. For Cardinal Wiseman, Rome exhibited ‘no distinction of past and present. Ancient Rome lives yet in modern Rome, so as to appear indestructible; and modern Rome is so interlaced with ancient Rome, as justly to seem primeval’ – a classical–clerical amalgam of old and new that later morphed into imperial–fascist. Could we but ‘join ... our past and present selves with all their objects’, wrote art critic Adrian Stokes, ‘we would feel continually at home’.

Figure 9 Charms of continuity: Bury St Edmunds, dwellings set into the medieval abbey front

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Figure 10 Charms of continuity: Avebury, medieval tithe barn athwart prehistoric stone circle

Figure 11 Decor of diachrony: Roman wall and interwar house, near Southampton
Intimate bonds of recall permeated William Maxwell’s boyhood home:
There were traces everywhere of human occupation: the remains of a teaparty on the wicker teacart in the moss-green and white living room, building blocks or lead soldiers in the middle of the library floor, a book lying face down on the window seat, an unfinished game of solitaire, a piece of cross-stitching with a threaded needle stuck in it, a paintbox and beside it a drinking glass full of cloudy water, flowers in cut-glass vases, fires in both fireplaces in the wintertime, lights left burning in empty rooms because somebody meant to come right back. Traces of being warm, being comfortable, being cozy together. Traces of us.  

Du Maurier’s ‘Manderley’ drawing room bore similar ‘witness to our presence. The little heap of library books marked ready to return, and the discarded copy of The Times. Ash-trays, with a stub of a cigarette; cushions, with the imprint of our heads upon them, lolling in the chairs; the charred embers of our log fires still smouldering’. We want animate shelter, not ‘a desolate shell . . . with no whisper of the past about its staring walls’. Love lavished on inherited relics bespeaks needs for a living past. Daily tending her long-dead husband’s shaving kit and watering her long-gone daughter’s hanging plants, an elderly widow keeps her past warmly alive.

Commemorative rites commingle past with present. A talismanic shield confers symbolic immortality on a New Guinea tribesman: ‘Accepting death, and yet denying it, he is not separated from his grandfather or his great-grandfather. They live on, protective and influential, represented by objects.’ Each stone or wooden churinga worked by the Aranda of central Australia ‘represents the physical body of a definite ancestor and generation after generation, it is formally conferred on the living person believed to be this ancestor’s reincarnation’. To Lévi-Strauss ‘the churinga furnishes the tangible proof that the ancestor and his living descendant are of one flesh’. He likens them to archival papers whose loss would be ‘an irreparable injury that strikes to the core of our being’. And he likens the initiation pilgrimages of Australian Aborigines, escorted by their sages, to conducted tours to the homes of famous men.

Accretive continuity enhances the whole lifespan; we see people not only as they are but also as they were, layer atop previous layer. ‘We are none of us “the young”, or the “middle-aged”, or “the old”,’ comments Penelope Lively. ‘We are all of these things.’

Growing up, maturing, ageing accompany awareness that the present develops from an inherent past. ‘Maturity means cultivating that past, integrating former experiences – previous ways of being – into the ongoing psychic activity.’ Household goods and mementoes quicken temporal awareness. ‘We have my great grandparents’ bed which my daughter sleeps on’, recounted an old woman. ‘It’s very small for a double bed and it amazes me that 3 sets of parents slept in it and conceived children in it!’ Such links with ancestors

256 William Maxwell, Ancestors (Knopf, 1971), 191.
257 Daphne du Maurier, Rebecca (1938; Pan, 1975), 7.
259 Penelope Lively, The House in Norham Gardens (Pan, 1977), 51.
and descendants mitigate mortality, much as vitrifying the dead in commemorative medallions once lent permanence to transient lives and instilled ancestral memories in descendants.\footnote{Quoted in Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, \textit{Meaning of Things}, 100, 215–16; Philippe Ariès, \textit{The Hour of Our Death} (1977; Penguin, 1983), 513–16.}

The ultimate in diachronic accretion was Jeremy Bentham’s proposal for landscaping the dead (his own clothed cadaver is permanently displayed at University College London): ‘If a country gentleman had rows of trees leading to his dwelling, the Auto-Icons [embalmed bodies] of his family might alternate with the trees.’ With ‘their robes on their back – their coronets on their head, ... so now may every man be his own statue’.\footnote{C. F. A. Marmoy, ‘The “auto-icon” of Jeremy Bentham at University College London’, \textit{Medical History} 2:2 (1958): 1–10; Jeremy Bentham, ‘Auto-Icon: or, Farther Uses of the Dead to the Living’ (1817), quoted in Martin A. Kayman, ‘A memorial for Jeremy Bentham’, \textit{Law and Critique} 15 (2004): 207–29.} A later benefactor, to ‘be of some use again one day’, more modestly asked that his cremated ashes go into an egg-timer.\footnote{Tom Gribble quoted in ‘Old timer’, \textit{Times}, 3 June 1983: 3.}

Celebrating accretion, as distinct from antiquity, is implicitly progressive. The past is appreciated not just for its own sake but as the portal to the present, its cumulations culminating in our own time.\footnote{Francis Haskell, ‘The manufacture of the past in nineteenth-century painting’, \textit{Past & Present}, no. 53 (1971): 109–20 at 112, 118.} The accretive palimpsest is a living past bound up with the present, not one exotically different or obsolete.

The virtues of continuity often conflict with those of antiquity. Preservation and restoration are similarly opposed. Those who hold antiquity supreme would excise subsequent additions and alterations to restore ‘original’ conditions; those devoted to continuity would preserve all time’s accretions as witnesses to their entire history.\footnote{See Chapters 10 and 11.}

Sequence

The present is an indivisible fleeting instant, whereas whatever duration we assign the past, it is a \textit{length} of time. Length lets us order and segment the past and hence begin to explain it. The histories of all things start in some past and go on until they cease to exist or to be remembered. Sequential order gives everything that has happened a temporal place, assigns the past a shape, and sets our own brief lifetime memories into the lengthier historical saga.

