
Introduction

The core of this book addresses the intersection between everyday life and a mere two hundred lines of poetry: Felicia Hemans's "Casabianca" (1826), Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751), and Charles Wolfe's "Burial of Sir John Moore after Corunna" (1817). All three works, widely read in schools and continuously reprinted in anthologies, were memorized and recited, whether willingly or unwillingly, in whole or in part, by significant proportions of the population in English-speaking countries for substantial stretches of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In consequence, these verses carried the potential to touch and alter the worlds of the huge numbers of people who took them to heart. This book examines the vital connections that were formed between my chosen poems and individuals, communities, discourses, beliefs, and behaviors—primarily in Great Britain, but also, at specific junctures, in the United States of America.¹ In all three case studies, the themes of the given poem and the peculiarities of its movement through time and space determine the stories told and the histories explored. At the same time, these chapters contribute to the book's general examination of the phenomenon of widespread poetry memorization in two national cultures, and consider what might be thought of as the successive phases in the life cycle of the memorized poem. The first study concentrates upon recitation as a physical experience for relatively young children; the second addresses some of the later psychological dimensions inherent within adolescents' and adults' internalization of a poem; and the third focuses upon adults only, asking under what circumstances a work long held within the self might suddenly deliver new and vital meaning.



When the topic of verse memorization is raised today, the invocation is often couched within a lament, a mournful regret for the loss of a world in which every individual could readily recite fine-sounding lines from a supply of poems recognizable to all. In Britain the lament is frequently tempered by an acknowledgment that the methods used to achieve such a laudable outcome were perhaps less than ideal and possibly counter-productive. Simple elegiac celebrations are not unknown: Gordon Brown, just days before he assumed the post of prime minister in 2007, could be

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heard on BBC radio, wistfully casting his mind back to the days he had memorized Gray's *Elegy*, summoning up some blank verse from Shakespeare, and wishing that schools still required the practice. It is commoner, however, to find a more conflicted response. Commentators generally would like to re-create that lost world—a society, or at least a significant number of individuals, that holds entire poems at its heart—but they want to find a different way of achieving this end. Thus, in the introduction to his anthology *By Heart: 101 Poems to Remember* (1997), the then-poet laureate, Ted Hughes, denigrated the rote-learning method generally used in schools for memorization, and vividly expounded “an array of other less laborious, more productive, more amusing techniques” to secure what he depicts as a life-enriching result (ix). A 1996 *Times Educational Supplement* article entitled “Learning By Rote Kills Verse for Life” had plowed identical furrows (McGavin). Five years before this, a pair of articles in the same publication also argued for the deep value of the memorized poem and suggested nontraditional routes to the goal. In her first essay, the novelist Sarah Neilan told a tale of redemption: after a bout of meningitis had apparently fragmented her brain, she underwent the “life-saving” experience of regaining her mind by recalling the poetry she had learned as a child (“Survival Tactics,” 25). In the second article, following what she characterizes as the “amazing response” to the earlier piece, she set forth “the secrets of enshrining words in memory”: these were the imaginative and enterprising tricks and turns that her “old teacher and mentor Sister Helena” had taught her in a boarding convent school many years before (“Hook, Line,” 27). In all of these writings, the mind's secure possession of a literary work is self-evidently a highly desirable and multivalent good, yet a dislike and distrust of the best-known method of memorization hovers close by and demands the presentation of alternative modes of installation.

Discussions of the topic of the memorized poem are altogether more numerous, more emotional, and less equivocal in the United States. Most are simply distressed by what is imaged as the loss of a common wealth.² With the passage of the recitation into oblivion, runs the burden of the stereotypical piece, division has come among the generations and communities of America: where once grandparents, parents, and children, townsfolk and country-dwellers, rich and poor, were united by a joint stock of rich poetic knowledge, now they are fractured and alien to one another. The time when the memorized poem held sway can still be glimpsed, but only just—it is slipping away as the last of those stalwart reciters, those doughty grandmothers and those entertaining great-uncles, reach the ends of their lives. Articles on poetry recitation typically generate large mailbags of letters either from those who still keep the flame alive themselves, or who remember those that did. In 1995, when histo-

rian Joan Shelley Rubin appealed in the *New York Times Book Review* for readers' descriptions of the poems they had recited in school between 1917 and 1950, and their feelings about "what the task meant to them at the time and later in life," she clearly tapped a wellspring of passionate remembrance: as one of her 479 correspondents commented, "I have been waiting all my adult life for someone to ask the question you pose" ("They Flash," 264, 271). "A Lost Eloquence," Carol Muske Dukes's op-ed piece in the *New York Times* at the end of 2002, was followed by a comparable flood of reminiscence. During his tenure as the nation's poet laureate, Robert Pinsky initiated what he called the "Favorite Poem Project" in 1997 to record ordinary people reading beloved verse aloud: although this enterprise, designed to reach as broad a constituency as possible, had multiple goals and outcomes, it inevitably spoke with particular resonance to those school-trained reciters of earlier eras and performed a highly valuable service in capturing their voices for posterity.³ Time after time, individuals expressed gratitude for the fact that their classroom experiences had resulted in a lifelong relationship with a literary work.

Such instances illustrate the heady blend of sentiment, reverence, and downright pleasure that suffuses the idea of the memorized poem in American culture; rarely are its laments for the passing of pedagogical recitation checked by the reservations about rote learning that characterize British considerations of the topic.⁴ Nevertheless, individuals on two sides of the Atlantic are united in their belief that there used to be a time when children regularly recited verse at school in their respective countries, but that this time came to an end. One aim of the pages ahead is to bring substance, clarity, and detail to this general and often rather hazily expressed idea, and to account for the significant differences between the ways in which the memorization of verse is remembered and discussed in Great Britain and the United States today. This book is first and foremost a historical examination, but, given the ties that bind us to the topic, it is also in part a study of contemporary attitudes towards a particular poetic practice, and, indeed, to poetry more generally.

At the outset, a few words are in order to suggest some of the arenas in which this specific form of verse memorization should be situated. The process of committing to heart sequences of words in set shapes has a long and significant presence in probably every culture one might care to mention, and thus constitutes an enormous field for analysis.⁵ Perhaps the practice that springs most readily to mind is the memorization of religious texts—from the Qu'ran to Bible verses, catechisms to prayers—but even the most casual survey throws up a huge array of other materials for consideration. Nursery rhymes, proverbs, saws, aphorisms, lore and laws, patriotic speeches, oaths, pledges, jokes, mnemonic aids, ballads, song lyrics—the average mind is the repository of innumerable

patches of patterned language, memorized consciously or unconsciously; study of the history and influence of any or all of these forms holds the potential to pay handsome dividends. Yet even though the focus is narrowed here to the memorization and recitation of poems in English only—actually, even tighter, chiefly to poems disseminated by the school and knowingly received in Great Britain and the United States as samples of “literature” written in English—then a broad area for investigation still remains. This is a practice that has a relatively long and complex past and a story that, in all probability, will never be over.

Indeed, although this project chooses primarily to look back in time, verse recitation undoubtedly has a forward-looking narrative too. One of the most significant, and certainly most widely reported, signs of revival in the United States is “Poetry Out Loud,” a recitation contest instituted in 2005 by the National Endowment for the Arts with generous funding from the Poetry Foundation; this is matched in Great Britain by staged recitations on National Poetry Day and the resuscitation of numerous verse-speaking competitions, such as the BBC-sponsored “Off By Heart” project, for children across the country.⁶ The memorization of poetry, then, has not disappeared in either Britain or the United States, and it seems improbable that it will ever vanish completely; for a variety of different reasons, there will always be those in any given community who find this activity appealing and worthwhile, and who will therefore practice it themselves and induce others to do likewise. Further support to recitation is afforded by the range of venues and occasions that exist, and have existed, for its encouragement and performance. For the most part this book will focus on the school as the prime site of propagation, but memorized poetry clearly has strong connections to a range of other institutions, formal and informal. Recitations can occur at the meetings of clubs and societies, in kitchens and parlors, theaters or village halls, pubs and coffeehouses, around campfires and on political platforms, in civic and religious ceremonies, and so forth—any and all of these instances constitute worthwhile areas for examination, and carry histories that inevitably overlap and intersect with the story of poetry in juvenile education.

