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**Books, Reading and the Mind
in the Work of William Godwin**

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I confirm that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Parts of Chapter Four are forthcoming for publication in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* and are included here by the permission of the editors.

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that the British philosopher, novelist and social critic William Godwin (1756-1836) used literary depictions and discussions of book-reading to negotiate public debates about the nature of the human mind. It takes an intellectual-historical approach to Godwin's representation of communications media, using this to illuminate the wider cultural significance of book-reading in Romantic-period Britain. I ultimately claim that for Godwin, the book-object became a literary presence and a conceptual tool by which he expressed and defended his belief in the reality and necessity of intellectual perfectibility.

My first three chapters set the groundwork for this argument by exploring Godwin's treatment of 'The Matter of the Reader' (Chapter One), 'The Ethics of Novel-Reading' (Chapter Two), and 'The Discipline of Reading' (Chapter Three). As Godwin engaged with debates about materialism, literary form and education, he negotiated inherited ambivalence about the nature of the human mind and the conditions necessary for its vitality. Godwin's writing about reading exposes a fundamental tension that runs throughout his corpus: he consistently invested confidence in the mind and idealised its operation, yet was simultaneously preoccupied by theorising major threats to its development.

My final two chapters argue that Godwin's writing about the book as a material medium provided an ongoing response to this tension. I show that his comparative evaluations of 'Social Media' (Chapter Four) and his literary rendering of books in terms of 'Bodies and Monuments' (Chapter Five) were contributions to debates about the powers of truth, death, and cultural memory. I conclude that Godwin used the book-object as a gesture of faith in the necessary perfection of human minds.

This dissertation remaps Godwin's contribution to British culture by drawing attention to the crucial role book-reading played in his philosophy, fiction, essays and correspondence. In doing so, it highlights a rich vein of enquiry opened up by the growing 'interdiscipline' of media history: the cultural figuration of books and reading.

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Some of the material in Chapter Four is forthcoming in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, and I am grateful to the editors of that journal for permission to include it here.

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Introduction

Books are the depository of every thing that is most honourable to man. Literature, taken in all its bearings, forms the grand line of demarcation between the human and the animal kingdoms. He that loves reading, has every thing within his reach. He has but to desire; and he may possess himself of every species of wisdom to judge, and power to perform.¹

Book-reading has a powerful and peculiar presence in the writing of William Godwin, the notorious British philosopher, novelist and social critic. As my opening quotation from *The Enquirer* (1797) shows, he invested its practice with authority to distinguish between different kinds of being. It operates here as a ‘grand line of demarcation’ not only between ‘the human and the animal kingdoms’, but also between different human persons: ‘He that loves reading’ is implicitly set against he who does not, endowed with superiority of mind (‘wisdom to judge’) and body (‘power to perform’). The contrast is explicit in the essay from which these comments are taken, and functions as a way of interrogating the forces that condition human life. As he distinguishes the ‘man of talent’ from the ‘dull man’, Godwin outlines multiple ways in which temperament, education and social environment may threaten one’s potential to assume the former’s bookish mode of being. The activity of book-reading becomes a locus of both anxiety and hope for Godwin, something that troubles his aspirations for human life as much as it defines them.

The tensions inherent to this essay are not unique; in fact, they represent a consistent feature of Godwin’s work. He repeatedly interrogated, theorised and symbolised both the activity of reading and the medium of the printed codex, and this preoccupation cuts across the generic variety of his fifty-year corpus. Books are as integral to his discussion of human nature in *Thoughts on Man* (1831) and *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled* (1836) as they are to his writing of the 1790s. Yet despite increasing recognition of Godwin’s seminal position as a literary practitioner and educational theorist, his discussions and depictions of media have been largely overlooked. This thesis starts from the conviction that we will not fully understand Godwin as a figure of cultural history unless we confront them.

My argument is that Godwin used depictions and discussions of book-reading to negotiate public debates about the human mind. I claim that for Godwin, the book-object became a literary presence and a conceptual tool by which he expressed and defended his belief in the reality and necessity of intellectual perfectibility. In other words, he wrote about books in certain ways in order to examine and justify his theory of intellectual progressivism: to confront the challenges it faced and to

¹ William Godwin, ‘Of an Early Taste for Reading’, *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature. In a Series of Essays*, in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, ed. by Mark Philp, Pamela Clemit, and Martin Fitzpatrick, 7 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1993) v, pp. 73-289 (p. 95)

propound it as an ideal for his times. This dissertation thus remaps Godwin's contribution to British culture by drawing attention to the crucial role that book-reading played in his philosophy, fiction, essays and correspondence. To date, there has been no systematic enquiry into the place of books and reading in his work. As I undertake this task, I also hope more generally to highlight a rich vein of enquiry that has been opened up by the growing 'interdiscipline' of media history: the cultural figuration of books and reading.²

That book-reading has an important place in literary and intellectual history might seem obvious, especially given the proliferation of media histories over the last few decades (many of which focus upon the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries). The majority of these accounts, however, prioritise material and economic history at the expense of the artistic, literary and intellectual contexts in which those material conditions played out. Within histories of reading, in particular, one finds a sense that cultural representations of reading are inferior to or a secondary part of reading's 'actual' history – even that they can obscure its history.³ Yet there is a limit to the knowledge we can acquire from materially oriented reading histories, partly because past reading is not a material thing; we can access objects, but we cannot access temporal, emotional and intellectual experiences with those objects, only records and representations of some of those experiences. If we treat such representations simply as means to ends, the significance of reading for the culture under study remains elusive and our accounts lack explanatory power. Indeed, we may miss the cultural ideology that inevitably underlies our own historiographical enterprises. Communications media and their associated practices have long functioned as symbols, stories and concepts, and in this capacity have shaped material history as much as they have been shaped by it. As Ina Ferris and Paul Keen argue, 'Books signify in several dimensions, from their traditional role as vehicles for the signifiers we call writing [...] to their function as social signifiers in themselves [...] to their overarching symbolic power'.⁴ Alberto Manguel's suggestive study of metaphors for reading, *The Traveler, the Tower, and the Worm* (2013),

² For media history as an 'interdiscipline' see Leslie Howsam, 'Thinking Through the History of the Book', *Mémoires du livre*, 7.2 (2016), n.p. <<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1036851ar>> [accessed 23 May 2018], originally delivered as the keynote address to the 23rd Annual Conference of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing.

³ See Leah Price, 'Reading: the State of the Discipline', *Book History*, 7.1 (2004), 303-20 (p. 313); William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 6; James Raven, Helen Small and Naomi Tadmor, 'Introduction' to *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 13-14. A salient exception to this rule are studies of reading through the lens of gender, which recognise the interdependence of historical practice and cultural ideology as perpetuated via text and image (e.g. Jacqueline Pearson's *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835* and Kate Flint's *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914*).

⁴ Ina Ferris and Paul Keen, 'Introduction: Towards a Bookish Literary History', in *Bookish Histories*, ed. by Ina Ferris and Paul Keen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1-15 (p. 6). This collection contains several essays that are exemplary in this regard, including Jon Klancher, 'Wild Bibliography: The Rise and Fall of Book History in Nineteenth-Century Britain' (pp. 19-40) and Barbara M. Benedict, 'Reading Collections: The Literary Discourse of Eighteenth-Century Libraries' (pp. 169-95).

is one of the few works that attend to this aspect of history, and it shows that the way in which societies have represented reading is a matter of importance in itself.⁵

One aim of this project, then, is to offer Godwin as an individual case study that responds to this scholarly deficit. His writing shows that book-reading, as something discussed, conceptualised and symbolised in the literature of Romantic-period Britain, participated in crucial debates about knowledge and human nature. Its cultural representation was not simply a reflection of these debates, in the sense of bearing witness to them as secondary receptacles, but was integral to them. Indeed, my argument involves the contention that Godwin came to view books themselves as essential to the mind's existence, objects that enabled its development and structured its future.

My concerns should be distinguished from two related lines of enquiry. 'Reading' in the sense of interpretive theory or hermeneutics has long been of interest to Romantic-period literary scholars, partly because the period is posited more generally as a seeding ground for the reading assumptions embedded in the modern-day academic discipline of English Literature.⁶ Informed by the legacies of post-structuralism and reader-response theory, this approach concerns the ways in which textual meaning may be constructed and complicated by the reader-author relationship. It has recently been brought to bear upon Godwin's work by Tilottoma Rajan, whose *Supplement of Reading* (1990) and *Romantic Narrative* (2010) tease hermeneutic implications from the writings of the Godwin-Shelley circle. Whilst questions of textual interpretation have undoubtedly informed my work, most notably in my discussion of the novel form in Chapter Two, my primary focus here is upon Godwin's representation of book-reading as an embodied cultural practice. I have found this sort of book-reading to be an arresting subject in his work precisely because it points beyond itself: Godwin exploits its metonymic potential, its ability to figure and distil the material, social and political dimensions of national life that he sought to explore.

More proximate to my work are studies which explore the implicit presence or consciousness within texts of their own nature as material media. The rise of media history has prompted twofold attention within literary scholarship: to the conditioning influences of print (and manuscript) culture upon literary form on the one hand, and to the ways in which literary texts may encode, signal and interpret their own mediatory nature, on the other. Once again, this has resonated especially for scholars of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, as exemplified by Andrew Piper's *Dreaming in Books* (2009) and Christina Lupton's *Knowing Books* (2012). My dissertation draws from such interest in

⁵ Alberto Manguel, *The Traveler, the Tower, and the Worm: The Reader as Metaphor* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). Cf. Brian Cummings, 'The Book as Symbol', in *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, ed. by Michael F. Suarez and H. R. Woudhuysen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 63-65; Régis Debray, 'The Book as Symbolic Object', in *The Future of the Book*, ed. by Geoffrey Nunberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 139-52.

⁶ A view indebted to Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985).

‘bibliographic poetics’, as Piper describes it, yet does not espouse it only insofar as it reflects back again upon the period’s print culture, which is the main concern for Piper as for others (Piper concludes that ‘Literature makes books as much as books make literature’).⁷ Godwin’s work shows us that the ‘question of how literature thinks in and about books’ is also pertinent beyond this medial self-reflexivity, illuminating a broad range of issues within cultural history. I mostly bracket the self-referential elements of Godwin’s writing, prioritising instead the more straightforward ways in which his depictions and discussions of book-reading intersect with public debates about the nature of the mind.

My project, then, combines the methodologies of historicist literary critics and intellectual historians in order to explore what Godwin’s work reveals about the cultural significance of book-reading in Romantic-period Britain. It responds to Jonathan Israel’s call for ‘controversialist’ intellectual history, a ‘reformed intellectual history presiding over a two-way traffic, or dialectic of ideas and social reality, [...] focusing less on finished theories [...] than on ‘thinking’ and debates’.⁸ In drawing from this approach, I follow many scholars who have sought to establish intellectual history as a viable and attractive task; indeed, although Israel critiques the Pocock-Skinner school for honing in upon ‘discourse’ at the expense of social context and historical detail, the literary contours of my project render me sympathetic to such focus. The ‘history of speech and discourse’ to which Pocock drew attention in his *Virtue, Commerce and History* (1985) is one that students of literature are well equipped to unearth, as Isabel Rivers has noted.⁹ Through my study of Godwin, I seek literary access to the ‘unresolved arguments’ that Israel places at the helm of social history.

Godwin particularly lends himself to such a controversialist approach because his life and work were bound up so overtly in the ‘unresolved arguments’ of his day. His writing, as I outline below, dramatically foregrounds the competing narratives of social progress and corruption that marked out this period, showing that they were rooted in urgent and practical debates such as those about population growth, industrialization and social unrest.¹⁰ As one critic has recently expressed it,

Much of the challenge and the pleasure of reading the writings of William Godwin lie in watching the principles of the Enlightenment wittingly and unwittingly come up against their

⁷ Andrew Piper, *Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 11. Cf. Christopher Flint, *The Appearance of Print in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), according to which eighteenth-century novels ‘recorded the self-conscious manipulation of [their] typographical nature’ in order to interrogate the period’s developing in print culture (pp. 1-2).

⁸ Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 23.

⁹ J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 5; Isabel Rivers, ‘Literature and the History of Ideas’, in *Encyclopaedia of Literature and Criticism*, ed. by Martin Coyle, Peter Garside, Malcolm Kelsall and John Peck (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1991), pp. 941-50 (pp. 944-45).

¹⁰ For an overview of these salient issues, see Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England, 1783-1846* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

limits. It is this tension, above all else, that his fictional and non-fictional works explore and demonstrate.¹¹

Another way of stating my thesis, then, is that Godwin wrote about books and reading in order to navigate the intellectual and social turbulence of his time. Book-reading became a locus through which he formulated, expressed and defended his convictions about knowledge, ethics and history. When we explore the ‘media consciousness’ of his work, I argue, we illuminate his place within a nexus of debates about what gives meaning and value to human existence.

My project is primarily indebted, of course, to the many existing studies of Godwin’s life and writings. The publication of scholarly editions of his work in the 1990s, the digitization of his diary in 2010, and his growing presence in the course reading lists of universities both testify to and have themselves enabled a renaissance of Godwin scholarship in the contemporary academy. My understanding of Godwin’s career and its reception has been guided primarily by Mark Philp, through his *Godwin’s Political Justice* (1986), his introductions to the *Political and Philosophical Works* and *Collected Novels and Memoirs* (the latter co-written with Marilyn Butler), and his entry for Godwin in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004). Biographies of Godwin by Don Locke (1980), Peter Marshall (1984) and William St Clair (1989) remain useful; Pamela Clemit’s ongoing work on Godwin’s letters is enabling ever deeper knowledge of his life, career and self-understanding; and Julie Carlson’s recent ‘literary biography’ of the Godwin-Shelley family is valuable as the only monograph that explicitly addresses Godwin’s interest in books and reading (though without systematic treatment).¹²

Drawing from this body of contextual scholarship, my project places books and reading at the centre of Godwin’s literary career. It thus most directly modifies and expands upon accounts of Godwin’s work that register his significance as an educational theorist: Ralph Burton Pollin’s *Education and Enlightenment in the Work of William Godwin* (1962) continues to be the most thorough, although much has been written since that attends to Godwin’s role as an educationist, children’s writer and bookseller.¹³ These works are valuable, but on the whole overlook the foundational importance of

¹¹ Graham Allen, ‘Review of Pamela Clemit (ed.), “The Letters of William Godwin”. Volume II: 1798–1805’, *Romanticism*, 23.1 (2017), 95-100 (p. 95).

¹² See Julie A. Carlson, *England’s First Family of Writers: Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Mary Shelley* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

¹³ Burton Ralph Pollin, *Education and Enlightenment in the Works of William Godwin* (New York: Las Americas, 1962). Examples of subsequent work include Carlson, *England’s First Family*; Pamela Clemit, ‘Godwin’s Educational Theory: “The Enquirer”’, *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 12 (1993), 3-11; Susan Manly, ‘William Godwin’s “School of Morality”’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 43.3 (2012), 135-42; Robert Anderson, ‘Godwin Disguised: Politics in the Juvenile Library’, in *Godwinian Moments: From the Enlightenment to Romanticism*, ed. by Robert Maniquis and Victoria Myers (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 125-46; William St Clair, ‘William Godwin as Children’s Bookseller’, in *Children and Their Books: A Celebration of the Work of Iona and Peter Opie*, ed. by Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), pp. 165-79; Matthew Grenby, *The Child Reader, 1700-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

books and reading to Godwin's educational theory. It goes without saying that my discussion of novel-reading in Chapter Three also draws from and contributes to a longstanding critical discussion of Godwin's fiction, which was instigated during his own lifetime by the essayist William Hazlitt. Most useful for my purposes have been Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975) and Pamela Clemit's *The Godwinian Novel* (1993). Godwin's own comments about the novel form have been a source of growing interest in recent years, yet he is still to be taken seriously as a literary critic.¹⁴ Chapter Three attempts to show the ethical impetus that kept his theoretical writing about fiction (as well as his fictional writing itself) alive and evolving until the very end of his life in the 1830s.

Godwin and Intellectual Perfectibility

William Godwin began his literary career in London in the early 1780s, after various unsuccessful attempts to work as a Dissenting minister. Given the breadth and variety of his output, he is best seen as a 'man of letters' rather than simply a novelist or a philosopher. As the unimpressed *Critical Review* put it in 1804:

The literary raiment of Mr. Godwin is variegated. He wears a grotesque suit, chequered with patches, laboriously selected from political, moral, and philosophical romances, dramas, novels, and 'light memorials of the frail and fair.' Distinguished by this panoply, his characteristic energy enlivens the masquerade of modern learning [...]¹⁵

Cynicism aside, this reviewer is not alone in identifying a 'characteristic energy' behind Godwin's 'panoply' of writing. Yet the modern-day tendency to carve up Godwin's corpus into different disciplinary categories obstructs access to this continuity, as does the narrative of quality decline that dominates twentieth-century accounts of his life. This project is based upon the contention that, throughout his fluctuating personal circumstances and his forays across the generic landscape, Godwin explored, defended and upheld several foundational convictions across nearly fifty years of literary work. In what follows I attempt to trace some of this continuity through a brief overview of his career.

Perhaps the most formative influence upon Godwin's career was his upbringing in the cultural environment of religious Dissent. His father and grandfather were Dissenting ministers, he was educated at Hoxton Dissenting Academy, and when he moved to London in the 1780s he became

¹⁴ This growing but patchy interest in his theory of fiction is indicated by the fact that the editors of a recent collection of essays on the Romantic-period novel use a quote from Godwin to open their introduction, yet leave it largely unexplored and decontextualized: see *Recognizing the Romantic Novel: New Histories of British Fiction, 1780-1830*, ed. by Jillian Heydt-Stevenson and Charlotte Sussman (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ [Anon.], 'Review of "Life of Geoffrey Chaucer"', *Critical Review, or, Annals of Literature*, 1.1 (January 1804), pp. 60-65 (p. 60).

involved in a predominantly Dissenting literary network. Godwin inherited a cluster of basic commitments from the theology, philosophy and social practices of rational Dissent, and these remained foundational to his work: most prominently, commitments to private judgment and to ‘frank’ public discussion, which were understood within a framework of necessity and perfectibility.¹⁶ *Political Justice* (1793) gave these principles their most powerful and well-known expression, but evidence suggests that they preceded the treatise. Godwin himself, in an attempt to chart the development of his philosophical principles, dated his commitments to the necessity and perfectibility of human lives, the centrality of intellect to ethics, and the immutability of truth (amongst other things) to the 1770s and 80s.¹⁷ Careful attention to Godwin’s subsequent work also reveals that these commitments continued beyond the 1790s. They undergirded his political pamphlets and his essays; his educational writings and books for children; his biographies; his novels; his dramas; his writings on religion.

To argue for such continuity is not to deny that Godwin’s writing developed, or that some of his views changed. As his earliest biographer William Hazlitt noted with approval, ‘he changes his opinions, and changes them for the better’.¹⁸ In fact, as Godwin himself attested, his high view of individual judgment meant that he considered it a moral duty to keep one’s opinions open to revision.¹⁹ Most famously, he adapted his work to accommodate the shifting concerns and terminology of philosophical debate in the 1790s, becoming more alert to the power of feeling and sentiment in the formation of judgment. These changes inflected his work of the later 1790s with a more sceptical tone, including his revised editions of *Political Justice*.²⁰ Yet as his essay ‘Of Scepticism’ (1797) shows, he saw such caution (‘rational sceptic[ism]’) to be compatible with his basic belief in the reality and accessibility of truth, rather than a threat to it. ‘The sceptic makes bare his own bosom to receive the beams of truth’, he claimed.²¹ The apprehension of truth through private judgment was still the cornerstone of his ethical and social theory, and Godwin was at pains to

¹⁶ See especially Mark Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice* (London: Duckworth, 1986), and Philp’s ‘Introduction’ to the *Political and Philosophical Writings*, I, pp. 7-45. For further discussion of ‘rational’ Dissent and its social legacy, see Chapter Three. A broad overview of the concept of perfectibility in Western culture is provided by John Passmore in *The Perfectibility of Man*, 3rd edn (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), and Godwin’s commitment to intellectual perfectibility situated briefly within ‘British anarchism’ on pp. 277-80, 321-23.

¹⁷ A transcription of Godwin’s ‘Philosophical Principles’ timeline is provided in Philp’s ‘Introduction’ to the *Political and Philosophical Writings*, pp. 17-18; see pp. 21, 24-25 for further detail about areas of continuity in Godwin’s post-1790s work.

¹⁸ William Hazlitt, ‘The Spirit of the Age’, in *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. by A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover, 21 vols (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1902), IV, pp. 185-368 (p. 212).

¹⁹ See Godwin’s preface to the 1796 edition of *Political Justice (An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice: Variants)*, in *Political and Philosophical Writings*, IV, pp. 6-7) and his ‘Thoughts occasioned by the perusal of Dr Parr’s Spital Sermon [...] being a reply to the attacks of Dr. Parr, Mr. Mackintosh, The Author of an Essay on Population, and others’, in *Political and Philosophical Writings*, II, pp. 163-208.

²⁰ See Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice*, and the section on reason and feeling in D. H. Monro, *Godwin’s Moral Philosophy: an Interpretation of William Godwin* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 36-56.

²¹ Godwin, ‘Essay of Scepticism’, in *Political and Philosophical Writings*, V, pp. 302-11 (pp. 302, 309). A similar passage can be found in his 1801 ‘Thoughts occasioned by the perusal of Dr Parr’s Spital Sermon’, pp. 171-72.

communicate this throughout the 1790s. '[T]he spirit and great outlines of [my] work [...] remain untouched', he insisted; the alterations made were 'not of a fundamental nature'.²²

I address other developments within Godwin's thought in this dissertation, including apparent qualifications to his confidence in the omnipotence of educational environment (see Chapter Three). Yet no such adaption, I argue, obscured his overarching conviction that all persons had the innate potential to develop true judgment (i.e., in the theory of human perfectibility). This conviction is nowhere more evident than in Godwin's final words to his 1831 *Thoughts on Man*, which echo and sustain those of his 1801 'Thoughts occasioned by the perusal of Dr Parr's Spital Sermon'. Both present a view of perfected human nature which is as unashamedly idealistic as that of the first edition of *Political Justice*: 'human understanding and human virtue will hereafter accomplish such things as the heart of man has never yet been daring enough to conceive'.²³

Above all else, Godwin's work is characterised by an interest in the life of the mind. His fictions, essays and histories alike are fuelled by a sense that the intellectual conditions of national life are the most important thing to be investigated, critiqued and challenged. Whether discussing political structures, childhood education, or literary form, one basic question remains the same: how active (i.e. alive) is the mind in this situation? Or, to put it another way, what possibilities for the mind does this mode of education, this political structure, or this literary form allow? When it came to history, the story of an individual mind at a certain point in time could be understood as a direct window into the story of his or her nation, because it demonstrated the extent to which that nation allowed the mind to flourish. Godwin certainly appreciated the body; at times he even troubled the distinction between body and mind (see Chapter One). Yet he consistently described the mind as the thing that made human persons truly human: 'Be it however where or what it may, [the mind] constitutes the great essence of, and gives value to, our existence'.²⁴

This enduring interest in intellectual vitality stemmed from the centrality of 'private judgment' to Godwin's ethical, social and political commitments. Like many Dissenters before him, Godwin believed that individual judgment was a perfectible faculty – that it had an innate capacity to apprehend truth – and that it would develop necessarily given the free and 'frank' dissemination of ideas. 'Man is in a state of perpetual progress', he argued in *Political Justice*. 'If we would arrive at

²² *Political Justice: Variants*, pp. 7-8. See also his defence of principles 'fundamental to the system' of *Political Justice* in the preface to *St Leon; A Tale of the Sixteenth Century*, in *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, ed. by Mark Philp, Pamela Clemit and Maurice Hindle, 8 vols (London: W. Pickering, 1992), IV, pp. 10-11.

²³ Godwin, *Thoughts on Man, His Nature, Productions, and Discoveries. Interspersed with Some Particulars Respecting the Author*, in *Political and Philosophical Writings*, VI, pp. 31-292 (p. 292). Cf. 'Thoughts occasioned by the perusal of Dr Parr's Spital Sermon', pp. 207-08.

²⁴ *Thoughts on Man*, p. 42.

truth, each man must be taught to enquire and think for himself'.²⁵ This process went hand in hand with social reform, because for Godwin, people necessarily live out their opinions and beliefs: 'to reform a man is to change the sentiments of his mind'.²⁶ He wrote confidently about this 'unspeakably beautiful' doctrine of private judgment,²⁷ envisioning a future of increasing intellectual (and thus social) perfection.

Godwin was full of caution, however, when it came to discussing the conditions required for such mental development to occur in the present day. He found threats to the vitality of private judgment in political structures, educational environments, social practices – even in the substance and nature of the mind itself. *Political Justice* is perhaps more explicit about threats to private judgment than it is about the potential of private judgment to bring about good. The work explores the many ways in which 'By its very nature political institution has a tendency to suspend the elasticity, and put an end to the advancement of mind'. It considers how religious traditions, social customs, and even politically radical organisations pose a similar threat, observing that 'Every scheme for embodying imperfection must be injurious'.²⁸ Godwin believed that reformation of the mind would bring about reformation of society, but it often appeared as a chicken-and-egg situation: which came first, and how?

Whilst many critics have noted this tension surrounding Godwin's conception of social reform, few recognise that the problem lay not so much in his theory of transition from one state to another, but in his theory of mediation.²⁹ He consistently posited truth as a powerful, objective force; he consistently believed that once apprehended, truth was irresistible; but the means of its apprehension was the sticking point. How was truth conveyed to the mind, if not through potentially corrupt human channels? Textual and aural media, historical customs, individual cognition – all were vital means of knowledge, yet all were treated with suspicion. I explore this mediatory conundrum directly in Chapter Four, 'Truth and Social Media', but each chapter explores it implicitly. Godwin's obsession with the issue was informed and enflamed by his materialist leanings (Chapter One), his literary

²⁵ *Political Justice*, p. 106; *Political Justice: Variants*, p. 143. See Philp's discussion of Godwin's view of private judgment in his *Godwin's Political Justice*. For three typologies of 'private judgment' in eighteenth-century religious discourse, see Chapter One of Daniel Patrick L. Huang, "'Private judgment' in the Anglican writings of John Henry Newman (1824-1945)", (doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1996) *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*. For the generation of 'perfectibility' as a more general social assumption in eighteenth-century culture, see James Sambrook, *The Eighteenth Century: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1700-1789* (London: Longman, 1986), especially pp. 229-33; David Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); and Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1940).

²⁶ *Political Justice*, p. 397. This particular phrase is removed in subsequent editions, but the argument remains the same: see *Political Justice: Variants*, pp. 295-96.

²⁷ *Political Justice*, p. 76 (retained in all editions).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106 (emphasis mine).

²⁹ For examples of this 'transition' focus, see Peter H. Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 404, and Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man*, pp. 278-89.

environment (Chapter Two), his educational background (Chapter Three) and his understanding of death (Chapter Five). It was ultimately the reason, I argue, why book-reading became such a locus of hope and anxiety in his work.

Godwin's search for the means of intellectual perfectibility should not be understood only as a response to this internal philosophical tension, however. He was engaging with debates about the future of the human mind which were neither private nor abstract, even when he articulated himself in such terms. He wrote in an historical moment in which the theory of ideas and their transmission was highly politicized, and this environment was the implicit focal point for many of his arguments in the 1790s and early 1800s. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution* (1790) and Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791) sparked a pamphlet war which testified to the ways in which the intellectual foundations of the British political system, including the proper role and scope of public opinion in its formation, were being intensely debated. The publication timing of *Political Justice*, a few weeks after the execution of Louis XVI and days after war with France was announced, was in this respect unfortunate, for Godwin's critique of social institutions was inevitably associated with revolutionary uprising. He was portrayed by the conservative press as dangerous, discreditable and disloyal until the end of his life (and beyond). This hostile context heightened Godwin's ambivalence concerning the means of intellectual advance, for in propounding his belief in necessary perfectibility he was anxious to stress that the political implications of this process were both real and powerful (providing hope for the future), yet also peaceful and gradualist (providing safety in the present). His 1795 pamphlet 'Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills' exemplifies this dual inflection. It can be seen in the very title, for in purporting to be written 'by a lover of order' it simultaneously advertises the author's gradualist credentials and establishes the central, unsettling question of the pamphlet: whose order? Godwin's rather conflicted answer is the necessary order of truth (see Chapter Four).

Godwin's progressivist framework was also prominently attacked by the political economist Thomas Robert Malthus, symbolising how emerging debates about Britain's rapidly growing population were placing cultural narratives of linear social progress under strain.³⁰ Malthus set out to refute Godwin in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (first published 1798) by demonstrating that social improvement had known limits: misery and vice were necessary forces that brought population size and food supply into equilibrium. Godwin responded briefly to Malthus in his 'Thoughts occasioned by the perusal of Dr Parr's Spital Sermon' (1801), and then at length in his *Of Population* in 1820. He spent many pages disputing Malthus's statistics, but his most powerful line of argument was that

³⁰ Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it affects the future improvement of society, with remarks on the speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and other writers* (London: J. Johnson, 1798); a substantially revised second edition appeared in 1803. Cf. Philip Connell, *Romanticism, Economics and the Question of 'Culture'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Catherine Gallagher, 'The Romantics and the Political Economists', in *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, ed. by James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 71-100 (pp. 75-76).

Malthus's focus upon bodily desire led him to misunderstand and underestimate the mind. He contended that logic, philosophy and historical observation justified the conclusion that the human mind was progressive by nature, including its ability to exercise judgment (e.g. in refraining from reproduction), foresight (e.g. in planning ahead for crises) and innovation (e.g. in creating solutions to new problems): 'the progressive power of increase in the numbers of mankind, will never outrun the progressive power of improvement which human intellect is enabled to develop in the means of subsistence'.³¹ Interestingly, the imagination plays a crucial role in Godwin's arguments: humankind will advance in mind only insofar as they summon the courage to conceive of themselves advancing, to imagine its possibility. This exposes one important link in his work between intellectual perfectibility and book-reading. Indeed, the interrelation of literature, mind and history became a topic of increasing interest to him, as shown by his essays 'Of the Durability of Human Achievements and Productions' and 'Of Imitation and Invention' in *Thoughts on Man* (see Chapter Five).

This leads us to another formative context for Godwin's promulgation of perfectibility – and one commonly neglected by his critics – the 'media consciousness' of Romantic-period Britain. I return to my opening comments, in which I tried to make a case for the sort of 'bibliographic poetics' that aims to illuminate fields of cultural history beyond media history itself. Historians concur that debates about print culture and its development were a major aspect of life and literature in this period, and it has even been cast as the first age of media histories, an age of stories about orality and textuality which were fuelled by 'competing narratives of progress and corruption'. As Ferris and Keen put it, 'new awareness of the 'presence' of books and printed matter [...] took increasing hold in the culture as the eighteenth century ran its course'.³² Yet Godwin's contribution to this environment has been curiously overlooked, despite the fact that he directly reflected upon it. He told a familiar story about the printing press as an agent of change – 'that glorious instrument for advancing the march of human

³¹ Godwin, *Of Population. An Enquiry concerning the Power of Increase in the Numbers of Mankind, being an Answer to Mr. Malthus's Essay on that Subject*, in *Political and Philosophical Writings*, II, p. 295. For a useful gloss on Godwin's argument here see Monroe, *Godwin's Moral Philosophy*, pp. 81-85.

³² Ferris and Keen, 'Introduction: Towards a Bookish Literary History', pp. 1, 5. Cf. Klancher, 'Wild Bibliography'; Paula McDowell, 'Towards a Genealogy of 'Print Culture' and 'Oral Tradition'', in *The Broadview Reader in Book History*, ed. by Michelle Levy and Tom Mole (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2015), pp. 395-415 (reprinted from *This Is Enlightenment*, ed. by Clifford Siskin and William Warner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 229-46); St Clair, *The Reading Nation*, pp. 10-12; James Raven, 'The Industrial Revolution of the Book', in *The Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. by Leslie Howsam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 143-61 (pp. 143, 159); Leslie Howsam, 'The History of the Book in Britain, 1801-1914', in *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, ed. by Michael F. Suarez and H. R. Woudhuysen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 180; Carla Hesse, 'Books in Time', in *The Future of the Book*, ed. by Geoffrey Nunberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 21-36 (p. 29).

improvement' – but it was imbued with his characteristic ambivalence about the practical nature and means of this advance.³³

Godwin had reason and opportunity to reflect upon his media environment. His *Herald of Literature* (1784) was a convincing spoof of the contemporary reviewing scene, and indicates that he was attuned to the social and material conditions of literary craft from an early date. He personally experienced all the highs and lows of literary fame, becoming a celebrity almost overnight after the success of *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams* and experiencing a fall from social grace almost as sudden following his *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* in 1798. He increasingly reflected upon his life in terms of his books, often self-identifying with their public reception ('I may be a martyr of this work' he wrote of *Political Justice* in 1824).³⁴ He also clashed with his publishers over the economic constraints of book production: his letters show him disputing the material form his works would take, including 'that space between the paragraphs which distinguishes all elegantly printed books'.³⁵ In 1805 he started a publishing imprint and bookshop with his second wife, which proved a lengthy and complex commercial failure, and the Godwins were forced to declare bankruptcy in 1825. This again prompted Godwin to reflect upon the media environment in which he was emotionally and financially invested, including the disparity, in his experience, between literary labour and the commercial world of print. Yet he continued to place his hope in the future of his books, which he believed would continue speaking long after he had become 'a clod in the valley'.³⁶

My task in this dissertation is to show that Godwin's literary interest in book-reading was not incidental or ephemeral to his key, enduring principles, but that it was essential to them, and more so than has hitherto been recognised. In what follows, I argue that Godwin participated in the media consciousness of Romantic-period Britain by using depictions and discussions of book-reading to examine, justify, and publicise his core belief in intellectual perfectibility. As we take a close look at this aspect of his work, we slice through the heart of the debates about the human mind with which he spent his life engaging.

Outline of dissertation

The first three chapters of this dissertation set the groundwork for my argument about print and perfectibility by exploring Godwin's depictions and discussions of the activity of reading. I explore his treatment of reading subjects, reading matter and reading advice, demonstrating that in and

³³ *Thoughts on Man*, p. 248; Cf. 'Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills, concerning treasonable and seditious practices and unlawful assemblies, by a lover of order', in *Political and Philosophical Writings*, II, pp. 123-62 (p. 155).

³⁴ Manuscript note as cited in Philp, 'Introduction' to *Political and Philosophical Writings*, p. 23.

³⁵ *The Letters of William Godwin*, ed. by Pamela Clemit, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011-2015), II (2015), p. 253.

³⁶ See 'Of the Length of the Life of Man: A Confession', in *Collected Novels and Memoirs*, I, pp. 61-65.

through each of these issues Godwin was addressing fundamental questions about the nature of the mind and its development. Each chapter provides evidence for my claim that Godwin negotiated an ambivalent view of the mind throughout his career. Their different perspectives all reveal ways in which he consistently upheld confidence in the mind, at the same time as he anxiously interrogated the exact relationship of printed works to ‘the full and free exercise of private judgment’.³⁷

In Chapter One (‘The Matter of the Reader’), I show that representations of reading in *Political Justice*, *Caleb Williams* and *Mandeville* participated in contemporary debates about the relationship between matter and thought. Godwin had argued in *Political Justice* that only independent thinking could give rise to beneficial social reform, and he considered reading a vital means of achieving this independence. Yet throughout the 1790s he increasingly described the reading mind in material terms, apparently reducing thought to matter’s mechanical realm. Across his fiction and philosophy Godwin depicted readers who were powerless to escape the conditioning influences of their educational environments, raising questions about whether and to what extent the human mind was indeed able to transcend its social context in an act of truly independent or private judgment.

These descriptions of reading do not simply raise problems, however. I argue that Godwin was intentionally drawing from an ambivalent or ‘double’ reading of mind that was integral to the philosophical and physiological writing of his time. Like other writers in his radical literary circle of the 1790s, he was exploiting the uncertain line between the literal and the metaphoric in the language of these works, in order to emphasise both the formative power of corrupt social environments and the ability of the individual mind to escape their confines and achieve intellectual agency through textual engagement. In other words, I claim that Godwin was attuned to the ways in which ‘reading matter’ could be transformed through fiction from an intellectual problem into a space for imagining social possibility.

In Chapter Two, (‘The Ethics of Novel-Reading’), I argue that Godwin’s writing of the early 1830s was the climax of a career-long attempt to express the value of the novel form in terms of its alliance with the moral perfectibility of the human mind. I show that Godwin claimed the novel as a special means of moral knowledge in his preface to *Cloudesley* (1830) and preface to the 1832 edition of *Fleetwood*, remediating the ideas of his earlier draft essay ‘Of History and Romance’ (1797). In doing so, he contributed to a growing public discourse that allied fiction-reading to ethics, one of the many factors that aided the social elevation of the novel form in the early nineteenth century. This critical work had a dark side, however: it was haunted by images of shallow writers and passive readers who abused the moral potential of their materials. Godwin’s approach to the novel was based upon an assumption about how the reader’s mind should interact with certain kinds of prose in order to

³⁷ This phrase is from Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice*, p. 159.

develop its capacity for ethical judgment, and as such it exposes his ambivalent view of the mind and its tendencies.

After my examination of this critical work, I suggest that Godwin used his final novel *Deloraine* (1833) to draw out the socio-political implications of the connection he had made between novels and moral knowledge. Through direct engagement with contemporary debates about criminal justice and print culture, this work upholds confessional narrative as a means to the true ‘moral law’ that he believed legal institutions had eclipsed. Yet it also offers a nightmarish portrayal of institutional power over the mind’s moral sense, casting doubt upon the ability of individuals to transcend the moral and intellectual dictates of their inherited social climate. I conclude that Godwin’s later work in and about the novel form exposes a tension between his conviction in human perfectibility through book-reading and his concerns about the moral illiteracy of the reading nation.

In Chapter Three (‘The Discipline of Reading’) I consider Godwin’s practical reading advice, found throughout his educational writings and correspondence over a period of forty years. In contrast to the many studies of Godwin’s pedagogy which assume these instructions are based upon the principle of freedom, I argue that they are best understood through the concept of discipline. I justify my approach by examining the roots of Godwin’s pedagogy in religious Dissenting education – specifically, the educational advice of a tradition within so-called ‘rational Dissent’, spearheaded by Philip Doddridge and Isaac Watts – in which the activity of reading became a new preoccupation, a focus of study (or *discipline*) in itself. Through their teaching methods, lectures and textbooks, these educators conceived of reading as a form of training, a *discipline* in the sense that applied to military, medical and moral regimes.

I then argue that Godwin inherited this conception of reading as a discipline, both in the sense of a focus of study and in the sense of a training regime that moulded the habits and abilities of participants. I show that he remediated and adapted the Watts-Doddridge pedagogical tradition through his practical reading advice, presenting reading as a form of training which should be undertaken in accordance with principles of exposure, routine and skill. I ultimately suggest that if we recognise the centrality of discipline to Godwin’s advice, we elucidate the conflicted view of the human mind that he inherited. Through his instructions he expressed great confidence in the mind’s discriminating powers, yet also great fear of its adverse principles, such as passivity, distraction and rebellion. Godwin thus probed across many years the extent to which the mind was corruptible, and the extent to which it was perfectible. He also developed his key response to this ambiguity: an increasing investment in textual production (something explored in more depth in Chapter Five).

My final two chapters explicate how Godwin’s writing about the book as a material medium provided an ongoing response to his equivocality surrounding the nature and power of the mind. I explore his comparative evaluations of media and his direct ruminations upon the printed codex, connecting them

to wider debates about truth, death and cultural memory. I ultimately claim that Godwin used the book-object itself as a gesture of faith in the necessary perfection of human minds.

I argue in Chapter Four ('Truth and Social Media') that when Godwin depicted the social operation of media he was negotiating an ambivalent concept of 'truth' and its relationship to the human mind. I draw attention to the places in *Political Justice*, *The Enquirer* and *Thoughts on Man* in which he directly evaluates book-reading as a means of apprehending truth and compares its social operation to that of conversation. Most criticism to date identifies disparity between these passages, but I argue that they are united by a concern with temporal regulation. Godwin repeatedly argues that book-reading and conversation, properly conceived, should work in harmony to balance the speed of intellectual exchange amongst members of society. Books are presented in terms of slowness, and speech is presented in terms of rapidity.

The more he describes these roles of reading and speaking, however, the more they become ambiguous and qualified, raising questions about sources of epistemic authority. They are energised by an uncertainty concerning which factors determine the knowing process and to what degree. At times truth is at the mercy of its mediation, and at others medial channels are subservient to truth as a self-sufficient, self-manifesting force. I ultimately argue that Godwin's assessments of media were exposing and probing an historically-resonant question: to what extent is truth dependent upon the activities, structures and mediation of social groups, and to what extent is it external to them? I suggest that Godwin inherited this ambivalence from the Dissenting culture in which he was educated, and explore its roots in a two-fold conception of truth that appeared throughout the educational and philosophical writing of the previous century. I thus situate Godwin's writing about media within an alethic dialogue, and argue that this shaped his understanding of the book's role in intellectual life.

In Chapter Five ('Books, Bodies and Monuments') I claim that Godwin increasingly presented printed books as substitutes for human minds, a strategy that became most concentrated in his early nineteenth-century writings. He repeatedly figured books in terms of human bodies, and sometimes in terms of commemorative monuments, in order to express the idea that they were ongoing physical legacies of passed human minds. I begin with his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) and his *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1803), showing that he presented these literary biographies as works that mediated personal presence: he claimed that they embodied a mind, which functioned as an ongoing member of intellectual community and thus had the power to instigate social change. Through his *Essay on Sepulchres* (1809) Godwin clarified and publicised this contention, tapping into contemporary debates about national identity and cultural memory in order to argue that great books had unique social presence and authority. His manuscript essay 'On Death'

(1810) brought this argument to its climax, claiming that books did not simply perpetuate human minds, but transformed them into something that transcended the limitations of human nature.

My conclusion is that, faced with challenges to his theory of intellectual perfectibility, Godwin was refining a longstanding contention that print technology was key to the unleashing of human intellect. He was claiming that the book gave durable form to various aspects of the mind that would otherwise be destroyed by death; they were a way of harnessing the progress made by individual thinkers and staging it as cultural memory. I show that Godwin was responding to public debates about political economy, national identity and religious belief, which had all brought the reality of death to bear upon his claims about the necessary intellectual perfectibility of humankind. As he defended this conviction against its critics, I argue, he exploited the symbolic power of the book-object in order to cast death as the ultimate means of intellectual advance. I thus read Godwin's nineteenth-century writings about the book-object as his most powerful defence of his belief in intellectual perfectibility.

1

The Matter of the Reader: *Materialism and Private Judgment*

Introduction

‘Reading furnishes the mind only with materials of knowledge; it is thinking makes what we read ours’, wrote John Locke in 1706.¹ He was claiming that good reading had both a material and an immaterial aspect. If reading was to be profitable – if the reader was to acquire intellectual substance from their materials – there must be an immaterial processing of material information or input. If reading stopped short of thinking, however, the reader could be considered in the same terms as a bookshelf. They were passive storage facilities, ‘furnishe[d]’ with ‘materials of knowledge’, yet lifeless. Locke’s dualism influenced the way many writers and educators described reading throughout the eighteenth century: Isaac Watts, for instance, argued that ‘if all your learning be nothing else but a mere amassment of what others have written [...] I do not see what title your head has to learning above your shelves’.² Like Locke, Watts was concerned to distinguish and develop the thought of his reader (‘your head’) in direct contrast to the material bulk of their library (‘your shelves’). This genesis of independent thought, he argued, was the *raison d’être* of reading, and it was what made the reader truly human.

Almost a century after Locke, and after a Dissenting education that used both Locke and Watts as teaching texts, William Godwin troubled this distinction between thought and its materials in his popular novel *Caleb Williams*.³ Its second and third editions increasingly describe the protagonist’s mental life in materialist language, and this includes his early and formative experience of reading romances. ‘I read, I devoured compositions of this sort’, Caleb records in the third edition (1797). ‘They took possession of my soul; and the effects they produced were frequently discernible in my external appearance and my health’.⁴ Reading has become a process of corporeal consumption, an explicitly physical activity by which books invade and manipulate his soul and body. Rather than marking a boundary between mind and text, Godwin describes a young man whose mind is

¹ John Locke, *Of the Conduct of the Understanding in Posthumous Works of Mr. John Locke: Viz. I. Of the Conduct of the Understanding. II. An Examination of P. Malebranche’s Opinion of Seeing All Things in God. III. A Discourse of Miracles. IV. Part of a Fourth Letter for Toleration. V. Memoirs Relating to the Life of Anthony First Earl of Shaftsbury. To Which Is Added, VI. His New Method of a Common-Place-Book, Written Originally in French, and Now Translated into English* (London: printed by W. B. for A. and J. Churchill at the Black Swan in Pater-Noster-Row, 1706), p. 60.

² Isaac Watts, *The Improvement of the Mind in The works of the late reverend and learned Isaac Watts, D.D* [...], 6 vols (London: printed for T. and T. Longman, J. Buckland, et al, 1753), v, pp. 185-358 (p. 189).

³ For details of the curriculum at Hoxton Academy, see Peter Marshall, *William Godwin*, pp. 33-45.

⁴ Godwin, *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, in *Collected Novels and Memoirs*, III, p. 280.

overridden by his reading materials. Caleb is possessed by his books, rather than possessing them: he becomes, as it were, his shelves.

In troubling the boundary between matter and mind in this way, Godwin established a conflict internal to his work that critics have been quick to notice. Across his writing, he argued that human beings had an innate capacity for independent intellectual activity or private judgment, and he continually upheld this capacity as the key to beneficial social change. Yet just as widespread was an image of the mind which appeared to be in danger of being enveloped by the mechanical realm of matter, rendering it powerless to escape the conditioning influences of its environment. In his fictional work especially, the inner lives of his protagonists are explicitly manipulated by the material, political and social conditions of their day, and remain trapped within them despite their attempts to render an impartial and reflective account of their experiences. As Marilyn Butler observes, Godwin's novels seem to threaten the 'conscious, sentient, unique individual' which he relied upon in his philosophy.⁵

In this chapter, however, I explore one way in which Godwin used the tension between mind and matter to both imagine and empower this 'conscious, sentient, unique individual'. I argue that his descriptions of reading, in both fictional and non-fictional works, bring to the foreground an ambivalent or 'double' reading of mind that was integral to the philosophical and physiological writing of his time. Godwin exploited the uncertain line between literal and metaphoric meaning in the language of such works, and in this way he was able to emphasise both the formative power of corrupt social environments and the ability of the individual mind to escape its confines. In other words, I claim that Godwin was attuned to the ways in which 'reading matter' could be transformed through fiction from an intellectual problem into a space for imagining social possibility.

I begin this argument by exploring Godwin's ambivalent descriptions and definitions of 'thought' in *Political Justice* (1793), which were echoed throughout his corpus and revisited especially in the early 1830s. I then show that this way of figuring mind was translated into his fiction, using *Caleb Williams* (1794) and *Mandeville* (1817) as case studies. I claim that Godwin used the slippery conceptual and linguistic framework of the mind in order to present a picture of the world in which necessity and perfectibility could work in tandem. He exploited the ambiguous nature of 'thought' in the contemporary imagination in order to expound upon the sinister power of material environments whilst simultaneously upholding the emancipatory potential of individual judgment.

⁵ Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), pp. 55, 58. Butler argues that Godwin partially succeeds in vindicating this 'individual', unlike the other writers of his literary circle.

Political Justice and the problem of thought

Godwin's *Political Justice* was based upon a founding assumption about the importance of independent thought, an ideal which he most frequently referred to by the loaded term 'private judgment'.⁶ For Godwin, private judgment was not simply the result of an enlightened and emancipated society; it was the means of achieving it. 'The proper method for hastening the decay of error, is not, by brute force, or by regulation,' he contends, 'but on the contrary by teaching every man to think for himself'.⁷ In every edition of the treatise he describes private judgment as 'a doctrine [...] unspeakably beautiful', and his analyses of social institutions and customs always take the principle as their reference point. National assemblies, for example, are considered to be pernicious because they encourage a false sense of unanimity and thus foster intellectual passivity in the individual.⁸ Significantly, Godwin writes about the activity of reading as essential to the development of private judgment. He contends that thorough engagement with 'literature' (in the generous eighteenth-century sense of the term) produces 'salutary' effects upon the mind, helping to disentangle it from prejudice and mistake.⁹

Despite this foundational commitment to independent thinking, however, the mind is threatened from every side in Godwin's *Enquiry*. Political institutions infect and corrupt human faculties to such an alarming extent that escape from prejudice is made to seem almost impossible. The influence of government 'fastens itself upon us like an incubus, oppressing all our efforts' towards independent judgment.¹⁰ There are social threats to its operation, too; everyday conventions of politeness, custom and 'domestic tactics' alienate people from 'the pursuit of truth'.¹¹ This paradox has been widely noted in the work of Godwin, Wollstonecraft and their literary-intellectual milieu, and is aptly described by Barbara Taylor as the 'corruption/progression antinomy haunting eighteenth-century thought', in which widespread belief in inevitable national and universal progress clashes with a plethora of ultra-negative analyses of current society.¹² Chapter Four of this dissertation investigates such social threats in depth.

In *Political Justice*, however, independent thought is troubled on a level more basic even than this. An epistemological threat develops over successive editions of the treatise, as Godwin increasingly uses the vocabulary of the materialist to describe the production of knowledge in the human mind.

⁶ For in-depth discussion of private judgment in Godwin's work, see Mark Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*. For the resonance of 'private judgment' in eighteenth-century religious discourse, see Chapter One of Daniel Patrick L. Huang, "'Private judgment' in the Anglican writings of John Henry Newman (1824-1945)", (doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1996) *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*.

⁷ Godwin, *Political Justice*, p. 450.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 76, 306-07.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁰ *Political Justice: Variants*, p. 125.

¹¹ *Political Justice*, p. 120 (retained in all editions).

¹² Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 162; Peter Marshall, *William Godwin*, p. 404.

Knowledge is a process of ‘impression’ from external forces, in which minds can be ‘ductile’, ‘stiff’ or ‘elastic’. Whilst he constructs the spread of truth in abstract, ethereal terms – ‘diffusion’, ‘dissemination’ – practical encounters with ideas are corporeal and tactile. This language is peppered throughout the treatise from the earliest printed version, but it becomes more concentrated as the editions progress and more problematic for Godwin’s ideal of independent thought.¹³

A good example of these troubling implications can be found in the section on ‘the Cultivation of Truth’, in which Godwin equates virtue with one’s ability to understand circumstances clearly in the mind. Where the first edition describes the need for ‘clear and distinct perception’ of these circumstances, in subsequent editions this is changed to ‘strong and vivid perception’.¹⁴ Godwin replaces an intellect which is imagined in visual terms, implying a degree of distance and independence from the circumstances under consideration, with one defined by the material force of impressions upon sensory faculties. This appears to problematize his ideal of the impartial thinking agent; rather than describing the mind as separate from the material processes of the body, it evokes the scientific discourse of corporeal cause and effect, implying that the human mind is at the mercy of impersonal external forces.

