

Bower of Books: Reading Children in Nineteenth-Century British Literature

By

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Abstract

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Bower of Books: Reading Children in Nineteenth-Century British Literature analyzes the history of the child as a textual subject, particularly in the British Victorian period. Nineteenth-century literature develops an association between the reader and the child, linking the humanistic self-fashioning catalyzed by textual study to the educational development of children. I explore the function of the reading and readable child subject in four key Victorian genres, the educational treatise, the *Bildungsroman*, the child fantasy novel, and the autobiography. I argue that the literate children of nineteenth century prose narrative assert control over their self-definition by creatively misreading and assertively rewriting the narratives generated by adults. The early induction of Victorian children into the symbolic register of language provides an opportunity for them to constitute themselves, not as ingenuous neophytes, but as the inheritors of literary history and tradition. The reading child's mind becomes an anthology, an inherited library of influences, quotations, and textual traditions that he or she reshapes with uniquely imaginative critical force.

The first chapter examines the nineteenth-century British reception of John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile*. I demonstrate that Locke's interest in cultivating skillful child readers, mediated through Rousseau's fictional pupil, informs Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* and Walter Scott's *Waverley*. Lockean educational discourse, combined with Rousseauian fictional strategies, serves as foundational for the early nineteenth century development of the novel. Chapter Two addresses childhood reading in the English *Bildungsroman*, interrogating the relationship between child protagonists who develop their identities through creative misreading and the ways that novels of growth and development shape their readers. *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, and *Maggie Tulliver* balance their absorption in the reading experience with their imaginative reshaping of their childhood reading, rewriting the books they encounter as they gradually learn to form themselves as subjects. Chapter Three traces the influence of children's books of natural history on the fantasy novels of Lewis Carroll and Charles Kingsley, with particular attention to the development of curiosity as a desirable trait for child readers. The child protagonists of natural history books, who serve as pedagogical models for child readers, inform the child protagonists of the fantasy novel, who model both successful reception of didactic instruction and comic failure to learn from their books. At the same time, the thematization of optical technology works together with the child's perspective to

embed readerly experience in childhood perception. The final chapter turns to the autobiographical reflections of John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin, and Edmund Gosse, investigating the metaphorical substitution of the acquisition of basic literacy for early childhood development and of canonical literacy for the development of identity over time. Each of these autobiographers defines himself through his ability to cultivate sublime readerly experience through re-reading. For Mill, the mature admiration that his father encourages in childhood reading must give way to a childish delight as an adult reader; for Gosse, his father's strict religious philosophy is displaced by his enchantment with the sound of poetic language; and for Ruskin, the ability to forget his childhood reading enables him to take the same pleasure in books over and over again.

For my father
and
for my son.

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Chapter 1

Imaginary Pupils: Educational Philosophy in Romantic Fiction

Je ne sais comment j'appris à lire; je ne me souviens que de mes premières lectures et de leur effet sur moi: c'est le temps d'où je date sans interruption la conscience de moi-même.

– Rousseau, *Confessions*

Introduction

Studies of children in literature tend to identify a moment of origin at which childhood begins to interest authors, and children begin to interest publishers – a moment before which children's voices are rarely represented, and after which child readers and characters appear everywhere. This obsession with the genesis of literary childhood derives largely from Philippe Ariès's groundbreaking *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (1960),¹ which argues that modern childhood came into existence in the late seventeenth century and that Western artistic and cultural representations of childhood as we now define it hardly existed before that time. In recent decades, scholars have responded to Ariès's controversial thesis by identifying manifestations of modern childhood in earlier periods, particularly in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.² Nevertheless, childhood studies has not left Ariès behind; critics continue to search for the moment of origin he theorized, though its precise situation – in the late seventeenth, the eighteenth, or the early nineteenth century – is hotly debated. Moments often cited as originary include the publication of John Newbery's *Little Pretty Pocket Book* in 1744, one of the first English-language books written and marketed for child readers; the Romantic poetry of Blake and Wordsworth at the turn of the nineteenth century, the first modern literary texts that enshrine childhood as an essential and valuable human state of being; and the educational philosophy of Locke and Rousseau in the late seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries, the first modern analyses of childhood capacities and learning.³

Why are scholars so invested in discovering the originary moment at which children

¹ Translated into English in 1962 by Robert Baldick as *Centuries of Childhood*.

² Notable responses to Ariès include Lloyd de Mause, ed., *The History of Childhood* (London: Souvenir, 1962), Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001), and Michael Wittmore, *Pretty Creatures: Children and Fiction in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007). Both Colin Heywood's *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001) and Hugh Cunningham's *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500* (London: Longman, 1995) offer histories of childhood that argue for more continuity between early modern and modern experiences of childhood than Ariès claims.

³ For example, in "The Origins of Children's Literature," M. O. Grenby summarizes the standard view that "[m]ost cultural historians agree that children's literature, as we recognise it today, began in the mid eighteenth century . . . *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book*, published by John Newbery in 1744, is often regarded as the most important single point of origin" (*Cambridge Companion* 4). In *Introducing Children's Literature: From Romanticism to Postmodernism*, Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb focus on the congruence between Romantic ideology and imaginative literature for children, writing that modern children's literature has its "roots in the radical shifting of aesthetic ideas that are defined under the broad term, Romanticism" and that "[i]ts existence originally arose from a growing interest in childhood as 'innocence' and thus a revelation of the 'true nature' of self" (4). And in *Written for Children: An Outline of English-Language Children's Literature*, John Rowe Townsend, while mentioning Newbery's publications, emphasizes Locke's and Rousseau's philosophical contributions.

become an important part of the literary scene? Perhaps because childhood is itself a form of beginning. Part of the difficulty in establishing a true point of origin is what dimension of literary childhood is considered as dominant: children's literature, children as protagonists, or children as subjects of theoretical interest. In this study, I argue that all three of these trends originate in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century educational philosophy, and that both children's literature and Romantic childhood derive from it.⁴ It is through the educational theory of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau that modern childhood becomes, not only a discrete literary and cultural phenomenon, but a crucial strand of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British fiction writing. Writing for and about children began, and largely continues, as a niche-market activity; but theories of childhood development and strategies for manipulating it establish a relationship between childhood and literary history, making childhood part of "mainstream" culture. Educational theory enables us to see literary children not only as objects or subjects, but as figures for processes of narrative development that are analogous to and inherent in other modes of textual progress. By focusing initially on childhood as it figures in eighteenth-century educational philosophy, rather than on children as a reading audience or a literary topic, we can analyze the particular relationship between late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century conceptions of childhood and the development of fiction.⁵

This chapter explores the progress of educational philosophy in English from the late seventeenth through the early nineteenth century, with particular attention to Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, the British reception of Rousseau's *Émile*, and the work of Maria Edgeworth. I argue that *Émile* reshapes, rather than refutes, Locke's *Thoughts*, promoting similar pedagogical principles, but in a fictional rather than a philosophical generic structure. In doing so, *Émile* creates a bridge between educational philosophy and fictionality, across which Lockean philosophy crosses into the nineteenth-century novel. Edgeworth's *Belinda* and Walter Scott's *Waverley* provide examples of Lockean educational philosophy driving the Romantic novel in particular. The connections traced here between Lockean and Rousseauian educational philosophy and the early development of nineteenth-century fiction suggest that the importance of childhood later in the mid-Victorian novel, particularly in the *Bildungsroman*, develops not only from the emphasis on childhood innocence and otherness in the Romantic poetry of Blake, Wordsworth, Barbauld, and their contemporaries, but from the intertwining of educationalism and fictive discourse in the work of Scott and Edgeworth. Although children are neither an intended audience nor protagonists for these Romantic novelists, the philosophical conception of children's capacities nevertheless underlies the structure of their works.

In tracing the relationship between children and reading in Locke's *Thoughts* and Rousseau's *Émile*, I attend both to the literature recommended for child readers and to the way that we read the theoretical child at the heart of each work. For Locke, the child is a potential reader, but there is little reading material appropriate to his age and station available in the late

⁴ Robert Bator has traced the way that Locke's *Thoughts Concerning Education* encouraged publishers to produce children's literature in the eighteenth century; see Robert Bator, "Out of the Ordinary Road: John Locke and English Juvenile Fiction in the Eighteenth Century," *Children's Literature* 1 (1972): 46-53. Wordsworth's debt to Rousseau is well-documented; see, for example, Bronwen D. Sewall, "The Similarity Between Rousseau's *Émile* and the Early Poetry of Wordsworth," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 106 (1973): 157-74, and W. J. T. Mitchell, "Influence, Autobiography, and Literary History: Rousseau's *Confessions* and Wordsworth's *The Prelude*," *ELH* 57.3 (1990): 643-64.

⁵ Alan Richardson has examined "the variety and sheer number of representations of children found in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century texts" (24) in *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1994).

seventeenth century. Only a few books, such as translations of Aesop's *Fables*, combine amusement and ethical instruction in a way Locke approves for children's consumption. More important than the child's reading capacity, however, is his facility with composition; Locke describes the child as a potential narrator who needs to learn how to relate incidents in his own life and in the public realm as coherent narratives. The child's ability to tell his own life or perspective as a story is an indicator, Locke implies, of his success as a gentleman and citizen. For Rousseau, however, reading is a dangerous activity, partly because children may sympathize with the wrong characters and learn the wrong lessons, but also because it is a form of mediation, replacing firsthand experience with an abstraction. Rousseau has little faith in the child reader's ability to cope with unfamiliar grammatical structures and figurative language or to extract the same morals from didactic fiction that civilized adults recognize. Reading is also disturbingly heterogeneous, discontinuous, and fleeting. Yet Rousseau makes an exception in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*, the one text he will allow *Émile* to read. Tellingly, the child of Rousseauian educational philosophy is to form himself in relation to one of the first great English-language novels, and this subject formation is to take place through re-reading and sympathetic identification. Rousseau's "imaginary pupil" is to study the novel; children are first to become readers, then adults.⁶

Over the course of the long eighteenth century, interest in educational discourse shaped the development of British fiction. The nineteenth century rise in children's books and child protagonists was preceded and enabled by the incorporation of Lockean and Rousseauian theory into the generic structures of English-language prose fiction. Looking to Rousseau for inspiration, authors such as Maria Edgeworth and Walter Scott made the nature of the young mind's malleability into an essential strand of novelistic plotting. Rousseau's pseudo-novelistic treatment of *Émile*'s development, in which he fuses the role of the pedagogue with that of the narrator, provides a formal connection between Locke's manual of child-rearing and the novels of growth and development that appear over the course of the next century. Subsequent nineteenth-century narrators, particularly in the work of Edgeworth and Scott, will assume aspects of the tutor, and the development of nineteenth-century protagonists will often be metonymically represented by their educational progress. Childhood, therefore, enters late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British literature, not only as an interest in the social roles performed by children as subjects, but as a theoretical *telos* driving the novel through educational patterns.

Locke's *Thoughts Concerning Education* initiates a discourse in which the driving concern of education is childhood, children are defined by their mental receptivity and flexibility, and children's reading practices must be carefully supervised.⁷ Although Locke is

⁶ For a discussion of Locke's and Rousseau's different strategies for "the inclusion of the grown-up child within society" (81), see Christoph Houswitschka, "Locke's Education or Rousseau's Freedom: Alternative Socializations in Modern Societies," in *Fashioning Childhood in the Eighteenth Century: Age and Identity*, ed. Anja Müller (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006) 81-8.

⁷ Although, as M. O. Grenby notes, "Locke's ideas were part of a movement already underway rather than an abrupt innovation" (7). See Grenby, "The Origins of Children's Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009: 3-18. Grenby's longer work on the subject of children's books in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, *The Child Reader, 1700-1840*, is also an excellent reference for children's reading behavior immediately after Locke's *Thoughts* were published (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011). Richard A. Barney argues for both Locke's continuity with previous tradition and his innovation, writing that "Locke's *Education* played a dual role in the history of early modern educational thought: first, his treatise consolidated many of the pedagogical innovations proposed since the mid-seventeenth century . . . second, it was exemplary of a new

most famous for his formulation of the *tabula rasa*, his theory of the child's mind contains more elements of determinacy than are typically recognized by critics. The child's mind is characterized as a river which, diverted early by a few degrees, can be significantly shifted at a much later period of maturity. Children have limited attention spans, unable to concentrate for long on any one thing, and unable to multitask. They must be brought to do educational tasks by subtle cajoling and manipulation, introduced to learning as play rather than as work, and convinced – or tricked – into believing that they choose their own activities and occupations. This well-meaning coercion troubles Locke, as it undermines free will and self-determination, and the culmination of the educational process is the moment at which children shift from obeying adults who behave with seeming rationality to imposing rational behavior on themselves. For this reason, Locke values the narrative instinct – the child's ability to construct and relate incidents in his or her life – more than readerly receptivity. Ultimately, Locke's child is to be critically self-reflexive, rather than a passive vessel receiving instruction in traditional social virtues – a writer perhaps more than a reader.

Rousseau's *Émile* adopts many of the educational tenets of Locke's *Thoughts*, but rearranges them within a quasi-novelistic framework. While Locke sees childhood as a state to be theorized and manipulated in order to construct an adult citizen who is motivated by the desire for love and approval and controlled by his sense of shame, Rousseau understands children as amoral, practical creatures undergoing a process of personal development not unlike the progress of a fictional narrative. Although Rousseau presents childhood using the trappings of prose fiction, he argues against encouraging children to read imaginative works, cautioning particularly against the use of fables and fairy tales as didactic instruments. Concerned that children are not sufficiently indoctrinated into the appropriate patterns of readerly identification, Rousseau suggests that their misreadings of moral tales result in their learning the wrong lessons. Instead of reading fairy stories, Rousseau argues that children should not be exposed to much reading except for utilitarian purposes. The notable exception is the one novel that Rousseau will allow on the child's bookshelf – *Robinson Crusoe*, which he sees as practical and relatively free of the corrupting influences of civilization. Rousseau further protects the child from his own misreadings by implying that *Crusoe* should not only be read but re-read, repeatedly, in order to be fully digested.

Both Rousseauian and Lockean forms of educational theory are evident in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*. Belinda herself takes a cool, rational approach to her own emotional development that is reminiscent of Locke's ideas about personal sovereignty, while her foil Virginia St. Pierre is a parodic representation of a real-life Rousseauian didactic experiment gone horribly awry. The novel places these two strands of eighteenth-century educational theory in conversation with one another, not to choose between them, but to mobilize the force of pedagogical development in novelistic plotting. Ultimately, *Belinda* argues for the importance of educating young people, particularly women, in order to cultivate their "retentive memory" – their ability to arrange learned information into frameworks and narratives in order to make use of it – a facility akin to Locke's emphasis on the child's ability to self-narrate. While demonstrating the dangers of taking Rousseau too literally as a teaching handbook, Edgeworth nevertheless uses his narrative strategies to develop and enhance the novel using educational progress and patterning. Scott's *Waverley*, by contrast, shows the problematic side of Locke's program for educating young gentlemen by allowing them to read playfully and heterogeneously

turn in educational theory from the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth century" (38). See Barney, *Plots of Enlightenment: Education and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1999).

through any materials that interest them, while ironically rewarding this playfulness in the end.