As commonly experienced, sequential awareness involves four temporal properties: diachrony, recurrence, novelty, and duration. Time is felt as a series of events that precede or follow each other; the past is a multitude of happenings, some earlier, others later, though many overlap. Their relation is one of potential cause and effect: what happens first may affect what happens later, but never vice versa. Diachronic consciousness has inestimable value: to recognize that certain things happened before and others after enables us to shape memory, secure identity, generate tradition, and prepare for the future.
Recurrence involves the repetition of events within which life is lived: the waxing and waning, ebbing and flowing of diurnal, lunar, and seasonal rhythms; our own breathing and heartbeats, sleeping and waking. Along with these cyclic happenings we experience others that are singular, unique, unrepeatable – the flow of individual careers and collective histories. These two modes of being are known as time’s circle and time’s arrow.

Time’s arrow flies only once from the irrecovable past towards the unmapped future, never again the same. The targets of time’s arrow are the contingent events and sporadic vagaries of human and natural history, a temporal dimension distinct from natural law’s recurrent clockwork time. The interplay of circle and arrow continually shapes our lives. Habitual customs – law-like, regular, predictable – interact with the uncertainties of history’s directional events.

Awareness of duration lets us measure time into comparable lengths. Standardized seconds and minutes and hours, weeks and months and years, pattern our routines, tasks, and relationships. Agreed chronologies let us segment the past into equal or unequal intervals, analyse events across cultural and geographical divides, and calculate paces of change. We celebrate anniversaries, count up days since important dates, and base expectations on calendric regularities. Duration places things in temporal context, points up past resemblances and differences, and fixes bygone events within firm temporal grids. Links between chronology and history are explored in Chapter 8.

Termination

The past is cherished in no small measure because it is over; what happened has happened. Termination gives it an aura of completion, of stability, of permanence lacking in the ongoing present. Back then ‘tensions and contradictions were ultimately reconciled . . . Everybody knew what to do and what to believe’. Nothing more can happen to the past; it is safe from the unexpected and the untoward, from accident or betrayal. Nothing in the past can now go wrong; said a Henry James character, ‘the past is the one thing beyond all spoiling’. Some feel it cleansed of evil and peril because no longer active, now impotent. To Carlyle all the dead were holy, even those who had been ‘base and wicked when alive’.

Being completed also makes the past comprehensible; we see things more clearly after their consequences emerge. To be sure, the past has new consequences for each successive generation and so must be endlessly reinterpreted. But these interpretations all benefit from hindsight available only for the past. We are able to sum up yesterday far better than today. The benefits and burdens of hindsight are discussed in Chapter 8.

Because it is over, the past can be arranged and domesticated, given a coherence foreign to the chaotic, ever-shifting present. Each age looks back enviously at the

269 Henry James, *The Awkward Age* (1899; Penguin, 1966), 150.
fancied quiet integrity and comforting certainties of the past, the Victorians to medieval
times as more stable and coherent than their own, modern nostalgists to Victorian
times for the same virtues.271 ‘Men had fixed beliefs in those days’, wrote the historian
J. A. Froude. ‘Over the pool of uncertainties in which our generation is floundering there
was then a crust of undisturbed conviction on which they could plant their feet and step out
like men.’272 This Victorian encomium to the eighteenth century echoes in every succeeding
era. The relative simplicity and transparency of bygone things and processes makes them
seem easier to comprehend. Yesteryear’s forms and functions were integral to our youth
when we learned how things worked, whereas today’s innovations are baffling save to
computer nerds and eight-year-olds. Hence the appeal of old tools and machinery: the
steam engine is more intelligible than the computer chip not only because its working
parts are visible, but because it fits into an order of things familiar from childhood.273

Childhood remembered shares this sense of pastness: in contrast to life’s later stages
it is finished, completed, summed up. Unlike our present incoherent mess, childhood is
framed by a beginning and an end. Its saga has the shape of fable: ‘once upon a time’, it
starts, and formulaically ends ‘happily ever after’.274

A past too well ordered or understood loses some of its appeal, however. Hence we
prefer survivals (and revivals) to seem haphazard and organic, like the architect Blunden
Shadbolt’s rambling, ‘wibbly-wobbly’ neo-Tudor dwellings.275 To feel secure from pre-
sent control or interference, the past should feel both completed and unconstrained.
The cherished traits I ascribe to the past are seldom consciously identified. Nonethe-
less, each of these attributes – antiquity, continuity, accretion, sequence, termination – is
an experienced reality. Together they give the past a character that shapes both its
inestimable benefits and its inescapable burdens. To the latter I now turn.

Threats and evils

Every past is worth condemning. Friedrich Nietzsche, 1874276

In the Past is no hope . . . the Past is the text-book of tyrants.

Herman Melville, 1850277

The past is useless. That explains why it is past.

Wright Morris, 1963278

273 Many mourn machines that can be seen, heard, and felt – steam locomotives, gramophones, and
typewriters (Rosecrans Baldwin, ‘The digital ramble: machinery nostalgia’, NYT, 19 June 2008; Tom
Hanks, ‘I am TOM. I like to TYPE. Hear that?’ IHT, 8 Aug. 2013: 7).
274 See my ‘The past is a childlike country’, in Travellers in Time (Histon, Cambridge: Green Bay, 1990),
75–82.
mocking the neo-Tudor’, Times, 11 June 1983: 8; Dan Carrier, ‘Calls to protect “wibbly-wobbly” Shadbolt
276 Friedrich Nietzsche, The Use and Abuse of History (1874; Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), 21.
277 Herman Melville, White-Jacket (1850; Northwestern, 1970), 150.
278 Wright Morris, Cause for Wonder (Atheneum, 1963), 53.
Forget history. Now is all that matters. Nissan car ad, 2010

We should build a monument to Amnesia and forget where we put it.

