Prodigious

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> Most prodigies do not become highly gifted adults, and most highly gifted adults were not prodigies. To succeed as a gifted adult, one must undergo a certain kind of transformation.
>
> —Robert J. Sternberg

> Too many fairies bent over this cradle.
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> —André Bazin on Orson Welles

"Cartoonist, Actor, Poet, and Only 10," shouted the headline in the *Capital Times*, a Madison, Wisconsin, newspaper, on 19 February 1926. Not surprisingly, the subject of the piece, son of the recently deceased Beatrice Welles and her businessman husband Dick, was all these things and more. Virtually from his infancy, Orson had been fiercely groomed in the arts by his mother, a community activist, pianist, and elocutionist. Beatrice spoke to him always as an adult, expected him to act like one, and as a further reinforcement even homeschooled him for a time. Both parents took little Orson to the theater, concerts, vaudeville, musical comedies, magic shows—the full range of performing arts high and low. Minor celebrities in their home base of Kenosha as they shuttled back and forth to Chicago, Beatrice and Dick moved in a sophisticated circle of notables in the arts and politics; their young son was a regular at their dinners and social gatherings, where guests were struck by his ability to hold his own with them in conversation.

Orson returned this extraordinary parental attention and immersion in the arts in an astonishing outpouring of early accomplishments, only a few of which are detailed in the newspaper article. At age eleven, he was sent to the Todd School where, under the indulgent eye of its headmaster, his parents' friend and new father figure Roger Hill—Dick Welles would finish drinking himself to death when Orson was fifteen—he was allowed to run the whole school arts program and

do more or less as he pleased the rest of the time. Orson left the school in a blaze of glory, with many acolytes and few friends, when he was sixteen. After a precocious acting stint at the Gate Theatre in Dublin, he became a sensation in New York in various artistic venues, culminating in a dazzling lineup of productions mounted through his Mercury Theater, including the infamous "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast that brought him national fame. After several years spent intensely writing and developing multiple movie, theater, and radio projects in New York and Hollywood, in 1941 he gave the world a movie he had cowritten, directed, and starred in: *Citizen Kane*. Orson was twenty-six years old. And then—

Here opinion divides. Did the wunderkind burn out after that peak early moment in his career, as the common view has it, or did he persevere against all odds to produce an oeuvre that culminated many years later in such fine films as *Touch of Evil* and *Chimes at Midnight*?

Rather than weighing in on this contended issue, I'd like to step back for a moment to consider prodigies as a broader category. Viewed across disciplines, these premature old souls—musicians, mathematicians, athletes, artists of all sorts—manifest spectacular accomplishments in childhood through early adulthood. They also share some strikingly common personal traits. Most crucially, however, prodigies tend to have parents (alternatively, mentors/teachers) with great but unrealized ambitions in the field they induct the child into at a very early age. Tiger Woods's father, like Mozart's, schooled his son relentlessly from infancy in his own vocation; both were their sons' teachers, closest companions, and inseparable cowalkers. The father of the Polish playwright and artist Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, himself an artist, boasted that his eight-year-old son, having already completed a play, would doubtless equal the output of the Spanish playwright Lope de Vega, also a prodigy, and produce thousands of works.

Central to the prodigy experience, then, is the proud parent who parades the child like a pet monkey (a recurring image in prodigies' own accounts of their upbringing) and whose own self-esteem, and very sense of self, is inextricably wedded to the child's accomplishments. Replacing playtime with other children by long hours of

rigidly directed solo activities, they mold the (most often) male child toward their own goals rather than allowing him to follow his natural inclinations, effectively robbing him of his childhood. The child is adored and rewarded for his accomplishments, but adoration is not the same as emotional nourishment and is usually made contingent on the demand for performance.

Because of his perceived gifts, moreover, the child prodigy is often cosseted and catered to; as his sense of entitlement grows, his will, never curbed, can swell to monstrous proportions. The child's mental development or special talent has been so foregrounded over his emotional development that the latter is stunted, sometimes for life. Result: a socially isolated young tyrant who's been both indulged and profoundly neglected by a parent or mentor whose orbit he's still trapped inside.

