THREE PRECOCIOUS BOYS:
WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM

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Newspapers and magazines constantly contain copy about the doings of wonder children, but seldom do they follow up any of these stories and tell whatever became of these individuals after they grew up. Because of the sad example of William James Sidis (*New York Times,* July 19, 1944), who was eleven years old when he delivered a paper before the Harvard Mathematical Club in 1910 but died a destitute computational clerk, the public mistakenly assumes that these children must have likewise "burnt out" and dropped out of sight. By poring through copies of old magazines for names and other particulars and then trying to located these persons with biographical directories, such as *Who's Who in America,* I am investigating what actually is the case of the precocious child in adulthood. By proceeding in this manner, I was able to come up with a number of former gifted children who are leading full, normal and interesting lives.

Defending Acceleration Through the Use of History and anecdotes

It is difficult to mollify those persons holding the implacable and all-too-common conviction that accelerating intellectually precocious children will ultimately lead them to harm. They justify their opposition to this method of stimulating the gifted educationally by arguing, "I once knew someone like that who..." One way that advocates of acceleration can deal with this kind of opposition is to cite examples of generally-well known persons who were once accelerated and how they eventually turned out. (Whether one can actually sway certain persons with opinion about the gifted by using facts is another matter, however, as anyone who has tried to do this by quoting Terman's studies can tell you.)

History and biography are bountiful resources of precocity for this purpose. Catharine Cox's *The Mental Traits of Three Hundred Geniuses* (Cox, 1926), revealed that a number of historical figures had dramatically shortened their academic training (even by early standards), thereby becoming able to start their careers much

sooner. Paul Dudley, who according to Sibley was the youngest person to enter Harvard College (at age ten), received his A. B. degree at age fourteen in 1960 and went on to become a prominent jurist in colonial Massachusetts (Shipton, 1933). John Trumbull, the Early American lawyer-poet who authored *M-Fingal and the Progress of Dulness,* passed the entrance examination to Yale College when he was seven and a half but waited until he was thirteen before he entered. He remained there as a student, then as the recipient of a bachelor's degree, and after that, as a tutor for nine years (Bowden, 1962). Verrill Kenneth Wolfe, the modern counterpart of Dudley and Trumbull, graduated from Yale College in 1945 at the age of fourteen. He majored in music at Yale and spent seven more years studying it after graduation before entering medical school. He is now a professor of neuroanatomy at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

In more recent homes we have seen the likes of three other remarkable men who entered college notably young and began to make their marks early in life because of it. The late Norbert Wiener, father of cybernetics, graduated from Tufts College at fourteen and wrote a book about his early life as a child prodigy called *Ex-Prodigy* (Wiener, 1953). A. A. Berle, Jr., Secretary of State under Franklin D. Roosevelt, entered Harvard College at age fourteen and graduated *cum laude* from Harvard Law School were also as precocious. Robert B. Woodward, the Nobel prize-winning chemist., graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at the age of nineteen in 1936 and was awarded his Ph.D. the very next year.

Special Methodological Concerns in This and Other Historimetrical Studies

As Cox (1926, pp. 16-29) has pointed out, there is an unfortunate flaw in using historimetrical data: only the *eminent* examples are ever preserved for empirical investigation. My method, as it turned out, is also far from perfect. For one thing, it was not possible to establish definitively the outcomes of the lives of more than one precocious woman. While I came up with the names of many female prodigies, marriage rendered them virtually untraceable. Of the men for whom I was able to obtain current addresses, only those in the over-sixty range were willing to correspond with me. Therefore, my sample is admittedly and inavoidably small. However, the element of objectivity that obtaining subjects from the articles found

under the heading "Children, Gifted" in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* introduced has served to keep my study more unbiased than other historimetrical ones in one way. Because the evidence from studies of a more massive scale, such as Terman's, which proved that the odds favor successful outcomes for the gifted, and because William Sidis and Hollingworth's case F constitute the few documented cases of untimely endings for unusually precocious children, it is not unwarranted to believe that once the other subjects become reachable, it will probably be seen that they, too, are well-adjusted.