Edna Longley (at 26th Bloody Sunday anniversary, Londonderry, 1998)

The past not only aids and delights; it also saddens and threatens. All its advantages have drawbacks, all its benefits subsume risks. This section reviews the evils felt to inhere in the past and the burdens it imposes, and shows how such pasts are exorcized or neutralized.

Traditionally, the past was as much feared as revered – indeed, feared because revered. Fateful events and tragic victims dominated its doom-laden teachings. Following St Augustine, medieval scholars viewed Adam’s fall as the origin of history, the record of human alienation from God, a litany of sins and tribulations, and a morally contagious malady. Like nostalgia, the past as communicable illness is a recurrent metaphor. Walt Whitman warned Americans heading for the Old World that ‘there were germs hovering above this corpse. Bend down to take a whiff of it, and you might catch the disease of historic nostalgia for Europe’. The sorry past still lingers on to endanger the present, its influence malign, its relics corrupting. ‘Where men have lived a long time’, J. B. Priestley surmised, ‘the very stones are saturated in evil memories’. The evils are threefold: the concomitant griefs that the grievous past saddles on the present; the burdensome weight of the past’s duration and unmatchable achievements; and the menace of its continuing potency.

The grievous past

The problem with the olden days . . . is that life was so unimaginably vile . . . Mud. Hens. Huge facial sores. Women getting raped. Children falling down wells. Hot mercury poured into open wounds. Horses having their heads cut off on battlefields. Rain for 500 years, non-stop, leading to whole countries getting wiped out by mildew. And everyone stinking of lard, pigs, urine and weasel. Caitlin Moran, 2010

History is quintessentially seen largely as a recapitulation of crimes and calamities, as for Robert Browning:

I saw no use in the past: only a scene
Of degradation, ugliness and tears

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279 New Scientist, 14 Aug. 2010, inside front cover.
282 Walt Whitman, Democratic Vistas (1871; Iowa, 2010), 72, paraphrased in Spender, Love–Hate Relations, xi.
The record of disgraces best forgotten
A sullen page in human chronicles
Fit to erase.285

Observers looked back aghast at countless evils and errors. ‘In the five progressive centuries that preceded’ presidential historian Edward Eggleston’s nineteenth, ‘there was never a bad, that was not preceded by a worse’. The past’s ‘fixed essences and hierarchies’, agreed a successor a century later, make it ‘a world we are fortunate to have lost and properly continue to flee’.286 Often enough, the more we learn about it the less we like it. Miseries of recent pasts overwhelm previously lauded glories. ‘The past which haunts us is not a golden age’, observes a historian of twentieth-century modernity, ‘but rather an iron age, one of fire and blood’. It is the memory of Auschwitz.287

Indiscriminate admirers of the past mistake changes in themselves for changes in the world, their own ageing ills for those of society in general. ‘Commending … those times their younger years have heard their fathers condemn, and condemning those times the gray heads of their posterity shall commend’, misanthropic oldsters ‘extol the days of their forefathers and declaim against the wickedness of times present’, wrote Thomas Browne.288 Nostalgic Luddites forget that every generation has lamented the loss of bygone felicity, morality, seemliness, argues psychologist Steven Pinker. “What is the world coming to?” they ask when a terrorist bomb explodes, a sniper runs amok, an errant drone kills an innocent.

The world in the past was much worse. The medieval rate of homicide was 35 times the rate of today, and the rate of death in tribal warfare 15 times higher than that. … The Crusades, the slave trade, the wars of religion, and the colonisation of the Americas had death tolls which … rival or exceed those of world wars. In earlier centuries … a seven-year old could be hanged for stealing a petticoat, a witch could be sawn in half, and a sailor … flogged to a bloody pulp.289

A résumé of life in bygone Britain presents a picture ‘so painful that it instantly improves the present. We all know that the Middle Ages were frightful, dirty, smelly and dangerous, but it comes as a surprise how awful the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries were’.290 Power cuts in the wake of Hurricane Sandy (2012) left a New York historian dirty, cold, frustrated by candlelight reading, and vowing ‘to spend more time in the present and a little less time wishing I was living at some time in the past’.291

Once-subjugated peoples claim uniquely parlous pasts. Centuries of Irish bards have keened ‘agony the most vivid, the most prolonged, of any recorded on the blotted page of...

human suffering’. A. M. Sullivan’s canonical Story of Ireland (1867) showed it ‘like no other country in the world... in cruelties of oppression endured’.292 The Irish Free State long continued to MOPE, as the ‘Most Oppressed People Ever’.293 The poet Adam Mickiewicz personified Poland as ‘the Christ among nations’, crucified for others’ sins. Stripped of autonomy, scarred by dismemberment, and plundered of cherished heritage, Poles keep a calendar of grievous reminders: Polish National Day mourns the stillborn eighteenth-century constitution.294 ‘There is only one nation of victims’, an Israeli journalist contends. ‘If somebody else wants to claim this crown of thorns for himself, we will bash his head in.’295 Other claimants to that crown include the United States, Germany, Ulster, and Colombia.296 A recent study finds Britain a ‘nation of victims’, because 73 per cent of all Britons – the disabled, women, ethnic minorities, homosexuals – are officially oppressed, some (black lesbians, for example) trebly impaired.297 At California history textbook hearings in 1987, group after group demanded that the curriculum show ‘its forebears had suffered more than anyone else in history’.298

Stressing past misery has its benefits. Bunker Hill, Gallipoli, and Pearl Harbor reinforced losers’ bonds more than their subsequent victories. ‘Suffering in common unifies more than joy does’, Renan consoled the French for their surrender to Prussia in 1870. In national memory ‘grievs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties and require a common effort’.299 The Chinese Communist Party deploys gory reminders of China’s victimization in the ‘century of humiliation’ from the First Opium War (1839–42) through the 1945 Sino-Japanese War to reinforce patriotism.300