There is another consequence of such an enmeshed relationship. It stems from the fact that before the child's boundaries with the world have fully formed, the parent's intense desires have fused with the child's intense wish to please. This unholy symbiotic union creates what I would call a double being, out of whom springs a creative energy vaster than any one person could produce on his or her own. In the case of creative artists, it's an energy whose preternatural maturity, both in content and technique, seems to come from nowhere. Because of the parent's sustained appropriation of the child's own sense of self, the prodigy's achievements are quite literally superhuman, for a good reason: they are the product of the combined talents of two people, not a single very young person. This is the paradox of the "wisdom beyond one's years" that prodigies typically display in their work, the confusing internalized mix of old and young, wise soul and needy infant.

The same symbiosis that gives prodigies their double portion of energy very quickly betrays them. It cannot be sustained indefinitely for another very good reason: the primal instinct of every living creature to separate, physically and developmentally, from its progenitor. In the Euro-American matrix I am considering, this impulse probably kicks in around age thirty rather than at the legally demarcated

eighteen or twenty-one, and it wreaks havoc on the conjoined Siamese twins that make up a child prodigy. A relationship this deeply merged cannot be severed without inflicting severe damage on the colonized organism. Cutting off from the parent or mentor means, in effect, cutting yourself in two. And yet the organism's deepest driving engine desperately needs this separation to happen. That is why the age of thirty, not by accident, often coincides with a dramatic diminution of the prodigy's professional career, emotional stability, or even physical life via a creative block, alcohol, insanity, or suicide. The young Witkiewicz did grow up to be a prolific painter, playwright, and novelist, but also an addict subject to suicidal depressions; he took his life at age fifty-four on the day Soviet Russia invaded Poland.

Many prodigies—Mozart being the obvious one, but also Keats, Shelley, and a considerable number of other romantics—die around age thirty from natural causes and without a self-assist. I am not attributing a fatal strep infection, tuberculosis, or drowning to issues of psychological separation, but it is still remarkable how many young artists with prodigious early attainments do not physically survive into middle age and older. Is there an unconscious prefiguring of the trajectory, pushing the artist early to get it all out? Truly, this is an unanswerable question.

"A person who has not made his great contribution to science before the age of thirty will never do so," the prodigy Albert Einstein is said to have declared. Early peaking notwithstanding, not all prodigies seem to follow a dire personal trajectory after that milestone year. And why, also speaking of Einstein, do a certain few in select specialized fields like mathematics seem to spring up of their own accord, like cuckoos in other birds' nests, without a stage parent guiding their steps? Possibly the answer lies somewhere along the precocious-prodigy continuum that I will look at later.

But it is the reckoning once the shadow line of thirty is crossed that interests me most about prodigies. What happens after the false persona the unnatural double being offers the world begins to crack at the seams, exposing the young achiever's raw and undeveloped self underneath? Though the golfer Tiger Woods's personal troubles had

been building beneath a pristine public persona for a long time, his precipitous fall from the pinnacle of success came two years after he turned thirty and only three years after his mentor father's death. I cheer for the authentic Tiger Woods, warts and all, who has fought his way back in the game after being painfully stripped of his family, his professional standing, and his reputation. Regaining his top rank as he struggles with addictions, back injuries, and a debilitating car accident is less important than the fact that he still has the opportunity to find out who he is.

Among other drastic reactions to hitting the wall of thirty, the nervous breakdown is a common recourse for a psyche desperate to separate. For those who manage to navigate through that disruption and come out the other side, it can do the trick, though sometimes at a high price. "They turned me into a trained monkey," a former violin prodigy said of his Juilliard teachers in Alex Vadukul's 2018 article in the *New York Times*. Then a breakdown at age sixteen gave Saul Lipshutz deep insight that changed his life. "I couldn't see myself," he says. "Childhood was lost. Time was lost. Then one day I finally saw myself and I thought: 'That's it. There has to be more.' But," he adds, "I lost everything realizing that." He made the extreme decision to forswear his talent and give up music completely—in effect, throw the baby out with the bath water—to regain his autonomy. He had no regrets, he said forty years later, his name now changed to Sam Chandler. "I made the right choice," he affirms. "I lived my life. Not the life of this violin."