Nevertheless, important though it is to state that verse recitation has neither died nor has ever been wholly dependent upon the school for its well-being, certain facts do carry a central significance. For defined periods in Great Britain and the United States, the memorization of poetry was not an elective pursuit but a mandatory element of mass educational systems. It is the crucial interplay of two words in that sentence—“mandatory” and “mass”—that created the phenomenon that is of most concern here. Communities containing large numbers of adults who could recite poems that others would recognize only came into existence

because even larger numbers of children had performed a particular pedagogical exercise with a limited range of literary works. Although poetry recitation has an influential and interesting history before widespread public schooling was fully established in Britain and the United States, the beginning of the memorized poem's true heyday was in both countries coincident with the consolidation of systems of free, and relatively prolonged, elementary instruction that came about only in the last three decades of the nineteenth century.

In Britain the grasp of this poetic practice, at its very strongest between 1875 and 1900, continued to be felt in the nation's basic educational system, if with progressively diminishing force, for a further forty years. Recitation certainly played a role in other kinds of institution, private and state-supported, inside and outside that historical stretch; in the case studies ahead we will frequently encounter individuals whose relationship with the poem in question did not begin in an elementary school. Nevertheless, it was the presence of this particular exercise in Britain's most extensive but least prestigious system of education that produced both the country's largest populations of reciters and its ambivalent opinions about the practice. In the United States pedagogical recitation had a longer and a broader reach: an important element in the lives of many elementary-school students until around the end of the 1950s, the memorized poem also held a place up to the same date in the high school education received by increasingly significant numbers of young people after 1930 or so. The fact that recitation persisted as a classroom exercise into the teenaged years of many individuals who are still alive today explains to a large degree why current American discussions of memorized poetry differ markedly from their British counterparts. Yet numerous other factors exerted pressure upon poetry's pedagogical progress in Great Britain and the United States, creating divergent histories and contrasting sets of attitudes.



This project employs a range of strategies to investigate these various histories and attitudes. Up to a point it is useful to argue that the memorized poem in my chosen contexts has both an institutional and an emotional history; these might also be designated the external and the internal histories of poetry recitation. The institutional or external history can be pursued via relatively familiar forms of historiography; the process by which the recitation of individual works of poetry in English came to assume such an important place within the education of vast numbers of British and American people is at times convoluted and complex, but it is there to be found within a variety of printed sources and other materials.

The next few pages of this introduction provide a summary of my general argument about the development of this phenomenon; Part I of the book devotes itself to a more detailed examination of the rise and fall of verse recitation in British and American popular education.⁷ Rightly speaking, however, this latter account should be labeled “Towards a Comparative Cultural History” or some such to indicate that it plots only the major features of a rich territory that offers great scope for further exploration.

My institutional history presents the story of the memorized poem’s achieved ubiquity as a materialist formation, not a romantic tale of the superior love of fine literature in days of yore. One strain in the nostalgic lament for the lost world of recitation insists that earlier ages had a truer reverence for poetry, a greater respect for its ability to instill beautiful words, beautifully expressed, into the young. I maintain, however, that the recitation of poetry became an integral part of life for as long as it did for the following reason: at a key moment in the establishment of popular schooling, the practice both shared the same general shape and carried the highest prestige of the limited educational opportunities that those systems could provide. Such a view by no means precludes the possibility that at different times and places, individual educators and students entertained and experienced exactly the kinds of noble feelings about verse that some of those who mourn the disappearance of widespread recitation might wish to believe were directional and mainstream. I nevertheless argue that the history of poetry in the schools, and thus the hearts, of the past is not primarily a story about the wisdom of our elders, and much less of young people’s joyful embrace of the literary. Instead I figure it as the haphazard evolution of an exercise that, as a daily practice, often had little to do with either the wonderfulness of poetry or its sustaining presence in the mind of the child or adult.

To be sure, numerous theories about the importance of the practice and the value of its content were certainly expounded at various historical moments and in different cultural climates. The multifaceted nature of poetry recitation meant that it could draw upon a wide range of rationalizations for its place in the curriculum. As Part I illustrates in its survey of the period before the advent of mass education, the presence of poetry—or at least, of verse—in the initial stages of a child’s acquisition of literacy was such a pervasive and unremarkable aspect of everyday life that it excited few justifications. The vernacular recitation exercises that began to be demanded of certain more advanced young readers in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, were understood primarily as necessary drill for their elocutionary and oratorical skills. Discussions of these latter practices celebrated the fact that both their external and internal characteristics contributed towards the production of the

public speaker. The performance of lines committed to heart strengthened a youth's memory and developed his confidence, self-presentation, and vocal delivery; the lines themselves supplied him with a rich hoard of quotations and an enhanced ability to reproduce effective literary style.

As the nineteenth century wore on and recitation found its secure home in the burgeoning systems of education for the poor, elements of these older justifications migrated into newer pedagogical writings and were placed, with varying degrees of importance, in relation to other arguments. Elocution and oratorical practice dropped down the chart of recitation's extrinsic merits; memory training gained a massive prominence, especially in the United States, and then a falling-off; the exercise of self-discipline and hard work needed to learn long works by heart generally won high marks throughout the period; the improvement of physical health, posture, and accent were significant factors for some.⁸ The intrinsic benefits—which is to say, the benefits deriving from intimate knowledge of given works—received progressively greater attention, but also underwent marked shifts of emphasis in different periods and quarters. Memorized poetry was important because of its religious and moral aspect: the individual, both in childhood and in later life, would be guided, improved, and comforted by the principles and sentiments stored within. Memorized poetry played an unrivaled role in the development of taste, in the refinement of the uncultured, in their elevation to a higher plane. Memorized poetry was both a benefit and an agent of democracy, a beacon of civilization, a promoter of patriotism and national pride; memorized poetry brought every boy and girl in touch with the best that has been thought and said, with the greatest literary achievements of their common language. Memorized poetry united individuals with their heritage and with each other. Memorizing and reciting poetry was an essential element of the study of English and American literature; memorizing and reciting poetry *was* the study of English and American literature. For the factions invested in recapitulation theory at the beginning of the twentieth century, children should chant memorized poetry (especially *Hiawatha* and the more stirring ballads) as an adjunct to their progression through the different stages of human development; for those enraptured by a rather fey brand of romanticism, children should recite poetry because children *were* poetry.⁹

Some of these tenets still make sense to us today; others require the excavation and reconstruction of contemporary circumstances for a full appreciation of their relative force. Nevertheless, although certain theories indubitably played a role in getting, and keeping, a particular exercise on mass education's books, they acted for the most part as supportive rather than motivating factors. Overall, they were less important than, in the first instance, specific exigencies, and in the second, the reproductive

tendencies of customary practice. The massive and long-running success of recitation in schools was initiated and sustained by its congruence with, and then its deep presence within, the grammar of the institution—the rules that, officially and unofficially, govern an organization’s quotidian operations.

Full substantiation of these comments requires detailed examination of the appropriate portions of the educational histories of Great Britain and the United States, but I will say a few more words here to round off the basic outline of my institutional argument. Compulsory poetry recitation figured prominently in what approximated to the founding documents, official or unofficial, of the public elementary systems in these two nations; consequently the practice, at that time formally continuous with their schools’ general practices, became encoded, so to speak, in the DNA of mass education. Once established within their regimens, regimens famously slow to change and especially prone to the repetition of the tried and tested, the memorized poem proved to be remarkably tenacious. If verse recitation began its career in popular education as a resonant encapsulation of the highest good that the elementary school could bestow upon its charges, then such a meaning and value only grew larger over the years. For the first half a dozen decades and more of mass schooling, during which successive generations of pupils and students who had undergone this specific form of training went on to become parents and teachers themselves, the recitation of a poem by a child carried an accrued power to signify to listening adults that what they understood as “education” was occurring. Despite the changing tides of pedagogical theory that washed over the elementary school, the ballast of custom served the memorized poem well; the recitation exercise may have had to shift from one corner of the curriculum to another, or to gather around itself at various times substantially different sets of justifications, but the basic practice continued with little alteration.

