**Abstract**

Poised at the start of the 1970s, David Bowie’s *Hunky Dory* now feels prophetic in its visions of a cynical “world to come” and the embittered generation who lived the long post-Woodstock comedown. This essay argues that the album mobilizes a discourse of idealized childhood that is one of Romanticism’s most enduring legacies, in order to enact a generational struggle that is both personal—the anxiety of the parent who fears creative displacement by their child—and public—the nostalgic and idealistic parent generation of the 1960s versus the bitter realism of their descendants. Tracing how “Kooks” replicates the image of the ‘Romantic child’ as articulated primarily in Wordsworth and Coleridge’s poetry, the essay situates the narrator’s reactionary impulse to keep the child a child forever against the album’s surrounding cast of angry, knowing teenagers. It argues that the Romantic child discourse—and the ways in which it still shapes, implicitly or otherwise, ideas about the relationships between parents and children, authors and texts, and reproduction and creative genius—enables the album to dramatize as a coherent text the ways in which those who inherited 1960s counterculture might, like Romanticism’s children in the 1820s and 1830s, resist calls to mythic, timeless unknowingness and instead turn to face painfully unfolding knowledge.

**Biographical Note**

Beatrice Turner is Head of the Research Office and Graduate School at the University of Roehampton. When not absorbed in preparations for statutory frameworks of varying degrees of mind-numbing administrative complexity, her research focuses on Romanticism’s children, biological and textual: her first monograph is *Romantic Childhood, Romantic Heirs: Reproduction and Retrospection 1820−1850* (Palgrave, 2017). She has recently co-edited, with Eliza O’Brien and Helen Stark, a collection entitled *New Approaches to William Godwin: Forms, Fears, Futures* (Palgrave, 2021).

**“Will you stay”: “Kooks,” *Hunky Dory*, and Romantic Childhood**

*Beatrice Turner*

*University of Roehampton*

*Hunky Dory* (1971) is a record on which things are everything but. Exemplifying David Bowie’s talent for inhabiting and dramatizing multiple identities, it is spoken both by and to the kids who have been left, as “Changes” has it, “up to our necks in it” by an etiolated parent generation. At its centre, however, is “Kooks,” a track whose inclusion at the heart of the record bothered me when I first heard the album as an undergraduate and has continued to bother me since. The bothering is, in fact, a not insignificant factor in my abiding love for *Hunky Dory* above any other record by Bowie. Set against the lyrical cynicism and extravagant orchestrations of “Oh! You Pretty Things,” or “Life on Mars?”, or the visionary anti-prophecy of “Quicksand” which follows it to close Side A, “Kooks”’s simple, twee arrangement and sentimental parental address has always seemed wilfully naïve to me, at odds with the rest of the album’s knowing embrace of coming apocalypse and its associated regenerative possibilities. In an album otherwise oriented towards “a world to come,” it is an appeal against change, against growing up, pointing both lyrically and musically back into a mythologized childhood.

The friction generated by that juxtaposition of imaginative stasis and knowing momentum, or innocence and experience (to make plain the thread this essay will string between a proto-glam pop album and Romantic poetry), is central to understanding the album’s (to me) powerful sense of tectonic cultural shift, and to understanding it as a profoundly Romantic text. *Hunky Dory*, as some of its early reviewers recognized, is about “both fathers and sons” (Ross). But childhood and parenthood as concepts do double duty in this text in a way that will be familiar to readers of Romantic poetry: the album understands both the powerful, ambivalent feelings that parents and children produce in each other, and the no less ambivalent forms of response and interrogation at play when a parent generation is supplanted by its descendants. In both of these senses, the personal and the cultural, *Hunky Dory* speaks about the implicit violence of reproduction. It presciently identifies how comfortably naïve 1960s ‘Flower Power’ counterculture would look when eyed up by the more jaundiced teenagers of the 1970s, while it also seeks self-consciously to mystify Bowie’s own feelings about impending fatherhood. Historical particularities of 1970s Britain aside, this is an agon with a clear and specific Romantic origin. “Kooks” reproduces with remarkable precision an image of the idealized child of nature—located most commonly in a handful of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poems—which scholars have named the ‘Romantic child’. But it also reproduces the fraught relationship this text-child has with their parent-author, while the album’s surrounding cast of angry, knowing adolescents dramatize the ways in which this reactionary idea of childhood has to be negotiated by those who inherit it.