Yet evil pasts can devastate those constrained to recall their dreadfulness. The antique lowboy in Cheever’s story mires its inheritor in a miserable yesteryear. Conjuring up the mishaps of the chest’s previous owners and ‘driven back upon his wretched childhood’,


293 Liam Kennedy, Colonialism, Religion and Nationalism in Ireland (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1996), 121.


he succumbs to the past’s horrors. Many a parent strives to spare children knowledge of family skeletons or bygone collective calamity. The global past in Lois Lowry’s post-catastrophe Community is so demoralizing that its memory is banned, save for a solitary Receiver tasked to recall the whole of human history. ‘The worst part of holding the memories [of] the deep and terrible suffering of the past . . . is not the pain. It’s the loneliness’ – an anguished isolation endured by traumatized Holocaust survivors and shamed victims of sexual abuse.302

Old wounds still fester. Inherited pain persists. Ancient injuries sap the pride, shrink the purse, cripple the power, and constrain the will even of remote putative posterity, who ‘too easily accept the story that they and their kind were always good for nothing’, and blame themselves for their subordination. ‘Grief is passed on genetically’, a Lakota/Dakota Indian says of the legacy of trauma, shame, fear, and anger handed down to Native Americans. ‘It has been paralyzing to us as a group.’ Endemic racism and accrued inequities hamper slave descendants to this day. Scarred by ‘post-traumatic slave syndrome’, some remain haunted by ancestral bondage. Ancient injustices are ingrained in the posterity of victims (and transgressors). ‘Passed down to children almost with their mothers’ milk’, such mindsets endure for generations.304 Persisting reminders of victimhood enhance tribal and national identity at psychic and therapeutic cost.

The stifling past

I am getting lost in my childhood memories like an old man . . . I’m being devoured by the past. Gustave Flaubert, 1875305

A past need not be evil or unhappy to poison the present. It is a common complaint that yesterday outshines today – a superiority that discourages creativity and makes the present mediocre. That each new generation is inferior to the last is a traditional truism.306 A past too esteemed or closely embraced saps present purposes and engenders apathy. In adoring antiquity, warned Sir Thomas Browne, men ‘impose a thraldom on their times, which the ingenuity of no age should endure’.307 The forger Alceo Dossena’s compulsion to imitate Renaissance masterpieces exemplified the burden of ‘Rome’s great and overwhelming past, at once a curse and a blessing’ that could never be shaken off.308

306 Eviatar Zerubavel, Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past (Chicago, 2004), 16–18.
308 Frank Arnau, Three Thousand Years of Deception in Art and Antiques (Jonathan Cape, 1961), 222.
The preservationist slogan ‘They don’t build them like they used to. And they never will again’ presumes today’s inherent mediocrity.

The sheer persistence of past routine can dim the present. It saddens a Hawthorne protagonist ‘to think how the generations had succeeded one another’ in a venerable English village, ‘lying down among their fathers’ dust, and forthwith getting up again, and recommencing the same meaningless round, and really bringing nothing to pass . . .’. It seemed not worthwhile that more than one generation of them should have existed.309 Hardy’s Tess rejects such history as self-demeaning: ‘Finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part would deny her personal agency.310

Obsession with roots and relics, heirlooms and mementoes, pre-empts concern for the present. In Marx’s phrase, ‘the tradition of all past generations weighs like an alp upon the brain of the living’.311 Past too revered inhibit change, embargo progress, dampen optimism, stifle creativity. ‘Your worst enemy is faith in a happy prehistoric time’, wrote Cesare Pavese, when ‘everything essential has already been said by the first thinkers’.312

The classic indictment is Nietzsche’s. Men ‘sick of the historical fever’, dilettante spectators born old and grey, are ‘withered shoots of a gladder and mightier stock’ mired in lethargic retrospection. Nietzsche cites two retrogressive follies. One is ‘hatred of present power and greatness masquerading as an extreme admiration of the past. Despising the present without loving the past, the ‘monumental’ historian invokes past authority to ensure present failure, as if to say, ‘Let the dead bury the living.’ The other is indiscriminate antiquarianism, ‘raking over all the dust heaps of the past’. Mummifying life with insatiable lust for everything old paralyzes the new.313

Antiquarian regress – and complaints about its stultifying effects – are perennial. Second-century self-contempt ‘prostrated itself before Greek models, and educated Romans grew ecstatic over ruins’, writes Peter Gay.314 Classical authority ‘transmitted with blind deference from one generation of disciples to another’, in Gibbon’s criticism, ‘precluded every generous attempt to exercise the powers, or enlarge the limits, of the human mind’.315

Classical antiquity’s monumental relics remain ubiquitous reminders of matchless virtues. Since the past stands for purity, the present is ipso facto polluted; ancient glory breeds modern decadence. In Kostas Mitropoulos’s cartoons the classical past imprisons modern Greeks.316 ‘I woke with this marble head in my hands’, wrote the

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309 Hawthorne, Doctor Grimshawe’s Secret, 220.
310 Thomas Hardy, Tess of the d’Urbervilles (1891; Penguin, 1978), 182.
311 Marx, Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, 5.
poet Seferis; ‘it exhausts my elbows and I don’t know where to put it down’.\(^{317}\) Curated hordes of fragmented statues bespeak the support exacted from the living to prop up the dead. ‘For modern Greek artists’, confesses one, ‘the ancient forebears are a tough act to follow’.\(^{318}\) The past is too grand to live up to. ‘Greeks aren’t what they used to be’, concludes a survey, for the sense of national identity relies mainly on precursors two-and-a-half millennia ago. ‘The most powerful individuals in this country’, complains a curator, ‘are the archaeologists’.\(^{319}\)