That poetry memorization as a mass phenomenon was intrinsically bound to the history of a particular institution is illustrated especially well by the British case: when the 1944 Education Act effectively wiped the elementary school off the map and created a new formation, the “primary school,” widespread pedagogical recitation disappeared with it. The situation in the United States would seem at first glance less amenable to hard-and-fast historical description. Certainly the absence of any centralized governmental directives meant that mandatory poetry memorization was neither created as a national practice with a stroke of the pen on a given date, as it was in Britain, nor brought to an end when the institution that hosted it was written off in a similarly definitive fashion. Instead, recitation stood at the mercy of the discrete decisions of thousands and thousands of teachers, school board members, county superinten-

dents, and state supervisors; perhaps unsurprisingly, far greater energy was expended in the United States than in Britain on the development and promotion of arguments to bolster the continuation, and in time, to urge the banishment, of the practice. But despite the myriad opportunities for divergence in the States, consensus of opinion generally ruled the day, giving rise to incredibly uniform patterns of behavior across the country and over the decades. The force of customary practice in the continued replication of a time-honored classroom exercise appears, if anything, more marked in the American than the British context. For over a hundred years, the recitation of poetry constituted an act that bore a central relation to American public education's understanding of itself.

And yet the time eventually came when that center could no longer hold. In Britain, mandatory recitation, in general decline after the 1920s, disappeared altogether with the abolition of the elementary school; the practice held on a little longer in the United States, but became an exceptional behavior by the 1960s. Within the culture of these countries three key areas of thought had eventually developed such profound differences, both from each other and from their own nineteenth-century counterparts, that they no longer shared enough common ground to support the continued presence of compulsory memorization in schools. In the first place, understandings of the role of mass juvenile education had undergone significant modulation; second, beliefs about the needs and abilities of the individual child had changed beyond recognition; and third, perceptions of the function of poetry, and its relationship to society, had been utterly transformed. As a result, a phenomenon that for so many years had formed a regular component of mass experience was demoted to the status of an optional pursuit.

This, then, represents one way of understanding the general course taken by verse recitation in Great Britain and the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The emotional or internal history of this phenomenon is to my mind as important as, and arguably of greater interest than, the institutional history just outlined. The key questions for this inquiry can be expressed as follows. How did people feel about memorizing and reciting poetry—both at school, and thereafter? How did the necessity of public performance affect children's experience with, and attitude towards, poetry in general and the specific works they learned? What was distinctive about this form of relationship with a poem, and what advantages and disadvantages accrued from it? Did the poems change the children, and did the children change the poems? How likely were they to form opinions about their assigned verses? If they did, what kind of opinions might these have been? What happened to these attitudes and opinions as they grew older? How did adults regard the experiences they had had with poetry in the classroom? Might a poem that still

kept its place within their hearts or heads in later life alter its meaning over time? To whom does a memorized poem belong?

The three case studies and the afterword of this book address different elements of these questions; in each instance, I have attempted to give depth and specificity to my inquiries by embedding them within the discussion of a poem whose thematics offer suggestive connections to the topic in hand. In comparison to Part I's single-minded attention to verse recitation's institutional progress, however, the discussion of the memorized poem's emotional history will inevitably appear somewhat diffuse. Nevertheless, I hope that my explorations of the felt, internal aspects of memorized poetry in British and American society combine to tell a story that both augments and to an extent challenges the arguments put forward elsewhere in these pages.

This complementary history pursues an elusive subject. Some of its difficulties are specific to aspects of the topic in hand. It is, for instance, famously hard to gain access to the feelings of children of the past—whether we consult works of fiction or poetry; memoir or autobiography; oral history or sociology (and at different points in this project I study all of these forms), we are almost always examining reconstructions after the fact. Other difficulties are endemic to all histories—whether we are examining representations of either the child's or the adult's attitudes and sensations, we must carefully consider both the writer's position and the text's specific location in time, place, and genre. But the relative paucity of documentation on what was in actuality a widespread experience presents perhaps the greatest challenge to interpretation. Out of the millions of individuals who memorized verses, only a tiny number represented or recorded their thoughts and feelings about the topic; no large-scale surveys of the views and opinions of those who learned poems at school exist.¹⁰ The records that we do have can be roughly divided into two categories. One category is comprised of works of fiction that present highly critical or otherwise derisive depictions of juvenile recitation; in my first case study I speculate at some length about the possible causes of this negative portrayal. The other category of representations appears primarily within autobiographical texts or anecdotal reports. These, as we shall see in the second case study's extended examination of a subsection of the latter category, are almost always highly positive about the practice.

Although my external argument about poetry recitation tends to stress the unromantically pragmatic and disciplinary function of this compulsory exercise within the institution, other notes are sounded in first-person accounts. Memoirists, autobiographers, essayists, newspaper letter- or article-writers, and those who reply to surveys about the topic are generally adamant, indeed often eloquent, about both the inspirational and the

liberating effect of the memorized poem in the classroom and beyond. This is not to say that they all tell exactly the same story about their experiences. Many, but by no means all, of these people explain that they found it relatively easy to commit a poem to heart; although most of them write with relish about their performance on a stage or in front of the class, others recall their mounting anxiety and clammy hands as the appointed time for recitation approached. Despite these divergences, however, writers or respondents generally coincide in their opinions about the ultimate worth of the exercise; their texts explicitly or implicitly make the important points that that which is mandatory is not necessarily unpleasant, and that to be required to do something difficult is not necessarily to be oppressed. On the contrary: for these advocates, school set the bar high when it came to verse recitation, and the expectation that they would make the jump spurred them to feats they might not otherwise have assayed. A successful performance not only brought an exhilarating rush of triumph at the time; it also left them with the secure possession of a beloved work forever after.

At this point it may seem as if my two histories of poetry recitation will be fundamentally at odds, or at least give substantially dissimilar accounts of the practice's meaning and value. To a certain degree, I think this is both inevitable and right. It is a truism that the characteristics of an experience assume different dimensions and significances whenever you alter your point of view, and, to shift my metaphor, a jarring discordance often rings out when analytical histories of a phenomenon are set alongside the memories of those who lived through it. Yet this apparent opposition between the two accounts is only one part of a larger story, primarily because those first-person testimonies come from only one part of a larger population. For this reason, the emotional history must perform a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, it wishes to explore the vivid specificities of personal memories. This project is intensely interested in how any one individual may have experienced the feelings, thoughts, and connections that could be created, inside and outside of the self, by the act of memorizing and reciting a poem. Yet on the other hand, it also wishes to place such experiences in relation to those of the vast numbers of other people who also memorized poems in class. How then do I maneuver between those who left representations, and those who did not—between the loquacious one and the unvoiced many—to create a larger community for our consideration?

To begin with, I find it useful to divide that huge gathering of onetime juvenile reciters into different groups. Positive reminiscences of poetry recitation emanate, we might reasonably assume, from a select constituency: those who valued the poetry exercise and enjoyed meeting, or exceeding, the expectations of their teachers were usually those who did

well in education more generally, and such individuals were and are more likely to compose their own texts, or indeed reply to surveys, in later life than those who had not similarly excelled.¹¹ What, then, are the salient characteristics of others within the larger population? Even though they never experienced the urge to put pen to paper to describe this part of their lives, did a good proportion of people like rising to the challenge of memorizing a poem in school and feel glad to have that work with them for the remainder of their days? Did another proportion of them loathe everything about a classroom ordeal that contained ample potential for humiliation and punishment, and then did they avoid anything that had the least smack of poetry about it forever after? And did a further proportion of individuals, perhaps a large swathe of people in the middle of this immense population of around three or four generations of Britons and Americans, feel, well, frankly indifferent about the whole affair? How many of them just did what they had to do at the time—got through the poem more or less, sometimes badly and sometimes well—and then thought little more about it, whether lines from the schoolroom standard popped up in their mind from time to time, or whether they did not?