My argument, then, is that we should read—and hear—“Kooks” as a text that articulates this Romantic archetype of childhood, and *Hunky Dory* as a text that works through a way of responding to that archetype, and to the wider Romantic project. The Romantic child is the idealized child of “We Are Seven,” or “Frost at Midnight,” or the Boy of Winander. This is the child figure who arrives direct from heaven “trailing clouds of glory” in Wordsworth’s “Intimations Ode” (l. 64), the “seer blest!,” who Barbara Garlitz could claim in 1966 had completely redefined attitudes to childhood for a century, and whose legacy in fact remains the dominant cultural understanding of childhood in the Western imagination (Garlitz 639).These poems imagined a radical new image of the child as someone preserved in eternal innocence and creative potentiality by their seclusion from formal education, society, the city, or any other form of experience that might taint their intuitive ability to read the natural world. They also, however, consciously and unconsciously dramatize the ways in which the adult author or parent creates this ideal child by over-inscribing a real child with a set of meanings that meet the author’s psychological and creative need for an eternal, archetypal child. By reifying the child into an aesthetic production, its creative potentiality is always forestalled; the child remains the adult’s own creation. As I have argued elsewhere, it is this process of reification, and the authorial anxiety of replacement that underlies it, that the Romantic poem is about when it speaks about childhood.[[1]](#endnote-2)

This reading of the child as the creative production of the adult speaker who cannot allow them to grow up shows us what is at stake for those who reject Romantic innocence, and it is this tension that *Hunky Dory* repeats, knowingly or otherwise. It is not my intention to claim thatBowie is consciously responding to and critiquing Romantic constructions of childhood; however, I am arguing that they form an available and culturally powerful discourse with which *Hunky Dory* engages. This discourse, and the ways in which it still shapes, implicitly or otherwise, ideas about the relationships between parents and children, authors and texts, and reproduction and creative genius, enables the album to dramatize as a coherent text the ways in which those who inherited 1960s counterculture might, like Romanticism’s children in the 1820s and 30s, resist calls to mythic, timeless unknowingness and instead turn to face painfully unfolding knowledge.

Before I consider the ways in which “Kooks” in particular draws on a Romantic discourse of childhood, it is useful to think about what makes it a Romantic text at all, because the milieu the song works to establish, one in which Bowie and son might “take the car downtown,” is very firmly of its contemporary moment. This sets it at odds with the rest of the album, in which the songs generally freewheel between imagined temporalities, mixing present, future, and mythic timelessness in a way more consistent with the usual swooping through-lines and leapings-off of the Romantic lyric. “Oh! You Pretty Things,” for instance, opens on a scene of cozy, anachronistic domesticity (“throw another log on the fire for me / I’ve made some breakfast and coffee”) only to jump dizzyingly forwards and outwards into cosmic prophecy via the image of the “crack in the sky and a hand reaching down to me.” Linguistically, too, there’s an opposition between the contemporary slanginess of “Kooks”’s vernacular (“I’m not much cop at punching other people’s dads”) and the stylized, surrealist imagery of, for example, “Eight Line Poem”: “But the key to the city / Is in the sun which pins the branches to the sky.” Contemporary setting and language aside, however, it is in the song’s celebration of quotidian detail and structural simplicity that its Romantic influence lies.

Like many of Wordsworth’s ballad poems, or Coleridge’s conversation poems, the song creates a domestic universe with an affect in excess of its constituent parts. This is achieved by picking out small individual images or events and elevating their intensity whilst limiting the imaginative horizon of the protagonists. In “Kooks,” that horizon is marked by the chorus refrain: “soon you’ll grow / So take a chance / On a couple of kooks . . .” The baby boy Bowie addresses will “soon . . . grow,” but into who, or what, is deferred for now. Just as the world of the “little cottage girl” of “We Are Seven” is circumscribed by the limits of the churchyard in which her siblings lie, Bowie the new father cannot imagine a spatial or temporal world beyond the newly established familial borders. Instead, he lists the items he and his wife have prepared for their child’s impending arrival: “a lot of things to keep you warm and dry / A funny old crib on which the paint won’t dry”; “a pair of shoes, a trumpet you can blow, and a book of rules / Of what to say to people when they pick on you.” As in “We Are Seven,” in which it is left to the reader to infer a family’s grief from the little girl’s recitation of her mundane daily rituals of eating, singing, and sewing at her siblings’ graves, this list does its own explicatory work without the narrator’s explicit realization: the inexpertly-painted crib and baby clothes sit on one side of the caesura created by the shift in melody and metre, and on the other, the presumably decorative rather than protective “paaaair of shoes” (the single stress awkwardly drawn out for two beats to make up the bar), the trumpet (mimetically illustrated), and the book of comebacks. It is left to the listener to get an immediate joke about these bohemian parents’ preparedness (or otherwise) for their new baby, and to recognize a more profound claim about the impossibility of anyone ever really being able to imagine what it’s like after a child arrives.