Narrative as Self-Regulation in Locke's *Thoughts*

John Locke's educational theory, though influential in its own right, was widely interpreted by nineteenth-century British authors through the lens of Rousseau's commentary and response in *Émile*. *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* has never been the most famous of Locke's works, although Victorian scholars clearly saw Locke as an important educational theorist.⁸ In 1876, for example, both James Leitch, Principal of the Church of Scotland Normal School in Glasgow, and John Gill, Professor of Education at the Normal College in Cheltenham, published volumes of essays on influential educational theorists, in each case dedicating a full chapter to Locke.⁹ Leitch's *Practical Educationists and Their Systems of Teaching* was based on the lectures he had delivered to his students, trainee teachers, to clarify the relationship between existing pedagogical practices and the theorists who had first proposed them. Some of the figures

⁸ The Victorian embrace of Locke as an educational philosopher was late but enthusiastic. In 1890, Alexander Campbell Fraser, Professor of Logic and Metaphysics at the University of Edinburgh, published a short biography and critical examination titled simply *Locke*. Fraser's book was the fifteenth volume in a series of "Philosophical Classics for English Readers" issued by William Blackwood and Sons, edited by William Knight, Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of St. Andrews. In his Preface, Fraser lost no time in connecting his work with the bicentenary of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, arguing that Locke's work had been more influential in the last two hundred years than that of any other philosopher and opining that the bicentenary was a convenient occasion for a "condensed Study of Locke" (v). His anxiety about the necessity of his volume was perhaps due to the fact that two other biographies of Locke, one far more substantial than his own, had appeared in the previous fifteen years. 1880 had seen the publication of *Locke*, by Thomas Fowler, a volume in the "English Men of Letters" series (a rival set of the lives of famous intellectuals), and 1876 had seen H. R. Fox Bourne's two-volume *The Life of John Locke*, which both Fowler and Fraser acknowledged as a groundbreaking source. Before that, the standard nineteenth-century biography of Locke was Peter King, Lord King's 1830 *The Life of John Locke* in two volumes, which, though compendious, erred on the side of panegyric – after all, King was closely related to Locke. More seriously for Victorian intellectuals, King did not seem to perceive the biographer's project as shaping a life in narrative; he was more interested in making excerpts from Locke's letters and journals available to the reading public, and less interested in contextualizing or synthesizing these excerpts to present his own depiction of Locke's personality. Nevertheless, nineteenth-century scholars respected King's access to Locke's private papers and, they presumed, his private character, and King's work remained an important source for later biographers like Fowler and Fraser. In general, the movement from King's 1830 text-centered biography to Fox Bourne's 1876 two-volume opus, and then to the late-nineteenth century "life of a great man" treatments by Fowler and Fraser, is a movement from seeing Locke primarily as a political theorist – the man whose arguments against the divine right of kings enabled the Glorious Revolution – to seeing Locke primarily as a metaphysician – the man who taught England and the Western world that ideas are learned rather than innate. This is a crude overgeneralization, of course, and all of the nineteenth-century biographers of Locke acknowledge both of these aspects of his work; but it is notable that Fowler, in 1880, concludes that Locke "seemed to be writing not for his own party or his own times, but for the future of knowledge and of mankind" (200), while King, fifty years earlier, argued that Locke's "lot was cast at the time the most fortunate for himself and for the improvement of mankind. Had he lived a century earlier, he might have been an enquirer indeed, or a reformer, or perhaps a martyr; but the Reformation, which was brought about by passion and interest more than by reason, was not the occasion for the exercise of his peculiar talents. Had he lived at a later period, the season and the opportunity suited to his genius might have passed by" (Vol. 2, p. 70). King's insistence on the particularity of Locke's historical situation gives way, over the course of the nineteenth century, to a view of Locke as a universal mind, the founder or at least the patron saint of English rationalism. Concomitantly, Locke's other works gradually diminish in prominence in the minds of his biographers, leaving the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* as his great stand-alone contribution to philosophical writing.

⁹ As Gill explains in his Preface, both texts are the result of an 1852 decision by the Committee of Council on Education that students in teacher training colleges "should be instructed in the Systems of Education that had been in use in this country" (iii).

Leitch describes are still familiar to us, including Locke, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and Herbert Spencer. Others are known only to specialists or have fallen into obscurity – Joseph Lancaster, Samuel Wilderspin, and David Stow.¹⁰ Leitch, for his part, admired Locke, yet tempered his admiration with an almost patronizing indulgence toward what he saw as the more unrealistic or metaphysical aspects of his recommendations for educators and parents. Of *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, Leitch wrote that “Locke’s book is quaint, and almost gossipy in style, and repeats itself in different places” and that it “may seem to modern readers to shine with the borrowed lustre of the author’s fame as a writer on philosophy” (4). Leitch tellingly dismisses *Some Thoughts* as “quaint,” implying that the book is an antiquarian curiosity rather than a work of continuing relevance for the nineteenth century. Yet Leitch tempers these not entirely unfair criticisms with his respect for Locke as the founder of a field, the man who “brings before us the great public school system of England” (vii). He admits that Locke “seems to love them [children] with his whole heart” (6), that *Some Thoughts* “gives evidence of matured judgment and of ripe experience” (4), and that some of its recommendations were ahead of their time: “the suggestions it contains being of great value, some of them having only of late years begun to make their way” (4). He characterizes Locke as a great philosopher, somewhat out of his element when it comes to education, but sustained by his philosophical rigor and his affection and respect for children. Gill takes a slightly different approach, arguing less for the merit of Locke’s work on its own and more for its influence on Rousseau, writing that the *Thoughts* “reappeared invested with all the genius of Rousseau, in *Émile*” (20). Thus Gill admits what Leitch obscures: that *Émile* was more influential for their immediate predecessors in the early nineteenth century than the *Thoughts*, and that Locke, at least when it came to educational philosophy, was absorbed by the Romantics and Victorians largely through the interpretation and influence of Rousseau.

Before Rousseau, however, Locke held sway as the greatest modern philosopher of childhood. In his 1690 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke describes the mind as a blank piece of paper that will be written on by experience, implying both the malleability and the limitations of the child’s psyche:

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas: – How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the MATERIALS of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE. In that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation employed either, about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the MATERIALS of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring. (2.1.2)

¹⁰ Indeed, Leitch himself might now be more obscure than any of them; for example, he merits not even a footnote in R. D. Anderson’s *Education and the Scottish People, 1750-1918*, nor does he appear in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. In the Preface to *Practical Educationists*, he hints that “Other educationists of equal merit and interest might have been included, but it was necessary to reduce the book to a reasonable size. Should this volume prove serviceable, it may be followed by another” (vii). The volume evidently did not prove serviceable, as it remained Leitch’s only publication on the subject (though he was also the author of several unremarkable novels). Nor was *Practical Educationists* reissued; its 1876 publication seems to have been its first and only appearance. Yet it is widespread in contemporary library holdings and seems to have been issued widely and survived admirably, a forgotten fossil of the high Victorian interest in education.

Experience includes both observation of the external world and observation of our own internal cognitive processes. Yet the “white paper” of the mind, though “void of all characters,” is formed in such a way that the inscription of both forms of experience will be limited. To pursue the metaphor, even when a page is blank, it can only receive certain kinds of impressions: written words and two-dimensional sketched images, rather than three-dimensional images, odors, or sounds. It can only receive them within its existing boundaries, as there is only so much space on the page. The limitations of the “blank page” metaphor – it can only record certain kinds of information, in certain configurations, and subject to certain limitations – imply not only that what we know remains dependent largely on experience, but that how we know it and how we organize that knowledge is restricted in scope.¹¹ Children may be empty vessels, but still have a form of their own that shapes what is poured into them.

Perhaps more evocative than the *tabula rasa* of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is the comparison of the child’s mind to a river with which Locke begins *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*.¹² The river has a set course, but can be channeled or diverted; earlier intervention results in a more significant change in its topography. Thus, early childhood impressions, Locke argues, are more significant than adult influences:

The little and almost insensible impressions on our tender infancies have very important and lasting consequences: and there it is as in the fountains of some rivers, where a gentle application of the hand turns the flexible waters into channels that make them take quite contrary courses, and by this little direction given them at first in the source, they receive different tendencies and arrive at last at very remote and distant places. (*Some Thoughts Concerning Education* 10)

The child’s mind, Locke suggests, balances inherent or inborn tendencies – the waters themselves – with the influence of experience and instruction – the “gentle application of the hand.” The timing of such influences is proportional to the magnitude of their effect; the earlier the intervention, the more extreme its effects, so that the “little and almost insensible impressions on our tender infancies” have *more* “important and lasting consequences,” presumably, than greater impressions made later on our adult selves. Imagining “the minds of children as easily turned this or that way as water itself” (10), Locke describes them, not as completely unformed, but as malleable and easily manipulable. The analogy of the diverted river also carries with it the suggestion that it is easy to throw the child’s mind “off course” by a careless or malevolent intervention in early life, and, equally, that it requires only the smallest modicum of care in the early years to get the child back “on course.” That is, the diverted river must have a proper channel, into which parents, tutors, teachers, and caregivers should guide the child.

The ease with which the child may be influenced, either for good or ill, increases Locke’s anxiety regarding proper educational methods. Children are problematic subjects in political liberalism because they obviously cannot be allowed to exercise unrestrained free will, yet any

¹¹ The mental limitations Locke implies are intriguingly similar to the symbolic limitations of mental development proposed by contemporary cognitive scientists. While philosophers and neuroscientists alike generally accept Locke’s argument that there are no innate ideas in the mind, twenty-first-century cognitive scientists have argued persuasively that the mind, though open and receptive, is hardwired in such a way that the kinds, types, and structures of knowledge which we can absorb are, at least to a minor extent, predetermined. See, for example, Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*, New York: Picador, 2009.

¹² The *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was first published in 1690; *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* followed a few years later in 1693, although it was developed from letters Locke wrote to Edward Clarke from 1684-1691. The “blank page” and the directed waterway are, therefore, contemporary images in Locke’s thinking and should be considered complementary rather than alternative.

coercion by parents or tutors may disrupt their progress of becoming reasonable adults capable of independent judgment. The question Locke must answer, as Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov phrase it, is “How do you govern children when they are in need of government and at the same time avoid establishing either habits of subservience or a taste for dominance unsuitable for a society of independent adults?” (ix). Locke’s educational methods therefore center on the tricky process of regulating children while gradually teaching them to regulate themselves. Self-regulating individuals enable the maintenance of a liberal democratic society, but because self-regulation does not come naturally to children, their personal sovereignty must initially be compromised in order to train them into a reasonable exercise of their adult freedoms. Then, at some point in the child’s education, the machinery of manipulation must slowly be laid bare to him, exposed, explained, and interrogated together with the tutor. Locke not only directs the child to find amusement in activities like reading, writing, and learning a foreign language, but coaches him to analyze the way his thoughts and inclinations were shaped in order to create that amusement.

In order to impress on children that adult demands are reasonable and consistent with a just political order, Locke encourages parents and tutors to cultivate an affect of calm rationality. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, he repeatedly stresses the inherent rationality of children and the importance of reasoning with them, or at least impressing on them an emotional sense that adult strictures and demands are generated by reason. “[C]hildren are to be treated,” he asserts, “as rational creatures” (35). Later he clarifies this claim:

But when I talk of *reasoning* I do not intend any other but such as is suited to the child’s capacity and apprehension. Nobody can think a boy of three or seven years old should be argued with as a grown man. Long discourses and philosophical reasonings at best amaze and confound, but do not instruct children. When I say therefore that they must be *treated as rational creatures* I mean that you should make them sensible by the mildness of your carriage and the composure even in your correction of them that what you do is reasonable in you and useful and necessary for them and that it is not out of *caprichio*, passion, or fancy that you command or forbid them anything. (58, emphasis original)

Rationality, therefore, as it relates to disciplining children, means, not providing a rational justification for one’s actions, but performing the impression of rationality. Young children will not understand arguments, but they do understand demeanor; and it is therefore not logic but stoical composure which will make them “sensible” of the rational origins of adult behavior. This affective solution to the problem of inculcating children into rational adult behavior is meant to bridge the gap between the irrational infant, who knows only his own needs and demands, and the gentleman, who understands social interrelationships and responsibilities. Locke’s modern liberalism depends on the child’s ability to be introduced to the appeal of the rational through its outward affect. He theorizes that when a child sees an adult act calmly, the child will infer that the adult is basing his actions on a chain of logical reasoning, rather than an emotional reaction. Locke implies that, having made this inference, the child will both respect the adult’s rationality and wish to emulate it. Once this respect and desire for emulation have been established, the tutor or parent may slowly introduce the child to the principles of logic, so that a comprehension of rationality may replace mere subordination to its stoic forms. Edmund Leites has suggested that Locke effects this transfer by separating the parent’s authority, which is temporary, from the law’s authority, which is permanent: “If parents embody the spirit of rationality in their own acts and speech, in time the law of reason can become detached in a

child's mind as a *separate* object of deep devotion" (104, emphasis original).

The variable nature of the child's attention complicates Locke's process for educating citizens. Locke describes the child's attention span as limited both in duration and in quality – children cannot, he argues, concentrate on more than one thought, or on any one thought for very long. He claims that "[c]hildren's minds are narrow and weak and usually susceptible of but one thought at once" (124). That is, children are incapable of multitasking, or of entertaining two thoughts simultaneously. The corollary to this is that children's "natural temper . . . disposes their minds to wander" (124). Thus, although children can only think about one thing at a time, they usually don't think about it for very long; their attentiveness is limited in quantity and in quality. Emotions seem to count as thoughts for Locke in this instance – he advises against waking any passionate feelings in children (such as a strong dislike of schoolwork) because that passion will displace their ability to concentrate on the material at hand. So, for Locke, with regard to children, a passion can be a thought, displacing other thoughts. Children therefore learn best when their minds are "in an easy calm temper" (125), neither distracted nor emotionally overstimulated. This argument – that a child's attention is monomaniacal yet also mercurial – has interesting consequences for the *tabula rasa*. "It is as impossible," Locke writes, "to draw fair and regular characters on a trembling mind as on a shaking paper" (125). That is, a child who is afraid cannot learn. Intriguingly, Locke implies that the "drawing" on the child's mind here is being done, not simply by exposure to the world and experience, but by the tutor himself; there is greater agency in the act of education here than in some of the passages from the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

In order to raise children into free citizens, and in order to avoid disrupting their ability to pay attention, Locke outlines educational methods that children will perceive as play rather than work. Locke argues that the difference between play and work is the individual's sense of being compelled – if one feels compelled to do something, the activity is work, while if one feels that he engages in an activity freely,¹³ it is play. An activity such as learning to read might take on the characteristics of either work or play depending on whether the individual feels compelled to perform it. Thus, Locke, theorizes, we can make use of children's boundless energy to learn games that amuse them by creating an environment in which they believe they are choosing to do work, and in which work is amusing and interesting, like play. On one level, this makes sense, especially to anyone who has worked closely with young children; the more that learning to read or write or to speak a new language can be taught through games and playful techniques, the more young children are receptive to it. However, this approach does mean that Locke builds his liberal society of free gentlemen on a deception – the tutor tricks his pupils into thinking they are choosing to learn, when in reality he is subtly compelling them to do so. It is a necessary trick, but an ethically problematic one. At some point in youth or early adulthood, the child is supposed to transition naturally from receiving his tutor's manipulative suggestions of choice to actually making choices for himself. But how is this transformation to be effected? And what if, instead of fully appreciating his free will, he finds himself bound into more and more intricately manipulative situations, in which the state, or religious institutions, or business institutions, or familial institutions, exert subtle influence that makes him *think* he is choosing certain behaviors and activities, while actually he is merely receiving suggestions? Or, what if, on learning that he

¹³ The complex verbiage is significant; whether or not an individual *engages* in the activity freely is less significant, for Locke, than whether he *feels* that he engages freely. Thus a parent might manipulate a child into learning the alphabet through playing a game with dice, and as long as the child believes that he chose and initiated the game, he will perceive the activity as "play" rather than as "work."

has been coerced, he rebels in disgust against the whole process? There is troubling slippage between the individual's sense of freedom and actual freedom. Locke, however, does not seem to perceive this difficulty, primarily because he sees human nature as tending toward activity rather than idleness. He notes that children play in a very earnest fashion, alluding to "the uneasiness it is to do nothing at all" (156) and claiming that "a young man will seldom desire to sit perfectly still and idle" (157) – a belief that is belied by Isaac Watts' famous children's hymn "Against Idleness" and similar moral injunctions. A key distinction, however, is that for Locke idleness is a complete lack of activity, while in a Puritanical sense idleness might refer to any activity not conceived of as work or duty. Locke, intriguingly, does not conceive of play as idle.

Because education is to be both practical and amusing, Locke recommends that literacy be taught by means of games and toys, and that texts given to children should be "easy pleasant book[s]" (114).¹⁴ He proposes several literacy games based on dice covered in letters of the alphabet and recommends Aesop's *Fables* and Caxton's translation of *Reynard the Fox* as appropriate books for child readers. He lauds the appeal of illustrations for child readers and advises that parents hold conversations with children about their reading. Although he acknowledges the necessity of foundational religious instruction, he discourages "the promiscuous reading of [the Bible] through by chapters, as they lie in order" (117) and suggests instead that children learn only the Lord's Prayer, the Creeds, the Ten Commandments, and a few of the more lively and detachable Biblical stories, "such as . . . the story of Joseph and his brethren, of David and Goliath, of David and Jonathan" (118). Robert Bator has argued that Locke's comments in *Thoughts* about the lack of available, appropriate reading material for children helped inaugurate the eighteenth-century explosion in children's publishing, including the works produced by John Newbery.¹⁵ Although Locke finds few texts to recommend for children's reading, he advises that they be taught to narrate stories of their own. Children should be encouraged to relate things in narrative form very early: "it might not be amiss to make children, as soon as they are capable of it, often to tell a story of anything they know, and to correct at first the most remarkable fault they are guilty of in their way of putting it together. [. . .] When they can tell tales pretty well, then it may be time to make them write them" (141), and then eventually they may be coached to write letters, but not witty ones – just "plain easy sense" (142). Locke evinces none of the Platonic fear of storytelling as connected with lying, even though he is very cautious of lying and concerned about its likely moral effects on children. Storytelling is a sense-making skill children may use to manipulate the world around them, although it is not an inherent capability but something that must be cultivated. Thus, as we begin to think about the relationship between children reading and being read, and writing and being written, we must consider Locke's suggestion that children are initially alien to narrative, and that their educational process takes place at least partially through being introduced to it, becoming part of it, and finally generating it for themselves.