The consequences of Godwin’s altered language in the example discussed above indicate that debates about matter and thought in this period were closely affiliated with debates about determinism. A great variety of British thinkers – from Ralph Cudworth and Humphrey Ditton to Thomas Reid – had argued that if mind was explained in terms of matter, it would legitimise the equation of human life with machinery, a position that became associated mid-century with the notorious *L’Homme machine* of La Mettrie (1748). Many feared that if the mind was not ascribed a dimension beyond matter, then human action would be understood as determined by the cause-and-effect conditions of the natural world. Free choice would be reduced to a psychological illusion, and the domain of ethics left largely redundant. It was for these reasons, as John Yolton has detailed, that eighteenth-century fascination with automata went hand in hand with a profound fear that modern science was ‘mechanizing’ humankind.¹⁵

Godwin’s writing about the mind often appears to make just such a ‘mechanizing’ move. In the first edition of *Political Justice* he states:

Though mind be a real and efficient cause, it is in no case a first cause. It is the medium through which operations are produced. Ideas succeed each other in our sensorium according to certain necessary laws. The most powerful impression, either from without or from within,

¹³ See Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice*, for Godwin’s changing language across successive editions of the *Enquiry*.

¹⁴ *Political Justice*, p. 143; *Political Justice: Variants*, p. 169.

¹⁵ See John W. Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), especially pp. 30, 45, 119, 124-25.

constantly gets the better of all its competitors, and forcibly drives out the preceding thought, till it is in the same irresistible manner driven out by its successor.¹⁶

This description of mind, in which ideas compete for prominence in a process akin to natural selection, positions the thinker as fundamentally passive. Ideas are received according to ‘necessary laws’, and the subject’s power to select them is limited. By the third edition, however, Godwin has altered the first sentence to read, ‘Though mind be a real and proper antecedent, it is in no case a first cause, a thing indeed of which we have in no case any experimental knowledge’.¹⁷ The mind can now only be known as an ‘antecedent’ rather than an ‘efficient cause’ – i.e., it precedes action, but it does not itself determine the nature of that action. This signals increased scepticism about the degree to which thinkers can be said to have agency, even in a secondary sense. The most powerful impressions imprint themselves upon the mind, and the thinker appears to be merely their receptacle.

When it comes to reading, this approach to mental life seems to have sinister implications. If the mind is necessarily subject to the most powerful ideas that it encounters, are its judgments at the mercy of its reading matter? As Godwin describes his ideal of an intellectually virtuous community in the *Enquiry*, he does indeed appear to position the reader in a materialist’s universe:

Having ventured to state these hints and conjectures, let us endeavour to mark the limits of individuality. Every man that receives an impression from any external object, has the current of his own thoughts modified by force; and yet without external impressions we should be nothing. We ought not, except under certain limitations, to endeavour to free ourselves from their approach. Every man that reads the composition of another, suffers the succession of his ideas to be in a considerable degree under the direction of his author. But it does not seem as if this would ever form a sufficient objection against reading. One man will always have stored up reflections and facts that another wants; and mature and digested discourse will perhaps always, in equal circumstances, be superior to that which is extempore [...] conversation and the intercourse of mind with mind seem to be the most fertile sources of improvement.¹⁸

The tension within Godwin’s approach to intellectual activity is clearly shown here. The reader is depicted as though at the mercy of external impressions, which battle for impact upon the mind. Their ideas are ‘modified by force’, suggesting reading to be a kind of coercion by which readers are manipulated by their materials. This language allows Godwin to explain the power and importance of reading according to contemporary systems of natural philosophy, yet it seems to eliminate from the picture any sense of the reader’s independence. At the same time, however, Godwin seems to suggest that such coercion can be a necessary, even positive, process. Because each person ‘will always have stored up reflections and facts that another wants’, reading is an activity of sharing, which enlarges its participants. It is ‘fertile’, an activity which generates something new in the mind and causes ‘improvement’. In other words, whilst Godwin’s descriptions of mind as matter jeopardize his central

¹⁶ *Political Justice*, p. 185.

¹⁷ *Political Justice: Variants*, p. 195.

¹⁸ *Political Justice*, p. 452 (virtually unchanged in subsequent editions).

claims about the development of intellectual autonomy, he also strives to keep the reader-as-agent on centre stage.

Interestingly, later editions of the *Enquiry* – in which the materialist language is most explicit – contain an insightful comment upon this very tension. In a discussion of education, Godwin remarks that:

Multitudes will never exert the energy necessary to extraordinary [educational] success, till they shall dismiss the prejudices that fetter them, get rid of the chilling system of occult and inexplicable causes, and consider the human mind as an intelligent agent, guided by motives and prospects presented to the understanding, and not by causes of which we have no proper cognisance and can form no calculation.¹⁹

The emancipatory energy necessary for intellectual independence is to be achieved, Godwin implies here, through an act of the imagination.²⁰ We must renounce determinism and instead ‘*consider* the human mind as an intelligent agent’ – believe that this is the case – and by doing so, we will find ourselves transformed for the better. This act of belief is far from a naïve or unreasonable gesture: in fact, it is crucial for understanding Godwin’s depictions and discussions of reading in later works.

Godwin’s explicitly stated model of the human mind in *Political Justice* allows for this imaginative operation. He was not quite a materialist or an immaterialist in the traditional senses of those terms; Peter Marshall describes mind and matter in Godwin’s view as ‘parallel interactive schemes’, but this perhaps fails to do justice to the complexity of his position.²¹ Godwin describes mind as a ‘mechanism’ like the body, and allows that we can use the vocabulary of physical process to describe its operation, but he argues that we must understand it to be ‘a mechanism of a totally different kind’.²² There is an overt element of mystery at play here, which has an important function. Godwin argues that we cannot know exactly how thought produces physical consequences, but he claims that this realm of unknowing does not mean that it cannot produce them or that thought does not exist. In fact, he echoes Hume in claiming that we cannot empirically know how anything causes anything; habit simply leads us to assume that it does.²³

Godwin uses this idea to argue that we must believe that the mind transcends matter, even if we cannot prove it by empirical method. Mind must be ascribed a dimension beyond matter, because only this dimension enables us to explain some of the fundamental elements of human life, intellectual

¹⁹ *Political Justice: Variants*, p. 24. He specifically addresses here those educators who assign intellectual ability to an unpredictable notion of innate genius – ‘the pretence that man is born all that it is possible for him to become’ – rather than post-birth education; yet its import is identical for those who would believe a person to be determined by material mechanism.

²⁰ See James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 7-8, for wider discussion about the extent to which the imagination was held to offer reconciliation between different conceptual realms in this period.

²¹ See Marshall, *William Godwin*, p. 97.

²² *Political Justice*, p. 176.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

agency being an example. A manuscript note reinforces this idea, suggesting that although thought is non-material, it is not *immaterial* – it is just as tangible as 'the vegetation & life of a plant', which cannot be materially located but nevertheless exists in the physical world.²⁴ Godwin's foray into physiology thus builds from the imperative to 'consider the human mind as an intelligent agent', and allows for this consideration through its deliberate ambiguity.

Godwin was not unusual for these ideas about mind and matter; he was borrowing from and responding to many other thinkers in the long-standing debate about the nature of thought.²⁵ Locke's dualism, in which thought was essentially 'superadded' to matter by God, came under pressure early in the eighteenth century. Scientists and philosophers began to grapple with the physiological applications of what Newton termed 'subtle elastic fluid', a concept which appeared to problematize the nature of matter as traditionally conceived. If matter had aspects of what had formerly been considered the immaterial, was the latter realm still necessary to explain human experience of the mind? A wide range of thinkers increasingly described moral and intellectual activity in physiological terms.²⁶ David Hartley, for example, investigated the relationship between ideas and nervous operation, and his explanatory discourse of vibration influenced British science and culture for decades. Although Hartley made a distinction between ideas and the material vibrations that supposedly corresponded with them, his claim about their correlation was often understood to blur the boundaries between thought and its materials. Joseph Priestley adapted Hartley's account, breaking down the traditional distinction between 'material' and 'immaterial' – all matter, in his account, is porous and defined solely by forces of attraction and repulsion – and claiming that 'thought' is a property of a system of such matter (the nervous system).²⁷

Godwin wrote at a time in which the nature of thought was much debated, and during which many medically significant neurological discoveries occurred in Britain.²⁸ His writings suggest that he largely espoused Priestley's views, like many from Dissenting communities, and like Priestley he described himself as modifying Hartley's system in order to avoid the 'material automatism with which it was unnecessarily clogged'.²⁹ His open or ambiguous view of the mind was also intended as

²⁴ Godwin, 'Untitled [on Matter, Thought, Motion and Identity]', n.d., Oxford, Bodleian Library, Abinger Collection, MS. Abinger c. 36 Fol. 3. Cf. *Essay on Sepulchres*, in *Political and Philosophical Writings*, VI, pp. 1-30, in which Godwin confesses himself 'more inclined to the opinion of the immaterialists; than of the materialists' concerning the nature of thought (p. 8).

²⁵ For an overview of this debate see Yolton, *Thinking Matter*.

²⁶ For an insightful case study of this broad movement, see Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660-1780*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991-2000).

²⁷ See Joseph Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit. To Which Is Added, the History of the Philosophical Doctrine Concerning the Origin of the Soul, and the Nature of Matter; with Its Influence on Christianity, Especially with Respect to the Doctrine of the Pre-Existence of Christ* (London: printed for J. Johnson, No. 72, St. Paul's Church-Yard, 1777), pp. 16-18.

²⁸ See Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 5-7.

²⁹ *Political Justice*, p. 176.

a means to side-step the problems he perceived in the accounts of reading and enlightenment produced by French *philosophes* with materialist leanings, many of whom Godwin read and admired. Helvétius's *Essays on the Mind* (1758), for example, describes the predicament of the poor labourer who 'prefers the blue library, to the writings of St. Real, Rochefoucault, and cardinal de Retz' and needs to be awakened to his 'true interest' in advancing the welfare of society through political and social reform.³⁰ The means by which the labourer might transcend the affinity of his ideas to his uninspiring reading matter is conspicuously lacking in Helvétius' materialist framework, however. The mechanics of the intellect render reading choice a matter of 'attachment', implying that the reader is ultimately passive and unable to change their ideas. Godwin confronted this problem as a student at Hoxton Academy and his during his early years as a writer, becoming convinced that, if the activity of reading was to be given emancipatory potential, then thought must be considered in some way independent of matter.

Another key influence upon the way Godwin used materialist language, and perhaps the most significant for understanding his enduring confidence in independent thought, is the way in which physiological vocabulary was operating in works of empiricist philosophy. Brad Pasanek describes the eighteenth century as being 'in the grips of an indirect or figurative empiricism', according to which the mind was understood through '*metaphors* drawn from the sensuous impressions'.³¹ Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), for example, had described knowledge production in terms of sensation and reflection, using verbs such as 'impress' and 'strike' to conjure up an explanatory picture of the genesis of ideas – yet Locke did not intend his work to be an anatomy of ideas. Indeed, he almost apologises for his discussion of physical sensation, admitting, 'I have [...] been engaged in physical inquiries a little further than perhaps I intended'.³² Locke's corporeal language of ideas hovers between the metaphorical and the literal. As Ann Jessie Vant Sant observes, his work represents 'a fusion of traditional metaphor with the natural scientist's and the physiologist's understanding of sensation [...] despite Locke's deliberate avoidance of the physicality of sensation, he cannot do without its vocabulary'.³³

Whilst this ambiguous signification of sensuous discourse may have allowed Locke to avoid a problem, it became a feature of more sceptical empiricist works. David Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739-40) capitalises on the limits of human knowledge, maintaining that 'Nothing is ever

³⁰ Claude Adrien Helvétius, *De L'Esprit: Or, Essays on the Mind, and Its Several Faculties* (London: Vernor, Hood, and Sharpe, 1810), pp. 51-53.

³¹ Brad Pasanek, *Metaphors of Mind: an Eighteenth-Century Dictionary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), p. 21 (emphasis mine).

³² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 7th edn, vol. 1 (London: printed for J. Churchill and Samuel Manship, 1715), p. 102.

³³ Ann Jessie Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 90.

present to us but our perceptions'.³⁴ All we experience of reality, according to Hume, is a succession of vivid impressions in the theatre of the mind. Undermining the common anti-materialist argument which claimed matter could never give rise to thought (and therefore that the substances must be distinct), Hume asserted that as far as our knowledge goes, 'any thing may be the cause or effect of any thing'; our idea of causation derives only from an experience of constant conjunction.³⁵ The nature and cause of the impressions in our mind, whether material or immaterial, can never ultimately be known; and the question of whether the language of 'impression' is literal or metaphoric must therefore be eternally ambiguous. This ambiguity proves essential, in Hume's *Treatise*, for the pragmatics of living. Although there is very little ground, according to its system, for proving notions such as individual agency, personal identity and moral value to be things-in-themselves rather than social fantasies, he concludes that the philosopher must act *as if* they were in order to live practically in the world. In everyday life the sceptic is obligated to 'yield to the current of nature' and 'live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life'.³⁶ The language of 'impression' for Hume thus takes on an element of extra significance than it does for Locke – the relationship of its imagery to reality cannot be known, but Hume insists that we assume it to have explanatory power, or else cease to function as social beings.

Godwin was by no means a Humean philosophically speaking: he remained committed to a view of 'truth' as an objective entity, something which was external to the knower and had great epistemological authority.³⁷ Yet his language of matter in *Political Justice* elicits and participates in the deliberately 'figurative empiricism' of Hume's *Treatise*. By describing mind in materialist terms, its formation could be articulated in a manner that had currency in the contemporary philosophical environment, and he could stress the formative power of material circumstances in his account of human intellect. Yet the overtly ambivalent status of his vocabulary – is it literal, metaphorical, or somehow both? – allows Godwin to imagine and assert what he cannot prove: his sacred ideal of independent thought. Thought is couched in physiological language, and is more than analogous to matter, and yet it escapes the confines of the material system through its mysterious nature as a mechanism 'of a totally different kind'.³⁸

Godwin's celebration of the emancipatory power of reading in the *Enquiry* was thus founded upon a discourse of matter drawn from eighteenth-century science and philosophy, just as much as it was

³⁴ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: A Critical Edition*, ed. by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. 137.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-63 (p. 163).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

³⁷ This view of truth is discussed in depth in Chapter Four. For a detailed account of Godwin's selective appropriation of Humean language, see Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, pp. 142-44, 154-56, 159-67.

³⁸ My reading of Godwin here is indebted to discussions of Hume and the sceptical imagination in Fred Parker, *Scepticism and Literature: An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne, and Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

problematized by such discourse. He continued to negotiate the tension in Humean style, as his treatment of the mind-matter theme almost forty years later, in *Thoughts on Man* (1831), strongly suggests. ‘The mind may aptly be described under the denomination of the ‘stranger at home’’, Godwin argues in his opening essay ‘Of Body and Mind’:

Where [the mind] resides we cannot tell, nor can authoritatively pronounce, as the apostle says, relatively to a particular phenomenon ‘whether it is in the body, or out of the body.’ Be it however where or what it may, it is this which constitutes the great essence of, and gives value to, our existence [...]³⁹

Godwin appeals once again to mystery as he addresses the nature of the mind. His quotation from 2 Corinthians 12 associates it with religious experience, a real aspect of human life that lies both within and beyond the scope of human knowledge. The great value and meaning that the mind has for human life, he argues, has a sort of obvious authority; it trumps physiological or philosophical conclusions about the nature of matter. Godwin spells this out in his later essay ‘Of the Material Universe’, directly echoing Hume:

The speculator in his closet is one man: the same person, when he comes out of his retirement, and mixes in intercourse with his fellow creatures, is another man. The necessarian [...] proves to his own apprehension irrefragably, that he is a passive instrument [...] But no sooner does this acute and ingenious reasoner come into active life and the intercourse of his fellowmen, than all these fine-drawn speculations vanish from his recollection. He regards himself and other men as beings endowed with a liberty of action [...] Nature is too strong, to be prevailed on to retire, and give way to the authority of definitions and syllogistical deduction.⁴⁰

The double standard of the materialist is adjacent to that of the necessarian: both are different men in the studious ‘closet’ to those that they are in everyday life. Godwin uses this discussion to contend that all persons must imagine themselves to be intellectual agents – they must act as though this is the case – no matter what theoretical conclusions about materialism or determinism they reach in private. As we shall see, this imaginative pragmatism, and its implications for the language used to describe acts of reading, took on an explicit role in his fictional works.

Reading matter in *Caleb Williams* and *Mandeville*

Descriptions of childhood reading feature in each of Godwin’s full-length novels, and one of the functions they perform is to place the matter of the mind upon centre stage. Perhaps the most striking example of this is found in the changes Godwin made to the opening of *Caleb Williams* in its second and third editions (1796, 1797). In the first edition Caleb is described as being ‘engrossed’ by reading

³⁹ *Thoughts on Man*, pp. 44, 42-43. The phrase ‘stranger at home’ is unattributed, but may be drawn from Edward Young’s *The Complaint: or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (London: R. Dodsley, 1742): ‘At home a stranger / Thought...’ (p. 6).

⁴⁰ *Thoughts on Man*, pp. 274-75.

as a child, ‘neglect[ing] no means of information from conversation or books’.⁴¹ The second edition inserts a new paragraph, which describes how he ‘delighted to read of feats of activity’ and connects this propensity to his supple and vigorous physical frame.⁴² The 1797 text further expands this account, and its changes are retained in subsequent editions. It details at length how Caleb’s mental disposition and reading matter mutually reinforce each other, culminating in irresistible cravings:

The spring of action which, perhaps more than any other, characterised the whole train of my life, was curiosity. [...] In fine, this produced in me an invincible attachment to books of narrative and romance. I panted for the unravelling of an adventure with an anxiety, perhaps almost equal to that of the man whose future happiness or misery depended on its issue. I read, I devoured compositions of this sort. They took possession of my soul; and the effects they produced were frequently discernible in my external appearance and my health.⁴³

Caleb’s mental and physical faculties overlap here to an alarming extent. His mind (‘soul’) and body (‘external appearance’) are together shaped by his reading material. This preference for ‘books of narrative and romance’ has an uncertain origin: it is partly determined by a prior internal disposition of curiosity, partly by his athletic physique, and partly generated by the activity of reading itself – the books themselves ‘took possession of my soul’. The passage positions his reading experience as a process of positive feedback, with its precise genesis uncertain. Godwin’s use of the term ‘attachment’ encapsulates this ambiguity: it implies both material connection (the mind’s fusion with its educative environment) and subjective bias (a preference for one thing over another). What kind of attachment is Caleb’s attachment to his books? Can mental and physical attachment be distinguished? The origins and nature of mental and physical states collide in this account of reading experience.

This growing preoccupation with the effects of reading upon his protagonist’s appearance and personality corresponds to the changes of language in *Political Justice* explored above: in both texts, matter seems to encroach upon mind. Godwin revised both texts for new editions during the same period in the mid-1790s (the second and third editions of *Political Justice* were published in 1796 and 1798). These years also saw the publication of *The Enquirer* (1797), a collection of essays on ‘Education, Manners, and Literature’, which describes the process of reading using similar corporeal language and addresses the issue of literary determinism head-on.⁴⁴ As the 1790s progressed, the boundary between the sensory and the intellectual became increasingly hard to distinguish across Godwin’s work, raising questions about the individual’s capacity for independent thought. A close look at scenes of reading in *Caleb Williams* and *Mandeville* suggests to us one reason why Godwin made the problem of intellectual determinism such an explicit theme in his fiction.

⁴¹ *Caleb Williams*, p. 7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 280.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ See especially the *Enquirer* essays ‘Of the Sources of Genius’, ‘Of an Early Taste for Reading’ and ‘Of Learning’.

Upon an initial reading, the language and plot of *Caleb Williams* suggest that its characters are materially determined, unable to transcend their formative environmental conditions and exercise independent thought. Caleb's reading experiences appear to govern his personality and the trajectory of his life. The process of attachment, consumption and possession quoted above, in which racy reading matter literally inscribes itself onto his body, conditions his mental character to be 'irresolute and pliable'.⁴⁵ This parallels, even merges with, his physical characteristics: his limbs are often described as flexible and active, and his body lends itself to manipulation and disguise from an early age. Throughout the novel, his mind is portrayed in similarly material terms, as pliable, impressionable and ductile.⁴⁶ The love of action and novelty instilled through his engagement with books even determines his mental temperature: he is frequently characterised by the 'burning', 'boiling' and 'glowing' of an inflamed imagination.⁴⁷

The materials of Caleb's mind consequently determine the passionate and impetuous way that he responds to events and makes decisions. Despite his frequent resolve to display 'firmness' and 'unalterable constancy', he describes his mental experience as akin to being blown about and driven by powerful winds, each one driving out the other with superior force.⁴⁸ An early example of this behaviour is found when Thomas is sent to fetch Caleb after his first departure from the Falkland estate. Initially Caleb describes in the strongest terms his conviction that to return would be impossible: 'I have taken my resolution [...] all the world shall never persuade me to alter'. Upon reading Forrester's letter, however, he experiences a dramatic U-turn in his ideas, and resolves to return with Thomas immediately. 'The letter overwhelmed every quality of my mind', Caleb records; 'The ideas it suggested had a tendency to fill the mind, and shut out the possibility of competition'.⁴⁹ This description signifies the processes of mind in spatial terms – ideas fill, shut out and overwhelm like wind or waves. It evokes Godwin's account in *Political Justice* of the genesis of ideas by mental impressions: 'The most powerful impression [...] constantly gets the better of all its competitors, and forcibly drives out the preceding thought, till it is in the same irresistible manner driven out by its successor'.⁵⁰ Caleb appears to be at the mercy of external impressions, which battle for impact upon his mind. Any independent conviction or resolve that he reaches – any hope of private judgment – seems to be instantly overridden.

For all his energy and enthusiasm, then, Caleb is positioned as passive. His early encounter with books is presented as a process of material formation, which determines the dispositions of his mind

⁴⁵ *Caleb Williams*, p. 248.

⁴⁶ See, for example, *Caleb Williams*, pp. 109, 141, 248; I note that Caleb's assertion that he is 'no longer irresolute and pliable' (p. 248) is ironically followed by an experience of mental turmoil and manipulation (p. 258).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 117. See Chapter Four for further implications of this language of temperature.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 142-43.

⁵⁰ *Political Justice*, p. 185.

and body and generates the impetuous curiosity that governs his actions. Many of Godwin's textual revisions for later editions of the novel emphasise this dynamic further. Where the first edition describes Caleb as impelled by 'an unconquerable necessity', for example, later versions read 'a tide of unconquerable impulse'.⁵¹ Godwin replaces the abstract concept of necessity with tangible and physical 'impulse', locating Caleb's sense of determinism in a material realm of cause and effect. His matter has been formed by his educational environment – most powerfully, by his reading materials – apparently precluding the effective development of private judgment.

This supremacy of matter over mind appears to be equally the case for Falkland. As a young man he 'imbibed the love of chivalry and romance'; like Caleb's undisciplined 'devouring', his childhood reading is a process of physical incorporation.⁵² These tales of chivalric tradition, combined with a classical education and a fascination with the histories of 'great men', shape him into a staunch upholder of tradition, a patron of the *ancien régime*. Moreover, just as Caleb's mental and physical characteristics merge together through his reading practice, the materials of Falkland's mind manifest themselves in his body. He is often described as 'inflexible', 'rigid' and 'cold', terms that apply both to his mental disposition and his physical features.⁵³ Indeed, by the time Caleb becomes his secretary, his fraught battle to preserve chivalric ideals has become 'inscribed in legible characters upon his countenance'.⁵⁴ Capitalizing on the various meanings annexed to the eighteenth-century term *character*, Godwin depicts Falkland according to the literal, older sense of a typographical mark, suggesting that the stamp of his material environment has determined his personal characteristics.⁵⁵ Like Caleb, he is ultimately depicted as critically passive, for he is physically 'inscribed' by his material circumstances; he has been written upon by his reading material.

When Caleb and Falkland meet in the final scene, they are extreme physical confirmations of the mental dispositions that their reading experiences have set in train. Caleb is wild and chaotic, whilst Falkland is shrivelled, hardened and corpse-like.⁵⁶ Although their reconciliation may be interpreted as signalling the possibility of a change in opinions, their characters remain true to the end. Falkland is still 'the fool of honour and fame', for he cannot survive without being 'the guardian of [his] reputation', and promptly dies.⁵⁷ Caleb's reasoning remains subservient to impulse and enthusiasm, epitomised by the fact that he finally becomes possessed by Falkland's reputation worship. He concludes by stating his allegiance to Falkland's tale, subverting his original statement of narrative

⁵¹ *Caleb Williams*, p. 270.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁵⁵ The *OED* shows that *character* connotes typographical figures as well as personal traits, moral reputations and literary protagonists – its use as mark or imprint long precedes its adaption for 'moral or mental qualities strongly developed or strikingly displayed' (c.1675). Cf. Deidre Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 5-6.

⁵⁶ *Caleb Williams*, p. 271.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

intent with his claim that he finishes the memoirs ‘that thy story may be fully understood’.⁵⁸ Once again his pliable mind has been usurped by the most powerful impression; he is arguably just as defeated as he was in the original manuscript ending, in which he was left drugged and incarcerated. Both the language and plot of *Caleb Williams* signal that its two main characters have been at the mercy of their reading materials. With ‘things as they are’, any hope of autonomous intellectual enquiry seems remarkably slim. When mind is described in terms of matter, reading becomes a malign and inhibiting activity.

Twenty years later, Godwin intensified this picture of intellectual determinism in his thrillingly dark *Mandeville* (1817). The trajectory of childhood reading had become a trope in Godwin’s novels: *St Leon* (1799) is enslaved to ‘the first lesson imprinted upon my infant mind’ (the love of fame), and in *Fleetwood* (1805) early bookish isolation instils in the protagonist a stubborn and misanthropic cast of mind, which engenders tragic consequences.⁵⁹ Yet Godwin depicted *Mandeville* as determined by his material environment and trapped within his mental dispositions more overtly than any of his other characters. He exploited the gothic potential of his determinist theme, using it to consider the experience of religion and mental illness in ways that prefigured James Hogg’s *Private Memoirs and Confessions* (1824). In *Mandeville*, the supremacy of matter over mind established in *Caleb Williams* appears to have reached a gloomy climax.

From *Mandeville*’s opening pages, Godwin’s narrator-protagonist constructs an account of his character formation in explicitly material terms. Describing the details of his childhood residence, he observes that

they insensibly incorporated themselves as it were with the substance of my mind; and my character, such as it was afterwards displayed, owed much of its peculiarity to the impressions I here received.⁶⁰

This comment merges together different kinds of ‘substance’. The material features of the house, the reclusive and strange personalities which populate it, the sombre violence of the waves against the rocks below – all converge in the mind of the young man, producing formative ‘impressions’. These forces confound any distinction between body and mind, for *Mandeville*’s physical appearance takes on the tenor of his environment in tandem with his intellectual disposition. In suggesting that his ‘character’ may be read in its subsequent display, *Mandeville* here portrays his life as irrevocably stamped by the particulars of its context. Like Falkland, his mind and body are conformed together in accordance with his educational environment.

Once again, a key aspect of this environment is reading material:

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁵⁹ *St Leon*, p. 155. See Chapter Four for further discussion of reading in *Fleetwood*.

⁶⁰ *Mandeville; A Tale of the Seventeenth Century in England*, in *Collected Novels and Memoirs*, vi, p. 23.

A book that my preceptor particularly recommended to my attention, was Fox's *Acts and Monuments of the Church*; nor did I need much persuasion to a study, to which my temper inclined me, and which occasions that sort of tingling and horror, that is particularly inviting to young persons of a serious disposition. In this tremendous volume the engravings eminently help to enforce the dead letter of the text. The representation of all imaginable cruelties, racks, pincers and red-hot irons [...] combined with my deep conviction that the beings thus treated, were God's peculiar favourites [...] produced a strange confusion and horror in my modes of thinking, that kept me awake whole nights, that drove the colour from my cheeks, and made me wander like a meagre, unladen ghost, to the wonder and alarm of the peaceable and well-disposed inhabitants of my uncle's house.⁶¹

In this description, both text and image engrave themselves into the young Mandeville's mind. The *Book of Martyrs* has an almost coercive effect, 'inforc[ing]' the substance of its pages upon the reader, manipulating not just his thoughts but his very 'modes of thinking'. In a similar fashion to Caleb, the incorporation of reading matter into mental substance is visibly manifested, expressed through his skin colour, constitution and bodily stature, reinforcing the idea that reading is a process of physical possession. Godwin's own attitude towards this particular text corresponds well to his novel's image of readerly subjection: in an unpublished draft on the composition of history he bitterly attacked the *Acts and Monuments* for its propagandistic bias and dubious sources, contending that it manifested the common tendency for 'a book of reasonable dimensions, of a grave & measured style' to smuggle prejudice to its audience undetected.⁶² Mandeville's reading experience of this weighty tome instils just such a disposition of latent hatred, leading him to embody its horror and gloom. The *Book of Martyrs* is integral to his mental and physical identity, welding both together.

This sharing of substance that Mandeville experiences during childhood is presented thereafter in the novel as something that has irrevocably determined his character, trapping him in a dark trajectory of jealousy and isolation against which he is powerless. The narration is littered with retrospective reflections that call this process to mind, and the plot is frequently interrupted with seemingly impotent laments: 'What a being I was, and for what a fate I was reserved!' Terms such as 'fate' and 'destiny' are ubiquitous, and Mandeville's retrospective speculations include the claim that his 'character was fixed', suggesting that he cannot escape his materially determined state.⁶³ Indeed, he frequently reflects upon the early formation of his mind in terms of physical deformity:

There were certain muscles of my intellectual frame that had never been brought into play; there were arteries of my heart through which the blood never rushed. My character was withered: not chilled; but dried, and stiffened, and changed to a yellow, death-like hue, like the confected carcasses of ancient Egypt. [...] My education I had derived from a formal, rigid, pedantic, pharisaical priest. Other inmates of the roof under which I dwelt I had had

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 52.

⁶² 'On the Composition of History; An Occasional Reflection', n.d., Oxford, Bodleian Library, Abinger Collection, MS. Abinger c. 29 Fols. 5-16 (7-8).

⁶³ *Mandeville*, p. 307.

none, except my unfortunate uncle, and his servants, who were more like *automata*, than human beings.⁶⁴

Here Mandeville reflects upon the formation of his mind through the language of the body. Certain ‘muscles’ and ‘arteries’ of his immaterial person have been deprived of use and sustenance, left to wither. Images of lifeless bodies – mummified corpses and automata – reflect both the mechanistic framework in which Mandeville’s life is imagined (he has no intellectual independence or vitality), and the uncanny effects to which it is put. Eventually, the distorted natures of his intellectual and bodily identities fully align through the literal disfigurement of the novel’s final scene. Mandeville ends his tale with a climactic assertion of possession, similar to that of *Caleb Williams*: ‘Clifford had set his mark upon me, as a token that I was his forever’.⁶⁵ This final surrender into past tense, combined with the imagery of branding, reinforces the novel’s characteristic sense of no return.

Reviewers of *Mandeville* were quick to identify this dark picture of material trajectory as the work’s central concern, and many considered it to be in conflict with the reformist views of Godwin’s political philosophy. Percy Shelley aptly captured the impression that the novel gave to its first readers:

The events of the tale flow on like the stream of fate, regular and irresistible, and growing at once darker and swifter in their progress; – there is no surprise, there is no shock; we are prepared for the worst from the very opening of the scene, though we wonder whence the author drew the shadows which render the moral darkness every instant more profound and, at last, so appalling [*sic*] and complete.⁶⁶

Shelley’s sense of wonder and profundity at *Mandeville*’s exploration of material determinism was not shared by the majority of reviewers, most of whom were repulsed rather than thrilled. Their comments identify a contrast between Godwin’s ideal of reform through independent thought in *Political Justice* and his bleak depiction of historical and social determinism in *Mandeville*. One writer suggested that Godwin’s repeated analyses of ‘whatever is deplorable in the constitution of society’ had led him to despair of his system, and accused him of ‘complaining of, and railing at, what he cannot hope to reform’.⁶⁷

Notably, however, this review equates Godwin’s own conception of reality with the constructions of his fictional narrator. In one respect it pinpoints the paradox of corruption and progress that all Godwin’s novels explore, yet it is also driven by assumptions about the nature and method of the reform that he hoped his work would achieve. In what follows, I show that Godwin presented the materially dictated lives of Caleb and Mandeville within a framework of perfectibility. His novels, I

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 131.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 174.

⁶⁶ As cited in Pamela Clemit, ‘Introductory Note’, in *Mandeville*, pp. v-viii.

⁶⁷ [Anon.], ‘Review of *Mandeville; A Tale of the Seventeenth Century* by William Godwin’, *The North-American Review and Miscellaneous Journal*, 7.19 (1818), pp. 92-105 (p. 92).

argue, trade upon the double reading of thought that *Political Justice* established. As Jon Klancher puts it, they bring ‘Godwin on Possibility’ to the fore, by using ‘the sign of fiction and its possible or virtual worlds’ as a mode or symbol of social redress.⁶⁸ In other words, at the same time that Godwin used his novels as troubling windows into interior lives, he also used them to imagine and assert the social possibility of independent thought by exploiting the ‘figurative empiricism’ introduced in his philosophical work.

Godwin’s mode of first-person narration provides the framework in which this figurative empiricism comes to the fore. Caleb and Mandeville are made the authors of explicitly subjective accounts, tales which derive their energy from the narrators’ internal responses to their circumstances. The novels adapt a tradition of confessional perspective that was pioneered by Defoe a century earlier, placing psychological experience at the helm of the drama. This context thus renders the sensory language of the mind an experiential language: Godwin’s narrators communicate the *felt* nature of social formation. Godwin goes further than this, however, for he creates narrators that are overtly flawed and unstable in mind. Mandeville’s disturbing psychological condition casts his explanation of childhood events into doubt, for example, and the open-ended conclusion of his tale invites speculation as to its import. Caleb’s constant fluctuation in convictions and opinions, culminating in the dramatic reversal in his interpretation of his own story, performs a similar function. We are even encouraged to read his entire history of Falkland in the first volume with caution, given that he admits he cannot vouch for its veracity.⁶⁹ Through his narrators, Godwin presented tales of psychological experience rather than authoritative histories of events.

This experiential mode of narration thus implicitly upholds the possibility of private judgment by interpolating the reader themselves as a judge. Godwin’s novels deliberately provoke multiple and conflicting readings; as Pamela Clemit writes, they place the ‘burden of interpretation and decision’ upon the reader.⁷⁰ This feature is exemplified by the central mystery devices of *Caleb Williams* and *St Leon*, by which the elusive contents of Falkland’s chest and St Leon’s alchemical secret become sites of endless conjecture for readers inside and outside the narratives, appropriated in ways that drastically alter interpretations of their ‘confessions’. As St Leon moves through history he is at times a philanthropic hero and at others a manipulative villain, and Falkland’s chest symbolises the unrealised promise of what Caleb calls a ‘faithful narrative’ – a definitive version of events.⁷¹ The

⁶⁸ Jon Klancher, ‘Godwin and the Republican Romance: Genre, Politics, and Contingency in Cultural History’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 56.2 (1995), 145-166 (p. 164).

⁶⁹ See *Caleb Williams*, p. 95.

⁷⁰ Pamela Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 6. See Chapter Two for further discussion of Godwin’s narrative technique and his own theory of the novel.

⁷¹ *Caleb Williams*, p. 267.

reader is thus invited to invent this 'faithful narrative' for themselves, to judge and interpret the accounts they have received.

This narrative context matters for our discussion because it manoeuvres the language of mental development in *Caleb Williams* and *Mandeville* into a realm of possibility and speculation. In other words, Godwin recruited his fictional form in order to provoke double readings of matter even more explicitly than he had done in *Political Justice*. The ambiguous metaphorical status of words such as 'impulse', 'impression' and 'character' allows for open-ended readings of character development: the terms express the formative nature of material circumstances, yet also reflect subjective experience, inviting readers to judge for themselves the authority and scope of the formative conditions that Caleb and Mandeville recall. This dual perspective is evident in Mandeville's account of his childhood influences:

they insensibly incorporated themselves as it were with the substance of my mind; and my character, such as it was afterwards displayed, owed much of its peculiarity to the impressions I here received.

The substances of mind and matter here are analogous ('as it were'), and although felt to be literally incorporated into one another, can be described as distinct. Moreover, Mandeville uses overtly performative language to describe his development: he considers his character 'such as it was afterwards displayed', evoking the most literal meaning of *display* in Godwin's time, 'to unfold to view' like a banner or naval signal (*OED*). Godwin exploits the ambiguity of materialist discourse, describing circumstances that tangibly impact upon Mandeville's personal development and yet he simultaneously implies that this may not be the complete picture.

These novels thus allow us to read matter in two ways: as a literal confinement in the material realm on the one hand, and as an experience of formative coercion in a prejudiced society on the other hand, which may be reinterpreted and transcended by future enquirers. Godwin's own summary of his authorial aims in a letter to *The British Critic* in 1795 appears to reinforce this view of his speculative ends. He claims that his goal was 'to disengage the minds of men from prepossession, and launch them upon the sea of moral and political enquiry'.⁷² His novels solicit the reader's imagination by confronting them with questions concerning the conditions of character development – to what extent is Caleb, or Mandeville, active rather than passive as an actor in the narrative? – and by doing so encourages them to realise the invitation of *Political Justice*, to 'consider the human mind as an intelligent agent'. Godwin was exploiting the ability of fiction to raise questions about the formation of the individual in the current state of society through his use of this mind-matter debate and its associated language.

⁷² 'To the Editor of the *British Critic*', 7 June 1795, in *The Letters of William Godwin*, 1, p. 117.

Reading matter as social critique

I have already indicated that there was a critical dimension to Godwin's use of materialist language in his novels. In what follows, I argue that his sensuous depictions of reading were in fact central to his ongoing argument against the acceptance of socio-political convention. By describing the reading mind as mechanical, passive and determined, Godwin positioned its social conditions as dehumanising. He was arguing that the ultimate and pernicious effect of institutions such as class and religion was their inhibition of intellectual agency, which for him was the very essence of human identity. This strategy was borrowed by other writers in his literary circle of the 1790s, most prominently by Mary Hays, and I use examples from their work below to illuminate Godwin's understanding of the relationship between reading and social critique.

Contemporary criticism often addresses the appearance of passive readers in Godwin's novels as secondary motifs – correlations of prior observations about social institutions. In Isabelle Bour's interpretation of *Caleb Williams*, for example, the reading experiences of Caleb and Falkland are considered simply as indicators of their a priori mentalities, by which they participate in the conventions of their station.⁷³ I demonstrate below, however, that the activity of reading was not an after-thought for Godwin, thrown in to back up an argument about class; his depictions of class are secondary to fundamental assumptions about reading. The materialist discourse that he uses positions his argument about class as a conclusion drawn from debates about the nature of humanity more widely. Godwin exploited the ambiguous nature of mind-matter language in order to imply that class systems, which promote limited and stratified educational environments, are dehumanizing. They disfigure the development of private judgment, as symbolised by Mandeville's disfigured face.

The activity of reading was such a point of interest in Godwin's fiction because, as I have shown, he understood it to be integral to the formation of the human person. Indeed, his novels suggest that all have the basic capacity to develop mental abilities through reading by depicting the fact of bookish formation amongst working class (Caleb) and upper class (Mandeville) alike. Godwin's nonfictional works made it clear that books had a special power to direct and exercise the mind, which rendered them a vital means of developing the faculty of private judgment. *The Enquirer*, for example, describes the generation of an infant's independent thinking through education in terms of a pseudo-spiritual 'awakening'. Biblical metaphors abound in descriptions of the mind's response to good pedagogy: the potter forming clay, the sower sowing seeds, the instructor breathing a soul into an

⁷³ Isabelle Bour, 'Sensibility as Epistemology in "Caleb Williams", "Waverley", and "Frankenstein"', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 45.4 (2005), 813-27 (pp. 815-16, 818)

unformed mass like God's original creative act. Throughout these descriptions, Godwin positions interaction with literature as the defining feature of humanity:

Books are the depository of every thing that is most honourable to man. Literature, taken in all its bearings, forms the grand line of demarcation between the human and the animal kingdoms.⁷⁴

Godwin contends that the generation of independent thought, especially though reading, is what makes human beings human. Indeed, he does not hesitate to describe the intellectually unformed or anti-literary as animalistic (the 'wild beast' Barnabas Tyrell makes a good example).⁷⁵ It was this conviction that underlay his reformist agenda: true reform would come about through the 'conquest of the judgment'. Anything less than this – anything that encouraged the mind to be passive – 'reduc[ed] men to the state of machines'.⁷⁶

If reading was considered an escape route from such dehumanising passivity of mind, then why did Godwin link them together in his fiction? The particular ways in which books trouble his protagonists suggest that he was making a point about the nature of social prejudice. In the current state of society, he implies, reading becomes disassociated from the formation of private judgment and instead becomes a tool of manipulation. Falkland's elitist environment warps his mind towards the quixotic and destructive ideals of his chivalric tales; Caleb's untutored upbringing suffers his mind to overindulge in the thrills of adventure, generating a hastiness of character which might have been balanced by a more disciplined and wide-ranging textual diet; Mandeville's narrow religious climate encourages hatred and prejudice to the extent of insanity.⁷⁷ Godwin uses the language of matter and necessity to describe their mental lives in order to suggest that these conditions have indeed 'reduc[ed] men to the state of machines'. Religious bias and class norms distort mental development, turning persons into passive, dependent beings. Only a new social order which respects foremost the operation of individual judgment, he implies, will redeem the humanness of humanity. It is a reversal of the 'closet' situation described in *Thoughts on Man*: in lived experience Caleb and Mandeville are positioned in the realm of necessity, described as subject to the forces of their social environments, yet from a position of speculative remove they offer the possibility of independence to their readers.

Godwin's use of reading for the purpose of social critique is further clarified when we consider its adoption and adaption by others. The most notable example is Mary Hays, a writer in the Joseph

⁷⁴ *The Enquirer*, p. 95; Cf. Godwin's preface to *Lives of the Necromancers: Or, an Account of the Most Eminent Persons in Successive Ages, Who Have Claimed for Themselves, or to Whom Has Been Imputed by Others, the Exercise of Magical Power* (London: Frederick J. Mason, 1834), especially p. vi.

⁷⁵ *Caleb Williams*, p. 19.

⁷⁶ *Political Justice*, p. 449.

⁷⁷ Interestingly, Godwin adds an episode to the second edition of *Caleb Williams* (p. 328) in which the protagonist stumbles across a book in the corner of a house, leading him to study etymology and read other texts more carefully and closely; this suggests that hope might remain for Caleb's reading development, were it not for Falkland's disruptive pursuit ('my collections promised to accumulate').

Johnson publishing circle and one of several women to whom Godwin became literary advisor in the mid-1790s.⁷⁸ Hays's semi-autobiographical novel *Emma Courtney* (1796) drew directly from Godwin's use of reading in *Caleb Williams*, employing a troubled reader-protagonist to comment upon the pernicious nature of social convention. Hays also borrowed heavily from her discussions of philosophy with Godwin, which had centred around questions of personal agency. Like Godwin, Hays exploits materialist language in her novel in order to raise questions about the ability of individuals to transcend the state of 'things as they are'. Yet the social evil to which she drew attention was one that she believed Godwin had neglected: gender convention.

Emma Courtney describes her own character as determined by material impressions, in a similar fashion to Caleb and Mandeville. She sets out the narrative to describe

the irresistible power of circumstances, modifying and controuling [*sic*] our characters, and introducing, mechanically, those associations and habits which make us what we are; for without outward impressions we should be nothing.⁷⁹

This account of materialist determination, signified by the language of 'associations' and 'impressions', frames the novel from start to finish, depicting Emma as trapped within predetermined dispositions and tendencies. The novel relates her struggle to negotiate the tensions between an overly sentimental disposition and a rigidly stratified community, in which patriarchal values determine socially sanctioned behaviour.

Emma's disposition is fashioned, in a large part, by reading material. At her most formative age she develops an ungoverned penchant for novels from the circulating library: 'Every day I became more attached to my books', she records, to the extent that she 'devoured' them.⁸⁰ Her reading is a corporeal experience of attachment and impression that echoes much of *The Enquirer* and the 1797 *Caleb Williams*, and Hays similarly incorporates the vocabulary of ingestion, indicating that the assimilation of pages involved in Emma's intellectual formation is a physical and vulnerable process. This initial, unchecked consumption of sentimental tales grates against Emma's subsequent engagement with classical history and metaphysical enquiry through the works of Plutarch and Descartes, for her fundamental tendency towards sentiment has been irrevocably set. Agony results: the uneven reading diet produces an irrevocable fault line between 'rational' and 'sentimental' matter, which compose her mind like layers of sediment. 'I went through, by my father's direction, a course of historical reading, but I could never acquire a taste for this species of composition', she relates;

⁷⁸ See Pamela Clemit, 'Godwin, Women, and "the collision of mind with mind"', *Wordsworth Circle*, 35.2 (2004), 72-76. For further detail on the Hays-Godwin intersection, see 'Hays/Godwin Correspondence 1794-1800', in *The Correspondence (1779-1843) of Mary Hays, British Novelist*, ed. by Marilyn L. Brooks (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004). Many of Godwin's interactions with Hays are recorded in his letters and in his diary: *The Diary of William Godwin*, ed. by Victoria Myers, David O'Shaughnessy, and Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010) <<http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>>.

⁷⁹ Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, ed. by Marilyn L Brooks (Peterborough: Broadview, 2000), p. 44.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

though it sometimes inspired ‘pleasure and enthusiasm’ it mostly left her ‘fatigued and disgusted’, craving the solace of poetry and fiction.⁸¹

The internal conflict that this reading produces in Emma’s mind also determines an external social conflict. Whilst she ardently desires to participate in the rational detachment and critical autonomy to which Mr Francis (a Godwinian philosopher figure) urges her, the sentimental bedrock of her disposition renders these exhortations impotent and obsolete. Emma is trapped within herself, unable to process or progress beyond her all-consuming feelings for Harley. The material language of the mind positions her as a passive character, like Caleb and Mandeville; she is unable to escape the ‘modes of thinking’ initially instilled through her reading material.

Emma’s disqualification from the ‘masculine’ arena of critical autonomy is understood by many critics to signal a fundamental disagreement with or departure from Godwin’s work. Marilyn Brooks, for example, argues that *Emma Courtney* turns the Godwinian exhortation to rational enquiry into ‘a public debate about an inadequate discourse’; it points out the felt incompetence, she suggests, of Godwin’s entire theory of social change through rationality.⁸² This claim assumes that Emma’s sentimental temperament is fully endorsed by Hays (which is far from clear), and also takes for granted that Godwin’s social theory excludes sentiment (which is untrue). Brooks accurately pinpoints a perceived problem concerning the process of individual reform, but this problem is one with which both Hays and Godwin were centrally concerned. Just like Godwin, Hays describes Emma’s intellectual formation in vividly material language in order to raise questions about the extent to which certain kinds of people can develop critical autonomy: she holds the discourse of reform up to scrutiny. In doing so, the novel performs a similar function to *Caleb Williams* and *Mandeville*, portraying the formation of private judgment in current society to be a brutal struggle. The experience of individuals such as Emma, the work suggests, testifies to the sinister power of material circumstances. Like Godwin, Hays paints a dark picture of ‘things as they are’.

Moreover, just as Godwin’s novels celebrate human potential for independent thought, *Emma Courtney* expresses confidence in the positive power of reading through its narrative frame. Emma’s story is an epistolary ‘confession’ to her son, who remains a textually absent figure, a symbol of a new generation. Through this addressee the novel appeals to external judgment: the future reader is urged to ‘exercise your understanding, think freely, [...] Rouse the nobler energies of your mind’.⁸³ Such overt summons to critical reinterpretation continue until the final pages, in which the novel’s future readers are imagined as harbingers of intellectual emancipation:

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁸² Marilyn L. Brooks, ‘Hays/Godwin Correspondence 1794-1800’, in *The Correspondence (1779-1843) of Mary Hays*, pp. 363-81 (p. 376).

⁸³ Hays, *Emma Courtney*, p. 42.

Posterity will plant the olive and the laurel, and consecrate their mingled branches to the memory of such, who, daring to trace, to their springs, errors the most hoary, and prejudices the most venerated, emancipate the human mind from the trammels of superstition, and teach it, *that its true dignity and virtue, consist in being free.*⁸⁴

Rather than espousing determinism, Hays's narrator prophesies autonomy. New generations of readers will attain to the freedom of private judgment, despite the bleak depiction of such opportunities in Emma's life. As they trace the sources of error in her educational circumstances their minds will develop beyond the material realm; independent thinking will be realised. Alongside Godwin's novels, then, *Emma Courtney* transcends the confining language of matter, and asserts the triumph of individual thought.

In a similar manner to Godwin, then, Hays used her conviction about bad reading to critique the social station of her fictional character. This similarity has been overlooked by contemporary criticism of *Emma Courtney*, much of which presumes that Hays's interest in reading is derivative from her critique of gender conventions.⁸⁵ One recent study, for example, argues that the problem of mental passivity addressed in *Emma Courtney* is an exclusively female one; assuming that Hays's feminist convictions led her to react against a popular discourse in which women were portrayed as more intellectually vulnerable than men, the author conflates this stance with Hays's protagonist, claiming that Emma becomes an example of how 'through disciplined reading, women *can* achieve the status of free and rational subjects'.⁸⁶ Another study similarly conflates Hays's own belief in the social value of 'intelligent and discriminating reader[s]' with her depiction of Emma's reading practices, attempting to reclaim the protagonist as 'as active reader' who courageously subverts gendered expectations.⁸⁷ These readings both overlook the specific physiological and philosophical discourse about mind and matter that Hays exploits, which positions Emma's character struggle alongside that of a Caleb or a Falkland. In other words, the woman tends to come before the reader, but for Hays social norms are harmful because they disrupt reading. Hays and Godwin both argued through their novels that the uniquely human faculty of private judgment was distorted by social restrictions upon education.

Reading was used as a similar mode of critique by other writers in Godwin's literary-intellectual circle. Mary Wollstonecraft's assertion of men and women's equal capacity to develop their mental faculties, for example, led her to castigate the current social situation in which women's reading was commonly limited to romances and behavioural instruction books. This textual diet, she argued,

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁸⁵ See for example: Richard De Ritter, *Imagining Women Readers, 1789-1820: Well-Regulated Minds* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Katherine Binhammer, 'The Persistence of Reading: Governing Female Novel-Reading in "Memoirs of Emma Courtney" and "Memoirs of Modern Philosophers"', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 27.2 (2003), 1-22; Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), e.g. p. 4.

⁸⁶ De Ritter, *Imagining Women Readers*, pp. 37-38 (emphasis mine).

⁸⁷ Binhammer, 'The Persistence of Reading', pp. 5, 7.

promoted intellectual feebleness and triviality. Whilst advocating reading as a key means of female emancipation, then, her work simultaneously analyses in scathing detail the role of books in perpetuating the eighteenth-century woman's 'infantine' position. Like Godwin, she indicates the need for a transformation of reading practice that will actualise books' potential to precipitate intellectual and social reform.⁸⁸ Along similar lines, Elizabeth Inchbald depicts her protagonist Miss Milner in *A Simple Story* (1791) as intellectually superficial through her concern for the material appearance of books rather than their content – 'you will be vastly pleased with them when you see how elegantly they are bound' – using this faulty relationship as evidence, in the final pages, that her father should have 'bestowed upon his daughter A PROPER EDUCATION'.⁸⁹ Gender norms are harmful in these works because they disrupt reading equality, rather than the other way around. Their primary concern is the growth of the human mind through literary engagement.