In my attempts to imagine the thoughts and feelings of the unrecorded majority, the pages ahead occasionally have recourse to modes of reconstruction that are more akin to the work of the historical novelist than to that of the historian, strictly considered. And it is in these ventures that I will sometimes appear to be closing the gap that just a moment ago began to open up between my institutional and emotional accounts. To my mind at least, it seems likely that the memorized poem exercise was indeed a trial for certain, and perhaps many, students and pupils: it is hard therefore for me to be simply celebratory about juvenile recitation within my study of the practice as a felt experience for huge numbers of people. Sections of the first case study, which include considerations of the anxious body of the reciting child, are especially concerned with this side of the question. Further, in its analysis of a specific constituency of British schoolchildren in the first half of the twentieth century, the second case study will wonder whether even individuals who were very good at memorizing verse might, in certain circumstances, have had complicated and conflicted emotions about both the practice of reciting and the specific poems they held within themselves. On the other side of things, however, I also engage in similarly speculative or hypothetical thinking to create a more expansive discussion of some of the unquestionably estimable benefits of memorized poetry than straightforward documentation would seem to allow. In addition to its examination of mixed feelings about verse recitation, that second case study also explores the role a memorized poem might play in enriching and expanding the mind, and in advancing creative and analytic thought, inside and outside of the classroom, for individuals and communities alike. The final case study config-

ures a more explicitly emotional form of this inquiry, arguing that in times of extreme duress, a poem committed to heart in childhood could bring much-needed solace to an adult in psychological pain.

As a whole, then, this project makes frequent changes to its angles of approach, and hopes thereby to navigate between the Scylla and Charybdis of these particular waters. Aiming to avoid an unqualified lament for the lost world of widespread poetry memorization, the pages ahead strive to keep historical specificity and demographic breadth in view, and to be clear-sighted about the practice's shortcomings. Just as importantly, they wish to steer clear of any blunt indictments of juvenile recitation as some kind of instrument of mass social control. Instead, this book honors the richly satisfying and sustaining inner experiences that could develop out of a simple pedagogical exercise, and argues that works of literature held within individual minds had the power to effect material changes in the world at large.



The preceding pages have already made reference to a number of the general topics that the book will explore. Before moving to a discussion of its other concerns and questions, I provide for the purposes of orientation a short overview and explanation of the sections that follow this introduction. As noted, Part I investigates recitation's progress within the mass educational systems that developed in Great Britain and the United States over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it concludes with a brief consideration of the factors that affected the constitution of juvenile recitation canons over the years. The histories traced therein are intended to provide a general background for the remainder of the book—a necessary undertaking, given that the chapters within Part II follow idiosyncratic routes rather than a broad path with equal and balanced sections of national coverage.

“Casabianca,” the poem at the center of the first of my three case studies, presents the spectacle of a child sailor who is blown to pieces because his sense of duty keeps him standing on deck during the bombardment of his ship; its author, Felicia Hemans, took her inspiration from accounts of the death of a valiant French boy who perished during the Battle of the Nile in 1798. I use this work as a lens to examine the processes whereby the performance of poetry in Britain's elementary schools forged short-term and long-term bodily relationships between individuals and measured language. Looking, among other things, at the history of corporal punishment within mass education, the chapter considers not only what happened to children, but also to poems with regular rhythms, during the process of enforced recitation. The fragmented survival of “Casabianca” in popular consciousness today, I argue, is the last remaining trace of its

pedagogical past, of a time when poetry was experienced in and through the body, and when the iamb connected to the heartbeat in a manner that we no longer appreciate, and certainly cannot feel.

The next chapter sets Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" within a very specific institutional and emotional history, aiming thereby to direct attention to the mingled pain and pleasure that can exist within the possession of a cultural object. The first half of the twentieth century saw progressively larger numbers of academically gifted working-class children in Great Britain receive government-backed scholarships; these awards allowed them to proceed from their public elementary schools to a free secondary education in what were otherwise fee-paying grammar schools. The *Elegy*, a staple poem for memorization by the highest-achieving elementary-school pupils, is famous for first raising and then dismissing the issue of undeveloped talent within society's lowest echelons. This case study considers how children from such ranks might have felt when they read and recited a work that dubs the poor both unlettered and mute. Further, it speculates about the ability of the memorized poem to stay within those individuals for the remainder of their days, and to act as a constant reminder of the educational and social processes that moved them out of one class and into another—an elevation the eighteenth-century poem deems impossible.

Popular history has it that General Wolfe recited Gray's *Elegy* to his officers on September 12, 1759, the eve of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham; he concluded his performance, it is said, with the words "Now, gentlemen, I would rather be the author of that poem than take Quebec" (Reed, 204). In the second half of the following century certain soldiers facing combat were more likely to have been thinking of another Wolfe and hearing the relentless beat of a different poetic work within their thudding hearts. My third case study resurrects "The Burial of Sir John Moore after Corunna," a piece all but lost to us today but which was once memorized by countless individuals in the nineteenth century. Charles Wolfe's poem, a reimagining of the hasty interment of a fallen general after one of the land battles in the Napoleonic Wars, was repeatedly quoted by soldiers and other individuals during the American Civil War when they found themselves having to organize, or witness, the burials of dead comrades. In recent years, cultural historians of Great Britain have tried to account for the massive shift in burial and memorial practices for the common soldier that occurred between 1815 and 1915. I argue that the presence of Wolfe's poem in the hearts and minds of ordinary people played its part in creating the social expectations that led to the establishment of the National Cemeteries in the United States, and thus, in due course, the mass memorialization of World War I.

Let me say a few words here about why the case studies are centered on these particular poems. Composed between the midpoint of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth, all three of my chosen works were in general circulation long before they became schoolroom standards in Britain and the United States; all three are by authors from the British Isles; all three are written in abab quatrains; all three focus, one way or another, on death. I find such convergences interesting and will return to each of them in due course, yet none of these points of uniformity played a determining role when I originally drew up my plans for this project. Rather, I chose these three works because they appeared to me to offer opportunities to explore a series of markedly distinct issues within a general consideration of the effects and affects of memorizing verse. In retrospect, I can see that certain other highly popular, much memorized, works could have licensed investigations similar to the ones I ended up conducting. It is also equally apparent to me that I could have explored substantially different questions about widespread poetry recitation, and thus have written a substantially different book, had I selected, say, Wordsworth's "Daffodils," Jane Taylor's "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," and Longfellow's "Psalm of Life" (all of which would have been completely justifiable choices, as would have been Portia's "Quality of Mercy" speech, Holmes's "Chambered Nautilus," Kipling's "Recessional"—or indeed many others).

Although I pay attention to the American history of juvenile recitation in Part I and often to the American reception of British poems elsewhere in these pages, I do not provide a case study centered upon an American-authored poem; given that substantial numbers of American poems were standard fare for memorization in schools in United States and Great Britain over the years, this is perhaps the book's most reprehensible omission. My conscience on this score is somewhat salved by the fact that the most extensive work on poetry memorization has to date been written by Americanist scholars; I think here especially of Angela Sorby's close-grained attention to such poems as Whittier's "Snow-Bound" and Longfellow's *Hiawatha* in her fine book *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry*, and of Joan Shelley Rubin's magisterial tome *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America*, which considers the recitation of American (and other) poems in the course of its broad survey of the important roles poetry has played for individuals in the United States. That said, I concede that my institutional training in British literature is responsible for a certain bias in this project, which in consequence may appear lopsided to some readers.