¹⁴ Heather Klemann has examined the ways in which John Newbery's *Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744) fulfills Locke's criteria for children's literature by incorporating physical objects with text – for boys, a ball was included with the purchase of the book, while girls received a pincushion. Klemann argues that "Newbery redefines the process of reading as an experiential act with an object" and that he therefore "marries Lockean pedagogy and epistemology" (225). See Klemann, "The Matter of Moral Education: Locke, Newbery, and the Didactic Book–Toy Hybrid," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 44.2 (2011): 223-44.

¹⁵ See Bator, Robert, "Out of the Ordinary Road: John Locke and English Juvenile Fiction in the Eighteenth Century," *Children's Literature* 1 (1972): 46-53. Bator also suggests that, while Locke's *Thoughts* encouraged the production of children's literature, Rousseau's *Émile* did not, largely because of Rousseau's injunction against allowing children to read.

Rousseau's Bookless Child

Rousseau's *Émile* (1762) responds to and reworks Lockean educational theory¹⁶ by means of fictionality – and, in doing so, associates fiction with developmental pedagogy. *Émile* establishes two kinds of connections between fiction and educationalism. First, *Émile* himself is developed as a fictional character; he is Rousseau's "imaginary pupil," an experimental hypothesis in narrative, and becomes over the course of the work an independent character, resisting the influence of the narrator and of his tutor and demonstrating the increasing power of fictionality over didacticism. Second, *Émile*'s encounters with certain forms of fiction, and his segregation from other forms, teach the reader how to relate intellectual development to reading behaviors. In particular, Rousseau's dislike of the Aesopian fable hints at his distrust for signs and symbolic narrative, and his penchant for *Robinson Crusoe* brings a pedagogical emphasis to the realist adventure novel. Thus *Émile* is fictional – a hypothesis that grows into a character – and is constituted through his carefully limited encounters with fiction. In the wake of *Émile*, fiction begins to seem like the appropriate place to describe and comment on educational methods, and educational methods are more often depicted as fictional constructs. As a result, educationalism, and the construction of the self through reading, comprise key aspects of early nineteenth-century novels such as *Belinda* and *Waverley*. It is unlikely that Locke's work on its own, or indeed the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century educational movement before Rousseau, would have brought about the same connection between the fictive and the education. Thus, Lockean ideas enter British fictionality by means of a detour through the French tradition – through Rousseau.

Yet, in spite of its later and continuing influence, *Émile* was received with widespread critical dismay on its first publication, partly because it contrasted so starkly in its structure and approach with Locke's popular work.¹⁷ The *Thoughts* had begun as "a series of letters of advice to his [Locke's] friend Edward Clarke on the education of his children," which Locke revised and expanded for publication in 1693 and expanded further for the 1695 edition (Grant and Tarcov xviii). The letters were originally written between 1684 and 1691 while Locke was living in political exile in Holland (ibid.). In his dedication, Locke admits that the informality of the letters is a continuing influence on the final text: "the reader will easily find," he writes, "in the familiarity and fashion of the style, that they were rather the private conversation of two friends than a discourse designed for public view" (7). This "private conversation" became a spectacular public success; the *Thoughts* went through three editions before Locke's death in 1704, and another twenty-five English language editions alone over the course of the eighteenth century. Rousseau would have read the first French translation by Pierre Coste, published in 1695, just

¹⁶ Christopher Kelly describes Rousseau, not as confirming or refuting Locke, but as extending Locke's ideas. As Kelly notes, Rousseau criticizes Locke on some specific points, such as that children are not capable of reasoning, and that tutors and parents should appeal to the child's love of approbation and dislike of shame, but also relies on Locke's authority to reinforce his ideas. "Thus, while Rousseau acknowledges Locke as an authority, he also sees him as a rival in need of correction" (xvi). See Christopher Kelly, Introduction to *Émile, ou, de l'éducation* in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, Vol. 13, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2010: xv-xxxii.

¹⁷ For a detailed reception history of *Émile* in Europe and the United States, see Bernadette Baker, "(Ap)Pointing the Canon: Rousseau's *Émile*, Visions of the State, and Education," *Educational Theory* 51.1 (Winter 2001): 1-43.

two years after the first edition.¹⁸ Thus when *Émile* appeared in 1762, it reached an audience extremely familiar with Lockean ideas of education and liberty, and the idiosyncrasies of Rousseau's project would perhaps have been more evident to the contemporary reader than its general outlay.¹⁹

Although Rousseau follows Locke in many ways,²⁰ he focuses more on the child and less on the tutor, emphasizing learning rather than teaching and advising parents to take a *laissez-faire* approach whenever possible.²¹ In his Preface, Rousseau distances *Émile* from other educational philosophies by describing its composition as an isolated, spontaneous phenomenon. He characterizes himself as writing "from his retreat" and the resulting work as a "collection of reflections and observations, disordered and almost incoherent" which grew beyond the "[m]onograph of a few pages" he originally intended to write (157). He claims that he is publishing what may be a very bad book indeed simply in order to "turn public attention in this direction" and stimulate debate; in fact, he tells us, he does not even know "what is thought or said" of ideas like his own (157). Yet in the very next paragraph, he makes a different claim: that his work is unique, that the existing "[l]iterature and learning of our age" tend to critique and tear down educational systems and practices without proposing anything new to take their place (157). But both of Rousseau's rather contradictory claims – that he is working in isolation, and that he knows his book is unlike anything else that has been written – are false. At the end of the second paragraph of his Preface, he admits it: "After Locke's book my subject *was* still entirely fresh," he tells the reader, admitting his knowledge of *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (157, emphasis added). Modern-day historian Hugh Cunningham, in his seminal *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, confirms that Rousseau "acknowledged Locke as his predecessor" and "almost certainly had him in mind when he wrote . . . that 'The wisest writers devote themselves to what a man ought to know, without asking what a child is capable of learning'" (65). In Cunningham's reading, Rousseau sets out to write the first *child-centered* educational treatise (emphasis added). Part of the child-centrism is a generic shift, from philosophy to romance, from educational how-to manual to utopian fantasy, from the case study to the character. The very qualities that make Rousseau's *Émile* unwieldy and impractical as an advice manual make it more successful as a work of fiction.

Identifying the genre of *Émile* has proved a difficult, and often vain, task for critics; Rousseau intentionally troubles generic boundaries, presenting his work as an educational handbook while incorporating aspects of the novel, the conjectural history,²² and the

¹⁸ See Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth, "Translators and The Transmission of Cultural Values" in *Translators Through History* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1995): 205.

¹⁹ Between the appearance of Locke's *Thoughts* in 1690 and the publication of Rousseau's *Émile* in 1764, little of note was produced in Britain or France regarding educational theory. As Rousseau himself writes, "After Locke's book my subject was still entirely fresh" (157). There were, however, a few contemporary texts of importance, particularly Fénelon's *Traité de l'éducation des filles* (1687, English trans. 1750), and it is worth noting that French educational theory had a rich history reaching back to the fourteenth century. See Barnard, H. C., "Some Sources for French Educational History to 1789," *British Journal of Educational History* 2.2 (May 1954): 166-9. Across the Atlantic, the revolutionary *New-England Primer* first appeared in American schoolrooms in 1689, almost contemporaneously with Locke's *Thoughts*.

²⁰ See n. 10 above.

²¹ Geraint Parry has examined the ways in which Rousseau's insistence on the child's freedom combine "a healthy life" with socio-political "liberation" (255). See Parry, Geraint, "*Émile*: Learning to be Men, Women, and Citizens," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2001) 247-71.

²² Tom Jones defines the Enlightenment conjectural history as "the probabilistic description of the pre-history of human institutions such as language or property, in the light of assumptions about the comparability of human

philosophical treatise. Many commentators choose to emphasize one of these generic leanings more than the others; Christopher Kelly, for example, suggests that *Émile*, like the *Discourses* and *The Social Contract*, is fundamentally a philosophical and political work, in this case examining the “relation between what is naturally good for oneself as an independent being and the demands of justice in relation to others” (xv). Others attend to the theoretical implications of uniting these disparate genres; Brian McGrath has recently argued that *Émile* develops from an educational work into a novel over the course of our reading, with this transformation hinging on the scene in Book III in which *Émile* reads *Robinson Crusoe*, “the happiest treatise on natural education” which will “serve as a test for the state of our judgment” (162, 163). McGrath reads the work as having a chiasmic structure, in which “[i]nitially, signs are capable of leading [*Émile*] astray from his proper, natural education . . . but by the opening of book 4 it is the world that threatens to lead him astray, and Rousseau must turn to signs in order to redirect *Émile*’s education” (121). Thus *Émile* must first be taught to focus on things over signs, and then on signs over things. I take the slightly different view that *Émile* holds novelistic potentiality at a distance throughout, making fiction the limit or border of educationalism.

Rousseau’s decision to represent his idiosyncratic philosophies of childhood and education in the form of a fictional experiment makes educational theory an integral component of fictionality. By this I mean that our understanding of the fictive, the experimental space of that which is neither truth nor lie,²³ comes to depend on our understanding of educational training – the protagonist’s and the reader’s. *Émile* makes the child as a child – “what he is before being a man” (157) – available for fictional exploration and deeper subjectivity in a way that Locke’s *Thoughts* alone does not. This is clear, for example, from Thomas Day’s *Sandford and Merton* (1783-89), which was, as Jacqueline Banerjee notes, “[i]ntended as an English version of *Émile*” (34) and which emphasizes the novelistic aspect of Rousseau’s project.²⁴

Locke’s *Thoughts* had established educational theory as a prevailing concern of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, emphasizing the relationship between children and books in particular. In *Émile*, the education of the child is proposed as a fictional project:

I have hence chosen to give myself an imaginary pupil, to hypothesize that I have the age, health, kinds of knowledge, and all the talent suitable for working at his education, for conducting him from the moment of his birth up to the one when, become a grown man, he will no longer have need of any guide other than himself. This method appears to me to be useful to prevent an author who distrusts himself from getting lost in visions; for when he deviates from ordinary practice, he has only to make a test of his own practice on his pupil. He will soon sense, or the reader will sense for him, whether he follows the progress of childhood and the movement natural to the human heart. (177)

nature in different times and places, and about the grand historical and climactic laws that govern the types and stages of human society” (333). *Émile* is not a conjectural history in this strict sense, due to its restricted focus on the development of an individual; but Rousseau’s assertion that his educational principles are in some degree universal – “wherever men are born, what I propose can be done with them” (159) – and his interest in the probabilistic – “an imaginary pupil” (177) – evoke the conjectural history as a related form. See Jones, “Conjectural Histories from the Renaissance to Romanticism,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 42.4 (Oct. 2006): 333-468.

²³ Catherine Gallagher writes that “In third person narratives . . . the distinctive sign of fictionality appears when the narrator depicts the subjectivity, or consciousness, of a character” (356). See Gallagher, Catherine. “The Rise of Fictionality,” in *The Novel, Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti, Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2006: 336-363.

²⁴ Day’s real-life educational experiment with two young apprentice girls is discussed below.

As Rousseau explains earlier, he has selected an “imaginary pupil” due to his own failure as a teacher of real pupils; the fictive experiment is a substitute for actual tutoring and teaching experience, a second attempt by Rousseau to work through the problem of childhood education. Although this narrative experiment appeals to contemporary Enlightenment philosophy and methods, it also moves beyond objective control into the imagination, looking forward to the preoccupations of Romanticism. Rousseau implies that the education of his imaginary pupil is entirely objective, with established preconditions, an experimental procedure, and objective results. He claims that he cannot “los[e] himself in speculation” because either he or his reader would realize that he is violating the terms of the experiment.

Whether or not it provides for greater verisimilitude, by adopting a fictional protagonist, *Émile* distinguishes itself from Locke’s *Thoughts*, which, although describing the possibilities for a child’s growth and potential, do not follow a real or imaginary child through that process. While Rousseau crafts a frame narrative concerning his fictional pupil and is therefore able to develop a novelistic arc, complete with startling denouement, Locke resists a progressive structure. The *Thoughts* covers first health, then educational methods, and finally educational substance; by contrast, Rousseau organizes *Émile* by periods of age, inviting us to read it almost like a *Bildungsroman*. At the end of the *Thoughts*, nobody is grown up, nobody has matured, and we are not attached to any character; instead, we are equipped to make our own decisions about the methods by which we will educate our own children. Locke writes that he has published in the hope that his work “may give some small light to those whose concern for their dear little ones makes them so irregularly bold that they dare venture to consult their own reason in the education of their children rather than wholly to rely upon old custom” (161). Locke is not interested in crafting the novelistic development of his actual or projected pupils as characters; he does not compose a narrative, but provides his readers with techniques by which they may overwrite the characters of their own children. His commitment to technique over character is attested, for example, by the fact that he never mentions his own pupils by name within the text (although their identities are confirmed by his dedicatory preface), and that he refers continually to “children” in the plural. It is a pattern, not a plot, that Locke proposes. Educational progress as fictional plot is Rousseau’s contribution to the generic development of fiction; his fusion of the narrator with the tutor lends a pedagogical cast to fictionality.

The moments at which *Émile* resists his tutor demonstrate the increasing power of the fictional aspects of the work over its purported contribution to educational theory. The surprising honesty of Rousseau’s method becomes evident at the moments when *Émile* works against his education – when the fictional aspects of the book outweigh its pedagogical advice. For example, in Book III, a young *Émile* interrupts a lesson on “the course of the sun and how to get one’s bearings” and demands to know “what is the use of all that” (326). *Émile*’s resistance to Rousseau’s pedagogy increases his characterological autonomy and downplays his role as a pedagogical illustration. In response to his defiance, Rousseau’s narrator anticipates his ability to make “a fine speech” to the boy on “[p]olicies, natural history, astronomy, even morality and the right of nations,” but admits that

our *Émile*, more rustically raised and with so much effort made a slow learner, will not listen to any of that. At the first word he does not understand, he is going to run away, frolic around the room, and let me perorate all alone. Let us seek a cruder solution. My scientific gear is worthless for him. (327)

Rousseau then proceeds to describe a manipulative process for teaching *Émile* the use of astronomy and navigational techniques by taking him on a long walk and pretending to get lost.

The child, exhausted and in tears, understands how much he needs to know how to get his bearings, and Rousseau points out the connection between this need and the lesson that Émile rejected earlier. Rousseau concludes that “he will not in his life forget this day’s lesson; whereas if I had only made him suppose all this in his room, my speech would have been forgotten the very next day” (328-9). Over and over again, Rousseau will describe scenarios in which the real-life consequences of knowledge or ignorance are used to encourage Émile to learn. Simply being told is not effective; Émile must live his mistakes, or rather Émile must live through carefully orchestrated situations that counterfeit serious mistakes in order to understand the value of knowledge. (Like Locke, Rousseau relies on the illusion of choice.) This process does not necessarily convince us of the “truth” behind Rousseau’s educational precepts, but it forms Émile as a fictional character and introduces narrative interest in the tension between pupil and pedagogue. When Émile resists tutelage, he must be trained through exposure to contrived situations, just as the flaws of a character in a novel are corrected, or exacerbated, through exposure to different scenarios of the novelist’s contriving.

Émile, himself a fiction, will encounter works of fiction only in carefully controlled ways. Rousseau plans to withhold most reading material from Émile and to encourage him to focus on language as a practical, utilitarian construct. Rousseau’s narrator argues that “[r]eading is the plague of childhood and almost the only occupation we know how to give it. At twelve Émile will hardly know what a book is” (253). Instead, he will teach Émile to read in a roundabout way, by orchestrating situations in which Émile will have to be able to read in order to get important information about things he wants to do – such as from letters and notes left by others. However, there will be almost no instruction for Émile in literature as such, or in the poetic or figurative use of language, or in reading for enjoyment. Émile is the anti-case for the kind of “reading child” described in this work. If the protagonists of *Bildungsromane*, such as Jane Eyre, David Copperfield, and Maggie Tulliver, are “reading children” who develop themselves in relation to their reading material – who make themselves, in certain ways, into walking and growing anthologies – and who are both objects and subjects of reading, then Émile is a readable child – who can be understood as a text (the object of reading) but not as the subject of one (a reader). His nature and actions are disunited.