Lyrically, then, “Kooks” might be considered a Romantic poem in the Wordsworthian mould. It certainly fits Wordsworth’s own criteria of “incidents and situations from common life” expressed in “plainer and more emphatic language,” especially in comparison to the heightened, occasionally grandiose language and stylized imagery of the rest of the album (Wordsworth 596; 597). It is also a good exemplar of his rule that in a poem “the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling” (599): the song builds upon the very slightest of actual incidents. Musically, too, it has a structural simplicity which echoes the plain diction of the lyrics. The song’s 4:4 time signature, the simplest of tempos (and usually the first learned), has an analogue in the ballad metre which drives many of Wordsworth’s narrative poems such as “Goody Blake and Harry Gill,” “The Idiot Boy,” or “We Are Seven.” The ballad metre, which alternates lines of iambic tetrameter and trimeter in four-line stanzas, would have been familiar to an eighteenth-century reader from popular broadsides: it is what might be called a ‘folk’ metre. It emphasizes rhythm over flow, drawing primary attention to the repetitive bouncy stanzas, and creates an effect that is, as numerous Romantic critics have observed, naïve or childlike, suggesting a nursery rhyme rather than a ‘serious’ poem.[[2]](#endnote-3) “Kooks”’s syncopated four-beat bars work in a similar way, establishing a relationship between childlike rhythm and subject, and suggesting, perhaps, that here is something that, unlike the rest of the album, ought not to be taken particularly seriously.[[3]](#endnote-4)

And yet its central position in the track order suggests that “Kooks” does matter, very much, and in what follows I will attempt to show why by reading it as an instance of a Romantic child poem and by unpicking the Romantic child’s relationship to creative and paternal authority. The song celebrates unselfconscious childish innocence and joyful resistance of adult knowledge in favour of an authentic native wisdom. That stance rests upon a central tenet of the Romantic child ethos, which is the suspicion of, and downright resistance to, formal education and socialization, as numerous Romantic critics have noted, to very different interpretive ends.[[4]](#endnote-5) The fifth book of *The Prelude* famously conjures up the “monster birth” of “these too industrious times,” the child who has been crammed with “learning and books” at the expense of his visionary connection with nature (V:293–4; 319). This product of a structured education system has become “no Child / But a dwarf Man” (V:295–6) while:

old Grandame Earth is grieved to find

the playthings, which her love designed for him,

unthought of. (V:347–9)

The ultimate horror of the rational child, Wordsworth suggests here, is its inability to value Nature’s gifts. The visionary access to the world which, as the Intimations Ode says, all children claim as their birthright, is lost to a brain “choked with grammars” (V:325).

“Frost at Midnight” offers a hopeful vision of an alternative future. Drawing on the same language of entrapment and freedom, it deplores Coleridge’s own schooldays, “pent mid cloisters dim,” and revels instead in the “far other lore” that his son Hartley shall know: the “lovely shapes and sounds intelligible” of the landscapes he wanders through unhindered (52; 59–60). In both texts, structured learning is an impediment to accessing creative potential and to true insight. “Kooks” repeats this central idea, with Bowie telling his baby son, “if you ever have to go to school / remember how they messed up this old fool.” Like the education in nature Coleridge desires for Hartley, he imagines his son’s freedom from the formal schooling that “messed” him up: “if the homework brings you down / we’ll throw it on the fire and take the car downtown.”