Ancestral marvels demean modern heirs who cannot create but only husband and copy. Italian painters and draughtsmen – Panini, Piranesi – so immortalized Roman decay and dissolution that tourists closed their eyes on everything modern for defiling the aura of antiquity.\(^{320}\) Romantic poets who flocked to Italy were besotted by its past and dismissive of its present. ‘Rome is a city of the dead, or rather of those . . . puny generations which inhabit and pass over the spot . . . made sacred to eternity’, wrote Shelley in 1818.\(^{321}\) He echoed Petrarch’s own regret, in recalling his wanderings there, that contemporary Romans were blind to the city’s past – ‘nowhere is Rome less known than in Rome’ – and the Romanticist Ugo Foscoli’s obsessive remembrances of the neglected dead. Lapped in sentimental adoration of Dante and Petrarch, the Brownings and their expatriate successors disparaged modern Italians as inept custodians of their ancient legacy.\(^{322}\)

Casting off this demeaning heritage was the *cri de coeur* of Italian Futurists. The late nineteenth century left Italy deprived of all but its past. Faced with Risorgimento failures, Italians took refuge in harking back to imperial Rome. Scorning the past as an obstacle to progress, Futurists termed Italy ‘the country of the dead’, Rome and Venice mired in mouldy relics, Florence a graveyard of antiquarian rubbish for transalpine tourists, their inhabitants slavish lackeys purveying fake antiquities. Why ‘this eternal and futile worship of the past?’ thundered Marinetti. He sought ‘to free this land from its smelly gangrene of professors, archaeologists, *ciceroni* and antiquarians’. The real Italy lay in modern machine-age Milan and Turin, not the Baedeker’d, *dolce far niente*, fetid necropolises.\(^{323}\)

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Many Futurists soon morphed into fascists. Italians must ‘quit living off ... the past’, declared Mussolini, cease being ‘degenerate and parasitic’, and ensure ‘past glories are surpassed by those of the future’.324

‘For something genuinely new to begin’, Mircea Eliade sums up zealots’ root-and-branch cleansing of the past, ‘the vestiges and ruins of the old cycle must be completely destroyed’. Cistercians, Puritans, Futurists, and Modernists all sought to remake a world that owed nothing to recent tradition.325

Adulation of the past inhibits the present not least because its cumulations engorge finite space and energy. Were the ‘enormous hosts of the dead ... raised while the living slept’, exclaims Dickens’s ‘Uncommercial Traveller’, ‘there would not be the space of a pin’s point in all the streets and ways for the living, [and] the vast armies of the dead would overflow the hills and valleys far beyond the city’.326 So too with their artefacts. ‘As each generation leaves its fragments & potsherds behind’, observed Hawthorne at the British Museum in 1855, ‘the world is accumulating too many materials for knowledge’. Admiring the Parthenon frieze, the Elgin Marbles, Egyptian sarcophagi, he nonetheless feared their incapacitating impact:

The present is burthened too much with the past. We have not time ... to appreciate what is warm with life, and immediately around us; yet we heap up all these old shells, out of which human life has long emerged, casting them off forever. I do not see how future ages are to stagger under all this dead weight, with the additions that will continually be made to it.327

Like many Americans, Hawthorne was simultaneously fascinated and appalled by the European past. Roman antiquity left ‘a perception of such weight and density in a by-gone life’ as to press down or crowd out the present. Next to the massive Roman past ‘all matters, that we handle or dream of, now-a-days, look evanescent’.328

More menacing than our museumized past is the discarded past, detritus that never truly disappears. In Italo Calvino’s ‘Leonia’, everything is new-made daily, all the used artefacts, from sheets and soap to boilers and pianos, are consigned to garbage every night, to be dumped outside the urban walls.

But as yesterday’s sweepings piled up on the sweepings of the day before, ... a fortress of indestructible leftovers surrounds Leonia, ... the scales of its past are soldered into a cuirass that cannot be removed. ... The greater its height grows, ... the more the danger of a landslide looms,


328 Hawthorne, Marble Faun, 6.
... an avalanche of unmated shoes, calendars of bygone years, withered flowers, submerging the city in its own past.329

The menacing past

The past not only appals by its crimes or cripples by its grandeur; it threatens by its lasting potency. 'We live entirely in the past, nourished by dead thoughts, dead creeds, dead sciences', moaned Henry Miller. 'The past ... is engulfing us.'330 As followers of Freud and Nietzsche are aware, 'the past is old stuff, and like depleted and worn out objects, it just clogs up our lives'. But though 'spent, banished, used up and made void, ... the threat of the uncanny' implacably persists.331 James Fenimore Cooper’s tale of the Swiss hereditary hangman who 'can neither inherit or transmit aught but disgrace' spells out the fearsome consequences of an inescapable legacy, the Roman damnosa hereditas.332

'Any normal child', concludes a biologist, 'hates what he inherits'. We must dispute the philosopher’s dictum that 'we only dread the future, but not the past'.333

A miserable childhood and utopian Marxism turned the philosopher Ernst Bloch firmly against reminiscence. 'Nothing past should be sought so faithfully that one goes back, truly back. ... The desire for it is depraved, and one will pay for it too. ... The return disappoints; ... life then and life now have no connection, or merely one in melancholy', towards things dead or broken. 'Separating oneself from one’s past is a test of one’s adaptation to fate.'334

Previous others live on to haunt us. In cemetery and charnel house, song and story, the dead oppress and cajole the living, who cannot exorcise their ghosts. Sheer survival may mandate concealing or expunging ancestral remains. Transgressors’ bodies were staked into bogs to make sure they would not rise from the dead to bedevil the living; Bronze Age burials were obliterated to expunge posthumous powers.335 Academics ‘who could slaughter their intellectual ancestors’ are more apt to prosper than those who adored them.336 As the progeny of past generations, Nietzsche reminded readers, ‘we are also the products of their aberrations, passions, and errors, and indeed of their crimes’.337 They