Rousseau’s objections to childhood reading center around the corrupting influence of civilization on the child’s mind. While Locke argues that reading introduces children to the social context of approbation and shame that will come to control their impulses, Rousseau believes that reading is a poor substitute for firsthand experience. Rousseau and Locke both emphasize the child’s bodily health, but for Locke this emphasis dovetails with the intellectual stimulation of activities like reading – both the body and mind are to be perfected – while for Rousseau the level of remove involved in reading rather than doing disrupts the immediacy of physical, personal engagement with the world. Rousseau argues that physical cultivation will on its own encourage intellectual cultivation, as long as the physical exercise is governed by the child’s own intelligence. This is the difference, for Rousseau, between the peasant and the savage: the peasant works hard, but always under someone else’s direction; the savage works hard, but always under his own direction. Thus, if children can be raised to be more like savages, Rousseau believes they will be “strong and robust” and therefore become more “sensible and judicious” (257). He plans to rebuild society by forming aristocratic men who can resist the civilizing and corrupting influences around them. The problem is not children, but culture – and books, and reading, are merely products of a corrupting culture to which the child should not be exposed. But how will a child raised in this way incorporate (or fail to incorporate) himself into

society? Children who constitute themselves as readers learn to find narrative trajectories by which to enter society. *Émile*, however, cannot incorporate himself into society and will not wish to. It is unsurprising, as we will see later, that Rousseau compares him to Robinson Crusoe.

Rousseau also objects to exposing children to fictional works because they present too many disunited messages and snippets of information; *Émile*'s education is to be coherent and integrated. Each library, and each book within it, is heterogeneous, containing many different conflicting messages and lessons to which the child will be exposed, especially if he reads dilettantishly through a variety of texts. In order to combat this problem, Rousseau hopes to eliminate the diversity of the library and of the individual text:

Is there no means of bringing together so many lessons scattered in so many books, of joining them in a common object which is easy to see and interesting to follow and can serve as a stimulant even at this age? If one can invent a situation where all man's natural needs are shown in a way a child's mind can sense, and where the means of providing for those needs emerge in order with equal ease, it is by the lively and naive depiction of this state that the first exercise must be given to his imagination. (331)

Rousseau is concerned about the wasting of imagination, which is an important cognitive capacity the child has that will make him able to understand the way men "provide" for their "natural needs." But another part of the problem is that the books are so different – he wants to "bring together" the lessons that are currently "scattered" and not joined "in a common object." Reading directs the child's imagination in many different directions, most of them (in Rousseau's opinion) wasted. This waste comes not just from narrative and story books, but from the easily misconstrued moral lessons of fables, or the boring oversimplification of scientific ideas in children's textbooks. Rousseau wants the child to be exposed to the methods and critical thinking patterns of science – of astronomy, geography, physics, and chemistry in particular – without being given too many of the principles or parameters behind them. Using the Socratic method, the child is supposed to deduce principles for himself, even those that have been long-established, like gravity or Copernican astronomy.

The substitution of representations for the things themselves makes Rousseau suspicious of the power texts have over child readers; he wants children to have "[n]o book other than the world, no instruction other than the facts" (312).²⁵ He advises prospective tutors and parents, "never substitute the sign for the thing except when it is impossible for you to show the latter, for the sign absorbs the child's attention and makes him forget the thing represented" (315). But in the case of reading, Rousseau does not object so much to the actual linguistic relationship between signifier and signified – the way letters stand for sounds which stand for words and then for thoughts. That relationship is something that he acknowledges *Émile* will have to learn to understand. Instead, he objects to the figurative, and perhaps inaccurate, representation of the world in narrative. It is not the representation of language but the representation of the world that causes problems. Ironically, Rousseau's bookless child, *Émile*, is himself a fictional construct, though not a fully developed character. What does it mean that Rousseau develops this "immediate child" who is ostensibly *not* built up by texts as a fictional, literary construct? *Émile* does not read a variety of other stories into himself, but he is still a character. Even though Rousseau is suspicious of the fictiveness of signs, he relies on fictionality to elaborate the nature

²⁵ Ironically, many eighteenth-century authors took Rousseau's insistence that hardly any books were appropriate for child readers as a challenge, and a vast body of children's literature was produced in response to *Émile*. See Sylvia W. Patterson, *Rousseau's Émile and Early Children's Literature* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1971).

of education and of knowledge.

Rousseau advises particularly against using fables as children's literature because children will mistakenly identify with the villains rather than the heroes.²⁶ Although his contemporaries describe the fables of Aesop and La Fontaine as "the morality of children" (249), they err in suggesting that children have the same capacity as adults to deduce moral lessons from fables and understand the relationship between the tale and the moral. Children may make sympathetic identifications with the characters and situations in fables, but they could do so against the grain of the story or against authorial intention – or, as Vivasvan Soni puts it, the "identificatory seductions of narrative produce a failure of judgment" (367). Thus, in La Fontaine's "The Crow and the Fox," the child may learn, not that "there are men who flatter and lie for profit" of whom one should beware, but that it might be profitable to flatter and lie (252).²⁷ The story opens the possibility of the child reading himself into the story in the wrong social role and learning the wrong lesson. "[I]nstead of looking within themselves for the shortcoming that one wants to cure or prevent," Rousseau writes, "they [children] tend to like the vice with which one takes advantage of others' shortcomings" (252). Imaginative stories such as fables are dangerous because the tutor cannot control how the reading or listening child will construct his sympathetic identification with the characters in the text.²⁸ Rousseau's concerns, although they seem dour and joyless, are borne out by later fictional cases of strange identifications made by child readers, particularly the imaginative associations of Jane Eyre and Maggie Tulliver (see Chapter 2). Reading children do seem to construct their own identities by connecting to characters in the texts they are exposed to, and their identifications are not easily predicted or directed by adults, or by the authors of "children's literature." Interestingly, Locke, though he is cautious about fairy tales, doesn't have the same concerns about fables – he recommends reading Aesop's fables to children.

Rousseau's close reading of "The Crow and the Fox" highlights elements of the fable that child readers or listeners might find confusing or misleading. Rousseau walks the reader of *Émile* through a line-by-line criticism of La Fontaine's version of the tale, in which he objects to titles the child won't understand, animals the child won't know about, grammatical inversions that will not be familiar to the child from everyday speech, unnatural pairings of animals and food, the distinction between an animal in nature and its function in fables, the use of unusual and obsolete vocabulary, the unrealistic fantasy convention that animals can speak, the presence of redundancy, the introduction of vices such as lying, the use of vocabulary too hard for the child,

²⁶ However, Guillemette Johnston has argued that, although Rousseau advises against using traditional fables in the education of children, the hypothetical scenarios that he constructs for pedagogical purposes within the text of *Émile* are in themselves a form of the fable: "Though Rousseau finds La Fontaine's fables potentially confusing for children, he develops his pedagogic mythology via fable-like, pragmatic 'texts' – which I will call myth/fables since they employ elements of both genres – that supply *Émile* with both active and passive directives through a generic yet metaphoric discourse that avoids negative or 'historical' components while exposing nature's code" (245). See Johnston, "Constitutive Elements of the Discourse of Natural Instruction in Rousseau's *Émile*: Situations and Implications," *Romantic Review* 92.3 (2001): 245-58.

²⁷ Frances Ferguson reads the problem slightly differently: "What is wrong with fables as reading matter for children is that they continually exaggerate the child's appropriate self love . . . into vanity . . . in operating as flattery" (77). See Ferguson, "Reading Morals: Locke and Rousseau on Education and Inequality," *Representations* 6 (Spring 1984): 66-84.

²⁸ As Soni points out, Rousseau creates a paradox here; although *Émile* is to be raised in freedom, he cannot be exposed to fables because they offer too much scope for independent judgment. See Soni, Vivasvan, "Committing Freedom: The Cultivation of Judgment in Rousseau's *Émile* and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 51.3 (Fall 2010): 367.

the use of mythological characters that will be unfamiliar to the child, the use of hyperbolic figurative speech, the use of clichés, the presence of artistic elements the child will not appreciate, and more. Rousseau would prevent the child from being exposed in a story to anything he does not already know from experience – learning should take place in the world, not in narrative. By contrast, Locke conceives of the world as a narrative, and believes children must be able to articulate their own stories within it.

Rousseau accepts only one book as fit for *Émile* to read during his childhood – *Robinson Crusoe*, which emphasizes practical survival in nature. Apart from the difficulty of Defoe’s prose for a child – presumably Rousseau is imagining that the tutor would read the book to or with *Émile*, or that *Émile* could peruse one of the many available redacted versions for child readers – *Crusoe* is interesting for its hyperrealism and emphasis not only on practical skills, but on solitude. *Émile*, like *Crusoe*, is meant to be self-sufficient, even lonely. *Émile*’s reading of *Crusoe* is explicitly described as personal identification:

I want him to think he is Robinson himself, to see himself dressed in skins, wearing a large cap, carrying a large saber and all the rest of the character’s grotesque equipment, with the exception of the parasol, which he will not need. I want him to worry about the measures to take if this or that were lacking to him; to examine his Hero’s conduct; to investigate whether he omitted anything, whether there was nothing to do better; to note Robinson’s failings attentively; and to profit from them so as not to fall into them himself in such a situation. For do not doubt that he is planning to go and set up a similar establishment. This is the true “castle in Spain” of this happy age when one knows no other happiness than the necessities and freedom. (332)

Rousseau’s mention of this particular book undermines his claims in other contexts that the child should not read at all, should have “[n]o book other than the world, no instruction other than the facts” because “[t]he child who reads does not think, he only reads; he is not informing himself, he learns words” (312). But Rousseau has no trouble imagining that *Émile* will think about reading *Robinson Crusoe*. One important element of *Émile*’s reading is that it involves a lot of re-reading – *Crusoe* is the only book Rousseau will allow *Émile* for many years, and it will be an ur-text for discussions of industry and natural science. Part of Rousseau’s anxiety about children reading is that they read something once and absorb its ideas imperfectly – he argues that ignorance is not dangerous, but misconceptions are. *Crusoe* will be a different reading experience for *Émile* because it will be a repetitive, in-depth exploration of the same text over and over again – he will be isolated with it and come to know it well, just as he will be isolated with his tutor/narrator so that he can come to know himself as subject/protagonist.

One more aspect of Rousseau’s work will influence the introduction of educational motifs into British fiction: emphasis on sexual difference in education. While Locke purports to give educational advice that is in most cases equally applicable to both sexes,²⁹ Rousseau introduces sharp distinctions between the proper education of men and women: “Once it is demonstrated that man and woman are not and ought not to be constituted in the same way in either character or temperament, it follows that they ought not to have the same education” (538). As we will see when we turn to the manifestation of educational discourse in British

²⁹ Near the beginning of the *Thoughts*, Locke writes: “I have said *he* here because the principal aim of my discourse is how a young gentleman should be brought up from his infancy, which, in all things, will not so perfectly suit the education of *daughters*; though where the difference of sex requires different treatment, it will be no hard matter to distinguish” (12).

fiction, Rousseau's imaginary female pupil, Sophie, inspires almost more conversation about the nature of education than Émile himself. Sophie's "whole education . . . ought to relate to men" because the "duties of women" are "[t]o please men, to be useful to them, to make herself loved and honored by them" (540). While Locke's child and Rousseau's Émile must be educated into an exercise of their independent freedom, Rousseau's female pupil, Sophie, will always remain dependent.³⁰ Fictional, and occasionally real,³¹ attempts to follow Rousseau's plan for educating women as the adjuncts of men – particularly wives and mothers – expose the disjunct between the appeal of Rousseau's "fictional experiment" to novelists and the flaws in his pedagogical strategies.

Recollective Memory in *Belinda*

Rousseau's educational philosophy fascinated and inspired philosopher Richard Lovell Edgeworth and his close friend Thomas Day, now remembered as the author of the moralistic story of childhood friendship *The History of Sandford and Merton* (1783-89).³² In the 1760s, both men embarked on Rousseauian educational experiments in their personal lives. Richard Lovell attempted to use the principles described in *Émile* to raise his eldest son, Dick, born in 1764. Dick's education was to be left "as much as possible to the education of nature and of accident" (Edgeworth, *Memoirs*, 178). His success was mixed; he reported that Dick was "bold, free, fearless, generous" but unfortunately "not disposed to *obey*" and uninterested in reading (179).³³ Richard Lovell persisted with the experiment until Dick was eight, even taking the boy to meet Rousseau himself, but eventually gave up and sent his son to a boarding school at a French monastery.³⁴ Thomas Day's experiment was equally unsuccessful, though more disturbing; Day tried to fashion an adopted apprentice girl into his ideal wife, modeling her on Rousseau's Sophie. As a single gentleman, Day was ineligible to adopt a young female apprentice himself, so in 1769 he persuaded Richard Lovell to act as his go-between. With his friend's help, Day procured two young women, whom he renamed, moved to France, secluded, and effectively tortured. After a year, Day was persuaded to abandon the experiment and send the girls away.³⁵

³⁰ For a review of several contemporary critical works that address Rousseau's misogyny, see Carol Blum, "Rousseau and Feminist Revision," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 34.3 (2010): 51-4. Susan Meld Shell has argued that Rousseau's disparaging treatment of female education is consistent with his other philosophical positions; see Shell, "Émile: Nature and the Education of Sophie," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2001) 272-301.

³¹ See Rowland, Peter, *The Life and Times of Thomas Day, 1748-1789: English Philanthropist and Author: Virtue Almost Personified* (Lewiston: E. Mellen Press, 1996).

³² Throughout this chapter, "Edgeworth" refers to Maria Edgeworth; her father is referred to as "Richard Lovell Edgeworth" or "Richard Lovell."

³³ Catherine Toal writes that Richard Lovell Edgeworth "witnessed disastrous effects in applying Rousseau's theories to the tutelage of his eldest son" (212). See Catherine Toal, "Control Experiment: Edgeworth's Critique of Rousseau's Educational Theory," in *An Uncomfortable Authority: Maria Edgeworth and Her Contexts* (Neward, Delaware: U of Delaware P, 2004), and Hollingworth, Brian, "Richard Edgeworth as Parent and Educator," in *Romanticism and Parenting: Image, Instruction, and Ideology* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars, 2007): 29-36.

³⁴ See Isabelle Bour, "Richard Lovell Edgeworth, or the Paradoxes of a 'Philosophical' Life," *Études Irlandaises* 34.2 (2009): 15-27.

³⁵ In a recent popular book, Wendy Moore has described Day's abuse of the two girls, aged eleven and twelve. Two girls had been selected so that Day would have a choice between them once they were ready for marriage, although he quickly abandoned one, whom he considered unintelligent. Day's tactics included renaming the girls "Sabrina"

The failure of these two educational projects tempered but did not destroy Richard Lovell's enthusiasm for Rousseauian child-rearing principles. Dick was only the first of twenty-two children born to Richard Lovell Edgeworth (with four different wives), affording him many opportunities to observe child development in his own household. Along with his second wife, Honora, he arranged a more "systematic course" of education for his subsequent children, taking a "Baconian approach" (Bour 9). His most famous child, the novelist Maria Edgeworth, arguably made education the focus of her authorial career. Her volume of moral fables, *The Parent's Assistant* (1796), often exceeds its didactic impulse in its creative storytelling, paving the way for nineteenth-century developments in children's literature.³⁶ Children's literature critic John Rowe Townsend argues that the "utilitarian emphasis" of Edgeworth's stories "clearly derives from Rousseau," although, as we will see, Edgeworth's other writings indicate a complex dialogue with Rousseauian principles (25). Two years after *The Parent's Assistant* first appeared, Richard Lovell and Maria co-authored³⁷ a two-volume work on child rearing, *Practical Education* (1798), largely based on domestic observations and notes made by Richard Lovell and Honora beginning in 1778.³⁸ In *Practical Education* the Edgeworths frequently reference and respond to both Locke and Rousseau, although they insist that their work is not meant to bolster any particular theory of childhood, claiming that they have "no peculiar system to support" and will "rely entirely upon practice and experience" (v). Perhaps in response to the disastrous childhood of Dick, they particularly denigrate Rousseau's ideas about child discipline, calling "impossible" his suggestion that "children should be governed solely by the necessity of circumstances" (177).

Practical Education gives detailed advice on how to regulate child readers. Chapter XII, "Books," is concerned with ensuring that children read in order to stimulate their analytical and imaginative capacities, rather than to memorize historical facts or famous verses without understanding. The difference between rote memorization and intelligent synthesis is described in terms of different kinds of memory. The Edgeworths argue that memory is frequently and inaccurately viewed through a banking metaphor: we are constantly "accumulating facts" in the way that we might also be "amassing riches," but this puts us in danger of loving the currency itself rather than its use value (346). In other words, parents and educators might mistakenly emphasize a child's ability to memorize facts over his or her ability to deploy them in a conversation or a chain of reasoning. The erroneous cultivation of "retentive memory" (346) lies behind all rote instruction, which fashions children who can rattle off poetry, respond to catechistical questioning, or list facts, without knowing what the words and images in their

and "Lucretia," moving them from England to France to separate them from anyone who might intervene in the "experiment" on their behalf, and attempting to make the more likely candidate insensible to pain by torturing her with hot wax and needles. See Moore, *How to Create the Perfect Wife: Britain's Most Ineligible Bachelor and His Enlightened Quest to Train the Ideal Mate* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

³⁶ F. J. Harvey Darton describes the stories in *The Parent's Assistant* as "highly esteemed by most critics and some children . . . when they are read, it is not for their purpose. It is because they are really good stories" (140). See Darton, *Children's Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life*, 3rd ed., rev. Brian Alderson (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 1982).