Another important aspect of the Romantic child is their social seclusion: the Boy of Winander’s companions are the owls whose “mimic hootings” he repeats (l. 398); those of the little girl of “We Are Seven” are her dead brother and sister. Dialogue with nature requires solitude; social exchange blocks the child’s visionary interpretation. “Kooks” replicates this too; Bowie’s gift of “a book of rules / of what to say to people when they pick on you” makes clear that being a ‘kook’, with its attendant creative gifts, means social exclusion. If this all sounds equally reminiscent of the much more recent counter-cultural imperative to “turn on, tune in, and drop out,” it is worth thinking about the importance of Blake to Ginsberg and Dylan, Wordsworth’s influence on Ray Davies, and flower power’s pantheist overtones. The popular culture of the 1960s, as Luke Walker notes, was heavily indebted to the Romantic poets (1). I want to insist however that on *Hunky Dory* we can hear something other than Romanticism as it was refracted through the 1960s. The discourse of Romantic childhood which it engages can be read as a celebration of the child’s intuition and inherent creativity—the “self-born carol”—but we can also read it as one that seeks to hold off experience and induction into the social order for reasons that have much more to do with the desires of the narrating adult than the child who is addressed and written into being under the supervising eye of the parent-author.

In Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven,” the little girl’s ideality derives from her inability to understand (and therefore her proximity to) death, and I think in that poem we are asked to regard the increasingly frustrated speaker not just with contempt but with profound suspicion. Alan Richardson observes that “Wordsworthian children of nature . . . must die so early” because, “rooted in a transcendental nature rather than culturally produced,” they are left “unsocialised and frozen in a state of eternal innocence” (Richardson 1989, 861). In fact, they are aligned with death *because* they are culturally produced. Richardson means that Wordsworth’s children always appear isolated from society and cultural structures, but this overlooks the fact that they are also produced as aesthetic objects that meet certain creative or psychological needs of the author. Even as the little cottage girl gracefully evades her interlocutor’s attempts to subjugate her worldview to his rational scheme, the poet-narrator’s interrogation compels her to produces herself for him as exactly what he really needs her to be: the death-marked Romantic child. His self-conscious presence in the poem reminds us that we can only ever approach a child in a Wordsworth poem through the poet’s mediating art. It is their production as this aesthetic ideal, as art rather than something natural, that the unavoidable death of the child in nature overwrites. Lucy’s fate, to be “Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course / With rocks and stones and trees,” is that of all immortal Wordsworthian children: bodily interment and disintegration is not just the price of transcendent immateriality but the sign of an exchange between death and art (ll. 7–8).

The innocent creativity of the Romantic child is always forestalled by early death because a condition of being a Romantic child is that their creative potential cannot ever be realized. Wordsworth’s “To H. C., Six Years Old,” makes this quite explicit:

Nature will either end thee quite;

Or, lengthening out thy season of delight.

Preserve for thee, by individual right,

A young Lamb’s heart among the full-grown flocks (ll. 21–24).

Coleridge’s description of poetic genius, the ability “to carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood” (IV.i.09), suggests why. His definition sets up the child as an emotional and imaginative repository to be drawn on for inspiration and consolation by the poet. The child in the Romantic poem, therefore, can only be either the poet’s child self encountered in memory or a figure that remains fixed in a perpetual childhood, their creative threat neutralized. Viewed in these terms, the Romantic child figure represents a psycho-creative anxiety of replacement: this figure can produce no rival poems. When, as is the case for Coleridge and for the speaker of “Kooks,” that authorship is complicated and overwritten by fatherhood, the anxiety of replacement is magnified, engendering a more disturbing displacement of biological child by textual creation. The generative ‘shalls’ of “Frost at Midnight” make Hartley a doubly-produced child, his future path determined by his father’s verse. “Kooks” may style its productive force as a question—“will you stay?”—but like Coleridge’s commandments, the lyrics inscribe the son as a future fellow kook. Bowie’s promotional notes hammer the point: “The baby was born and it looked like me and it looked like Angie and the song came out like—if you’re gonna stay with us you’re gonna grow up Bananas” (Bowie, *Hunky Dory* promotional material). Non-kookiness means not staying. It means not belonging to the father.

