

# Ghosts from an Imperfect Place: Philip Ridley's Nostalgia

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ABSTRACT: Philip Ridley's three major works from the 1990s serve as powerful reminders of nostalgia's origin as a physical affliction caused by an acute longing for home and the past. The recurrence of nostalgia in his *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991) and *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* (1992) reflects larger, ongoing debates about nostalgia in British culture, from Thatcher's call for a return to Victorian values to the rise of Tony Blair's New Labour party and its championing of Cool Britannia, which looked back to 1960s Swinging London. Yet, in his final play of the decade, *Ghosts from a Perfect Place* (1994), Ridley suggests that nostalgia can be transformed from a purely retrospective gesture into a prospective one.

KEYWORDS: Philip Ridley, nostalgia, *The Pitchfork Disney*, *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*

Elderly Eastern European immigrants reminiscing about life in the old country, right-wing news commentators remembering the way things never were, and baby boomers recalling life before mortgages and Viagra by indulging the occasional joint or affair: what these three dissimilar groups share is a passion for nostalgia. In contemporary parlance, nostalgia is sanitized memory, the past without the pain. The nostalgic mind gazes uncritically back at its past and longs for that moment to return. It does so because the present lacks the simplicity, the values, the opportunities—a set of indeterminate qualities that make the past so desirable. But the past that nostalgia conjures is idealized, not messy; it is not the true past. There are no despots, class conflicts, or failed revolutions; no long lines for bread, no burning crosses, no bad cases of the clap. Nostalgia is fiction in the guise of history.

This familiar understanding of nostalgia as a sentimental longing for a fictionalized past is a development of the twentieth century. The *Oxford*

*English Dictionary* locates the first use of nostalgia with this specific meaning in a 1900 article published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, while the *Online Etymology Dictionary* records the first “main modern” use of nostalgia as meaning a “wistful yearning for the past” in 1920.<sup>1</sup> In recent decades, critical theorists and historians have transformed “nostalgia” into an almost exclusively pejorative term. But while this modern sense of nostalgia is a recent etymological development, the term itself has a much longer history. “Nostalgia” stretches back to the late-seventeenth century, when it is first introduced as a medical term, a use that continued well into the nineteenth century. For centuries, then, nostalgia was not maudlin recollection but a disease with dire consequences if it went untreated.

The characters of Philip Ridley’s plays are sick with nostalgia. Ridley’s three major works from the 1990s serve as powerful reminders of nostalgia’s origins as a physical affliction caused by an acute longing for home and the past. The characters of *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991) and *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* (1992) are so enamoured of fictions of the past that they go to violent ends to preserve them. Such adherence to a nostalgic vision leads to a dismissal of the present and an abdication of the future. The recurrence of nostalgia in Ridley’s plays reflects larger, ongoing debates about nostalgia in British culture, from Thatcher’s call for a return to Victorian values to the rise of Tony Blair’s New Labour party and its championing of Cool Britannia, which looked back to 1960s Swinging London as its model. Yet, in his final play of the decade, *Ghost from a Perfect Place* (1994), Ridley suggests that the cure for nostalgia is perhaps nostalgia itself. That is, the recognition of nostalgia can serve as a means of transforming it from a purely retrospective gesture into a prospective one. Nostalgia, in Ridley’s work, appears inescapable, but the nostalgic gaze backward can on occasion be painfully turned towards the future.

The sight of two unhealthy adults greeted audiences at London’s Bush Theatre in January 1991, in the premiere production of *The Pitchfork Disney*, directed by Matthew Lloyd. Presley and Haley Stray, the siblings at the centre of the play, have “*unevenly cut hair*,” pale skin with “*dark rings beneath bloodshot eyes*,” and teeth black “*like [they have] been eating liquorice*” (II, 38).<sup>2</sup> These twenty-eight-year-old fraternal twins were abandoned ten years ago by parents who left the flat and never returned and who are now presumed dead, even murdered. As a result, the twins never grew up, reverting instead to an infantile state. They have become perpetually lost children: strays. In that cluttered East End flat filled with memorabilia of their childhood, the Strays eat and sleep, never leaving except to purchase chocolate and biscuits. Plagued by nightmares and insomnia, they take sleeping tablets, and Haley sucks on a baby’s

dummy dipped in a bottle of the dead parents' medicine. They bide their time telling stories that either wistfully look back to their childhood or describe the present as a terrifying place, populated by rabid dogs and murderous foreigners.

The pleasure that the Strays take in mutually constructing a narrative of the past is seen in Presley's retelling of his recurring nightmare. Here, the present is rendered as a void, in sharp contrast to the safety and wholeness of the past. While the nightmare is Presley's, the telling is a shared experience, a ritual in which both participants know their roles. Since the questions asked have an answer known to both questioner and respondent, it is the performance of asking that matters:

PRESLEY Where shall I begin?

HALEY The sky.

PRESLEY It's black. A sheet of dark cloud obscures everything. No heaven visible. No stars, no moon, no sun. Nothing.

HALEY Is it snowing?

PRESLEY Slightly.

...

HALEY Describe the street, Presley.

PRESLEY Well... you remember the corner shop? The one where we got all our shopping. Where the shopkeeper called Mummy "Mrs. Stray" and always asked how Daddy was.

HALEY The shop where we bought our sweets?

PRESLEY The very same.

HALEY Remember.

PRESLEY It's gone.

HALEY Totally?

PRESLEY Utterly. (23–24)

In this performance, the past is configured spatially: there is the "corner shop" where the shopkeeper referred to their mother in formal terms and inquired about their father, a shop where the siblings purchased their beloved sweets, which function as a fetish for the pair, the only food that they now ingest. But in the present, the corner store no longer exists; the entire world has been annihilated into a wasteland, with "a sheet of dark cloud obscur[ing] everything" (23). The twins find comfort in imagining that a nuclear holocaust has left them the world's only survivors. In a phrase repeated throughout the play, Presley tells Haley, "No heaven visible," implying that the apocalypse has left the world without any sense of a beyond. What does remain, however, is the home of the Strays, which stands, in Haley's words, "like a dark tower in a wasteland" (25).