Less dramatically, many prodigies simply fade in later life, with their work lacking the magic of their early efforts. Is this possibly because that extra energy provided by the parental secret sharer is now absent? Vladimir Nabokov remarked of musical wunderkinder that they were "pretty, curly-headed youngsters waving batons or taming enormous pianos, who eventually turn into second-rate musicians with sad eyes and obscure ailments and something vaguely misshapen about their eunuchoid hindquarters." This cruel observation speaks to the extended infantility a rarefied upbringing often inflicts on prodigies. When the separation stalls, the paradoxical initial state

of being old on the inside and young on the outside reverses: the body ages, but the trapped infant within never grows a day older.

The image that comes to mind is of the Homunculus in Goethe's second *Faust*, a miniature man the alchemist Wagner has created (and imprisoned) in a glass retort. Touchingly, the creature begs Wagner to give it an awkward hug like a real father, but there's glass between them! The Homunculus's great dream is to break out of its enchanted container and become a real human being. Yet that glass womb of the parental psyche can be a wonderfully safe and seductive place to stay. There is a psychological type the Jungians call the *puer aeternus* or *puella aeterna*, those Peter Pans or eternal youths who never quite settle down in a particular place or vocation and typically find it very hard to *complete* the projects they start. After their youthful burst of achievement, many prodigies show this diminished focus of concentration, always preferring the enchanted world of infinite possibility over the mundane reality of a finished work. One thinks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and all those two-page outlines of philosophical tomes that were never written.

No one, including the man himself, questions the fact that Orson Welles was a prodigy, and as his many biographers testify, he carried the "Infant Prodigy" label himself as a proud banner into adulthood. Welles's parents were both dead by the time he was fifteen, but Beatrice had already strongly imprinted herself on her son, and the headmaster Roger Hill and his parents' close friend the doctor Maurice Bernstein lionized the boy and stayed idolaters at the Orson altar all the way through his adulthood. The puer/senex axis in Welles's psyche is poignantly embodied in Simon Callow's account of the heavy makeup the sixteen-year-old budding impresario and his classmates wore to impersonate adult characters in their theatricals at the Todd School, prefiguring the twenty-three-year-old's playing the older Charles Foster Kane in *Citizen Kane*. I'm struck by the abundance of old man's wisdom in that film; whether it came from Orson or his script collaborator Herman Mankiewicz, I can't say. Even more striking is how beautifully the young actor embodies an old man's bearing, an old man's sadness, on the screen.

Orson's mother wanted him to act like an adult. This he knew how to do, but could he *be* an adult? Could he break the glass retort? By his late twenties, the inevitable separation from the internalized shade of the supremely disciplined Beatrice Welles had begun, but with problematic consequences. After *Citizen Kane*, this prodigy's astounding outpouring of finished productions increasingly gave way to a kind of manic overextension, characterized—however each of the films actually completed is judged—by chaotic organization and lack of follow-through.

The first step down this future path might well have been Welles's impulsive decision to fly to Brazil to start filming the documentary *It's All True*, instead of staying in Los Angeles to supervise postproduction of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which resulted in the studio butchering what might well have been his next undisputed masterwork. Later productions were further undermined by his capricious behavior and temper, as he moved out of the stabilizing zone that earlier steadying collaborators like John Houseman had provided. The Infant Prodigy behaved like one the rest of his working life.

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For my second case, we move a century back in time to that glass-enclosed hothouse of prodigies, Victorian England. Among the innumerable budding talents nurtured in sheltered family settings during that era, John Stuart Mill presents an interesting exception to the usual prodigy's trajectory. His father James Mill, a short-tempered, relentless taskmaster, was determined to mold his son in his own dogmatic rationalist's image. As Mill recounts in his *Autobiography*, James taught the boy Greek at age three and Latin at eight along with arithmetic and intensive reading, according to a strict pedagogic strategy. Unlike the extravagant praise lavished on Welles, young Mill was subjected to the opposite extreme. Believing that "self-conceit" was "one of the evils most liable to attend on any sort of early proficiency, and which often fatally blights its promise," Mill tells us, his father "kept me, with extreme vigilance, out of the way of hearing myself praised, or of being led to make self-flattering comparisons between

myself and others." To Mill's credit, however much of this harsh judgment he may have internalized, it did not succeed in shutting down his later intellectual development. "The element which was chiefly deficient in [my father's] moral relation to his children," he comments with admirable understatement, "was that of tenderness."