³⁷ In the Preface to *Practical Education*, the Edgeworths list chapters written by Maria and chapters written by Richard Lovell. Catherine Gallagher has interrogated the authorial relationship between father and daughter, noting that in practice Maria was typically responsible for all the prose composition, while Richard Lovell, admittedly an incapable writer, supplied ideas and inspiration. Nevertheless, both Edgeworths perceived Richard Lovell as the greater intellectual force. See Gallagher, "The Changeling's Debt: Maria Edgeworth's Productive Fictions," in *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: U of California P, 1994) 257-328.

³⁸ See Bour 9.

responses actually mean. Instead, the Edgeworths encourage the development of what they call “recollective memory,” which means that children must “arrange facts so that they shall be ready for use” through association, synthesis, analysis, and extrapolation (346). Recollective memory, crucially, involves the deployment of “invention” (344).

Because they value the development of “recollective memory” over “retentive memory” in childhood reading, the Edgeworths recommend not only parental supervision and attention to age-appropriateness, but also indulgence of children’s reading propensities. Parents, especially if they are planning to educate their children in a “private family” rather than at a public school, should read all books before allowing their children to see them (324). They should feel free to make liberal use of “the pen, the pencil, and the scissors” to expurgate children’s books as they see fit (322). They might even consider each individual child’s temperament and select particular stories for specific children to read (321-2). Age-appropriateness should be considered carefully, so that children are not faced with difficult language or dissipated characters (322-3). All descriptions and depictions of moral failings should be censored, due to the “danger of catching faults by sympathy” (324). Sentimental stories must be read sparingly, as there is a “danger of creating a romantic taste,” especially in girls (334). Likewise, adventure stories (including *Robinson Crusoe*) are problematic, as they do not prepare boys for their necessary adulthood in a tedious and unheroic profession (336). As we will see in Chapter 3, the Edgeworths argue that natural history is the best possible topic for children to read about, as it is realistic, informative, interesting, and can assist in the cultivation of a sense of religious awe (338). Yet with all of these conservative restrictions on what children might be allowed to read, the Edgeworths lament that not enough books exist for child readers (343). They also suggest that children be allowed to read in their own way, skipping over difficult passages, or stopping once they are bored or frustrated (343-4). Although they admit that this might result in the formation of “desultory habits” (as indeed it does with Scott’s hero Waverley), they argue that this is preferable to forcing children to read a quantity of material that they cannot comprehend (344). Like Locke, the Edgeworths are concerned that not enough children’s literature exists which is both comprehensible by child readers and morally upright. Like Rousseau, they worry that children will be preoccupied by words and forget practicalities.

Maria Edgeworth’s engagement with Rousseau and the fallout of Rousseauian educational ideas among British philosophers comes to a head in her 1801 novel *Belinda*.³⁹ In my reading, *Belinda* stages the relationship between recollective and retentive memory in order to emphasize that Lockean educational principles are most effectively deployed using Rousseauian narrative strategies. The novel’s eponymous protagonist is a cool-headed and strongly moral young debutante who turns her smattering of girlish education to great intellectual and moral account. By “reading” the narratives of the lives of married women around her, she is able to navigate the marriage market in order to achieve both fortune and happiness. Her melodramatic foil and romantic rival, Virginia St. Pierre, raised in isolation as a prospective wife for our hero – obviously an allusion to Day’s attempt to fashion himself a spouse – exemplifies the dangerous of incomplete education and unsupervised reading for women.⁴⁰ As her captor-benefactor encourages her to form herself into Rousseau’s Sophie or St. Pierre’s Virginie, she

³⁹ See Julia Douthwaite, “Experimental Child-Rearing After Rousseau: Maria Edgeworth, *Practical Education* and *Belinda*,” *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies* 2.2 (1997): 35-56.

⁴⁰ Toal confirms that *Belinda*’s “subplot . . . parodies the scheme concocted by the enthusiastic devotee of Rousseau (and close friend of Richard Lovell Edgeworth) Thomas Day, to educate a wife for himself on the model of *Émile*’s “Sophy” (213).

reads herself instead into the position of a heroine in a sexually-charged romance. The hero, Clarence Hervey, the architect of Virginia's mis-education, is a careless aristocrat whose cleverness just barely makes up for his lack of application, self-discipline, or self-reflection; with his Oxford education, he is just informed enough to be troublesome to the women around him.⁴¹ Meanwhile, in the ideal Percival household, Locke's educational principles come to life with happy results, as father and mother coach their children in both practical and artistic knowledge without separating them from the world. Edgeworth uses all of the various educations in *Belinda* – her own, Virginia's, Clarence's, and the young Percivals' – to show the advantages of Lockean pedagogical principles. Yet, in order to demonstrate Locke's superiority as an educational theorist, Edgeworth relies on Rousseau's fusion of the fictional and pedagogical.

Belinda climaxes with the revelation that Clarence Hervey, the object of our eponymous heroine's affections, has not been keeping a secret mistress, as the novel's readers and characters all suspect, but instead attempting to fashion a wife. The sheltered and ingenuous Rachel Hartley, whom Clarence renames Virginia St. Pierre after the heroine and author of St Pierre's 1787 novel *Paul et Virginie*, introduces a fairy-tale element into the novel; raised by her grandmother in a cottage in the New Forest, she has never seen a man in person until Clarence stumbles across her. Rachel – or, as we must call her, Virginia – provides the perfect fodder for his determination to turn the final chapter of Rousseau's *Émile* into a real-life experiment – an experiment that, like Thomas Day's real-life version, utterly fails.⁴² From the first moments of her introduction, Virginia is less a character than an anthology, a personified collection of texts. Clarence imposes two of these texts upon her: Rousseau's *Émile et Sophie* and St. Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*, both of which he intends to suggest and consolidate her pastoral innocence and dependence – perhaps in contradistinction to the Biblical heritage of her given name, “Rachel,” which he finds “excessively disagreeable” (369). The novel imposes two more textual structures on Virginia, making her the protagonist of a fairy tale subplot in which she falls in love with a portrait, and describing her as a Robinson Crusoe figure (372). Rejecting all of these external impositions of generic structure, Virginia defines herself through her eager reading of romances, which have the dangerous effect on her that eighteenth-century commentators warned might beset female readers: unable to distinguish books from real life, she dreams of herself as a quasi-medieval heroine with two knights fighting over her in a “splendid” tournament (388). Virginia's crisis occurs when she finally reads *Paul et Virginie* and realizes how differently she has interpreted the plot of her life than Clarence has.

The interrelation of educational discourse and romantic plotting that surrounds Virginia is explicitly derived from Rousseau's *Émile* and Edgeworth's firsthand knowledge of Day; but the more subtle educational discourse surrounding the novel's heroine, Belinda, like the overriding ideas in *Practical Education*, reflects the principles, not of Rousseau, but of Locke. Edgeworth herself sets up the distinction, writing that “The virtues of Virginia sprang from sentiment; those of Belinda from reason” (376). Like Sophie, Virginia “loves virtue . . . because there is nothing

⁴¹ Toal writes that critics “either dismiss the [Virginia St. Pierre] episode as ‘somewhat silly,’ regard it as Edgeworth's Wollstonecraftian defense of a female right to rational education, or note Virginia's integration . . . into a regime of domesticity and loyal usefulness to the imperial enterprise,” and argues that “the refutation of Rousseau in the subplot elevates the self-assurance of the Edgeworthian educational credo into a kind of wish fulfillment” (214).

⁴² “Marilyn Butler contends that Edgeworth's educational writings carry on a sustained antagonistic engagement and struggle with [Thomas] Day” (Toal 213). See Marilyn Butler, “Edgeworth's Stern Father: Escaping Thomas Day, 1795-1801,” ed. Alvaro Ribeiro and James G. Basker, in *Tradition in Transition: Women Writers, Marginal Texts, and the Eighteenth-Century Canon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

so fine as virtue” and because her close associates value it (577); while Belinda, like Locke’s gentleman, knows that “the principle of all virtue and excellency lies in a power of denying ourselves the satisfaction of our own desires where reason does not authorize them” (29). Criticized by contemporary reviewers for her cool-headedness and lack of sensibility, Belinda – surely, as Kathryn J. Kirkpatrick has pointed out, an important predecessor to Austen’s Elinor Dashwood – personifies a Lockean principle as much as Virginia does a Rousseauian fiction.⁴³ The combined tension and affinity between these two characters reflects the complex interrelationship of these two strands of eighteenth-century educationalist discourse and demonstrates that Rousseauian educationalism meshes more harmoniously with the emerging fictional structures of the early nineteenth century than Lockean pedagogy. Virginia, though melodramatic, is formed from a concatenation of novelistic heroines, and her education, however idiosyncratic, is generically congruent with the pattern of Edgeworth’s early Romantic novel. By contrast, Lockean philosophy, when incorporated into the novel, feels stilted and unnatural.

On the novel’s publication, the *Critical Review*, like many others, condemned *Belinda*, arguing that the heroine’s extraordinary self-possession jarred against its novelistic frame:

Belinda is as much a stoic as Zeno. She *can love without passion*, and transfers her affections from Mr. Hervey to Mr. Vincent, and from Mr. Vincent back again to Mr. Hervey, with as much *sang froid* as she would unhang her cloak from one peg and hang it upon another. All the world have agreed that love is a passion; and, when acting on a proper object, love with enthusiasm is the will of God and nature. With love as her stimulus, the tender female flies into the arms of her husband as pure as the sun-beams: divest her of this enthusiasm, and bid her look on marriage with the eye of *reason* only, and she will see sexual intercourse as its immediate consequence. Will this, or will it not, decrease her delicacy?

Upon the whole, miss Edgeworth’s literary fame is not benefited by the appearance of *Belinda*. Novel-writing does not seem to us to be her *fort*. . . . (237)

Leaving aside the unfair characterization of Belinda as someone who looks on marriage “with the eye of *reason* only” – she does, after all, refuse the wealthy Sir Philip Baddely because she cannot love him – it is striking that the reviewer’s description of “love with enthusiasm,” presumably a more fitting subject for novel-writing than loving “without passion,” corresponds both to Virginia’s obsession with the unseen Captain Sunderland and to Rousseau’s description of the manner in which Sophie ought to love Émile.

While Virginia “educates” herself with sensation novels, Belinda educates herself about social morality by “reading” Lady Delacour’s autobiographical narrative. *Belinda* describes several different versions of educational projects. Of course, there is the educational experiment that Clarence Hervey undertakes with Virginia St. Pierre, which is an obvious allusion to and sendup of *Émile*. Yet even from the very beginning, when the novel focuses more on the marriage prospects of a mid-level society girl surrounded by meddling relatives and dissipated associates, education is subtly the focus, and the thread that joins together a variety of otherwise disparate plotlines. Belinda and the reader join together in learning the history of the unfortunate and unscrupulous Lady Delacour, collaboratively “reading” the text of Lady Delacour’s life, which operates as an embedded novel within the novel. Through the reading of her patroness, Belinda is able to educate herself about social mistakes both trivial and serious, and to fill up the gaps in her otherwise rarefied, esoteric education, which has been designed to give her a passing familiarity with textbook learning and a fine lady’s achievements and to make her nominally

⁴³ See Kirkpatrick xxi.

more fit for the marriage market. The way that Belinda defines and refines her selfhood by reading Lady Delacour's life is an interesting precursor to the way that heroines like Jane Eyre and Maggie Tulliver will define themselves through their own reading and through the sympathetic attachments that it creates.

Belinda mediates her response to the education provided for her and develops her personhood in addition to her marital eligibility. The first education that we encounter in *Belinda*, and the most important one for the novel, is Belinda's own "education" as superintended by her aunt, the pandering Mrs. Stanhope. We learn that "Belinda was handsome, graceful, sprightly, and highly accomplished; her aunt had endeavoured to teach her, that a young lady's chief business is to please in society, that all her charms and accomplishments should be invariably subservient to one grand object – the establishing herself in the world" (7). Thus Belinda's education is the most heartlessly pragmatic and vocational training we could imagine – training for the gendered vocations of first eligible maiden and then wealthy wife. Belinda's own intellectual or moral improvement are completely irrelevant to this training; indeed, as it becomes evident that Belinda is artistic, inquisitive, thoughtful, self-critical, and capable of moral reasoning – in other words, that Belinda has contrived to reap what we would now think of as the benefits of a liberal arts education from the smattering of training that her aunt has provided. Mrs. Stanhope becomes increasingly irritated. She has endeavored to form Belinda to the mold of a social role; instead, she has inadvertently been party to the birth of an independent intellect. Hoping to have formed Belinda into the stock character of eligible society wife, she is dismayed to find that instead she has on her hands a creative, independent thinker whose focus on means over ends may jeopardize her livelihood and future success. Belinda has, against her aunt's efforts and all odds, used her education to become a person, rather than to melt into a role. Edgeworth, however, rewards Belinda's ethical and intellectual efforts by giving her the marriage that both she and Mrs. Stanhope desire, fulfilling the same paradox that proponents of liberal education claim: focusing on means over ends will, eventually, succeed in bringing about better or more effective ends anyway.

Belinda's participation in the marriage market is assumed by the novel, though Lady Delacour and Lady Anne Percival attempt to shape that participation in distinctive ways. Interestingly, there are many parallels between the ideal Percival and dissipate Delacour households. Lady Anne, like Lady Delacour (and Mrs. Stanhope), has something of the matchmaker in her. The difference is not that she refrains from encouraging Belinda to marry, but in the choice of suitor; Lady Anne encourages Belinda's interest in the intellectual and emotionally perfect Mr. Vincent, whose mixed racial background makes him questionable in the eyes of British high society; while Lady Delacour and Mrs. Stanhope, for all the wrong reasons, encourage Belinda's interest in the intellectually facile but morally underdeveloped Clarence Hervey. Belinda is not empowered to resist the marriage market, but to shape her participation in it.

The education of the novel's "hero," Clarence Hervey, is also explored. Clarence's experiences at Oxford reinforce his weak tendency to blend into any available role. We learn that Clarence has been extremely successful at Oxford, particularly as a writer; but that he is ready to distance himself from his intellectual success in order to court the approval of his more superficial companions: "His chameleon character seemed to vary in different lights, and according to the different situations, in which he happened to be placed. He could be all things to all men – and to all women" (14). Not unlike Scott's Edward Waverley, Clarence is a waffler. Finding himself capable of a variety of feelings and intellectual tasks – and finding himself

introduced into various different social circles – he is able to conceive of ways to fit himself into each role. It is telling that in Clarence’s first appearance in the novel, he imitates an actor, drawing Lady Delacour into a mock scene with him.⁴⁴ Clarence’s problem contrasts strongly with Belinda’s – she cannot conceive of how to sacrifice the complexity of her own mind by forcing it into a prescribed role; he cannot figure out how he might genuinely inhabit one of the many different roles available to him.

Although the political and personal consequences of *Belinda*’s marriage plot may seem to stray from the subject of childhood education, Edgeworth depicts Belinda’s adult dilemma as the consequence of her childhood upbringing, and the forerunner to her own eventual role as a mother and domestic educator.⁴⁵ In the novel, Edgeworth presents the Percival children as ideally educated yet surprisingly dispassionate. One of the things that reconciles Belinda to the role of society wife is that, while participating in Lady Anne Percival’s domestic paradise, she sees how rewarding it can be to become a (society) mother and to superintend the subject formation of her own children. Yet, interestingly, Edgeworth makes the Percival children seem somewhat cold and unfeeling, even ventriloquizing through Lady Anne the opinion that young children do not have the same kinds of feelings as grown adults: “People who expect sentiment from children of six years old will be disappointed, and will probably teach them affectation. Surely it is much better to let their natural affections have time to expand. If we tear the rose-bud open, we spoil the flower for ever” (239). Emotional development is here equated with display – it would be easy to use the same rosebud metaphor to suggest that children are tightly wound up inside and only gradually learn to express their feelings. But psychological depth, according to this model, is only present if and when it can be expressed. Instead of being cute or sweet or emotional, the Percival children seem mechanistic: “In this large and happy family there was a variety of pursuits. One of the boys was fond of chemistry, another of gardening; one of the daughters had a talent for painting, another for music; and all their acquirements and accomplishments contributed to increase their mutual happiness, for there was no envy or jealousy amongst them” (216). The Percival nursery has a prelapsarian peace and happiness, yet also a rich artistic and intellectual life – it is an Edenic *salon*. Lady Anne Percival and Mr. Percival are not unlike the stock-character parents in nineteenth-century children’s books of natural history, who combine flawless execution of their parenting duties with encyclopedic knowledge of science and art: “Mr Percival was a man of science and literature, and his daily pursuits and general conversation were in the happiest manner instructive and interesting to his family. [. . .] From the merest trifles he could lead to some scientific fact, some happy literary allusion, or philosophic investigation” (216). Mr. Percival therefore displays the same kind of intellectual facility and quickness in conversation for which the dissipated Lady Delacour is also celebrated, yet turned to the service of education rather than amusement (although amusement is a happy byproduct of the Percival method). The Percivals seem to be following Locke’s advice that they “set them [their children]” upon desiring of *learning* themselves and make them seek it as another sort of play or recreation” (114).