In the 2003 New York revival of the play at the Greenwich Street Theatre, Victor Villar-Hauser and Tara Denby's portrayal of the siblings revealed the horrifying state of being trapped in time (*Pitchfork*). Looking glassy-eyed and malnourished, Villar-Hauser and Denby embodied traumatized adults reliving the past as a means of coping. Ridley told the production's director, Kevin Kittle, that the play emerged from the question, "How do we live in a godless world?" (Personal interview). In other words, the play is about the problem of nihilism, which Nietzsche links to the moment when "*the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking; 'why?' finds no answer" (§2). The siblings speculate that the reason they are the sole survivors of this imagined holocaust is because they were deemed "good" by their parents. Yet, in the absence of God the Father (and Mother), those value judgements no longer hold weight. Without the parents to confer and confirm their status as "good," the Strays must tell stories about the past. In the face of nihilism, Ridley suggests, we seek comfort in narratives, as a way to relive the time before we knew that He was dead; we invent an idealized past because the harsh reality that there is no higher being, no guardian looking out for us, is almost too much to bear. In Kittle's production, Villar-Hauser's Presley manically uttered the question, "And what did Mummy say to me?" barely able to wait for his sister's reply, "'What a good boy you are'" (25). In the world of the Strays, the enunciation of the platitude (in this case, the reminder of Presley's "goodness") keeps at bay the realization that their parents and their idealized childhood are both gone. That quest for a lost past is specifically localized in the space of their parents' former home. The Strays must continue to reiterate the stories, and they must do so in this specific place; their desire for the past has, in essence, sentenced them to house arrest.

Ridley's depiction of the Stray children leads to an inescapable diagnosis: they are sick with nostalgia. Ridley's characters recall the cases of nostalgia first articulated by Swiss doctor-in-training Johannes Hofer, who invented this new category of illness in his 1688 medical dissertation. The illness in question targeted youths, typically young men, who lived or studied abroad; they would be stricken with fevers or "consumed by the 'Wasting Disease'" (380). The cause, Hofer determined, was an "afflicted imagination," brought about by "living spirits" that revisit "the oval tubes of the center of the brain," arousing "the uncommon and ever-present idea of the recalled native land" (381). Those stricken with the disease would "frequently wander about sad," "bear jokes or the slightest injuries or other petty inconveniences in the most unhealthy (frame of) mind," and attend "to nothing hardly, other than an idea of the Fatherland" (386).

In the first recorded use of the term, Hofer called this sickness “nostalgias,” which he claimed was “Greek in origin,” “composed of two sounds, one of which is *Nosos*, return to the native land; the other, *Algos*, signifies suffering or grief” (381). While previous discussions of the illness used the informal term “homesickness,” Hofer sought to give medical validity to the disease by substituting an ancient Greek term, *ΝΟΣΤΑΛΓΙΑ*, for *Heimwehe*, the German word for “homesickness.” But “nostalgias” is a neologism; Hofer brings the Greek roots together for the first time. His signifier, therefore, suffers from the disease it signifies. It looks back wistfully at an invented medicinal Fatherland—ancient Greece, that mythic birthplace of philosophic and scientific thought—in order to lend a contemporary idea the patina of history. While giving the illness a Greek term was necessary insofar as Hofer was conforming to the dictates of seventeenth-century medicine, in this case, circumstances have given his retrospective gesture a particular irony. Nostalgia, from its inception, has been nostalgic about itself.

Hofer's formulation locates nostalgia's source in a longing for place, the “recalled native land,” which was conjured in the afflicted by objects or sounds that functioned metonymically for the Fatherland. Such reminders rendered the subject ill. Over a century later, Kant reformulated Hofer's description to include a temporal element in the disease's etiology. In his 1798 *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (*Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*), Kant wrote, “The homesickness [*Das Heimweh*] of the Swiss . . . is the result of a longing that is aroused by the recollection of a carefree life and neighborly company in their youth” (§32). For Kant, the nostalgic longed not merely for home but for home as it had been. On returning home, “[the homesick Swiss] think that everything has drastically changed, but it is that they cannot bring back their youth” (§32). The objects, therefore, stand in not only for a distant place but also for a lost time. In *The Pitchfork Disney*, the Strays' home is littered with objects that function in this manner: the chocolate bars, the baby's dummy, the bottle of medicine, the father's saved wage packets. These objects identify the flat as the parents' home, while simultaneously conjuring up the time of Presley and Haley's childhood. Though the Stray siblings have never left home, those reminders render the siblings ill; like the Swiss described by Kant, the Strays are homesick even at home because the home that they desire is not merely a place but a place located in the past.

Presley shatters the siblings' state of isolation when he invites Cosmo Disney into the flat. When Presley sees the beautiful blonde Cosmo from the window, Cosmo is hunched over, ill, and Presley is drawn to him out of a homosocial, almost pre-sexual, desire. When Cosmo's “foreign” companion, the grotesque Pitchfork Cavalier, leaves Cosmo behind on

the curb and Haley is silenced into sleep by the tablets and medicine-soaked dummy, Presley acts. He brings Cosmo inside. Cosmo vomits. This abject introduction, the spilling out of Cosmo's guts onto the floor of the Strays' hermetic space, announces the arrival of the material world in the Stray museum. The present has made its presence known.

The eighteen-year-old Cosmo is a showman; beneath his black leather overcoat he sports a red-rhinestone-and-sequin jacket that dazzles Presley. In pubs and clubs, Cosmo eats live insects and pets—"Caterpillars. Maggots. Worms. Beetles. Moths. Goldfish. Slugs. Spiders... mice... even... a live canary" (69)—for horrified audiences who pay him nicely for the terrifying thrills he provides. Cosmo's deposit on the Strays' floor is the price he pays for an evening of hard work; as he tells Presley, "Have to get it out of my system" (36). This purging serves as a metaphor for Cosmo's relation to the past. Unlike Presley and Haley, who literally ingest the past (the parent's medicine, the childhood sweets) in order to bring it closer, Cosmo renders the past as abject, as something that must be expelled at all costs.