The lifesaving breakdown this unnatural upbringing inevitably provoked came when Mill was twenty. As he describes it in the section of his autobiography titled "Crisis in My Mental History," he was stricken with a debilitating depression when he realized that actually achieving all the rational goals inculcated in him by his father would bring him no happiness whatever. And further that his father,

> to whom it would have been natural to me to have recourse in any practical difficulties, was the last person to whom, in such a case as this, I looked for help. Everything convinced me that he had no knowledge of any such mental state as I was suffering from, and that even if he could be made to understand it, he was not the physician who could heal it.

It is telling that Mill's depression took place in an inner territory his father had no access to and in fact amounted to his first unconscious act of separation. That inner territory was not located in his head, his father's territory, but in his heart, the realm of *feelings*. Mill had to live in this unfamiliar place alone and, crucially, was forced to figure a way out of the dis-ease in his neglected feelings all by himself.

The turning point was reading a passage in the French writer Jean-François Marmontel's memoir describing the death of the writer's father—a telling detail—and his determination, as a very young boy, to rise to the occasion of providing for all the family's needs: "A vivid conception of the scene and its feelings came over me, and I was moved to tears. From this moment my burden grew lighter." Imagining himself as an autonomous entity like that writer as a young boy, with a father out of the picture for good, thus giving him the interior space to take on the role of father and provider in his own right, made it possible for Mill not only to cut the cord with his own real-life father but to experience his emotions more directly. Previously, he

pointed out, "To know that a feeling would make me happy if I had it, did not give me the feeling. My education, I thought, had failed to create these feelings in sufficient strength to resist the dissolving influence of analysis, while the whole course of my intellectual cultivation had made precocious and premature analysis the inveterate habit of my mind."

With a newly gained ease in the realm of feelings, Mill tells us, he turned to the cultivation of pleasure and the inner life of the person as expressed in the arts, especially poetry. Most important of all, he fell in love—but, in a classic puer's move, with a married woman he could not possess. Mill and his soulmate Harriet Taylor maintained an intellectually close but physically chaste relationship until her husband died twenty years later and they were finally able to marry. Twenty years was probably the right amount of time for this emotionally undeveloped person to catch up with his feelings and mature sufficiently to enjoy a fully uxorious marriage—which sadly lasted only seven years until Harriet's death.

After completing the needed emotional separation his breakdown provided, Mill was able to separate intellectually from his father, but without having to abandon that territory altogether. His philosophical thinking continued to grow and unfold even as, in terms of employment, he spent his whole adult life inside his father's glass retort, the East India Company. Ever modest, he may even have derived some slight benefit from his father's harsh criticism in avoiding the prodigy's occupational hazard of inflation and grandiosity. Mill is the rare prodigy who managed to rescue himself to enjoy maturity in his full psyche as well as in the realm of his early achievements.

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But there's another category to consider here. Alongside prodigies stand their half-siblings, the merely *precocious*, those not-quite prodigies who show talent very early on but contrive—consciously, unconsciously, or simply through lack of opportunity—to avoid manifesting adult-level accomplishments on the world's stage while still very young. All prodigies start out precocious, but not all precocious

children become prodigies. Sometimes precocious children grow up to have their talents unfold gradually, in the usual developmental way; other times they seem stalled, blocked from realizing their promise in much the same way that prodigies do.

In many cases, though, a long siege of the doldrums after a precocious start conceals a much-needed hibernation that culminates in late-life blossoming. It might be argued that those precocious children who don't quite become prodigies, who go into a long period of hibernation/stagnation before realizing their talents when they are much older, are the ones who have truly caught a break, because during that obscurity and isolation they have the chance—so long as they avoid suppressing their talent altogether—simply to grow up.

Precocious children, like prodigies, sacrifice the ordinary experiences of childhood to a premature intellectual adulthood, growing up too quickly in their heads and too slowly in their hearts. But prodigies take this imbalance to a whole new level. Emotional maturity is a luxury often denied them, but it can be won, usually via a bumpy road of real-world tempering, by the precocious.