In *Belinda*, Edgeworth uses novelistic narrative to demonstrate the power of what she and her father had referred to as “retentive memory” in *Practical Education*. When writing of

⁴⁴ On Clarence’s first appearance in the novel, we find him “throwing himself into an actor’s attitude” and “speaking in a fine tone of stage declamation” (13).

⁴⁵ Julia Briggs has argued that the “importance that Locke attributed to early education indirectly enlarged the role of mothers” (73). See Briggs, “‘Delightful Task!’: Women, Children, and Reading in the Mid-Eighteenth Century,” in *Culturing the Child, 1690-1914: Essays in Honor of Mitzi Myers* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2005) 67-82.

“Books,” the Edgeworths parse the relationship between memorizing and analyzing information: “It is not sufficient therefore in education to store up knowledge, it is essential to arrange facts so that they shall be ready for use, as materials for the imagination, or the judgment, to select and combine. The power of retentive memory is exercised too much, the faculty of recollective memory is exercised too little, by the common modes of education” (346). What better way to “arrange facts so that they shall be ready for use” than to weave them together in fictive form, just as Locke’s pupil is to learn to construct his life in narrative? Belinda’s self-determination consists of using recollective memory to analyze the narrative of Lady Delacour’s life and to establish a very different narrative for her own life and marriage. By contrast, the educational achievements of other characters – such as Clarence’s malleability and the technical perfection of the Percival children – are mere exercises in retentive memory. In this sense, Belinda’s Lockean exercise of her reasoning faculties is more creative and imaginative than Virginia St. Pierre’s “natural” upbringing and literary daydreams.

Waverley’s Desultory Education

While *Belinda* obviously parodies the educational methods of Rousseau, Walter Scott’s *Waverley* more subtly satirizes those of Locke. Edward Waverley, a notoriously passive and indecisive protagonist, is made so by his careless reading as a child and a youth. He reads indiscriminately through the voluminous, heterogeneous library that his uncle and ancestors have amassed at Waverley-Honour, sustaining his attention to each volume only while it entertains him. Largely free of tutorial direction due to the conflicting influences and lackadaisical air of his father and uncle, he has no guidance regarding the relative merits of different texts or the deeper understanding of prosody and literary technique that would give him true mastery.⁴⁶ Although he manages to educate himself in the literary content necessary to an eighteenth-century gentleman, including Shakespeare and Milton, classical literature, and French and Italian novels, his critical thinking skills are superficial and undeveloped. He is incapable of “study and rivetted attention” (31), makes himself “unfit for serious and sober study” (15), and “los[es] forever the opportunity of acquiring habits of firm and incumbent application, of gaining the art of controuling, directing, and concentrating the powers of his own mind for earnest investigation” (12). The consequences of this “desultory habit of reading” (13) will play out throughout the novel. Waverley’s “wavering and unsettled habit of mind,” the result of his “vague and unsatisfactory course of reading,” will continually forestall him in passive inaction and indecision at crucial moments, when his political allegiance, his marital prospects, the lives of his allies, and even his own life are at risk (31). In addition, Waverley will repeatedly fail to understand his dire personal and political situation due both to his overdeveloped romantic tendencies and to his inability to “read” the narrative of his own actions from the perspectives of those around him. Nevertheless, the malleable sympathetic faculty he develops as a result of his “desultory” reading will position him for eventual personal and political success.⁴⁷

Waverley’s indecisiveness and his failure as a reader are well-known. Less frequently

⁴⁶ Ian Duncan locates Waverley’s failed education in “the larger failure of patriarchal culture. Our hero has too many fathers because he lacks one, in whom biological paternity and patriarchal exemplarity might coincide. This problematical paternity rehearses the literary genealogy of the hero as female quixote” (67). See Duncan, “The Romance of Subjection: Scott’s *Waverley*” in *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992: 51-105.

⁴⁷ See Jane Millgate, “*Waverley*: Romance as Education,” in *Walter Scott: The Making of the Novelist* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1984): 37-58.

observed is the similarity between the careless manner in which Waverley reads and the strategies that Locke proposes for teaching children in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. As we have seen, Locke suggests that education can be made appealing to children by reframing it as play, rather than work, devising games for learning the alphabet, spelling, and reading and providing entertaining books adapted to a child's capacities and interests, such as Aesop's *Fables*. It is just this conflation of education and entertainment that Scott derides in Chapter 3 of *Waverley*, "Education." Scott's narrator worries that reframing learning as play will develop children's interest in the method rather than the medium – they will learn to love amusement and games, rather than embracing the drier content of history, geography, or religion that are delivered by means of the games. This accords, somewhat paradoxically, with Scott's condemnation of Waverley's reading. Although Waverley does master the correct content, he does so through the wrong methods – romantically rather than didactically – and his intellectual, even his ethical, capacities are crippled. Scott understands the mismatch of educational methods with schoolroom subjects as a generic conflation of two different cognitive faculties: Waverley reads "rather to awaken the imagination than to benefit the understanding" (14). Yet these two faculties are nowhere more conflated than in Scott's composition of the novel itself, in which he claims that "the most romantic parts of this narrative are precisely those which have a foundation in fact" (340). The failure of imagination to afford critical reflection which Scott dramatizes in Waverley's life is undermined by the success of "imaginary scenes" to transmit a factual and critical analysis of eighteenth-century Scottish history and society (140). In other words, the novel's methodology unites imagination and understanding in educational philosophy, while the novel's plot splits them apart.⁴⁸

Waverley's undirected education contains elements of Lockean pedagogical freedom. Although Locke's suggestion that games and amusement could be used to convey educational content was not the first or last such innovation, it was still novel when it appeared in seventeenth-century England, and Locke was credited throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with conceiving the idea of learning as play.⁴⁹ Locke argues that education can be reframed to children as a form of entertainment rather than toil, that games may be devised which convey educational content, and that forcing children to learn will only make them rebel against their lessons. His caution against making learning feel like work for children was particularly directed at the process of learning to read:

When he can talk, it is time he should begin to learn to read. But as to this, give me leave here to inculcate again, what is very apt to be forgotten, viz. That a great care is to be taken that it be never made as a business to him, nor he look on it as a task. We naturally, as I said, even from our cradles, love liberty and have

⁴⁸ Similarly, Kenneth M. Sroka has observed that "Ironically, *Waverley* (itself a novel) instructs by amusing and asserts the importance of fiction in the formation of character" (140). See Sroka, "Education in Walter Scott's *Waverley*," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 15 (1980): 139-64. Ian Duncan has argued that Scott's novels convey a Humean "normative and socializing model of the imagination" rather than "the Kantian-Coleridgean idea of a transcendental imagination" (Introduction, *Approaches*, 23). In relation to educational philosophy in *Waverley*, we might say that Waverley himself attempts to exercise the transcendental imagination (with disastrous consequences), while *Waverley* the novel exercises the Humean normative imagination, which is more congruent with the faculty of understanding. See Duncan, Introduction to *Approaches to Teaching Scott's Waverley Novels*, ed. Evan Gottlieb and Ian Duncan, New York: MLA, 2009: 19-25.

⁴⁹ Margaret J. M. Ezell confirms that "[m]ost of Locke's ideas on education were not new. Evelyn, Aubrey, Eachard, and Milton had urged similar reforms in curriculum and teaching methods" (114). See Ezell, "John Locke's Images of Childhood: Early Eighteenth Century Response to *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 17.2 (1983): 139-55.

therefore an aversion to many things for no other reason but because they are enjoined us. I have always had a fancy that learning might be made a play and recreation to children; and that they might be brought to desire to be taught, if it were proposed to them as a thing of honor, credit, delight, and recreation or as a reward for doing something else and if they were never chid or corrected for the neglect of it. (113-4)

Locke goes on to propose a variety of educational reading games, such as pasting the letters of the alphabet onto a multi-sided die in order to teach children to identify them, then combining several dice in order to play word-formation games and learn spelling; once the child can identify words, he can be given “some easy pleasant book suited to his capacity,” such as Aesop’s *Fables* (116). Locke recommends Aesop in particular because, he argues, the *Fables* are “stories apt to delight and entertain a child” but “may yet afford useful reflections to a grown man” (116-7). Scott’s *Waverley* will repeatedly question this claim, asking whether the “romantic fiction” which is “the most fascinating to a youthful imagination” actually provides useful material for Edward’s adult reflections – particularly given the casual manner in which he has read it (14).

Although the young gentleman⁵⁰ whose education Locke designs is considerably younger than Edward Waverley at the beginning of Scott’s novel, and Aesop is simpler than the Shakespeare, Milton, Ariosto and Spenser that Waverley reads, the aside on educational philosophy on Chapter 3 indicates Scott’s preoccupation, not only with Lockean philosophy of mind, but with Locke’s educational advice about children in particular, as well as the latter-day adherents of such advice. Scott uses Waverley’s badly-organized education as an opportunity to rail against the educational advice, derived from Locke and proffered by the Edgeworths and other prominent educationalists of the day, that learning new skills and material can be presented to children as games and forms of play. When recounting Waverley’s careless reading, Scott’s narrator interrupts to parry the anticipated counter-argument of his reader:

I am aware I may be here reminded of the necessity of rendering instruction agreeable to youth, and of Tasso’s infusion of honey into the medicine prepared for a child; but an age in which children are taught the driest doctrines by the insinuating method of instructive games, has little reason to dread the consequences of study being rendered too serious or severe. The history of England is now reduced to a game at cards, the problems of mathematics to puzzles and riddles, and the doctrines of arithmetic may, we are assured, be sufficiently acquired by spending a few hours a-week at a new and complicated edition of the Royal Game of the Goose. There wants but one step further, and the Creed and Ten Commandments may be taught in the same manner, without the necessity of the grave face, deliberate tone of recital, and devout attention hitherto exacted from the well-governed children of this realm. It may in the mean time be subject of serious consideration, whether those who are accustomed only to acquire instruction through the medium of amusement, may not be brought to reject that which approached under the aspect of study; whether those who learn history by the cards, may not be led to prefer the means to the end; and whether,

⁵⁰ As described above, Locke had personal experience tutoring the children of the Clarke family; the hypothetical child of the *Thoughts*, however, is a philosophical abstraction. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between Locke and the Clarke children, see Adriana Silvia Benzaquén, “Locke’s Children,” *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 4.3 (Fall 2011): 382-402.

were we to teach religion in the way of sport, our pupils might not thereby be gradually induced to make sport of their religion. (12-3)

The narrator's concern that the means and ends of childhood education are disharmonious reflects his objection to the worthy content and careless method of Waverley's exposure to literature. There is something comically joyless about this objection; after all, the narrator seems to be arguing largely that education is not meant to be amusing or enjoyable, and that pupils should experience serious study as a tedious task requiring self-discipline. While Locke worries that overly strict methods of teaching will discourage children from applying themselves to their studies, Scott's narrator worries that repackaging serious subjects for childhood consumption by making them amusing will only feed a taste for amusement.

Interestingly, both Scott and Locke describe the result of their fears, the child who is taught to read in the wrong way, in terms of excess consumption—a surfeit. For Locke, the surfeit is of books themselves:

It injures their healths, and their being forced and tied down to their books, in an age at enmity with all such restraint, has, I doubt not, been the reason why a great many have hated books and learning all their lives after: it is like a surfeit that leaves an aversion behind not to be removed. (Locke, 114)

For Scott, the surfeit is of “idle reading,” which malforms Waverley's taste and character:

I have already hinted that the dainty, squeamish, and fastidious taste acquired by a surfeit of idle reading, had not only rendered our hero unfit for serious and sober study, but had even disgusted him in some degree with that in which he had hitherto indulged. (Scott 15)

It is particularly important that Locke conceives of children's reading behaviors as a form of consumption, akin to eating, because so much of the opening sections of *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* is dedicated to the care of the child's body. Locke assumes that parents care too scrupulously for their children, coddling them and feeding them on dainties, and that children should be exposed to more physical hardships and fed a plainer diet. In the same way, he also assumes that parents and tutors force children to learn to read using books that are boring or difficult, such as obscure chapters of the Bible. In both cases, children should be given simpler fare and not “crammed” with rich foods or ornate prose (16, 18). Scott, however, sees Waverley's self-indulgent reading as more dangerous than a forced program of study, because “desultory” reading allows Waverley to develop his own tastes and preferences before he has wide enough experience of literature or the world to form them accurately. Thus his habit of picking and choosing the bits of books he finds most delightful develops in him a “dainty, squeamish, and fastidious taste,” and his “appetite” for reading gradually diminishes because he feeds himself with the richest and most cloying prose (15, 13). Waverley's fantasy world will continue to be described in terms of consumption: living in his dreams is “delectable,” and indulging in reverie is like “chew[ing] the cud of sweet and bitter fancy” (17, 18).⁵¹

Paradoxically, then, for Locke, forcing the child to read under a tutor's direction results in a surfeit, while for Scott, allowing the child to read independently results in a surfeit. Playful reading is essential to the formation of the Lockean gentleman, but disastrous to the formation of Scott's Waverley. The key difference is that in Locke, the child's readerly freedom is largely illusory. Although Locke recommends giving the child “some easy pleasant book suited to his capacity,” and enjoins parents and tutors never to make children do “anything like work or serious,” he does not propose that children be allowed to approach reading through their own

⁵¹ As Claire Lamont notes in her introduction to the novel, Scott quotes from *As You Like It* 4.3.100.

process of discovery, as Waverley does (116, 114). Instead, the tutor should subtly direct the child's course of reading, choosing the books to which he is exposed and crafting the games that he plays so that he can be "cozened into a knowledge of the letters" (114). Locke's child is only superficially free to do what he pleases, while Scott's young protagonist is almost entirely, ruinously, free to read or act in any way he chooses.

Like Rousseau, Scott hints that re-reading is essential to the faculty of understanding. Waverley's desultory reading, however, does not allow for re-reading or mastery of the texts at hand: "the poor student is limited to a narrow circle for indulging his passion for books, and must necessarily make himself master of the few he possesses ere he can acquire more" (13), but the enormous library to which Waverley is exposed provides an overwhelming opportunity to skim imaginatively over vast stores of knowledge without developing the faculty of understanding. Part of Waverley's problem is that his uncle's library is voluminous, heterogeneous, and carelessly assembled:

The library at Waverley-Honour, a large Gothic room, with double arches and a gallery, contained that miscellaneous and extensive collection of volumes usually assembled together, during the course of two hundred years, by a family which have always been wealthy, and inclined of course, as a mark of splendour, to furnish their shelves with the current literature of the day, without much scrutiny or nicety of discrimination. Through this ample realm Edward was permitted to roam at large. (13)

Waverley reads too much and too carelessly; as a young and unguided pupil, he cannot know which books are classics and which are trash, which are famous and which unknown, which long-beloved and which long-forgotten. He does not know how to value the material to which he is exposed, what to prize and what to disdain.⁵² Scott's narrator assumes that Waverley is not capable of forming aesthetic judgments or developing his own tastes; we might have thought, for example, that exposed to so many different books, Waverley could learn to distinguish for himself between fine and tedious prose, or between fine and tedious sentiments. And, indeed, he does so to an extent; although he favors "romantic fiction" and the "themes the most fascinating to a youthful imagination," he becomes "master of Shakespeare and Milton," makes "the usual progress" in classical literature, and reads Italian novels, French romances, and English histories (14). It is not what Waverley reads, but how he reads it, that corrupts him:

while he was thus permitted to read only for the gratification of his own amusement, he foresaw not that he was losing for ever the opportunity of acquiring habits of firm and incumbent application, of gaining the art of controuling, directing, and concentrating the powers of his own mind for earnest investigation,—an art far more essential than even that learning which is the primary object of study. (12)

Because the young Waverley does not force himself to keep reading books after his first gleam of interest in them has waned, and because he does not persist in learning the subtleties of literary expression, he makes himself poorly equipped for deeper critical thinking—"unfit for serious and sober study" (15). He is intelligent and easily masters the rudiments of new languages or textual forms, but is also easily satisfied with his first, superficial understanding. As if this were not enough, Waverley is also cast adrift in time, provided with "the current literature

⁵² For an extended discussion of the role of books and their materiality in *Waverley*, see Peter Garside, "The Baron's Books: Scott's *Waverley* as a Bibliomaniacal Romance," *Romanticism: The Journal of Romantic Culture and Criticism* 14.3 (2008): 245-58.

of the day” from two centuries.⁵³ He reads widely, but not well.