A corollary of this observation is that, contrary to what might be assumed, depictions of passive reading in Godwin's and Hays's fiction are not dependent upon the genre or textual content of the books being read. Whilst novels shape the characters of Caleb and Emma in particular ways, for example, the basic fact of textual influence does not depend upon their being novels. As we've seen, Emma's disposition is formed through her reading of Plutarch as well as her library fare: her troubles don't come from novels *per se* but from her unbalanced education, a topic Hays expounded upon in her earlier *Letters and Essays* (in which she refused to condemn, as a principle, the reading of popular romances).⁹⁰ Hays's social critique hinges upon a model of human nature that positions the activity of reading as central to selfhood, first and foremost, and this is the basis upon which observations about literary form or gendered education rely. The same was true for Godwin: Caleb is damaged not because he reads tales of romance, but because his reading of such tales is obsessive and unbalanced.⁹¹

Godwin's fiction reflected his foundational conviction about the human capacity to realise independent thought through reading, and this was shared and illuminated by his literary circle of the 1790s. The perpetuation of social and educational inequality between men and women, between landed gentry and the working class, between those of different religious sects – these were portrayed as social ills because they were understood to channel the formative power of reading into unnatural, limited avenues, rendering it a power that distorted human flourishing. Godwin used the 'double

⁸⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. by Janet Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 71-75. Cf. Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, pp. 71-72 (in which Taylor discusses the connection Wollstonecraft perceived between female novel-reading and the sexual immorality of mind and body).

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Inchbald, *A Simple Story*, ed. by J. M. S. Tompkins (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 146, 338.

⁹⁰ Hays, 'Letter to Mrs. -- on Reading Romances, &c', in *Letters and Essays, Moral, and Miscellaneous* (London: printed for T. Knott, 1793), p. 90.

⁹¹ See Chapter Two for discussion of the novel form in Godwin's work, and Chapter Four for further consideration of different kinds of reading matter in *Caleb Williams*.

reading' which the concept of thought allowed in order to portray the dark power of social prejudice alongside the possibility of change.

Conclusion

Through his fiction and his philosophy, Godwin persistently engaged with debates about the relationship between matter and thought in order to make an argument about the nature and operation of reading. His work shows that the distinctive value of independent thought, which Locke had described as the essential characteristic of good reading practice at the beginning of the eighteenth century, was still being upheld by reformist writers at the beginning of the nineteenth. In the midst of intellectual controversy – and in some cases extreme scepticism – about the nature and operation of the mind, Godwin used his work as a platform for imagining the possibility of intellectual agency and social change through reading.

In doing so, Godwin was developing a recognised feature of eighteenth-century writing. The problem of matter and thought had been integrated into mid-century sentimental fiction, for example; David Fairer has shown that the acknowledged mystery of the matter-thought relationship gave rise to a celebration or excess of meaning-making through physical signs in the novels of Henry Mackenzie and Laurence Sterne.⁹² Godwin built upon this idea of excess or possibility in order to defend and uphold his belief in intellectual perfectibility. He placed an act of the imagination at the heart of his concept of private judgment, and used this to fuel and undergird his practice of novel writing. For Godwin, imaginative literature could use the language of matter to serve an ideal of mind.

Godwin's work also demonstrates, however, a new commitment to bringing to public attention perceived social threats to such intellectual independence. He exploited materialist discourse in order to argue that the development of autonomous intellect was disabled in lived experience. Social power structures fostered, for Godwin, the passive acceptance of prejudice: they produced readers who, like Caleb and Mandeville, were unable to transcend the confines of their pages. He thus represented reading as an activity that simultaneously troubled and emancipated humankind, presenting human intellectual experience from two contrasting perspectives.

This chapter has explored one way in which Godwin approached the novel as a special means of intellectual insight and emancipation. The following chapter turns to directly consider his theory of the novel form, as expressed at the beginning and the end of his career. I find at its centre a similarly twofold conception of human intellect: Godwin invests great hope in the mind's innate capacity to

⁹² See David Fairer, 'Sentimental Translation in Mackenzie and Sterne', *Essays in Criticism*, 49.2 (1999), 132-51, and Butler's discussion of sentimental fiction in Chapter One of *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*.

transcend manipulative social forces, and great fear in its vulnerability to such forces in everyday experience.

The Ethics of Novel-Reading: *Fiction and Moral Law in the 1830s*

Introduction

William Godwin ended his preface to the 1832 edition of *Fleetwood* on a disturbing note. After giving a lengthy retrospective account of the composition of his most famous novel, *Caleb Williams*, he recollected the experience of one of its first readers:

Thus I have endeavoured to give a true history of the concoction and mode of writing of this mighty trifle. [...] And, when I had done all, what had I done? Written a book to amuse boys and girls in their vacant hours, a story to be hastily gobbled up by them, swallowed in a pusillanimous and unanimated mood, without chewing and digestion. I was in this respect greatly impressed with the confession of one of the most accomplished readers and excellent critics that any author could have fallen in with (the unfortunate Joseph Gerald). He told me that he had received my book late one evening, and had read through the three volumes before he closed his eyes. Thus, what had cost me twelve months' labour, ceaseless heart-aches and industry, now sinking in despair, and now roused and sustained in unusual energy, he went over in a few hours, shut the book, laid himself on his pillow, slept and was refreshed, and cried,

‘To-morrow to fresh woods and pastures new.’¹

Godwin was appropriating a long tradition of gustatory metaphor (‘gobbled’ ‘swallowed’) in order to present novels as disposable commodities, things consumed for temporary pleasure and then discarded.² He evokes the idea that novel-readers – even those who are otherwise ‘accomplished readers and excellent critics’ – allow their fictional fare to bypass the mind, and to feed only the sensations of the body. In fact, Godwin’s description of eating ‘without chewing or digestion’ turns this into a deliberately absurd picture. Such a mindless way of reading, he implies, is as pointless as dining without a digestive system.

Earlier in the preface, Godwin had described his original ambition for the work in strikingly different terms. In the glow of success that he had experienced following the publication of *Political Justice*, he was ‘unwilling to stoop to what was insignificant’, and thus said to himself, ‘I will write a tale, that shall constitute an epoch in the mind of the reader’.³ He envisaged the novel in direct collaboration with the improvement of human minds, a work that would ensure ‘no one, after he has read it, shall ever be exactly the same man as he was before’. These lofty hopes jar with Godwin’s subsequent description of the work’s reception: the text he had hoped would induce an ‘epoch’ in the mind of the reader becomes instead fuel for ‘vacant hours’, an inconsequential time-filler. The preface thus

¹ Godwin, Preface to *Fleetwood: or, The New Man of Feeling*, in *Collected Novels and Memoirs*, v, p. 12.

² See Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

³ Preface to *Fleetwood*, pp. 8, 10.

provokes a question about the place of novels and novel-reading in Godwin's conception of intellectual perfectibility. As he reflected upon his literary career at the end of his life, had he lost faith in the power of fiction to benefit the mind? Garrett Sullivan claims that he had, and that this preface shows a more general 'pessimism regarding print culture' which had enveloped him as his career progressed.⁴

In this chapter, I argue by contrast that Godwin's writing of the early 1830s brought to a climax a career-long attempt to situate novel-reading within a framework of moral perfectibility. I show that his prefaces to *Cloudesley* (1830) and the *Bentley's Standard Novels* edition of *Fleetwood* (1832) remediated and developed the ideas of his 1797 draft essay 'Of History and Romance' in order to claim the novel as a unique source of moral knowledge. In doing so, they contributed to a growing public discourse that allied fiction-reading to ethics, one of the many factors that helped to 'elevate' the novel form socially.⁵ Yet I show that these writings also reflect Godwin's dark view of the state of the human mind in contemporary society: they bring to the fore his anxieties about shallow writers and passive readers who waste or abuse the moral potential of their materials. His approach to the novel was based upon an assumption about how the reader's mind should interact with certain kinds of prose in order to develop its capacity for ethical judgment, and as such it exposes his ambivalent view of the mind and its tendencies.

After examining this critical work, I argue that Godwin used his final novel *Deloraine* (1833) to make the socio-political implications of his argument about novels and moral knowledge explicit. Through its direct engagement with contemporary debates about criminal justice and print culture, this novel crystallises Godwin's vision of how confessional fiction could reclaim the true 'moral law' that he associated with the emancipation of independent thought. Yet it also offers a nightmarish portrayal of institutional power over the mind's moral sense, casting doubt upon the ability of individuals to transcend their inherited social climate of intellectual dependence. *Deloraine* is thus integral to Godwin's critical discussion about the social role of prose fiction in the early 1830s, and unearths some of the key factors underlying his ambivalent depictions of readers. I conclude that Godwin's later work in and about the novel form exposes a tension between his conviction in human perfectibility through book-reading and his concerns about the moral illiteracy of the reading nation.

⁴ Garrett A. Sullivan, "'A Story to Be Hastily Gobbled Up': 'Caleb Williams' and Print Culture", *Studies in Romanticism*, 32.3 (1993): 323-37 (p. 337).

⁵ The language and concept of 'social elevation' here are indebted to the work of Ina Ferris, especially 'Transformations of the Novel - II', in *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, ed. by James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 473-89, and *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). See also William Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: the Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684-1750* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

1. Novels and the Mind

The novel in the 1790s

Godwin claimed several times in the 1790s that the novel was a crucial vehicle for engendering the kind of thinking that led to social reform. One of his best-known articulations of this position appeared as a letter to the editor of the *British Critic* in 1795, in which he replied to an accusation by one of the paper's correspondents that his goal in writing *Caleb Williams* had been to 'throw an odium on the laws of my country'. Godwin's response was to claim an intention 'of much greater magnitude'. The object of *Caleb Williams*, he stated, was 'to disengage the minds of men from prepossession, and launch them upon the sea of moral and political enquiry'.⁶ In this statement he connects the mind, specifically, to the development of moral and political good. Novels can stimulate independent thought in their readers, he implies, which is the first step towards reforming the ethical priorities and social structure of modern life. It was a vision that Godwin reiterated in more general terms in his preface to *The Enquirer*, describing himself as 'persuaded that the cause of political reform, and the cause of intellectual and literary refinement, are inseparably connected'.⁷

Anticipating demand for a second *Enquirer* volume, Godwin drafted an essay in 1797 which made a more detailed case for 'that species of literature, which bears the express stamp of invention, and calls itself romance or novel'. 'Of History and Romance' is concerned with ascertaining which sorts of prose narrative are best suited to improving the minds of readers ('My first enquiry is, Can I derive instruction from it?').⁸ Godwin contrasts different styles of narrative history in order to make a comment about the unique potential of narrative fiction to benefit readers. He begins by criticizing abstract accounts of nations as 'dry and frigid', arguing that historiography is at its best when it facilitates personal encounters between readers and characters:

The men I would study upon the canvas of history, are men worth the becoming intimately acquainted with. [...] Superficial acquaintance is nothing. A scene incessantly floating, cannot instruct us; it can scarcely become a source of amusement to a cultivated mind. I would stop the flying figures, that I may mark them more clearly. There must be an exchange of real sentiments, or an investigation of subtle peculiarities, before improvement can be the result. There is a magnetical virtue in man, but there must be friction and heat, before the virtue will operate.⁹

Godwin uses the language of visual portrait here ('canvas', 'scene', 'figures') to make a connection between detailed textual characterisation and the moral improvement of readers. If the author fleshes out the actors of their narrative, they will facilitate 'an exchange of real sentiments': an intimate encounter between reader and character which will draw out and develop the readers' moral

⁶ 'To the Editor of the *British Critic*', 7 June 1795, in *The Letters of William Godwin*, I, pp. 116-17.

⁷ *The Enquirer*, p. 79.

⁸ 'Essay of History and Romance', in *Political and Philosophical Works*, V, pp. 290-301 (pp. 297, 298).

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 290, 292, 294.

knowledge ('magnetical virtue'). Godwin employs a discourse of moral sentiment that had been precipitated mid-century by the ethical theories of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers – notably Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) – according to which human capacity for imaginative sympathy was posited as the basis of a shared 'moral sense'.¹⁰ The vocabulary of the body was often used to describe this sentimental experience, reflecting the ambiguous line the concept trod between philosophy and physiology. Godwin exploits this language here, contrasting the 'dry and frigid' experience of reading abstract national histories to the 'friction and heat' engendered by character studies. The latter sort of prose encourages the reader to imaginatively identify with the text's subject, triggering the same moral sentiment that would be facilitated by a real interpersonal encounter. Godwin had already capitalised on this idea in his *Enquirer* essay 'Of An Early Taste in Reading', which uses the same derogatory phrase – 'superficial acquaintance' – to invest great intellectual and moral value in the idea of intimate friendship with one's reading matter.¹¹

Such character focussed historiography is inevitably speculative, Godwin notes, rendering it a sort of fiction in its own right. But the line between fact and fiction is far from clear: 'True history consists in a delineation of consistent human character, in a display of the manner in which such a character acts under successive circumstances'. In other words, Godwin argues that *real* histories are those which give a detailed account of the relationship between character, context and action, using a specific individual to illustrate something general and timeless. It follows from this, he claims, that novelists are in fact the best historians, for they have far more scope to render their accounts convincing and thus give them representative power. 'The writer of romance [...] is to be considered as the writer of real history', Godwin announces:

The writer of romances collects his materials from all sources, experience, report, and the records of human affairs; then generalises them; and finally selects, from their elements and the various combinations they afford, those instances which he is best qualified to pourtray [*sic*], and which he judges most calculated to impress the heart and improve the faculties of his reader. In this point of view we should be apt to pronounce that romance was a nobler species of composition than history.¹²

First this idealised romance writer 'collects' and 'generalises', gathering a broad range of evidence about human nature and events; then he 'selects', distilling his evidence into specific characters and 'instances', which will represent something true from the whole. In this sense, Godwin argues, his work is a real history of human experience. Godwin also firmly situates his activity in a framework of

¹⁰ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). Cf. Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: a Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660-1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991-2000), especially volume II. Godwin's essay 'Of Religion' (1818) reiterates his allegiance to this theory of moral sentiment: see *Political and Philosophical Writings*, VII, pp. 59-74 (p. 67).

¹¹ *The Enquirer*, p. 96. For further discussion of this reading advice and its connection to the development of the imagination, see Chapter Three.

¹² 'Essay of History and Romance', pp. 301, 299.

moral perfectibility, for the aim of a good novel is to ‘impress the heart and improve the faculties’. It is not simply that the novelist is able to give a better psychological portrait, and thus portray the human condition more vividly, than the historian. The real advantage lies in the relationship this opens up between reader and textual subject, the ‘exchange of real sentiments’. By presenting the reader with true-to-life characters, the novelist is able to engender the sort of ‘friction and heat’ between reader and subject that will initiate and develop their ‘magnetical virtue’ or moral sense.

Godwin is far from sanguine about the social reality of novels and novel-reading in this essay, however. As he introduces his conception of the novel’s contribution towards moral improvement, he pauses to make a preliminary qualification in his argument. ‘This sort of writing has been exposed to more obloquy and censure than any other’, he notes, and concedes that this is partly justified when one assesses the novel ‘as an object of trade among booksellers’. He describes with evident disdain a ‘class of readers, consisting of women and boys, and which is considerably numerous’, who require ‘a continual supply of books of this sort’. Because of this demand from lesser educated persons, writers and booksellers have become indiscriminating in what they produce; for although few novels make a fortune, ‘There is scarcely one by which some money is not gained’. This is the reason why the whole form is fallen into disrepute, Godwin explains, and why ‘such works are rarely found to obtain a place in the collection of the gentleman or the scholar’. He concludes that we must distinguish between true and false novels if we are to make a moral case for the literary form. ‘The critic and the moralist [...] [have] taken into their view the whole scum and surcharge of the press’, but ‘I should consider only those persons who had really written romance, not those who had vainly attempted it.’ If we are to benefit from the opportunities for intellectual and moral improvement that the novel offers, Godwin implies, we must divide the literary field into two categories: real novels (which benefit the mind) and pseudo-novels (which don’t).¹³

As the essay draws to a close, Godwin complicates this picture further by suddenly arguing that all novels inevitably fall short of their moral potential. Hard on the heels of his proclamation that romance is true history, he announces ‘a deduction to be made from this eulogism’, because the production of true romance is a task for which the faculties of even the best novelist are incompetent. The writer of abstract history at least implicitly acknowledges that ‘events are taken out of his hands and determined by the system of the universe’; the novelist, however, ‘is continually straining at a foresight to which his faculties are incompetent, and continually fails’. To accurately portray the relationship between character, context and action is impossible: ‘to tell precisely how such a person would act in a given situation, requires a sagacity scarcely less than divine.’ Godwin concludes,

¹³ Ibid., pp. 298-99.

therefore, that 'To write a romance is a task too great for the powers of man'. True novels actually lie out of reach.¹⁴

The final paragraph of 'History and Romance' makes an ambivalent move towards situating this in a trajectory of perfectibility. Godwin suggests that the failure of novels and novelists reflects the reality that all 'the sciences and the arts of man are alike imperfect', constantly in progression towards something better. This is the situation that we have to work with, he implies; we need to confront the reality of mismatch between aspiration and reality in the current state of society. The tensions inherent to the novel in fact encapsulate the defining tension of human life for Godwin, according to which minds are caught between forces of corruption and perfection.¹⁵

The novel in the 1830s

'Of History and Romance' was not published in Godwin's lifetime, but its ideas did surface publicly in his preface to *Cloudesley* (1830). *Cloudesley* was the first novel that Godwin had produced since *Mandeville* in 1817, and was composed during a period in which he was revisiting his previous fictional work pending its republication in the *Bentley's Standard Novels* collection. Godwin's reading records from this time suggest a renewed interest in the novel form more generally: diary entries for 1829 include novels by Daniel Defoe, Henry Mackenzie, Ann Radcliffe, Elizabeth Inchbald, Walter Scott, Edward Bulwer Lytton, and James Fennimore Cooper (amongst others). *Cloudesley's* preface makes a case for the novel in a manner similar to 'Of History and Romance', though more concise. Godwin begins by identifying the shortcomings of historical narrative, subtly developing his previous account by placing greater emphasis upon the internal dimensions of character:

[N]o man thoroughly understands himself: how then is it to be expected, that the historian, who looks at him through a narrow aperture, and sees but a small part of his thoughts, his words and his actions, should arrive at a sounder result?

The conventional historian, Godwin argues, is barred from access to real knowledge about the persons whose lives they record. Their understanding of internal character or selfhood necessarily remains inadequate, because their task only allows for 'a narrow aperture' into past lives. This is a shortcoming, for Godwin, because it 'render[s] the attempt to pass a sound judgment upon the characters of men to a great degree impossible'. In other words, neither writer nor reader have the inside information that they need in order to arrive at moral knowledge.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Preface to *Cloudesley: A Tale*, in *Collected Novels and Memoirs*, VII, p. 7.

Godwin then introduces his previous claim that ‘The writer of romance [...] is to be considered as the writer of real history’:

When the creator of the world of imagination, the poet, or writer of fiction, introduces his ideal personage to the public, he enters upon the task with a preconception of the qualities that belong to his being, the principle of his actions, and its necessary concomitants. [...] In this sense then it is infallibly true, that fictitious history, when it is the work of a competent hand, is more to be depended upon, and comprises more of the science of man, than whatever can be exhibited by the historian [...].¹⁷

Fiction discloses greater knowledge of human nature than so-called historical writing, Godwin argues, because the author has greater freedom to unveil and explore the very things that make their agents human: qualities of being, principles of action, webs of contingency. Interestingly, these are the principles that *Political Justice* had claimed were neglected by the contemporary legal system and yet were essential to sound ethical judgment. In a discussion of criminal justice, Godwin had argued that the legal system, by its very nature as an institution, could not take into account the individuality of each accused person and their unique set of formative circumstances (see below for further discussion). By maximising these elements of human existence and eliciting the judgment of the audience upon their particular manifestations in plot and character, fiction could thus provide a better means of moral literacy than other social codes. In this sense, Godwin argues, it ‘comprises more of the science of man’ than anything pretending to be factual.

This link between *Cloudesley*’s preface and *Political Justice* is important because it underscores the fact that the Godwin of the 1830s continued to place the life of the individual mind at the helm of his ethics.¹⁸ This position stemmed from his basic assumption about humanness, that humans were distinguished from animals and from machines by their perfectible intellectual lives. He had critiqued institutional law in *Political Justice* along these lines: by ‘reduc[ing] men to intellectual uniformity’, the law was ‘reducing men to the state of machines’.¹⁹ We see the same logic involved in Godwin’s critique of historical narrative. His call to ‘stop the flying figures’ was about rescuing past lives from the sort of ‘superficial acquaintance’ that effaced their personhood. *Cloudesley*’s preface makes this explicit through a comparison of page and stage, according to which the novelist contributes more to the moral development of society than the dramatist because he has more scope to render the unique details of intellectual life: he ‘explains the inmost thoughts that pass in the bosom of the upright man

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁸ In this respect, his work participated in a more general preoccupation with individuality, which is now considered the characterising trait of early nineteenth-century ethical theory (especially those theories allied to reformist politics). See Alex Zakaras, ‘Individuality, Radical Politics and the Metaphor of the Machine’, in *The Edinburgh Critical History of Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. by Alison Stone (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 223-41; John Skorupski, ‘Ethics and the Social Good’, in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century (1790-1870)*, ed. by Allen W. Wood and Songsuk Susan Hahn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 434-68.

¹⁹ *Political Justice*, pp. 449-50.

and the perverse'.²⁰ The connection Godwin was making between the life of the mind and moral perfectibility was picked up by *Cloudesley*'s reviewers. He 'makes the analysis of our inmost thoughts the *materiel* for melioration of the human species', one reader noted.²¹

In his introduction to the 1832 edition of *Fleetwood*, Godwin further developed this claim about the moral significance of disclosing a character's 'inmost thoughts', connecting it to the specifics of narrative technique. During a retrospective account of the composition of *Caleb Williams*, he explains his choice of first-person mode by allying it to the 'science of man' that *Cloudesley*'s preface had described:

I began my narrative, as is the more usual way, in the third person. But I speedily became dissatisfied. I then assumed the first person, making the hero of my tale his own historian; and in this mode I have persisted in all my subsequent attempts at works of fiction. It was infinitely the best adapted, at least, to my vein of delineation, where the thing in which my imagination revelled the most freely, was the analysis of the private and internal operations of the mind, employing my metaphysical dissecting knife in tracing and laying bare the involutions of motive, and recording the gradually accumulating impulses, which led the personages I had to describe primarily to adopt the particular way of proceeding in which they afterwards embarked.²²

Godwin was justifying his choice of confessional narrative by casting it as a facilitator of the sort of moral knowledge he had described in 'History and Romance' and the preface to *Cloudesley*. First-person perspective gives readers access to the complex relationships between character, context and action: it exposes 'the private and internal operations of the mind', 'the involutions of motive', and 'the gradually accumulating impulses' that underlie human events. This intimate portrait thus engages the reader's moral faculties by encouraging them to imaginatively identify with the character, and by giving them the inside information they need in order to interpret and judge the character's actions. Godwin uses the language of physical science – 'dissecting', 'analysis', 'recording' – in order to lend authority to his enterprise. This sort of fictional narrative, he implies, is the real 'science of man'.

Through all these comments, Godwin was participating in a longstanding public debate about the moral significance of novel-reading. His work represents one aspect of a critical movement in the early nineteenth century, which strove in various ways to link the sensitive reader of fiction to the sensitive reader of the moral landscape. In the essay 'On The Origin And Progress Of Novel-Writing' (1810) that prefaced her selection of eighteenth-century reprints *The British Novelists*, Anna Barbauld claimed that novels not only generate pleasure, but also 'have had a very strong effect in infusing

²⁰ Preface to *Cloudesley*, p. 8; Godwin makes Shakespeare an exception to this rule. For Godwin's attitude to drama more generally, see David O'Shaughnessy, *William Godwin and the Theatre* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010).

²¹ [Edward Bulwer-Lytton], 'Cloudesley, by the Author of Caleb Williams', in *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, 28.109 (Jan 1830), pp. 368-373 (p. 368).

²² *Fleetwood*, p. 10.

principles and moral feelings'.²³ William Hazlitt explored this notion further in his *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (1819), arguing that through novels we 'imbibe our notions of virtue and vice from practical examples, and are taught a knowledge of the world'. We gain this knowledge not from the 'professed moralist', but from 'the painter of manners', who 'gives the facts of human nature, and leaves us to draw the inference'.²⁴ There is a clear similarity to Godwin's ideas here, in the assumption that the simple apprehension of human experience ('the facts of human nature') will be morally formative.

Contemporary historians and critics consider this kind of discourse integral to the novel's social elevation in the early nineteenth century – its journey from an unrespectable form to one with recognised literary authority and public value. Ina Ferris has shown that the novel in the 1810s and 20s attempted 'deliberate self-alignment with non-fictional genres' and argues that this was an attempt 'to harness for itself the cultural power of modern fact and to transform itself into a properly public genre'. Godwin's language of ethics, along with his language of history, was an endeavour to ally his fiction to other genres of writing with greater social weight, and he thus participated in a wider movement of elevation. Indeed, the very contexts of this growing body of critical comments about the novel (prefaces, essays, lectures, reviews) are significant. They show that the novel was becoming a form with a history, deemed worthy of theorising, which could be organised into respectable collections.²⁵

This social and material context helps us to understand Godwin's choice of ending to his 1832 preface to *Fleetwood*. This was his own critical introduction in a reprint collection of 'classics' – Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley's *Standard Novels* – a collection which was conceived according to a 'conscious editorial policy to secure revised texts and new Prefaces in which the author's mature judgment was passed on his earlier work'.²⁶ In the early 1830s, then, Godwin was professionally required to reflect once again upon his fictional craft, and this time he was speaking into a context in which the novel was rapidly rising in public grace. His emphasis was thus less upon defending the moral status of the form as a whole (as it had been in 1797), and more upon criticising those readers

²³ Anna Barbauld, *The British Novelists; with an Essay, And Prefaces Biographical And Critical, By Mrs. Barbauld. A New Edition*, 50 vols (London, York and Edinburgh: printed for F. C. and J. Rivington et al., 1820), I, pp. 46-47.

²⁴ William Hazlitt, 'On the English Novelists', in *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1819), pp. 208-65 (pp. 209, 211).

²⁵ See Ina Ferris, 'Transformations of the Novel - II', pp. 473, 489; Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Michael Gamer, 'A Select Collection: Barbauld, Scott, and the Rise of the (Reprinted) Novel', in *Recognizing the Romantic Novel: New Histories of British Fiction, 1780-1830*, ed. by Jillian Heydt-Stevenson and Charlotte Sussman (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), pp. 155-191; Jon Klancher, *Transfiguring the Arts and Sciences: Knowledge and Cultural Institutions in the Romantic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Homer Obed Brown, *Institutions of the English Novel from Defoe to Scott* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

²⁶ See the editors' 'Introductory note' in *Fleetwood*, p. v.

who missed its moral potential. He built from some of his essays in *Thoughts On Man*, written during the late 1820s, which in various ways made good reading a fundamental condition of moral knowledge.²⁷

Godwin's closing description of the way in which *Caleb Williams* was 'hastily gobbled up' by 'boys and girls [...] in a pusillanimous and unanimated mood' is thus best understood as an ironic comment about the prevalence of shallow reading practice, intended to expose, in David McCracken's words, 'a certain class of readers'.²⁸ He echoes the anxieties he had expressed in his essay 'Of History and Romance' about the 'class of readers, consisting of women and boys', who lacked discrimination and thus lowered the standard of the novel's production and reception. His lengthy preceding account of compositional labour, and the projected intellectual and moral implications of his aesthetic choices, renders the ending deeply bathetic. His novel-readers lack 'digestion' – they consume the story but fail to process it, fail to extract moral nutrition from the lives that it contains. As he contrasts the author's 'twelve months' labour' with Gerrald's one-evening binge, Godwin presents such reading practice as a travesty to his *Standard Novels* readers.

Yet the inclusion of Joseph Gerrald also troubles the boundaries of this reading 'class'. Gerrald was a political reformer and member of the London Corresponding Society, with whom Godwin had had close acquaintance before his trial for sedition in 1794 and eventual deportation in 1795.²⁹ He was thus apparently the ideal reader for *Caleb Williams*, one well attuned to the social and political ideas that Godwin hoped to convey. Yet Godwin describes his reading experience in uninspiring, even passive terms: he simply 'went over [it] in a few hours'. This hasty encounter with the text unsettles clear distinctions between 'true' and 'false' novel-readers, in much the same way that the ending of the essay 'Of History and Romance' had unsettled the distinction between 'true' and 'false' novel-writers. Godwin's critical writing seems to place the weight of moral responsibility for the novel form upon its readers, and yet if 'one of the most accomplished readers' could fail, what hope was there for others?

Godwin's *Deloraine* (1833) was composed at the same time as the preface to *Fleetwood* and begun almost immediately after the preface to *Cloudesley* was published.³⁰ In what follows, I show that this final novel was based upon similar anxieties about the social possibility of moral literacy. Godwin

²⁷ See especially 'Of the Duration of Human Life', 'Of Human Vegetation', 'Of Imitation and Invention' and 'Of Belief' in *Thoughts on Man*. See Chapter Three for further discussion of reading advice in *Thoughts on Man*.

²⁸ David McCracken, 'Godwin's Literary Theory: The Alliance between Fiction and Political Philosophy', *Philological Quarterly*, 49.1 (1970), 113-33 (p. 121).

²⁹ See *The Letters of William Godwin*, I, p. 93 n.1. Gerrald died soon after deportation, hence Godwin's reference to him as 'unfortunate'.

³⁰ In his Preface to *Deloraine*, Godwin claims that he began working on the novel shortly after *Cloudesley* was published in January 1830, but that he paused the composition (*Deloraine*, p. 5). *Deloraine* appears almost daily in *The Diary of William Godwin* from April 1831 until November 1832.

used it to flesh out the socio-political dimensions of his critical argument about novels and knowledge, using contemporary debates about criminal justice and print culture to dramatize his critical vision of how fictional narrative could reclaim true ‘moral law’. Yet whilst *Deloraine* upholds the sanctity of private judgment in many respects, it also offers a nightmarish portrayal of institutional power over the mind’s moral sense, casting doubt upon the ability of individuals to escape an inherited social climate of intellectual dependence. The last novel of Godwin’s career thus unearths, I suggest, some of the key factors underlying his ambivalent critical writing about the novel form.

2. The Case of *Deloraine*

Murder is at the centre of Godwin’s *Deloraine* (1833). This is true in a literal sense – the act is narrated in the middle of the second of three volumes – and in a figurative sense, for the substance and style of the entire work revolve around it, submitting it to constant interrogation. What this novel pursues is not factual knowledge of the perpetrator’s identity or proceedings (the act occurs in public), but moral knowledge. It foregrounds the conflicting stories that may be told about human action, and in doing so opens up the question of whether, and in what ways, human behaviour is morally legible. Most prominently, *Deloraine* launches an assault upon ‘the vocabulary of undistinguishing law’.³¹ Representatives of the British criminal justice system appear in its pages as defunct story-tellers, whose narratives obscure, rather than disclose, moral knowledge.

In what follows, I argue that Godwin used this fictional set-up to dramatize the socio-political implications of his critical argument about novels and moral knowledge in the early 1830s. He used *Deloraine*’s tale to flesh out his critical vision of how confessional narrative could emancipate independent thought in order to reclaim true ‘moral law’: through the mode, content and style of his narration, Godwin confronted a disparity between legal and moral guilt that he had first identified in *Political Justice* and placed individual private judgement at the centre of ethical decision-making. Yet his novel also stages a violent battle between competing stories and endows institutional forces with a terrifying power over the mind’s moral sense. *Deloraine*’s bittersweet ending ultimately casts doubt upon the ability of the mind to achieve independent moral judgment in a society whose systems foster bad stories and weak readers. I suggest that this work pinpoints the ambivalence about the nature of the mind that undergirded Godwin’s wider ambivalence about the social role of novels.

I proceed by addressing two sorts of narrative at play in *Deloraine*. Firstly, I explore the narratives of crime perpetuated by the legal system and its mechanisms of publicity, which Godwin presents on an immediate level as reductionist and inhuman. I then consider how the content, structure and narration of *Deloraine*’s personal account disrupts this narrative system more implicitly, presenting human

³¹ *Deloraine*, in *Collected Novels and Memoirs*, VIII, p. 233.

action as contingent, ambivalent and ultimately irreducible. Godwin confronted his audience with contrasting modes of moral literacy, I argue, and made the role of printed texts themselves within this explicit and self-conscious. I finish by drawing attention to the dark picture of intellectual dependence which runs throughout the novel, arguing that Godwin used it raise his most poignant question about the possibility of true moral literacy in the current state of society.

Legal Narrative

Criminal law features in *Deloraine* as a narrative imposed upon human action, and it is criticised as a reductive mode of representation. This criticism is not only implicit – the legal narrative jars against the personal experience presented to the reader by the narrator – but also explicit in Deloraine’s direct reflections upon his circumstances. These reflections commence immediately after he shoots William dead: ‘I knew enough of the laws of my country,’ Deloraine claims, ‘to know that that which in my mind was a vindication, would not be so received in an English court of justice as to obtain my acquittal of the crime of murder’.³² This conflict of interpretations is shortly explained by a description of the law’s fundamental approach to moral knowledge:

Nothing, I was well aware, was more precise than the expounding and application of the English law in the case of murder. It is like the application of a cloth-yard in a mercer’s shop. [...] the life of the individual arraigned, is disposed of in obedience to terms and definitions. The only question is, Does the deed under consideration come up to the rule? Just as in the shop of the mercer we decide, Does the cloth measure three feet of twelve inches each? [...] No consideration is had of the character of the parties, or the nature of the provocation. The heart of the judge is dead within him, and so of the rest. The whole is determined, in a way that more resembles the turning of a machine, than the decision of that complicated being called man, endowed with eyes to see, and an understanding to discriminate, and a heart to feel, and a moral sense to judge according to the eternal law written in the skies.³³

Institutional law obscures moral knowledge, Deloraine claims, because it is based upon the wrong sort of measurement. It works according to rules, categories and terms, which are appropriate for judging inanimate materials such as cloth, but of little use when it comes to understanding ‘that complicated being called man’. It is based upon an inadequate, overly simplistic mode of representation; it upholds a story about moral behaviour that is untrue to human life. Deloraine assumes that such a mechanistic approach to public judgment not only harms the person accused, who is simply ‘disposed of’ according to the rules, but also damages the judicial authorities themselves, whose abilities to reason (‘understanding’, ‘discriminate’) and feel (‘heart’, ‘sense’) are overridden and blunted by the legal machinery. Criminal law thus dehumanises all participants – ‘The heart of the judge is dead within him, and so of the rest’ – because it replaces the living capacity for moral judgment with rigid, insensible measures. Reductive representations of human action usurp the minds of all involved.

³² Ibid., p. 148.

³³ Ibid., p. 152.

Deloraine's view of criminal law appears to be confirmed by the actions of the legal authorities once he has fled the scene of violence. The local magistrate organises an inquest on the morning after the killing, assisted by the doctor, the coroner, and a hastily assembled jury. They process the available information solely according to 'the principal constituents of what the law denominates the crime of murder', valuing only those categories of legal measurement that Deloraine had bitterly critiqued. After interviewing witnesses they conclude with a judgment of wilful unprovoked homicide, finding no evidence for 'a charge of previous malice' but sufficient time lapse before the act itself for 'malice aforethought'. Godwin's matter-of-fact, list-like prose affirms the mechanistic impression of the meeting: 'This verdict was accordingly found and recorded; and the coroner in conclusion issued his warrant for my apprehension'.³⁴ It jars with the preceding relation of the actual killing, which after nearly two volumes of context is embedded in a matrix of relational and psychological pressure. The narrative produced by the inquest accounts insufficiently for the event, for its language seems to extract the event unnaturally from its proper home.

The law is critiqued again in similar terms by Deloraine's daughter and ally Catherine, in an eloquent appeal that brings the plot to its climax and finally ends the flight/pursuit motif of the third volume. Boldly confronting Travers, who has tracked them across Europe in the name of English justice, Catherine states:

I know how the law construes all this. It scorns to take account of previous circumstances, of any of the strings that twine themselves round the human heart. It comes with its scales, and weighs every thing to the partition of a hair. It comes with its measures, and takes account of roods, and yards, and inches of space, and reckons hours, and quarters of an hour, and minutes, and seconds of time. And it finds in the present case the required sum of space and time, and pronounces a crime of malice prepense, and a verdict of wilful murder. It hurries the actor therefore to an ignominious death. – But I speak to a man, who has not by long poring on precedents and cases purged himself of all sentiments of humanity, to a West Indian, who has quick pulses beating in his heart, a 'soul made of fire, an offspring of the sun'. [...] Deloraine, however unfortunate in the offence he has committed, has not deserved the retribution you seek. He has no felonious qualities. He is neither profligate nor malicious. Though he shed the blood of William, he did not imbrue his hands in guilt. He has contracted no moral defilement. He could not fail to be sufficiently unhappy in the memory of the wide-spreading and tragical consequences of the act into which he was hurried.³⁵

Catherine appropriates the language of the law here in order to attack the way that it 'construes' events. Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries On the Laws of England* had distinguished between 'excusable' and 'felonious' homicide, for example, and her claim that Deloraine 'has no felonious qualities' is a deliberate subversion of accepted criminal categories.³⁶ Whilst the action itself, extracted from its context, falls under the definition of felonious homicide (an unlawful deliberate

³⁴ Ibid., p. 183.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 279.

³⁶ Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries On the Laws of England*, 10th edn, 4 vols (London; Oxford: A. Strahan, T. Cadell and D. Prince, 1787), IV, p. 177.

killing), the personal qualities of the perpetrator himself resist the category and trouble its authority. The ‘scales’ and ‘measures’ of the law are thus insufficient for attaining moral knowledge. Catherine presents them as Deloraine had done previously, as blind, mechanical and inhuman. She addresses Travers by contrast as a sentient, discriminating being, who can apprehend the reality of the situation if he chooses: that Deloraine ‘has contracted no moral defilement’. Her speech in its entirety contains a radically alternative narrative about Deloraine’s action, presented in a manner deliberately antithetical to the stories circulated by social authorities, in which Deloraine is a tragic figure and Travers the one morally ‘degraded’ by his role as ‘a hunter of human blood’.³⁷ This climactic appeal reinforces the novel’s central theme of defunct legal judgment, and positions it in a framework of narrative conflict.

These direct critiques of criminal law intersect in several places with Godwin’s comments about legal institution in *Political Justice*, which he consulted during his composition of *Deloraine* in the early 1830s.³⁸ All editions of the work had argued that criminal law was fundamentally flawed because it took insufficient account of the contingency, complexity, and individuality of human action. Godwin began by addressing and redefining the term ‘law’ itself. ‘Reason is the only legislator’, he argued, and thus ‘The functions of society extend, not to the making, but to the interpreting of law’.³⁹ In other words, the law of reason – apprehended by human beings through the faculty of private judgment in an interminable, yet perfectible process – should be the only fixed principle that determines society’s response to wrongdoing. Legal codes and structures sustained over time by societies tend to ossify the faculty of private judgment and thus obscure the true law of reason:

Law tends no less than creeds, catechisms and tests, to fix the human mind in a stagnant condition, and to substitute a principle of permanence, in the room of that unceasing perfectibility which is the only salubrious element of mind.⁴⁰

Institutional law, Godwin argues, makes judgments about human behaviour in the future by constraining it to the precedents and frameworks of the past. It operates upon ‘a principle of permanence’, rather than a principle of progress, thus violating his central tenet of intellectual perfectibility. This conflict of principles is referenced by Deloraine’s contention that the English legal system neglects ‘the eternal law written in the skies’ (above). Its fixed regulations are unable to account for the unusual, ambivalent nature of Deloraine’s situation, which the reasoning mind would apprehend and prioritise. The novel thus incorporates Godwin’s contention in *Political Justice* that moral knowledge is not attained by the fixed measures of institutions, which are static and prone to misrepresentation, but only by the ongoing and non-predetermined operation of private judgment.

³⁷ *Deloraine*, p. 279.

³⁸ See entry for 30 Aug 1832 in *The Diary of William Godwin*.

³⁹ *Political Justice*, p. 95.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 413.

Although Godwin's rhetoric in *Political Justice* often makes the 'law of reason' sound as though it should be easily apprehended by the individual mind, his ensuing discussion of the proper treatment of crime shows that he does not believe this will be the case. Moral judgment is complicated, time-consuming, and must take many different truths into account. Overall, Godwin argues in *Political Justice* that public attitude towards wrongdoing should be informed by three main principles (which are neglected by the institutions of current society):

1. *The rule of mind.* In accordance with his central tenet of private judgment, Godwin believes that 'To reform a man is to change the sentiments of his mind', for people always act according to what they think. He argues that such mental reformation of the wrongdoer is always preferable to forcible punishment, for it produces the greatest good. Society's approach to crime should therefore focus upon its intellectual causes, and be energised by a desire for intellectual change.⁴¹ When decisions must be made about individual cases, the minds of those involved should be the utmost priority for judges.

2. *The rule of necessity.* Godwin's believes that crime should be understood in light of the immense power of material and intellectual antecedents upon present human behaviour (see Chapter One). This includes an overall focus upon the causes of crime and thus upon its prevention for the future, rather than its curtailment in the present; and, when moral judgments must be made concerning individual cases of wrongdoing, an awareness of contingency and a disposition towards compassion.⁴²

3. *The rule of individuality.* Godwin contends repeatedly that no two crimes are alike, for characters, circumstances and context are never identical. The fixed categories, time measurements and modes of evidence sustained by legal institutions are thus inherently unjust, for their tendency is to level such distinctions rather than taking them into account. Murder is a key example here: 'how complicated is the iniquity of treating all instances alike, in which one man has occasioned the death of another?' Godwin asks. 'Can a system that levels these inequalities, and confounds these differences, be productive of good?'⁴³

Interestingly for our purposes, *Political Justice* explicitly describes the current legal system's neglect of these areas in narrative terms. The fixed categories of criminal law ignore and confound all the subtleties of thought, motive, and psychology that each case involves, and thus the law tells defunct stories about the mind. Or rather, it tells defunct stories about human life that fail to take the centrality and complexity of the mind into account. 'What a vast train of actual and possible motives enter into the history of a man, who has been incited to destroy the life of another?' Godwin asks. He draws attention to 'the uncertainty of history' in this regard: if scholars still dispute whether Cicero was 'a

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 374, 379, 397.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 368-69.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 384-85. See also pp. 411-17. Cf. For further discussion of some of these ethical principles see D. H. Monro, *Godwin's Moral Philosophy*.

vain or a virtuous man’, how will it be decided concerning ‘the man who was tried last week at the Old Bailey?’ He continues:

This part of the subject will be put in a striking light, if we recollect the narratives that have been written by condemned criminals. In how different a light do they place the transactions that proved fatal to them, from the construction that was put upon them by their judges? [...] Who will say that the judge with his slender pittance of information was more competent to decide upon the motives, than the prisoner after the severest scrutiny of his own mind? How few are the trials which an humane and a just man can read, terminating in a verdict of guilty, without feeling an uncontrollable [*sic*] repugnance against the verdict? If there be any sight more humiliating than all others, it is that of a miserable victim acknowledging the justice of a sentence, against which every enlightened reasoner exclaims with horror.⁴⁴

Here Godwin describes the limitations of the justice system through the concept of narrative. Events may be represented more or less faithfully by the parties involved, yet the system is such that the judge, ‘with his slender pittance of information’ and predetermined behavioural categories, will always tell an obfuscatory tale. The prisoner himself will tell a better narrative, Godwin claims, since he knows instinctively to prioritise and scrutinise ‘his own mind’. Yet the legal story is invasive and manipulating, often leading even the accused to ‘acknowledg[e] the justice’ of its conclusion. The audience member, if he be ‘enlightened’, will intuit that the label ‘guilty’ is nearly always reductive and therefore a distorted interpretation of the circumstances under investigation.

Godwin’s argument about narrative fiction in his essay ‘Of History and Romance’ can thus be seen in germinal form in this section of *Political Justice*. He uses the example of historiography to make a point about the necessity of interior knowledge to ethical judgment: historians dispute whether Cicero was vain or virtuous, he claims, because his inner motives remain inaccessible to them. This important status given to interior life should thus have two effects on judgment of contemporary criminals: firstly, humility on the part of the judge, who must acknowledge the limits of his knowledge, and secondly, greater weight given to accused persons’ own testimonies. Personal confessions are deemed most useful for the apprehension of moral knowledge, because they provide interior knowledge that would otherwise remain out of reach (‘the severest scrutiny of his own mind’). This argument thus lays the groundwork for Godwin’s later claim that fictional confession could be truer to the human condition than any historiographical enterprise. It also establishes the ethical backdrop to this claim: for Godwin, the ability of romance to provide representative truth about human interiority rendered it a unique source of moral knowledge.

The entire story of *Deloraine* is based upon these ideas precipitated by *Political Justice*. The legal system inherently provides a woefully inadequate representation of Deloraine’s action, and the plot is driven by the ensuing tension between the dehumanising force of legal stories and the complex, compelling account of the protagonist himself. It owes much to *Caleb Williams*, as contemporary

⁴⁴ *Political Justice*, pp. 386-87.

reviewers noticed, and Godwin's diary shows that he was rereading it at the time of composition. Yet *Deloraine* is preoccupied more singly with the idea that fictional confession could provide a knowledge of human nature that was superior to that offered by institutional justice, using Deloraine's self-analysis in order to expose and explore the falsehood sustained by impersonal systems of law. Like *Caleb Williams*, it also forces the reader to ask questions about the conditions required for access to a completely 'faithful narrative' of the events themselves.⁴⁵

This connection between narrative and justice is made even stronger in *Deloraine* by Godwin's engagement with a real crime narrative, that of Eugene Aram. Aram, a successful philologist, was convicted and hanged for the murder of his associate Daniel Clark in 1759, fourteen years after the event took place and amongst considerable controversy. His case was widely publicised via the *Newgate Calendar*, and was experiencing a resurgence of popularity in the nineteenth century.⁴⁶ It had been used to reformist ends in the late eighteenth century by Holcroft and by Godwin himself. It had surfaced directly in *Caleb Williams* through the story of Raymond, which troubled the black-and-white legal judgments of society and posed one of the key questions that Godwin felt was latent in Aram's case: should the virtuous character of a wanted person, displayed during a significant lapse of time between crime and apprehension, affect subsequent legal judgments?⁴⁷ Aram was fast becoming a tragic figure in popular literature, signalled by the publication of Thomas Hood's 'The Dream of Eugene Aram' (1829). Godwin himself made notes for a novel based upon Aram's life, which he may have given to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, whose own novel *Eugene Aram* appeared in 1832 and was adapted into a play the same year.⁴⁸

Deloraine's story has clear similarities to Aram's, and Godwin used the parallel to critique the law for its insufficient attention to the complex human category of character and its relation to time. As Catherine argues, criminal law 'reckons hours, and quarters of an hour, and minutes, and seconds of time', yet fails to take into account enduring patterns of character. Godwin used Deloraine as both a tragic figure and a reformatory voice, uniting both 'versions' of Aram in Romantic-period literature and highlighting the protean nature of criminality itself. By referencing and to some extent rewriting a 'real' crime story that was in popular circulation, Godwin drew attention to the various stories that

⁴⁵ See *Caleb Williams*, p. 267; on these aspects of *Caleb Williams* see Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel*; Emily Anderson, "I Will Unfold a Tale!": Narrative, Epistemology, and "Caleb Williams", *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 22 (2009), 99-114; and Kenneth W. Graham, *The Politics of Narrative: Ideology and Social Change in William Godwin's "Caleb Williams"* (New York: AMS Press, 1990), p. 106. For a summary of contemporary reviews of *Deloraine*, see Kenneth W. Graham, *William Godwin Reviewed: A Reception History, 1783-1834* (New York: AMS Press, 2001), pp. 554-59.

⁴⁶ See Nancy Jane Tyson, *Eugene Aram: Literary History and Typology of the Scholar-Criminal* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1983), pp. 3-4.

⁴⁷ *Caleb Williams*, p. 203.

⁴⁸ For these notes and Godwin's relationship with Bulwer-Lytton, see C. Kegan Paul, *William Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries*, 2 vols (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1876), II, pp. 304-05.

may be told about human action, and argued that the law might be usefully perceived and critiqued in narrative terms.

In order to emphasise this narrative dimension to institutional judgment, Godwin gives it an overtly textual embodiment throughout the novel. *Deloraine* becomes aware of the legal rendering of his case solely through newspapers, and these printed forms pursue him across Europe with aggressive, distorted tales about his life and character. Godwin's use of the newspaper associates legal judgments with crude publicity, in a similar manner to Falkland's handbills in *Caleb Williams*. He was tapping into a well-known trope, for as Aled Jones has shown, the image of the newspaper as an agent of corruption – moral, intellectual, political – had become a common one in nineteenth-century literature.⁴⁹ Deloraine's first confrontation with his case in such a printed form occurs, appropriately enough, in a bookshop; a British paper catches his eye, and although it contains nothing unsurprising, it has a powerful effect upon his mind:

Though all this was matter of course, was drawn up in the ordinary forms, and might have been anticipated by me almost word for word as I found it, yet such is the nature of the human mind, that a stronger and almost a new effect is produced upon us, when it comes to be subjected to our sense. It lost its vagueness, the misty and obscure form it previously bore, and thrilled through the marrow in my bones. It was like the writing upon the wall [...] ⁵⁰

In accordance with the defunct measures of legal judgment, the newspaper story makes no allowance for ambivalence, nuance or uncertainty. The events are presented to the reader in black and white, literally and figuratively. The newspaper's sensory dimensions reinforce this reductive aspect of legal narrative: as material object, 'subjected to our sense', it makes clear and stark what Deloraine knows to be 'obscure'. This is an unnatural embodiment, and as such elicits horror: it 'thrilled through the marrow in my bones'. It also precipitates violence:

The paragraph I beheld struck at my liberty and my life. Till the hour of the rash act I had committed, I had been a recognised and authentic member of the aristocracy of my country, protected by its laws and with all my immunities and privileges, and honoured by my fellow-citizens. [...] Now I was proclaimed as a loathsome and rejected member of the community, and a price was fixed upon my head. [...] My head was devoted, a victim to the demands of criminal law; and the code of civilization could not be satisfied without my extirpation.⁵¹

The narrative here is inherently hostile: it strikes, demands, victimizes. And a key mechanism of this violence is its typology, its recognition and sorting of subjects via the 'code' of institutional law. Deloraine's status as 'authentic' and 'honoured' is suddenly reversed to 'loathsome and rejected', simply due to the unreasoning measures of criminal law. The newspaper's ultimate contribution is to

⁴⁹ See Aled Jones, *Powers of the Press: Newspapers, Power and the Public in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996); Matthew Rubery, *The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction after the Invention of the News* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), especially pp. 3-20. See also my discussion of Godwin's attitude to ephemeral print in Chapter Four.

⁵⁰ *Deloraine*, p. 209.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

exacerbate and reinforce this categorisation through public embodiment. By disseminating legal measures in sensory form, it materialises them.