After listening to some of Presley's stories, Cosmo scolds him, "You like talking about the past, don't you?" to which Presley replies, "It's... comforting" (64). Cosmo responds by taking out a wad of cash: "Money, Mr. Chocolate. . . . Most comforting thing in the fucking world" (65). The childhood that Presley romanticizes is eradicated from Cosmo's own history: "[o]nce I had the skin of a baby and now I got this skin. I unzipped my old skin and threw it away. One day I was shitting my nappy, the next I was earning money. I had no childhood" (74). While Presley finds comfort in a state of dependency, Cosmo is repulsed by it and instead finds comfort in profit, since it creates a sense of self-sufficiency. Childhood must be shed like an "old skin" because it represents the time before money. In Cosmo's account, he was transformed from abject dependent ("shitting my nappy") to wage earner overnight, bypassing the intermediary stage of childhood entirely.

Presley's love of the past makes him, in Cosmo's eyes, one of the many "ancient children addicted to their chocolate" (74). But, for Cosmo, chocolate represents not only nostalgia for childhood but also homosexual desire. Cosmo finds Presley's interest in him "suspect," and frequently asks Presley, "You sure you ain't homosexual?" (66). Cosmo accuses Presley of wanting to "ride the chocolate highway" (56), an image transforming the childhood sweet into excrement, anal eroticism displacing the pleasure Presley takes in the past. Cosmo's conflation of childhood and male homosexuality, and his repulsion from both, originate in his hatred of dependency. In Cosmo's mind, both the past and homosexuality represent the need for another person, which is a sign of weakness.

Cosmo's coupling of childhood and homosexuality manifests itself in a fear of male contact. He refuses to let Presley touch him and launches into a tirade about how all the men who try to, or even look at him sexually, should be gassed and bombed. Cosmo understands touching—especially any contact that connotes homosexuality—as nostalgic, as a diseased longing for the past. For Cosmo, both the past and any tinge of the homosocial must be erased; the only reality is an economy driven by fear. A physical embodiment of Thatcher's decree that "there is no society," Cosmo lives only in a present dominated by individual greed. Cosmo's performances are a "ghost train," giving audiences what they want: "[m]an's need for the shivers. Afraid of blood, wanting blood. We all need our daily dose of disgust" (74–75). Cosmo capitalizes on this secret need, and unlike Presley, who seeks comfort in the otherness of his childhood or homosexual desire, Cosmo renders himself free from attachment and obligation. For Cosmo, "it's survival of the sickest," plain and simple (75).

When Pitchfork, Cosmo's "work associate," arrives to pick him up, Presley is horrified to meet a monstrous man with a face so hideous that a black leather bondage mask must hide it from view (66). (In their stage act, Cosmo, after he gobbles insects and rodents, reveals what is under Pitchfork's mask.) When Pitchfork enters the apartment, he takes an interest in the sleeping Haley, picking her up like a doll and holding her to his chest, swaying back and forth. "Having a boogie," Cosmo explains (98). In production, it is a moment of humour and horror: What is he going to do to her? When Presley objects, Cosmo says, "He won't do anything. Vital parts of him are missing. Know what I mean? He's touching her out of a sense of nostalgia" (99). Pitchfork is a perfect associate for Cosmo: unable to speak, with a face terrifying enough to be a source of income, and without genitals, which greatly reduces the possibility of homosexual consummation. Pitchfork represents the castrated nostalgic, whose love of the past has been rendered harmless and inoffensive. Unlike Presley, whose nostalgia has made him into an "ancient child addicted to chocolate," Pitchfork merely succumbs to occasional bouts of nostalgia with unconscious women.

The pathologization of the past and the equation of homosexual affection with infantile delusion are also central to *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*. Ridley's second play—also directed by Matthew Lloyd—opened in May 1992 at the Hampstead Theatre, London. It takes place during Cougar Glass's umpteenth nineteenth birthday. Cougar is an amalgam of Presley and Cosmo. Like Presley, Cougar is trapped in time: he wants to remain a perpetual teenager. Like Cosmo, he is an object of desire capable of extreme violence. At the play's start, Cougar has just finished dyeing his hair and now bakes his face with a sun-ray lamp in



order to disguise the signs that he is a man in his thirties. His companion is Captain Tock, a forty-two-year-old bald man, also tortured by the signs of his age but, unlike Cougar, unable or unwilling to disguise them. The pair lives above an abandoned factory in London's East End, in a dilapidated room littered with the Captain's "*babies,*" "*stuffed birds, china birds, paintings of birds*"; Ridley describes the space as "*somewhere between museum and aviary*" (119). The Captain is Cougar's sugar daddy: he takes care of Cougar, prepares the place for the latest party, plucks out missed grey hairs from Cougar's scalp, and fawns over him as a desired object that he can never have.

The latest party is part of a ploy to seduce a fifteen-year-old boy named Foxtrot Darling, played in the original production by Jude Law. Cougar has befriended the boy, taking on the role of the older brother whom Foxtrot has recently lost. The conquest is a cruel ritual, in which both the Captain and Cougar know their respective roles. After Cougar succeeds in deflowering Foxtrot at the party, he will discard him, moving on to the next victim. The eagerness immediately to cut ties is part of a larger pattern: Cougar is terrified by anything from the past because it reminds him of the passing of time. Cougar derides the antiques that the Captain treasures as junk; he ridicules the Captain for his premature baldness. As with Cosmo, Cougar's irrational fear of the past is manifested in a fear of human contact. When the Captain enters, he is not permitted to touch Cougar. When Cougar needs his grey hairs plucked, the Captain must wear gloves because Cougar is worried that the Captain will "leak" on him; the Captain's elderly body, in Cougar's mind, may overflow its boundaries, and his youthful body must remain pure. Cougar even spurns the touch of his victims, since his paedophiliac lust for boys serves to maintain the illusion of his youth. Thus, when Cougar manages to seduce Foxtrot (albeit briefly), Foxtrot does not touch Cougar: rather, Cougar masturbates the boy, controlling the young male body. Cougar manipulates the boys as only an adult could, but in the boys' idealization of him, Cougar sees reflected back a confirmation of his own youthfulness.