“Frost at Midnight” and “Kooks” both show a father responding to a son’s birth with another creative act, an implicitly competitive gesture. But these are also texts that in both cases reproduce the child as a silent creation who possesses no authorial power of his own. In “Frost at Midnight,” Hartley is not merely a silent presence in the text, but is imagined by his father as always without the means to articulate himself: though he’ll learn to read the “lovely shapes and sounds intelligible of God in nature,” the only language Hartley is going to learn is that which “God utters”—a language it would be blasphemy to speak (l. 61). As such, the poem imagines a perpetual infancy in which Hartley’s “silent breathing” is the only possible—or desirable—communication (l. 7). “Kooks” is framed as a one-sided dialogue, the chorus a repeated question that leaves no opening for a reply:

Will you stay in our lovers’ story?

If you stay, you won’t be sorry

Soon you’ll grow so take a chance

With a couple of kooks hung up romancing . . .

Romancing who? The line trails off and refuses to say, but it’s the kid, surely, who’s being romanced, seduced into an endless childhood through that repeated entreaty to “stay” in the adults’ “story.” The speaker’s offer to his son of his own extended “season of delight” conceals the fact he is subordinate to the narrator’s personal narrative, one in which the author remains the lover and the kook—the Romantic poet—and the child remains a child.

The Oedipal threat, and the implicit violence of reifying one’s child into art which “Frost at Midnight” dramatizes, reveals the problematic nature of the adult desire for the child to remain a child. The question of whether this desire might stem from something more personal than the politics of education and the question of social progress is something to which criticism has paid surprisingly little attention. The consequence has been that in texts such as “Frost at Midnight” and “We Are Seven,” which dramatize this adult address to and production of the ideal Romantic child, the extent to which these poems are self-aware about that process has not really been acknowledged in the critical urge to either condemn or to celebrate Romantic childhood. As James Holt McGavran and Jennifer Daniel argue, scholarship which emphasizes the perceived social and political disengagement of the Romantic child does not adequately “recognize how deeply the sense of crisis—of repeated threats to children and childhood across time, class, race and gender—is embedded in the Romantic concept itself” (xv). Yet it is precisely that flickering self-awareness, the way that Coleridge and Wordsworth poise a poem on the edge of admitting the fear and jealousy the child raises whilst also acknowledging its ideality, that “Kooks” engages, and that *Hunky Dory* as a whole responds to.

Whether it is consciously understood as a Romantic tension or not, in *Hunky Dory* Bowie puts this address to the child at the heart of an album that that speaks insistently back to “Kooks”’s idealizations. In so doing it reveals why, despite Bowie’s publicity statements, the relationship between David Bowie the person and the speaker of “Kooks” is far from straightforward. The performance works to bring out the ways in which the lyrics ventriloquize this adult speaker who may well represent counter-cultural freedom, but also doesn’t want the kid to grow up and become, as “Changes” has it, “immune to your consultations.” There’s a neat congruence between the subject and the arrangement—that simple 4:4 time, the childish-sounding piano arrangement—which is missing from the other tracks. The coherence of form and content almost seems designed to resist thought. Unlike “Life on Mars?” and “Oh! You Pretty Things,” or “Fill Your Heart,” the listener is not required to unpick the lyrics from the orchestrations. The speaker has a complex relationship to Bowie: while the song was written as a response to the birth of Bowie’s real-life son, he is also doing one of his voices on “Kooks.” Of course, he is arguably always doing a voice, but this I think is a performatively insincere voice. When he rolls his R’s on “brings you down,” we’re supposed to hear not just a Bowie cipher speaking but a parody of parochial Englishness. It is a more exaggerated version of Ray Davies’s vocal performance on *The Kinks are The Village Green Preservation Society* (1968), an album with its own ambivalent relationship to Romantic poetry, and to Wordsworth in particular. The speaker of “We Are Seven” belongs to a text that wants to make fun of his pedantry, and in a similar way Bowie’s vocal performance on “Kooks” works to make the narrator sound old-fashioned and fussy, for all his carefree Romantic intentions.

It is the presence of this adult figure, and his Romantic conservatism (although, like the Coleridge of “Frost at Midnight,” he’d never view himself as a reactionary), that provides the album with a focal figure at which the rest of the album’s anger and grim sense of prophecy can be directed. The opening track makes this generational conflict central to the album. In “Changes,” the children of the old generation are “trying to change their worlds,” exchanging monolithic certainties for fragmentation and multiplicity, and the speaker turns from his self-interrogations to admonish that listening parent figure: “Don’t tell them to grow up and out of it.” It’s clear that a different kind of growing up is stake when he asks, “Where’s your shame, you’ve left us up to our necks in it”: growing up on those terms means exchanging adolescent rebellion for acceptance of the status quo, rather than acquiring the social knowledge that sparks the desire to create your own bespoke world. Teenaged anger at the social and cultural inheritance left by the previous generation is repeated in various ways across the album, but it comes into focus, and responds most directly to “Kooks”’s performance of Romantic nostalgia in “Oh! You Pretty Things.”