To make partial amends, the project's afterword adopts a different stance from the case studies by resuming Part I's comparative mode. It also rings the changes by focusing upon two works that were written dur-

ing recitation's heyday and that currently hold preeminent status both as, and among, memorized poems in popular culture on two sides of the Atlantic. Positioning W. E. Henley's "Invictus" (1888) as an American national favorite and Rudyard Kipling's "If—" (1910) as a British poem of poems, the afterword conducts a consciously allegorical reading to orchestrate a return to the topic raised in the introduction's opening pages. The memory of mass juvenile recitation, I noted there, arouses very different feelings in the United States and Great Britain. To close the book, I consider in what ways this might be connected to how individuals in these two countries regard not only their nation's educational past, but also their relationships with poetry, with society, and with themselves.



In the course of their peregrinations my case studies investigate a wide range of esoteric subjects and histories. Taken as a whole, however, the book positions itself within just a few associated zones of academic inquiry. Both its debts and its desired contributions to the history of education and curricular studies should be manifest. It is also an obvious beneficiary of the lively activity that has over the last twenty to thirty years galvanized three key fields within historical literary studies, namely the history of the book, the cultural history of reading, and reception history.¹² To date, most of the important works in the first two of these areas have been relatively wide surveys of the social functions of authors, or readers, or academic study, or the book trade, in a particular period. Part I of this book follows such leads, aiming to add to these bodies of knowledge by tracking the genealogies of primers, anthologies, and school-room reading books and by insisting upon the importance of the often-overlooked chapter of juvenile recitation within mass literacy's history. But within the three case studies this project eschews the general overview and engineers instead a singularly narrow point of entry to its topic. It is my hope that such a reduction of the literary text to no more than fifty quatrains makes workable a capacious form of reception study.

I draw my encouragement to create wide cultural penumbras around short literary works from numerous sources. Analyses of the interplay between an aesthetic object and a broad range of social issues and concerns are today not unusual within research in the humanities. For Anglo-American literary scholars, this general development can be traced back to the 1980s, when historicist criticisms, dividing roughly into a British practice of cultural materialism inspired by Raymond Williams, and the Foucauldian path of American new historicism, made it their mission to break down barriers between seemingly distinct discourses and representations. Yet the landmark explorations in these critical schools, especially

the latter, usually addressed themselves primarily to the synchronous forces of a single moment: however invested in, or unconcerned with, the idea of an author such studies might be, and however imaginatively or diligently they reconstruct the informing prehistory of significant topics, they frequently and most famously worked to capture the energies at play at the time of textual inscription. For a considerable number of years, the most promising models for wide-ranging study of a text's subsequent progress through time and its complex relation to social forms were to be found not in mainstream literary criticism, but in the works of literary sociology that came out of the historicist schools.¹³ Here, however, most investigations ultimately elected to fold their findings back into a greater understanding of the constitution of the explicitly bookish worlds of, for instance, publishing practices or the politics of literary criticism.

In more recent times the general development of cultural studies, especially the subsection thereof that we might call afterlife studies, has resulted in increasing interest in a given text's ability over time to have meaning and influence in spheres beyond the specifically literary.¹⁴ This project bears a strong family resemblance to works in this line, but there are certain characteristics peculiar to its object of analysis that complicate the relationship. Reception studies, however narrowly or widely they configure the historical, geographical, or demographical area reached by their chosen literary object, usually consider how a specific work has signified or signifies different things to different people in different contexts. This can be examined in minutely detailed or general and abstract ways, but there is a tacit understanding that the dynamic between the semantic content or cultural meaning of a text and its readers is key. In this study, however, no such relationship can be assumed; to put it quite plainly, it is perfectly possible to memorize and recite a poem without much or indeed any conscious thought about either its micro- or macro-particularities.¹⁵ Because this project is always cognizant of the bodily mode by which its literary works were sent out into the world—of the corporeal dimensions of the processes of both memorization and recitation—its discussions can never restrict themselves to the question of how a text's meaning was received. A species of performance history is perforce an element of these reception histories; these are temporal studies of the progress of either a meaning allied with a practice, or simply of a practice alone.

Mentioning the necessity of attention to the body foregrounds a particular irony. Although there is no integral reason why a memorized poem must ever be spoken aloud, the outward expression of lines committed to heart was a mandatory element of the specific historical phenomenon here under investigation.¹⁶ And yet this is a book about the production of sound through the act of verbal recitation that examines only its textual

traces, the references in a range of printed materials to what was in one of its chief aspects an essentially oral and aural event. Another version of this project could strive to address this disjunction by including, for example, a CD of reciting voices, or by taking a different form itself, such as that of a radio program. Even so, a major problem would remain. Although it would certainly be possible to incorporate and discuss exceptional, especially professional, performances, the vast majority of the voices in which I am most interested were never recorded; indeed, many of them predate the period in which sound recordings were either easily or commonly made. Instead we must summon up in our head multitudes of everyday recitations, competent and otherwise, spoken in chorus or alone, in and out of the classroom. The inherent difficulties of accessing the sounds of the past explain to a degree why consideration of this key component of many kinds of cultural experiences has only recently become an element of literary analysis. My own attempt to restore a sense of hearing to our apprehensions of worlds that fell silent long ago is particularly indebted to the growing field of Victorian sound studies.¹⁷ It is also intended to counter discussions of literature in its nineteenth- and twentieth-century contexts that argue that this period is characterized by the dissociation of the audible voice and the literary work.¹⁸ From the readerly, if not the writerly, point of view, poetry in Great Britain and the United States had never made a louder noise.

Although these physical aspects of memorization and recitation make this a somewhat specialized variant, my book nevertheless participates in some of the usual projects of reception histories. Accordingly it makes a by-now familiar challenge to the hegemony within academic literary studies of author-centered periodization, the taxonomic principle that, despite some significant exceptions, continues to rule the internal organizations of such entities as university departments, pedagogical anthologies, and professional associations. As mentioned earlier, although I incorporate a number of poems written and published during the period of mass juvenile recitation, my case studies focus upon three works that appeared in earlier eras; I cross other institutional boundaries by looking on occasion at the effects of a British selection of works upon American memorizers and reciters. By making this latter move, I join company with both a growing number of colleagues who interest themselves in Anglo-American literary relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (the essays in Meredith McGill's edited collection, *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange* have been especially inspiring to me), and the still larger cohort of critics exploring literature's transnational journeys more generally. Admittedly, I do pay some heed to the individuals who wrote my chosen poems and to the circumstances of each work's composition, but for the most part I choose to spend time in the worlds of the consumers, rather than the producers, of literature.

Loosening the tie that connects a text exclusively to its author and its original national milieu is a liberating experience; once this is done, we gain the opportunity first to glimpse the myriad of other ways in which a literary work might relate to people, eras, and places, and then to see how our ideas about the shape and character of those specific cultures might thereby undergo transformation. The case studies take on the task of exploring some of the myriad relationships, but the remainder of this introduction speaks briefly to the broader ramifications of these reconfigurations and their connection to the book's concern with mass juvenile recitation *in toto*. My guiding question is this: what can we see—either for the first time, or with greater clarity—once this huge involvement with poetry is put back into the picture?¹⁹ To the extent that the responses to this query over the next few pages dwell on academic themes, they are most closely related to my concerns as a practicing Victorianist, but I hope there are issues of interest here for scholars of other areas and for general readers.

My first point can be made relatively quickly. The idea that the ethos of the Victorian era came to a sudden and decisive end has long-standing currency, both in various forms of cultural histories and in general opinion. This notion has played a structural role in the academic arrangement of literature in English; if the texts of the high modernists are taught as the paradigmatic works of the first half of the twentieth century, as they often have been, then it is easy to see why things would look this way. By switching attention from the production to the consumption of texts this project offers a complementary perspective. In Great Britain and the United States, both the practice and a good proportion of the poetic contents of juvenile recitation continued unchanged throughout the period when a revolution in attitudes towards familiar literary forms and conventions is meant to occur; from around the 1870s to the 1930s or so, the formative and arguably dominant relationship that most people ever had with the entities known as “English literature” or “American literature” remained more or less the same. For majority populations in these two countries, then, no break occurred and thus the customary mode of periodization does not apply. In making this argument, I hope to contribute not just to literary discussions but to the growing numbers of studies in other areas of cultural inquiry that argue that many widespread patterns of thought and behavior that came into being in the nineteenth century did not undergo abrupt and radical alteration after the devastation of World War I.