What repulses Cougar about the Captain is that, in him, he sees only a reminder of the aging process: the Captain's bald head reflects Cougar's own greying hair; the Captain's desire for Cougar's younger body mirrors Cougar's own vampire-like desire for youth. Paradoxically, Cougar's fear of aging and the past makes him, in essence, a quintessential nostalgic: he romanticizes his youth to the point where he spends his entire present acting as if he were still living in the past. The mere mention of Cougar's real age sends him into a violent fit, with headaches so acute he cannot speak or stand. And, tellingly, it is only the sight of the withered eighty-year-old neighbour Cheetah Bee that can soothe him.



Her beyond-the-pale body—"wrinkled and pale," "eyes bloodshot and plagued by cataracts," "brown and rotten [teeth]," "breath smell[ing] of decay"—comforts him with the knowledge that she is "at the end" and he is "at the beginning," thus allowing him to maintain the fiction that he is still nineteen (153).

The play contrasts Cougar's pathological nostalgia with the nostalgic traditionalism of Sherbet Gravel, Foxtrot's eighteen-year-old fiancée, who accompanies him to his own seduction. Sherbet tells Cougar and the Captain of her love of all things traditional:

Cake on birthdays. Eggs at Easter. . . . And Christmas! Ooooh, I love everything to do with Christmas. It's time for the family. Getting together, turkey, Christmas pudding, watching television all afternoon—usually a big film, or cartoons—singing Christmas carols, turkey sandwiches. And then New Year: midnight chimes, arm in arm. . . . Christmas and New Year are times for the family. I never used to believe that. But I've changed. The past year has taught me a lot. About the value of traditional things. (171)

Sherbet's litany of "traditional things" conjures up the neo-Victorian nostalgia of Tory propaganda: the centrality of family, the importance of proper signifiers for the holidays (the turkey, the chimes, the singing of carols), and the love of a past as it never was. The irony is that Sherbet falls far from the ideal of anything "traditional": the former girlfriend of Foxtrot's brother, she appears to have been responsible for his downfall and death. She is seducing Foxtrot just as Cougar is, and her appearance at the party is motivated by her cruel desire to unmask Cougar as a thirty-year-old man. Her success in capturing Foxtrot derives from a power that Cougar lacks: heterosexual reproductivity. Not only is she Foxtrot's wife-to-be; she is also the mother of his "Future One." Indeed, though the unborn child's paternity is in doubt, her pregnancy impels Foxtrot's proposal; the demands of family secure Sherbet's victory in the contest for Foxtrot's affection. A desire to punish Cougar's "unnatural" pursuit of youth motivates her love of the traditional. In her invocation of family duty, Sherbet reveals the violence of that nostalgic narrative: the "value of traditional things" does not necessarily stem from affection and generosity but is triggered by a need to control and punish. Thus, in Cougar and Sherbet, Ridley presents two models of nostalgia united by a principle of cruelty.

Both *The Pitchfork Disney* and *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* close with images of violence that demonstrate the regressive or reactive nature of nostalgia. When Cosmo convinces Presley to leave the flat with Pitchfork to fetch more chocolate, Presley is nervous to leave his unconscious sister alone with Cosmo but does so in order to gain

Cosmo's approval. While Presley is gone, Cosmo replaces Haley's dummy with his finger. In a parody of oral sex, Haley begins to suck his finger, causing Cosmo to reach a sexual climax. Presley returns, however, discovering Cosmo in mid-orgasm. In retaliation, Presley breaks Cosmo's finger, forcing Cosmo to flee the flat.

This seemingly victorious moment, when Presley turns the tables on Cosmo, gives way, in the play's conclusion, to an image of regression. Haley awakens from her sleep in a fit of terror:

HALEY Mum and Dad—oh, they were so good. Who would want to hurt them like that?

(PRESLEY and HALEY embrace each other.)

PRESLEY Calm down, Haley.

HALEY But it makes no sense, Presley.

PRESLEY I know, I know.

HALEY There is no meaning.

PRESLEY I know.

HALEY I'm scared.

PRESLEY Me too.

HALEY I'm scared.

PRESLEY I'm scared. (108)<sup>3</sup>

The unexplained nature of the parents' disappearance gives way to fearful nihilism: "There is no meaning." Now that Presley has let Cosmo into their world, albeit momentarily, the past appears to have lost its ability to comfort. The repetition ("I'm scared") reveals that their encounter with the present confirms their fear of it. Though Presley has defeated Cosmo, breaking his phallus and thus castrating him, the incident only reiterates the Strays' powerlessness. The final image echoes the play's opening: the two siblings alone, ensconced in their tomb-like apartment and ritualized existence. This echo, the near repetition of opening and closing images, is something that Kittle's 2003 production made explicit in its staging. The visitation will be bracketed as yet another justification for the return to the reiteration of their nostalgic vision of childhood. The encounter with Cosmo and Pitchfork will not bring about change but will instead serve as a further excuse never to leave home.

In *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*, Cougar refuses to be defeated by Sherbet. Despite her presence, Cougar does seduce Foxtrot, using a heterosexual pornographic magazine as bait in order to masturbate him briefly. But Cougar, for the first time, finds his desire thwarted. First, the Captain interrupts Cougar's sexual act with the boy, and then Sherbet announces Cougar's true age to Foxtrot. Though it initially appears that Sherbet will be victorious—she aims a gun

at Cougar – Cougar overpowers her in a scuffle, violently punching her in the stomach until she miscarries. Cougar, in essence, is beating the “Future One” out of Sherbet. This sadistic act is the price the female body must pay for attempting to castrate the narcissistic and nostalgic male. In his repeated punching of a pregnant woman’s stomach, Cougar is literally destroying the future.