As the novel progresses, newspapers take licence with the content of Deloraine's story, distorting it more obviously. They are also increasingly associated with Gothic literary tropes: they energise a long flight-and-pursuit narrative, which owes much to *Frankenstein*, and includes elaborate disguises, a ruined castle, and an encounter with an escaped lunatic. As Deirdre Lynch notes, Gothic fiction in this period is marked out by its interest in the possession of stories – i.e., in who has the power to interpret and thus control events.⁵² In *Deloraine*, Godwin allies the reductionist narratives of criminal law to this anxiety about tale-telling, ultimately implying that institutional justice employs its stories about human behaviour for the purposes of irrational coercion, distortion of reality and oppressive surveillance. These sinister aspects to legal narrative become explicit in Deloraine's encounter with a second newspaper. Its threat is hinted at before it becomes manifest; hiding in a castle under the dubious protection of Jerome, Deloraine finds his life compared to that of Brissac, previous tenant who committed fratricide. 'I certainly felt small pleasure in being classed by him with M. Brissac', he reflects;

I assuredly looked upon my offence in a very different light. [...] There was no mixture of depravity and vileness in what I had done; and, however the vocabulary of undistinguishing law might call my act and that of M. Brissac by the same name, I was fully convinced that a sound and discriminating judgment would place an eternal distance between them.⁵³

Once again, the law's mode of measurement is described as inadequate, for it is unable to distinguish fundamental differences of character and motive in two murder cases. Deloraine connects the flattening legal interpretation of his actions to its 'vocabulary', its lexical system of representation, which obscures the workings of healthy judgment. This consideration of manipulative discourse is shortly followed by a material example. Deloraine chances upon a page torn from a French newspaper, which offers a large reward for his apprehension:

But the events were so distorted by their pretended historian, and the whole seemed composed with so diabolical a malignity, that I had a difficulty in supposing that the facts which had actually occurred, could have furnished the materials to so odious a misrepresentation.⁵⁴

This time, Deloraine's character and history are entirely twisted to fit the 'misrepresentation' that he was the 'only author' and 'only perpetrator' of the events. All misfortune and ambiguity are removed from the story: the article alleges that he always knew William to be alive, and labels him a 'tyrant-

⁵² Deirdre Lynch, 'Transformations of the Novel - I', in *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, ed. by James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 451-72 (p. 468). Hal Gladfelder claims this as a key feature of fictional crime narrative in this period, too: see the preface to his *Criminality and Narrative in Eighteenth-Century England: Beyond the Law* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

⁵³ *Deloraine*, pp. 232-33.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

husband’, the hyphenated phrase implying familiar typology. ‘What means this paper?’ Deloraine exclaims. One thing is clear: the newspaper fully establishes the connection Godwin is making between legal judgments and spurious narratives about human behaviour. It positions legal narrative as an invasive Gothic nightmare, which twists Deloraine’s memories, experiences and relationships into an uncanny double version. Godwin also associates legal narrative with contemporary anxieties about ephemeral print culture, exploiting the widespread perception of newspapers as agents of ignorance and immorality. The article empowers base motives: it prompts Jerome to betray Deloraine for reward money, and to excuse his actions by describing himself as a naïve reader (‘if it had not been for that paper [...] I never heard of anything so cold-blooded’).⁵⁵ Godwin thus aligns stories generated by criminal law with the dangers associated with mass literacy; he evokes the image he had conjured in his essay ‘Of History and Romance’ of readers and writers who are concerned about the price of their wares, but don’t have the moral or intellectual wherewithal to question their quality or veracity.

In describing the judgments of institutional law as bad stories about human behaviour in *Deloraine*, Godwin was also drawing directly from contemporary parliamentary debates about criminal law. Capitalising on the reformist energy precipitated by the passing of the 1832 Reform Act, he used one particularly controversial issue – the justice of capital punishment – to pinpoint the more general conviction amongst legal campaigners that the very representation or ‘image of justice’ was at stake in their work.⁵⁶ Whig activists had made this a key issue: if laws were justified and expressed in terms of impersonal universal principles, it was argued, they would seem more acceptable to an increasingly unrestful public. Godwin’s intervention in *Deloraine* was to present the entire justice system as a social force that enshrined a discrepancy between human experience and its representation. He makes a distinction between the abstract principle of reason itself (‘the eternal law’) and institutionally-fixed principles (human law), arguing that the latter obscures human access to the former. *Deloraine* thus exploits a cultural moment in which ‘English law was a touchstone for scandal in many educated circles’, in David Lemmings’s words – a moment in which social commentators were particularly sensitised towards the ways in which the justice system was perceived, and the ways in which the system itself could misread or misrepresent human behaviour.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 249. On the association of newspapers with working class literacy in this period, see David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

⁵⁶ Randall McGowen, ‘The Image of Justice and Reform of the Criminal Law in Early Nineteenth-Century England’, *Buffalo Law Review*, 32.1 (1983), 89-125 (p. 96); David Bentley, *English Criminal Justice in the Nineteenth Century* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1998), especially the introduction; Philip Handler, ‘James Mackintosh and Early Nineteenth-Century Criminal Law’, *The Historical Journal*, 58.3 (2015), 757-79. On capital punishment in particular, see V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770-1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁵⁷ David Lemmings, ‘Law’ in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age*, ed. by Iain McCalman, Jon Mee, Gillian Russell, Clara Tuite, Kate Fullagar, and Patsy Hardy (Oxford University Press Online), n.p. <

Confessional Narrative

Godwin used the confessional form of *Deloraine* to disrupt this system of legal narrative. I show below that through structure, narrative mode and prose style, he emphasised the elements of justice that *Political Justice* had argued were lacking in society: the complexity, necessity and individuality of human character and action. By prioritising the private thoughts of his protagonist and by recruiting the private thoughts of his readers, Godwin positions independent judgment as the true standard of moral arbitration. He thus offers *Deloraine* as a facilitator of the sort of moral knowledge that he had allied to the novel form in his critical writings of the 1790s and early 1830s. He also uses the novel to suggest that such knowledge undermines the justice institutions of his day – i.e., that it precipitates socio-political reform.

Firstly, Godwin uses the overall structure and balance of content in *Deloraine* to alienate the constructions of legal narrative from lived experience. We see this most simply in what the tale includes: we are presented with Deloraine's entire, unwieldy personal history. The first volume acquaints the reader at length with his childhood, education, and idyllic first marriage; it recounts the death of his first wife, and his introduction to his subsequent wife Margaret Borrodale. During the next volume tension builds in this second marriage, which is brought to a crisis when Deloraine discovers that her previous lover, thought to be dead, is alive and expecting her hand. Towards the middle of the book, Deloraine finds William sitting beside his wife and instinctively shoots him with a pistol, the distress of which causes Margaret to die from haemorrhage. Yet the murder is described in an unusually laconic style; the story quickly descends into a lengthy flight-and-pursuit narrative, which takes up most of the third volume, and features most prominently Deloraine's developing relationship with his daughter Catherine. In other words, the overall structure and content of *Deloraine* privileges the protagonist's entire character development, and it thus encourages moral judgment to be based upon this holistic view, rather than upon the single act of homicide. By placing the murder in a complicated web of history and psychology, Godwin also draws attention to the power of antecedent circumstances, raising questions about the necessity of Deloraine's action and therefore the extent to which he should be held accountable. Further, by structuring the whole story of Deloraine's life around his relationships with his wives and his daughter, the novel suggests that the real issue to be addressed for his moral development is not his act of violence, but his attitude towards women. Deloraine consistently idealises and objectifies women, which is the root cause of his aggressive jealousy, and this is something he begins to unlearn as the novel draws to a close.

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199245437.001.0001/acref-9780199245437-e-383>> [accessed 24 May 2018].

Godwin also alienates legal narrative from lived experience through what he leaves absent from the novel. Deloraine is never tried. He immediately flees after he kills William, assuming that the system of criminal law will be inadequate in its moral judgment upon the case. Official legal spaces, procedures and apparatus are thus conspicuously absent from the novel, unlike in *Caleb Williams*: it is as though the system has been denied a home. Criminal law is represented in ghost form, through Travers, through the mob, through the newspapers. It is always on foreign territory, an alien force that invades human life. The legal story, moreover, is denied an ending. Catherine's climactic appeal to Travers is successful and he ceases his European pursuit, but Deloraine remains in exile from England, knowing that a price remains upon his head. The justice that has been recognised and felt between two personal parties cannot be mirrored by institutional justice, Godwin implies. Criminal law remains suspended in the novel, and the psychological effects of this lack of closure imbue it with a bittersweet ending. Such lack of closure was a recognised feature of Godwin's novels, and annoyed most reviewers – particularly those of *Mandeville*.⁵⁸ In *Deloraine*, however, this kind of ending was bound up with a specific attempt to show the inadequacy of legal narrative. By leaving its 'official' story pending, Godwin disrupts the law's drive towards simplified case-closure.

The ambivalent content of *Deloraine*'s narration further disrupts the authority of legal narrative, for it highlights the ambiguities inherent in past action and insists that these inform moral judgment. His account of the murder, for example, accrues uncertainty as it is repeated and reconsidered, resisting the simple and pre-determined categories of motive and moral character that the criminal law system sustains. Catherine articulates this notion in her appeal to Travers, connecting the moral uncertainties of Deloraine's action to the fact that William's appearance was unprecedented and bizarre, thwarting neat conclusions. She presents his survival as a defiance of 'the condition of human life', an unnatural event 'which in the usual train of human affairs happens to none'. This is a fact for which the law makes no allowances. It tries to quantify recognised aspects of the case, rather than acknowledging its uniquely strange nature: 'It comes with its scales [...] It comes with its measures'.⁵⁹ By contrasting this rigid measurement of the fatal event to Deloraine's shifting and ambivalent renderings, Godwin portrays the law as a system of false measurement, which cannot do justice to the tangled, irreducible nature of human action.

These faulty legal 'measures' are also counteracted by another sort of ambiguity in *Deloraine*'s narration, that concerning time. Although the story begins rather conventionally with his birth, Deloraine builds temporal disruption into it as he proceeds: he started composing the tale at a certain point in his flight from the law, he records, and signals that the narrative is being continued in the

⁵⁸ See, for example, [Anon.], 'Remarks on Mandeville', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 2 (January 1818), pp. 402-08. For this writer the ending of the novel was 'a conclusion "so lame and impotent," that but for the words THE END, at the bottom of the page, we would naturally turn over the leaf for another chapter. [...] to leave everything unsettled, as in the conclusion of Mandeville, is to part with the reader on bad terms' (p. 408).

⁵⁹ *Deloraine*, pp. 278-79.

present around its crisis point, rather like in *Caleb Williams*. Throughout his account Deloraine draws attention to the fact that he is including information inaccessible to him at the time of action and thus only gained at a later date, sometimes presumably after the climax itself.⁶⁰ The tale ends by placing the process of composition into the preceding narrative, and imagining its moral tendency upon future generations. Yet it also deliberately evades historical location, conjecturing that it will be most of use centuries down the line, when the particulars of names and dates have been forgotten.⁶¹ The narrator is thus anxious to position himself and his narrative in time, and yet simultaneously highlights his nonlinear (even atemporal) rendering of events. By contrast, the demands of the law are portrayed in terms of precise time measurement: it ‘reckons hours, and quarters of an hour, and minutes, and seconds of time’. Indeed, the verdict of malice prepense hangs upon these measures. Godwin’s conscious temporal disruption of Deloraine’s tale undermines the authority of these minutes and seconds, placing their strictures in a disorienting web of past, present and future.

Secondly, Godwin’s mode of narration itself also launches an assault upon the interpretive framework of the law. He chose first-person perspective in order to prioritise subjective accounts over institutional ones, and to draw attention to the complex operation of the individual’s mind. As the 1832 introduction to *Fleetwood* made clear:

[First person mode] was infinitely the best adapted, at least, to my vein of delineation, [...] the analysis of the private and internal operations of the mind, employing my metaphysical dissecting knife in tracing and laying bare the involutions of motive, and recording the gradually accumulating impulses, which led the personages I had to describe primarily to adopt the particular way of proceeding in which they afterwards embarked.⁶²

As mentioned above, Godwin justified his mode of narration by fusing it to those elements of justice that he had argued were neglected by institutional law in *Political Justice*. First-person perspective gives a privileged position to the operation of an individual’s judgment, the ‘private and internal operations of the mind’. By conveying events to the reader through this channel, the subject’s intellectual life – however flawed – is implicitly offered as the key to understanding and interpreting events. Moreover, first-person allows Godwin to illustrate the basic necessity of thought and action. It allows him to make explicit ‘the involutions of motive’, ‘the gradually accumulating impulses’ that contribute to human behaviour. Finally, he argues that this mode enables him to delineate the complexity and irreducibility of human life. The utmost precision and technical care is required to portray mental life successfully; the pen must become a ‘metaphysical dissecting knife’, teasing apart the delicate nuances of psychology. Godwin’s ‘laying bare’ of the mind results in protagonists that resist straightforward character judgments, who are neither ‘innocent’ nor ‘guilty’, defying familiar categorisation.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, e.g. pp. 125, 129, 137, 186-87, 219, 277.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

⁶² *Fleetwood*, p. 10.

This was a decision with overtly socio-political implications. Some critics have seen Godwin's 1832 preface as reflecting a shift to a politically redundant subjectivity, and have linked this to the fact that he dropped *Things as They Are* from the title of *Caleb Williams* in its 1831 edition.⁶³ Yet Godwin's interest in the individual mind was always an interest of public import because private judgment remained the keystone of his theory of social reform (see Introduction), and his aesthetic choices were allied to this principle. As one reviewer of his fiction recognised in 1830, Godwin 'makes the analysis of our inmost thoughts the *materiel* for melioration of the human species'.⁶⁴ The connections between Godwin's account of fictional psychology in 1832 and his critique of justice in *Political Justice* (which he consulted that year) make this explicit: the first-person mode was in part a challenge launched against the misconstructions of institutional law. This mode and its ideological justification was in fact a belated development of Defoe's confessional novels at the beginning of the eighteenth century, as Pamela Clemit, Deirdre Lynch and Hal Gladfelder have all noted. Godwin was employing a tradition of criminal narrative that presented events to their readers exclusively from the position of the social deviant, drawing their readers into 'imaginative complicity' with the protagonists.⁶⁵ He was making a statement about public ethics, attempting to redress both institutional displacement of private judgment in moral discrimination, and institutional neglect of the complexity, necessity and irreducibility of individual life.

Thirdly and finally, whilst the fact of first-person perspective elevates the individual mind in the process of moral discrimination, the style in which that perspective is rendered implicitly recruits readers themselves to the judgment task. Godwin's prose mirrors his subject's thought processes, which respond to a new event or intelligence with a sequence of reflections, questions and imagined possibilities. Deloraine's receipt of William's ship letter, for example, initiates such a string of reactions. He begins with a question of knowledge – 'What was I to believe?' – and after contemplating historical possibilities, considers a question of action, the appropriate response to the unopened letter: 'On what was I to resolve?' Ultimately, after reading it, he wonders what the letter means for his own being, and poses a question of identity: 'What was I now?'⁶⁶ Pockets of intellection thus cluster around key plot developments, framing them as matter for thought and offering them up to scrutiny. Godwin himself wrote of the novel-writer's need for a mode of expression that would 'give the reader recollection & pause, which [...] should perpetually revive & reanimate the reader's attention'. This meant providing 'resting-places' for the reader's mind, of the sort provided by

⁶³ See for example Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel*, pp. 211-13; Gladfelder, *Criminality and Narrative*, pp. 2-3; Sullivan, "'Caleb Williams" and Print Culture', pp. 336-37.

⁶⁴ [Edward Bulwer-Lytton], 'Cloudesley, by the Author of Caleb Williams', in *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, 28.109 (Jan 1830), pp. 368-373 (p. 368).

⁶⁵ Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel*, pp. 55-56; Lynch, 'Transformations of the Novel - I', pp. 462-65; Gladfelder, *Criminality and Narrative* (quotation is from p. 9).

⁶⁶ *Deloraine*, pp. 110, 113.

Deloraine's interludes of rumination.⁶⁷ This feature is perhaps of most import in *Deloraine* when it comes to the murder itself. The protagonist-narrator revisits the scene in his mind's eye repeatedly, viewing it from various angles, and often unsettling his previous convictions about the appropriate moral judgments to be drawn.⁶⁸ As Godwin encourages his readers to participate in Deloraine's protean mental stream, he thus prompts them to pause and consider the moral significance of the events for themselves.

By reconstructing the subject's intellection in this manner, Godwin also presented the narrator's mind itself as a key object of scrutiny. Contemporary reviewers noted the importance of this: *Deloraine* is 'full of thought, and the matériel of thought', wrote one, recognising the link that he established between the mental life of his protagonist and the mental life of his reader.⁶⁹ This was the core element of Godwin's challenge to institutional forms of knowledge: he aimed, as he wrote in 1795, to 'disengage the *minds* of men' from their 'prepossession' by social systems and to incite them to 'moral and political enquiry'.⁷⁰ His literary concept of confession was in fact entirely predicated upon this link between interior analysis and social reform, as Pamela Clemit has shown.⁷¹ His interest in fictional and autobiographical 'confession' reflected a longstanding conviction that, in order for true justice to be apprehended in society, the formative conditions of intellectual life (political, social, religious) needed to be continually exposed and improved. This is why Godwin's preface to *Cloudesley* founded its high conception of the novel form upon its ability to render 'inmost thoughts'. In *Deloraine*, dramatization of the narrator's mental life highlights the protean and contingent nature of interpretive judgment, suggesting that the fixed, pre-determined categories of motive and moral character upheld by criminal law are inadequate. It thus also becomes an invitation, a proposal that his audience join in the process of re-forming these judgments.

Deloraine's confession finishes on a deeply ambivalent note, however. It emphasizes the power of institutions over human moral sense, and thus seems to question the very possibility of true moral literacy in society's current state. This is foreshadowed early in the tale, as Deloraine absorbs the 'vocabulary of undistinguishing law' during his descriptions of events. His initial account of the killing, for example, is preceded by two emotionally intense accounts: the first of William and Margaret's reunion, during which they temporarily relive their relational past in a 'sort of transporting delusion', and the second of Deloraine's dark broodings, in which he tussles with hatred against his rival, his wife, and himself ('all that constituted my individuality').⁷² When it comes to the violent act that results when these two situations collide, however, Deloraine suddenly empties the agents of all

⁶⁷ Godwin to Wollstonecraft, 30 April 1797, in *The Letters of William Godwin*, i, pp. 203-04.

⁶⁸ *Deloraine*, pp. 156, 157, 213-14, 262-63, 284-85.

⁶⁹ [Anon.], 'Deloraine. By the Author of "Caleb Williams"', *Literary Gazette*, 838 (1833), p. 81.

⁷⁰ 'To the Editor of the *British Critic*', p. 117 (emphasis mine).

⁷¹ See Pamela Clemit, 'Self-Analysis as Social Critique: The Autobiographical Writings of Godwin and Rousseau', *Romanticism*, 11.2 (2005), 161-80.

⁷² *Deloraine*, p. 143.

their history, personality and emotion. William and Margaret are described as ‘two human figures, a male and a female’; as the violence is about to erupt, they become ‘the parties’; and finally, they are ‘Two human bodies, dead, or apparently dead, [...] at my feet’.⁷³ He uses the cold language of a legal statement, which detaches the persons involved from the very things that give them identity. These contrasting modes of representation jar increasingly throughout Deloraine’s narration; Godwin portrays legal discourse as an unnatural intrusion into his protagonist’s thought-world, something that obscures the true meaning of human events.

This institutional colonization of Deloraine’s mind is exacerbated by textual manifestations of legal narrative. Newspaper stories manipulate his judgment, gradually overpowering its capacity for independent conviction. Deloraine describes how the first article he encountered ‘haunted my thoughts, as the paper lay before me’:

My soul was in tumults. Alternately the ideas I have above expressed passed in sad and dreary order before me; and alternately they shaped themselves into a wild and terrific dance of death, till I no longer knew where I was, or what I was.⁷⁴

The newspaper story has slotted Deloraine into a conventional story of crime: ‘I was proclaimed as a loathsome and rejected member of the community’. Its effect is to destabilise Deloraine’s knowledge of his own life and character, forcing him to question the authenticity of the memories, practices and beliefs that have shaped his identity. ‘I no longer knew where I was, or what I was’, he states; he begins to wonder whether the newspaper version of his life might be true. The sheer physical presence of the pages seems to impress this idea upon his mind – ‘It was like the writing upon the wall’.

The second newspaper account has even greater psychological power. The picture it paints is so grotesque that it first prompts Deloraine to defend himself: ‘I cared not for the world and its constructions. I felt in my heart that I was justified’. Yet he soon slips into a train of anxious reflections, questioning his memories of the fatal event and his motives for taking action. ‘This paper [...] first suggested to me a doubt of the all-sufficiency of the evidence upon which I had acted’, he records. The possibility devastates him, producing ‘a total revolution in the system of my being’.⁷⁵ It precipitates an increasingly negative stream of reflections, which often revise or contradict his earlier convictions. Soon Deloraine asserts: ‘never did I regard [my action] but as the most aggravated and atrocious crime that imagination itself could devise’.⁷⁶ His language echoes that of the second newspaper article, suggesting that he has absorbed its two-dimensional construction of his character.

By the time that Deloraine’s tale has reached its conclusion, he seems almost completely overpowered by the reductive legal story of his life. Godwin echoes the printed ending of *Caleb Williams*, in which

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 143-45.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 209.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 245-46.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 263

Falkland's confession leads Caleb to announce that 'I have been his murderer'; 'I began these memoirs with the idea of vindicating my own character' but 'I have now no character that I wish to vindicate'.⁷⁷ Deloraine's apparent moral victory over Travers causes him to enter a similar realm of self-abasement and narrative revision. Whilst he was on the run, Deloraine claims, his 'thoughts were beguiled':

But, now that my person is secure, and I no longer fear the ministers of human justice, my condition becomes infinitely worse. I have nothing to do, but to ruminate on what I have committed. [...] And the more I revolve in my secret soul the deed I have perpetrated, the blacker does it shew itself.

He concludes that his character is 'odious, horrible even to the imagining, and past all redemption', once again reflecting the second newspaper account (which described him as 'an unparalleled monster, heartless, selfish and sanguinary').⁷⁸ Although Catherine is able to heal, Deloraine's moral sense has been irrevocably warped by the interpretation of his life produced and promoted by the criminal law.

Why finish with this nightmarish portrayal of institutional power over the mind's moral judgment? Godwin's preface to *Fleetwood* in 1832 ended with a disordered reading experience, and the final scene of his 1833 novel provides a similar close-up of a weak mind, a reader whose capacity for ethical knowledge has been overwhelmed by his social climate. This conclusion represents a tension that remains as unresolved in *Deloraine* as it does in the preface to *Fleetwood*: the capacity of the mind to launch into independent territory is set starkly against its tendency to capitulate to the status quo. The reading mind became a battleground in Godwin's work, upon which human potential conflicted with human habit and behaviour.

Conclusion

Godwin made a renewed effort to link the novel form to intellectual perfectibility in the early 1830s. As he revisited his fiction in theory and in practice, he argued that confessional narrative was a special means of moral knowledge. By representing and encouraging an effort towards intellectual independence, he argued, this sort of narrative fiction could disengage human minds from the inadequate 'readings' of human nature and behaviour perpetuated by their socio-political institutions. He exploited a moment in which novelists were increasingly associating their work with the social authority of non-fictional genres, remediating his draft writing from the 1790s in order to ally the novel to ethical theory.

⁷⁷ *Caleb Williams*, pp. 276-77.

⁷⁸ *Deloraine*, pp. 284, 285, 245.

I have also shown, however, that Godwin's particular view of the mind imbued this argument with ambivalence. He repeatedly depicted readers that had given way to mental passivity, in both critical and fictional works, drawing attention to the prevalence of intellectual dependence amongst the contemporary reading nation. His writing about novel-reading in the early 1830s distils enduring, unresolved questions about the nature of the human mind itself: Was it strong enough to transcend the confines of its social climate? Could inherited forms of intellectual dependence ever be overcome? What were the conditions necessary for such emancipation?

One of Godwin's ongoing responses to this tension was to write about good reading practice. This was a longstanding strategy in his educational writings, but Godwin integrated it into his novel-writing too. Reading advice is interspersed throughout *Deloraine*, and involves the remediation of passages that had appeared in print elsewhere. The narrator praises the practice of rereading, for example, expressing the notion that revisiting a book after a lapse of time leads to the discovery of new things, and thus enriches the mind. This passage clearly echoes a section of Godwin's essay 'Of the Duration of Human Life' in *Thoughts on Man* (1831), which he was composing at the same time as his novel.⁷⁹

Reading in company is portrayed as another means of particular benefit: Emilia reads with Deloraine, Travers reads with William, Deloraine reads with Catherine, and the shared experience 'enhances the gratification tenfold'. In *Deloraine* as in *St Leon*, the salutary potential of reading becomes especially manifest in a social context: '[It] makes the proposition, the fact, or the sentiment, leap as it were from the insensible page, and become impregnate with life'. It helps participants to see things anew, so that they share 'modes of apprehending and judging'.⁸⁰ In other words, reading develops relationships, it develops judgment, and it does so in part by tying the two activities together. This repeated, shared reading is the opposite of the solitary, disposable experience that blights the ending of the *Fleetwood* preface. It also contrasts starkly with Deloraine's lonely absorption of newspaper stories about his life. It is in some respects a counterbalance, an attempt to nudge actual readers into the sorts of practices that will benefit the mind.

Deloraine is not alone in its implicit division between good reading and bad. In fact, one of the consistent features across Godwin's corpus is his appeal to the notion of 'true reading'. My next chapter turns to directly consider Godwin's practical reading advice, and to explore the assumptions about the mind upon which it was based.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 28; *Thoughts on Man*, p. 118. In his Preface to *Deloraine*, Godwin claims that he began working on the novel shortly after *Cloudesley* was published in January 1830, but that he paused the composition (*Deloraine*, p. 5). Godwin's diary records that *Thoughts on Man* was mainly composed between January 1830 and February 1831.

⁸⁰ *Deloraine*, pp. 236, 173; see also pp. 16-23. Cf. *St Leon*, pp. 43-45. See Chapter Four for further discussion of communal reading in Godwin's novels.

The Discipline of Reading: *Education and Dissenting Pedagogy*

Introduction

‘[F]ew men have sufficiently reflected on the true mode of reading’, William Godwin contended in *The Enquirer* (1797).¹ His comment reflects a longstanding interest in reading as a practical task, and simultaneously advertises his exclusive attitude towards it: the fact that reading had a ‘true mode’ meant that it also had a false one. Writing to Percy Shelley a few years later, Godwin argued that ‘True reading is investigation, [...] an active enquiry’.² Particular ways of reading were so important to him because they were allied to the development of the mind. Healthy reading and the formation of private judgment were mutual developments. Such a crucial activity was not to be taken lightly, and accordingly practical advice about how to read appears throughout Godwin’s educational writings and correspondence.

Insofar as it attracts critical attention in the modern day, this reading advice is discussed almost exclusively from the standpoint of *freedom*. The focal point tends to be Godwin’s essay ‘Of Choice in Reading’ in *The Enquirer* (1797), and its most relevant context is assumed to be the political debates in Britain following revolutionary events in France. Godwin’s advice is cast as a liberal voice in the midst of conservative reactionism: Richard De Ritter, for example, recommends that his reading advice ‘be viewed as a microcosmic exploration of the use and abuse of power, and of the reaction it provokes: a concern of obvious public relevance in the 1790s’. Others emphasise Godwin’s interest in the freedom of children’s reading, in particular, linking this to wider concerns about the social role of the imagination. Few look beyond the political context of the 1790s, and fewer still take into account Godwin’s reading advice beyond this period.³

In contrast to these approaches, I argue in this chapter that Godwin’s reading advice as a whole is best understood from the standpoint of *discipline*. I justify this by examining its roots in the pedagogical

¹ *The Enquirer*, p. 237.

² Godwin to Percy Shelley, Dec. 10 1812, in ‘Godwin/Shelley Correspondence’, *Collected Novels and Memoirs*, I, p. 81.

³ Richard De Ritter, *Imagining Women Readers*, p. 91. See also: Matthew Grenby, *The Child Reader, 1700-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) (e.g. p. 244), and Grenby, ‘Politicizing the Nursery: British Children’s, Literature and the French Revolution’, *The Lion and the Unicorn: A Critical Journal of Children’s Literature*, 27.1 (2003), 1-26; Susan Manly, ‘William Godwin’s “School of Morality”’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 43.3 (2012), 135-42; Robert Anderson, ‘Godwin Disguised: Politics in the Juvenile Library’, in *Godwinian Moments: From the Enlightenment to Romanticism*, ed. by Robert Maniquis and Victoria Myers (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 125-46; Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 127; Julie Carlson, *England’s First Family of Writers*, especially pp. 80-81.

culture of religious Dissent – specifically, the reading advice of one educational tradition within so-called rational Dissent, which was spearheaded by John Jennings, Philip Doddridge and Isaac Watts. This body of reading advice has not to date been brought to bear upon Godwin’s work, despite many acknowledgements from critics that eighteenth-century Dissenting culture was an important influence upon his pedagogy.⁴ I argue here that its understanding of reading as a form of discipline was Godwin’s main inheritance in his educational writings, and the key concept that he remediated in his practical advice. Rather than denying the importance of educational and political freedom for Godwin, I hope to show that the organising concept of discipline encompasses and contextualises his concept of freedom most usefully. It reveals that educational freedom for Godwin meant a form of beneficial exposure to heterogeneous beliefs and choices, rather than an attitude of self-sufficiency or a blanket rejection of all social authority.

My contention in this chapter is that when we look at Godwin’s reading advice through the lens of *discipline*, we clearly see the conflicted view of the human mind that he inherited from rational Dissenting culture: great confidence in its discriminating powers, yet great fear of its adverse principles, such as passivity, distraction and rebellion. The key issue that concerns Godwin in his reading instructions, as critics note, is authority – who or what is to be trusted with power in the educational process – and I argue here that this was at root a long-standing issue concerning the nature of the human mind, rather than simply an extension of the debate about political power in the 1790s into the domestic realm. Through his instructions, Godwin was probing the extent to which the mind was corruptible and the extent to which it was perfectible. I also suggest that we catch a glimpse of his response to this tension through the main way in which his reading advice departs from that of his educational forebears: an increasing investment in textual production (something explored further in Chapter Five).

The discussion of this chapter is not limited to childhood reading, in part because Godwin himself often did not make a clear distinction between the reading practices of adult and child. I consider childhood insofar as it mattered to Godwin’s reading advice, and its importance lay in its ‘ductility’, its nature as a crucial window for instilling habits that would set the tenor for later life. I also draw attention to Godwin’s specific advice for mature readers: the importance of revisiting books read in former days, exploiting old reading notes, and making the composition of new works an integral part of the reading life. Throughout all this I bracket Godwin’s involvement in the business of children’s publishing; my focus is his written reading advice, rather than the production or marketing of reading matter itself.

⁴ Works that acknowledge the importance of Dissenting education upon Godwin’s work more generally include Pamela Clemit, ‘Godwin’s Educational Theory: “The Enquirer”’, *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 12 (1993), 3-11, and Burton Ralph Pollin, *Education and Enlightenment in the Works of William Godwin* (New York: Las Americas, 1962), especially chapters one and two on the concepts of rationality and perfectibility.

Unlike Isaac Watts, Godwin did not devote a book or an essay purely to the topic of ‘how to read’, but instead dispersed his ideas throughout his educational treatises and letters, which span a period of over forty years. His comments feature in broader philosophical discussions of communication and pedagogical method; even an essay with the title ‘Of Choice in Reading’ is primarily concerned with power relations and epistemic authority – ‘choice’ – rather than ‘reading’ in and of itself. My main sources are Godwin’s two essay collections *The Enquirer* (1797) and *Thoughts on Man* (1830). I also draw from personal correspondence between these publications, to Marmaduke Martin in 1798 and to Percy Shelley in 1812. Godwin acted as educational adviser and tutor to a number of young men, and the letter to Martin was subsequently incorporated into ‘Letter of Advice to a Young American’, an 1818 pamphlet which responded to the enquiries of an aspiring student from the USA, Joseph Vallenge Bevan.⁵

Whilst I argue in this chapter that a clear pattern of advice emerges from Godwin’s work, then, I also respect the individual contexts of Godwin’s comments, showing differences and developments within them as well as continuities. In fact, the dispersed and integrated nature of Godwin’s reading advice as a whole is significant in its own right, reflecting something crucial about his approach to reading. For Godwin, ‘true’ reading was not a study skill that could be segregated from others, but rather an outworking of a way of life, an action that sprung naturally from the ‘enquiring’ disposition. Indeed, by writing the bulk of his educational advice as essays and weaving his reading advice throughout them, Godwin was attempting to instil this enquiring disposition as he described it. According to *The Enquirer*’s preface, his essays were ‘the materials of thinking [...] the hints of enquiry rather than actual enquiries: but hereafter perhaps they may be taken under other men’s protection, and cherished to maturity’.⁶ In other words, Godwin chose the essay form in order to embody his educational advice, to initiate his audience into the discipline of ‘true’ reading.

Discipline is a rich term with a long history; I will exploit two aspects of its meaning as I make my argument in this chapter.⁷ I begin by outlining an educational tradition that flourished in several Dissenting Academies during the mid-eighteenth century, in which the activity of reading became a new preoccupation, an area of study (*discipline*) in itself. Its key figures, Philip Doddridge and Isaac Watts, had a broad influence upon Dissenting education through their teaching methods, lectures and textbooks, which were embraced in the academy Godwin attended at Hoxton. I show that their

⁵ See the editor’s introduction to Godwin, ‘Letter of Advice to a Young American, on the course of studies it might be most advantageous for him to pursue’, in *Political and Philosophical Works*, v, pp. 318-38 (pp. 318-19), and references to Bevan in *The Diary of William Godwin* throughout the year 1818.

⁶ *The Enquirer*, p. 78.

⁷ The *OED* entry for ‘discipline, *n.*’ distinguishes between ‘Senses relating to punishment’, ‘Senses relating to training, instruction, or method’ and ‘Senses relating to order arising from training or instruction’. My first use of the term here refers to sections 5a and 7a: ‘Instruction as given to disciples, scholars, etc.’; ‘A branch of learning or knowledge; a field of study’. My second use refers mainly to section 4a, ‘Instruction or teaching intended to mould the mind and character’, yet also draws from its specific application to military, medical and moral regimes (see sections 4, 8 and 9).

approach to the life of the mind meant that reading was conceived as a form of training, *discipline* in the sense that applied to military, medical and moral regimes. I then explore the three main principles within this discipline of reading as they were remediated in Godwin's work – exposure, routine and skill – drawing attention to the conflicted view of the mind that these principles expose.

Reading and Rational Dissenting Pedagogy

Perhaps the most important context for Godwin's educational theory is eighteenth-century rational Dissenting pedagogy. The Dissenting academies of eighteenth-century Britain had developed in response to the 1662 Act of Uniformity which, together with the statutes of the Universities, effectively barred all non-conformists from Oxford and Cambridge. They were generally small, irregular and lacking in resources, often facing closure or relocation due to legal action or the death of a tutor. Yet their curricula developed into the most broad and innovative of their day, and countless figures of influence emerged from their student ranks: from Daniel Defoe to Joseph Priestley to John Keats. Godwin came from a family of strong Dissenting tradition, as discussed in the Introduction, and was educated at Hoxton Dissenting Academy (having been rejected from Homerton due to heterodox views).⁸

The life of the mind was very important to religious Dissenters of the eighteenth century, many of whom believed it to have crucial ethical, even salvific, implications. Despite various and important differences between Non-Conformist groups, three unifying beliefs held by all Dissenting denominations were commonly summarised as '1. The right of private judgment, 2. Liberty of conscience, and 3. The perfection of scripture as a Christian's *only* rule of faith and practice'.⁹ This first emphasis upon independent intellectual conviction was particularly important to Rational Dissenters, who upheld reason as the primary arbiter in religious matters. Their approach was founded on the belief that the human mind had an innate capacity to distinguish truth from error given equal circumstances, or as Joseph Priestley put it, that 'Truth will always have an infinite advantage over

⁸ For a wealth of information on Dissenting Academies and for up-to-date scholarship, see 'Dissenting Academies Online', *The Dissenting Academies Project*, The Queen Mary Centre for Religion and Literature in English, Queen Mary University of London <www.qmulreligionandliterature.co.uk/research/the-dissenting-academies-project> [accessed 24 May 2018]; predecessors to this project include Irene Parker, *Dissenting Academies in England: Their Rise and Progress and Their Place among the Educational Systems of the Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914); H. McLachlan, *English Education Under the Test Acts: Being the History of the Non-Conformist Academies 1662-1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1931); Joe W. Ashley Smith, *The Birth of Modern Education: The Contribution of the Dissenting Academies, 1660-1800* (London: Independent Press, 1954). For details of the curriculum at Hoxton during Godwin's time, see Peter Marshall, *William Godwin*, pp. 33-45.

⁹ Qtd. in Daniel E. White, *Early Romanticism and Religious Dissent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 10.

error, if free scope be given to inquiry'.¹⁰ Thus for many, including the obscure Sandemanian sect in which Godwin was raised, eternal life was at stake in the operation of an individual's private judgment. At times this focus upon truth's 'natural revelation' (through reason) left the role of 'special revelation' (through Biblical texts) rather uncertain; it was a problem of authority that caused division within Dissenting Academies throughout the century.¹¹

In accordance with this high view of reasoning powers, many Dissenting educational institutions were founded upon the concept of 'free enquiry'.¹² Uninhibited questions were encouraged, and in many cases a pattern of teaching emerged that tended to emphasise methods of critical activity over and above specific doctrinal tenets. These educational programmes were far from sceptical or secular; as Tessa Whitehouse points out, 'theological education [was] the core aim of academies, even those with a markedly liberal approach to education'.¹³ Yet within this theological agenda, many tutors came to believe – as Richard Price put it later in the century – that the task of education 'should be to teach *how* to think, rather than *what* to think; or to lead into the best way of searching for truth, rather than to instruct in truth itself'.¹⁴ As an educational ethos this was mercilessly attacked by conservative thinkers, perhaps most famously in Edmund Burke's criticism of Price in 1790. 'His zeal [...] is not for the propagation of his own opinions, but of any opinions', Burke wrote. 'It is not for the diffusion of truth, but for the spreading of contradiction'.¹⁵ For Burke, the emphasis that rational Dissenters

¹⁰ Joseph Priestley, *The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion: A Sermon* [...] (Birmingham: printed by M. Swinney; for J. Johnson, no. 72. St. Paul's Churchyard, London, 1785), p. 18. For more on the concept of truth in Dissenting culture, see Chapter Four.

¹¹ For a helpful definition of Rational Dissent and its place within Christian denominations, see Mark Philp, 'Rational Religion and Political Radicalism in the 1790s', *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 4 (1985): 35-46 (esp. p. 36); see also the essays collected in *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). On Sandemanianism in particular see 'Glasites', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and Mark Philp, 'Godwin, William (1756-1836)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press Online, 2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-10898> > [accessed 23 Feb 2018]: 'Whereas Calvin preached faith, not works, Sandeman scorns faith and presents God as saving or damning a person solely 'according to the right or wrong judgment of the understanding'. For a thorough overview of Dissent in general in this period see Michael Watts, *The Dissenters: Vol. 1: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978) and *Vol. 2: The Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995); see also Alan P. F. Sell, *Philosophy, Dissent and Nonconformity, 1689-1920* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2004).

¹² 'Free enquiry' was not, of course, an exclusively religious concept, but one that had traction in various realms of intellectual and cultural life in the period. Towards the end of the century Joseph Priestley even suggested that it had become a banal phrase, perceived by many as 'a worn out and useless topic' (*The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion*, p. 6). Nevertheless, 'free enquiry' was a defining mark of Godwin's religious upbringing and the teaching texts from which he was tutored. For more detail of the broad associations of 'freedom of thought' in eighteenth-century culture, see Peter N. Miller, "'Free Thinking" and "Freedom of Thought" in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *The Historical Journal*, 36.3 (1993), 599-617.

¹³ Tessa Whitehouse, *The Textual Culture of English Protestant Dissent, 1720-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 17.

¹⁴ Richard Price, *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, and the Means of Making It a Benefit to the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 51.

¹⁵ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the French Revolution in France*, ed. by Conor Cruise O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 95.

placed upon method meant that they failed in substance. They dispersed their students into heterodoxy and scepticism, thus failing in education's primary task, to pass on an inherited body of wisdom to the emerging generation.

This emerging pedagogical priority of 'how to think' over 'what to think' gave the practice of reading a new prominence and significance within Dissenting Academies. Dissenters had long emphasised the importance of rigorous, independent engagement with the Scriptures, but many tutors began to develop this devotional advice into a broader educational principle. Reading became a sort of discipline in itself – a focus of study in its own right – and a crucial one, because in their view different modes of enquiry were allied to different moral, social and spiritual outcomes. As one Dissenting pupil noted, the 'true End of Reading' for tutors such as Doddridge was 'to furnish the Mind with *Materials* to exercise its own Powers'.¹⁶ In other words, reading was a God-given means to develop the faculty of private judgment; this was its 'true End' or teleology. Reading was central to the life of the mind, and thus central to the very fabric of society.

One notable body of reading advice that emerged from this ethos was centred around a collaborative network of Dissenting educationists, which included Jennings, Doddridge and Watts. Their advice can be described according to three principles for inculcating intellectual health – exposure, routine and skill – which reflected the mix of confidence and doubt that rational Dissenters invested in the human mind. Trust in the mind's innate capacity to discriminate between truth and error led to the advocacy of wide-ranging, extensive reading – what I have called the principle of exposure. At the same time, fear of its adverse principles (passivity, distraction, rebellion) led to a focus on adhering to rigorous reading regimes and honing particular skills of critical engagement with texts. Taken as a whole, their advice figured reading as a discipline, in the sense of a training programme. The principles they espoused were formative for Godwin, as we shall see, and permeated his educational writing.

John Jennings (1687-1723), who established an academy at Kibworth, is an early example of the rational Dissenting emphasis upon extensive reading. One of his pupils recorded that he 'encourages the utmost freedom of inquiry. He furnishes us with all kinds of authors of every subject, without advising us to skip over the heretical passages for fear of infection'. When he gave lectures, 'Mr Jennings does not follow the doctrines or phrases of any particular party; but is sometimes a Calvinist, sometimes an Arminian, and sometimes a Baxterian, as truth and evidence determine him'.¹⁷

Jennings's approach was founded on an ideal of intellectual exposure; he followed the argument of

¹⁶ Job Orton, *Memoirs of the Life, Character and Writings of the Late Reverend Philip Doddridge, D.D. Of Northampton* (Salop: printed by J. Cotton and J. Eddowes; and sold by J. Buckland, in Pater-Noster-Row, London, 1766), p. 125.

¹⁷ Philip Doddridge, *The Correspondence and Diary of Philip Doddridge, D.D. Illustrative of Various Particulars in His Life Hitherto Unknown; with Notices of Many of His Contemporaries, and a Sketch of the Ecclesiastical History of the Times in Which He Lived*, ed. by John Doddridge Humphreys, 5 vols (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), I, pp. 198, 156.

Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644), which in its campaign against press licensing had claimed robust reasoning skills as a product of uncensored reading. He was convinced that the mind's critical powers would be strengthened by exposure to a broad range of views.¹⁸ It was a controversial standpoint even amongst other Christian denominations, many of which did not share this exalted view of human intellect and feared that young readers would be corrupted by unorthodox or immoral texts. As early as 1703, Samuel Palmer wrote a pamphlet that defended the Dissenting schools against charges of licentious and lewd reading, indicating that their affiliation with unrestricted reading practice was already strong.¹⁹

To ensure this freedom of reading was undertaken responsibly, Jennings maintained a strict routine of study for all his students, and would question them extensively about their reading to ascertain whether or not they were using their independent reason in response to their books.²⁰ Exposure was good for the reading mind insofar as it equipped them for intellectual battle: it was a means of provoking the mind to be active, forcing it to reason independently rather than allowing it to passively accept the orthodox position. Whilst many criticized Jennings's approach as irresponsible, others greatly admired his generosity towards different viewpoints and emphasis upon disciplined critical engagement. His method was formative for future Dissenting educationists including Doddridge, Watts, and Andrew Kippis (Godwin's own tutor at Hoxton).²¹

Philip Doddridge (1702–1751), a pupil of Jennings who became leader of the Academy at Northampton, admired this reading advice and developed it further in his own educational practice.²² A voracious reader and a polymath, Doddridge was the first Dissenting tutor to establish an academy

¹⁸ See John Milton, *Areopagitica; A Speech of Mr. John Milton For the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing, To the Parliament of England*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. by Ernest Sirluck, 8 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), II, pp. 480-570. For more information about Jennings's teaching, see 'Dissenting Education and the Legacy of John Jennings, c.1720-c.1729 (Second Edition)', ed. by Tessa Whitehouse, *The Dissenting Academies Project*, Queen Mary University of London, <www.qmulreligionandliterature.co.uk/online-publications/dissenting-education>; and Mark Burden, 'Jennings, John', in *A Biographical Dictionary of Tutors at the Dissenters' Private Academies, 1660-1729* (London: Dr Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies, 2013), pp. 294-300.

¹⁹ Samuel Palmer, *A Defence of the Dissenters Education in Their Private Academies: In Answer to Mr. W-Y's Disingenuous and Unchristian Reflections upon 'Em. In a Letter to a Noble Lord* (London: printed and are to be sold by A. Baldwin, 1703), pp. 15-16; for a later example of the strongly differing views about what was appropriate to read within Dissenting communities themselves, see Watts, *The Dissenters: Vol. 2: The Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity*, pp. 209-10.

²⁰ See Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, p. 464.

²¹ Whitehouse's *The Textual Culture of English Protestant Dissent* examines the collaborative relationship of this educational group in great detail.

²² For a thorough explication of Doddridge's teaching, see Isabel Rivers, *The Defence of Truth through the Knowledge of Error: Philip Doddridge's Academy Lectures* (London: Dr Williams's Trust, 2003). See also her discussion of Doddridge in 'Dissenting and Methodist Books of Practical Divinity', in *Books and Their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. by Isabel Rivers (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982), pp. 127-64 (pp. 136-38), and her entry for Doddridge in the *ODNB*: 'Doddridge, Philip (1702–1751)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press Online, 2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-7746>> [accessed 23 Feb. 2018].

library (others relied on teachers' private collections), and he gave lectures to his students on its contents and proper use. Doddridge was convinced that extensive, unrestricted reading would foster sound critical judgment; individual reasoning would be strengthened through the habitual practice of discernment, leading to more reliable knowledge of God's truth. In a letter to John Wesley, he argued that 'in order to *defend the truth*, it is very proper that a young minister should know the chief strength of error'.²³ Wesley, like many others, strongly objected. Their dispute about pedagogy highlights a more fundamental theological disagreement about the nature of the mind, which was endemic to both the established church and nonconformists in this period, and revolved around the extent to which human reason was affected by sin. For Doddridge, the mind was more perfectible than it was corrupted, and this was reflected in his confidence in wide reading.

Doddridge's method of lecturing further enacted his belief in the principle of exposure. He would assemble opposing arguments from several authors representing the main approaches to his topic, and discuss his views of their merits; students would then copy down a broad reading list and follow up the references for several hours in the library. At the next lecture he would question his pupils concerning their opinions before proceeding to the next subject, and whilst making his personal beliefs clear, his concern to foster a proper investigative method in his students came over and above his own doctrinal convictions. As Isabel Rivers points out, the rhetorical emphasis upon 'free enquiry' amongst Rational Dissenters did have practical boundaries; the denominational agendas of academy life remained strong, and library resources were limited.²⁴ Nevertheless, Doddridge was both criticised and respected for his perceived encouragement of extensive reading, emphasis upon independent judgment and avoidance of dogmatism.

Alongside this emphasis upon extensive reading, Doddridge believed in the formation of disciplined reading habits. Time was a fleeting resource and needed to be used wisely. He himself kept to a strict schedule of study, often rising at 5am to read for several hours before breakfast.²⁵ An early memorandum entitled 'Rules for the Direction of my Conduct While a Student' contains the commitment: 'Never let me trifle with a book with which I may have no present concern'.²⁶ This fear of wasting time through 'superficial' reading is evident throughout his writings. He later advised a friend to 'consider books as a food we ordinary sort of animals cannot live without; and yet we may possibly be overcharged, if we cram ourselves with more than we can digest'.²⁷ His portrayal of careful reading as digestion was a resonant and widespread metaphor, one picked up by Watts, and later in the century by Godwin.

²³ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, IV, p. 493 (emphasis in original).

²⁴ Rivers, *The Defence of Truth*, pp. 18, 31.

²⁵ See comments throughout Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*.

²⁶ Doddridge, *Correspondence and Diary*, I, p. 97.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 459.

To ensure that reading was properly digested, Doddridge advocated close, critical engagement with books. Job Orton – a pupil, friend and later a colleague of Doddridge – testified to these habits of ‘Care and close Study’ in a posthumous biography, remembering him as a keen note-taker who sought out books with large margins.²⁸ Orton recalled his example with admiration:

As he cautioned his *Pupils* against that indolent and superficial Way of Reading, which many Students fall into, so he took Care that his own Example should enforce his Precepts. His usual Method was, to read with a Pen in his Hand, and to mark in the *Margin* particular Passages, which struck him. Besides which, he often took down Hints of what was most important, or made References to them, in a *blank Leaf* of the Book, adding his own reflections on the Author’s Sentiments.²⁹

This close, analytical sort of reading was important to Doddridge not simply for understanding the text, but for the formation of individual reasoning powers. It was about adopting and honing the critical skills that would ensure one’s faculty of judgment was effective. As Orton noted, Doddridge believed that ‘the true End of Reading [was] only to furnish the Mind with *Materials* to exercise its own Powers’.³⁰ To unite the practice of reading with one’s own writing, in particular, was to take a crucial step in the formation of private judgment – a conviction that Godwin would endorse and expand upon throughout his literary life.

This nascent pattern of reading was articulated most fully in the writings of scholar and hymnodist Isaac Watts (1674–1748). Whilst Watts did not hold a tutorial post, his educational works were very influential amongst the Dissenting network; Arthur Davis remarks that ‘he was commonly accepted by his colleagues as the principal adviser on matters educational’.³¹ He also had a close literary relationship with Doddridge, both editing each other’s texts and building from their ideas.³² Watts’s treatise *The Improvement of the Mind* (1741, 1751), a sequel to his enormously popular *Logick; Or, the Right Use of Reason in the Inquiry After Truth* (1725), took the Rational Dissenting conviction about the centrality of independent reason and translated it into a set of practical instructions for conversation, meditation and reading. The reading principles of exposure, routine and skill, developed by Jennings and Doddridge, were manifest most clearly in Watts’s work. He presented reading as a discipline for the mind, akin to physical exercise or labour, and expanded in detail upon particular strategies for promoting the rigour and growth of critical faculties.

Like Jennings and Doddridge, Watts presented critical exposure as essential to the healthy development of the mind. Yet although he eulogised the proliferation of printed material throughout

²⁸ Job Orton, *Memoirs of Doddridge*, p. 16.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 124.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 125.

³¹ Arthur Paul Davis, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Work* (London: Independent Press, 1948), p. 100.