331 John Scanlan, On Garbage (Reaktion, 2005), 162–3.
336 Anthony Grafton, Bring Out Your Dead: The Past as Revelation (Harvard, 2001), 293.
337 Nietzsche, Use and Abuse of History, 102.
still threaten. ‘Those who venture too close . . . risk being pulled back into a past of fixed essences and hierarchies’ ruled by princes and prelates.338

Japanese who find the weight of tradition unbearable break entirely with long-worshipped ancestors. Wretched inheritors of ancestral woes and misfortunes, they sever karmic bonds to escape forebears’ malign grip.339 Convinced that ancestral character resurfaces in descendants, a Yoruba villager seeks to erase a forebear’s grievous life from collective tribal memory, lest inherited disgrace wreck his descendants’ prospects.340

Like the ancestral past, inherited property can be a dubious blessing. Not every relic is seemly or desirable. Along with the ‘the Old Master over the carved surround of the saloon fireplace’ in the stately home comes ‘the peeling wallpaper in the servant’s bedroom’.341 Adored survivals may be also detested. Among the cabbages, diesel six-wheelers, and theatre props in old Covent Garden, one’s delight in ‘this tight-packed, smelly, rakishly scruffy and vital corner of London is equalled by a deep conviction . . . that the whole bloody lot ought to be bulldozed’.342 clinging to Lancashire’s old industrial monuments was held sheer masochism, yet ‘in fighting to remove the greyness of its economy, it would be a pity to tamper with its soul’. But even the soul may perish in such surroundings. Dank Mancunian greyness so depressed one lover of the past that she felt inclined to eradicate everything Victorian and Edwardian.343

Many strive to forget or banish baneful recall. To prevent sorrows being ‘kept raw by the edge of repetitions’, Thomas Browne termed it mercifully beneficial to be ‘forgetful of evils past’.344 Memory must be curtailed or obliterated, advised Nietzsche, lest the past become the gravedigger of the present. ‘No artist will paint his picture, no general win his victory, no nation gain its freedom’ without forgetting the past.345 Zionist pioneers in Palestine ‘cultivat[d] oblivion. We are proud of our short memory. The more rootless we see ourselves, the more we believe that we are more free, more sublime. It is roots that delay our upward growth.’ After the Holocaust horror, some Jews wanted to consign Jewish history to oblivion.346 Cambodia’s prime minister urged his countrymen to ‘dig a deep hole and bury the past’.347

338 Ozment, Ancestors, 1.
345 Nietzsche, Use and Abuse of History, 9.
The need for exorcism impels Naipaul’s post-colonial Africans:

We have to learn to trample on the past . . . to get rid of the old, to wipe out the memory of the intruder . . . There may be some parts of the world . . . where men can cherish the past and think of passing on furniture and china to their heirs . . . Some peasant department of France full of half-wits in châteaux; some crumbling Indian palace-city, or some dead colonial town in a hopeless South American country. Everywhere else . . . the past can only cause pain.

Naipaul was equally dismissive of the ‘ecstatically contemplated . . . golden Indian past . . . a religious idea, clouding intellect and painful perception, numbing the stress in bad times’.348 So too the Russian in Thomas Harris’s Archangel warns that the past still menaces: ‘this isn’t England or America, the past isn’t safely dead here. In Russia, the past carries razors and a pair of handcuffs’.349

Demolition is the common fate of despised and dangerous legacies. As with distressing memories, out of sight, out of mind. Iconoclasts down the ages expunge detested reminders. Dreaded, oppressive, shameful pasts spawn iconoclastic frenzy. Each Chinese dynasty made an auto-da-fé of its predecessor’s precious relics. Roman emperors regularly removed images of rivals, destroying or displacing portraits, razing or substituting new heads on statues.350 During English monastic dissolution, Protestants aimed to wipe out every Catholic icon, to make ‘utterly extinct and destroy all shrines’, in a 1547 Tudor injunction, ‘so that there remain no memory of the same’.351 An Egyptian jihadist would demolish the pyramids and the Giza sphinx: ‘All Muslims are charged . . . to remove such idols, as we did in Afghanistan when we destroyed the Buddha statues.’352 The missionary founder of Berea College, Kentucky, Dr John Fee, so loathed slavery that he literally knifed out every Scriptural reference to servitude. Fee’s mutilated Bible, on display in Berea’s library, attests his faith that evil can be undone by being literally excised.353

Oblivion is a parallel remedy: expunging all mention of the now-detested man or matter and enjoining amnesia. Two aims animate injunctions to forget: to doom a sinner by blotting out his name (Deuteronomy 29:20); to blot out the sin, ‘forgive their iniquity and . . . remember their sins no more’ (Jeremiah 31:34).354 Forgetting is a common prelude to forgiving: amnesia facilitates amnesty. To restore amity after Odysseus’ vengeance against Penelope’s suitors, Zeus purges antagonists’ ‘memories of the bloody slaughter of their brothers and their sons’. To foster a myth of uninterrupted ancestral freedom, and to antiquate Solon’s laws and thus make them unassailable, public amnesia

349 Thomas Harris, Archangel (Hutchinson, 1998), 167.
353 I saw Fee’s Bible in the Berea College library in 1988.
was decreed when Athens regained democracy in 403 B.C. Citizens were forbidden to discuss recent sufferings or to seek revenge against traitors who had aided the oligarchs. Recall was forbidden precisely because the recent past was remembered all too well; it was put out of mind because dangerously painful.355