After the ambulance takes Sherbet and Foxtrot away, Cougar and the Captain sit together at the table. With Cougar’s help, the Captain completes a story that he began telling the party guests earlier in the evening: a story he made up many years ago for “someone [he] cared for a great deal. Someone who did not care for [him]” (192). It is a fable about a self-obsessed prince whose face is transformed into a vulture’s by a wizard. The wizard has told the prince that his face will return only when he discovers “the fastest clock in the universe”; after years of heartache, a blind girl saves the prince, and as a result, his face is restored. The Captain returns to this fable in the play’s final moment:

CAPTAIN And the Prince and the Blind Girl lived . . . happily together.  
 And the years flew by them. Years became hours. Hours became seconds.  
 Because the Fastest Clock in the Universe is . . .  
 COUGAR Love  
 CAPTAIN Hallelujah! (212)

In finding true love, the prince has solved the wizard’s riddle about the “fastest clock in the universe.” The story’s cliché lesson – that love is blind and timeless – is rendered grotesque in this context. The Captain cannot punish Cougar for what he has done to Foxtrot and Sherbet, and Cougar, who enjoyed his birthday cake as Sherbet bled, shows no signs of remorse. The closing image of Cougar and the Captain together makes clear that there will be more nineteenth birthday parties. The future will only bring more of the same, for the Captain’s love is truly blind: blind to Cougar’s inhumanity.

These two endings theatricalize a violent conflict between past and present, and in both cases, the past becomes a prison. Presley and Haley are in the throes of what Peter Sloterdijk calls “nihilistic shock,” which occurs “when one realizes that there is no given meaning, but that we manipulate it and then ‘consume’ it ourselves” (348). The twins’ response to this lack of meaning is retreat. Cougar and Captain Tock also retreat into the past: Cougar, into a continued search for lost youth, and the Captain, to the moment when he first encountered Cougar and love between the two seemed possible. This is reactive nostalgia; like the worst case of Hofer’s illness, it is a desire for the past that denigrates the present and forecloses the possibilities of the future. Reactive nostalgia refuses to

see the fictional element in its romantic glance backward. Rather than use the nihilistic crisis of meaning as an opportunity to recognize that we create interpretations of the world, as Nietzsche suggests in his final writings, nihilistic shock instead makes the characters see their nostalgia as truth: a truth that must be maintained at any cost. For Ridley, this leads to brutality.

The Strays are incapable of moving beyond the past; they have transformed the words of Mummy and Daddy into the word of God, and it has imprisoned them. The twins must excise the outside world so that its influence does not violate their “truth.” The finger that penetrated Haley’s mouth must be snapped in half and the intruders banished from the flat. The Captain and Cougar embrace the fiction of lost youth. Cougar has convinced himself that he is actually nineteen, despite all of the evidence to the contrary. The result: Cougar is a pedophile with a quasi-genocidal streak, and the Captain, his somewhat willing accomplice.

Reactive nostalgia objectifies the fictional past, and an all-consuming retrospective view of the world has made this foursome sick with time. Ridley, in holding up these characters as examples of the unhealthiness of nostalgia, refracts ongoing controversies in British culture about nostalgia. The National Heritage Acts of 1980 and 1983, which sought to “save” historic buildings for future generations, along with Margaret Thatcher’s call during the 1983 campaign to return to Victorian values, sparked powerful debates about the relationship between the past and the present, revealing it to be a hotly contested political issue. Fears about a multicultural Britain, which Thatcher famously stirred up—for instance, when during a January 1978 television interview she referred to immigration as “swamping” England<sup>4</sup>—remain at the heart of any discussion of the British “character” or “heritage,” for the nostalgic image of Merrie England emblazoned on the national conscience is most decidedly a white one. Presley, when he first sees Pitchfork and Cosmo from the window, calls the grotesque Pitchfork “foreign,” which prompts a hysterical response from Haley: “[y]ou know what Mum and Dad said about foreigners. They’re dangerous, Presley. Dangerous and different. They beat up women and abuse children. They don’t do things the way we do. They hate us. They’d kill us all if they had the chance” (30). While Ridley’s two plays never specifically refer to a political context, they reveal nostalgia’s cruel subtext; what lies beneath Sherbet’s love of the traditional, Presley and Haley’s fear of the foreign, and Cougar’s obsession with youth is violence. Yet, in his final play of the decade, Ridley dramatizes the possibilities of an active, self-conscious nostalgia, opposed to the violent, reactive nostalgia displayed in the conclusions of his first two plays.

The 1990s were defined not by a Tory agenda but by the emergence and victory of New Labour. In the year following his Labour Party's landslide victory in 1997, Blair stated, "I want Britain to be seen as a vibrant, modern place, for countries wrapped in nostalgia cannot build a strong future" (qtd. in Norman). This dismissal of nostalgia crystallized New Labour's position as the party of change. Blair's England was to be hybrid; the buzzword of the moment was "inclusivism." Here was a chance to renew British identity for the new millennium. The enemy was not a multicultural Britain but an England imprisoned by a conservative and racist history, an England afraid to change. Globalization was calling, and Blair knew that the new economy would not look kindly on a backward-looking island. Blair's focus on "creative industries" and "lifestyles" was fuelled by a hope that Britain's standing in the world could change; that London could finally shed its image as the land of tea, crumpets, and bad teeth.

While Blair's victory was not yet a reality when Ridley's third play, *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, was staged (in April 1994, again at the Hampstead and again directed by Matthew Lloyd), the culture of New Labour and Cool Britannia had already established itself in the popular imagination. By 1994, commentators had noticed a revitalization of British arts and culture, and within two years, news weeklies, such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, would dub the phenomenon "Cool Britannia." In a move that would eventually backfire, New Labour declared war on nostalgia by aligning itself with Cool Britannia in order to prove its commitment to all things cool and new. Blair told the audience at the 1994 *Q* awards that rock 'n' roll was an important part of British culture and then actively courted musicians during his successful campaign. But crucially, New Labour never wanted to eradicate tradition, just make it a bit more inclusive, a little less staid. Given Cool Britannia's indebtedness to the 1960s and the culture of Swinging London, it was more the substitution of one nostalgia for another: baby boomer in place of neo-Victorian. Cool Britannia was heralded as a return to the sixties, but it was an Austin Powers vision of Swinging London, a nostalgic commodity. Cool Britannia, the rush of newness with which New Labour aligned itself, came wrapped in the Union Jack, not the most forward-looking of symbols.