³² See Whitehouse, *Textual Culture*; this relationship is evident throughout Doddridge’s *Correspondence and Diary*. Notably the posthumous volume of Watt’s *Improvement* was heavily edited by Doddridge and David Jennings.

history as a divinely ordained process, he downplayed the overt summons to extensive reading that characterised his colleagues' work.³³ Instead, he used the principle to advocate an internal disposition towards exposure, a posture of openness to ideas. Quoting the book of Proverbs, Watts instructed readers to 'Cry after knowledge, and lift up thy voice; seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures'.³⁴ For Watts, this disposition of exposure involved placing oneself in the author's shoes and viewing things from his or her perspective: 'Enter into the sense and argument of the authors you read', he advised. Readers must be imaginatively open to the viewpoints they come across; only by this sort of intimate mental investment will they be enabled to judge the merit of the work accurately.³⁵

Watts was also at pains to present good reading as a temporal discipline, a way of life that readers formed through deliberate habits. Readers, he contended, must seek 'by degrees *an Habit* of judging justly, and of reasoning well'.³⁶ This meant that they had to work regularly at their task: do not 'abandon reading and labour', he urged, listing the verbs side by side to imply their affinity.³⁷ He repeatedly used agricultural imagery to emphasise this point: 'infinite errors will overspread the mind, which [...] lies without any cultivation', he argued, warning would-be readers against idleness or half-hearted reading. The neglected intellect, he warned, will become 'a barren desert, or a forest overgrown with weeds and brambles'.³⁸ He believed that the mind must be tilled regularly like a field, or it would never be fruitful.

In giving these instructions, Watts was reacting strongly against the idea that intellectual ability could be innate and unschooled. He was not denying the existence of talent, but attacking the pedagogical idea that talent would bring itself to fruition unaided by educational discipline. 'Presume not too much upon a bright genius,' Watts cautioned from the beginning of *Improvement of the Mind*, 'for this without labour and study will never make a man of knowledge and wisdom'.³⁹ This sort of presumption was particularly pernicious because it appeared to undermine the key Dissenting conviction that truth must always be actively examined for oneself and not chosen by instinct or blind trust. The treatise is thus at pains to present reading as an 'industry', and frequently warns against the mental and spiritual dangers of critical apathy.⁴⁰

³³ '[T]he providence of God has brought printing into the world' – see Watts, 'A Discourse on the Education of Children and Youth', in *The works of the late reverend and learned Isaac Watts, D.D* [...], v, pp. 359-408 (p. 372). Cf. Godwin, *Political Justice*, p. 141; *Political Justice: Variants*, pp. 138-39; *Thoughts on Man*, p. 248.

³⁴ Watts, *The Improvement of the Mind*, in *The works of the late reverend and learned Isaac Watts, D.D* [...], v, pp. 185-358, (p. 195).

³⁵ Watts, *Improvement of the Mind*, p. 209.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67 (emphasis mine).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 185-88.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 188; cf. Watts, *Logick; Or, the Right Use of Reason in the Inquiry After Truth*, in *The works of the late reverend and learned Isaac Watts, D.D* [...], v, pp. 1-184 (p. 162).

⁴⁰ e.g. Watts, *Improvement of the Mind*, p. 195.

Watts expressed his conflation of reading and labour practically through the endorsement of strict reading routine, giving instructions, like Doddridge, for the efficient use of time. He believed different topics and pursuits should have regular seasons, like recommending crop rotation to make the most of the soil. ‘Let every particular study have due and proper time assigned it’, he advised; ‘Order and method in a course of study will have a happy influence to secure you from trifling and wasting your minutes in impertinence’. When organising this schedule, it was also important to be aware of the mind’s limits: ‘Do not apply yourself to any one study at one time longer than the mind is capable of giving a close attention to it without weariness or wandering’; ‘Don’t over-fatigue the spirits at any time’.⁴¹ Habits of private judgment would be formed most effectively through reading schedules that maximised attentive capacities.

Diligent habit wasn’t enough on its own, however: ‘There are many who read with constancy and diligence, and yet make no advance in true knowledge by it’.⁴² Watts also recommended specific techniques of critical engagement with one’s reading matter, and he went into them at greater length than other Dissenting pedagogues. He gave detailed instructions about how become a skilled reader, describing practical strategies that would render the labour of the reader effective and fruitful. There was a degree of finitude and fallenness to the mind that meant the reader needed to be cautious and thorough in their engagement with books. He wanted readers to develop abilities and strategies that would protect them from these tendencies to deception, superficiality, impotence.

Watts separated ‘reading’ and ‘meditation’ into separate sections in *The Improvement of the Mind*, but he considered them inseparable, like two sides of the same coin. He made it clear that ‘meditation, or study’ was an integral part of truly profitable reading, and encapsulated this contention in gustatory metaphor. Reading was like eating, and critical engagement with one’s reading was like digestion:

It is meditation and study that transfers and conveys the notions and sentiments of others to ourselves, so as to make them properly our own. It is our own judgment upon them as well as our memory of them that makes them become our own property. It does as it were, concoct our intellectual food, and turns it into a part of ourselves: Just as a man may call his limbs and his flesh his own, whether he borrowed the materials from the ox or the sheep, from the lark or the lobster [...] it is all now become one substance with himself.⁴³

In expressing the need to ‘digest’ reading by means of this extra dimension, Watts was drawing from a long tradition of reading-eating metaphor. As Denise Gigante has explored, the imagery of digestion in eighteenth-century writing had two major strands of meaning: it could suggest the drive of corporeal, Hobbesian appetite, as well as an older idea of holistic engagement with authoritative revelation, ‘a presecular ontology of eating based on the edible Word of Christianity’.⁴⁴ Watts was

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 259; pp. 205-06.

⁴² Ibid., p. 208.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 201.

⁴⁴ See Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History*, p. 21 (and passim).

perhaps exploiting both connotations: readers could be shallow gobblers, concerned merely with their transient appetites, or devoted recipients, who processed the materials they received through the discipline of close engagement. He was implying that intellectual health and growth could only be acquired from reading matter if it was skilfully processed, integrated into a larger critical economy. As he wrote later in the treatise, ‘Readers may cram themselves in vain with intellectual food, and without real improvement of their minds, for want of digesting it by proper reflections’.⁴⁵ Most significantly, Watts allied this practice to the formation of an independent intellect. Shallow readers merely regurgitate the arguments of books they read, but the digesting reader transforms them into their ‘own property’. He implied that intellectual nutrients would only be acquired through a certain sort of reading.

Accordingly, Watts gave instructions about how to read in this distinctive, meditative manner. He advised readers to work through books slowly (after a quick initial survey of the contents and structure). He recommended that books were read more than once, with the occasional exception of history, ‘poesy’ or travels.⁴⁶ He also placed great stress upon proper habits of notation; commonplace books were a popular educational resource at the time, but Watts’s treatise transcended commonplacing conventions and expanded their usual role.⁴⁷ He recommended that students mark up their books with questions and comments, create their own index systems, and even rewrite an original text into a more convincing argument. He argued that particularly worthy books should be written out in an abridged form for personal use, a suggestion that was popular in Academy teaching and may well have inspired the practice that Godwin prescribes in his educational writing (see below). ‘[O]ne book read over in this manner, with all this laborious meditation, will tend more to enrich your understanding, than the skimming over the surface of twenty authors’, Watts claimed.⁴⁸ It forced the reader to verbalise their interaction with the text, bringing their response into clear formation and enabling them to reflect upon it; it was a safeguard against thoughtless reading, prejudice, and the passive absorption of error. Godwin was greatly impacted by this idea that the marriage of reading and writing enabled private judgment to be properly formed.

Watts’s reading advice thus distilled the fundamental principle of all these Dissenting educators: discipline. We see this reflected in the language of training, labour, and cultivation, which describes the task of reading according to a version of Protestant work ethic. Watts, in particular, persistently

⁴⁵ Watts, *Improvement of the Mind*, p. 209.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 76, 198, 206, 211.

⁴⁷ For a detailed account of commonplace book usage in the eighteenth century see David Allan, *Commonplace Books and Reading in Georgian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Allan locates the decline of the commonplace book during Godwin’s lifetime, a context which perhaps contributes to his insistence upon writing’s alliance with reading (see Allan, *Commonplace Books*, pp. 261-63 and my discussion of Godwin below). Heather Jackson’s study of marginalia specifies the 1830s and 40s as the period when ‘[t]he annotating reader went into retreat’: see Heather J. Jackson, *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

⁴⁸ Watts, *Improvement of the Mind*, pp. 206-08 (p. 208).

described reading as ‘labour’ and ‘industry’.⁴⁹ Joseph Priestley summarised and reiterated this view when he argued that the nature of a good education as a whole was ‘constant exercise and discipline’.⁵⁰ As a foundational ideal, this may at first appear antithetical to that of independent reasoning, which was the professed goal of such Dissenting education. But it was in fact integral to it, as Richard Price expressed in the 1780s:

[H]itherto education [...] has been a *contraction*, not an *enlargement* of the intellectual faculties; an *injection* of false principles hardening them in error, not a *discipline* enlightening and improving them. Instead of opening and strengthening them, and teaching to think *freely*; it hath cramped and enslaved them, and qualified for thinking only in *one* track.⁵¹

Price encapsulates the Dissenting position here by presenting mental strength, freedom and enlightenment as the outcomes of ‘a *discipline*’. Rational Dissenters pictured intellectual life as an ongoing battle: they believed that the mind had an innate capacity to apprehend truth when in an active, unprejudiced state, but that in order to reach that state it must fight against the reigning social climate of passivity and prejudice, which hampered the development of private judgment from birth. Only by engaging habitually in action and by training oneself in the techniques of reasoning, interpreting and imagining would one become independent, truly skilled, able to judge effectively.

The reading advice propounded by Dissenters in the Watts-Doddridge tradition thus exposes a conflicted view of the human mind. Their pedagogy was best publicised for its underlying confidence in the mind’s innate abilities, and its emphasis upon the benefits of mental exposure through extensive reading brought much ridicule and censure. But they also adhered to principles that were less radical and less optimistic: their focus upon inculcating habit reveals a fear of mental tendencies to passivity and indolence, and their focus upon critical skills reveals a fear of the impotence, superficiality and prejudice that threatened intellectual life. Their reading advice indicates that they were grappling with key philosophical and theological questions about the nature of the mind. Does it lend itself more to corruption or to perfection? Is it innately active or passive, honest or deceptive? What degree of confidence should we place in it?⁵²

Despite the internal tensions and external hostility that they experienced, this group of educators had considerable influence. Doddridge’s lectures were revised, annotated and circulated for about 70 years after his death, and were influential both in Dissenting institutions and amongst a wider public – they were even used by some Oxbridge tutors.⁵³ Watts’s books, in particular, were immensely popular. *The Improvement of the Mind* was famously praised by Samuel Johnson – ‘Whoever has the care of

⁴⁹ Ibid., e.g. p. 195, 201, 208, 256, 271.

⁵⁰ Priestley, *The Importance and Extent of Free Enquiry in Matters of Religion*, p. 5.

⁵¹ Price, *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution*, pp. 51-52 (emphasis in original).

⁵² See Chapter Four for further exploration of these questions.

⁵³ See Rivers, *Defence of Truth*; eventually the lectures were used as interdenominational ammunition during the early nineteenth century, when tense relations between evangelicals and liberals erupted into heated debates about the nature of Christian knowledge. On those debates more generally, see Watts, *The Dissenters*, II.

instructing others, may be charged with deficiency in his duty if this book is not recommended' – and a contemporary historian describes it as 'one of the best known textbooks' of the period.⁵⁴ Its especial popularity in Romantic-period Britain is attested to by the fact that it went through several new editions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

The Discipline of Reading in Godwin's Work

Godwin's fundamental interest in reading practice – particularly his sense of the determinative effects of different kinds of reading – stemmed from the educational approach outlined above. I argue in this section that Godwin inherited the rational Dissenting conception of reading as a discipline, both in the sense of a focus of study, and in the sense of a training regime that moulded the habits and abilities of the participant. He believed that such discipline was fundamental to the achievement of freedom and independence, and articulated this in similar terms to his Dissenting forebears long after he abandoned his religious convictions. See, for example, this extract from some reading advice in *The Enquirer*:

The discipline of mind here described is of inestimable value. He that is not initiated in the practice of close investigation, is constantly exposed to the danger of being deceived. His opinions have no standard; but are entirely at the mercy of his age, his country, the books he chances to read, or the company he happens to frequent. His mind is a wilderness.⁵⁵

In similar terms to Price, Godwin assumes here that intellectual independence – the cultivation of one's private judgment – is achieved through 'discipline of mind'. But Godwin is more specific, making a particular sort of reading fundamental to this discipline: 'the practice of close [textual] investigation'. This is the prerequisite for intellectual freedom. The reader that doesn't undergo this reading discipline will remain dependent upon their cultural, social, and historical circumstances, 'at the mercy' of time and chance. Like Watts's undisciplined reader, their mind is unfruitful as a consequence, 'a wilderness'.⁵⁶

Godwin's own education was clearly shaped by the Doddridge-Watts tradition. Two of his tutors at Hoxton, Andrew Kippis and Samuel Morton Savage, had been disciples and friends of Doddridge, and in his autobiography he gave prominence to his memories of reading during his time there, suggesting its key role in Academy life.⁵⁷ Evidence shows that Godwin had a keen eye for pedagogical theory from an early date: one of his first published works is a prospectus for an Academy of his own (which was never actualised). Notably, this work gives reading a special

⁵⁴ Davis, *Isaac Watts*, p. 88; Samuel Johnson, 'Life of Watts', in *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.: Together with His Life, and Notes on His Lives of the Poets*, ed. by John Hawkins, 11 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), IV, pp. 179-88 (p. 186).

⁵⁵ *The Enquirer*, p. 103.

⁵⁶ Cf. Watts, *Improvement of the Mind*, p. 185.

⁵⁷ McLachlan, *English Education*, pp. 117-25; Godwin, 'Autobiographical Fragments and Reflections', in *Collected Novels and Memoirs*, I, pp. 39-66 (p. 42).

importance, assuming that a child's education should be tailored to instil within them a love of reading and to encourage critical engagement with books.⁵⁸ Godwin was undoubtedly familiar with Watts's educational work, and records reading his *Logick* as late as 1792.⁵⁹

Yet Godwin's debt to the Watts-Doddridge pedagogical tradition is perhaps shown most clearly by the fact that he continued their emphasis upon the 'how' of education over and above the 'what'. He articulated it explicitly as his central principle in *The Enquirer*: 'It is of less importance', he argued, 'that a child should acquire this or that species of knowledge, than that, through the medium of instruction, he should acquire habits of intellectual activity'.⁶⁰ This conviction about intellectual life forms the backbone of the collection: each essay is concerned, at root, with the conditions necessary for instilling and directing beneficial habits of mind. It also translates directly into a concern about reading, just as it had done for Doddridge and Watts. Godwin attaches great significance to particular modes and strategies of reading, allying them to various kinds of outcome for the intellectual life. We see this concern clearly in his infamous passage about the 'tendency' of reading in *The Enquirer*: Godwin's fundamental argument is that a child's moral character will ultimately be determined by their 'temper of mind' – the 'how' of their thinking and reading – rather than simply by the content of their books.⁶¹

Godwin, then, was remediating in his educational writings a Dissenting tradition in which reading was understood not simply as a useful accomplishment or a means to impart information, but as a crucial tool of enquiry in itself, according to which the mind was shaped for good or for ill. He believed that the development of 'true' reading practice would ultimately lead to the advancement of the human species because it was integral to the development of private judgment, the linchpin of social behaviour. As he wrote in *The Enquirer*, 'He that loves reading, has every thing within his reach'.⁶² This high view of reading is reflected in the fact that Godwin's advice was directed to a specific sort of person, 'the enquirer' – a highly idealised person whose fundamental concern was to nourish their intellectual life. This is not to say that his writings were designed exclusively for full-time students, but that they assume the cultivation of intellectual life as their primary end or priority.

In what follows, I compare Godwin's practical reading advice with that of his predecessors, approaching it via the three principles that emerged from the Doddridge-Watts network: exposure,

⁵⁸ Godwin, 'An Account of the Seminary That Will Be Opened on Monday the Fourth Day of August, at Epsom in Surrey, for the Instruction of Twelve Pupils in the Greek, Latin, French, and English Languages', in *Political and Philosophical Writings*, v, pp. 9-10, 20.

⁵⁹ See entry for 18 April 1792 in *The Diary of William Godwin*.

⁶⁰ *The Enquirer*, p. 85. For an overview of the role of independent reason in Godwin's educational works, see Ralph Burton Pollin, *Education and Enlightenment*.

⁶¹ *The Enquirer*, p. 138 (and see further discussion below).

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 95. Cf. Isaac Watts, *Logick*, p. 1: 'Reason is the glory of human nature, and one of the chief eminencies whereby we are raised above our fellow-creatures the brutes in this lower world' (Watts's footnote defines *reason* as 'all the intellectual powers of man').

routine, and skill. My main goal is to show that he drew heavily from this tradition, but I also highlight areas of departure. Godwin resisted what he perceived to be a hermeneutic bias towards the Christian Scriptures, paid more attention to the role of the imagination in reading, and placed a stronger emphasis upon composition, which he positioned as reading's greatest fruit. He thus adapted the advice to suit a more sceptical framework of enquiry and an increasingly author-focussed literary environment. On a fundamental level, however, Godwin's reading advice reveals that he inherited the Rational Dissenters' ambivalence about the nature of the mind. It exposes his mixture of hope and fear in the mind's capacities and tendencies, and indicates some of the ways in which he attempted to negotiate it.

Exposure

Like Jennings and Doddridge, Godwin advocated wide-ranging, extensive reading practices in order to train readers in critical discernment. This was his particular focus in *The Enquirer*, in which he argued that readers should be exposed to a wide range of printed material from the earliest age, of different languages, genres and viewpoints; in this way, their critical judgment would be sharpened as they learnt to distinguish truth from error. 'It must probably be partial, not extensive, information, that is calculated to lead us astray', he contended. '[H]e who reads in a proper spirit, can scarcely read too much'.⁶³ The essay 'Of Choice in Reading' is devoted to the argument that textual restriction is always detrimental to the young. Like those before him, Godwin echoed the argument of Milton's *Areopagitica*, which had allied the licensing of the press with European Catholicism and intellectual oppression. He asks,

Is it our duty to digest for our offspring, as the church of Rome has been accustomed to digest for her weaker members, an *Index Expurgatorius*, a catalogue of those books in the reading of which they may be permitted to indulge themselves?⁶⁴

Censoring a child's reading, Godwin argues, is a harmful and authoritarian practice; it undermines relational trust and results in critical naivety. Only the reader with unrestricted access to printed works from the earliest age will be properly trained to reason, distinguish and judge. The wise parent or teacher will 'Suffer him [the child] to wander in the wilds of literature'.⁶⁵

⁶³ *The Enquirer*, pp. 95, 237-38.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-36; see Milton, *Areopagitica*, pp. 493, 569: 'this project of licencing crept out of the *Inquisition*'; 'this *authentic* Spanish policy of licensing books' (emphasis in original). Cf. Sharon Achinstein, *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁶⁵ *The Enquirer*, p. 142.

On one level, this argument was about releasing the reader from harmful external authorities, and thus a political argument.⁶⁶ Godwin had claimed in *Political Justice* that the major evil of political institutions was their inherent narrowness or fixity of ideas, which hindered accurate judgment of alternative viewpoints because it excluded them *a priori*. Recent government legislation against sedition reinforced this view, and Godwin's 'Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills' (1795) makes similar use of Milton and the Catholic 'Index' in order to protest against political censorship.⁶⁷ Giving the new generation complete freedom of reading choice would protect them from institutional indoctrination, Godwin reasoned. It would encourage them to rethink the traditions and assumptions of the reigning order.

On a more fundamental level, however, Godwin was making an argument about the mind. His advice was based upon the philosophical-theological assumptions of rational Dissent, and sprung from his own articulation of these principles in *Political Justice* – in particular, a great confidence in the mind-truth relationship. A person's private judgment became reliable and effective if it was developed through habitual exercise and practice, like a sort of military training. In Godwin's language, the mind needed to be kept 'flexible' or 'ductile'. By advocating extensive, unrestricted reading, he was thus claiming that critical exposure was essential to the formation of a healthy mind. It was like a soldier's experience of conflict: it was essential to know your opponents, to learn how to fight from repeated engagement with the enemy. The idea had been well publicised through Dissenting leaders and pedagogues long before Godwin's time, Doddridge being a prominent example. Priestley had encapsulated it in an educational work of the late 70s, arguing that shielding a student from certain writers was 'like committing him with an enemy, of whom he had no previous knowledge'.⁶⁸

Viewed from this perspective, Godwin's essays 'Of Choice in Reading' and 'Of an Early Taste in Reading' are best seen as extensions to his first essay of the *Enquirer* collection, 'Of Awakening the Mind'. Generous, extensive reading practice is crucial for Godwin because it enables the most fundamental thing, which is the awakening of private judgment, the spirit of 'true enquiry'. As we've seen, he understood the goal of education as the formation of 'habits of intellectual enquiry', the development of a proper attitude or posture of mind.⁶⁹ Reading's importance thus lay primarily in the fact that it inculcated this through the experience of enquiry that it facilitated. His much-discussed theory of the moral and intellectual 'tendencies' of books makes most sense when read in this context: when considering the effects of books upon young readers, 'Every thing depends upon the spirit in

⁶⁶ The political implications of Godwin's emphasis upon uncensored reading have been well-documented by recent critical accounts: e.g., Manly, 'William Godwin's "School of Morality"', and De Ritter, *Imagining Women Readers*, p. 91.

⁶⁷ 'Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills', p. 155. Cf. Godwin's discussion of national education in *Political Justice*, p. 357.

⁶⁸ Joseph Priestley, *Miscellaneous Observations Relating to Education: More Especially as It Respects the Conduct of the Mind* (London: J. Johnson, 1778), p. 59.

⁶⁹ See the essay 'Of Awakening the Mind' in *The Enquirer*, p. 85.

which they are read'; 'he who reads in a proper spirit, can scarcely read too much'.⁷⁰ Godwin was arguing that the mind's receptive posture determines the way that it receives textual content, and therefore the development of mental posture should be the primary focus of curricula, not textual content.

Whilst this principle of critical exposure was a well-known aspect of Dissenting education, Godwin's specific focus upon early childhood reading was controversial even among Dissenters. This was exacerbated by the timing of his publication: in the wake of Revolutionary events across the Channel, his theory of 'tendency' sounded like an excuse to infuse radical doctrine into the most vulnerable, despite the fact that it was drawn from Dissenting faith in the mind's innate capacity to distinguish truth from error. Even the reviewers that were charitable towards his descriptions of 'the true mode of reading' elsewhere in *The Enquirer* were critical of his recommendation of unrestricted childhood reading in the same volume. 'Books are, in effect, companions', wrote one; 'and parents might almost as safely trust their children to gather up any straggler whom they may find in the streets for an associate, as, before their judgment is in some degree matured, to read any book that falls in their way'.⁷¹ It was the effect of exposure upon the young mind that was in dispute. For this reviewer, exposure to a broad range of ideas could only be a corrupting force, but for Godwin, it trained the mind in its most vital task, discernment.

Godwin's principle of reading exposure in *The Enquirer* was designed to foster not only rational engagement, but also sympathetic engagement. Imaginative exposure was just as important to him as critical exposure. This was partly a continuation of Dissenting advice: Watts had described good reading as 'Enter[ing] into the sense and argument of the authors you read', a sort of penetration into the thought-worlds of others. Whilst it might be strategic initially to take a cursory overview of a text – skimming through in order to survey its contents or refresh one's memory – serious reading was marked out by imaginative investment.⁷² In *The Enquirer*, however, Godwin made sympathetic immersion more explicit as a principle for would-be readers. Watts, like most Dissenters from earlier in the century, had often viewed the imagination with suspicion, sometimes portraying it as a threat to reason. In accordance with the elevation of the imagination in late-eighteenth-century thought, Godwin remedied this neglect, and presented a good relationship between an author and a reader as intense and absorptive.⁷³ It was about investing in someone else's thought-world; liberating the imagination in order to see the world through different eyes.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 141, 237-38.

⁷¹ [William Enfield], 'Review of "The Enquirer"', *Monthly Review*, 23 (1797), pp. 291-302 (p. 294).

⁷² Watts recommends this skimming strategy in *Improvement of the Mind*, p. 206.

⁷³ See for example Isaac Watts, *Logick*, pp. 99-100. Cf. James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

This principle is clearly seen in the essay ‘Of an Early Taste for Reading’, in which Godwin describes the powerful hold of texts over readers’ imaginations in positive terms: ‘When I read Thomson, I become Thomson; when I read Milton I become Milton’, he asserts. ‘I find myself a sort of intellectual camelion [*sic*], assuming the colour of the substances on which I rest’.⁷⁴ Somewhat counterintuitively, the critically active reader must begin by suspending their faculties and submitting to the whims of their material, almost to the extent of self-effacement. A good reader must ‘become the creature of his author’; he ‘bends with all his caprices, [and] sympathises with all his sensations’.⁷⁵ Reading is imagined as a temporary possession, by which the reader becomes assimilated into the world of the book. Godwin argued elsewhere in *The Enquirer* that a good author will ‘pour their whole soul into mine [...] raise my ambition, expand my faculties, invigorate my resolutions, and seem to double my existence’.⁷⁶

This idea that reading might ‘expand’ or ‘double’ the reader indicates the developmental purpose for which Godwin intended such immersive habits. He believed that the faculty of sympathy was vital to intellectual life, and that imaginatively invested reading was the key means of giving it exercise. It is ‘This mode of reading, upon which we depend for the consummation of our improvement’, Godwin claimed; by practising imaginative empathy from an early age, the reader would learn to sympathise with the situations and viewpoints of others, and thus expand their range of understanding.⁷⁷ As indicated by his phrase ‘*intellectual camelion*’, he saw this as integral to the mind’s task of judgment: feeling was essential to reason, not separable from it. Indeed, it is this immersive reading habit that has produced Godwin’s ‘man of talent’ described at the beginning of the ‘Early Taste for Reading’ essay, an idealised enquirer who possesses great analytic and creative powers. Godwin’s choice of Milton and Thomson as his example authors for this imaginative activity is not incidental, either; he considered poetry, drama and prose narrative (of both historical and fictional origins) especially important vehicles for the exercise of sympathy.⁷⁸

This imaginative exposure wasn’t only important for the development of reasoning powers. In Godwin’s view it was also central to morality. Just as he placed confidence in the connection between truth and the mind’s reasoning faculty, he figured a special relationship between moral goodness and the mind’s feeling capacity; this led to his advocacy of imaginative exposure from an early age as well as critical exposure. As Pamela Clemit notes, *The Enquirer* was a transitional work for Godwin, marking the point from which he consistently prioritised imaginative operation and explored its role in the development of sympathetic generosity, influenced by moral sense theory through thinkers such

⁷⁴ *The Enquirer*, p. 96.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 140-41; for the idea of reading as ‘benign possession’ in this period more generally, see Jackson, *Romantic Readers*, pp. 296-97.

⁷⁷ *The Enquirer*, p. 96.

⁷⁸ See my discussion in Chapter Two of Godwin’s essay ‘Of History and Romance’ and preface to *Cloudesley*. For Godwin’s attitude to drama more generally, see David O’Shaughnessy, *William Godwin and the Theatre*.

as David Hume and Adam Smith.⁷⁹ In fact, Godwin was interested in this before the 1790s, for literary sympathy is the hallmark of his early collection of published sermons (1784). His key strategy in these pieces was to encourage imaginative engagement with an exemplary Biblical figure (Aaron, for example, after the loss of his sons) in order to recruit interest in his subsequent analysis and application of the passage.⁸⁰ Godwin made this conviction particularly explicit in his work of the late 1790s, however, after the first edition of *Political Justice* was criticised for being exclusively reason-focussed.⁸¹ He increasingly emphasised his belief that feeling and reason must operate in tandem, each modifying, directing and expanding the other. *The Enquirer* thus figures healthy reading as a dialectic between rationality and sensibility, possession and being possessed. The imaginatively exposed reader expands their faculties of understanding and of feeling, literally gaining mental substance and structure from their engagement with reading material.

In accordance with this conviction, Godwin described imaginative exposure through reading as a preventative measure, as well as a developmental one. The reader who remained imaginatively disengaged was barred from the task of free enquiry; he ‘makes a superficial acquaintance with his author [...] Stiffness and formality are always visible between them’. Godwin argued that lack of sympathy would mar a textual relationship in the same way that it would mar a face-to-face relationship. Reading of the unimaginative kind made ‘an unproductive pedant’, for since the nature of print as a long-distance medium tended towards the disengagement of the affections, readers who remained at arm’s length inevitably succumbed to the dangers of cold rationalism.⁸² The best readers were imaginatively and intellectually porous, like Godwin’s ‘man of talent’ in *The Enquirer*. In order for the mind to develop holistically, it must be fully exposed to the ideas and sentiments of others.

Godwin’s principle of exposure was also manifest in his advocacy of simultaneous reading. In his ‘Letter of Advice’, he advised the serious reader to have several books on the go at once:

He should compare one authority with another, and not put himself under the guidance of any. This is the difference I make between reading and study. He that confines himself to one book at a time, may be amused, but is no student.⁸³

These instructions reflect the ambivalent concept of the mind upon which the principle of reading exposure was based. Godwin was expressing caution about textual authority, reminding readers to exercise discrimination and not to entrust themselves to any one viewpoint or source. Reading one

⁷⁹ Clemit, ‘Godwin’s Educational Theory’, pp. 9-11.

⁸⁰ See Godwin, ‘Sketches of History in Six Sermons’, in *Political and Philosophical Writings*, VII, pp. 1-58.

⁸¹ Godwin articulated this strategy explicitly in his preface to *St Leon* (1799): ‘I have been anxious for opportunity and leisure to modify some of the earlier chapters of that work [*Political Justice*] in conformity to the sentiments inculcated in this. Not that I see cause to make any change respecting the principle of justice, or any thing else fundamental to the system there delivered; but that I apprehend domestic and private affections inseparable from the nature of man, and from what may be styled the culture of the heart’ (p. 11). For further details see Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice*, and D. H. Monro, *Godwin’s Moral Philosophy*, pp. 7, 36-56.

⁸² *The Enquirer*, pp. 96-97. See Chapters Four and Five for Godwin’s writing about print as a medium.

⁸³ ‘Letter of Advice to a Young American’, pp. 327-28.

work at a time would cloud one's mental vision and promote an uncritical attitude towards the author's views. Godwin thus exposes his fear of the mind's darker aspects: its tendency to be undiscerning, to be lazy, to fall under the sway of the loudest voice.

These dangers even led Godwin to apply the principle of exposure to the physical space in which one reads. In the 'Letter of Advice' he argued that readers should be 'surrounded' with books, so that they 'sit in some measure in the middle of a library'. Writing to Percy Shelley, he claimed that a 'true' reader should be 'surrounded with a sort of intrenchment [*sic*] and breastwork of books'. This environment was important because it reminded them of their position within a dialogue, the material objects symbolising a circle of conversation.⁸⁴ In other words, it encouraged readers to stay on the alert, to stay focussed on the ends for which intellectual exposure was intended: critical development. Yet Godwin's military language, 'intrenchment and breastwork' (modes of fortification), also makes this a hostile setting, positioning the mind in danger of attack. Reading several works at once provided a sort of mental barricade, defending it from the assaults of error, prejudice and passivity.

This sort of reading was accordingly an important statement of distinction for Godwin. It was a sign that the reader had resisted the intellectual vices of their age. Such conviction is evident in his 'Letter of Advice' comment about 'the difference [...] between reading and study'. Like Watts, he was presenting the activity of reading as fundamentally unprofitable when uncoupled from 'meditation, or study', and here he offers simultaneous reading as an indication that this mistake has been avoided. In a similar vein, the letter to Percy Shelley associates the reading of one book at a time with 'boarding-school misses'. To read several books at once, Godwin implies, is to separate oneself from immature, amusement-driven readers, who read only to experience pleasure and have no interest in the life of the mind.⁸⁵

Godwin also developed this principle of reading exposure to accommodate religious scepticism, and in this respect he departed from the advice and practice of his Academy days. After the collapse of his faith, Godwin resisted the interpretive authority that his educators had endowed upon the Christian Scriptures, arguing that they should be read in the same manner as any other book. As Isabel Rivers points out, the pedagogical methods of Dissenting academies were based upon theological assumptions about epistemic authority (the 'perfection of scripture as a Christian's *only* rule of faith

⁸⁴ Ibid.; Godwin to Percy Shelley, Dec. 10 1812, in 'Godwin/Shelley Correspondence', p. 81. For an insightful discussion of this 'simultaneous' reading advice in light of theories of sociality, see Julie Carlson, *England's First Family of Writers*, pp. 80-81. Real conversation was itself vital to Godwin, of course, a corrective to the uncritical or narrow attitudes that books might foster; Chapter Four of this project discusses Godwin's comparison of reading and conversation as different media. On the place and practice of conversation in Dissenting and radical circles during this period, see John Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community, 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸⁵ 'Letter of Advice to a Young American', p. 328; Godwin to Percy Shelley, Dec. 10 1812, in 'Godwin/Shelley Correspondence', p. 81.

and practice’).⁸⁶ Thus, whilst Isaac Watts could recommend that students ‘Deal freely with every Author you read’, he qualified his advice by adding that ‘I would be understood to speak only of human Authors, not of the sacred and inspired Writings’.⁸⁷ The tension of authority evident here between reason and revelation was something Godwin felt keenly as a young man, and his eventual response to it was to erase the distinction entirely. He reflected upon his own education with frustration, writing of the Bible in 1818 that:

happy shall that man be, who comes to its examination and study with a firm and impartial mind, and not, as I did in my early acquaintance with its contents, with a mind overlaid with religious awe, and tutored beforehand as to what spirit it was to be read with, what I must look for and what I must find it, what set of feelings, arising in its perusal, I must instantly check, and what set of feelings I must cherish with fervour and devotion.⁸⁸

Godwin aligns his experience here with that of his eponymous protagonist in *Mandeville* (1817) – a character whose environmental conditioning predisposes him to superstitious ‘tingling and horror’ upon his reading of the *Book of Martyrs* – thus contrasting the restrictions of Dissenting practice in his childhood with the free and impartial ideal upheld in its educational theory.⁸⁹ The mind’s capacity for private judgment was ‘overlaid’ by prior instruction, compromising its independence.

Overall, Godwin remediated the principle of reading exposure that he had inherited from rational Dissent in three ways: in his advocacy of extensive reading, imaginatively invested reading and simultaneous reading. He also developed the principle in various directions, sometimes pushing it beyond orthodox bounds. He placed a new emphasis upon critical exposure for very young readers, expanded upon the role of the imagination, and removed what he saw to be a hermeneutic bias towards the Christian Scriptures. Ultimately, however, Godwin’s emphasis upon exposure in reading reveals the ambivalence that he inherited concerning the mind’s innate tendencies. His instructions for extensive, intellectually porous reading practices suggest a high degree of confidence in the mind’s discriminating powers, yet his strategies for defending the reader against prejudice and passivity present an unsettling picture of its weakness, ignorance and susceptibility.

⁸⁶ Rivers, *The Defence of Truth*, p. 18.

⁸⁷ Watts *Improvement of the Mind*, p. 207; see Rivers, ‘Defence of Truth’, p. 18. Dissenting rhetoric often appears to conflict with educational practice in this regard; Joseph Priestley, for example, preached that ‘You, my brethren, have no interest whatever in the support of christianity, if it be false [...] we, therefore, as dissenters, shall be absolutely inexcusable, if we be not friends to free inquiry in its utmost extent, and if we do not give the most unbounded scope to the use of our reason in matters of religion’ (*The Importance and Extent of Free Enquiry in Matters of Religion*, p. 24).

⁸⁸ ‘Of Religion’, in *Political and Philosophical Writings*, VII, pp. 59-74 (p. 72).

⁸⁹ See *Mandeville*, p. 52.

Routine

Like Watts, Godwin presented ‘true’ reading as a temporal discipline. He believed that healthy habits of enquiry were formed by adhering to routine, and that the task of reading must thus be undertaken with regularity. He himself certainly lived up to this ideal: the records of his fifty-year diary show that a structured routine of reading, writing and conversation never left him. Godwin emphasised strategies for this sort of daily discipline throughout his educational writings: use your time most efficiently to its proper end, he urged, in the same way that you would for bodily exercise or a military drill. Once again, these instructions reflect two divergent perspectives on the human mind: a confident view of its innate capacities and a cautious view of its rebellious tendencies. Godwin became increasingly preoccupied with reading in relation to time as his career progressed, theorising the perceived threats to this mental activity more intentionally in the 1820s and 30s.

In *The Enquirer* Godwin argued that methodical habits of reading should be instilled in children from a very young age. His essays ‘Of the Sources of Genius’ and ‘Of an Early Taste for Reading’ propounded this idea most directly, but throughout the collection he used the imagery of husbandry to underscore his point. Just as Watts had warned that ‘infinite errors will overspread the mind, which is utterly neglected and lies without any cultivation’, Godwin described the goal of education as ‘a cultivated intellect’.⁹⁰ The point of quotidian discipline, Godwin contended, is that

[The child’s] mind must not be suffered to lie idle. The preceptor in this respect is like the incloser of uncultivated land; his first crops are not valued for their intrinsic excellence; they are sown that the land may be brought into order.⁹¹

The sheer fact of regular reading prepares the ground for intellectual life, Godwin claimed; it was an essential part of mental cultivation, whatever the initial ability of the student. Without this discipline, the soil of the mind would become hard and overgrown, unable to produce its crop of sound judgment. As if to reinforce this, Godwin depicted the fate of a young aristocrat who was indeed ‘suffered to lie idle’ in his novel *Fleetwood*. Left to wander through literature at his will during childhood, Fleetwood develops an unhealthy mind – a ‘sick imagination’ – which condemns him to domestic misery.⁹²

Given such potentially disastrous outcomes, Godwin urged that the young be guided into rigorous reading strategies. ‘Let us not from a mistaken compassion to infant years, suffer the mind to grow up in habits of inattention and irresolution’, he exhorted in ‘Of the Study of the Classics’. This essay protested against the idea that the early reading of classical texts was unnecessary for a good education, arguing that engagement with the classics in their original languages was especially vital

⁹⁰ *The Enquirer*, p. 83.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85. Cf. the essay ‘Of An Early Taste for Reading’ (pp. 94-97), which describes the promise of talent in children as an ‘embryon seed’ which must be nurtured carefully lest it ‘suffer an untimely blight’.

⁹² *Fleetwood*, p. 235.

for a child's development. It was integral to producing 'discipline of mind', for the linguistic and logical skills thus developed would foster critical activity and protect against the 'lethargic indolence' of an under-exercised brain.⁹³

A disciplined approach to student reading had characterised Dissenting academy teaching, but Godwin was rechanneling its arguments towards a specific contemporary issue. Watts had resisted, in his educational work, the growing idea that intellectual ability could develop untutored, instructing would-be readers to 'Presume not too much upon a bright genius'. *The Enquirer* attacked this more explicitly as a rival educational trend. In 'Of Learning', Godwin decried the state of those who have not 'engaged in any methodical and persevering course of reading', and particularly took issue with those who justified such a casual approach through a belief in innate, natural genius. '[L]earning is the ally, not the adversary of genius', he argued; whilst children bring certain dispositions with them into the world, true genius is always generated subsequent to birth through structured immersion in the habits of enquiry.⁹⁴ An early routine of reading, Godwin claimed, was essential for the creation of critical health.

Godwin's emphasis upon temporal discipline for the very young further reflected his conflicted assumptions about the child's mind. His principle of exposure expressed great confidence in the mind's innate propensity to reason, judge and identify truth, yet his principle of routine suggested that these propensities needed to be instilled from outside – indeed, it suggested that the young tended to forget or rebel against them. His agricultural imagery expressed this tension well: crop growth is both a power or potential innate to the seeds, and a condition that the farmer must labour towards. Accordingly, in 'Of An Early Taste for Reading', Godwin described the promise of talent in children as an 'embryon seed' which should be nurtured carefully lest it 'suffer an untimely blight'.

In fact, Godwin addressed the issue of innate tendencies directly both in *The Enquirer* and in *Thoughts on Man*, a continuity which suggests it troubled him throughout his career. In both collections he acknowledged differing, innate qualities in children at birth and yet simultaneously contended that education was the most powerful influence upon the mind.⁹⁵ Godwin theorised the dark side of the mind more explicitly in *Thoughts on Man*: he devoted an essay to what he called the principle of 'innate rebelliousness', arguing that 'It is the business of education to tame the wild ass, the restive and rebellious principle, in our nature'.⁹⁶ Like Dissenting educators before him, Godwin

⁹³ *The Enquirer*, pp. 103, 105.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 231, 238. Cf. the *Enquirer* essay 'Of the Sources of Genius', pp. 87-94, and 'Of the Distribution of Talents' in *Thoughts on Man*, pp. 48-67. Works that advanced the popularity of this concept of 'natural original genius' included Edward Young's 'Conjectures On Original Composition' (1759) and William Duff's 'Essay on Original Genius' (1767). For the theological impetus for some of these ideas, see D. W. Odell, 'The Argument of Young's "Conjectures on Original Composition"', *Studies in Philology*, 78.1 (1981), 87-106.

⁹⁵ See *The Enquirer*, pp. 87-94, 231, 238, and the essay 'Of the Distribution of Talents' in *Thoughts on Man*, pp. 48-67.

⁹⁶ *Thoughts on Man*, p. 100.

presented reading as a discipline in order to counter such omens of irrationality and stubbornness. His instructions for reading routine are at once a statement of fear toward intellectual corruption, and a statement of faith toward intellectual potential.

Alongside his theorising of intellectual rebellion, Godwin increasingly theorised the reader's use of time. In *Thoughts on Man* he explored the life of the mind from various different temporal perspectives, most notably in 'Of the Duration of Human Life', 'Of Human Vegetation' and 'Of Leisure'. 'Of the Duration of Human Life' addresses the importance of using time effectively: Godwin details the ideal work patterns of a scholar, describing how temporal windows of mental efficiency should be exploited, but not exhausted.⁹⁷ Like Watts in *The Improvement of the Mind*, he recommended strategies that would maximise one's temporal opportunities and exercise one's judgment to the greatest degree. In 'Of Human Vegetation', however, he claimed that this focus on mental activity was only part of the story. He even quoted and critiqued his own account of 'the man of talent' in *The Enquirer*, claiming that he had overlooked the pervasive presence and multiple uses of mental indolence. He went on to distinguish between four mental states that together constituted the sum total of intellectual life, and recommended reading to the state of most heightened attention rather than the partial 'mental indolence' that one experiences whilst lying in bed. He did, however, make a distinction between the demands of 'books of instruction' and 'books of amusement', noting that partial intellectual passivity was a great source of pleasure to readers of fiction and spectators of theatre.⁹⁸ The basis of both essays is Godwin's contention that the ideal enquirer 'disposes of his hours much in the same manner, as the commander of a company of men whom it is his business to train in the discipline of war'. Rather than a casual or haphazard occupation, reading is cast as an integral part of a military strategy.⁹⁹

Godwin's warfare imagery reflected his belief that disciplined, intentional reading was something that needed to be campaigned for in current society. He particularly attacked the idea of reading solely for entertainment; locating its home within the highest sphere of mental engagement, he imagined reading as a kind of military exercise, a key part of humanity's ultimate battle for critical autonomy. Since he considered the entire use of one's time as analogous to 'the discipline of war', Godwin included under this heading the emerging category of 'leisure hours'. In his essay 'On Leisure', he argued that this kind of time was just as much involved in the intellectual 'warfare' of life as the time of business.¹⁰⁰ Reading in leisure time was thus infinitely distinct from reading *for* leisure. Writing to Shelley in 1812, he had claimed that a 'true' reader should be 'surrounded with a sort of intrenchment and

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 110-17. See Chapter Four for more on reading and time.

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 119-28 (pp. 123-24); cf. p. 133 (in the essay 'Of Leisure').

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 133.

breastwork of books. It is for boarding-school misses to read one book at a time'.¹⁰¹ In opposing the strategic bookishness of the serious reader, whose intellectual activities represent a structure of defence against the ideologically fraught environment, to the stereotypical schoolgirl who reads for entertainment, Godwin was dismissing casual, amusement-driven reading methods. His 'true mode of reading', in contrast to the leisure reader, was methodical and industrious.

Skill

A diligent routine of reading and an extensive reading scope were not enough on their own, however. Just like Watts, Godwin argued that 'true' reading involved specific skills of critical engagement. 'He that is not initiated in the practice of close investigation, is constantly exposed to the danger of being deceived', he cautioned.¹⁰² This reflected his conviction that skilled reading was a discipline, just as much as reading routine or exposure; techniques of textual engagement had to be learned, repeated and integrated into a way of life. In all his educational writings Godwin reaffirmed the emphases that Doddridge and Watts had placed upon close reading, slow reading and notation, allaying these activities to the proper formation of private judgment.

Godwin appropriated the familiar comparison of reading and digestion in order to argue, like Watts, that only the careful, critical reader would benefit from their materials. 'True reading is investigation', he wrote to Shelley, 'not a passive reception of what our author has given us, but an active enquiry, appreciation and digestion of his subject'.¹⁰³ In *The Enquirer's* 'Of Learning' he presented a lengthy contrast between the shallow reader and the 'true' reader, using gustatory language to drive his point home. He began by presenting books as objects of dense 'nutriment'; he then argued that 'the true mode of reading' was the mode that processed this effectively, turning it to profit. He refuted the popular argument that avid reading overloaded the mind with the thoughts of others and 'prevent[ed] its digesting them'. '[I]f the systems we read, were always to remain in masses upon the mind, unconcocted and unaltered, undoubtedly in that case they would only deform it', but the true reader will 'mix', 'dissect, and 'sift' a work's contents, 'repassing in his thoughts the notions of which it consists'. Godwin claimed that it was only through this process that the ideas the reader encountered would be 'render[ed] his own', echoing Watts's alliance of digestion and possession (reading 'concoct[s] our intellectual food, and turns it into a part of ourselves').¹⁰⁴ He thus portrayed disengaged reading practices as both unprofitable and unhealthy.

¹⁰¹ Godwin to Percy Shelley, Dec. 10 1812, in 'Godwin/Shelley Correspondence', p. 81. For more on Godwin's idea of leisure, see Robert Anderson, 'Godwin, Keats and Productive Leisure', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 33.1 (2002): 10-13.

¹⁰² *The Enquirer*, p. 103.

¹⁰³ Godwin to Percy Shelley, Dec. 10 1812, in 'Godwin/Shelley Correspondence', p. 81.

¹⁰⁴ *The Enquirer*, pp. 233-37.

Critically rigorous reading was a two-edged process for Godwin: it involved both dismantling texts and remaking them. The passage about the ‘true mode of reading’ from *The Enquirer* makes this clear:

if we read in a just spirit, perhaps we cannot read too much: in other words, if we mix our own reflections with what we read; if we dissect the ideas and arguments of our author; if, by having recourse to all subsidiary means, we endeavour to clear the recollection of him in our minds; if we compare part with part, detect his errors, new model his systems, adopt so much of him as is excellent, and explain within ourselves the reason of our disapprobation as to what is otherwise. A judicious reader will have a greater number of ideas that are his own passing through his mind, than of ideas presented to him by his author. He sifts his merits, and bolts his arguments.¹⁰⁵

Skilled reading was partly a process of breaking down: the reader must ‘dissect’, ‘compare part with part’, ‘sift’ and ‘bolt’ (used in the now uncommon sense of examining or separating by sifting, as through a bolting-cloth). Dissecting a text in this manner would bring many benefits. The reader would better grasp the structure and argument of their text, they would ward off their own propensity to erroneous judgment, and they would develop a healthy critical posture. Yet this deconstructive scrutiny was also closely allied to a creative process. Readers must ‘new model’ the text, adopting its worthy elements and combining them with their own ideas to form new material. Godwin wove the activities of dismantling and remaking together so tightly that they seem hard to distinguish from each other in this passage, the very structure of his description echoing the integrative reading process that he recommends. The point of such reading was to bring the ideas of the author into such intimate intercourse with those of the reader that, much like in the digestive process, they would be broken down in order to be remade and assimilated.

Godwin recommended several practical things to aid this task of critical engagement, which built in many respects upon Watts’s advice. As discussed under the heading of exposure, he believed that reading several works simultaneously was crucial, because it would enable to reader to compare a broad range of ideas and bring them into conversation with each other. Of equal importance was to ‘Learn to read slow’, as his ‘Letter of Advice’ instructs.¹⁰⁶ This theme was expounded upon with most zeal in ‘Of the Duration of Human Life’ in *Thoughts on Man*:

Be earnest in your application, but let your march be vigilant and slow. There is a doggrel couplet which I have met with in a book on elocution:

Learn to speak slow: all other graces
Will follow in their proper places.

I could wish to recommend a similar process to the student in the course of his reading. [...] Nothing is more easy than to gabble through a work replete with the profoundest elements of thinking, and to carry away almost nothing, when we have finished.

The book does not even deserve to be read, which does not impose upon us the duty of frequent pauses, much reflecting and inward debate, or require that we should often go back, compare one observation and statement with another, and does not call upon us to combine

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 237.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Letter of Advice to a Young American’, p. 328.

and knit together the *disjecta membra*.

It is an observation which has often been repeated, that, when we come to read an excellent author a second and a third time, we find in him a multitude of things, that we did not in the slightest degree perceive in a first reading. A careful first reading would have a tendency in a considerable degree to anticipate this following crop.¹⁰⁷

This essay unites slow reading with critical activity. The process does not seem to be necessarily linear but transcends the written structure – Godwin suggests that readers must pause, back-track, and tease apart premises and statements in order to unfold the work's scope within their mind. Slow reading would create the space and time necessary for dismembering ('compare one observation and statement with another') and remodelling ('combine and knit together the *disjecta membra*'). Indeed, Godwin's inclusion of the 'doggerel couplet' here perhaps exemplifies this instruction; extracting it from the rather unremarkable context in which it was 'met' during his reading, Godwin weaves it into his argument, imbuing it with new significance.

The records of Godwin's diary suggest that he practiced this kind of concentrated, non-linear reading himself. Entries show that he often did not read through works systematically; he dwelt closely upon a cluster of pages at a time, particularly when consulting philosophical or historical works. His diary entries for July 1794, for instance, record 'Hume on Tragedy, 10 pp', 'Hume, Standard of Taste, 24 pp', and 'Hume, Phil. Sects, p. 12', rendering the question 'When did Godwin read Hume?' far from straightforward to answer. Godwin also appears to distinguish between two kinds of reading in his diary, using 'cala' to indicate his perusal through a text in a more piecemeal fashion, '*ca et la*'.¹⁰⁸ These habits perhaps reflected his belief that, rather than racing through one book at a time, readers should focus upon specific sections of various books and bring them into conversation with their own thoughts. This was one way of avoiding the tendency to 'gabble' through books, leaving them empty-handed.