Three Examples of Verbal Precocity from 1920

An article published in the *Literary Digest* (November 13, 1920) provided the most finds when it came to tracing the typical grownup "child genius." It gave the names of three boys who entered Harvard and Columbia while still rather young and who are still alive in 1975. I was able to ascertain what became of all three. It was possible to interview one man personally when he was on the Hopkins campus. Another has corresponded with me a few times. In the case of the third man, *Who's Who in America* contains an extensive listing on how his career has progressed.

L, Now a Physician

The first man, L., was twelve years old when he passed the Harvard entrance examinations and fourteen when he was admitted. At age three he was fluent in German and English, could read anything put before him in either language, and could answer questions about what he read. When he entered the first grade at age six he suffered the not uncommon fate of the advanced gifted child: the teacher did not realize that L could already read and more. His situation was finally improved only after he was seen by his teacher reading a newspaper in his father's office. During the months after that incident he was promoted until he was placed at his proper level in the fourth grade. He entered high school when he was about nine.

L's ambition right from childhood was to become a professor of classical languages. As a pre-schooler he began to teach himself Latin by translating books from Latin and back again, then comparing his versions with original Latin sources. When he entered the first grade he knew as much Latin as the average college sophomore did. In the same way he taught himself Greek and could compose Greek poetry by the time he reached high school. Throughout high school, even though he never participated in class, his best

grades were in these subjects. (He would, however, occasionally help out the teacher who encountered a problem in translation, in the manner of the mathematically talented youth.)

As a very young child L would hide in his room with a Latin book when other children were around. By the time he was in high school, he would play games, and got along well enough with boys but, to his regret, less well with the girls, a frequent complaint voiced by male accelerants. But his preference all along was to be alone and study Latin and Greek. His family opposed this because they wanted him to become a doctor like his father, and would hide books from him whenever they caught him at it. As a matter of fact, L secretly wrote the Harvard exams instead of the College Boards for the University of Pennsylvania because he associated the latter place with his father's plans for him.

L claims that he was less than outstanding as a freshman in subjects such as English and mathematics. After his freshman year at Harvard L concentrated solely on classical languages and literature. He graduated with highest honors in Classics at age eighteen in 1924. He next went ot Oxford and earned another baccalaureate in 1926. He also got his M.A. there and fulfilled all the requirements for his doctorate but writing the thesis. He left without it and went on to the American Academy in Rome on a fellowship.

Upon returning to America L tried to start a teaching career but was unable to secure tenure at any of the colleges where he was hired. He then studied at the Johns Hopkins University Medical School and got his license to practice in 1945 at approximately age thirty-nine. During World War II he was a lieutenant in the Navy's Medical Corps and served in the Pacific. After the war he was unable to find a teaching position from which he was not forced out. He was apparently an excellent teacher who would increase the enrollment in introductory Latin by fifty percent, but he did not win favour with the authorities by treating his students as equals. Not writing his Oxford thesis might indicate that he was probably not an academic of the publishing variety either.

L eventually took over his father's practice and became a country doctor, something he had strenuously avoided all his life. At age sixty-nine L still practices medicine in a small Pennsylvania town, but now, happily, has found a way to keep his hand at teaching as well. A couple of times a year he comes to Johns Hopkins as a visiting lecturer in classics and gives lectures on his favorite topic, witchcraft (L was very impressed by the magic that one of his Ox-

ford professors could perform and decided to become a witch him-self--he bleongs to a coven and is quite knowledgeable about the ancient religion.) Attending one of his talks would convince anyone that L is undoubtedly an outstanding teacher, even if he is not a conventional college one.