The ancient Athenian example proved serviceable in early-modern Europe, when religious conflicts imperilled social stability and state exchequers. To enable reconciliation, former foes had to forget past injuries. The 1598 Edict of Nantes required memory of quarrels ‘be extinguished and put to rest’.356 Ending the Thirty Years War, the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) imposed ‘perpetual oblivion and amnesty’ on all parties.357 Mindful of Restoration England’s festering sores, Thomas Hobbes pronounced forgetting the basis of a just state, amnesia the cornerstone of the social contract. Disregarding ‘the evil past’ for the sake of ‘the good to follow’, offences should be pardoned, not punished; wrongs forgotten, not avenged. Remedial oblivion became a vital tool of English statecraft, Civil War antagonists adjured to forget. ‘Acts of Oblivion’ in 1660 pardoned men who had borne arms against Charles II and in 1690 those who had opposed William III. Suppressing memory of grievances defanged enduring resentments.358

French revolutionaries decreed oblivion integral to freedom; écrasez l’infâme exhorted reformers to expunge all traces of the base past. After the Terror of 1794, citizens were ordered to ‘forget the misfortunes inseparable from a great revolution’.359 Amnesia was essential to the national heritage, taught Ernest Renan in 1882. ‘Every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of St. Bartholomew, the massacres in the 13th century Midi: only by smothering such crimes could France flourish.’360 A century later the genocidal ruptures of Vichy France had in turn to be forgotten. ‘Are we going to keep open the bleeding wounds of our national discords forever?’ chided President Georges Pompidou in 1972; it was time ‘to forget those times when the French didn’t like each other’.361 Selective amnesia also promoted Anglo-French amity. English consent to let Napoleon’s corpse be taken from St Helena for reburial in Paris would ‘wipe out all traces


359 Citron, Mythe national, 183; Bertrand Barer de Vieira, ‘Report by the Committee of Public Safety’, An II [1794], quoted in Gildea, Past in French History, 32.

360 Renan, Qu’est-ce qu’une nation? 38.

of a sorrowful past’, envisaged a French worthy. Of Canada’s bitter Anglo-French battles Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier in 1900 urged that ‘the memory of those conflicts of the last century be forever forgotten’.

American colonists expunged from memory Old World evils to realize the blessings of the New. Immigrants shed noxious European traditions to embrace American novelty. ‘Forget your past, your customs, and your ideals’ to speed Americanization, a Jewish immigration guidebook advised in 1890. ‘We had to try to obliterate centuries’ worth of memory’, an Italian-American agreed, ‘in just two or three generations’. President George H. W. Bush invoked the statute of limitations against the festering wounds of Vietnam; Americans must forget it, for ‘no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory’.

It may be true that ‘some measure of neglect and even forgetting are the necessary condition for civic health’, as Tony Judt concluded. But ‘a nation has first to have remembered something before it can begin to forget it’. The French had to remember Vichy as it was – not as they had misremembered it; so too the Poles with the Jews, Spain with its Civil War. Yet the hoary maxim that ‘to know all is to forgive all’ seems no more valid in private than public affairs. Rather, as Ivy Compton-Burnett’s discreet butler observes, ‘to forgive, it is best to know as little as possible’. To exorcise corrupt memory, once-cherished keepsakes are banished. ‘Out they go – the Roman coins, the sea horse from Venice, and the Chinese fan. Down with the stuffed owl in the upstairs hall and the statue of Hermes on the newel post! . . . Dismiss whatever molests us and challenges our purpose.’ Throwing out souvenirs, ‘getting rid of all the physical and emotional blockages in your home’, promises to restore one’s health.

Neutralizing its relics tames the past. ‘By displaying what had gone before and making an ornament of it’, writes Lively, ‘you destroyed its potency. Less sophisticated societies propitiate their ancestors; this one makes a display of them and renders them harmless’. We subdue an overbearing past by sequestering it. Once memorialized, it loses power to harm the present – as with Nabokov’s narrator who ‘transformed everything we saw into monuments to our still nonexistent past . . . so that subsequently when the past really existed for us, we would know how to cope with it, and not perish under its burden’.

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369 Penelope Lively, The Road to Lichfield (Heinemann, 1977), 178.
Satire is another way to neuter the past. An SF tale portrayed Napoleon as obsessively touchy about being short and Robin Hood as a Mafia-type lout; thus made risible they ceased to be figures of dread.371 A cartoonist’s dialogue demystifies the autobiographical past:

‘I almost drowned yesterday, and my whole life flashed in front of me!’
‘That must have been exciting!’
‘Not really; I’d seen it before.’372

The scholar confronts the past’s evils is to understand it better. ‘If the Past has been an obstacle and a burden’, Lord Acton advised, ‘knowledge of the Past is the safest and surest emancipation’.373 History’s emancipatory role is the main burden of J. H. Plumb’s 1969 The Death of the Past. ‘Nothing has been so corruptly used as concepts of the past’ in ideologies designed mainly to justify ruling elites.

[But this] old past is dying, its force weakening, and . . . the historian should speed it on its way, for it was compounded of bigotry, of national vanity, of class domination . . . History has burrowed like a death-watch beetle in this great fabric of the past, honeycombing the timbers and making the structure ruinous . . . This critical, destructive role is still necessary, [given persisting] illusions about the past . . . and historians [must] cleanse . . . those deceiving visions of a purposeful past.374

But Plumb’s vision of the enlightened historian cleansing bygone times of delusive myths and errors, plumbing the past for its hidden unsavoury secrets, threatens both inquirer and the past. Zealous curiosity is traditionally feared as a danger to the fabric of the past. Equating the search for forbidden lore with greed for hidden treasure, Christianity blamed the Fall on impious lust for knowledge. Augustine held ‘lust of the eyes’ the besetting sin of pagan priests, philosophers, and heretics. Worse than the desire for riches was the quest for prideful renown that bred diseased craving for arcane secrets, notably the evil arts of astrology and alchemy. Beyond knowing God, all human knowledge was sheer vanity. Not until long after Francis Bacon did unfettered curiosity cease to be a diabolical vice.375