As the novel proceeds, Scott’s narrator will not maintain the same level of didactic gravity. In fact, the narrator’s playfulness and the novel’s heterogeneity will seem to encourage the very kind of reading that proves initially problematic for Waverley himself. The narrator encourages us to read *Waverley* the novel in just the way that has malformed Waverley the protagonist, and Scott seems confident that his readers will handle playful reading in a more sophisticated manner than his character initially does. Narratorial interjections grow more frequent, such as the opening of the first chapter of the second volume, in which Scott’s narrator glories in his “tyranny over my readers,” “arbitrary power, and “display of the extent of my own reading” (115), or the final chapter, in which the narrator compares himself to a coach driver who, once paid, will “still linger near you, and make . . . a trifling additional claim upon your bounty and good nature” (339). Scott’s narrator is sarcastically, yet seriously, interested in whether or not the reader will continue to follow his narrative – after all, he writes, “I cannot call you into Exchequer if you do not think proper to read my narrative” (115), and “[y]ou are . . . free . . . to shut the volume” (339). He shows familiarity with the desultory habits of the novel reader, who tends to skip prefaces and read last chapters first, and manipulates this tendency by appending as a final chapter the material he thinks proper for a preface. In this way, the novel tricks its careless readers into the very kind of reading they try to avoid – they receive their “education” in Waverley’s history one way or another.

Conclusion

Within the general connection between educationalism and the novelistic, there is a more specific concern with reading – reading as learning, reading as entertainment, and reading as social conditioning. Locke and Rousseau both argue for the restriction of children’s reading material and the dangerous power of indiscriminate reading to (mis)shape young minds; Locke suggests only a few books for children to read, centering on Aesop’s *Fables*, while Rousseau fixates on *Robinson Crusoe* as a work connected to practical, natural experience. Their arguments against children’s voracious reading are strikingly if unsurprisingly similar to contemporary anxiety over women’s reading behaviors – contamination, confusion, and distraction may result from exposure to the “wrong” texts. Even Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, writing together in *Practical Education*, caution against allowing children to read arbitrarily through the books that might be available to them, advising the “use of the pen, the pencil, and the scissors” (241) before books are given to children. Thus, ironically, while the nature of childhood educational development comes to underlie the plotting of the nineteenth century novel, pedagogues attempt to restrict children’s actual reading practices. In the mid-nineteenth century, we will see these two trends clash as Victorian authors, including Dickens, Eliot, and Charlotte Brontë, experiment with semi-autobiographical child protagonists who are allowed to read voraciously and indiscriminately and who fashion themselves through their manipulation of uncensored reading material.

In the chapters that follow, I demonstrate how the children of the high Victorian

⁵³ Marilyn Orr connects Waverley’s careless reading with his difficulty relating his lived experience of time to history: “Because he does not learn to read well, Waverley is without the habits of mind which would enable him to read or interpret his experience wisely and to narrate his time appropriately” (718). See Orr, “Real and Narrative Time: Waverley and the Education of Memory,” *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 31.4 (1991): 715-34.

Bildungsroman, the mid-Victorian fantasy novel, and late Victorian autobiography hearken back to the educational subjects of the Romantic novel, and how the interaction of fictional development and educational progress for protagonists like Edward Waverley and Belinda Portman paves the way for the fictional childhoods of David Copperfield and Jane Eyre. I explore the consequences of the interrelation between educationalism and fictionality for the development of the Victorian child fantasy novel and for the late Victorian autobiography. All of these texts turn on how we as readers approach child protagonists and how children formulate their own subjectivity in relationship to a program of reading. That is, I am taking the title of this work, *Reading Children*, in both of its implicit senses, referring not only to what and how children read, but also to how readers approach children when they are literary subjects. In order to understand fiction in the nineteenth century, we must understand the textuality of childhood – particularly childhood as a space of education, both literary and non-literary.

Chapter 2

“Reading as if for life”: Bookish Children in the *Bildungsroman*

Formerly it was wisely said, “Tell me what company a man keeps, and I will tell you what he is”; but since literature has spread a new influence over the world, we must add, “Tell me what company a man has kept, and what books he has read, and I will tell you what he is.”

– Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Practical Education*

Introduction

The nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* teaches us about reading children – both children who read, and how we as readers should understand the child subject.¹ From Jane Eyre curling up in the window-seat of Gateshead Hall with Bewick’s *History of British Birds*, to David Copperfield lying on his bed with his father’s copy of *Tom Jones* “reading as if for life,” to Maggie Tulliver explaining Defoe’s *History of the Devil* to her father’s friend Mr. Riley, child protagonists in the classic Victorian coming-of-age novels are voracious readers. In the cases of Jane Eyre and David Copperfield, the later narrating self identifies the child as a reader; in the case of Maggie Tulliver, Eliot’s distant-yet-intimate narrator does so. The moments at which we see children in the *Bildungsroman* engaging in self-fashioning by reading are also moments at which we as readers must evaluate our own interpretive strategies. Watching the child in the *Bildungsroman* read becomes a model for the narrator attempting to “read” his or her, or someone else’s, past; and watching the narrator read the reading child teaches us how to engage with the novel itself.

Three of the great Victorian examples of the genre, *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, and *The Mill on the Floss*,² includes a very early scene in which we witness the child protagonist reading a text that is foreclosed to us. By “foreclosed,” I mean that the text that the child reads is not quoted or excerpted in the novel; while we may already be familiar with the child’s reading material, or we might be able to access it as an object in its own right outside the world of the novel, the novelist does not consider it important for us to read the text along with the child protagonist. We as readers witness the child reading, but do not share in the particulars of the reading experience. Each of these novels also ends with the embedded text of a letter that we *do* share in some way with the matured protagonist. *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield* conclude with the disclosed text of letters from secondary characters residing in Britain’s colonies: Jane receives a letter from her cousin and would-be suitor St. John Rivers, who is dying alone in India, and David receives a letter from his prolific correspondent and surrogate father Wilkins Micawber, who claims to be succeeding spectacularly in Australia. Similarly, just before the catastrophic flood that ends *The Mill on the Floss*, we read, along with Maggie Tulliver, Stephen

¹ In this chapter, I focus on the private subjectivity of childhood as it is displayed in the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*. For treatments of childhood in relation to imperialism, see Ala A. Alryyes, *Original Subjects: The Child, the Novel, and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001); and Laura C. Berry, *The Child, the State, and the Victorian Novel* (Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 1999).

² Note that Moretti, in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, considers *Daniel Deronda* to be Eliot’s great contribution to the genre. I have chosen to focus on *The Mill on the Floss* due to the explicit narration of childhood scenes in the novel, which contrast more profitably with *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield*.

Guest's final letter to her. All three novels also involve other kinds of external, quoted, excerpted, or allusive texts in their final chapters. *Mill* concludes with Maggie and Tom's shared epitaph, a Biblical quotation, which is readable by everyone *but* those who are its object (the corpse in the grave does not read its own epitaph). *David Copperfield* also references an epitaph (undisclosed to the reader) toward the end of the novel – the text that David chooses to commemorate Ham's life, which David later copies and sends, via Mr. Peggotty, to Emily.³ Likewise, St. John Rivers' letter to Jane concludes with a Biblical quotation that alludes to, or functions as, St. John's own self-chosen epitaph. The contrast between the reading strategy of the child protagonist at the beginning of the *Bildungsroman* and the reading strategy that the mature protagonist and the external reader are meant to share by the end of the novel constitutes the true work of the high Victorian *Bildungsroman*.

I do not mean to suggest that the epitaph performs the same function as the epistle, either in a general sense, or within the *Bildungsroman*, or within these specific novels. In *Jane Eyre*, as we will see, St. John's letter and the Biblical passage he invokes, perhaps anticipating his epitaph, work together to distance and contain Jane's feelings about the various possible narratives of her life: the one she has rejected (marriage to St. John, abandoning Rochester) and the one she has chosen (marriage to Rochester, abandoning St. John). In *David Copperfield*, Micawber's letter and the epitaph David chooses for Ham evoke different writerly conventions, the formulaic languages of correspondence and of mourning, to distinguish the different ways in which David has constructed himself as a writer. In *Mill on the Floss*, the words of Stephen Guest's letter to Maggie are displaced by her passionate resistance to her feelings for him, while the epitaph she shares with her brother attempts to compensate for the injustices of her life. Scenes of reading bracket each novel: at the beginning they train the reader in observing the child subject, and at the end they test the strength of the identificatory bonds formed between the reader and the now-matured child protagonist. However, the model of readerly identification and the mode of *Bildung* that function in various forms in *Jane Eyre* and, in a somewhat different form, in *David Copperfield* fail in *The Mill on the Floss*. The reader and protagonist cannot share the moment of reading that closes *Mill*, and the clumsy catastrophe that ends the novel also ends our immersion in Maggie's perspective.

I will first elaborate the model of the reading child as I see it established in *Jane Eyre*. Moving to *David Copperfield*, I will argue that David's development from reading child to writing subject emphasizes the ways in which he remains childish and undeveloped – and in which the novel resists its own teleology. Finally, turning to *Mill on the Floss*, I examine why Eliot abandons one plot (of the reading and readable child developing into a reading and sympathetic subject) for another, far more simplistic one (of externally induced catastrophe).

There is a vast critical literature on the *Bildungsroman*.⁴ Particularly relevant to the

³ I acknowledge that both Micawber's letter and Ham's epitaph are not capstones for *David Copperfield* in quite the same way that St. John Rivers' letter is in *Jane Eyre* or Maggie and Tom's epitaph is in *The Mill on the Floss*. However, as I argue below, I believe that both of the texts embedded in the concluding chapters of *Copperfield* are key to reading the closing image of "Agnes pointing upward."

⁴ The German term *Bildungsroman*, defined as "a novel that has as its main theme the formative years or spiritual education of one person," became common in English-language literary criticism in the early twentieth century; the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites its first usage in 1910. See "Bildungsroman, n.," *OED Online*, June 2013, Oxford UP, 20 June 2013 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/18946?redirectedFrom=bildungsroman>>. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* is usually identified as the first significant work in the genre. Several important treatments are discussed in the pages that follow. Also of note is Marc Redfield's *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the*

consideration of childhood and reading in the genre are Jerome Buckley's *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*,⁵ which acknowledges the importance of the "psychology of the child" to the *Bildungsroman*; Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*,⁶ which classifies the English *Bildungsroman* as a form of "children's literature" that conforms to the narrative ethics of the fairy tale; and Lorna Ellis's *Appearing to Diminish: Female Development and the British Bildungsroman, 1750-1850*,⁷ which argues for the reintegration of treatments of the female *Bildungsroman* into the criticism of the genre as a whole. Each of these works considers youth in the English *Bildungsroman*, though none of them fully accounts for the ways in which Brontë, Dickens, and Eliot connect the reader's experience to the readerly education of the protagonist. Buckley and Moretti, in particular, engage with the consequences of linking childhood to a narrative form.

In *Season of Youth*, Buckley narrates the history of the form in English literature,⁸ beginning with Dickens's *David Copperfield* and *Pip*, and connecting British interest in the genre to Wordsworth's reflections on boyhood and Carlyle's translation of *Wilhelm Meister*. Buckley emphasizes the ways that the English *Bildungsroman* draws on both the autobiographical tradition and the *Künstlerroman*. He argues that the heroes of these novels must undergo a "trial by parents, by money, by the city" and by love, but that they are sustained by "privileged moments of insight, epiphanies, spots of time" (22). Buckley also notes the connection between the rise of the *Bildungsroman* and the development of interest in childhood as a period of unique subjectivity relevant to narrative: "Not until the psychology of the child was taken seriously as an appropriate literary concern was the writing of the English *Bildungsroman* a possible enterprise" (19).⁹ Buckley's treatment is limited to semi-autobiographical heroes, all of whom are English, with the exception of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, and all of whom are male, with the exception of Maggie Tulliver. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Lucy Snowe are notably absent, and the influence of Scott's *Waverley* is dismissed with the debatable claim that the novel "makes no effort to develop significantly the theme of initiation" (9).¹⁰ Although Buckley does

Bildungsroman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1996), which, noting that the genre emerges contemporaneously with academic literary criticism, argues that the *Bildungsroman* "does not properly exist" and is "one of academic criticism's most overwhelmingly successful inventions" (vii); for Redfield, the genre is worth considering because doing so "brings into sharp focus the promises and pitfalls of aesthetics" which illuminates ideology (viii). Most recently, Joseph R. Slaughter has argued that the *Bildungsroman* "is ideally designed to effect . . . a transfer of narratorial agency" from the novel itself to its protagonist, and that this transfer enables "the individual's progressive incorporation into the regime of universal human rights" (92). See Slaughter, "Becoming Plots: Human Rights, the *Bildungsroman*, and the Novelization of Citizenship," in *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham UP, 2007).

⁵ Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1974.

⁶ Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 1987, rev. ed. 2000.

⁷ Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1999. See also Sonjeong Cho, *An Ethics of Becoming: Configurations of Feminine Subjectivity in Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot* (New York: Routledge, 2006). On the female child heroine of the *Bildungsroman*, see Sarah E. Maier, "Portraits of the Girl-Child: Female *Bildungsroman* in European Fiction," *Literature Compass* 4.1 (Jan. 2007): 317-335.

⁸ All of Buckley's case studies are of English authors, with the notable exception of James Joyce.

⁹ Jacqueline Banerjee challenges the contention that childhood is a particular concern of the nineteenth century and argues for eighteenth-century instances in *Through the Northern Gate: Childhood and Growing Up in British Fiction, 1719-1901* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).

¹⁰ Buckley argues that "Scott does begin *Waverley* . . . with an account, largely autobiographical, of the hero's early reading; but he presents no dramatic vignettes of Edward's childhood or any clear impression whatever of the growing boy. [. . .] Then, at the end of five short chapters . . . [t]he actual plot commences" (8-9). As I have argued in Chapter 1, the narrator's account of *Waverley*'s early reading illuminates his childhood by connecting him to

attend to the subjectivity of young child characters, he focuses more on maturation, apprenticeship, and “the making of a gentleman,” issues that continue to dominate conversation about the *Bildungsroman*.

Moretti’s *Way of the World*, taking a broader approach, examines the European *Bildungsroman*, particularly in its Germanic origins and British and French manifestations. Moretti locates the origin of the form not only with Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, as nearly all critics do, but also with Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. *Way of the World* focuses on the importance of youth – primarily adolescence and early adulthood, rather than childhood – in the *Bildungsroman*, arguing that, while the classical epic defines heroes as mature men of what we would now call middle age, nineteenth-century culture reimagines youth as “the most meaningful part of life” (3). The *Bildungsroman* therefore resists psychoanalytic criticism because both “youth and the novel have the opposite task of fusing . . . the conflicting features of an individual personality” (10-1). Moretti argues that the *Bildungsroman* is “very sensitive to major historical changes,” especially the effects of the French Revolution, but that the sociopolitical stability of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England resulted in greater generic stability for the form (181). Due to its ahistoricity, the nineteenth-century British manifestation of the *Bildungsroman*, taking as it does an “insipid’ hero,” is a more “elementary form” of the genre (11). When Moretti turns to a consideration of *Waverley*, *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, and *Great Expectations*, he notes that, unlike their counterparts in the German and French traditions, these are “children’s literature,” because “deep down, these novels are fairy tales” (185). By this Moretti means that “the standards of common morality invade every page and every action: the world has meaning *only if* it is relentlessly divided into good and evil” (187). Austen and George Eliot escape “the judicial-fairy-tale model” because “the hero is no longer an innocent child, but a young adult fighting for values not yet socially accepted” (214, 215). However, Moretti omits *The Mill in the Floss* from his argument, preferring to focus on *Daniel Deronda* and *Middlemarch*. Moretti’s refusal to engage the staging of childhood subjectivity in the British *Bildungsroman* leaves no place for Maggie Tulliver’s bouts of intense feeling, and his conflation of fairy tales with bourgeois morality and with child protagonists is problematic at best.

Both of these works conflate childhood with adolescence in the general category “youth” – as, of course, do the novels they read.¹¹ It is important, however, to distinguish the ways that works such as *David Copperfield*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Mill on the Floss* are not only novels of growth and development in which adolescents confront the wide world but also staging grounds for the subjectivity of pre-adolescent children at the beginning of their developmental process. “Youth” tends to connote adolescence and early adulthood, as it does for characters like Wilhelm Meister, Stephen Dedalus, or Daniel Deronda. But some of the most famous English

contemporary debates about the nature of education and the role of books in the formation of children’s characters. Buckley’s odd attempt to divorce the first five chapters from the rest of the work overlooks the continuing ramifications of *Waverley*’s “desultory reading.”