The track begins with a Blakean visionary awakening into a nightmare: “look out my window, what do I see / a crack in the sky and a hand reaching down to me.” This vision, seemingly addressed to one of the pretty young things, seems to prophesize a new social order, a “world to come.” In the present, “the earth is a bitch, we’ve finished our news / Homo Sapiens have outgrown their use,” but the future offers regenerative potential that is both exhilarating and terrifying to the speaker: the “nightmares” are “here to stay.” In a move that exemplifies the speakers’ ambiguous position as neither one of the “coming race” nor their parents, he switches address between the first and second verse, so that the song is addressed back to the parents: “look at your children, see their faces in golden rays / don’t kid yourself they belong to you, they’re the start of a coming race.” On the album version, Bowie sings this line in an ambiguous way, with a slight pause after “yourself,” so that it could mean “don’t be fooled that your children or the golden rays that illuminate them have anything to do with you,” or it could mean, “don’t kid yourself, these rather sinister Nietzschean super children are precisely your fault.” Either way, if the coming age of “Homo Superior” promises hope or destruction, the cheerful, bathetic chorus line “don’t you know you’re driving your mamas and papas insane” makes plain how little the parent generation understands what is happening, or what futures are at stake. The father of “Kooks” who wants his son to “stay in our lovers’ story” here becomes the unknowing one, unable to see that the children who rejected his call for eternal innocence are engaged in remaking the world for their own purposes, rather than merely driving him insane.

When *Hunky Dory* was released, Bowie’s notes on each of the tracks were used as promotional material. This is the note for “Pretty Things”: “The reaction of me to my wife being pregnant was archetypal daddy—Oh he’s gonna be another Elvis. This song is all that plus a dash of sci-fi” (Bowie, *Hunky Dory* promotional material). If the song records at one level a father’s sense that his child will, and should, eclipse him, then “Kooks” offers an interesting corollary. It is a narrative in which the speaker’s son is not part of “the coming race” and he and his generation have not “outgrown their use,” but rather imagines a perpetual summer of love in which, crucially, the new Elvis cannot displace him creatively. The resonance between those two tracks reflects the Romantic anxiety of replacement I described in “Frost at Midnight’” and in Wordsworth’s dead Romantic children, an anxiety which finds release in the act of fixing the child in text. In an interview with *Melody Maker* shortly after the album’s release, Bowie described his work as analogous to psychotherapy: “my act is my couch” (Watts).

But offering the text and its performance up as analysand’s narrative marshals the listener into a private reading while also concealing both the cultural work the song does and its historical sense. To suggest the song is a straightforward conduit into his inner psychology is a characteristically misleading piece of Bowie commentary. Like Wordsworth and Coleridge’s constructions of Romantic childhood, “Kooks” encodes its own fissures, wearing the signs of a strained artifice. The speaker is not or does want to be aware that his personal and cultural moment is drawing to a close; his repeated entreaty to “stay” is symptomatic of his refusal to confront both his son’s eventual adulthood and his own creative displacement by the harsher art of the new pretty things. As an album, *Hunky Dory* belongs to that new generation. It dramatizes the gaze of the child back at the texts and cultural monuments of their parents, and the ways in which they find those monuments wanting. “Kooks”’s position at the album’s center directs our attention to its tonal incongruity, while Bowie’s shapeshifting acts, from nostalgic dad to furious teenager to dispassionate narrator, suggest that he’s ultimately on the side of experience, not innocence.