Having been moved to write this essay partly out of personal experience, I offer myself here as a case in point. Homeschooled on an old schooner in Florida through fourth grade, graduated from high school at age fifteen, from college age nineteen, I was what might be called situationally precocious. In a different situation it might have been a different story, and I count myself lucky to have missed the prodigy boat by a mariner's mile. My good fortune was to have a gentle female parent who, though emotionally distant, was no stage mother. Yes, she was a novelist herself, at the time an unpublished one, whom I certainly intended to please by producing a full novel, in the mode of the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys mysteries, when I was ten. She was very supportive but did not push me or ride piggyback on my efforts. As a result, my motley assortment of early writings and artworks, lacking the ersatz boost of an internal adult cowalker, were nothing remarkable; they were just fun to do. After getting a master's degree at age twenty and spending two abysmal years in the civilized wilderness of a famous Boston suburb, I escaped to the Hawaiian

islands, where I put thoughts of writing aside to live out my lost adolescence full throttle for ten glorious years. When I finally decided, on reaching the crucial age of thirty, that *even though* it was also what my mother wanted for me, I wanted to be a writer too, this was a goal that took many further years of hard work to realize. I had the belated but greater satisfaction of being granted the time, space, privacy, and freedom to grow up in a way my actual growing-up years did not permit me to do.

For a more celebrated example of precocity subverting the classic prodigy trajectory, let's move back another hundred years from Mills to the writer and pundit Samuel Johnson. From the age of three, the Lichfield polymath looked to be on a perfect prodigy's life path—born to older parents, with a doting father who loved to display and exhibit his little boy genius, something the son loathed and avoided even at an early age. Using a now familiar metaphor, Johnson wrote to his unrequited love Hester Thrale that the "quiet misery of late marriages" is that "an old man's child. . .leads much such a life. . .as a little boy's dog, teized with awkward fondness, and forced, perhaps, to sit up and beg." Johnson's bookseller father was a man who loved books and literature, yet the relative unsophistication of both provincial parents left their son the inner space to move into intellectual territory he could make entirely his own. In this way Johnson was able to reject his father as a cowalker—and later on torpedo the label of boy wonder that was increasingly applied to him in adolescence. Although he was already being noticed for his exceptional mind and brilliance at the age of nineteen (that "great boy will someday be a great man," it was already being noted), a series of unforeseen life reversals steered Johnson away from the prominence he had precociously attained in provincial drawing rooms.

As his biographer Walter Jackson Bate has chronicled, a deep malaise of the spirit overtook Johnson when lack of funds forced him to leave his promising studies at Oxford after only one year. This dark paralysis of will was to last a full twenty years. In its early years, during his ignominious return to his parents' home in Lichfield, it has almost the feel of a prequel to the sufferings of Thomas Hardy's

autodidact hero in *Jude the Obscure*. On the surface this extended breakdown looked like the prodigy's typical shutdown, yet Johnson had never been a real prodigy. He had produced no amazing works and was not the least bit famous; during his tragically short stint at Oxford, also, he had emphatically rejected the label "prodigy" and the self-aggrandizement it might have promoted. In all these ways, some instinctive and some simply force of circumstance, he may well have spared himself the prodigy's fate of premature fame, inflation, and burnout. Johnson's twenty-year doldrums weren't burnout—he hadn't *done* anything yet—but rather a fallow field that helped engender the exceptional man to come.

During these years Johnson still displayed the telltale signs of childhood social isolation and "spoiling" characteristic of prodigies growing up in the laser glare of an intense parent's overattached gaze. Depressed or merely lazy (his own constant self-condemning label), in his twenties the young genius was suffered to lie in bed till noon as his mother toiled downstairs in his now deceased father's bookshop. This "paralyzed indolence," a teenage characteristic the puer personality tends to carry well into adulthood, was something he would bitterly chastise himself for the rest of his life. Still, his biographer and acolyte Boswell noted that "though indolence and procrastination were inherent in his constitution, whenever he made an exertion he did more than any one else."