This general emphasis on nineteenth-century origins remains in play as I open up a broader topic. What might we notice about some of the blind spots and assumptions of academic literary studies over the years if the story of the memorized poem were fully restored to view? My answers to this question ground themselves in the following observations:

(1) the nineteenth century witnessed the appearance of two new sorts of engagement with vernacular literature, one of which would be associated with the university and the other with the elementary school; (2) these themselves were epiphenomena of two signal events of the 1800s, the twin explosions in the demographics of literacy and the availability of material to read. It is my contention that the subsequent histories of the university's and the school's differentiated modes of literary study are intimately and somewhat fractiously related; to use evolutionary terms, one might say that the simultaneous but particular developments of these two forms were profoundly influenced by their ecological proximity. Explorations of the different phases of this relationship, I suggest, would yield a more nuanced understanding of how the creation of two specific kinds of reading communities effected a series of schisms of which we are today the inevitable heirs.

Of these schisms, I direct particular notice to the chasm that yawns between ideas about poetry within the university and those that pertain elsewhere. This is an exciting moment to discuss the exact characteristics of this gap. For many years, although there was a bountiful amount of analysis of poetry in its academic contexts, little serious consideration was given to the many roles that poems have played and can play in everyday life. In the first place, studies in the cultural history of reading tended to focus upon the relationship between general readers and texts in prose. In the second, literary studies displayed only partial interest in how poetry's various positionings might work to create site-specific reading behaviors; with a few important exceptions, attention was paid primarily to the history of interpretative practices within the profession itself, or to the question of how and where poetry was read before the advent of mass literacy. Now, however, the many different types of public and personal experiences with the genre that came into existence in the nineteenth century and that are part of life today are beginning to attract the academy's attention. In addition to the books by Sorby, Rubin, and McGill already cited, the work of such critics as Tricia Lootens, Virginia Jackson, and Mary Loeffelholz is increasing our understanding of both the constitution of such relationships and their long-lasting effects.

If poetry's extracurricular activities used to be outside the purview of English departments, then so were some of the groups of poems that correspond to those various sites and forms of poetic engagement. I am most interested in the fate of the canon that constituted itself during the heyday of recitation in British and American mass education. Many of these classroom texts are short poems that possess an apparent regularity of form and whose content makes an apparently unironic appeal, often to love for family, country, and God. Even more succinctly: these seem to be straightforward and simple poems that rhyme. Once the possession of

huge numbers of people, such pieces today have a limited circulation, persisting only in the minds of the last generation of individuals who got them by heart; in the memories of their descendants, who heard their parents or grandparents recite them; and, in the company of other sorts of poetry, within volumes like *The Best-Loved Poems of the American People* or *The Nation's Favourite Poems*.²⁰ I want to ask why many of these verses do not make it into the academy's reading lists. There may seem to be a quick and obvious answer to this question, but I suggest that this is actually a more complicated issue than it at first appears. Only by attending to the intertwined histories of literary studies in the school and the university can we begin to understand certain prejudices and absences within the latter location's analysis of literature in English.

The features and tendencies to be explored are, I believe, both deep-rooted and largely unacknowledged; they have persisted, with only minor alterations, throughout academic literary criticism in the twentieth century and up to the present day, despite the fact there have been numerous and much-discussed changes in the field over this period. Of these shifts, the most significant were prompted by the extensive theory wars that took place within the humanities from the mid-1970s onwards. As a result of the ensuing critiques of the ideological investments and biases of literary studies, both the range of texts examined in academic settings and the stances of those examinations underwent major revision. Just as importantly, these developments prompted a devastating attack upon the concept of transhistorical value. From this point on, the mainstream of literary criticism has generally been loath to declare in print that a text is good or bad; if evaluations of this kind are made, they are invariably situated within defined contexts, historical and otherwise.

No doubt scholars of all fields feel that there are texts from the zones under their watch that do not get a fair crack of the university whip; in the case of texts with a longer history, some of these may have at one time had a happier (or at least, a more noticed) time of things, only to suffer a subsequent neglect, while others may never have received attention in academic contexts at all. There is of course no inherent reason why any given work "deserves" attention; moreover, a commonsensical reader might well point out at this juncture that professors of literature only have so many hours in the day just like everyone else and that choices will have to be made. Nevertheless, the omission of the prototypical "best-loved poems" from today's academic canons seems noteworthy to me because these verses supply a currently important desideratum. Thanks to the rapid growth of various forms of cultural history and analysis, a strong trend in literary studies has been the discussion of works that are deemed to have at one time or another garnered a demographically significant readership—significant, that is, with respect to size or social con-

stitution. Because the poems in the recitation canon were memorized by those huge numbers of ordinary people, we can certainly award them a tick in the first box and debatably in the second one too. And yet many of the pieces continue to occupy the curious status of objects that used to be everywhere and are now nowhere (or very nearly nowhere).

Although it may well be foolhardy to attempt to analyze the meanings of an academic silence, I want to suggest two possible reasons for its existence. First, I suspect that despite all those radical changes to the field of play, most of the “short and simple” poems of the recitation canon retain the power to elicit the kind of dismissive responses that the discipline might like to think it left behind somewhere in the 1950s. Alternatively, or additionally, I believe that many of these verses evoke an even more startling response from a normally voluble community, a response that is no response whatsoever. In other words, these are either bad, embarrassing, or embarrassingly bad poems, about which we do not wish to speak, or they are stupid poems about which we can think of nothing to say at all. This conundrum could be investigated in numerous ways, but I will make a couple of approaches, both of which require that we keep in mind the structural implications of the phenomenon identified earlier—that splitting of literary study into distinct institutional formations under the pressure of a rapidly expanding literate population. It is possible to think more concretely about responses or nonresponses to many of the school-room standards if we consider the set of assumptions that functioned as first the grounding, and then the long-reigning, theories of the academic study of English literature. Thereafter, that analysis can be extended and nuanced if we turn to a particular phase of the discipline’s development, a phase that witnessed the triumphant success of a single methodological practice.

To begin: the 1860s saw the appearance of new concepts about the associated ideas of the place and function of culture, and the relationship between literature and life. Matthew Arnold, a figure who will loom large in the British history of school recitation, played a key role in disseminating and adapting for English-speaking audiences Continental aesthetic discourse, most particularly Immanuel Kant’s theory of the “uselessness” of the work of art, and the artist’s—and the literary critic’s—necessary detachment from the immediate concerns of the public sphere.²¹ A paraphrase of Arnold’s derived formulation about the aesthetic realm might run as follows: the required “disinterestedness” of the true work of art meant that, ideally, the poem existed away from the political factionalism and social inequities of the quotidian, creating a place in which individuals could access their best selves, free from the warping particularities of class identities and the petty cares of the moment. Not only art but also its production and its consumption should be placed at a remove from

everyday life—the better, on the one hand, to console and inspire the individual, and on the other, to comment upon the world at large, and thus, by indirect influence, bring it closer to a state of perfection.

Although these ideas were challenged and modified over time, versions thereof became centrally embedded within some of the principal tendencies of academic literary criticism for the next hundred years or so. Of their modulations, the most important was the relocation of the ideal world of art from *above* the level of the broad workaday world (as in Arnoldian theory) or *away* from all involvement with social concerns (as in aesthetic theory's *l'art pour l'art* doctrine) to a place in *opposition* to the mainstream of existence, a mode of life that was increasingly depicted as a debased condition of being. Given especial impetus from the creative and critical writings of key modernist authors (especially T. S. Eliot), this point of view gained a powerful and long-lasting orthodoxy in the academy, not incidentally because it was congenial to thinkers on both the right and left of the political spectrum.