Above all, Godwin argued that writing enabled this kind of digestive, skilled reading. The profitable reader was the one who 'renders [ideas] his own', and thus the pinnacle of Godwin's reading advice was the formation of personal response on paper. Doddridge had advised the student 'to read with a Pen in his Hand', and Watts had recommended that readers marked, summarised and rewrote passages. Following their instructions, Godwin recommended specific practices of notation:

I have practiced a manner [of reading] from my youth, to which in a considerable degree I ascribe my improvement, such as it is. This is, always to read with a pen in my hand, & to put down in the fewest words that can be made to convey a full & perspicuous meaning, such leading points of the author as strike me when they occur, points that I most wish to remember, & upon which his way of thinking principally turns; as well as such thoughts, properly my own, as suggest themselves in the perusal. This takes very little paper, frequently

¹⁰⁷ *Thoughts on Man*, p. 115. On the concept in this passage of books themselves 'calling upon us' to combine and knit things together, see Chapter Four.

¹⁰⁸ See the online introduction to *The Diary of William Godwin* [accessed 24 May 2018].

not above three or four pages, half the size I am now writing, for each author. [...] It must be of a sort that can be taken in almost at a glance, & consulted & reconsulted with facility.¹⁰⁹

Godwin presented the assembly of one's own materials as an essential part of textual processing; to truly learn from the thoughts of a writer, readers must wield a pen themselves. This enabled them to judge accurately and remember these judgments when they revisited the text in the future ('consulted & reconsulted'). It would thus enable that crucial process, the formation of private judgment: 'thoughts, properly my own'. This was the ultimate goal of reading for Godwin, as it was for Jennings, Doddridge and Watts.

Yet Godwin expanded upon the role of writing to a greater degree than his Dissenting predecessors, insisting that more formal composition was integral to the proper process of reading. Something about good reading fostered good writing, and for Godwin the two should never be separated. In his discussion 'Of Learning' he observed that: 'the industry which books demand, is of the same species as the industry requisite for the development of our own reflections; the study of other men's writings, is strikingly analogous to the invention and arrangement of our own'.¹¹⁰ Later, he argued in his letter to Shelley that to read well 'I must place myself in the situation of a man making a book, rather than reading books'.¹¹¹ Whilst on one level the process of 'true reading' fostered the critical industry essential to writing skills, on another level the reader must already assume the position of an author to recruit this kind of industry in the first place. This relationship was aptly summarised in his letter to Martin:

The great art perhaps of profitable reading is to have the mind, not passive, but active & at work during the whole sitting, composing, if I may so express it, for itself, even while studying the compositions of another. He that would read to purpose, should spend half as much time in writing compositions of his own, as in reading.¹¹²

Godwin presented reading and composition as mutually reinforcing, their integration and collaboration essential to the formation of an autonomous critical posture. Any practice that alienated the two was not considered 'profitable' or 'to purpose'.

The formal process of writing mattered so much to Godwin because it was, in his estimation, intimately linked to the production of sound judgment in society. His comments participate in a growing emphasis upon the uses of writing in his social theory. Successive editions of *Political Justice* in the 1790s increasingly urged the communication of knowledge to be practised explicitly amidst a current climate of repression and timidity – 'If every man today would tell all the truth he knew, it is impossible to predict how short would be the reign of usurpation and folly' – and his novels across the following decades upheld the centrality of written 'confession' to social

¹⁰⁹ Godwin to Marmaduke Martin, 10 February 1798, *Letters of William Godwin*, II, pp. 9-10.

¹¹⁰ *The Enquirer*, p. 237.

¹¹¹ Godwin to Percy Shelley, Dec. 10 1812, in 'Godwin/Shelley Correspondence', p. 81.

¹¹² Godwin to Marmaduke Martin, 10 February 1798, *The Letters of William Godwin*, II, p. 10.

advancement.¹¹³ Godwin believed that the creation of writer-readers would foster an environment of free communication, remedying the current lack of knowledge sharing amongst communities. Moreover, as Chapters Four and Five show, Godwin increasingly wove the book-object into his model of perfectibility, using its physical nature to defend and flesh out his theory of society's necessary intellectual advancement.

Thoughts on Man reflects this growing ideological investment in books and book-writing, for in it Godwin positioned textual production as the reader's ultimate goal or end more overtly than he had done before. 'The man who does not speak, is an unfledged thinker; and the man that does not write, is but half an investigator', he claimed in an essay 'Of Intellectual Abortion'.¹¹⁴ This essay laments the fate of minds that enjoy 'the richest soil' and yet fall prey to 'indolence and irresolution', writing nothing in return. Their ideas and plans terminate in 'miscarriage', because

They skim away from one flower in the parterre of literature to another, like the bee, without, like the bee, gathering sweetness from each, to increase the public stock, and enrich the magazine of public thought.¹¹⁵

Evoking Seneca's much-appropriated image of the bee, Godwin contrasts half-committed readers with a neo-classical scholarly ideal: unlike those who harvest and reproduce truth, virtue and knowledge for the benefit of society, they flit aimlessly from flower to flower, contributing nothing. The reader who actively commits their responses to paper, however, he aligns with a long-running heritage of productive enquirers, scholarly harvesters whose activity benefits the public realm. Unproductive reading did not merit the name, for Godwin, and he believed that the making of minds was completed by the making of texts.

In Godwin's work, then, the marriage of reading and writing became the major skill of 'true reading'. This focus departed from the reading advice of Watts and Doddridge, which ultimately considered reading's end-goal as the personal knowledge of God-given truth; Godwin shifted the perspective more absolutely onto the process of knowledge exchange, or literary activity, itself. He constructed the textually productive reader as 'the genuine hero' in *Thoughts on Man*, a traveller who battled his way through a literary landscape against temptations to indolence and passivity:

The man who merely wanders through the fields of knowledge in search of its gayest flowers and of whatever will afford him the most enviable amusement, will necessarily return home at night with a very slender collection. He that shall apply himself with self-denial and an unshrinking resolution to the improvement of his mind, will unquestionably be found more fortunate in the end. He is not deterred by the gulphs [*sic*] that yawn beneath his feet, or the mountains that may oppose themselves to his progress. He knows that the adventurer of timid mind, and that is infirm of purpose, will never make himself master of those points which it

¹¹³ *Political Justice: Variants*, p. 163; see Pamela Clemit, 'Self-Analysis as Social Critique: The Autobiographical Writings of Godwin and Rousseau'. On the role of 'confession' in Godwin's fiction, see Chapter Two.

¹¹⁴ *Thoughts on Man*, p. 41; *The Enquirer*, pp. 232-33.

¹¹⁵ *Thoughts on Man*, p. 73.

would be most honourable to him to subdue. But he who undertakes to commit to writing the result of his researches, and to communicate his discoveries to mankind, is the genuine hero.¹¹⁶

Once again, his argument echoed that of Watts:

In the pursuit of every valuable subject of knowledge keep the end always in your eye, and be not diverted from it by every pretty trifle you meet with in the way. Some persons have such a wandering genius, that they are ready to pursue every incident, theme or occasional idea, till they have lost sight of their original subject [...] like a man who is sent in quest of some great treasure, but he steps aside to gather every flower he finds, or stands still to dig up every shining pebble he meets with in his way, till the treasure is forgotten and never found.¹¹⁷

Both writers positioned the reader as a pilgrim along the lines of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, arguing that a focus upon the end-goal of reading, the celestial city of knowledge, would enable them to withstand temptations of idleness and superficiality. Godwin thus associated his productive reader with a holy quest, distinguishing their journey from the profane loitering of inferior readers. Here the parallel ends, however. The goal for Watts's traveller was to find the kingdom of heaven, emphasised here by the allusion to Jesus's parable of the treasure in Matthew 13.44. Watts, in fact, had little to say about the activity of writing in *The Improvement of the Mind*, besides a caution against vanity in his final paragraph in the event that his student go on to the practice of criticism. Yet for Godwin, the reader's goal was not a body of treasure, as it were, but the journey itself. He modified the tradition of Dissenting reading advice to prioritise individual creative assertion, making the 'genuine hero' the reader who conquered the literary landscape through their active contribution.

Conclusion

Godwin's instructions for reading were conceived according to the principles of exposure, routine and skill that he had received from rational Dissenting culture. For all the educators discussed here, the practice of reading was important because it was understood to form the reader's very nature as a person, shaping their understanding, feelings and actions. This conviction was reflected in the imagery that they used to describe reading: as they figured it in terms of eating, farming and walking, they cast it as essential to the health, growth and direction of human life. As he remediated advice from earlier in the eighteenth century, Godwin certainly made it his own. He resisted the hermeneutic claims of Christian Scripture, developed the principle of imaginative reading, and made composition integral to 'true reading'. Yet despite these departures from his predecessors, he retained their overall conception of reading as a discipline.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 74; cf. p. 225.

¹¹⁷ Watts, *Improvement of the Mind*, p. 257.

Ultimately, Godwin's reading advice reveals that he inherited the rational Dissenters' ambivalence concerning the nature of the mind. He invested great hope in the mind's innate ability to apprehend truth and to develop salutary habits, yet his overall tenor of discipline shows great fear of adverse intellectual principles: passivity, superficiality, rebellion. Emphasising the susceptibility of the human mind to corruption allowed him to diagnose the noetic ills of contemporary society. Yet he also sought to maintain that intellectual perfectibility was a necessary process, and so he simultaneously emphasised the capacity of the human mind to discern, develop and mature.

Godwin's educational writings thus expose a conflicted stance concerning the degree to which the human mind should be invested with epistemological authority. They are fuelled by an unanswered question: How reliable or competent is the mind in acquiring true beliefs, and which factors affect this? The following chapter, 'Truth and Social Media', directly explores this issue. As Godwin evaluated the social roles of different communications media, he was engaging with a longstanding debate about the relationship between the mind and truth, and he placed the printed codex at the heart of the discussion.

Truth and Social Media: *Books and Intellectual Regulation*

Introduction

In 1796, John Thelwall accused William Godwin of ‘recommend[ing] the most extensive plan of freedom and innovation ever discussed’, yet simultaneously ‘reprobat[ing] every measure from which even the most moderate reform can rationally be expected’.¹ By identifying ‘measure’ as the sticking point, Thelwall was not only responding to Godwin’s criticism of his own involvement in the cultural apparatus of political radicalism; he was also pinpointing an internal conflict that would pervade Godwin’s entire corpus. The *fact* of truth’s ‘irresistible advance’, throughout his writings, is flanked by anxious assessments of the *means* of this advance. Godwin was persistently troubled by the particular ways in which truth could be apprehended by the mind, and thus realised as human knowledge.²

In *Political Justice*, for example, Godwin describes a hypothetical situation to his readers in which truth spreads throughout society. This happens through the activities of a chosen few, who acquire and communicate knowledge with relative ease:

Let us imagine to ourselves a number of individuals, who, having first stored their minds with reading and reflection, proceed afterwards in candid and unreserved conversation to compare their ideas [...] We shall then have an idea of knowledge as perpetually gaining ground, unaccompanied with peril in the means of its diffusion. Reason will spread itself, and not a brute and unintelligent sympathy.³

Framed as it is by the language of imagination, this idealised picture of reading and speaking collides with a litany of warnings and qualifications concerning how it should be achieved in the here-and-now. In the text surrounding this passage and throughout the treatise as a whole, it is the ‘peril’ that looms large: written and spoken words are untrustworthy vessels, hindering truth’s apprehension by the contexts of production and reception that they necessarily involve. Hard on the heels of its

¹ John Thelwall, *The Tribune*, vol 2 (London: Symonds, Ridgway, and Smith, 1796), vii. In its immediate context, Thelwall’s complaint responds to Godwin’s recent ‘Considerations on Lord Grenville’s and Mr Pitt’s Bills’ (1795), in which the author condemns both the legislative proposals of government and the activities of London’s politically radical societies, such as the London Corresponding Society, which such legislation was designed to censor. For Godwin’s disagreement with Thelwall, see Mark Philp, ‘Godwin, Thelwall, and the Means of Progress’, pp. 59-82, and Jon Mee, ‘“The Press and Danger of the Crowd”: Godwin, Thelwall, and the Counter-Public Sphere’, pp. 83-102, both in *Godwinian Moments: From the Enlightenment to Romanticism*, ed. by Robert Maniquis and Victoria Myers (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

² For ‘irresistible advance’ see *Political Justice: Variants*, p. 138. As this sentence implies, I use ‘knowledge’ to denote human apprehension of ‘truth’ (the concept of which this chapter investigates).

³ Godwin, *Political Justice*, p. 121. Retained in all subsequent editions.

publication Godwin made such threats the overt focus of his novel *Things as They Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), in which truthful words are lost amongst a storm of communal bias, personal passion and manipulative rhetoric. Ensuing editions of *Political Justice* (1796, 1798) preserved the original version's strange duality, however. The advance of truth was undoubtedly Godwin's rallying cry, yet his preoccupation its dark counterpart, the 'peril in the means of its diffusion'.

This chapter examines Godwin's direct depictions of those means and the peril that they pose to the spread of knowledge in society. I draw attention to the key places in which he assesses the printed codex as a 'means of diffusion' and contrasts its social work to that of conversation: 'Of Revolutions' in *Political Justice* (1793-8), 'Of Learning' in *The Enquirer* (1797) and 'Of Belief' in *Thoughts on Man* (1831). The comments they contain have often been recruited as evidence for a change in direction, by which Godwin's enthusiasm for the conversational culture of London's radical intellectuals in *Political Justice* gave way to his (perhaps less sanguine) investment in books.⁴ I argue here, in contrast, that they highlight more continuity of thought than discontinuity, for they are fundamentally united by a regulative concern. Godwin contends throughout that book-reading and conversation, properly conceived, should work in harmony to balance the speed of intellectual exchange, giving them complementary temporal roles in the social pursuit of knowledge. Intellectual 'commerce' may be slowed or mobilised by reading or speaking respectively, thus preventing hastiness of mind on the one hand, and stagnancy of mind on the other.

Yet Godwin was anxiously preoccupied by these temporal dynamics of knowledge exchange, and this reveals an internal conflict in his work about the degree to which such regulation was necessary to the intellectual progression of society. The roles he assigns to reading and conversation are ambiguous and qualified, raising questions about sources of epistemic authority: his descriptions hinge upon an uncertainty concerning which factors determine the knowing process and to what degree. At times truth is at the mercy of its mediation, and at others medial channels are subservient to truth as a self-sufficient, self-manifesting force. In this way Godwin's work uncovers and probes an historically resonant question: to what extent is truth dependent upon the activities, structures and mediation of social groups, and to what extent is it external to them?

My argument is ultimately that, as Godwin discussed and depicted the social operation of different media, he exposed the crosscurrent of philosophical commitment that underlay his enduring

⁴ See, for example, Julie Carlson, *England's First Family of Writers*, pp. 77-79; Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds*, p. 148. Other works that assume this shift include: Garrett A. Sullivan, "'A Story to Be Hastily Gobbled Up': *Caleb Williams* and Print Culture", *Studies in Romanticism*, 32.3 (1993), 323-37; Kristen Leaver, "Pursuing Conversations: 'Caleb Williams' and the Romantic Construction of the Reader", *Studies in Romanticism*, 33.4 (1994), 589-610; Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite, 'Introducing Romantic Sociability', in *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-23 (p. 16).

preoccupation with the means of intellectual advance more generally. I trace his language of medial regulation to an ambivalent conception of truth in the religious Dissenting environment in which he was educated, according to which truth was both an omnipotent entity and a social product. Godwin's struggle to conceptualise the nature and role of book-reading, I argue, distils a larger struggle to negotiate an inherited context of alethic ambiguity. This ambiguity was not simply a problem, however. I suggest that it also became a literary tool by which Godwin invested reformatory hopes in his media environment.

Media and Temporality

The most consistent feature of the book-object in Godwin's writing is its tendency to slow intellectual exchange. In 'Of Revolutions' its social role is presented in terms that initially appear deprecatory:

Books have by their very nature but a limited operation; though, on account of their permanence, their methodical disquisition, and their easiness of access, they are entitled to the foremost place. But their efficacy ought not to engross our confidence. The number of those by whom reading is neglected is exceedingly great. Books to those by whom they are read have a sort of constitutional coldness. We review the arguments of an "insolent innovator" with sullenness, and are unwilling to stretch our minds to take in all their force. It is with difficulty that we obtain the courage of striking into untrodden paths, and questioning tenets that have been generally received. But conversation accustoms us to hear a variety of sentiments, obliges us to exercise patience and attention, and gives freedom and elasticity to our mental disquisitions. A thinking man, if he will recollect his intellectual history, will find that he has derived inestimable advantage from the stimulus and surprise of colloquial suggestions; and, if he review the history of literature, will perceive that minds of great acuteness and ability have commonly existed in a cluster.⁵

The 'very nature' of books here is 'methodical', 'limited' and 'cold'; they impose restrictions and difficulties upon readers that conversational exchange does not. A book's 'efficacy' as a vector is undermined by its rigid and uncompromising 'constitution', thus apparently counteracting the very mental flexibility which features in *Political Justice* as the gateway to social justice and human achievement. In fact, the language of books here echoes that used elsewhere in the *Enquiry* to condemn political institutions, which have 'a tendency to suspend the elasticity, and put an end to the advancement of mind'.⁶ Conversation is the inverse, an activity defined by its promotion of such 'freedom and elasticity'. Its portrayal as an expansive and enabling activity seems to position it as unquestionably superior: it stretches, releases and strikes out into 'untrodden paths', whereas book-reading limits, chills and discourages fresh enquiry.

A manuscript version of this passage seems to take the contrast even further. The original draft reads:

Every man, that will recollect the history of literature, will perceive that great intellectual penetration has commonly existed in a cluster. What is elicited in the commerce of mutual

⁵ *Political Justice*, p. 121 (kept in all subsequent editions).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

friendship, in the actual contact of mind with mind, is incomparably more excellent than what we draw from the shelves of a library. It is by an experimental acquaintance with the sallies of mind, by that observation which resolves the compound, knowledge, into its constituent parts, by the sympathy that participates in friendly commerce [*sic*] the vigour of the inventor, that men are taught to feel the practicability of wisdom, are excited to generous emulation, and led forward by gradual steps to the summit of excellence. It is with difficulty that we obtain the courage of striking into untrodden paths, and questioning tenets that have been generally received; but example infuses into the mind both enterprise and firmness. We often read the arguments of an ‘insolent innovator’ with sullenness, and are unwilling to stretch our minds to take in all their force. But conversation obliges us to exercise a polite attention [...]. – Familiar discussion therefore is an object next in importance to that of laying open our ideas to general examination, giving permanence to their form, and inviting public attention to the important topics to which they may relate, through the medium of the press.⁷

This extract suggests that conversational friendship facilitates a kind of mental ‘commerce’ that book-reading inhibits. The sympathy generated by ‘actual contact of mind with mind’ mobilises a joint venture in the realm of thought; a deleted word in Godwin’s manuscript reveals that ‘friendly commerce’ was originally ‘friendly shares’, underscoring the nature of the conversational task as mutual participation in an intellectual economy.⁸ A book is thus not simply a sluggish or less effective medium of truth, but is a disruption of this interpersonal circulation – by blocking the ‘actual contact of mind with mind’, it stands in the way of truth’s direct apprehension.

Yet at the same time as he identifies this reticence in the book-form, Godwin takes for granted that it does not detract from its ‘foremost place’ in intellectual life. The manuscript draft likewise places familiar discussion as ‘an object *next* in importance’ to that of the dissemination and scrutiny of printed works. Indeed, it could be argued that they earn this place precisely because they are ‘methodical’, stiff and stubborn; they foster habits of discipline that are necessary for mental independence, the ‘courage of striking into untrodden paths’. This idea had surfaced in the preface to the first edition to *Political Justice*, which described books as beneficial because they were ‘by [their] very nature an appeal to men of study and reflexion’.⁹ Whilst conversation, therefore, features in this passage as an essential lubricant for the mind, the ‘methodical’ pace of book-reading is implicitly presented as a stabilising counterbalance to its colloquial freedom.

The surrounding context makes it explicit that such slowness was indeed conceived as an advantage. As suggested by the chapter title, ‘Of Revolutions’, Godwin’s argument about media was part of a larger argument about the appropriate means of political reform. The section preceding his discussion of books’ ‘limited operation’ in *Political Justice* launched a temporal argument against the activities of radical organisations, such as the London Corresponding Society, whose exploitation of large-scale oral appeal he deemed uncondusive to private judgment. ‘Instead of informing the understanding of the hearer by a flow and regular progression, the orator must beware of detail, must render everything

⁷ *Political Justice: Variants*, pp. 151-52.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁹ *Political Justice*, p. v.

rapid', he complained. 'Truth can scarcely be acquired', he argued, because 'laborious enquiry' is neglected, and participants bend instead to superficial rhetoric. The regularity and perseverance instilled into persons by book-reading is described as precisely what is missing in Society members: 'Strict disquisition, especially to persons not much in the *habits of regular* thinking, is difficult'.¹⁰

This wider argument about the cultural apparatus of radicalism explains Godwin's emphasis upon both the slowness of books and the merits of small-group conversation amongst friends (as opposed to that of larger meetings or formal associations). He reiterated the critique in his 'Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills' (1795), a treatise which described both heat and rapidity as the hallmarks of unreflective exchange – the 'cauldron of civil contention simmers' – reinforcing the fact that his ascription of 'constitutional coldness' to the codex was a counter-discourse to the perceived dangers of oratorical enthusiasm. For Godwin, a certain kind of conversation worked in harmony with book-reading as a remedy for rash conviction; together they shaped the enquiring mind and regulated its intellectual pace.¹¹

Godwin restates this approach to book-reading in *The Enquirer's* 'Of Learning', an essay that uses the idea of the book's 'methodical industry' to argue for the importance of reading in early education. He elaborates upon the properties of the book at length, arguing that stately, moderate speed is something the codex 'imposes upon' its reader:

Books undertake to treat of a subject regularly; to unfold it part by part till the whole is surveyed; they are entirely at our devotion, and may be turned backward and forward as we please; it is their express purpose to omit nothing that is essential to a complete delineation. They are written in tranquility, and in the bosom of meditation: they are revised again and again; their obscurities removed, and their defects supplied. Conversation on the other hand is fortuitous and runs wild; the life's blood of truth is filtrated and diluted, till much of its essence is gone. The intellect that depends upon conversation for nutriment, may be compared to the man who should prefer the precarious existence of a beggar, to the possession of a regular and substantial income.¹²

Here books order their readers: they encourage them to explore a subject regularly, 'to unfold it part by part', a process of intellection that mirrors the turning pages. Evoking Milton's *Areopagitica*, which his diary suggests he consulted during *The Enquirer's* composition, Godwin argues that books

¹⁰ 'Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills', p. 133 (emphasis mine). Studies of these politically radical cultures and their relationship to media include Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Stephen Behrendt, *Romanticism, Radicalism, and the Press* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997); Andrew McCann, *Cultural Politics in the 1790s: Literature, Radicalism and the Public Sphere* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999), and McCann, 'William Godwin and the Pathological Public Sphere: Theorizing Communicative Action in the 1790s', *Prose Studies*, 18.3 (1995), 199-222; John Barrell, *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Jon Mee, *Print, Publicity and Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹¹ *Political Justice: Variants*, pp. 143-44; 'Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills', p. 133. For Godwin's specific conversational ideal, see my discussion below.

¹² *The Enquirer*, p. 237.

have a concentrated potency that renders them more intellectually nutritious than the spoken word. A book, for Milton, is something distilled, ‘the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalm’d and treasur’d up’, ‘preserv[ing] as in a violl the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them’.¹³ Godwin’s essay ‘Of Learning’ contrasts this vision of the book to the qualities of conversation, which is ‘fortuitous and runs wild; the life’s blood of truth is filtrated and diluted, till much of its essence is gone’.

The language of commerce features again here, too, but this time for opposite ends. The value gained from conversation is analogous to a beggar’s irregular and scanty income, whereas books establish a reliable system of profit. In direct contrast to *Political Justice*, it is the activity of reading which enables one mind to ‘collate itself with other minds’ in intimate commerce, providing the arena of ‘actual contact’ that was previously reserved for familiar discussion. Conversation seems here to diffuse or destabilise the flow of knowledge-sharing, whereas book-reading enlarges and secures it. The dense, ‘methodical’ nature of book-reading works to secure and stabilise ideas precipitated by conversation, and in doing so respects the very nature (‘life’s blood’) of truth.

In fact, despite its emphasis on method and regularity, this passage highlights the disruptive properties that Godwin ascribed to book-reading: books lend themselves to being ‘turned backward and forward as we please’, resisting the incessant linear flow of conversation and creating a space of concentrated reflection. As material media, they carve space out of time. This emphasis is part of Godwin’s response to the contention that books were an overrated aspect of education, because they tended to clog up the mind: ‘We have been told, that a persevering habit of reading [...] overloads the intellect with the notions of others’.¹⁴ His response in ‘Of Learning’ is to theorise the book’s intrusive, weighty nature as an aid to intellectual health. He describes reading as a process by which the mind ‘collate[s] itself with other minds’, a verb that suggests thickening or fusion rather than flow, but which has positive connotations. Books stop readers in their tracks, Godwin argues, and the pause is enriching rather than inhibiting.

This positive conception of the book’s disruptive nature resurfaced many years later in Godwin’s *Thoughts on Man* (1831). Although this essay collection reflects several interests that matured after his 1790s work, it sustains the temporal concern with media that emerged in *Political Justice* and *The Enquirer*. In fact, evidence suggests that temporality became of increasing interest to Godwin; in his diary he refers to several of the *Thoughts on Man* essays simply as ‘On Time’, and a footnote to the essay ‘On the Duration of Human Life’ indicates that he was rereading William Watson’s *A Treatise on Time* (1785), which he had originally consulted in 1792.¹⁵ In ‘Of the Durability of Human Achievements and Productions’, for example, he interrogates the book-object’s capacity for historical

¹³ See entry for 3 June 1796 in *The Diary of William Godwin*. Milton, *Areopagitica*, pp. 492-93.

¹⁴ *The Enquirer*, p. 233. Cf. Carla Hesse, ‘Books in Time’, p. 27.

¹⁵ *Thoughts on Man*, p. 114; see diary entries for 29-30 June 1792 in *The Diary of William Godwin*.

preservation (books ‘embalm’ bodies of human achievement), and presents book-reading as an activity that weighs an accumulated legacy of understanding against the current intellectual moment.¹⁶ Most significant for our discussion, however, is the direct contrast between reading and speaking that appears in the essay ‘Of Belief’. Here Godwin investigates the power of conversational speed over participants’ mental faculties. He depicts the sudden conviction elicited by speech as a kind of intellectual ambush:

[I]nestimable as is the benefit we derive from books, there is something more searching and soul-stirring in the impulse of oral communication. We cannot shut our ears, as we shut our books; we cannot escape from the appeal of the man who addresses us with the earnest speech and living conviction. [...] Sudden and irresistible conviction is chiefly the offspring of living speech. We may arm ourselves against the arguments of an author; but the strength of reasoning in him who addresses us, takes us at unawares. It is in the reciprocation of answer and rejoinder that the power of conversation specially lies. A book is an abstraction. It is but imperfectly that we feel, that a real man addresses us in it, and that what he delivers is the entire and deep-wrought sentiment of a being of flesh and blood like ourselves, a being who claims our attention, and is entitled to our deference. The living human voice, with a countenance and manner corresponding, constrains us to weigh what is said, shoots through us like a stroke of electricity, will not away from our memory, and haunts our very dreams. It is by means of this peculiarity in the nature of mind, that it has been often observed that there is from time to time an Augustan age in the intellect of nations, that men of superior powers shock with each other, and that light is struck by the collision, which most probably no one of these men would have given birth to, if they had not been thrown into mutual society and communion. And even so, on a narrower scale, he that would aspire to do the most of which his faculties are susceptible, should seek the intercourse of his fellows, that his powers may be strengthened, and he may be kept free from that torpor and indolence of soul, which, without external excitement, are ever apt to take possession of us.¹⁷

Amongst its many other interesting features, this passage revisits the idea of intellectual commerce through its language of ‘reciprocation’, ‘communion’ and ‘intercourse’: conversation once again becomes the realm of ‘actual contact’ through which the exchange of knowledge most naturally occurs. And once again, Godwin’s evaluations of both media – the human voice and the printed page – concern their relation to time. Discussion promotes a present speed: it stirs, shoots, shocks and excites. Books are ‘an abstraction’, and thus contribute to sluggishness or ‘torpor’. Godwin is ambivalent about the merits of conversation, however. Speech ‘takes us at unawares’, in contrast to the book’s less immediate effect. From this angle, ‘Of Belief’ affirms *The Enquirer*’s presentation of books as objects that ‘force us to reflect’ rather than manipulating belief. He was reiterating his argument that books bring pockets of order to bear against the dispersed energy of conversation; that they promote a regular, orderly, contemplative mode of intellectual life.¹⁸

What emerges from this continuity in Godwin’s discussion of books – his focus upon flow, speed, and regulation – is a wider concern with an ideal or model of intellectual commerce. All the passages

¹⁶ *Thoughts on Man*, p. 88. Quotations below are from this source.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 176-77.

¹⁸ *The Enquirer*, p. 96.

quoted above seek to promote a specific version of community, one in which reading, speaking and writing play different but equally important roles. The concern is indicated by Godwin's repetition of words such as 'cluster', 'collate' and 'communion', which he uses to stress the necessity of fellowship or participation in an economy of knowledge. This is the hinge upon which his judgments turn: in *Thoughts on Man*, conversation's positive, energising role depends upon the fact that it induces 'reciprocation', 'communion' and 'intercourse' amongst its participants in a way that books cannot. *The Enquirer* denounces educational reliance upon conversation by comparing it to beggarly means, and describing book-reading, in contrast, as a regular system of profit. Comments in *Political Justice* are concerned with easing a flow of knowledge: books tend to disrupt or stall intellectual exchange, which has positive functions, but also creates the need for the mobilising force of conversation, properly conceived.

Godwin was using an idiom familiar to his readers. A shared language of movement, speed and regulation had been used by writers and philosophers throughout the preceding century to discuss the exchange of knowledge and its social ramifications – they assumed, in Robin Valenza's words, an 'economic model of knowledge generation and transmission'.¹⁹ This concept of truth as a progressive flow or profitable movement of exchange emerged in conjunction with concerns about the kind of people, institutions or channels that mediated its movement (the things that orchestrated its apprehension and thus materialisation *as* knowledge). Godwin's work exposes a connection between the temporal language of Romantic-period depictions of media – a phenomenon increasingly recognised – and these inherited anxieties about the social nature of knowledge.²⁰ Two eighteenth-century essays serve to illustrate this point, both of which contain important similarities to Godwin's work: Samuel Johnson's 'On Studies' (1753), and David Hume's 'Of Essay Writing' (1742).

Johnson's 'On Studies' explores the difficulty encountered by the public intellectual or 'man of letters' in his stewardship of the intellectual economy. Taking its cue from Bacon's famous aphorism – 'Reading maketh a Full Man; Conference a Ready Man; And Writing an Exact Man' – it articulates how practices of reading, speaking and writing should be used to facilitate an ordered flow of knowledge, yet also places them in a context of innate tendency towards disorder, disproportion and

¹⁹ Robin Valenza, *Literature, Language, and the Rise of the Intellectual Disciplines in Britain, 1680-1820* (Cambridge, 2009), chapters 1-2 (quotation is from p. 13); see also Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Commercial Society in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), especially chapters 1-2, and Stephen Copley, 'Commerce, Conversation and Politeness in the Early Eighteenth-Century Periodical', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 18 (1995), 63-77. For the general fate of this discourse in Dissenting culture later in the century, see Isaac Kramnick, 'Review of "Virtue, Commerce, and History" by J. G. A. Pocock', *The Journal of Modern History*, 59.1 (1987), 161-65 (pp. 163-65).

²⁰ For this temporal interest see Piper, *Dreaming in Books*, pp. 11-12; Hesse, 'Books in Time'; Christina Lupton, 'Immersing the Network in Time: From the Where to the When of Print Reading', *ELH*, 83.2 (2016), 299-317, a forerunner of her forthcoming volume *Reading and the Making of Time* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, August 2018).

confusion.²¹ Johnson extolls the importance of books against the accusation that they are ‘useless lumber’, yet also warns against the dangers of book-learning: scholars easily become ‘overloaded’, ‘entangled’ and inflexible, thus ineffective at communicating knowledge to the wider community. Conversation develops book-readers into ‘ready’, adaptable and effective communicators, yet it easily engenders sophism, ‘inaccuracy’ and ‘confusion’. This leads Johnson to posit the stabilising role of writing, something that fixes, contracts and scrutinises what conversation diffuses. His emphasis upon the ways in which different communicative forms counteract or balance each other finds more than an echo in Godwin’s essay ‘Of Learning’.

Johnson finishes, however, by acknowledging the immense difficulty of holding these activities in harmony. He claims that ‘To read, write, and converse in due proportions is [...] the business of a man of letters’, and yet he considers the conditions or opportunities that enable these proportions to be exceedingly rare. His closing remark encapsulates the consequent ambivalence of the man of letters’ mediatory task: ‘it is, however, reasonable, to have perfection in our eye; that we may always advance towards it, though we know it never can be reached’. Society’s intellectual economy always relies upon compromised communication, Johnson implies, a falling-short of ‘due proportions’. Yet progress towards perfection is possible – indeed, it is the human experience. His essay assumes something in the nature of truth to be tenacious and self-evident, enabling the studious person to ‘always advance’ despite their many limitations.

Similar assumptions about the nature of knowledge were explicit in the work of David Hume, whose *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) upheld everyday faith in, or reliance upon, the ‘current of nature’ in response to the paralysing conclusions of sceptical empiricism. Hume’s career shift to essay writing after his *Treatise* indicates the importance he attached to the writer’s role in regulating and directing this social flow of knowledge. ‘Of Essay Writing’ describes the learned essayist as a mediating figure, who works to maintain a healthy ‘Correspondence’ between the Men of Letters and the Men of the World, between realms of books and of speech. Economic language becomes the extended conceit; the essayist initiates and maintains intellectual ‘Commerce’ or ‘Balance of Trade’. This balance matters because a harmonious society, for Hume, is not simply based upon reciprocal pleasure, but also upon the exchange of knowledge: ‘every one displays his Thoughts and Observations in the best Manner he is able, and mutually gives and receives Information, as well as Pleasure’. The essayist and their work thus become essential to the maintenance of a healthy society.²²

²¹ Samuel Johnson, ‘On Studies’ [originally untitled], *The Adventurer*, 85 (28 August 1753), pp. 85-90; for the original aphorism see Francis Bacon, *Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall* (London: John Haviland, 1632), pp. 293-94. Cf. Robert DeMaria, *Samuel Johnson and the Life of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). For the emerging concept of the ‘man of letters’ in the eighteenth century, see Valenza, *Literature, Language, and the Rise of the Intellectual Disciplines*, especially chapters 1-2.

²² David Hume, ‘Of Essay Writing’, in *Essays, Moral and Political*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: printed for A. Kincaid, 1741-42), II (1742), pp. 1-8. For the ‘current of nature’ see Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: A Critical*

Hume's philosophical scepticism may have been unusual for his time, but as Fred Parker and others have shown, his work represents the ways in which implicit ambivalence towards the nature of knowledge was frequently translated into a confidence, or perhaps ideological investment, in particular forms of textual dissemination during the eighteenth century.²³ His emphasis upon the role of the learned essayist also indicates that such confidence in the flow of knowledge went hand in hand with deep concerns about the kinds of people, institutions or channels that regulated it. In other words, as theories of knowledge were increasingly embedded in theories of sociality, the scope and means of sociality became a locus of anxiety. In different ways Hume and Johnson both assume that knowledge exists as a force or movement independent of the knower, and yet their work remains ambiguous about the extent to which social channels have power over it.

Regulation and Authority

Godwin's assessments of media feature both this inherited discourse of intellectual economy, and its ambiguity concerning regulative authority. As he describes their social roles, reading and conversation disturb and encroach upon one another; both appear full of inherent dangers to truth's progress, yet the very properties that cause this jeopardy are deemed essential for balancing the other's defects. Conversation 'runs wild' into hasty conviction or shallow chatter, yet these problems of fluidity are necessary for dislodging the prejudice, torpor and seclusion that book-reading promotes. Books are slow, difficult and disengaging, yet these things counteract the facile slipperiness of the spoken word. The two activities are imagined in such intimate relations that they often seem to overlap: Godwin's educational advice, for example, prescribes methods of conversational reading, by which numerous texts are brought into a circle of dialogue and the reader's written responses enlist them in a network of critical exchange.²⁴ His regulation of communicative activities becomes a Johnsonian balancing act. It reveals an anxious tension at the heart of his work, concerning the precise ways in which medial regulation affects the progress of truth in society.

This tension is partly revealed through Godwin's distinction between different kinds of conversation. He gives a certain kind of conversation an important social role, to instigate and mobilise intellectual exchange. Whilst books counteract a perceived social tendency towards rapidity, heat and superficiality, conversation counteracts an equally dangerous tendency towards stagnancy and lethargy of mind. In *Thoughts On Man*, Godwin recommends oral discussion on the basis that it keeps

Edition, ed. by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 171-78, 175.

²³ Fred Parker, *Scepticism and Literature: An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne, and Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Cf. Timothy Milnes, 'Trusting Experiments: Sociability and Transcendence in the Familiar Essay', *Romantic Circles: Praxis Series*, 2017, n.p.

<<https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/prose/praxis.2016.prose.milnes.html>> [accessed 24 May 2018].

²⁴ See Chapter Three on reading advice.

the participant ‘free from that torpor and indolence of soul, which, without external excitement, are ever apt to take possession of us’, describing its work in terms of ‘electricity’, ‘shock’ and ‘collision’. In *Political Justice* its benefits are likewise ascribed to its ‘stimulus and surprise’; and even during *The Enquirer’s* critique of educational overreliance upon conversation, conversation is described as ‘the more unlicensed and dignified sallies of the mind’, echoing the positive language that Godwin had used in his draft of the *Political Justice* passage (‘experimental acquaintance with the sallies of mind’). As many moral and educational theorists had done before him, Godwin places great value upon the sympathy generated by face-to-face contact: human presence acts as a mental stimulus by which imaginative empathy develops, a faculty involved in many different aspects of the understanding. In ‘Of Belief’ this is referred to as a ‘peculiarity in the nature of mind’, the cognitive investment that accompanies one’s experience of ‘voice [...] countenance [...] and manner’. Conversation is thus central to intellectual enquiry insofar as it actuates, inspires and exercises the organs of independent thought.

Yet Godwin’s depiction of conversation as a positive, instigating force was also a response to a different sort of conversation – an inhibited and unfruitful sort associated with contemporary culture. Like many other dissenters, as Jon Mee has shown, Godwin wrote from a position of critique that considered mainstream conversational culture to be artificial and unhelpfully restrained by custom. The ideal of conversational candour – what Godwin sometimes calls ‘sincerity’ or ‘frankness’ – was about clearing away these cultural blockages to allow for truth to be clearly sought after and apprehended.²⁵ Godwin argued in *Political Justice* that ‘dictates of worldly prudence and custom’ and ‘artificial delicacy’ had produced an intellectual economy in which ‘everything is disfigured and distorted’, yet he maintained that if candid intellectual enquiry were to be pursued, ‘Conversation would speedily exchange its present character of listlessness and insignificance, for a Roman boldness and fervour’.²⁶ As indicated by his reference to classical republican culture, this argument was inherently political. Godwin understood political institutions to be detrimental to such revitalised exchanges of ideas: ‘Whenever government assumes to deliver us from the trouble of thinking for ourselves, the only consequences it produces are those of torpor and imbecility’.²⁷ Awareness of these political dimensions was heightened during the 1790s when Pitt’s government cracked down upon radical activity by introducing new measures of censorship and restrictions upon meetings. Godwin

²⁵ See Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds*, pp. 137-67; the Dissenting backdrop to this ideal is outlined in Tessa Whitehouse, *The Textual Culture of English Protestant Dissent*, and D. O. Thomas, *The Honest Mind: the Thought and Work of Richard Price* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977). For differences in conversation culture between provincial and urban Dissenters, see Anne Janowitz, ‘Amiable and Radical Sociability: Anna Barbauld’s “free Familiar Conversation”’, in *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770-1840*, ed. by Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 62-81. For the theory of conversation more generally in this period, see Peter Burke, *The Art of Conversation* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), and *The Concept and Practice of Conversation in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1688-1848*, ed. by Katie Halsey and Jane Slinn (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

²⁶ *Political Justice: Variants*, pp. 161-62.

²⁷ *Political Justice*, pp. 320-21.

reflected upon these measures at length in ‘Considerations’, and his second edition of *Political Justice* included the following remark:

What is it that, at this day, enables a thousand errors to keep their station in the world; priestcraft, tests, bribery, war, cabal and whatever else excites the disapprobation of the honest and enlightened mind? Cowardice; the timid reserve which makes men shrink from telling what they know; and the insidious policy that annexes persecution and punishment to an unrestrained and spirited discussion of the true interests of society.²⁸

This comment expresses the benefits of his conversational ideal: as something ‘unrestrained’ it breaks through the fetters of unexamined custom, and as something ‘spirited’ it animates minds that have been weakened by inertia. Godwin thus positions his positive version of conversation in reaction to social forces of mental restraint, oppression and indolence stemming from cultural habit and political environment.

Godwin qualifies this idea of conversational inhibition throughout his work, however, careful to distinguish it from the kind of unrestraint that he associated with political societies and public oratory.²⁹ Immediately after extolling the consequences of allowing truth ‘a plain and direct appeal’ to human understanding by removing the ‘obstacles’ to its discussion in cultural life, he adds:

But these consequences are the property only of independent and impartial discussion. If once the unambitious and candid circles of enquiring men be swallowed up in the insatiate gulf of noisy assemblies, the opportunity of improvement is instantly annihilated. The happy varieties of sentiment which so eminently contribute to intellectual acuteness are lost.³⁰

This distinction draws attention to the difficult balance that Godwin attempts to negotiate: conversation must remain ‘independent’ and ‘impartial’, and yet its very benefits have been described as arising from its co-opting nature, its powerful current of sympathetic stimulation. Sheer numbers thus become the decisive factor, explaining Godwin’s assertion in *Political Justice* that ‘Discussion perhaps never exists with so much vigour and utility as in the conversation of two persons. It may be carried on with advantage in small and friendly societies’.³¹ The unruly potential of speech must be harnessed by a small group limit, a non-institutional context, and the practice of book-reading, which stabilises and enriches the conversational enquiry.

These descriptions of different kinds of conversation are further complicated by different kinds of reading matter. Ephemeral printed forms, such as handbills and newspapers, are associated with the promiscuous immediacy of speech, a criticism which becomes a plot device in *Caleb Williams* (1794). Ever since Caleb passes the hawker selling his ‘paper’ of criminal adventures in the streets, ephemeral print becomes a disruptive presence, which follows him across the country and ruins the trusting

²⁸ *Political Justice: Variants*, p. 163.

²⁹ For an exploration of the positive aspects of public speaking in Godwin’s work, see Victoria Myers, ‘William Godwin and the “Ars Rhetorica”’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 41.3 (2002), 415-44.

³⁰ *Political Justice*, p. 122.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

relationships he tries to build. Godwin revisited the issue in his last novel, *Deloraine* (1833), in which newspapers exchange complicated truths for reductive and incendiary opinions (see Chapter Two). He was tapping into a widespread contemporary awareness of the temporal implications of ephemeral print. As Mark Turner records, newspapers and periodicals in this period encoded a particular sort of time in the social imagination: they ‘suggest[ed] and construct[ed] different socio-cultural understandings about time, in a period in which temporal shifts and disruptions were a sign of its modernity’.³² In 1814, the French philosopher Benjamin Constant spelled out the relevance of these temporal associations to political fears:

All enlightened men seemed to be convinced that complete freedom and exemption from any form of censorship should be granted to longer works. Because writing them requires time, purchasing them requires affluence, and reading them requires attention, they are not able to produce the reaction in the populace that one fears of works of greater rapidity and violence. But pamphlets, and handbills, and newspapers, are produced quickly, you can buy them for little, and because their effect is immediate, they are believed to be more dangerous.³³

Constant describes a common connection between ephemeral print and the ‘rapidity and violence’ of the mob in the minds of the educated classes. Godwin’s depictions of handbills and newspapers appear to fall in with this view: he described them in his novels as inflammatory and manipulative, media which rushed past the truth and hunted down the innocent. They encourage mental passivity and uniformity in a similar fashion to the ‘rash and headstrong’ oratory of political societies.³⁴

In fact, despite Godwin’s generalized claims about the slowness of ‘books’ in his theoretical works, certain ‘books of narrative and romance’ also become a source of impetuous speed in *Caleb Williams*. Caleb’s childhood books are described in terms of the hastiness instigated by speech and ephemeral print: ‘I could not rest’, he records, ‘I panted for the unravelling of an adventure’. They shape him into an impetuous and irresolute character, whose actions are driven by ‘unremarked and involuntary sympathy’. These were dangerous effects that Godwin clearly did not attribute to his own novels (the express purpose of which he described as the instigation of ‘moral and political enquiry’).³⁵ Other sorts of books, moreover, have different effects upon his protagonist. Godwin added an episode to the second edition of the novel, in which Caleb’s chance encounter with a dictionary prompts him to embark upon a careful study of language. This sort of reading marries both ‘industry and recreation’,

³² Mark Turner, ‘Time, Periodicals, and Literary Studies’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 39.4 (2006), 309-16 (p. 312), and ‘Periodical Time in the Nineteenth Century’, *Media History*, 8.2 (2002): 183-96. See also Margaret Beetham, ‘Time: Periodicals and the Time of the Now’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 48.3 (2015), 323-42.

³³ Benjamin Constant, *De La Liberte Des Brouchures, Des Pamphlets et Des Journaux* (Paris: Chez H Nicolle, a la Librairie Stereotype, 1814), quoted in translation by Carla Hesse in ‘Books in Time’, p. 27.

³⁴ *Political Justice*, p. 123. Cf. Garrett A. Sullivan, “‘Caleb Williams’ and Print Culture”, pp. 332-33.

³⁵ *Caleb Williams*, pp. 280, 121. ‘Letter to the Editor of the *British Critic*’, 7 June 1795, *The Letters of William Godwin*, I, p. 117.

channelling his mind in a healthier direction. Unfortunately, it is soon disrupted by Falkland's pursuit.³⁶

Godwin's personal correspondence reveals a similarly conflicted assessment of epistolary writing. He made an irritable remark to Thomas Wedgwood in a letter of November 1795, concerning the need to clarify the content of his previous letter: 'Do you not feel how very inadequately epistolary communication supplies the place of oral discussion?' This prompted Wedgwood to respond that 'on some accounts I prefer writing to conversation. But this preference is owing entirely to my want of a prompt & clear expression of my thoughts, which exercise alone can supply'.³⁷ Godwin's rejoinder reveals the centrality of the temporal to his thinking:

Your preference of correspondence to conversation seems to be founded in part in suggestions of vanity. How intolerably creeping & tedious is this interchange? I am not inclined to doubt that my time is well spent in your society; but, in writing thus, I comply with my feelings, & run counter to the bias of my judgment. I believe correspondence ought scarcely in any case to be admitted, but when the parties are at a distance from each other.³⁸

Godwin assumes here that letters are intended as conversational substitutes ('how very inadequately epistolary communication *supplies the place* of oral discussion'), and on these grounds dismisses them as unsatisfactory. The merits of conversation stem from the stimulating effect of personal presence, from the immediate 'reciprocation of answer and rejoinder', which is precluded by the 'intolerably creeping & tedious' breaks between letters. Epistolary exchange thus occupies an uncertain territory between the personal force of speech and rigidity of books, yet participates in the temporal dynamics of neither medium.³⁹

Even reading spaces both enable and jeopardize the knowledge economy in Godwin's work. A letter of 1805 to his acquaintance Joseph Planta, principal librarian at the British Museum, contends that public reading rooms can diffuse one's mental powers, and thus counteract the beneficial fixity of books:

But it is impossible for me to express, or for any person who has never been engaged in a work of patient & unintermitted investigation fully to conceive, the disadvantages that must attend an examination of authorities & documents in a public Reading Room. For this purpose passages must not only be read with a deep & concentrated attention, but the writer must also reason, weigh, & make inferences, as he reads. But a public Reading Room, however decorously ~~managed~~ conducted, must be attended with infinite distractions to ~~such a~~ ~~writer~~ a person so employed. The majority of the frequenters of such a room will always be

³⁶ *Caleb Williams*, p. 328.

³⁷ To Thomas Wedgwood, 7 November 1795, *The Letters of William Godwin*, I, p. 132, and p. 135 n.7.

³⁸ To Thomas Wedgwood, 10 November 1795, *The Letters of William Godwin*, I, p. 134.

³⁹ For an overview of Godwin's ambivalent relationship to letters, see Pamela Clemit, 'Holding Proteus: William Godwin in his Letters', in *Repossessing the Romantic Past*, ed. by Heather Glen and Paul Hamilton, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 98-115 (especially pp. 100-01). Cf. Judith Barbour, "'Obliged to Make This Sort of Deposit of Our Minds": William Godwin and the Sociable Contract of Writing', in *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770-1840*, ed. by Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 166-85.

persons who read more from a spirit of vague curiosity, & that they may spend their time agreeably to themselves, than from any other motive.⁴⁰

The scholar's activity here combines all the crucial elements of reading ('deep & concentrated attention'), conversation ('reason, weigh, & make inferences') and writing ('engaged in an elaborate work'), yet it is fundamentally undermined by the public nature of the Museum's reading room. The very presence of other readers distracts the mind and promotes 'a spirit of vague curiosity', the antithesis of the concentrated attention that books require. Godwin had already expressed similar ideas in the preface to his *Life of Chaucer*, claiming that the Museum's refusal to allow him to borrow books and consult them in his 'own chamber' was 'productive of great loss of time and many disadvantages'.⁴¹

If public libraries detract from the beneficial potential of book-reading, however, private libraries concentrate them into vices. In *Fleetwood* (1805), the protagonist's personal 'reading closet' becomes a symbol of the character distortion engendered by bookish isolation. Ruffigny warns Fleetwood about his need to maintain a balance between private book-reading and social interaction:

The furniture of these shelves constitutes an elaborate and invaluable commentary; but the objects beyond those windows, and the circles and communities of my contemporaries, are the text to which that commentary relates.

Yet the reading space that Fleetwood frequented in his ancestral home has already proved too powerful:

[H]ere it had ever since been my custom to retire with some favourite author, when I wished to feel my mind in its most happy state [...] I entered it now, after a twelvemonth's absence, with a full recollection of all the castles which I had sat there are builded in the air, the odes, the tragedies, and heroic poems which, in the days of visionary childhood, upon that spot I had sketched and imagined. [...] how unalterably it had fixed its hold upon me as my favourite retreat.⁴²

The 'hold' of this particular reading space reflects and precipitates Fleetwood's stubborn, antisocial adherence to his feelings, a character flaw that was fostered by his education: undisciplined, isolated reading habits lead him to privilege his sentiment above every other social demand, including his relational responsibilities. His wife's unknowing appropriation of the reading space is doubly poignant, a threat to his material memories and his mental habits of castle-building, and it triggers a

⁴⁰ Godwin to Joseph Planta, 12 June 1805, *The Letters of William Godwin*, II, pp. 354-56 (p. 355).

⁴¹ Preface to *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, the early English poet: including memoirs of his near friend and kinsman, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster: with sketches of the manners, opinions, arts and literature of England in the fourteenth century*, 2 vols (London: Richard Phillips, 1803), I, p. xvi. The letter to Planta was written during Godwin's research for his *History of the Commonwealth of England; from its commencement, to the restoration of Charles the Second*, 4 vols (London: printed for Henry Colburn, 1824-28).