Johnson's unremitting self-reproach was symptomatic of an abiding self-hatred and crippling perfectionism. But the endless resolutions to bid farewell to sloth, the charts and schemes for self-improvement he drew up against himself also hint at the adult struggling to break through the glass wall and emerge from this infant cocoon. The two decades of obscurity and depression look to have been a psychological blessing in disguise. Forced to adopt the demeaning (but psychologically healthy as a corrective to inflation) role of nonentity as he shuttled back and forth from Lichfield and elsewhere to London, failing at teaching and laboring anonymously in the nether regions of the journalism world well into his forties gave Johnson the priceless opportunity to escape the prodigy's early catapult to fame/early crash

trajectory, to grow up in private outside the glare of fame. It was the long incubation period he needed, as all precocious puers and puellas do, to catch up with himself emotionally, to sprout into a soul grown expansive enough to accommodate fame (mostly) without running off the rails. In Johnson's case the slow and quiet process of emotional maturation, which takes its own time and can never be hurried, had two crucial ingredients: his own unflinching native honesty and his marriage to an older woman who was the first to offer love, sex, companionship, and (possibly) real maternal affection in lieu of hero worship to the gawky, unattractive, high-minded young virgin with the brilliant mind.

How did Goethe free his Homunculus from the prison of the glass retort? With a strong erotic impulse, of course: the little glass-caged man falls madly in love with the goddess Galatea, causing him (with the help of Proteus, the god of metamorphosis) to break out of his container and plunge into the ocean. This is the first of a "thousand thousand steps," he's warned, in the long evolutionary process that will send him on his path to humanity, and it was what befell Samuel Johnson and John Stuart Mill, luckily for them both—belated initiation into sex and female partnership, most probably on the marriage night, for two painfully shy, puritanical introverts by the women who became their wives.

In this way, after a long blank period, an awkward, precocious young almost-prodigy could grow up to be an Old Bull (Boswell having already conceded Johnson was a "John Bull"). And once having tasted fame in middle age, Johnson clearly adored the spotlight. The supreme self-absorption on display, both in public and in private, in the heady days of his late celebrity (Kate Chisholm has noted his use of the pronoun "I" twenty-one times in a letter to his dying friend Hill Booth) showed that he retained the prodigy's sense of the inviolability of his own opinions along with an ongoing infantility in needs. Even as he generously extended money and hospitality to those around him, Johnson proved himself able, like so many, to recreate perfectly the psychic atmosphere of his childhood: the little prince enveloped in the boundless psyche of a worshipful, devouring public-cum-parent.

But Johnson also had friends as well as worshipful followers, real friends and lots of them. And though in time his opinion came to seem as unassailable to himself as it did to the world at large, his unceasing self-examination helped keep the scales in balance. This Old Bull displayed humor as well as gravitas in articulating the deeply ethical human values he cherished. Speaking of the relative merits of life and art, Johnson counseled a young writer to read Joseph Addison "if you mean to be a good writer or what is more worth, an honest man."

Meanwhile that other Old Bull Orson Welles had started out a handsome young fellow who, sheltered but lacking the hesitant sensitivities of a Mill or a Johnson, plunged prodigiously into sexual adventure. Welles's fate, however, was still to keep beating against the walls of the retort, engendering movie project after movie project and hatching very few. Like Johnson, though, he did display his own brand of late-life charisma, brilliantly playful with his friends to the end, even as his formidable persona of pundit-huckster-prima donna hardened in the public mind. Welles also found, his biographer Simon Callow reports, "extraordinary benevolence toward life" in his final days. As Yeats said poignantly of Oscar Wilde in an often-quoted epitaph, "He was an unfinished sketch of a great man, and showed great courage and manhood amid the collapse of his fortunes."

Oliver Goldsmith once chided Samuel Johnson that the world had a "claim" on him to write more than he did, an assertion that must have resonated all too well with Johnson's own negative self-judgments. Johnson's response came from the mature territory inside him he'd been able to stake out on his own: "No man is obliged to do as much as he can do," he told Goldsmith. "A man is to have part of his life to himself." That part of life—the personal part outside pure achievement that has nothing whatever to do with "leisure time," hobbies, vacations, or the like—is the territory prodigies and other relentlessly high performers find so very hard to claim.