Insisting in their various ways upon distanced relationships between literature and modern life, such understandings held damaging implications for forms of literary engagement that were predicated on no such notions of removal or critique from the margin. Of these, the memorization and recitation of poetry at school—a practice that sought to locate culture at the very heart of general culture—represented perhaps the most widespread example. But ideas about the necessity of critical distance also carried dire consequences for the type of works that were most appropriate for, and thus intimately associated with, such centrist modes. Critics who subscribed to the last, and eventually dominant, concept of literature's required oppositional stance were the most obviously contemptuous of the texts that had been widely enjoyed in the second half of the nineteenth century, and proved especially likely to heap disdain upon the form and content of the verse embraced in that age. To the modernists, and then much of the academic literary criticism that followed in its wake, most of the poetry valued in the Victorian era was self-evidently bad, embarrassing, or stupid, and therefore not worthy of any kind of serious attention. The works of a restricted number of famous poets from this period were, it is true, subjected to analysis, but they too suffered to some degree from versions of these slurs.²²

Implicitly or explicitly, such rejections or disparagements often carried some kind of link to the cataclysm of 1914–18. It was axiomatic for many years that the poetry best known and most cherished in the second half of the nineteenth century was irrelevant to, and perhaps partly culpable for, a world fragmented by the horrors of the Great War; such ideas both located themselves within, and contributed towards, that general consensus that the Victorian ethos came to a sudden and definitive end.²³

Certainly it is not hard to see that aspects of nineteenth-century literary culture must have looked unbearably naïve or at the very least misguided after the carnage of trench warfare; Wilfred Owen's excoriating "Dulce et Decorum Est" provides perhaps the casebook example of this bitter theme.²⁴ Nevertheless, the critical rejection of the poetry held dear in a broad swathe of Victorian contexts was also motivated by other factors, not least the academy's fundamental adherence to the concept of art's necessary distance from the quotidian and the mass. For literary scholars in the first half of the twentieth century, the immediately preceding era was saddled with the clear disadvantage of looking, in its attributes, remarkably similar to, and yet in its disposition demonstrably different from, their own times. The idea that "a literary work was supposed to embody a kind of heterodox or critical relation to modernity" proved especially damaging (Guillory, 140), I would suggest, to works that had been produced or celebrated in the only other society that had experienced the conditions of modern life most denigrated in twentieth-century criticism, but which had neither expected nor wanted all of its literature to position itself as their adversary.

With the seismic shifting of critical paradigms over the last thirty years, a sizable number of Victorian texts once considered beyond the pale of academic interest have now gained secure footholds within the canon. Yet to an almost overwhelming degree it has been works in prose, not poetry, that have received this new attention, with novels enjoying the most notable triumph. To be sure, a few volumes by certain key novelists already carried a long and respectable critical history thanks to their perceived aesthetic qualities, but armfuls of other examples of the genre are nowadays regularly discussed in the university. The onetime best-seller or massive popular success has become an especially favored object of analysis.²⁵ While at earlier moments in the twentieth century many of these works would have been thought unworthy of study for a whole raft of deficiencies (formal awkwardness or predictability; formulaic themes or plots; triteness; conservatism; sentimentality; and so forth), these very features are now grist to the mill. Today discussions of the ideological forces affecting both the fictions themselves and later judgments thereof are likely to constitute part of the academic inquiry; contemporary interest in the cultural positioning of texts has had the effect of nullifying, or at least contextualizing, judgments about quality.

Numerous arguments could be adduced to explain why scholars otherwise keen to excavate the connections between literature and life have so far been relatively uninterested in many of the poems of the recitation canon. One important contributory factor, I think, has been the hobbling effect of the profession's methodologies, most specifically the technique it considers appropriate for the study of poetry. When confronted with a

poem, especially a short poem, critics subject it to a close reading. Yet this reflex action carries its own history, a history that is deeply rooted in that larger story of literary study in the academy. Most famously associated with British Practical Criticism as pioneered in the 1920s and the American New Criticism of the 1940s and 1950s, the technique of close reading typically explores the relationship between a work's ideas and its formal properties and devices. Although any scrap of text can be investigated in this manner, close reading has for several generations enjoyed a special relationship with densely patterned works of literature, which in practice has generally meant poetry. Furthermore, in its purest form—which is to say, when it is performed as an end in itself, not, as is frequently the case today, as an ancillary to other methods of inquiry—the close reading tends to prefer a short work of poetry because it aims to come to a conclusion about the totality of its object of study.

The hallmark of this purest form, as most perfectly practiced by the New Critics, is the discovery of contradictions—tensions, ironies, paradoxes, and so forth—in the relation between content and form.²⁶ By the end of the investigation, however, such productive oppositions are usually brought to some type of a resolution, thereby demonstrating that the work in question is unified by a more deeply interfused coherence of meaning that could have been foreseen at the beginning of the journey. Certain sorts of poems richly rewarded this type of address; it was a good job, indeed, that dense and knotty works by, for instance, Donne, Blake, and Yeats were short because celebrated close readings thereof found a great deal to say about the many different ways in which they confounded expectations and easy apprehension. But—and here I put it mildly—the poems in the memorization canon do not respond well to the set moves of the close reading, however modified and adapted these procedures may have been in the years since the reign of New Criticism. The very qualities of formal regularity, thematic transparency, and cultural centrality that made the recitational standard suitable for the school's mode of engagement with the literary render it generally unfit for this purpose.

In other words, I am arguing that the tools that literary critics hold in their hands today have been shaped over the years by the objects they have been used to explore. In order to approach many of the “best-loved” poems, we need both to scrutinize the historical lineage and thus the structuring assumptions of our preferred techniques, and to consider how we might develop or resuscitate alternative forms of address. Under these provisos, aspects of the close reader's art will, I think, continue to prove invaluable; it may be hard to move slowly and carefully through apparently simple verses, but it is a necessary task, given that any and every stretch of language, especially a consciously structured stretch like a poem, might well deliver more than can be seen at first or second glance.

But to expect a schoolroom standard to furnish experiences akin to those offered by the classics of the New Critical canon would clearly constitute a form of short-sightedness in itself; works from one historical tradition cannot be adequately read according to criteria developed within a different, and indeed an opposed, historical tradition. Yet refocusing our vision so that we can look apparent simplicity in the face is no simple matter. For one thing, there are numerous types of simplicity to be found within the recitation canon. For another, the connections between a text and its contexts may prove to be anything but simple: these relationships always carry the potential to develop into a complex affair.

Throughout this project I am therefore asking variants of the following question: how have the different cultural positionings of poetry over the years affected the ways we look at a poem? My book concerns itself with the historical phenomenon of a broadly prevalent mode of relationship between literature and life, but in fact the school provided only one of the many venues and occasions that brought—and still bring—large numbers of people into regular contact with all sorts of poetic forms. More extensive scrutiny of the roles that verse can play in the world off campus would not only develop our understanding of what poetry can mean to people, but it could promote new ways of writing about such bonds. Moreover, such a scrutiny might also have the salutary effect of further questioning the status of the various divisions between academic and popular conceptions of what a poem should be, and what it should be for. To this end, I have attempted in the course of this project to suspend my usual ideas, overt or covert, about what is good in, or about, a poem, and to learn how to appreciate works that were initially impervious to my habitual practices. Recognizing that this is a book written from within the academy and its traditions about a nonacademic relationship with poetry and some nonacademic poems, I have tried to confront my conflicted allegiances whenever they arise.

These, then, are my larger ideas about the scope and potential of this project. I now wish to list, in no particular order, a few of its subsidiary findings. Some of these have been quite surprising to me; certainly many of my first ideas about the topic turned out to be wrong. For example, when it became clear early on in my research that a disproportionate number of the poems in the recitation canon were about death and honor, I assumed that I would ultimately argue that the school had in some way appropriated the practice of commemoration from the church, and that this had something to do with the spread of both secularism and nationalism. I did not expect that I would only begin to understand the relationship between poems of noble martyrdom, education, and organized religion in the British context if I followed the course of first government funding, and then a series of highly influential classroom read-

ing books, as they criss-crossed the Irish Sea. This turned out, then, to be a much more interesting and complicated process than I could have guessed. Other journeys I have taken in these pages also confounded my expectations at various junctures. Sometimes, it is true, they involved a lengthy excursus in a historical field that may at times seem far removed from the topic of the memorized poem, but I hope that the trip is worth it in the end.