Ridley's play engages the pop cultural phenomenon of Cool Britannia, not by citing its more obvious signifiers (Britpop or the Young British Artists) but through its demythologizing of 1960s Swinging London and the cult of the gangster. The Ridley-penned 1990 feature film *The Krays* became popular by tapping into the mythology surrounding two real-life gangster brothers: Ronald and Reginald Kray, nightclub owners whose "firm" was involved in a number of illegal activities, including gambling,

fraud, and murder. Though they were arrested in 1968 and eventually sentenced to thirty years in prison, Ronnie and Reggie had a long career spanning two decades: the well-to-do patrons of the brothers' clubs either didn't realize that they were gangsters, or more likely, didn't care all that much. Rather than pariahs, the Kray Twins became icons of Swinging London, spotted with pop stars and actors, even appearing in photographer David Bailey's *Box of Pin-Ups*. Despite their violent criminal activities and despite Ronnie's homosexuality, the Krays were seen as "local boys who made good," reinforcing working-class family values while busting heads and shagging tarts. Dick Hebdige argues that the popularity of the brothers stemmed from their reinforcing popular London mythology: "[t]heir role was to play the East End villain in a fable made in the West End." This divide between the crime-ridden East End and the posh West End has a long history; according to Peter Ackroyd, it was during the 1880s that "the East End became 'the abyss' or 'the nether world' of strange secrets and desires," an image that gained credence from the rampage of Jack the Ripper in 1888 (678). But the uncivilized East, with the allure of its thugs and quaint accents, became, in the 1960s, a site of authenticity, a "truly" British locale. Swinging London witnessed the beginning of an illicit romance between popular culture and the figure of the gangster, and the Krays were at the beginning of this trend.

With the return of Swinging London during the Cool Britannia years, gangster chic once again became a prominent part of British popular culture. Morrissey, always enamoured of representations of working-class British life, penned a song about the Kray Brothers, 1989's "The Last of the International Playboys," and the narrator of his 1994 track "Now My Heart Is Full" addresses the gangsters from Graham Greene's 1938 novel *Brighton Rock* as his friends. Legend even has it that Morrissey sent flowers to Ronnie Kray's funeral in 1995 (Spanton). In the years that followed, *Time Out* published an article on East End gangsters (1999); director Guy Ritchie made 1998's gangster comedy *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*; and Dave Courtney, a professional "debt collector" twice charged with murder, had a best-selling autobiography with his 1999 *Stop the Ride I Want to Get Off*. The mythology of "local boys making good" enjoyed a renewed appeal in the nineties, sitting well with Cool Britannia's desire to locate an authentic British identity, separate from American influence.

Set in Bethnal Green, birthplace of the Krays and Ridley himself, *Ghost from a Perfect Place* occurs on the day that gangster Travis Flood returns to his old stomping ground, which he has not seen since fleeing in 1969 to avoid arrest. At the play's start, Travis enters Torchie Sparks's flat, "a dimly lit room" that still shows the signs of a fire, "the walls, floor

and woodwork . . . all badly scorched' (223). Travis is here because he met Torchie's granddaughter Rio in a graveyard and the pair arranged to meet in her grandmother's flat for a sexual transaction. Torchie is well aware of her granddaughter's profession – Rio is the sole breadwinner of the family – and she makes haste to leave before Rio returns for the date. But before she goes, Torchie realizes who the gentleman caller is: it is none other than Mr. Flood from "the heydays" (246).

Torchie is nostalgia personified, and she views Mr. Flood as a "ghost from a perfect place." She regales Travis with stories of the past: how the crowds would part at the market when Travis and his boys would appear, how Travis gave Torchie's daughter Donna a lily when she was crying. Travis claims to have no memory of Donna or Torchie, but to prove her point, Torchie produces the pressed lily that Travis gave her daughter, saying it was like "a splinter from the cross itself" (236). Of the past, Torchie tells Travis, "The heydays are like a perfect place for me. A perfect place I visited once, but can never visit again" (246). Peppering her conversations with "Lor'struth" and offering Travis "a traditional East End cuppa" complete with "bickies," Torchie is a caricature of the working-class Londoner, who would not be out of place on an episode of *EastEnders*. Nostalgia, in this guise, becomes not threatening, but parodic, where the past is transformed into a sentimental space, a "perfect place."

Like Torchie, Travis is enamoured of the past. He has come to promote his autobiography *The Man with the White Lily*, a title that conjures up the image of a dandy, not a criminal, an association strengthened in the play's first production, with well-known classical actor John Wood in the role. The first sentence of Travis's book reads like a fairy tale: "Once, long ago, I was born in a paradise called Bethnal Green" (245). Since he has left the East End, Travis lives a life of "days in heaven," waking up on silk sheets, doing laps in his swimming pool, driving his Cadillac, and shark fishing on his speedboat. Torchie tells a different story, of a life so full of heartache it borders on the comical. She tells Travis of how her daughter Donna was pregnant at age fourteen and then died in childbirth, of how her husband threw himself out of a window and now lies brain dead in a hospital, of how a horrible fire nearly killed her and Baby Rio, leaving her with a busted "drumstick." About this last misfortune, Torchie Sparks jokes to Travis, "Now if you can remember my name. You'll have a bit of a chuckle." "The Sparks family living in a burnt house," Travis responds, adding, "No one has the ability to laugh at their misfortunes like the women of the East End" (242–43). These are types straight from classic East End mythology: a gangster with a fierce exterior but a kind heart; an elderly working class woman, "the salt of the earth," who, despite the hand that life has dealt her, does not cry, but laughs at her suffering.