⁴² *Fleetwood*, pp. 69, 194.

sequence of jealousy and passion.⁴³ In what spatial context is truth best pursued? Godwin presents an ambiguous answer, a balance of public and private environments, of the sociality of books and people.

As the example of the library from *Fleetwood* indicates, Godwin's novels explore yet another factor that affects the social operation of book-reading: domestic context. The narrators of *St Leon*, *Fleetwood* and *Deloraine* all describe family reading as an essential element of life, an almost transcendent experience through which the mind's thoughts and sentiments are properly shared and managed by participants. In *St Leon* (1799), the reading of husband and wife during their early married years is presented a process of 'accord' by which minds 'meet and mingle'. Solitude is important – 'Separation [...] prepared us to enter with fresh ardour into society and conversation' – yet it must be balanced by regular experiences of shared reading:

Thus we added to each other's stores, and acquired a largeness of conception and liberality of judgment that neither of us would have arrived at, if separate. [...] we rejoiced in this reciprocation of benefits, while each gave or received something that added to value of mind and worth of character.⁴⁴

Here domestic reading is explicitly portrayed as an activity of commerce: it mutually enriches, enlarges and regulates resources of mind. Indeed, as *St Leon* later mourns this period of his life, he uses the phrase 'amicable commerce' to name his loss.⁴⁵ Godwin drew from the language that he had used to describe conversation in *Political Justice* – 'the commerce of mutual friendship, [...] the actual contact of mind with mind' – in order to suggest that shared reading recruits the best aspects of both reading and speaking.

In *Fleetwood*, the narrator likewise describes reading together within marriage as the promotion of mental 'accord' and correspondence: it is 'a pleasure that should be husbanded. [...] we are like instruments tuned to a correspondent pitch, and the accord that is produced is of the most delightful nature'.⁴⁶ Godwin reiterated the principle in *Deloraine* (1833) and further applied it to father and daughter, depicting Catherine and Deloraine's shared reading as an animating force that breathes life into rigid pages:

To the solitary reader his books are indeed a dead letter. [...] [Shared reading] makes the proposition, the fact, or the sentiment, leap as it were from the insensible page, and become impregnate with life.⁴⁷

In fact, the importance of communal reading in *Deloraine* stretches beyond the relations of blood or marriage, encompassing friendships too: Catherine and Margaret, and William and Travers, all

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁴⁴ *St Leon*, pp. 43-45.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 143-44.

⁴⁶ *Fleetwood*, p. 199.

⁴⁷ *Deloraine*, p. 236; for reading within marriage, see pp. 18-19.

experience this bookish mutuality as an essential feature of their intimacy.⁴⁸ The hallmark of healthy families, friendships and communities is social engagement with books, Godwin seems to imply. Solitary reflection must be combined with the regulatory discipline of communal experience.

Each of these novels, however, also depicts and explores the dysfunctional effect that domestic environments can have upon intellectual regulation. Their protagonists represent various imbalances in the social dynamics of knowledge exchange, and experience the tragic effects of their relational poverty. The ‘amicable commerce’ of St Leon’s family, for example, is ruined after his pact with the mysterious stranger condemns him to forever harbour a dark secret from his wife and children: ‘My domestic character was [...] wholly destroyed. I had a subject of contemplation that did not admit of a partaker’.⁴⁹ Just as he cannot reveal his source of gold, St Leon can no longer share the resources of his mind with those he loves, and the apparent blessing of alchemy becomes a curse.

Fleetwood’s unchecked indulgence in solitary reading during childhood endows him with a stubborn attachment to his own sentiments, and this tarnishes his new marriage. He comes to believe that Mary has usurped his old reading closet, and her variety of interests and ‘elastic’ nature threaten his domineering control over their time spent reading together. This renders the idyllic description of shared reading that I quoted above highly ironic – far from being ‘instruments tuned to a correspondent pitch’, Fleetwood is only ever in tune with himself. When Mary leaves for a botanical expedition in the middle of their reading of Fletcher’s *A Wife for a Month*, Fleetwood declares:

She has wounded me in a point, where I am most alive. Fletcher, my old friend, friend of my boyish days, whose flights I have taught the echoes of the mountains to repeat, whose pages I have meditated in my favourite closet, – she has affronted me in thee, Fletcher, and for thee, if not for myself, I will resent it.⁵⁰

His anger stems from the experience of his ‘boyish days’ and ‘favourite closet’, indicating that it is the unchecked solitariness of his education that constitutes the barrier to harmonious domestic life. One sees here the ugly potential of book-reading that Godwin addresses elsewhere, the intellectual disease of isolation: Fleetwood embodies the ‘desperate sort of firmness and inflexibility’ of *The Enquirer*’s isolated learner, and St Leon the ‘cold reserve’ criticised in *Political Justice*.⁵¹ When intellectual exchange is divorced from a healthy communal context it becomes a corrupting force, and domestic life itself disintegrates.

Mandeville (1817) provides an even darker example of communal book-reading gone wrong.

Although the protagonist has an isolated upbringing, his childhood reading is not undertaken alone: it is directed by ‘a formal, rigid, pedantic, pharisaical priest’, whose guidance ossifies Mandeville’s

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 154, 174-75.

⁴⁹ *St Leon*, pp. 143-44; see also pp. 137-39.

⁵⁰ *Fleetwood*, pp. 201-02.

⁵¹ *The Enquirer*, p. 106; *Political Justice*, p. 120.

mind into a position of hatred and paranoia. Mandeville thus succumbs to a version of the ‘torpor and indolence of soul’ that *Thoughts on Man* connects to unsociable book-reading. The closed religious environment of his household insinuates itself into his intellectual temperament, contrasting sharply with that of Beaulieu cottage, where his sister is raised. His instructor, his domestic environment, and the ‘tremendous volume’ of Fox’s *Book of Martyrs* all conspire to dictate his character and his fate, raising questions about the extent of individual agency in the midst of such intellectual directives.⁵²

In one respect of course, socially dysfunctional readers are a common trope in the fiction of this period, and Godwin’s characters participate in a literary trend. One thinks of how the protagonist’s ‘desultory’ childhood reading in *Waverley* (1814) shapes his ‘wavering and unsettled’ character, or how Catherine’s private absorption in books of ‘all story and no reflection’ in *Northanger Abbey* (1817) results in social illiteracy and embarrassment.⁵³ But Godwin’s examples are much darker, for the effects of his characters’ bad reading are less easily accommodated or corrected by subsequent social experience (as they are with *Waverley*, Catherine, or even Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*). In fact, his readers probe and unsettle the very definition of functional society rather than being regulated by it. The importance, but immense difficulty, of knowledge being properly regulated through the activities and channels of social groups is underscored by the tangled nature of their media engagement and its powerful, often disturbing consequences. In this way, *St Leon*, *Fleetwood* and *Mandeville* unearth and embody the problem of authority addressed by Godwin’s educational and philosophical writings. They interrogate how decisive society’s different medial structures and channels are upon the apprehension of truth; they probe how reading, writing and speaking should best function in a domestic context; and they provide an ambivalent answer.

Truth thus emerges from Godwin’s work hampered by regulative problems, which are found both in the means of exchange (text, speech) and the environments in which those exchanges occur (spatial, social, domestic). Behind all of these factors, however, is the movement of truth itself. Godwin’s wariness about the speed instigated by ephemeral print and oral appeal, for example, was not a response to immediacy *per se*, but involved the belief that this velocity did not correlate with truth’s own progress. Describing the work of a beneficial book in ‘Considerations’, he argued that

If it undermine the received system, it will undermine it gradually and insensibly; it will merely fall in with that gradual principle of decay and renovation, which is perpetually at work in every part of the universe.⁵⁴

A truly revolutionary book, here, is not one that incites sudden action, but one that colludes in the organic advance of truth amongst society as a whole, ‘that gradual principle of decay and renovation’.

⁵² *Mandeville*, pp. 131, 52. For these issues of intellectual agency, see Chapter One.

⁵³ Walter Scott, *Waverley; Or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since* (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 48, 73; Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. by Marilyn Butler (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 8.

⁵⁴ ‘Considerations on Lord Grenville’s and Mr Pitt’s Bills’, p. 141.

Godwin thus references an intellectual tempo that transcends the dynamics of reading or speaking, a spirit of change that is everywhere ‘perpetually at work’. This principle leads him to claim that ‘Reform must come [...] if we endeavour to keep it out too long, it will overwhelm us’.⁵⁵

It is important to recognise that the expression of this ‘gradual principle’ was integral to Godwin’s immediate political aims in ‘Considerations’. The pamphlet was designed to contribute to public debate about proposed legislation to limit the activities of radical societies by making their meetings illegal and by censoring the press (the so-called Gagging Act of 1795). Godwin wanted to make his own position clear, and it involved sharp critiques of both government officials and radical activists. By presenting truth as a self-manifesting force, he downplayed his radicalism and thus distanced himself from the political activism that was causing establishment alarm, casting himself as a non-threatening gradualist. His depictions of oratory as a precipitate force reflect this strategy: ‘It is not [...] in crowded audiences, that truth is successfully investigated’, Godwin claims (here establishing his break with Thelwall). At the same time, the ‘gradual principle’ allowed Godwin to justify his reformist credentials to radicals: their hopes and desires were vindicated because ‘Reform *must* come’. By casting books as naturally reformatory objects, he presented the literary world of which he was a part as innately allied to the radical cause.⁵⁶ In other words, by defending the social work of books according to the ‘gradual principle’, Godwin was appealing to a higher authority in order to deflect hostility from both poles of the debate. It was a political strategy that shaped much of his work in the 1790s, including his revisions to *Political Justice* throughout the decade.

Yet Godwin’s description of the gradual principle also exposes an unstable relationship between truth and media that transcends this immediate context. Throughout ‘Considerations’, the cultural apparatus of print seems to threaten or confuse the force of truth, rather than simply ‘fall in’ with it as Godwin claims. An abstract version of the printing press is presented in competing terms to the ‘gradual principle’, as a transcendent force that cannot be withstood once set into motion. Godwin even uses a quote from the gospel of Luke to position it as the Messianic cornerstone (‘against which whosoever stumbles, shall be broken’). Crucially, as ‘Considerations’ involves a plea for the freedom of the press, both this power of print and its associated ‘principle’ of renovation appear at the mercy of human arbitration. ‘Lord Grenville’s bill is probably the most atrocious,’ he writes, ‘because writing and the publication of science, [...] of all imaginable things, [are] the most essential to the welfare of mankind’. According to this argument, the bill places at risk ‘all that is dignified, all that is ennobling’. Godwin thus frequently appeals to a version of truth which is an unstoppable force, yet apparently considers it jeopardised from all sides by society’s medial structures – by the cultural

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 159.

⁵⁶ Cf. Paul Keen, *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

apparatus that orchestrates both the printed and the spoken word. Truth's apprehension, Godwin acknowledges, is 'a delicate and awful task'.⁵⁷

Godwin had already personified the vulnerability of this 'gradual principle' in the character of Clare in *Caleb Williams*. This novel delineates a dramatic battle for psychological ownership, fuelled by both eloquent oral appeals and inflammatory printed matter. Yet these intense exchanges are held in sober contrast to Clare, whose 'unreserved' conversation 'flowed with [...] ease', whose 'frankness' was 'tranquil' and measured. Most significantly, his public speaking was orderly and appropriate: 'Every word was impressed with its true value, and none was brought forward with disproportioned and elaborate emphasis'.⁵⁸ Clare embodies the intellectual benefits of speech, for Godwin, which obtained only insofar as it respected the proportioned advance of truth itself, something that freely 'flowed' and yet retained a 'mild', stately caution. Clare is an authoritative figure whilst he lives, deeply respected by all, and Falkland listens with tears to his parting admonition. Yet he dies early, and his advice is ignored. The rest of the novel is a riotous distortion of the 'true value' that he represents: print, speech and even physical appearances are vehicles of deception, passion and confusion. Caleb describes how he is 'hurried along I do not know how', subject to 'uncontrollable enthusiasm', 'irresistible force' and 'rapidity'. He is overtaken by the contagious warmth associated with political associations in Godwin's *Enquiry* and 'Considerations', confessing, 'I had no time to cool or to deliberate'.⁵⁹

Truth and Dissent

For the first readers of *Caleb Williams*, however, Clare's exemplary qualities had a further layer of significance. Terms such as 'frankness', 'flow' and 'unreserve' were watch-words of Dissenting culture and testify to the fact that Godwin's concern about medial authority was partly inherited from his educational environment. 'Free enquiry' was the founding principle of the Academy he attended at Hoxton; whilst the phrase signified variously in eighteenth-century writing, it denoted a specific ideal in the Jennings-Doddridge tradition of Dissenting academies, of which Hoxton was a part. It referenced a perceived need to liberate and regulate intellectual exchange within society, and also promoted teaching methods that prioritized the process of 'enquiry' over and above its specific propositional content or doctrine (see Chapter Three).⁶⁰ As Richard Price put it, the task of education 'should be to teach *how* to think, rather than *what* to think; or to lead into the best way of searching

⁵⁷ 'Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills', pp. 159, 145-46, 131-32.

⁵⁸ *Caleb Williams*, 23-25.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 107, 117, 145, 249.

⁶⁰ See Chapter Three; Cf. Miller, 'Free Thinking' and 'Freedom of Thought' in Eighteenth-Century Britain', pp. 599-617. Whitehouse identifies the Jennings-Doddridge tradition as one of 'moderate orthodox academies, where particularities of denomination were played down in favour of a broad consensus that freedom of conscience, intellectual enquiry, and wide reading were to be encouraged' (*Textual Culture*, p. 42).

for truth, rather than to instruct in truth itself'.⁶¹ At the same time, however, this principle encapsulated the alethic ambivalence undergirding such pursuits. It highlighted the two-fold understanding of truth that was emergent in Dissenting culture, and which came to fruition in Godwin's writing.

On one level, truth was understood in this tradition as an objective body of knowledge, accessed progressively by humankind to the extent that they engaged in this 'free enquiry'. Truth was commonly described as self-evident to the impartial enquirer, because human rationality was a God-given resource and truth itself was divine revelation. Joseph Priestley reflected this when he claimed that 'Truth will always have an infinite advantage over error, if free scope be given to inquiry'.⁶² Belief in this 'advantage' became the overt justification for theories of intellectual and moral perfectibility, and fuelled the vibrancy and confidence of Dissenting academy life. Because its apprehension was, in part, a soteriological issue (to do with salvation), presenting it as naturally self-manifesting was profoundly consequential for theological doctrine.⁶³ Truth was presented as both a fixed ideal and an unstoppable movement, and this depiction undergirded a general optimism in the human condition.

This confidence, however, was held alongside sharp critiques of forces deemed to constrain or distort truth's apprehension. Dissenting communities were keenly aware of their marginalised social status, and often characterised mainstream culture in terms of superficiality or prejudice, an environment in which the flow of truth was either dispersed by triviality or blocked by closed-mindedness.⁶⁴ There were also theological disagreements over the extent to which human sin had noetic implications. Professions of truth as self-evident thus collided with images of a society in which truth was jeopardised, thwarted or elusive. The Dissenting ideal of 'candour' or 'frankness' in sociable exchange reflects these concerns, evoking a context in which Priestley's 'free scope' was hard to come by. Indeed, thinkers such as Priestley and Horne Tooke began to give language itself a formative role in belief, sometimes complicating the Dissenting emphasis upon simple, 'pure' communication. Another version of truth was thus being addressed, one increasingly bound to the processes and means of its discovery.

⁶¹ Richard Price, *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution*, p. 51.

⁶² Joseph Priestley, *The Importance and Extent of Free Enquiry in Matters of Religion*, p. 18. The same view lies behind Blake's famous line, 'Truth can never be told so as to be understood, and not be believ'd'. See *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell in William Blake's Writings*, ed. by G. E. Bentley, Jr., 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), I, pp. 74-99 (p. 84).

⁶³ This had obvious implications for the growth of universalism; see Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man*, p. 330. For a thorough overview of Dissenting theology and philosophy in this period see Michael Watts, *The Dissenters: Vol. 1: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978); see also Alan P. F. Sell, *Philosophy, Dissent and Nonconformity, 1689-1920* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2004), and the essays collected in *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁶⁴ Whitehouse, *Textual Culture*, pp. 22-23, 54.

This double vision of truth – at once self-evident and elusive, self-sufficient and dependent – was clearly illustrated by the scrutiny with which the tradition treated educational media. A good example is Isaac Watts’s *Improvement of the Mind* (1741), a treatise that sprung from the Jennings-Doddridge community yet enjoyed influence far beyond, going through several new editions in the later eighteenth century. This work upholds intellectual enquiry as a spiritual ideal, yet is dedicated to scrutinising the dangers of different communicative means, and advising the reader as to how their involvement with such means should be conducted. Book-reading is a case in point: whilst Watts evokes the familiar connection between print technology and spiritual-intellectual progress, and epitomises the central place given to reading in the sociable ideals of his Dissenting culture, the task seems problematic from the outset. After wading through decisions about what is necessary to read in the first place, Watts considers how the reader’s enquiry is threatened by the book’s own form. Its ‘bulk’ or weighty nature can promote uncritical assent, on the one hand, leading to over-reliance upon an author’s opinions and thus a ‘dogmatical spirit’. Yet on the other hand, it can discourage investigation entirely, leading weaker readers to ‘hover always on the surface of things’ and remain irresolute. Both dangers involve superficiality, by which the book’s literal surfaces engender surface-level thinking. To illustrate their social ramifications, an example is given:

Subito is carried away by titles pages, so that he ventures to pronounce upon a large octavo at once, and to recommend it wonderfully when he had read half the preface. [...] But *Subito* changes his opinion of men and books and things so often, that no body regards him.⁶⁵

Subito represents the person, or rather imagined social type, who tries to short-cut knowledge by speeding up the labour of intellectual enquiry. His name references a musical term (familiar to Watts the hymnodist) meaning ‘sudden’; it denotes temporal disruption, and contrasts with the language of order, regularity and tranquillity that characterises the instructions of the treatise at large. Significantly, *Subito*’s haste is connected to his status as a fickle, insubstantial conversationalist. His lack of reading discipline means that he thins and diffuses the flow of truth, rendering him a chatterer of no service to the knowledge economy at large. Ironically then, for Watts, the book’s ‘bulk’ can starve intellectual life; a large octavo can promote hasty, light-weight thinking. He argues that this danger must be counteracted by rigorous reading habits, about which he goes into great detail.

What was at stake in such instructions about the pursuit of knowledge was regulative authority: the degree of epistemological weight one should ascribe to medial forms, as opposed to truth itself. Watts’s assessments of media draw attention to a latent ambiguity in Dissenting thought over the degree to which individual effort, medial environment or the supposed power of truth itself was decisive in engendering belief. For most religious believers, the implications of this internal tension were kept at bay, because they held to a theological doctrine of revelation that enabled them to have confidence in truth’s divinely ordained tenacity. Yet the approach laid foundations for a different

⁶⁵ Isaac Watts, *The Improvement of the Mind*, pp. 190-91.

counterculture at the turn of the century, which came to fruition in Dissenting-educated thinkers such as Godwin. He inherited, on the one hand, a version of truth as an unstoppable force pertaining to salvific ends, and on the other, a version that was subordinate to the contemporary social environment, human faculties, and the very nature of medial channels. His education also sensitised him to a language that evaluated intellectual community in terms of temporal dynamic, and imbued this with immense social significance.

Godwin's assessments of reading and speaking, with their fraught dynamics of speed, weight and temperature, thus reflect and negotiate the authority problem of his educational inheritance. Although he abandoned revealed religion, he retained the double vision of truth that pervaded its culture. On one level, he appropriated its language to negotiate contemporary debates about the nature of socio-political reform: he critiqued radical societies in the 1790s by positioning them at the extreme ends of scales measuring heat and cold, rapidity and stasis. On a more fundamental level, however, the discourse gestured to a conceptual ambiguity concerning how this intellectual system was regulated. Truth's innate authority had to be asserted in order to theorise perfectibility, yet in order to diagnose the noetic ills of society its means of apprehension were endowed with great, often terrible, power.

This view becomes even more explicit when one considers Godwin's direct descriptions of 'truth'. Throughout the 1790s he presented it as a force self-sufficient enough to make independent progress: in 1793 'truth is omnipotent', in 1795 truth is a 'resistless tide', and in 1797 'Truth is powerful, and, [will] make good her possession'. The revised editions of *Political Justice* all continue to place hope for social reform in the 'value and energy of truth' itself.⁶⁶ Yet alongside this portrayal is a vulnerable, dependent version of truth. The same pages that proclaim truth's omnipotence contend that 'if there be such a thing as truth, it must infallibly be struck out by the collision of mind with mind'. A later manuscript note confirms this idea, remarking that 'Truth, [...] arises from the relative character & disposition of two persons or things, the speaker & the hearer, the words uttered, & the temper of him by whom the words are received'.⁶⁷ Godwin makes an uneasy combination of the two versions in his 1797 essay 'Of Scepticism', in which he argues that the sceptical empiricist 'is the genuine friend of truth'. Truth here is a self-evident body, like the sun: 'The sceptic makes bare his own bosom to receive the beams of truth'. Yet it is also a means of direction or discovery, like the wind: the sceptic 'always holds himself ready for the gale of truth, and spreads his canvas that he may feel its lightest

⁶⁶ 'Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr Pitt's Bills', p. 159; *Political Justice*, p. 120; *The Enquirer*, p. 143; *Political Justice: Variants*, pp. 156-57. Godwin's own timeline of his 'Philosophical Principles' lists under 1778 the conviction 'That truth is immutable and independent'. See the transcription in Mark Philp, 'Introduction' to *Political and Philosophical Writings*, p. 17.

⁶⁷ *Political Justice*, p. 15; 'Notes on the biographical sketch of William Godwin inserted in the 'Monthly Mirror', Jan. & Feb. 1805', MS. Abinger c. 31, fol. 117. The transcription is Pamela Clemit's in 'Self-Analysis as Social Critique: The Autobiographical Writings of Godwin and Rousseau', p. 174.

breath. His voyage of discovery is never finished. His views perpetually vary, yet perpetually improve'.⁶⁸

The friction between all these concepts of truth is encapsulated in a comment from the *Enquiry*:

The great cause of humanity, which is now pleading in the face of the universe, has but two enemies; those friends of antiquity, and those friends of innovation, who, impatient of suspense, are inclined violently to interrupt the calm, the incessant, the rapid and auspicious progress which thought and reflection appear to be making in the world. Happy would it be for mankind if those persons who interest themselves most zealously in these great questions would confine their exertions to the diffusing, in every possible mode, a spirit of enquiry [...].⁶⁹

The movement of truth here is calm and gradual, yet rapid and incessant; it naturally manifests its progress through thought and reflection, yet is reliant upon the exertions and zeal of certain proponents; it is the unassailable *telos* of humanity, and yet is threatened both by those who value the past and those who hasten the future. The language of 'diffusing' and 'spreading' that Godwin frequently uses to describe truth's advance suggests an intangible and uncontrollable force, yet truth also appears dependent, chaotic and material, 'struck out' by a process of collision. From this mixed portrayal flows the mixed instructions that Godwin gives to his readers: whilst he urges them to have serene confidence in truth's authority, he also confronts them with qualified and often conservative social advice. Truth's nature as a progressive force is constantly weighed against the contention that it must be properly stewarded by the structures and channels of society. It is both an assumption (transcending the activities of knowledge exchange) and a conclusion (produced only by their proper enactment).

Godwin's concerns about medial regulation thus feature a major legacy of Dissenting educational culture, this bifurcated concept of truth. In doing so they distil a broader philosophical development, an alethic crosscurrent in British empiricism that was integral to much Romantic-period writing. As Tim Milnes has shown, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley all exploited a recognized 'tension between truth as ideal and truth as dialogue'. They explored, consciously or unconsciously, what it meant to be committed to truth as an intersubjective reality: something that was constituted by subjects in dialogue and yet, at the same time, was a presupposed condition that enabled and limited this dialogic activity.⁷⁰ We might understand Godwin's work as recruiting the same ambivalence, probing the extent to which truth is dependent upon the activities, structures and tools of social groups, and the extent to which it is external to them. Indeed, the tension was perhaps especially poignant for an examiner like Godwin, who was tied to his inheritance closely enough to define truth as a forceful, teleological ideal, yet secularised enough to abandon belief in its personal divine origin and

⁶⁸ 'Of Scepticism', in *Political and Philosophical Writings*, v, pp. 302-09 (p. 309).

⁶⁹ *Political Justice*, p. 127.

⁷⁰ Timothy Milnes, *The Truth About Romanticism: Pragmatism and Idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), passim (quotation is from p. 82).

emphasise its provisional, dependent nature at any given time.

Conclusion

Our opening quotation from *Political Justice* suggests that Godwin used this conceptual tension around ‘truth’ to make a statement of faith. ‘Let us imagine to ourselves’, it begins, presenting his ideal of intellectual community in terms of an imaginative summons by which the reader is exhorted to anticipate something as yet unrealised. The following two sentences reiterate this summons, beginning with the phrase ‘let us suppose’ and thus linking imagination to assumption. This group of enquirers figured in the mind’s eye read and speak in such a manner that true knowledge naturally gains ground: ‘Reason will spread *itself*’. And the ideal that they encapsulate should stimulate real attempts to ‘bring [truth] into daily use’, Godwin argues. Such an effort will inevitably gain social momentum: ‘[T]he beauty of the spectacle will soon render the example contagious’.⁷¹

Such recruitment of readerly imagination features across Godwin’s corpus, undergirding both fiction and philosophy, educational and historical commentary. It is more than a rhetorical flourish. It is a literary strategy that trades upon competing perspectives on truth – it is both an appeal for faith in truth’s authoritative bearing and an invitation to initiate its realisation. The final words of Godwin’s last philosophical work reaffirm the centrality of this strategy to his corpus. After describing the wonderful capacities of human nature, and the heights to which it has soared at various points in history, *Thoughts on Man* concludes:

And it is but just, that those by whom these things are fairly considered, should anticipate the progress of our nature, and believe that human understanding and human virtue will hereafter accomplish such things as the heart of man has never yet been daring enough to conceive.⁷²

This closing sentence entices the reader into an imaginative task: to consider, anticipate and believe. Human understanding will advance only through its courage (‘daring’) to conceive itself advancing; conviction in truth and its progress is necessary for the task of its discovery. *Thoughts on Man* thus ends by implicitly evoking its ‘very nature’ as a book-object, according to Godwin. Its inherently demanding, disruptive material form lends itself to this imaginative pursuit, in which the paused mind ‘strikes out’ beyond the confines of its usual channels.

As we have seen, Godwin’s assessments of reading and conversation reflect an historical moment in which the social operation of media was highly politicised. The spatial and temporal dynamics of intellectual life were debated as matters of controversy, and Godwin’s appropriation of the discourse of regulation was in part an attempt to publicly negotiate his own position as a gradualist reformer.

⁷¹ *Political Justice*, pp. 121-22.

⁷² *Thoughts on Man*, p. 292. A similar passage occurs at the end of Godwin’s ‘Thoughts occasioned by the perusal of Dr Parr’s Spital Sermon’, pp. 207-08.

Yet his contribution also shows that these debates were conditioned and enlivened by a context of philosophical turbulence. Godwin recruited the media environment of Romantic-period London in order to ‘anticipate the progress of our nature’ – to invest in truth’s ideal whilst simultaneously grappling with the problems of its apprehension, the ‘peril in the means of its diffusion’. His writing exposes an alliance between the period’s literary consciousness of medial form and the shifting alethic commitments of its writers.

I have indicated throughout this chapter that Godwin gave the book ‘the foremost place’ in his evaluations of media. As the passage from *Political Justice* shows, he linked this position from the beginning of his career to ‘its permanence’. The essay ‘Of the Durability of Human Achievements and Productions’ in *Thoughts on Man* revisited this idea through its description of printed volumes ‘embalmed in collections’, presenting the book-object as not simply a temporal regulator, but a temporal survivor. My next and final chapter argues that Godwin increasingly wrote about books in this way. His essays from the first decade of the nineteenth century explicitly presented books as objects that enabled the minds of their authors to escape the power of death.

Books, Bodies and Monuments: *Print and Perfectibility in the 1800s*

Introduction

In 1809 William Godwin published his *Essay on Sepulchres*, a proposal for a system of national monuments in which commemorative priority would be given to writers rather than fighters. He justified this arrangement by describing authors as persons who were not fully dead:

Military and naval achievements are of temporary operation: the victories of Cimon and Scipio are passed away; these great heroes have dwindled into a name; but whole Plato, and Xenophon, and Virgil have descended to us, undefaced, undismembered, and complete. I can dwell upon them for days and for weeks: I am acquainted with their peculiarities; their inmost thoughts are familiar to me; they appear before me with all the attributes of individuality; I can ruminate upon their lessons and sentiments at leisure, till my whole soul is lighted up with the spirit of these authors.¹

Such dismissal of military claims to historical tenacity was a bold move, especially as it appeared during Britain's long and expensive conflict in Europe (1803-15). Even more striking, however, are the terms in which Godwin makes his counterclaim for literary achievement. The classical authors he mentions should be commemorated, not because they are in danger of being forgotten, but because they remain cultural participants. They deliver 'lessons', exchange 'sentiments', and thus contribute towards social enlightenment ('my whole soul is lighted up'). Unlike the wounded battle heroes of the British military, they remain 'whole' and 'undismembered', present to the living in corporeal terms. Godwin blurs the boundary here between authors and their books, describing printed volumes as compounds of body and mind, matter and spirit. Yet these books have done what human persons cannot do: they have defied the power of death.

This passage represents a pervasive aspect of Godwin's nineteenth-century work, according to which he expressed the social power of the book in terms of its ability to preserve and to transform the human nature of its author. In this chapter, I show that his writing of the early 1800s repeatedly figured books in terms of bodies and commemorative monuments, casting them as the ongoing legacies of passed lives. My argument is that, faced with challenges to his theory of intellectual perfectibility, Godwin was refining his longstanding contention that print technology was key to the unleashing of human intellect by claiming that the book gave durable form to various aspects of the mind that would otherwise be destroyed by death. In other words, books were a way of harnessing the

¹ *Essay on Sepulchres: or, a Proposal for Erecting some Memorial of the Illustrious Dead in All Ages on the Spot where their Remains have been Interred*, in *Political and Philosophical Writings*, VI, pp. 1-30 (pp. 28-29).

progress made by individual thinkers and staging it as cultural memory. I show that Godwin was responding to public debates about political economy, national identity and religious belief, which all in various ways brought the reality of death to bear upon his central conviction about the necessity of intellectual perfectibility. As he defended this conviction against its critics, Godwin exploited the symbolic power of the book-object in order to cast death as a means of intellectual advance.

I begin with Godwin's biographies, focussing upon his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) and his *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1803). Through these works, he tapped into a growing public and personal interest in literary biography in order to articulate the idea that a true 'self' or 'life' could be invested in a book, enabling that person to influence future communities. Godwin's correspondence with his publisher around the production of his *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* reveals that he associated such personal presence not simply with textual content, but also with the material form of the book-object itself. The book acquired a vividly corporeal form in his imagination, and the identity of the embodied subject became an anxious conflation of persons both living and dead.

I then turn to the essays Godwin composed at the end of the decade, which changed the idiom from book/body to book/monument. In his *Essay on Sepulchres* Godwin clarified and publicised his contention that books were substitutes for past minds, drawing from contemporary debates about national identity and cultural memory in order to argue that certain book-objects had unique social presence and authority. His manuscript essay 'On Death' (1810) brought this argument to its climax, claiming that 'great' books didn't simply perpetuate human minds but transformed them, enabling them to transcend the limitations of human nature. Taken together, these writings claim the printed codex as both the guarantee and the structuring force of a universal process of intellectual perfection.

Bodies: The *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*

Godwin was one of the first writers to theorise the social power of biography. He began at the turn of the nineteenth century, just as literary biography was developing into an independent and highly popular genre and was itself aiding the development of a national literary canon and the concept of literary celebrity.² Capitalising on this growing cultural interest in the relationship between texts and lives, Godwin blurred the boundary between authors, their works and their biographies, using the

² For the rise of literary biography in this period, see Richard Altick, *Lives and Letters: The History of Literary Biography in England and America* (New York: Knopf, 1966); Annette Wheeler Cafarelli, *Prose in the Age of Poets: Romanticism and Biographical Narrative from Johnson to De Quincey* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); *Romantic Biography*, ed. by Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes (Aldershot; Ashgate: Routledge, 2003); Heather Jackson, 'What's Biography Got to Do with It?', *European Romantic Review* 22:3 (2011): 357-72 (especially pp. 357-64); Deirdre Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 22.

dynamic to argue that printed books could become living participants in a universal process of social reform. He described his literary biographies as works that mediated personal presence: a good biography embodied a mind, he argued, which functioned as an ongoing member of intellectual community and thus had the power to instigate social change. As he reflected in 1815, 'I never felt within me the power to disjoin a great author from his work'.³

Godwin articulated this conviction in germinal form in 1798 through his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a biography of his late wife Mary Wollstonecraft. The *Memoirs* prioritise the intellectual dimensions of Wollstonecraft's life: Godwin expresses his interest in the 'features of her mind' and the growth of 'her understanding', and he ends the first edition with the reflection, 'I believe I have put down the leading traits of her intellectual character'. He also repeatedly presents this mind in embodied terms. He describes his biographical task as a compilation of Wollstonecraft's 'materials', recounts her physical demise in detail, and even transcribes her gravestone into the text: 'HERE LIES MARY'.⁴ In his preface, Godwin had highlighted the connection that he envisaged between this materialised mind created through biography and his project to instigate social reform. He anticipates that 'The justice which is thus done to the illustrious dead, converts into the fairest source of animation and encouragement to those who would follow them into the same career [*sic*]'. He owns himself convinced that,

the more fully we are presented with the picture and story of such persons as the subject of the following narrative, the more generally we shall feel in ourselves an attachment to their fate, and a sympathy in their excellencies. There are not many individuals with whose character the public welfare and improvement are more intimately connected, than the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.⁵

Drawing from his draft essay of the previous year, 'Of History and Romance', Godwin links vivid characterisation to the recruitment of moral sense and the instigation of intellectual enquiry.⁶ He assumes that Wollstonecraft's 'picture and story' will incite sympathetic attachment in its readers, a process which will produce, in turn, 'public welfare and improvement'. The biography, in other words – the textual rendering of Wollstonecraft's 'character' – will enable readers to apprehend and benefit from the 'excellencies' of her life, including her efforts towards social reform. There is, moreover, a second aspect to this sort of textual life. By substituting her name for her printed works ('the author of *A Vindication*', as in the title of the *Memoirs*), Godwin presents Wollstonecraft's own authorial

³ *Lives of Edward and John Philips, Nephews and Pupils of Milton* (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, Paternoster-Row: by S. Hamilton, Weybridge, Surrey, 1815), p. vi.

⁴ *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in *Collected Novels and Memoirs*, I, pp. 85-142 (pp. 88, 127, 141, 139-40). For more on the corporeal aspect of this text, see Angela Monsam, 'Biography as Autopsy in William Godwin's "Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman"', *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, 21.1 (2008), 109-30.

⁵ *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 87. The second edition has 'a sympathy in their fate, and an attachment to their excellencies', which makes even more clear the connection between sympathetic identification with a subject's life ('fate'), and the development of virtuous character (p. 147).

⁶ See Chapter Two for further discussion of this essay.

achievements as a form of embodiment. His publication of her edited posthumous works alongside the biography reinforces such a conception. By means of the texts written by and about her, he implies, Wollstonecraft herself will be present to readers, and thus continue her impact upon the minds and hearts of members of society.⁷

Somewhat ironically, this association of print with personal knowledge became the focal point of the abusive reviews that Godwin's *Memoirs* received. One writer for the *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* mocked Godwin for 'Thinking her whoredoms were not known enough, | Till fairly printed off in black and white', connecting his textual dissemination of Wollstonecraft's life to a scandalous, rather than inspirational, form of personal knowledge.⁸ The *Anti-Jacobin's* poem exposes a gendered aspect to the idea of literary intimacy in this period through its exploitation of the familiar connection between women writers and sexual laxity. Yet it also highlights more generally how contentious the concept of personal knowledge through print had become at the turn of the century. By bringing the relationship between intimacy and publicity under scrutiny, printed biographies or 'lives' unearthed disagreements on a philosophical level about the relationship between attachment and judgment. Once 'printed off in black and white', Wollstonecraft's social deviancy was construed as a force of moral corruption by critics of the *Memoirs*, rather than a stimulus to intellectual enquiry. Her written life was thus found offensive, rather than inspiring.

Despite this hostile reaction, Godwin continued to develop the link he had made in the *Memoirs* between authorial embodiment and social reform, and it became explicit in 1803 through his *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*. In the preface to this work, Godwin described the biographer as a necromancer, able to rescue deceased persons from oblivion and bring them into contact with readers of the present day:

It was my wish [...] to carry the workings of fancy and the spirit of philosophy into the investigation of ages past. I was anxious to rescue for a moment the illustrious dead from the jaws of the grave, to make them pass in review before me, to question their spirits and record their answers. I wished to make myself their master of the ceremonies, to introduce my reader to their familiar speech, and to enable him to feel for the instant as if he had lived with Chaucer.⁹

This preface casts the biography as a site of personal presence. The biographer (Godwin) obtains personal knowledge of his subject (Chaucer), embodies this in textual form, and thus connects the reader's life to Chaucer's life. It is an image of sociability, according to which the reader gains access to the 'familiar speech' of former times. This counteracts one of the key effects of human death, the

⁷ Tilottama Rajan explores Godwin's concept of personal 'tendency' in the *Memoirs* and posthumous works at length, from a slightly different critical perspective; see especially 'Framing the Corpus: Godwin's "Editing" of Wollstonecraft in 1798', *Studies in Romanticism*, 39.4 (2000), 511-31.

⁸ [C. Kirkpatrick Sharpe], 'The Vision of Liberty: Written in the Manner of Spencer [*sic*]', *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, 9.38 (August 1801), pp. 515-20 (p. 518).

⁹ *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, I, p. xi.

separation of past generations from present ones: the reader feels ‘as if *he had* lived with Chaucer’ in the fourteenth century. Through Godwin’s book, he can form attachments and exchange ideas with dead thinkers. Echoing the language of his *Memoirs of Wollstonecraft*, Godwin states his desire to ‘do justice to’ the person of Chaucer, presenting his *Life* as a locus for the spread of knowledge between past and present communities.¹⁰

Once again, Godwin made the mind central to this picture. Chaucer must be resurrected intellectually, he claimed, if he was to be brought to ‘full and complete life’:

The full and complete life of a poet would include an extensive survey of the manners, the opinions, the arts and the literature, of the age in which the poet lived. This is the only way in which we can become truly acquainted with the history of his mind, and the causes which made him what he was.¹¹

Godwin argues that to truly know Chaucer, to apprehend the things ‘which made him what he was’, one must investigate ‘the history of his mind’. This involves looking beyond the literary works that he produced, and beyond bare historical facts and dates, to his formative environment – to the intellectual and literary tenor of fourteenth-century England. This is an important object for Godwin because, as the preface makes clear elsewhere, Chaucer is a representative figure for the nation’s intellectual improvement at large. ‘No one man in the history of human intellect ever did more, than was effected by the single mind of Chaucer’, Godwin claims; he is ‘the father of our language’ and fountainhead of ‘poetry in our island’.¹² By presenting Chaucer’s ‘full and complete’ intellectual life to a new generation of readers, the biography sets out to capture something of this unique mind, extending its power into the contemporary social world.

This approach to literary biography attracted ridicule, particularly from those sympathetic to the British antiquarian movement. Walter Scott produced a scathing summary for the *Edinburgh Review*: ‘The authenticated passages of Chaucer’s life may be comprised in half a dozen pages; and behold two voluminous quartos!’¹³ Scott’s assessment hinges upon a disagreement with Godwin over the nature and bounds of Chaucer’s life, which for Scott was lost amidst digression and speculation. His reference to ‘authenticated passages’ reveals the importance of documentation to his conception of historiography, a priority that had been precipitated amongst antiquarians by the ballad collections of Thomas Percy and Joseph Ritson.¹⁴ What to Godwin contains the very essence of Chaucer’s life – ‘the causes which made him what he was’ – are to Scott extraneous and spurious matters, and the work is dismissed as a history ‘not so much of what Chaucer actually did *do*, as of what he and all his

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. vii.

¹³ Sir Walter Scott, ‘Review of Godwin’s “Life of Chaucer”’, *Edinburgh Review*, 3 (January 1804), pp. 437-52.

¹⁴ See Maureen N. McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and Penny Fielding, *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture, and Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

contemporaries *might, could, would, or should have done*'. Rather insightfully, Scott links this dynamic to Godwin's fiction-writing:

[Chaucer's] biographer might with equal plausibility have grafted upon his story a supposed attempt to escape, and given us a Newgate calendar chapter from the horrors of Caleb Williams, or the langours of St Leon.

This comment unintentionally reinforces the connection that Godwin himself had made between history and romance in 1797. The things that diminished the *Life of Chaucer* for Scott – cultural commentary, imaginative speculation, intellectual context – were the very things that, for Godwin, brought Chaucer to life.¹⁵

Godwin's correspondence surrounding the production of his *Life of Chaucer* reveals a more complex picture of the sort of life that he imagined his work to embody or to mediate, however. The *Life*'s preface briefly references a dispute with his publisher, Richard Phillips: Godwin recalls that in the midst of his composition, when 'I saw my materials growing under my hand', Phillips assured him that the work would not be commercially viable beyond the length they had originally agreed upon, 'two volumes in quarto'.¹⁶ Godwin suggests that he submitted rather peacefully to the decision to keep his work within these limits, but personal correspondence shows otherwise. He had passionately argued against the curtailing of his project, appealing to an ethic of personal encounter in order to make a case for the *Life*'s social significance (and thus special treatment). This argument resembles that of the preface, yet the corporeal imagery Godwin used in his letters was far more graphic than anything in print:

I have thought a thousand times, since our conversation of Tuesday, with great earnestness & anxiety, of this unhappy question that has arisen about the Chaucer. [...]

What horrible confusion! What monstrous disproportion! What an entire dislocation of all the members of a well-arranged work!

A thousand times I have said to myself, I will give up the point. Yet, why should I ruin the best book I ever undertook? Why should I be myself the man to put an extinguisher over my literary character? I am now in the best & maturest part of my existence; I have taken incredible pains in collecting & arranging the materials of this book: must all this be made a sacrifice to *erroneous* calculations? [...]

The public is not so blind & stupid as you imagine. They will see the ridiculousness of a book pretending to be a standard-book & then changing its plan in the middle; & will despise the author as he ought to be despised. The main characteristics of the great literary works of man, beyond all flights of genius & original sallies of thought, are the proportion of parts & the symmetry of a whole.

You are most fundamentally mistaken in your *pecuniary calculation*. Two volumes patched up in the manner you recommend will sell perhaps better in the first month: fools will not know the difference: but in a very short time the men of sense & taste will be heard, & the book will be consigned to contempt & oblivion. With what face shall a work claim to be

¹⁵ Godwin's response to Scott's review, a letter to the editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, survives only in part. See *The Letters of William Godwin*, II, pp. 302-03. The extant section echoes the language of his letter to Phillips (see analysis below), claiming that the reviewer has 'confounded the two main orders of human minds, the man of genius, & the blockhead'.

¹⁶ *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, I, pp. xiii-xiv.

regarded as a standard-work, thus cramped, & cribbed, & mangled in its most essential members; a figure with a well looking head and trunk, but shrivelled & blasted in its lower extremities? [...]

I conclude with urging again upon your consideration, that there are books of genius, & there are books that are otherwise. If you think my book is of the vulgar & every day class, you do well in your present proposition. But, if it is in its constituent nature what I suppose we both hope it is, you do not act the part of a bookseller (understanding by a bookseller a man dealing in books, & capable of feeling his true interests, even when the case should not be of the sort that every day brings before him), but of a murderer & a suicide in one.¹⁷

This is fundamentally an argument about material production: Godwin claims that ‘the materials of this book’ demand proportion, symmetry and proper arrangement, encapsulating such ideals in the term ‘standard-work’ or ‘standard-book’. The *Life*’s social impact will be jeopardised, Godwin implies, if its content does not correlate with its formal appearance. He had already raised this sort of concern with Phillips during the previous year, as shown by a string of letters which accuse the publisher of a ‘shabby mode of printing’ and argue that a higher aesthetic standard of production ‘best brings out an author’s meaning’.¹⁸ Yet this subsequent letter makes the argument intensely personal, envisaging the results of Phillips’s proposal as a tortured, abortive form: it will cause ‘entire dislocation’, a figure ‘cramped & cribbed, & mangled in its most essential members; [...] a well looking head and trunk, but shrivelled & blasted in its lower extremities’. The book itself is something living, a creation whose development should be respected like human development. Evoking Psalm 139 – ‘Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all my members were written’ – Godwin contrasts the care of divine synthesis to this enforced ‘dislocation of [...] members’, presenting Phillips’s requirement as a premature birth. His accusation of murder also echoes the anthropomorphism of Milton’s *Areopagitica*, in which ‘hee who destroyes a good Booke, [...] kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye’. The reference associates Phillips with political censorship, positioning his demands as oppressive, unreasonable and damaging to national intellectual life.¹⁹

Given the argument about necromancy in the *Life*’s preface, one might associate the identity of this book-body with that of Chaucer himself. Indeed, Godwin refers to the dispute as a question about ‘the Chaucer’, eliding his textual subject with the book’s material dimensions. It is Chaucer whose ‘face’ will be mismatched by a ‘monstrous’ appearance, incompletely fleshed out by the book’s contents. It is Chaucer’s life thus at stake, should Phillips choose to make himself ‘a murderer’. Godwin also claims that the book’s curtailed length will maim ‘my literary character’, however. Just as the work itself will be considered repulsive for ‘changing its plan in the middle’, its author will be despised as someone who falls short in the middle of his career: ‘I am now in the best & maturest part of my

¹⁷ Godwin to Richard Phillips, 31 March 1803, *The Letters of William Godwin*, II, pp. 276-78.

¹⁸ Godwin to Richard Phillips, 18 July 1802, 19 July 1802 and 21 July 1802, in *The Letters of William Godwin*, II, pp. 252-56 (pp. 253, 255).

¹⁹ John Milton, *Areopagitica*, p. 492.

existence'. The victim of the murder may thus also be interpreted as Godwin, 'shrivelled and blasted' in the climax of his authorial efforts. In fact, Godwin aligns his own vocation with 'the great literary works of man', casting his own figure, in turn, as representative. Just as his preface to the *Life* would make Chaucer a synecdoche for national intellectual pursuit, Godwin's letter conflates his own work with cultural work more generally, presenting Phillips's proposal as an injury against all 'books of genius'.

Godwin thus associates his material book-object with various kinds of vitality: that of its textual subject, his own authorial person, and the mind of a collective ideal, Man. He considers the *Life of Chaucer* valuable for what he calls 'its constituent nature', a suggestive phrase that refers to a physical collection of pages, an enclosed subject (Chaucer), an invested author (Godwin), and the shared essence of all 'books of genius'. In Godwin's imagination, all these lives intersected in the book-object. He used the language of the body in order to articulate his conception that books could encapsulate and perpetuate some of the most valuable elements of human persons.

Ironically, even though Godwin submitted to Phillips's two-volume scheme, most reviews of the *Life of Chaucer* considered it too long.²⁰ Godwin hinted at plans for a third, supplementary volume, yet never managed to expand it, and its second edition was issued with only minor revisions.²¹ His conception of his book's inherent social authority, however, was developed and enriched over the ensuing years to form an ambitious defence of the role of the printed codex in society's progress towards intellectual perfection.

Monuments: Essays on Sepulchres and Death

As the first decade of the nineteenth century drew to a close, Godwin wrote two essays that directly addressed the subject of death. This was also a time during which Godwin showed renewed interest in the power of the printed word, persistently probing in his writings 'the degree to which books are dead or alive', in Julie Carlson's words. This dual interest in lifespans and books, Carlson suggests, was precipitated by Godwin's disintegrating social network and his newly hostile encounters with the print market (which entailed stark financial and emotional challenges).²² We might also note the death of several reformist acquaintances: Holcroft, Paine and the publisher Joseph Johnson all died in 1809, and Godwin wrote Johnson's obituary notice for the *Morning Chronicle*.²³ However, as indicated

²⁰ For a summary, see Graham, *William Godwin Reviewed*, pp. 214-15, 221-22. Scott's review is representative in this regard: 'behold two voluminous quartos!'

²¹ For this projected 'future volume' see Godwin's letter to Phillips on 5 April 1803, in *The Letters of William Godwin*, II, pp. 278-79. For the second edition, the original two quarto volumes were made four octavo, but the text was not lengthened (see entry for 17 February 1804 in *The Diary of William Godwin*).

²² Carlson, *England's First Family of Writers*, pp. 78-80.

²³ Obituary notice for Joseph Johnson, *Morning Chronicle*, 21 December 1809, p. 3 (published anonymously). Cf. Philp, 'Introduction' to *Political and Philosophical Writings*, pp. 23-24.

above and by previous chapters, Godwin's interest in the relationship between books and death was not simply reactionary but was also an outworking of his long-standing belief in the ability of books to generate social reform. Throughout his educational, historiographical and biographical writings to date, Godwin had been developing the idea that books could mediate real, personal encounters and thus be considered in themselves active agents of intellectual improvement.

Essay on Sepulchres, as its subtitle explains, is 'a proposal for erecting some memorial of the illustrious dead in all ages on the spot where their remains have been interred'. In order to understand the nature and purpose of this scheme, we must understand the view of death that Godwin sets out in the *Essay*'s opening pages. Death is depicted here as a problem for the mind, first and foremost. It is at its most devastating, Godwin argues, in the loss that it entails for the intellectual progress of human societies. 'It is impossible to calculate how much of good perishes, when a great and excellent man dies', he exclaims. 'It is owing to this [...] that the world for ever is, and in some degree for ever must be, in its infancy'. In other words, when a 'great' person perishes, all their advances in moral and political thought are lost, their contribution to social good ceases, and this stalls the improvement of the world at large. Referring back to this concept of infancy later in the essay, Godwin writes that 'The world is much like a school; [...] the studies that are entered on, and the instruction that is given, are perpetually beginning'.²⁴ It is as though society is subject to a constant haemorrhage of mind, by which collective striving towards truth and justice is thwarted.

In addressing this topic, Godwin was partly responding to the criticism that his belief in human perfectibility had received over the past few years. He had been ridiculed for whitewashing the reality of death in *Political Justice*, which had finished by confidently painting a picture of a future in which death would be surpassed as the human mind improved. Perhaps the most infamous of these attacks was from Thomas Robert Malthus, whose *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) argued that misery, vice and death were necessary to the survival of the species, because they kept population size and food supply in equilibrium. Godwin had already responded to Malthus in his 'Thoughts Occasioned by [...] Dr Parr's Spital Sermon' (1801), but he continued to feel the pressure of the criticism, eventually publishing a book-length reply in 1820 entitled *Of Population. Essay on Sepulchres* appeared between these two ripostes and formed part of their justification of his confidence in intellectual progress. He used it to address the problem of death directly, and in order to do so he conceded that it was indeed *the* major setback for human perfectibility. It rendered human societies like infant schools, which constantly lost their most advanced members and constantly gained new, ignorant ones.²⁵

²⁴ *Essay on Sepulchres*, pp. 8, 14.