As I said at this essay’s outset, childhood and parenthood are doubled concepts in the Romantic poem, and they are on *Hunky Dory*, too. If “Kooks” subconsciously articulates an Oedipal struggle between the poet-father and his text-son that is intensely personal, it also dramatizes a publicly-oriented reactionary adult incursion into teenaged self-awakening that brings into focus the rest of the album’s call to “wake up, sleepyhead.” As Shelton Waldrep notes, from *Hunky Dory* onwards, “Bowie quickly established himself and his songs as anti-sixties, pro-seventies anthems for the doomed youth of the future” (106). *Hunky Dory* seems eerily prescient about the ways in which the revolutionary optimism of the 1960s would in the 70s be replaced by economic stagnation and social unrest on both sides of the Atlantic, the spectre of the Vietnam War and Watergate hanging over the US cultural imagination, while in Britain the decade would come to be synonymous with rising inflation, the erosion of workers’ rights, and sectarian conflict. The utopian visions of the 1960s, personified by “Kooks” Romantically-inclined narrator, must have felt distant and naïve to those who came of age in the decade after Woodstock.

*Hunky Dory* describes a cultural shift from a Romantic idealism, one in which Major Tom can look in awe at the beauty of “Planet Earth,” unifying the human race through his gaze from “one hundred thousand miles,” to a social order characterized by fragmentation and pop culture’s demand for performance, in which, as “Life on Mars?” has it, we are each the stars of “the freakiest” and “the best-selling show,” trapped in endless representation (“it’s about to be writ again”). In this vision, rather than gaze back approvingly at ourselves from afar, we are instead strangers to each other and ourselves, looking outwards for aliens. This bears comparison I think with another post-revolutionary comedown. After the Battle of Waterloo, the Romantic counter-culture movement also gave way to a more cynical and conservative pervading spirit. Victor Nemoianu called the post-1815 period one which registered “the social and spiritual shock of the preceding age,” manifested in both a “feeling of chaos” and a therapeutic interest in the family, in empiricism and factual precision and in history (14–6; 30). A new generation of authors, some of whom, like Hartley and Sara Coleridge, had to contend with their father’s textualizations of their child selves, like the disenchanted teenaged voices of *Hunky Dory*, saw that their parents’ generation’s experiment had failed to turn radical enthusiasm into the promised better world. The conservative decades of the 1820s and 1830s, like the 1970s and 1980s, would require new forms of protest and new forms of art. The nihilism of punk, disco, and new wave appear on the face of it to articulate creative identities that stood apart from the utopian aesthetics of their precursors more successfully than Romanticism’s direct inheritors were able to find sufficiently new forms of expression. Yet Romanticism proved a resilient set of ideas in both centuries, able to survive both Europe’s bitter struggle towards representative democracy in the 1830s and the depredations of free market economics, and it remains the structuring discourse for how we think and feel about childhood. The baby of “Kooks” and the sleeping Hartley of “Frost at Midnight” retain an emotional force that manages to transcend scepticism about their parents’ motives, encoding our ambivalent collective cultural investment in the idea of the eternal child.

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1. See especially section two of Chapter One, “The Family, the Child, and the Memorial,” in *Romantic Childhood, Romantic Heirs: Reproduction and Retrospection 1820−1850*. Palgrave, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. See, for example, Heather Glen’s *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake’s* Songs *and Wordsworth’s* Lyrical Ballads and Alan Richardson’s *Literature, Education and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780−1832*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. A version recorded for John Peel at the BBC in June 1971 has a single acoustic guitar accompanimentth and is played in a minor key. Bowie sings with far less emphasis on the beat, and sometimes off it altogether. The result is an elegiac, quite different song, but one in which the central resistance to growing up remains. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. The ‘fantasy versus reason’ debate is familiar enough that I do not need to rehearse it extensively. In the hands of children’s literature scholars such as Geoffrey Summerfield, Mary Jackson and, earlier in the twentieth century, F. J. Harvey Darton, Percy Muir and Mary Thwaite, the Romantic child’s lack of education represented the triumph of “fantasy over reason” (Summerfield 175) or “a revulsion among those of enlightened artistic and literary predilections against an airless, inhumanly narrow view of the child’s mind” (Jackson 191). To later critics such as Mitzi Myers, Judith Plotz, Andrew O’Malley and Alan Richardson, who are influenced by the social and political perspectives of feminist criticism and new historicism, the Romantic discourse of childhood conceals a reactionary conservatism which uses the state of childhood to retreat to “a conservative fantasy of an idyllic past” rather than engage with the ambivalence and complexity of a socially and industrially developing society (O’Malley 128). In this reading, the Romantic child’s lack of education strips deprives them of agency and ensures their economic and social subjugation. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)