Mythology, according to Roland Barthes, “is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things; in [myth], things lose the memory that they were once made” (142). Like the Cool Britannia phenomenon itself, with its invocation of a 1960s defanged and depoliticized, Torchie and Travis, in subscribing to the myth of “the heydays,” no longer remember the true loss or pain at the heart of their shared history.

Nostalgic recollection is quickly brought to an end when Rio arrives. After Torchie leaves, Travis has a sudden change of heart. He wants not sex but to talk with Rio. When Rio refuses and insists that Travis pay her for sex, Travis threatens to leave. Rio brutally kicks Travis to the floor. Rio’s gang then appears—the Cheerleaders, self-proclaimed disciples of Saint Donna, Rio’s deceased mother—and ties Travis to a chair with tights. In her own nostalgic rendering of the past, Rio has transformed her mother into the “Saint of All the Damaged Girls Living in the Ruins” and her suffering into a rallying call. In their garish make-up, pony-tails and gold mini-skirts, Rio, Miss Sulphur, and Miss Kerosene are the parodic reincarnation of Travis and his boys as “riot grrls.” Transforming Bethnal Green from a “paradise” to a “shit-hole,” Rio narrates her life as a series of degradations that lead to a violent form of empowerment, where Rio and her Cheerleaders spend their days roaming the East End in search of fights, drugs, and tricks. Travis degrades their antics as child’s play. “You’re all talk,” he tells them, “And talking is nothing. It’s what you do to skin that matters” (283).

In the scene from the play that caused the most controversy when it was first staged, the girls show Travis what they can do to skin. Miss Kerosene and Miss Sulphur take a lit cigar and “very casually” stub it repeatedly against Travis’s face. Even with a face covered in burns, Travis taunts them, “In the heydays grown men would be in ecstasy when—Ahhh!—inflicting pain! But this is child’s play. Just like your stupid Saint Donna” (284–85). At this point, Rio threatens Travis with a pair of large scissors, and for a moment, it appears that she is going to slash his face or castrate him. Onstage, this moment is one of Ridley’s “image-arias,” where “that one icon-like image” conveys a “wordless meaning.”<sup>5</sup> With Travis tied to a chair, Rio towers over him with scissors, and for the first time, he is truly terrified. Recognizing that he is not in control and that Rio has the power to harm him, Travis confesses. He raped Donna when she was fourteen, he is Rio’s father, and his autobiography is a lie:

There ain’t no fortune. Never was... No swimming-pool. No Cadillac.  
No speedboat. Nothing. Just an endless succession of petty jobs.  
And always moving. And everywhere I go I change my name. Invent new  
stories about myself. In the end, I begin to forget who I am. Who I was.

So I write a book . . . Yes! I wore a black suit! Crowds parted to let me through!  
 A snap of my fingers meant kneecaps would fly! That's it. In a paradise  
 called Bethnal Green they will remember. . . . I have to publish the book myself.  
 It costs me nearly everything I got. The rest goes on a plane ticket. And  
 this suit. . . . I come back here. Visit all my old haunts. But . . . hardly anyone  
 remembers me. . . . Except . . . in a graveyard I meet a girl.

...

Now I know who I am. (289–90)

With his confession, Travis is cured of his nostalgia, and as a result he is able to recognize himself for the first time. He is not a former businessman-cum-gangster with a posh life in the States but an old man who, in an act of desperation, has invented a past in order to make his mythology a reality.

Rio, no mere passive observer in this moment, dismisses the other Cheerleaders from the room and enjoins Travis to act out the rape of Donna, imagining herself in the role of her mother. "We're in the car," she tells him. "Come closer, Donna," he replies (288). In a manner similar to the storytelling of Presley and Haley Stray, father and daughter together narrate the story of Rio's conception: Donna, after seeing Travis and his men beat up her father because he owed Travis money, lets Travis rape her so he will no longer hurt her family. This meta-theatrical moment is a scene of surprising compassion between the two, despite the horrific subject matter. Rio wants to know where she comes from, and Travis wants to reveal these events to her. And crucially, the re-enactment of Donna's violation reverses Travis's fate. By taking on her mother's role, Rio's nostalgic biography—the powerful Daughter who transcends the suffering of the Mother—is confronted with the material reality of rape. Travis relives this event with his daughter—the product of his violence from the supposed "heydays"—thus debunking the gangster mythology that he took such pleasure in disseminating.

Travis's cure by fear is reminiscent of the prescription for nostalgia promoted by Jourdan Le Cointe, a physician who during the early days of the French Revolution published *Le santé de mars* (*The Health of Mars*). In this 1790 book, Le Cointe claimed that nostalgia could be overcome by inciting pain or terror; he recommended a red-hot iron to the abdomen (see Reinhard). This sadistic remedy literally terrified a longing for the past out of the patient. One imagines the kind of medical licence this provided sadists, and it is not far removed from what Rio, Miss Sulphur, and Miss Kerosene do to Travis. Ridley's play demonstrates how terror unveils memory and cures nostalgic impulses. Terror leads Travis to confess, forcing him to see his past anew.

Ridley's remedy, however, is different from Le Cointe's in a crucial way. Travis masochistically wills his own terror. The male body that violated now seeks violation. In an important narrative twist, Travis is not merely the victim of Rio and the other girls. He literally asks for it: "[o]h, you'll have to do better than that"; "[t]hat won't make me tell you"; "[i]s . . . is this the best you can do?" (284). Unlike Torchie, who can never confront the past without the comfort of sentimentality, Travis opens up the possibility of real violence by pushing Rio to the brink, in order to confront the past in the form of his daughter, the result of his violent past. In a moment of Kantian sublimity, where pleasure and terror commingle, Travis wants to be hurt, and only when the violence nears the point of no return can he finally debunk the great gangster mythology. The man with the white lily is no more.