Efforts to divine the future were most anathematized, but inquiries into the past, especially the pagan past, were likewise censured. Medieval treasure hunters who craved the fabled riches of antiquity found their transgressions regularly thwarted. In William of Malmesbury’s tale, the magically versed Gerbert of Aurillac (Pope Sylvester II, 999–1003) seeks Octavian’s treasures in subterranean Rome, near a statue inscribed ‘Strike Here’. Unlike previous seekers, Gerbert hits not the statue but the spot shadowed by its pointing finger – a trope taken from St Augustine’s commentary on fathoming the subtext of Holy

374 Plumb, Death of the Past, 16, 83, 115.
Scripture. Digging discloses a golden king and queen dining off golden dishes in a vast golden palace. But they are beyond reach; when Gerbert tries to touch them ‘all these images . . . leap into life and rush at the offender’, plunging the whole scene into darkness; Gerbert barely extricates himself. The admonitory lesson is nihil erat quod posset tangi etsi posset videri – ‘what is unveiled is only to be understood by the eyes, and is never to be transformed into tangible riches’.376

To penetrate the past is perilous. Dante’s infernal underground brimmed with the glories of pagan antiquity, but its denizens were damned for all eternity – the past was ‘the Devil’s greatest whore’, in Luther’s phrase. While the future was known only to God, knowledge of the past was a mystique shared by Satan and his hybrid offspring, such as Merlin, who knew all things that had been said and done.377

While both divination and retrospection were forbidden, the future was ‘higher’, the past ‘lower’, with the added opprobrium of pagan artifice. Malmesbury’s Gerbert is a stand-in for the historian-chronicler, announcing that what is surmised of the past never existed or, still worse, that those who seek possession destroy its very reality. Adjurations never to look back, as in the dire warnings addressed to Lot’s wife and to Orpheus, apply to time as well as place. Insistence on knowing his past devastates Oedipus. ‘The past is seen as a separate place, . . . or ambiguously undead’, writes a medieval historian. ‘It is untouchable, sequestered’ from the observer by mechanical and magical barriers, ‘and utterly irretrievable’.

Yet it is ever at risk of violation. Merely examining the past can be fatal to it. In archaeological excavation ‘We murder to dissect’. The antiquarians had felled the tree that they might learn its age by counting the rings in the trunk’, commented a nineteenth-century observer in Rome. ‘They had destroyed, that they might interrogate.’ The mummified head of Ottokar II of Bohemia rapidly disintegrated when his thirteenth-century tomb, in Prague’s St Vitus Cathedral, was reopened to see what could be learned from it. Reminiscent of Gerbert is Herbert Winlock’s account of penetrating the Meket-Rē tomb at Thebes in 1920. Turning on his flashlight, the explorer fancied that he momentarily glimpsed the little green men coming and going in uncanny silence – who then froze, motionless, forever. ‘Winlock had looked into a cavity and seen the past in motion, and stilled it with his torch’. The risk is more than fanciful: ‘Shine a light bright enough to see an object’, a conservator warns, ‘and it will fall apart before your very eyes’. Assured that ‘nothing will change’ when the National Trust exhibits her beloved shabby stately home, Alan Bennett’s chatelaine retorts, ‘the looking will change it. Looking always does.’

The evils attributed to the past are as manifold and complex as the benefits in whose wake they often follow. Malignant compulsions and coercive injunctions offset the past’s attractions; excessive devotion to it dims confidence and thwarts enterprise. To deny the past is less usual than to rejoice in it, but its demerits are nonetheless consequential. The past’s virtues may distress us no less than the vices. ‘It is not just bad experiences we want to protect ourselves from but good experiences as well, and for some of the same reasons’, notes a reporter. ‘It scares us to turn over a rock and find some worm of history we thought dead still crawling about; it scares us too, though, to find the darkened present illuminated by some flickering light from the past.’

381 George Stillman Hillard, Six Months in Italy (Boston, 1853), 4: 299.
Only a past seen as truly over ceases to be a threat. While still alive, Henry James’s cousin Minny Temple was both beloved and menacing, once dead ‘a bright flame of memory’ worshipped in complete safety.\textsuperscript{386} At the Hangchow tomb of Sung dynasty hero Yueh Fei, kneeling effigies of his betrayers were traditionally stoned by tourists; they are now protected objects of historical worth. Images of pagan gods smashed by early Christians now shelter in the Vatican Museum, no longer dangerous rivals but historical curios of aesthetic merit.\textsuperscript{387} A century after Culloden, Victoria trivialized the long-gone Stuart threat as masked-ball theatre, and with Albert at Balmoral danced the Highland Fling in tartan plaids.\textsuperscript{388} But once-dead pasts may return to intimidate the present. A Confucian temple restored in China in 1965 was burnt two years later. ‘When they had confidence in historical progress . . . Communists could patronize their Chinese cultural past. But if the pastness of the past was not so certain, . . . and regress was the spectre, crisis . . . stripped the national cultural heritage of its protective historical color.’\textsuperscript{389}

In sum, the past ‘is a time bomb, and its fuse burns brightest in the half-light of competing versions’ of founding myths of national identity. We inherit the obsessions of the dead, ‘assume their burdens; carry on their causes; promote their mentalities, ideologies, and . . . superstitions; and often we die trying to vindicate their humiliations’, writes Robert Pogue Harrison. ‘Why this servitude? We have no choice. Only the dead can grant us legitimacy.’\textsuperscript{390}

\textsuperscript{386} Leon Edel, \textit{Henry James: The Untried Years, 1843–1870} (Lippincott, 1953), 325.
\textsuperscript{388} Andrew Sanders, \textit{In the Olden Time} (Yale, 2013), 212–13.