I have often thought of this project as the recovery of a lost chunk of the quotidian. Along the way, I have enjoyed picking up some of its chip-pings, the endlessly repeated *minutiae* of common experience that fall to the side when the practice that holds them together drops out of fashion. The fact that juvenile recitation involved set bodily postures as much as verbal delivery was one such retrieval; the recognition that I should already have known this from my readings of nineteenth-century texts like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was another order of discovery altogether.²⁷ I experienced versions of that latter realization many times over: the information that I needed was there all along, but I just hadn't been looking for it. The small departmental library at my former University of California campus turned out to contain a whole shelf of recitation anthologies, from a battered old edition of Lindley Murray's *English Speaker* to a varied collection of classroom readers used in the state's public schools in the first half of the twentieth century. The books had arrived there after our Department of Rhetoric was disbanded, I learned, and had been undisturbed, or at least unborrowed, for years.

I found, too, that my sense of the tradition of English literature began to shift; as I compared today's academic canon with the canons of school-rooms past, not only did the relative magnitudes of various authors start to alter, but different parts of individual oeuvres either came into the light or disappeared from view. It is hard, for example, to overstate the importance that certain works by William Collins, Thomas Campbell, and Robert Southey once held; now they are rarely read. Up to a point I was aware that some of the nineteenth-century Shakespeares were Shakespeares different from the ones we currently possess; the reading scene in *Mansfield Park* (311–12) told me long ago that Cardinal Wolsey's speech from *Henry VIII* used to be considered a superlative set-piece for domestic performance, but who knew that parts of *King John* were regularly visited upon schoolchildren in the nineteenth century? And what I formerly thought of as a personal obsession of Thomas Hardy's turned out to have had a far broader reach; texts invoking the battles of the Napoleonic Wars hung over the classrooms of Victorian and Edwardian Britain just as the poems of World War I loom over the English lessons of British secondary schools today. In addition I have encountered en route not only a large number of poems that I had never read before, but also many

rewardingly quirky but now neglected historical studies. One of my favorite research finds bears the title *An Unwritten Chapter in the History of Education*. These investigations of the story of the memorized poem in general and the tales of my three memorized poems in particular together constitute my attempt to insert a new chapter into my own education, and thereby to correct many of the misapprehensions and incomplete understandings that lurked therein.



I may hitherto have given the impression that there are no existing theoretical discussions of memorization and literature. This is not quite true. “Critic”/“Reader,” an essay from 1979 by George Steiner, addresses the topic as an important part of its project of defining the difference between its two titular figures. To be a critic, the article argues, is to distance oneself from the art object in order to find one’s angle on it; for Steiner, this is essentially a secular act. To know a work by heart so that one might recite it, however, is to be the highest or consummate form of reader; the internalization and reproduction of a work of literature is an act that celebrates its mysterious being and is thus akin to an act of theological worship. In the course of his essay Steiner makes numerous interesting points about recitation’s place in different times and cultures and tells some especially effective stories about the deep value of the memorized literary work to individuals *in extremis*. It is, however, his central dichotomy that most arrests my attention, because it has prompted me to wonder whether one can combine the perspective of a critic with the devotion of the reader who has memorized a text. Is knowing a work so that you can judge it an essentially different act from making a work a part of your being? Is a critic’s study of the memorized poem in some way either an impossible project, or a project that risks dangerous consequences by clashing the epistemological and the ontological together?

To the extent that my book is a historical study, and to the extent that I do not believe, as Steiner does, that the critic’s act of judgment must finally become part of an evaluation of quality, I do not feel that it is necessarily perilous to bring criticism and memorization into the same frame. Nevertheless, at numerous junctures in the pages ahead, I have been conscious of a sort of spectral barrier, a force separating those two modes of relation to a literary work that Steiner helpfully defines. Most particularly, I find myself running up against this imaginary divide in my second case study, when I pose a version of the following question. What role might memorization of a poem play within literary study in the classroom, or indeed in any learning environment, when that literary study is also striving to encourage the critical analysis of the poem? Deliberately

or not, poetry was for years presented to British and American children in a manner that was likely to preclude conscious thought about the words that were memorized or recited. And yet I have ultimately come to think that this was not, and is not, an inevitable result of learning words by heart. On the contrary: I believe it is possible to imagine a kind of teaching that would promote a dialectical relation between an individual's embodiment of a poem and his or her questioning of a poem. In the final estimation, I suggest that such a dynamic oscillation has the potential to create the very best of relationships between an individual and a literary work.

In his illustration of the various differences between critics and readers, Steiner observes that the former abstract small sections of a text to make their points, while the latter, in their ideal form, deliver the work in its entirety.²⁸ In this respect, at least, I often take on the character of the reader in this book, affording myself the luxury of incorporating whole poems into my text and avoiding, for the most part, close reading's characteristic feature, the truncated quotation. Let me preface my final remarks in this introduction, then, with every single line of "Lord Ullin's Daughter," a ballad that Thomas Campbell composed on a trip to the Isle of Mull in Scotland in 1795:

A Chieftain to the Highlands bound,
Cries, "Boatman, do not tarry;
And I'll give thee a silver pound
To row us o'er the ferry."

"Now who be ye would cross Lochgyle,
This dark and stormy water?"
"O! I'm the chief of Ulva's isle,
And this Lord Ullin's daughter.

"And fast before her father's men
Three days we've fled together,
For should he find us in the glen,
My blood would stain the heather.

"His horsemen hard behind us ride;
Should they our steps discover,
Then who will cheer my bonny bride
When they have slain her lover?"

Out spoke the hardy Highland wight:
"I'll go, my chief—I'm ready:
It is not for your silver bright,
But for your winsome lady.

“And by my word, the bonny bird
In danger shall not tarry:
So, though the waves are raging white,
I’ll row you o’er the ferry.”

By this the storm grew loud apace,
The water-wraith was shrieking;
And in the scowl of heaven each face
Grew dark as they were speaking.

But still, as wilder blew the wind,
And as the night grew drearer,
Adown the glen rode armed men—
Their trampling sounded nearer.

“O! Haste thee, haste!” the lady cries,
“Though tempests round us gather;
I’ll meet the raging of the skies,
But not an angry father.”

The boat has left a stormy land,
A stormy sea before her—
When o! Too strong for human hand,
The tempest gather’d o’er her.

And still they row’d amidst the roar
Of waters fast prevailing;
Lord Ullin reach’d that fatal shore—
His wrath was chang’d to wailing.

For sore dismay’d, through storm and shade,
His child he did discover;
One lovely hand she stretch’d for aid,
And one was round her lover.

“Come back! Come back!” he cried in grief,
“Across this stormy water;
And I’ll forgive your Highland chief,
My daughter!—o, my daughter!”

’Twas vain: the loud waves lash’d the shore,
Return or aid preventing;
The waters wild went o’er his child,
And he was left lamenting.²⁹

Had I been born in Great Britain some time between 1870 and 1920 and educated in a public elementary school, it is highly probable that I

would have encountered this poem when I was nine; “Lord Ullin’s Daughter” frequently appeared in the classroom readers for this age group throughout that period and was a very popular choice for memorization and recitation. Had I been the kind of nine-year-old then that I was in 1971, it is likely that I would find it relatively easy and extremely enjoyable to recite this piece alone or in concert. It is also likely, I think (although now I am getting into more uncertain waters), that if I had memorized the poem at this age, then it would have stayed in my head for good; in the years that followed I would have been able to say its lines, out loud or to myself, whenever I had wanted to do so. As it was, the primary education I actually experienced had no time either for recitation or poems like Campbell’s; this being so, I had been on this earth for around four decades before I read the ballad in full. I do not intend to start arguing here that this is an important and unjustly neglected poem; I will not begin to make the case that it is a work that everyone should know. Instead, I will just say this: I would have liked to have had “Lord Ullin’s Daughter” with me for all those years.