In his final play of the decade, Ridley presents the forward-looking possibilities of nostalgia. In this instance, when nostalgia is forced to confront itself as a false narrative, there is transformation. Upon hearing Travis's confession, Rio again approaches him with the scissors, but instead of hurting him further, she sets him free. Travis asks if Rio will tell her grandmother what he has told her; she says no. Rio's forgiveness might itself be a nostalgic gesture, sparing the life of a man she was once eager to hurt only because she now knows that he is her father. Yet, when he goes to kiss her goodbye, she spits in his face.<sup>6</sup> The violence of her conception cannot so easily be forgotten or forgiven; it cannot readily be absorbed into a comforting narrative of familial obligation.

What happens to Travis Flood and Baby Rio is left ambiguous. But with the unveiling of the nostalgia that surrounds Travis's past, change has now become possible. Travis is not a Bethnal Green boy who made good but a thug who raped a fourteen year-old girl and who has spent the remainder of his adult life eluding capture in America. Donna is not the disembodied saint of Rio's hyperactive imagination but a scared kid who was raped and had the unfortunate luck to die during childbirth. Donna's victimizer now has a face: Rio's father's. The challenge now facing both Travis and Rio is what they do with such knowledge. It seems unlikely that either will banish nostalgia from their worldviews. The frequency with which Ridley's characters suffer from it suggests that he views nostalgia as nearly inescapable. Nostalgia is, as Svetlana Boym terms it, a "'democratic' disease" (5): even in Hofer's first formulation, the disease afflicted both soldiers and students; it was not exclusive, unlike melancholia, the illness of poets and philosophers. Indeed, nostalgia's inclusiveness suggests memory's seemingly limitless capacity for transforming the past into a safe haven. That retrospective rendering might perhaps be the modern subject's way of grappling with the bitterest of contradictions: that life is both too long and not long enough.

Ridley's first two plays conclude with a sense of confining circularity. The Stray twins and Cougar and the Captain appear bound by their nostalgia to repeat their actions. *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, on the other hand, suggests another outcome. There is a moment of silence, a "very, very long pause" that follows Travis's exit, where Rio remembers her encounter with her only living biological parent (291). With Travis gone, she absorbs the day's events. In other words, she begins to fictionalize them into memory. This silence could represent the formation of a new nostalgia—the day Rio met her father—but it is broken by Torchie's entrance. The grandmother reminds Rio of what she does not want to become, sentimental and uncritical. Torchie's nostalgia, which turns the past into a "ghost from a perfect place," inoculates Rio: it does not abolish nostalgia but rather forces it into a state of self-reflection. Nostalgia, then, is recognized as a fiction and, therefore, can no longer be a completely retrospective gesture. The mythology of Saint Donna that anchored Rio's young adult life cannot function as it did before. The story has a face; events have been transposed. Her nostalgia for Saint Donna will be a ghost from an imperfect place and time. The violence that marked Rio's entry into the world refuses to be absorbed easily into the East End mythology that her grandmother upholds. While she is grateful to Travis for telling her where she comes from, she still must spit in her father's face for what he has done and create a future without him.

## NOTES

- 1 From the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "2.a. Sentimental longing for or regretful memory of a period of the past, esp. one in an individual's own lifetime; (also) sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past. 1900 *Amer. Jnl. Sociol.* 5 606: 'It is the reason and convenience that lure him [sc. man] from the time-hallowed; it is nostalgia that draws him back'" ("Nostalgia"). From the *Online Etymology Dictionary*: "Transferred sense (the main modern one) of 'wistful yearning for the past' first recorded 1920" ("Nostalgia").
- 2 All quotations from the three Ridley plays are taken from the 2002 Faber edition of *Plays: One*. Ridley revised these plays for each publication: the individual Methuen editions published to coincide with the first production, the 1997 Methuen edition of *Plays: One*, and the 2002 Faber edition of *Plays: One* (see list of editions below). The 2002 edition is taken as the definitive versions of these plays.
- 3 In the Methuen editions of *The Pitchfork Disney* and *Plays: One*, the play's conclusion is different, in that the parents are not mentioned, but all versions of the play share the repetition of the same closing line, "I'm scared."

- 4 In the 30 January 1978 interview, Thatcher stated, “I think people are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, and law, and done so much throughout the world, that if there is a fear that it might be swamped, people are going to be really rather hostile to those coming in” (qtd. in McFadyean and Renn 85).
- 5 “For me, the visual side of drama has always been vital. I’ve always seen images as engines of emotion. I’ve always sought that one icon-like image that will convey a wordless meaning, an image-aria, if you like.” (Ridley; qtd. in Sierz 43)
- 6 Rio’s act of spitting in Travis’s face is specific to the 2001 version of the play. In the original Methuen 1994 edition, Rio ritualistically washes Travis after freeing his hands. She also puts a fresh white lily in his lapel after she confesses that she too was responsible for the death of someone she loved (a boyfriend who committed suicide). The 1997 Methuen edition of *Plays: One* cuts all this stage business as well as Rio’s confession: Rio simply says goodbye to Travis. Ridley’s changes are significant because, with each revision, the reminder of Travis’s past violence is made clearer and Rio no longer simply forgives Travis (see list of editions below).

## EDITIONS OF RIDLEY PLAYS

- The Fastest Clock in the Universe*. London: Methuen, 1992.
- The Fastest Clock in the Universe. Plays: One*, Methuen 89–175.
- The Fastest Clock in the Universe. Plays: One*, Faber 109–212.
- Ghost from a Perfect Place*. London: Methuen, 1994.
- Ghost from a Perfect Place. Plays: One*, Methuen 177–243.
- Ghost from a Perfect Place. Plays: One*, Faber 213–292.
- The Pitchfork Disney*. London: Methuen, 1991.
- The Pitchfork Disney. Plays: One*, Methuen 1–88.
- The Pitchfork Disney. Plays: One*, Faber 1–108.
- Plays: One*. London: Methuen, 1997.
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- . *Ghost from a Perfect Place*. Ridley, *Plays: One* 213–292.
- . *The Pitchfork Disney*. Ridley, *Plays: One* 1–108.
- . *Plays: One*. London: Faber, 2002.
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