M, Now a College Professor

L's fellow underage member of the Harvard Class of 1924 is now a professor of classics at the University of California at Los Angeles. M was fifteen when he entered Harvard. He did this by skipping two grammer school grades and by telescoping his high school years from four years to three by carrying an extra load. He got his A. B. degree when he was eighteen, his M. A. at nineteen, and his Ph.D. at twenty-one in 1927. That year he became a member of the UCLA faculty, but his promotions came at an unusually slow rate because, beyond co-authoring two books, he did not publish much. This was probably due to his overwhelming interest in music, rather than teaching, research, or other professional concerns. He was made a full professor at age sixty-five.

Though he makes claims to be the contrary, M is an impressive letter writer and has made to me what seems to be very astute observations regarding success. He credits his "family background of unstinting encouragement and sympathetic tastes" as an immeasurable asset to intellectual endowment, which the unfortunate L never enjoyed. He also mentions that gifted persons still face the fight "to obtain a living, sometimes at the cost of unremunerative 'talents'." M himself decided to defer to his all-exclusive interest in music, which was apparent from his early youth, oveg professional consideration.

Hollingworth's Child E, Now Dean of a College at Cambridge University

E, the third person in the article, was a man who was able to combine both a "favorable background" and the right compromise of his "unremunerative talent," serving as proof of the validity of M's formula for success. In a book entirely devoted to children with IQ's over 180, Hollingworth (1942, pp. 134-158) recorded the details of his life as the case history of Child E. He was enrolled at Columbia Univeristy in 1920 at age twelve, as it seemed undesirable to move away from home to a college dormitory at that age. Having been elected to membership in the Phi Beta Kappa Society, he

graduated in 1923 at age fourteen. Shortly after his A. B. (which took him only three years), he earned more degrees; his master's degree from Columbia in 1942; his Ph.D. at Columbia in 1931; Master of Sacred Theology, Union Theological Seminary, 1923; Bachelor and Master of Sacred Theology, General Theological Seminary, 1933 and 1934; and an honorary Doctorate of Sacred Theology degree in 1956 from General Theological Seminary. In 1969 he received an M. A. from Cambridge University.

E's parents took great pains to provide their unusual son with special educational advantages, including a trip to Denver in 1918 to witness a solar eclipse. His father wanted his son to enter Harvard and his mother favored New York University, but both allowed their son to go on to Columbia, his own choice. In turn, E became a minister in the Episcopal Church, his mother's fondest wish for him. By this move, E might have done a disservice to his visible creativity, but he found an outlet for it in his work as a theological scholar on such topics as Byzantine Egypt. His entry in *Who's Who in America* contains a long list of publications. In 1969 E was a lecturer in Divinity at Cambridge. Today he is Dean of Chapel of Cambridge's Jesus College, a position he has held since 1972.

Considerations in Assessing the "Succes" of Each Case

In conventional terms E can be rated the most successful member of the group, but the other two cannot be dismissed as "failures" by comparison. Instead, L and M illustrate the limiations of the way we ordinarily define success in economic terms or in the career sense. In L's eyes, M would be in a more enviable state than he, because M has the full-time position in classics that L always desired. L, on the other hand, is still a creative man who, according to someone high up in the Johns Hopkins Classics Department, writes excellent Latin prose and poetry. Therefore, L manages to utilize his gifts even if he is not an official academic. M is not uncreative himself; while he has not abandoned the classics, he channels his drive and originality mainly in the direction of music. We cannot judge one of these complex individuals as superior to the other, no matter how we weigh creativity and self-satisfaction in our definition of success. One way of approaching a conclusion which is not moot is by noting that none of these men is a broken, unhappy Sidis.

Conclusion

E, L, and M represent a small sample of the number of outcomes

a talented person can expect to meet. Their examples show that gifted persons must face the same trials in life that anyone else does. They appear to suffer no observable damage from being accelerated; on the contrary, their examples indicate the advantages of having been exposed to a variety of experiences at an early age. Who knows what may await others who finish their academic training as early? One may hope that they too, can look forward to the same fascinating lives these men seem to have enjoyed, but with better economic propsects.

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