²⁵ See my Introduction for further detail about the Godwin-Malthus dispute. This interpretation of the intention behind *Essay on Sepulchres* is reinforced by Godwin's own reference to it in his preface to *Mandeville*: it was

Godwin insists from the beginning of his *Essay on Sepulchres*, however, that minds are not wholly lost through death. He identifies a material aspect to intellect, and claims that a remnant of this has a posthumous existence. Although he confesses himself ‘more inclined to the opinion of the immaterialists; than of the materialists’ when it comes to defining the nature of thought itself, he considers it important that ‘my acquaintance with the thoughts and the virtues of my friend, has been made through my eyes and my ears’. Knowledge is always embodied, and to love someone’s intellect is to love their whole person. Such love spills over into the objects and places associated with them, and these gain, he argues, ‘an empire over my mind’. He was drawing from a growing interest in the ability of memory to forge connections between places, objects and persons, prominent in the literary work of Robert Southey and William Wordsworth (the latter’s own ‘Essay on Epitaphs’ was published in 1810).²⁶ Godwin argues that it is not only unavoidable, but reasonable to become attached to the physical spot of a friend’s interment, because this ‘is our only reality’. It is the material locus through which we can recall ‘the thoughts and the virtues’ of the deceased person.²⁷ Through tangible places of mourning, the living can reclaim something of the dead.

This insistence on the material embeddedness of knowledge leads Godwin to present an initial critique of the commemorative practices of current society. He argues that British citizens do not make the most of the real intellectual solidity of dead persons available to them, and thus they miss an opportunity to counteract some of the social loss inflicted by death. ‘We remarked some way back, that ‘the world was for ever in its infancy’’, Godwin recalls; ‘It is indeed so: we cut ourselves off from the inheritance of our ancestors’. He implies that his readers deliberately neglect the material reality of dead minds. He argues later that the British inhabit an ‘old country’, literally composed of the remains of great thinkers and thus full of sites of potential knowledge recovery. Yet they spurn its advantages: ‘They do not husband their inheritance’.²⁸ Godwin connects the intellectual loss of dead persons to a neglect of husbandry amongst the living, who have a duty to tend to their physical remains. Exactly what Godwin means by ‘husbandry’ at this stage remains mysterious. Yet he clearly suggests that British society does nothing to prevent a process of *dismembering*: the material parts of dead minds are being forgotten, left to dissolve into oblivion.

These observations about the nature of death pave the way to Godwin’s solution: a national effort to memorialise the greatest minds. He exhorts his readers to ‘seize on what we can. Let us mark the spot [...] let us visit their tombs; let us indulge all the reality we can now have, of a sort of conference with

something written from a uniquely ‘private sentiment’, produced in order ‘to try whether, as Marmontel says, they valued me for myself’ (*Mandeville*, p. 8).

²⁶ See Philp, ‘Introduction’ to *Political and Philosophical Writings*, p. 23. Cf. Wordsworth, ‘Essay on Epitaphs’, in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), II, pp. 43-119.

²⁷ *Essay on Sepulchres*, pp. 8, 10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 19.

these men'.²⁹ Dead people can continue as social beings, for Godwin – they can still participate in intellectual life – yet this only happens when the living 'seize' upon something of their material remains. The appeal is later rendered as a personal demand:

I wish to live in intercourse with the Illustrious Dead of All Ages. I demand the friendship of Zoroaster. [...] I would say, with Ezekiel, the Hebrew, in his Vision, 'Let these dry bones live!' Let them not live merely in cold generalities and idle homilies of morality; but let them live, as my friends, my philosophers, my instructors, and my guides! I would say with the moralist of old, 'Let me act, as I would wish to have acted, if Socrates or Cato were the spectators of what I did!' And I am not satisfied only to call them up by a strong effort of the imagination, but I would have them, and men like them, "around my path, and around my bed," and not allow myself to hold a more frequent intercourse with the living than with the good departed.³⁰

This idea of conversing with the dead through tokens of remembrance was commonplace, but Godwin redirects it into unusually literal territory. The materiality of commemorative monuments is his great preoccupation in the *Essay*; he does not allow his readers to settle for an 'effort of the imagination' alone, but locates the reality of dead thinkers in their remaining 'solidity', the *hic jacet* of a sepulchre.³¹ Considering how busts or portraits can bring historical figures to life in the mind of their contemplators, he elevates tombs to a higher level, arguing that 'the dust that is covered by his tomb, is simply and literally *the great man himself*'.³² It is a physical reality that works in partnership with a psychological reality – the imaginative nature of man, who is 'a creature "looking before and after"' – and creates a real meeting of past and present minds. Godwin asks of the dead, 'Had their thoughts less of sinew and substance [...] than ours?', encapsulating the strange alliance of material and immaterial that he propounds. Intellectual exchange is incarnate, given 'sinew and substance', through the monument itself. Godwin's sepulchres are the loci of material-spiritual encounters, sites that foster appropriate sentiment towards 'Illustrious' thinkers and thus embody real relationships.³³ In this manner, they counteract the loss to collective intellectual improvement that death entails.

Godwin's emphasis upon location indicates that his *Essay on Sepulchres* is also an argument about a nation. He describes the proposal as 'a scheme for Great Britain', although he mentions his hope that it will take root in other countries, whose leaders will follow the British example. The importance of national landscape is made clear by Godwin's proposition that a map be produced, showing the British Isles in its tomb-studded aspect, alongside a 'Catalogue' or directory of those interred in its

²⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

³¹ Ibid., p. 10.

³² Ibid., p. 20 (emphasis in the original).

³³ Ibid., p. 23. On the connection between Godwin's *Essay on Sepulchres* and associationism, see Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 322-41, and Rowland Weston, 'History, Memory, and Moral Knowledge: William Godwin's "Essay on Sepulchres"', *The European Legacy*, 14.6 (2009), 651-65.

soil.³⁴ Forging a link between national thinkers and the earth upon which they trod – even reminding his readers that an ‘old country’ such as Britain is literally composed of clods of great men – Godwin positions his countrymen as inheritors of a starkly material legacy. They are unified, not simply around a land mass, but a land ‘of the most admirable fertility’; a land in which the material remains of the ‘Illustrious Dead’ are ‘fruitful of sentiments and virtues’ that ‘elevate [man] to a God’.³⁵ Godwin thus presents the British nation as the collective heir of an inheritance of intellectual production, and propounds a message of unity around this shared past. Citizens of the present day ‘do not husband their inheritance’, he argues, because they do not understand how integral it is to their national make-up. In fact, this British heritage includes writers from ancient Greece and Rome – Godwin lists Shakespeare and Milton in the same line as Plato and Virgil – which advocates the importance of living British thinkers by giving them an ancient lineage, and subtly aligns them with an idealised republican past.³⁶

At first reading, this seems rather a departure from the Godwin of *Political Justice*, who had argued fiercely against the prejudicial sentiment engendered by national governments. The *Monthly Review* certainly felt so, commending *Essay on Sepulchres* for being ‘more in the style of *antient piety* than of *modern philosophy*’.³⁷ Godwin’s exhortation that British readers should ‘husband their inheritance’ seems especially Burkean, perhaps part the wider ‘reconceptualization of the literary past as a form of collective cultural patrimony’ that Philip Connell identifies as a more general and salient feature of society in this period.³⁸ Yet Godwin’s concern with monuments to the intellect is also deliberately subversive of his immediate political context. He wrote during a time of unprecedented investment in military monuments, which had been precipitated by the Napoleonic wars and particularly by the death of Nelson in 1805. His *Essay* challenges the idea that British military victories in Europe were fundamental to the nation’s identity – that the national inheritance of future generations should be understood in terms of a tradition of physical prowess or Protestant loyalty.³⁹ ‘Military and naval achievements are of temporary operation’, he argues, ‘but whole Plato, and Xenophon, and Virgil

³⁴ *Essay on Sepulchres*, pp. 24, 29-30. For more on *Essay on Sepulchres* and location, see Paul Westover, ‘William Godwin, Literary Tourism, and the Work of Necromanticism’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 48.2 (2009), 299-319, later incorporated into his *Necromanticism: Traveling to Meet the Dead, 1750-1860* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

³⁵ *Essay on Sepulchres*, pp. 18-19.

³⁶ Godwin summarized his idealized view of classical culture in a letter to Mary Shelley at the end of his life: ‘The species has, I believe, for the last fifteen or eighteen hundred years, been grievously depressed below the standard which is set before us in the ancient republics of Greece and Rome’ (transcribed in *Political and Philosophical Writings*, VII, p. 79). On the general significance of classical literature and history in Godwin’s life and career, see Philp, ‘Introduction’ to *Political and Philosophical Writings*, pp. 22-23.

³⁷ [Anon.], ‘Review of “Essay on Sepulchres”’, *Monthly Review*, 61 (1810), Art. 44, p. 111.

³⁸ Philip Connell, ‘Bibliomania: Book Collecting, Cultural Politics, and the Rise of Literary Heritage in Romantic Britain’, *Representations*, 71 (Summer 2000), 24-47 (p. 30).

³⁹ On the context of military monuments, see Alison Yarrington, ‘Nelson the Citizen Hero: State and Public Patronage of Monumental Sculpture 1805-18’, *Art History*, 6.3 (September 1983), 315-29. On the formation of national identity in opposition to European powers in this period, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

have descended to us, undefaced, undismembered, and complete'. He evokes the literal dismembering of Nelson, who had famously lost his arm at the Battle of Santa Cruz de Teneriffe, implying that books have greater resilience and worth than the battle heroes of popular commemoration. He argues for the cultivation of a different sort of national identity, one constituted by a legacy of intellectual and literary achievement.

Godwin's intellectual monuments are in fact subtly presented as a sort of usurpation of national cultural memory. He proposes that his directory of monuments should replace the 'Catalogue of Gentlemen's Seats' that were commonly included in travellers' guides.⁴⁰ Visionary thinkers and writers should become the national landmarks, he implies, rather than the landed estates of noble families. He constructs a vision of the British nation that is marked (literally) by intellectual merit, embodied by symbols of the virtues of the mind, rather than of aristocratic authority or political power. Indeed, throughout the essay Godwin attacks cultural links between monuments and wealth, explicitly rejecting the ornamental style of burial associated with those in socio-political power. The erection and maintenance of tombs at Westminster Abbey, he contends, have no correlation to genuine merit, only to fortune. The sepulchre of his proposal, by contrast, is 'A very slight and cheap memorial, a white cross of wood'; he will 'leave the rest to the mind of the spectator'.⁴¹ Perhaps Godwin's appeal to private subscription for the financing of his project was also a response to the contention over the funding of Westminster Abbey's literary 'pantheon', a suggestion that those with the means to patronise commemorative schemes should disown private interests, and devote themselves instead to this public ideal.⁴²

Contemporary reviews show that no one was really sure what Godwin's concrete objective was in his *Essay on Sepulchres*; some directly assessed the shortcomings of his monument scheme, others understood it 'rather as a play of genius than as a serious proposal'.⁴³ Yet whatever his intentions were concerning the wooden crosses, it is clear that Godwin invited his readers to consider books as such monuments. While at one point in the essay books work in tandem with monuments – reading an author's work in a particular location helps to bring the text to life – at many other points books are clearly positioned as monumental materials themselves. Great thinkers 'are still with us in their stories, in their words, in their writings'; a deceased friend can survive only 'in his memory, and his

⁴⁰ *Essay on Sepulchres*, pp. 28-30.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13, 7, 18.

⁴² See Philip Connell, 'Death and the Author: Westminster Abbey and the Meanings of the Literary Monument', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 38.4 (2005), 557-85 (p. 563), and Matthew Craske, 'Westminster Abbey 1720-70: A Public Pantheon Built upon Private Interest', in *Pantheons: Transformations of a Monumental Idea*, ed. by Richard Wrigley and Matthew Craske (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 57-79.

⁴³ [Anon.], 'Review of "Essay on Sepulchres"', *Monthly Review*, 61 (1810), Art. 44, p. 111. For a summary of the reviews of Godwin's *Essay*, see Graham, *William Godwin Reviewed*, pp. 299-302.

works'.⁴⁴ As seen in the quotation that opened this chapter, Godwin sometimes elides this concept of book-monument with that of book-body:

Military and naval achievements are of temporary operation: the victories of Cimon and Scipio are passed away; these great heroes have dwindled into a name; but whole Plato, and Xenophon, and Virgil have descended to us, undefaced, undismembered, and complete. I can dwell upon them for days and for weeks: I am acquainted with their peculiarities; their inmost thoughts are familiar to me; they appear before me with all the attributes of individuality; I can ruminate upon their lessons and sentiments at leisure, till my whole soul is lighted up with the spirit of these authors.⁴⁵

The material legacies of these classical writers are strikingly corporeal: 'whole' Plato have descended, 'complete', like preserved bodies. Godwin's use of negatives – 'undefaced, undismembered' – evokes an image of time as a brutaliser, destroying faces and limbs, and yet simultaneously asserts that this process is defied by the book form. His reference to battle injury adds another layer of meaning, implying that these particular books have emerged victorious from a process of intellectual warfare. He echoes the language of his letter to Phillips, which had lamented the 'entire dislocation of all the members' of his work, and connects the idea to that of survival through history. A good book is here a re-membering of its author.

In fact, Godwin applies this principle to *Essay on Sepulchres* as a book-object itself. In the preface, anticipating the question 'If your proposal is impracticable, why then is it published?', he uses the same language that appears later to describe the sentiment produced by monument contemplation. The book is not to be 'considered as complete' in itself, but will work in partnership with the 'intellectual eye', resulting in an 'elevation of mind'. There is something in the act of reading the text of *Essay on Sepulchres* itself, Godwin suggests, which makes its project 'a reality':

For just so much time as any one shall spend in reading and meditating on the suggestions of these pages, provided it be done in a serious frame, the project is a reality, and is as if it were executed.⁴⁶

This conditional clause – 'provided it be done in a serious frame' – echoes that of his later instructions for visiting book-monuments. Locating the presence of the Illustrious Dead 'in their stories, in their words, in their writings', Godwin describes these materials as 'their place, [...] where, *if* we dwell in a composed and a quiet spirit, we shall not fail to be conscious of their presence'.⁴⁷ Books and monuments are conflated in this self-referential turn. Both are presented as the material loci of immaterial presence, and thus as potential sites of relationship, attachment and personal knowledge.

This assimilation of monuments and literary works is reinforced by Godwin's intriguing comment about literary characters. 'Yet to an imaginary person I do not refuse the semblance of a tomb', he

⁴⁴ *Essay on Sepulchres*, pp. 23, 8 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

states, observing that ‘I should be delighted to visit the spot where Cervantes imagined Don Quixote to be buried, or the fabulous tomb of Clarissa Harlowe’.⁴⁸ This comment seems to undermine, at first glance, Godwin’s previous insistence upon the importance of physical remains (‘the dust that is covered by his tomb, is simply and literally *the great man himself*’). Yet if we imagine books as such physical remains, as Godwin encourages us to do, it is easier to understand how this material potency might function as a monument to a character as much as to an author. Godwin’s own fictional characters use the language of ‘monument’ to frame their projected legacy; St Leon and Mandeville both describe themselves in such terms.⁴⁹ In the manuscript ending of *Caleb Williams*, the protagonist declares: ‘I am a stone – a GRAVE-STONE! – an obelisk to tell you, HERE LIES WHAT WAS ONCE A MAN!’⁵⁰ This conflation of subject and sepulchre is important, for it reflects Godwin’s interest in the ways in which materialisation made voices durable. He changed the ending of *Caleb Williams* because it appeared too bleak to his reformist contemporaries, but Caleb’s turning to stone in the original version articulates his monumentalising vision in germinal form. Just as he printed Wollstonecraft’s grave into her biography, Godwin’s monumental presentation of his fictional characters was a gesture of faith in reform. He was embodying the subject, marking the site of its presence, that the reader might be moved towards ‘a sort of conference with these men’.

This concept of the book, moreover, is presented as an explicitly secular version of immortality. Godwin used his *Essay on Sepulchres* partly as a riposte to the pious conclusions of Sir Thomas Browne’s *Hydriotaphia, Urne-Buriall, or, a Discourse of the Sepulchrall Urnes Lately Found in Norfolk* (1658), which he records reading in 1804 and consulting again in 1808 about six months before he started writing the essay.⁵¹ On an immediate level, Godwin’s *Essay* shares Browne’s concern with the social significance of commemorative monuments, and draws from his mournful contemplation of human frailty against the ravages of time. Browne describes the work of the archaeologist in terms not dissimilar from those Godwin uses to describe his sepulchre project: ‘to preserve the living, and make the dead to live, to keep men out of their urns, [...] is not impertinent unto our profession’.⁵² Yet Godwin overtly resists Browne’s argument that monuments are a testament to human futility, which should prompt the living to invest in the traditional Christian conception of an afterlife. *Urne-Buriall* becomes an eloquent sermon:

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁹ *St Leon*, p. 31; *Mandeville*, pp. 146, 217-18, 309.

⁵⁰ *Caleb Williams*, p. 340.

⁵¹ See entries for 17-19 April 1804 and 15-16 March 1808 in *The Diary of William Godwin*. A copy of Browne’s work was listed amongst Godwin’s posthumous book sales: see ‘The Catalogue of the Curious Library of that Very Eminent and Distinguished Author William Godwin (1836), compiled by Sotheby and Son’, printed in *Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons*, ed. by A. N. L. Munby, 12 vols (London: Mansell with Sotheby Parke Bernet Publications, 1971-74), VIII (1973), pp. 283-318.

⁵² Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, Urne-Buriall, or, a Discourse of the Sepulchrall Urnes Lately Found in Norfolk. Together with the garden of Cyrus, or the quincunciall, lozenge, or net-work plantations of the ancients, artificially, naturally, mystically considered. With sundry observations*. (London: Printed for Hen. Brome, 1658), p. 5.

Pyramids, arches, obelisks, were but the irregularities of vain-glory, and wild enormities of ancient magnanimity. But the most magnanimous resolution rests in the Christian religion, which trampleth upon pride and sits on the neck of ambition, humbly pursuing that infallible perpetuity, unto which all others must diminish their diameters, and be poorly seen in angles of contingency. [...]

To subsist in lasting monuments, to live in their productions, to exist in their names and predicament of chimeras, was large satisfaction unto old expectations, and made one part of their Elysiums. But all this is nothing in the metaphysicks of true belief. To live indeed, is to be again ourselves, which being not only an hope, but an evidence in noble believers, 'tis all one to lie in St Innocent's church-yard as in the sands of Egypt. Ready to be anything, in the ecstasy of being ever, and as content with six foot as the *moles* of Adrianus.⁵³

For Browne, the ancients' hope that they might 'live in their productions' was vainglory, part of an outdated superstition that has been surpassed by 'the metaphysicks of true belief'. For Godwin, by contrast, the only subjects who survive are those commemorated in books: 'They are not dead. They are still with us in their stories, in their words, in their writings'. In Godwin's secular vision of the human race – that of perfectible beings, yet with no Christian heaven or hell awaiting them after death – hope for longevity lies precisely in what Browne declaims. The dead do indeed 'subsist in lasting monuments' and 'live in their productions'.

This mattered for Godwin because the perspective taken by *Urne-Buriall* encapsulated what he considered to be one of the most pernicious aspects of Christian religion, its claim that real improvement to moral and intellectual life would be achieved only after death, in a heavenly realm. He reiterated this criticism in his manuscript essay 'Of Religion' (1818), and later in his final and unfinished work, *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled* (1836).⁵⁴ For centuries, he argued, this Christian emphasis upon the celestial realm had suppressed the true potential of the human mind to improve in the terrestrial realm, in part by causing believers to doubt its capacities in the here-and-now. 'Christianity is the nightmare that has pressed down all [the mind's] exertions, and paralysed its articulations', he claimed.⁵⁵ *Essay on Sepulchres* contributed to this argument by setting itself overtly against Browne's text, presenting perfectibility as an earthly reality, and claiming that books testify to this ongoing intellectual vitality that human persons can achieve. In this respect, it is perhaps more radical than its critics have allowed it to be; it certainly seems ironic that the *Monthly Review* praised it for its 'style of *antient piety*'.⁵⁶

Godwin thus used his *Essay on Sepulchres* to claim that books represented and facilitated a process of universal intellectual progress: they preserved the best minds of the past (the 'Illustrious Dead') in order to nourish the minds of the living. The *Essay* owes a debt to John Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644), seen most clearly in Godwin's depiction of books as objects containing a special sort of life, the best

⁵³ Browne, *Urne-Buriall*, pp. 82-84.

⁵⁴ See 'Of Religion', p. 67, and *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled: In A Series of Essays*, in *Political and Philosophical Writings*, VII, pp. 75-240.

⁵⁵ *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled*, p. 199.

⁵⁶ [Anon.], 'Review of "Essay on Sepulchres"', *Monthly Review*, 61 (1810), Art. 44, p. 111.

of which survive a process of intellectual warfare. Milton's famous argument against the licensing and censorship of the printing press involved the claim that 'a good Booke is the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalm'd and treasur'd up on purpose to a life beyond life'. The value of these book-lives was associated, not simply with the personal merits of their authors, but with the universal power of truth and reason: great books contain 'the breath of reason it selfe, [...] an immortality rather than a life'.⁵⁷ This conception of certain books being inherently authoritative and vital undergirds Godwin's *Essay*, surfacing most noticeably in his claim that 'great' books always survive the challenges of time and changing fashion by a process of natural selection:

It is with the memories of men, as it is with books. Those will always be the most numerous, which are of the freshest date. But this is all accident. The books and the memories of men in the eighteenth century, at present overrun our libraries, and clog up our faculties. But the time is hastening on, when this shall not longer be the case, when they shall be reduced to their true standard, and brought down to their genuine numbers. The tomb, the view of which awakens no sentiment, and that has no history annexed to it, must perish, and ought to perish. The description of the fate of mortal writings, so admirably given by Swift in his Dedication to Posterity, is not less applicable to the present subject.⁵⁸

True to his Dissenting educational background, Godwin assumes that Truth has self-evident value and uses this to argue that only 'Illustrious' minds survive through print in the long-term (see Chapter Four). He evokes Milton's association of truth and life in order to envision a process by which, in spite of the contemporary proliferation of printed works, only the most able minds could survive and thrive in book-form across generations. The mere materiality of printed pages is not enough in itself; the tomb 'which awakens no sentiment' will perish.

This aspect of Godwin's *Essay on Sepulchres* at once echoes and subverts the many jeremiads of modern print culture that featured in the writing of his contemporaries.⁵⁹ He employs a well-aided notion, that the modern literary marketplace promotes quantity over quality, yet he resists the inference of social degeneration which many others were inclined to draw from it. One gloomy satire for the *Monthly Expositor* actually recruited the contemporary print market as evidence to refute Godwin's particular belief in perfectibility, conjuring up a *Dunciad*-inspired image of 'scribblers who cannot write a verse' in order to imply that 'the world degenerates from age to age'.⁶⁰ Godwin draws from the same tradition of Scriblerian satire in the section from his *Essay* quoted above, yet he comes to a very different conclusion to that of his critic. He references Jonathan Swift's dedication to 'His

⁵⁷ Milton, *Areopagitica*, pp. 492-93.

⁵⁸ *Essay on Sepulchres*, p. 26.

⁵⁹ On the ubiquity of corruption narratives in Romantic-period discussions of print see Paula McDowell, 'Towards a Genealogy of 'Print Culture' and 'Oral Tradition'', and Andrew Piper, *Dreaming in Books*, pp. 5-6. Cf. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's description of the demise of the social role of books in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) – 'as their numbers increased, they sank still lower' – *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 187.

⁶⁰ [Anon.] A GODWINIAN, 'Modern Perfectibility', *The Scourge, or, Monthly Expositor of Imposture and Folly*, 1 (June 1811), pp. 463-66 (pp. 464-5, 463).

Royal Highness Prince Posterity' in *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), which had mocked the vast numbers of writers who claimed literary immortality in their prefaces, and traced the journey of their works to their final use in ovens, brothels, and toilets: 'I inquired after them among readers and booksellers, but I inquired in vain; the memorial of them was lost among men, their place was no more to be found'.⁶¹ Just as Swift's dedication identifies a body of intellectually vacuous works that forfeit memorialization and become waste matter, Godwin's *Essay on Sepulchres* identifies a class of 'mortal writings', which lack the immaterial power required for longevity. Yet Godwin uses this idea to advance a principle of natural selection: he uses Milton's alliance of truth and life to argue that book-monuments survive in their 'genuine numbers', that the earth will ultimately absorb the flood of unworthy modern print. In this way, he argues in his *Essay on Sepulchres*, books testify to the possibility and reality of intellectual progress. They show the power of truth through 'Illustrious' minds, who have made and continue to make headway in the human struggle towards intellectual perfection.

The following year, Godwin drafted an essay 'On Death' (1810) that refined this concept of the book-object's special kind of life. His *Essay on Sepulchres* had considered books as modes of presence, by which dead minds were preserved and made manifest. 'On Death' develops the connection he had forged between books and social authority, but from a contrary perspective – by exploring books as modes of absence. Hitherto unpublished, 'On Death' describes how a book can endow its author with a divine-like existence through its function as a distance medium. In other words, Godwin claims that books do something more than simply preserving or distilling great minds; they transform them, enabling them to transcend the limitations of human nature.⁶²

'On Death' considers the book-object as a disembodiment, a site of authorial absence. Godwin begins by observing that bodily absence lent authority to ancient Eastern monarchs, and argues that their practice was based upon an acute perception of the human heart: 'That which we clearly understand, & can define in all its bearings, we do not contemplate with reverence'. He then applies this principle to books, portraying 'the author & the friend' in sharp contrast to each other:

The man that I admire most at a distance, if I fall into unrestrained & often intercourse with him, will lose much of my reverence. [...] I see he is a man, I perceive that in many ways he is ever such a one as my-self, I find in him human infirmities, & know that he cannot always be great; my eye becomes fatigued with continually looking up; & having repeatedly contemplated him in his elevations, I come at last to survey him in his littlenesses. There is another thing beside this: if he is an author, & I take him in his works, I can never read him

⁶¹ Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub: To which is added The Battle of the Books and the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, ed. by A. C. Guthkelch and David Nichol Smith, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 34-35. Godwin further explored Swift's 'Dedication', and this quotation directly, in his essay 'On the Durability of Human Achievements and Productions' in *Thoughts on Man* (p. 83).

⁶² 'Untitled [Essay On Death]', 1810, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Abinger Collection, MS. Abinger c. 86, Fols. 36-39. The following transcriptions are my own. Godwin recorded the composition date of this essay as 6 October 1810 in *The Diary of William Godwin*.

through – no, I can never read him through. Let us suppose that I am thoroughly master of his writings; yet he has written, it may be, only upon one, or upon two subjects; I cannot tell how he would have expressed himself, or how he thought, upon others. An author, when he purposes to write, retires himself into his treasury, and unlocks all his hoards. But he does not use them all: he selects only such as are to his present purpose. When he has composed a book, he closes the door of his sanctuary, & comes forth. It is perhaps a splendid assemblage of beauties that he exposes before me. But I cannot tell what there is still accumulated in the magazine he has quitted. It is for his unknown wealth, as I may say principally, that I worship him. I do not love to gauge the dimensions of his mind. I love to guess & wonder, & guess & wonder still. But, if I am his familiar acquaintance, I then can read him through. It is no longer in his power [...] to play the miser or the politician with me. He does not now bring forth a certain arrangement of magnificent materials, & close the door of the magazine upon all the rest. We talk on all subjects; I propose to him upon one occasion or another all questions, & he supplies to me with the frankness of a manly mind; I can almost tell what he thinks, & how he would express himself, on every subject. The differences between the author & the friend is nearly as great as between a scriptory evidencer or affidavit, where a man says just the things his judgment suggests & arranges them to his mind, & an evidencer, placed up in the witness box, who is questioned, & sifted, & exposed as a laughing-stock to all the bystanders.

The book has social authority, here, because it represents something that is fundamentally absent. It provokes continuous intellectual pursuit, and commands respect, because its content is only ever partial: it signifies ‘unknown wealth’. Yet it is not only the content that trades upon such virtual capital. The book-object also holds its author forever out of reach, preventing any sense of personal familiarity in its readers. Face-to-face meetings promote frankness and friendship, but they sacrifice reverence, because they confront the participants with ‘human infirmities’. In conversation, the dimensions of the mind can be gauged. Authors are immune to such measurement, however, because their material works distance them from their audience. Books represent what cannot be gauged, and thus possess that unfathomable element that Burke ascribed to the sublime. By the mystery of removal, they endow the author with transcendent authority – ‘I cannot read him through’ – and thus keep the eyes ‘continually looking up’, elevated above the mortal realm. They exalt their authors into objects of ‘worship’, something beyond the human. Books thus function here as idols rather than monuments, for they represent and iconise sacred beings.

Godwin goes on to develop this idea of deification, arguing that books endow their authors with god-like attributes, and thus with unique social power:

[W]e studiously plant the in-avoidable season of death with exaggerated terrors, & render it formidable to our deluded imaginations. It is to destroy this view of the subject, that these pages are written: & I assert, in opposition to this statement, that death is to the genuine votary of fame the hour of his triumph. [...]

Death is to the great man a real apotheosis. There is a deeper truth than the vulgar customarily imagine, in the Greek and Roman idea, that death turns a man into a God. It undoubtedly heaps upon him some of the characteristic privileges of a God. It renders him invisible, a being whose influence may powerfully be felt, but whose power no eye can see. It renders him incomprehensible, a being that discloses of himself as much as he thinks proper to disclose, but of whom no one knows more than he chooses to reveal, & whose secrets cannot be found out. It renders him impassible: we may conceive towards him any idle resentment;

but all our wrath and all our artillery will be directed against him in vain. It clothes him with a character supernatural & divine: the man who speaks to us, & the man who from his closet addresses to us a letter, acts according to the known laws of the material universe: but the man who for a thousand years has ceased to occupy a place in any corner of the globe, & yet who exercises over us his omnipotence undiminished, is surely after a certain fashion a God. Let therefore him who aspires to be truly great, no longer look upon death with repugnance; let him think it his choicest & most unvalued privilege; let him regard it as that sacred & much desired moment, when he shall divest him of every thing extraneous, degrading & vulgar, when he shall become simply & entirely himself, & enter now & for ever into his genuine inheritance.

Decades before it appeared, Godwin preempts Gustave Flaubert's famous picture of the author, who 'like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork'.⁶³ He lists several of the so-called incommunicable attributes traditionally ascribed to the Christian God and applies them to the author of books: they obtain omnipresence, inscrutability, impassibility, and thus a unique power over the minds of their readers. The crucial point here is that the author escapes 'the known laws of the material universe'. Their capacity to contribute to the intellectual improvement of society is no longer confined to their mortal person, with all the spatial limits, emotional vulnerability and sheer ordinariness that it entails. Most significant is their escape from intellectual transparency and finitude: the author becomes 'a being that discloses of himself as much as he thinks proper to disclose, but of whom no one knows more than he chooses to reveal'. In making this statement, Godwin was appropriating a key element of John Calvin's theology, according to which the pious know God only insofar as he gives himself to be known – i.e., that God is sovereign over the creature-Creator knowledge encounter.⁶⁴ For Godwin, the truly great obtain this divine prerogative of 'incomprehensibility' through the book-object, which endows them with authority over the knowing process. Books transform dead human minds into divine minds, he argues, which direct and govern the intellectual pursuits of the living.

'On Death' thus seems to overturn many of Godwin's conclusions in *Essay on Sepulchres*. Rather than fleshing out authors, rendering them familiar, corporeal and accessible, books disembodify and de-familiarise them. The value of particular locations in *Essay on Sepulchres* is replaced by an ideal of omnipresence; great authors are those who have 'ceased to occupy a place in any corner of the globe' and thus assume 'a character supernatural & divine'. Whereas in *Essay on Sepulchres* books embody life, here books are death-objects, exploiting all the social advantages of personal absence and

⁶³ As translated by James Joyce in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Jacqueline Belanger (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2013) p. 18. Joyce rephrases Flaubert's original assertion that 'The artist in his work must be like God in his creation – invisible and all-powerful: he must be everywhere felt, but never seen'. See Flaubert to Mlle Leroyer de Chantepie, 18 March 1857, in *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert*, ed. and trans. by Francis Steegmuller, 2 vols (London: Faber and Faber, 1981-84), I, p. 230.

⁶⁴ For example: 'And it [the pious mind] does not attach to him whatever it pleases, but is content to hold him to be as he manifests himself'. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I, p. 42. This aspect of Calvin's work formed a major tenet of the religious sect of Sandemanianism in which Godwin was raised (see Chapter Three).

remove. In 1809 death was ‘The greatest of earthly calamities’, yet in 1810 death is ‘that sacred & much desired moment’. Rather than depriving the earth of illustrious thinkers, death is ‘the hour of [their] triumph’, a ‘privilege’, for it invests them with a cultural power that is unfettered by material finitude. By embodying death, in a curious paradox, books overcome the terrors traditionally annexed to its power.

In an important respect, however, Godwin’s *Essay on Sepulchres* and ‘On Death’ are united. Both essays are anxious to show that books transpose authorial life into a higher plane of existence. They both argue that books are a life-in-death, tokens of victory over the forces of loss and silence that human history entails. They both contend that the book-form is continually powerful: whether considered as a site of presence or of absence, it renders death ‘a real apotheosis’ for the great thinker, for it renders him ‘simply & entirely himself’. *Essay on Sepulchres* is perhaps more in keeping with Godwin’s previous work through its association of books with attachment, friendship and personal presence. It reads in some ways as the climax of his biographies of Wollstonecraft and Chaucer, for it is devoted to the fusion of books and lives. Yet ‘On Death’ brings to the foreground a strand of thinking that had been present in all these works, the author’s power as an ideal or an icon. In making his case for Chaucer’s ‘full and complete life’, Godwin not only used the language of incarnation and embodiment, but also that of paradigm and symbol: Chaucer was powerful because he represented a legacy of intellectual awakening. Likewise in *Essay on Sepulchres*, the names of individual worthies are referred to less often than their collective abstraction, ‘the Illustrious Dead of All Ages’. Readers are instructed to approach literary monuments with religious reverence, a disposition that echoes that used to describe book-reading in ‘On Death’: they must be viewed ‘with the intellectual eye’, ‘spiritually’. In fact, Godwin’s entire sepulchre project is designed to refute what he describes as a modern tendency to consider dead ancestors ‘too poorly and literally’. It depends upon a national ‘spirit of propagation’, a shared understanding of literature as an inheritance with transcendent value.⁶⁵

Through his essays at the end of the decade, then, Godwin was exploiting two images of the canonised author, that of the friend and the icon. These tropes were widespread in the writings of his time, as Dierdre Lynch has recorded; their prevalence bears witness to a shared need to represent the value of literary works both in terms of an intimate, affective relationship and an authoritative ideal.⁶⁶ Yet while in one sense representative of a wider cultural interest, Godwin is distinctive in his *way* of constructing and upholding these idealized qualities of authorship – the way that he persistently anchors them in the material properties of the book-object itself. The author functions as both friend

⁶⁵ *Essay on Sepulchres*, pp. 6-7, 18.

⁶⁶ See Lynch, *Loving Literature*, pp. 35, 92 and passim. Paul Westover argues that both Godwin and Hazlitt sought to uphold the author as an icon and incarnate the author as a friend in this way: see Westover, ‘William Godwin, Literary Tourism, and the Work of Necromanticism’, p. 307.

and icon because the book as a distance medium makes this tension possible, in the sense that it is at once a site of presence (potently material and immanent) and a site of absence (defined by lack and deferral). Godwin's attention to the book as an object was thus central to his elevation of authorship's social role, which is the ultimate strategy behind all the writings discussed in this chapter. By describing literary works in terms of continuous cultural (cultivating) power, and presenting the logic for this power in the book's material form, Godwin gave a secular justification for the significance of his authorial career.⁶⁷

In fact, by presenting the book as a meeting point of material and immaterial realms, Godwin aligned it with his conception of 'thought' itself, which he understood as neither physical mechanism nor supernatural process but a mysterious combination of both (see Chapter One). The human mind 'is not less a system of mechanism, according to the doctrine of necessity, than the [body], but it is a mechanism of a totally different kind', he had claimed in *Political Justice*. He was still appealing to this conception in 1831, describing the mind as the 'stranger at home': 'Where it resides we cannot tell, not can authoritatively pronounce, as the apostle says, relatively to a particular phenomenon 'whether it is in the body, or out of the body.'⁶⁸ Perhaps Godwin's most striking move in his *Essay on Sepulchres* and 'On Death' is his suggestion that the book-object encapsulates thought's equivocal nature and channels its power for social good. As both a presence and an absence, an object and a subject, a somewhere and a nowhere, the book gives unique cultural power to great minds. Godwin insisted that human thought was re-membered and perfected in the book-form, remaining live and active after an author's death.

These sentiments are reiterated in a somewhat macabre manuscript note from 1819, in which Godwin reflects on his personal feeling of impending death:

I feel the pen dropping from my hand. The fingers that trace these lines will very speedily be void of sense & motion. The mind that dictates to the fingers will soon cease to animate my frame, & will live only in the speculations I am now delivering to my fellow beings. Other [minds] will read them, will weigh, consider & examine their justness & their use; but the author who first digested them, will have finished his task, and rested from his labours.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ By contending that these book-focused concerns were about literature's cultural power, I use the term *culture* first and foremost in its eighteenth-century sense of cultivating, or tending natural growth, as Godwin and his contemporaries would have primarily understood it. For Godwin, the specific power of the book's form lay in its continual provocation towards intellectual communion – a productive sharing of intellect by which society progresses towards truth and justice – and its efficacy was conceptualised as *cultural* in this teleological sense. For a useful gloss upon the meanings and evolution of the term *culture* during Godwin's lifetime, see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 54.

⁶⁸ *Political Justice*, pp. 176-7, *Thoughts on Man*, pp. 42-46. See Chapter One for Godwin on matter and thought. Godwin's remarks about 'thinking matter' accord in a large part with the views of Joseph Priestley, whose influence was felt at Hoxton Academy; see, for example, his *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (London: J. Johnson, 1777).

⁶⁹ 'Untitled [on feeling close to death]', dated 9 May 1819, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Abinger Collection, MS. Abinger c. 32, Fol. 32. The transcription is my own.

In this note Godwin locates the afterlife of his mind, specifically, in his writing. The apprehension of death suggests to him both the finishing of bodily life ('sense & motion', 'frame'), and a beginning of a new life, in which his mind continues to interact with other minds 'in the speculations I am now delivering'. As in both his *Essay on Sepulchres* and 'On Death', Godwin acknowledges the power of death and yet at the same time refuses to give it the last word.

Neither this manuscript nor his essay 'On Death' were published, but Godwin incorporated the argument of 'On Death' into a later collection of essays, *Thoughts on Man* (1831). He wove its claims about divinity into the opening essay 'Of Body and Mind', which contends that 'the man of great literary and original endowments' achieves a god-like status, transcending the confines of his mortal body.⁷⁰ Later, in a discussion 'Of Imitation and Invention', Godwin introduces the connection he had made between such divinisation and the progress of the human mind at large. This essay's founding question, 'Is there indeed nothing new under the sun?', fuels an enquiry into literature and history, which culminates in the claim that 'the poet is immortal'. As he addresses the subject of death, Godwin argues that an author's ability to transcend the grave is integral to the intellectual improvement of humankind:

If, as the beast dies, so died man, then indeed we should be without hope. But it is his distinguishing faculty, that he can leave something behind, to testify that he has lived. And this is not only true of the pyramids of Egypt, and certain other works of human industry, that time seems to have no force to destroy. It is often true of a single sentence, a single word, which the multitudinous sea is incapable of washing away. [...] It is the characteristic of the mind and the heart of man, that they are progressive. One word, happily interposed, reaching to the inmost soul, may 'take away the heart of stone, and introduce a heart of flesh.' And, if an individual may be thus changed, then his children, and his connections, to the latest page of unborn history.⁷¹

The works of great writers, down to their individual sentences and words, are here summoned as evidence for the 'progressive' nature of 'the mind and the heart of man'. The beneficial power that such works have over the mind extends beyond the scope of individual readers to their families, friends, and generations yet to come. This is so much the case that history itself is encompassed by the metaphor of the codex at the end of the passage ('latest page'). Godwin's closing plea in this essay is against 'Presumptuous innovators' who have adapted the writings of Chaucer and Spenser into modernised English: 'you may as well attempt to preserve the man when you have deprived him of all his members; as think to preserve the poet when you have taken away the words that he spoke'.⁷² Echoing the corporeal language of his letter to Phillips almost twenty years earlier, Godwin figures the words of a great writer as his limbs. Only the reproduction of these same words can continue his

⁷⁰ *Thoughts on Man*, pp. 46-47.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 149; 142-43.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 150. Cf. *Lives of Edward and John Phillips*, p. 325, in which an abridgement is described as akin to a 'naked skeleton', and the essay 'Of the Study of the Classics' in *The Enquirer*, which attacks both abridgements and translations as a 'waste of time' (p. 100-01).

presence amongst the living and render him a tangible, ongoing benefit to the minds and hearts of readers.

Conclusion

Through his writings of the early nineteenth century, Godwin came to express the book as an object that not simply preserved but transformed the human mind. He formulated his ideas in a context of personal and public loss, and during a period in which his central belief in the perfectible nature of human society was subject to intense criticism. Tapping into public debates about history, theology and national identity, Godwin figured the book as a body, a monument and even an idol in order to defend and uphold this belief. His *Essay on Sepulchres* and 'On Death' gave particular attention to the formal aspects of the book-object in order to defend his conviction that intellectual exchange was a vital, durable and progressive activity. In its representation of the dead mind, he argued, a book not only extended its thinking presence among the living but gave it a new sort of thinking presence that transcended the limitations of human life.

It is clear that the material power of the codex was not, in Godwin's understanding, the only active cause of truth's social apprehension through print. As the chapters of this thesis have shown, he argued in various ways throughout his corpus that readers must be of a certain kind; that literature itself may be more or less conducive to 'true enquiry' through its content and style; and that truth itself had an independent force or weight manifested (to some extent) through all these things. Godwin's concern with 'Illustrious' thinkers in his *Essay on Sepulchres* reflects some of these complications, for it involves two claims that sit uneasily alongside each other: that certain writers have historical traction due to the intrinsic value of their ideas, and that the vitality of these writers also depends upon the activity of readers, who have a duty to 'husband' their particular inheritance. The materiality of print was thus not sufficient for intellectual survival, in Godwin's estimation, but it was necessary. He assigned real power to material media, a strategy which enabled him to write confidently about the reforming capacity of print.

This strategy is perhaps shown most starkly by Godwin's late essay 'On the Durability of Human Achievements and Productions' (1831), in which he explicitly connects the properties of the book-form to the collective improvement of human minds. The most astonishing and unique feature of human life, he argues, is 'the faculty we possess of giving a permanent record to our thoughts'. As he considers death's pervasive power, he claims that books are the only true survivors of history:

Books have the advantage of all other productions of the human head or hand. Copies of them may be multiplied forever [...] The Iliad flourishes as green now, as on the day that Pisistratus is said first to have stamped upon it its present order. The songs of the Rhapsodists,

the Scalds, and the Minstrels, which once seemed as fugitive as the breath of him who chaunted them [*sic*], repose in libraries, and are embalmed in collections.⁷³

The ‘fugitive’ nature of human life is counteracted, Godwin argues here, by the printed book. He creates a sense of stasis – ‘stamped’, ‘embalmed’ – to represent the longevity enabled by the book-form, whose fixity and uniformity counteracts powers of loss and decay. Yet he also gives books vitality and agency, describing them as things that multiply and flourish like living organisms. The dead continue to sing and to speak, communicating with the living communities who preserve them. Like his *Essay on Sepulchres*, Godwin’s essay ‘On the Durability of Human Achievements’ upholds the book-form as the linchpin of long-term social progress, a site of re-remembering that works against the tendency of human civilization to function like a perpetual infant school. Its conclusion is that ‘Knowledge, in its most considerable branches shall endure, as long as books shall exist to hand it down to successive generations’.⁷⁴

⁷³ *Thoughts on Man*, pp. 80, 88.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

Conclusion

In 1793, when William Godwin first published an argument for belief in intellectual progressivism, he used the global development of speech, writing and reading as his foremost piece of evidence. Echoing the Marquis de Condorcet, he argued that ‘in the invention of printing is contained the embryo, which in its maturity and vigour is destined to annihilate the slavery of the human race’.¹ In 1801, as he defended this belief against its critics, he appealed to and refined the same principle. ‘Thoughts occasioned by the perusal of Dr Parr’s Spital Sermon’ refutes the idea that ‘vice and misery, as my antagonists so earnestly maintain, [are] entailed on us for ever’, by describing the power of literary works to prefigure and elicit the highest capacities of human nature.² At the very end of his life in 1836, Godwin was still employing a narrative about communications media in order to uphold the idea of intellectual perfectibility. As he anticipated the diminishing hold of Christian religion over the life of the mind, he noted that ‘Writing and reading are becoming almost universal. [...] Natural knowledge has made a perpetual progress. Arts of every kind have been eternally improving’.³ Throughout his career, Godwin cherished and developed a deep conviction that print technology was a beneficent force that steered humankind towards their future.

My dissertation has examined how and why Godwin used the book-object in his writings, and has traced its presence to this enduring faith in the necessary perfection of human minds. I have argued that Godwin participated in the media consciousness of Romantic-period Britain by using depictions and discussions of book-reading to examine, justify and publicise his core belief in intellectual progressivism. As he engaged with debates about materialism, ethics, pedagogy, truth and death, and as he attempted to negotiate the volatile political climate of his day, he used the book-object as a literary presence and a conceptual tool by which he expressed and defended his most foundational conviction. It is my contention that this consistent and powerful element of Godwin’s corpus must be recognised if we are to fully understand and appreciate his place in cultural history.

Godwin’s literary use of print technology resonates beyond his individual career, however. We have seen that books became a means to navigate the intellectual crossfire of his time and place – perhaps ultimately to diffuse tensions between the rationalism, humanism and scepticism that had animated the developments of philosophy, theology and the physical sciences during his upbringing in eighteenth-century Britain. In this respect his work goes some way to contextualising the more widespread ‘media consciousness’ of Romantic-period culture to which I drew attention in my Introduction. It indicates some of the ways in which writers appropriated print media as symbols,

¹ *Political Justice*, pp. 27-31, 141.

² ‘Thoughts occasioned by the perusal of Dr Parr’s Spital Sermon’, pp. 207-08.

³ *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled*, p. 235. This is a repetition from an earlier section: see p. 132.

concepts and stories in order to participate in a period of intellectual ferment – a period, in Marilyn Butler’s words, ‘when controversy was at its most intense, and art became one of its outlets’.⁴ Godwin’s complex literary investment in the book is a reminder that the ubiquity of media ‘discourse’ in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture was not simply, as Paula McDowell supposes, a response to the technology of ‘media shift’ itself.⁵ It was also an active part of other cultural shifts, which involved changing assumptions about the very nature and ends of human life.

In fact, this aspect of Godwin’s work finds an echo in many discussions and depictions of media in the present day. Our contemporary ‘digital revolution’ has fostered unprecedented interest in the history of communications media, reflected in the proliferation of research projects, textbooks and university courses which revolve around it.⁶ Yet this field of interest does not simply bear witness to a desire to understand the material and socio-economic factors that condition our media environment – it also continues to ‘mediate media’ (in McDowell’s phrase). Researchers and theorists still exploit the symbolic and narrative dimensions of the book, and still use its history to make arguments about the nature and ends of human life. Amongst recent histories of reading, for example, are accounts that attempt to further particular concepts of gender identity, political change and social morality.⁷ The author of one recent ‘history of communications’ tells a story about the book in order to magnify the limits of human agency – ‘to explain what media *do* to the way we live and what we believe’ – and to advance the conclusion that ‘[a] new world of signs has taken control of us’.⁸ For all these writers, books and their histories ultimately have something to say about social life – about what it *means* for objects, ideas and stories to be produced, exchanged and put to use – and how this could or should be done better.

One aim of this dissertation, then, is to offer Godwin as a foregoing and potent example of this contemporary practice. His work encourages us to recognise and examine the commitments that necessarily underlie our own attempts to describe, narrate and understand the communications cultures of the past and the present. In this respect, my study of Godwin’s writing confirms Leah Price’s contention that ‘the history of books is centrally about ourselves’.⁹ It bears witness to the fact that books, as manifested within literary, artistic and scholarly culture, have a track record of representing and furthering our deepest hopes, anxieties and beliefs. Godwin shows us a literary

⁴ Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830* (Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 187.

⁵ Paula McDowell, ‘Towards a Genealogy of ‘Print Culture’ and ‘Oral Tradition’’, p. 411.

⁶ Textbook publications in book history in the last five years, for example, have included Routledge’s *Introduction to Book History* (2013), the *Cambridge Companion to the History of the Book* (2014), Broadview’s *Reader in Book History* (2015) and Broadview’s *Introduction to Book History* (2017).

⁷ E.g., Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*; Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. by Lydia Cochrane (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991); Frank Furedi, *Power of Reading: From Socrates to Twitter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁸ Marshall T. Poe, *A History of Communications: Media and Society from the Evolution of Speech to the Internet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 25, 275 (emphasis mine).

⁹ Leah Price, ‘Reading: the State of the Discipline’, p. 318.

precedent for using the book's cultural power to exchange ideas about the nature, ends and possibilities of human life.

Godwin's particular use of the book-object remained as much a personal interest as a public strategy or philosophical proposition. As he represented books in reformatory terms, he was in part justifying his own choice to pursue a literary career after leaving his role as a Christian minister in the 1780s. A letter to Mary Shelley dated 15 April 1830 expresses this concern succinctly. Giving instructions about how she should describe his latest book, *Thoughts on Man* (1831), to the publisher John Murray, he wrote:

Whether it is published during my life, or after my death, it is a light that cannot be extinguished – “the precious life-blood of a discerning spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life”.¹⁰

Here Godwin reiterates the connection between books and bodies that he had exploited in his early-nineteenth-century work, translating it into a statement of confidence in his own literary life. He quotes Milton's *Areopagitica*, using its portrayal of books as agents of reform in order to invest the fruit of his labours with active power, something that transcends his biological lifespan. The ‘master spirit’ of Milton's original is changed to ‘discerning spirit’, which subtly reflects Godwin's concern to emphasise the thinking power of his ‘embalmed’ legacy.¹¹ Whether he lives or dies, Godwin argues, the published book will be indestructible. It thus extends his very being, transposing it onto a new level of existence.

This is of course a specific claim about the merits of *Thoughts on Man*, which Godwin describes with typical immodesty as ‘very far from being merely one book more, adding to the numbers of books already existing in English Literature’. Yet this letter also epitomises the confidence that he placed in the cultural power of the book across his writing, and once again situates the source of this power in its capacity to perfect the human mind. For unlike Milton, Godwin positioned books as the only immortality available to humankind, the only means of ‘life beyond life’. This move enabled him to imbue the authorial vocation – his vocation – with tremendous civic responsibility. Throughout his work Godwin gave the literary person a death-defying task, making him or her the linchpin of social progress towards truth and justice.

¹⁰ Godwin to Mary Shelley, 15 April 1830, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Abinger Collection, MS. Abinger c. 48, Fol. 68. The transcription is my own.

¹¹ John Milton, *Areopagitica*, p. 493.

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