¹¹ The term “child” has a long history; it was originally a synonym for what we would now think of as “young man” (a usage retained in “Childe Harold” or “Childe Roland”), and only gradually came to refer to an earlier period of age. Differentiating between phases of life has long been troubling. We might think, for example, of the Renaissance seven ages of man, *à la* Shakespeare, or the classical world’s division between *puer*, *juven*, *vir*, and *senex*. In contemporary Western culture we recognize infants, children, adolescents, and young adults, perhaps even with some further, more fine-grained designations such as “toddler” and “tween,” though agreement on the exact ages that fall into these categories would be difficult to find. Puberty and the age of majority are obvious cultural rites of passage that mark changes in life stage, as is the transition to schooling.

Bildungsromane do not begin with “youths” in the sense of young people (typically men) embarking on adult life; instead they begin with “youths” who are also children. We think of *Jane Eyre* in terms of the first job held by a young, inexperienced governess – a young adult apprenticeship story – but Jane is ten and small for her age when the novel begins, and nearly a third of its pages detail her life from ages ten to eighteen.¹² Likewise, Maggie Tulliver is “gone nine” at the opening of *The Mill on the Floss*. David Copperfield’s eponymous novel begins even earlier with his birth. By emphasizing the investment of the European *Bildungsroman* in youth, critics have tended to obscure the English *Bildungsroman*’s particular investment in childhood.

It matters that the English *Bildungsroman* frequently commences with a reading child because this starting point creates an immediate connection between the protagonist and the reader through the narrator. There is a sense that, in childhood, the protagonist and the reader are interchangeable, as yet undifferentiated by experience, particularly literary experience. Just as David Copperfield curls up on his bed to read *Tom Jones* or Jane Eyre turns to *Gulliver’s Travels* for comfort, the reader of the *Bildungsroman* also has an immediately accessible narrative of self-formation surrounding the act of reading. The text in the reader’s hand analogically equates with the text in the protagonist’s hand; and this analogy is complicated and made interesting by the partial but incomplete synonymy between the protagonist and the text about the protagonist.¹³ That is, I read *Jane Eyre*, Jane Eyre reads Bewick’s *History of British Birds*, and there is slippage between *Jane Eyre* the novel and Jane Eyre the protagonist. Just as Jane self-fashions and self-characterizes by describing her reading, I as the reader am provided with a potential narrative about self-fashioning in the act of reading her. The connection between reader and protagonist contains greater potential when the protagonist is a child, unaware of reading conventions, still learning how to read and able to make creative mistakes in the reading process. The *Bildungsroman* teaches us about reading children, but also about narrating our own subject formation, whether from childhood or from a later point, through a personal reading history.

Jane Eyre’s Misreading

Jane Eyre may stereotype herself as bookish, but she is actually a poor reader, easily distracted by details, paying more attention to pictures than to words, and aggressively reading against the grain in order to turn the books she has at hand into the books she wants to have. “Reading” in the narrow sense of “decoding written or printed matter” is not Jane’s greatest skill; she is far better at “reading” in the broad sense of “interpreting.” Jane’s own imagination and experience, or lack of experience, often make her into a parody of a reader-response critic, transforming texts into what she wants or needs to read rather than what they actually are. Yet she is an excellent “reader” of the situations and people around her, both through the medium of the nineteenth-century pseudosciences of physiognomy and phrenology, and through her own acts of sympathetic observation and narration. Jane’s nonstandard reading practices also educate her imagined reader in the process of reading the various narratives into which Jane has opportunities to interpolate herself.

Ultimately, the stories that are most important in *Jane Eyre* are not the ones that Jane herself reads, not the books she comes across that can function, temporarily or partially, as structural materials for her reading of her own life. On the contrary, the books Jane reads are all

¹² In response to a question from Mr. Brocklehurst, Mrs. Reed gives Jane’s age as “[t]en years” (40).

¹³ The beginning of Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* takes this connection to its logical extreme by forcing the reader to re-experience the process of becoming literate.

but elided by her imagination, experiences, and subjectivity. The narratives that matter most in this novel are the untold stories of those around Jane – the history of Rochester’s first marriage to Bertha Mason and his subsequent wanderings, the story of the dissipated French opera singer Céline and her bastard daughter Adèle, and the tale of Jane’s uncle John Eyre, his fortune, and Jane’s long-lost relationship to the Rivers family. These are not stories that Jane could read in any book, but stories she must narrate for herself. By placing herself in a position to tell her own story, she makes it possible for herself to overhear, learn, and relate the stories of those around her; and once every story has been told, the novel can dispense of the remnants of Rochester’s past and bring the loving couple together. Letters, signs canny and uncanny, even the body of Bertha herself are merely mementos; once these objects have been narrated, they are extraneous and dispensable. Indeed, they must be disposed of in a convenient fire before the novel can come to a conclusion, before Jane can write, “Reader, I married him” (498). Reading is only a distraction from listening, which makes it possible to narrate, which makes it possible to inscribe a text, which results in another text.

Jane Eyre famously opens with a scene of reading.¹⁴ The young Jane, glad of the fact that the weather is too unpleasant for her relatives to insist that she take a walk, climbs into the windowseat, wraps herself in a cocoon of scarlet curtains, and reads. What she reads is Thomas Bewick’s *The History of British Birds*, specifically Volume II, *Water Birds*.¹⁵ Her rapt attention to the book is disrupted by the rude entrance of her cousin John, who forces her to emerge from the curtains so that he can take pleasure in thrashing her for an imagined offense against his mother. John’s bullying curtails Jane’s attempt to absorb herself in a text, transforming her from a reading subject into a social object. Readers may be absorbed in tracing Jane’s shift from reading a book to receiving a blow. However, as Gayatri Spivak and others have observed,¹⁶ Jane is not really “reading” the book she holds, at least not in the narrowest sense of that term. Although she skims her favorite parts of the descriptions in “certain introductory pages” (14), for the most part she “reads” only the woodcut illustrations:

Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting: as interesting as the tales Bessie sometimes narrated on winter evenings, when she chanced to be in good humour; and when, having brought her ironing-table to the nursery hearth, she allowed us to sit about it, and while she got up Mrs. Reed’s lace frills, and

¹⁴ All citations are to the 2003 Penguin Classics edition, edited by Michael Mason.

¹⁵ The introductory section Jane admits to reading and the illustrations she describes can all be found (with the possible exception of the problematic third image) in the 1816 edition of Volume II, *Water Birds*. Bewick first published Volume I on *Land Birds* in 1797; the second volume on *Water Birds* first appeared in 1804, and the two volumes were reissued as a pair regularly throughout the century. In the notes to the Penguin edition of *Jane Eyre*, Michael Mason correlates the images Jane describes with the first editions of each volume of Bewick, and therefore claims that the final image Jane mentions is in Volume I instead of Volume II. This is accurate for the first editions, but Bewick tended to shuffle the placement of the “Vignettes” (his term for the decorative illustrations that closed each entry) in each new edition, moving images within and between volumes. The Brontë family owned both volumes in the 1816 edition and used them as sources from which to practice sketching, and it is this edition that Charlotte seems to imagine on Jane’s lap. In the 1816 edition, the seven images that interest Jane all appear close together toward the middle and end of Volume II (from pages 200-361), while in other editions they are scattered more widely through the volume or appear in Volume I instead. See L. Duin Kelly, “Jane Eyre’s Paintings and Bewick’s *History of British Birds*,” *Notes and Queries* (June 1982), 230-2; and Susan B. Taylor, “Image and Text in *Jane Eyre*’s Avian Vignettes and Bewick’s *History of British Birds*,” *Victorian Newsletter* 101 (Spring 2002), 5-12.

¹⁶ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” in *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (Autumn 1985): 246.

crimped her night-cap borders, fed our eager attention with passages of love and adventure taken from old fairy tales and older ballads; or (as at a later period I discovered) from the pages of *Pamela*, and *Henry, Earl of Moreland*. (15)

Thus a scene that seems to demonstrate Jane's precocious readerly pleasure actually establishes a complex web of cultural transmission. Jane behaves as if she is reading a text, but instead of focusing on the words, she focuses on the images. Even the way in which she dismisses the words suggests that she is more interested in the physical appearance of the word as an art object on the page than in the word as a signifier – she tells us that she “cared little for” the “letter-press” of the typeface in Bewick (14). Spivak observes that Jane “cares little for reading what is *meant* to be read” (246). Reading the images by inventing fanciful stories to accompany them, Jane is reminded of oral tales narrated by the maid, Bessie, while she performs her domestic labors – oral tales that, as we shall see, have a complex literary provenance.

The connection of Bessie's domestic labor to her storytelling evokes the long-established gendering of household arts and the tale-telling that both accompanies these tasks and appropriates them as rhetorical figures. Karen E. Rowe has argued that “the intimate connection, both literal and metaphorical, between weaving and telling a story . . . establishes the cultural and literary frameworks within which women transmit not only tapestries that tell stories, but also later folklore and fairy tales” (300). If we accept that spinning a yarn and spinning a tale are figuratively and sometimes literally connected, then it is unsurprising that in Bessie's case both labor and storytelling are not creative but re-creative. Bessie is not a spinner or a weaver – rather than participating in cottage industry, she is in domestic service, re-creating and maintaining the textile art of others instead of generating yarn, thread, or fabric herself. Just as Bessie re-irons lace frills sewn by someone else back into place and re-crimps the border of a cap made by another, she re-tells pre-existing fables, ballads, and stories. Only “at a later period” will Jane realize that some of Bessie's stories are drawn, perhaps indirectly, from the eighteenth-century sentimental novel and from popular ballads and tales. In other words, when Jane opens a volume of *The History of British Birds*, she pretends to read a text while actually reading pictures; but instead of truly reading the pictures, she composes her own stories; these stories recall oral narratives; these oral narratives lead her to a memory of “women's work”; but this “women's work” disguises the adaptation and transmission of texts. Jane has been reading all along, reading without knowing it, reading in spite of herself.

It is not precisely the text that Jane avoids that is eventually narrated to her. Jane places on her lap and explores a naturalistic text, Thomas Bewick's *The History of British Birds* – a drawing-room natural history book in which woodcut illustrations of each bird accompany descriptions of the bird's appearance and habitat.¹⁷ But the texts that Jane eventually comes to know – both as Bessie's hearthside audience and as “life imitating art” – are Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and Henry Brooke's *Henry, Earl of Moreland*. The connection to *Pamela* is perhaps more easily parsed by today's reader; we hardly need guess at the lessons that Jane learns from hearing tales of a virtuous young woman who refuses to compromise her own integrity under duress from an immoral high-class suitor who is also her employer. Like *Pamela*, Jane will place her own moral sensibility above the exigencies of her situation; and like *Pamela*,

¹⁷ In the Preface to the first edition of Volume I, Bewick writes that “[t]his work . . . will contain an account of all the various tribes of birds either constantly residing in, or occasionally visiting our island, accompanied with representations of almost every species, faithfully drawn from nature, and engraven on wood” (vi). The work is written for non-specialists, “the less informed,” as existing works are directed toward “the skillful practitioner” of natural history (iii).

Jane will have her “*Virtue Rewarded*.” It is perhaps less obvious to the modern reader what contribution *Henry, Earl of Moreland* makes to the formation of Jane’s character. Henry Brooke’s now largely forgotten sentimental novel *The Fool of Quality, or, The History of Henry, Earl of Moreland*, published in 1766, captured the attention of eighteenth-century readers, including Methodism founder John Wesley, who published an abridged version titled *Henry, Earl of Moreland* in 1781 for distribution in his churches.¹⁸ Wesley wrote that *The Fool of Quality* was “one of the most beautiful pictures that was ever drawn in the world” (qtd. in Coutts xii) and seems to have been particularly taken with its theological overtones. Of especial relevance for *Jane Eyre* is the protagonist Henry’s supposed “foolishness.” His behavior is foolish in the genteel world of the novel because it is honest and principled – in the face of cruelty and immorality, he holds, seemingly at great cost to himself, and without clarifying his perspective to those around him, to a moral course of action. Henry and Jane resemble one another not only in their morality but in their reticence about it. It matters little to Jane, for example, what people think of her past while she lives under the protection of the Rivers family in Marsh End and Morton; it is enough for her to know that she has done right.

Thus, to return to the opening of *Jane Eyre*, Jane acts the part of the shy, bookish child reading about animals in Bewick’s *British Birds*, but the stories she is really imbibing, the narratives for which she is preparing to be the heroine, are heavily sexualized and, just as importantly, novelistic. At her nurse’s knee, she learns what it means to marry – and to refuse to marry – the master; and she learns what it means to establish an independent, individualistic moral center separate from the code of society. Jane takes these oral lessons into her supposedly more innocent reading. When she takes a volume of Bewick off the shelf, she appears to “read” a treatise on natural history, but she ignores the trappings of natural history – the descriptions of each bird in its habitat and the beautiful woodcut illustrations that are still prized by printers and artists today for their detail and elegance. Instead, she carefully selects elements of the book – including sections of the exotic, icy settings described in the introduction, along with the pictorial “Vignettes” that appear at the end of each section – in order to compile her own narrative of frozen landscapes and Gothic overtones.

Jane describes her reading experience as a series of disconnected images which she elaborates using the descriptions of frozen landscapes in Bewick’s introduction:

The words in these introductory pages connected themselves with the succeeding vignettes, and gave significance to the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray; to the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; to the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking.

I cannot tell what sentiment haunted the quite solitary churchyard, with its inscribed headstone; its gate, its two trees, its low horizon, girdled by a broken wall, and its newly-risen crescent, attesting the hour of eventide.

The two ships becalmed on a torpid sea, I believed to be marine phantoms.

The fiend pinning down the thief’s pack behind him, I passed over quickly: it was an object of terror.

So was the black horned thing seated aloof on a rock, surveying a distant

¹⁸ Michael Mason suggests that the stories Bessie tells Jane are derived from Wesley’s abridgement, rather than from Brooke’s complete novel. (See page 505, n. 6 to Chapter 1, in Mason’s 2003 Penguin edition of *Jane Eyre*.) I assume Mason’s reasoning was twofold; first, Wesley replaced the book’s title with its subtitle in his edition, making Brontë’s reference to *Henry, Earl of Moreland* point more clearly toward the abridgment, and second, Wesley’s edition would have been more widely available.

crowd surrounding a gallows. (14-15)

While we might be tempted to congratulate Jane for applying information from the book's introduction to its subsequent illustrations, the reading experience that she creates for herself bears little relationship to the ostensible educational purpose of Bewick's text. *A History of British Birds* has elements of both primer and encyclopedia. In Volume II on Water Birds, for example, there is one entry for each of 144 birds, divided into 21 sections. Each entry is headed with a large woodcut illustration of the bird and, functioning as a title, its common name. Additional common names and any scientific names of the bird are given as subheadings. Next follows a prose description of the bird's appearance and habits, typically running from one to three pages, occasionally a little more or less. Most of the entries conclude with another woodcut illustration, often significantly smaller than the image of the bird. These concluding illustrations, which function as capstones for the entries, are referred to by Bewick – and by Brontë and Jane – as “Vignettes.” The Romantic subgenre of the pictorial vignette, a small illustration often depicting village life or a landscape, surfaces in numerous texts of the period. Rosen and Zerner argue that “the vignette launched a powerful attack on the classical definition of representation” because “it has no limit, no frame” (qtd. in Taylor 10) – it is an image without a defined border. As several critics, including Susan B. Taylor, Jane W. Stedman, and L. Duin Kelly, have noted, Bewick's vignettes in *The History of British Birds* rarely bear any direct or clear relationship to the birds or their descriptions, and Bewick seems to have used them in a largely decorative sense, varying the pairings of birds and vignettes between editions. It is possible that some or all of the woodcuts for the vignettes had been created for other publications and were only being re-used as “filler” for *British Birds*. The vignettes are therefore extremely heterogeneous, including charming country scenes, still-life objects, and angelic cherubs, but also desolate seascapes, mischievous devils, gravestones, and executions, especially hangings. Occasionally the vignettes function as reminders of mortality, crime, and punishment, such as an image of a broken-necked body swinging from the gallows; others are innocuous, such as an image of children ice-skating on a frozen pond.

In the passage quoted above, Jane describes seven images that appear as vignettes in the 1816 edition of *A History of British Birds*, Volume II: Water Birds. Although this volume was first published in 1804, the Brontë family owned the 1816 edition,¹⁹ and it seems to be this edition that Charlotte imagines resting on Jane's lap. Several critics have attempted to identify the specific images that Jane describes; in most cases the correlations are obvious, as in the fourth image mentioned, the “quite solitary churchyard, with its inscribed headstone; its gate, its two trees, its low horizon, girdled by a broken wall, and its newly-risen crescent, attesting the hour of eventide” (15). One of Bewick's vignettes fits this description precisely. In other cases, Jane's descriptions could fit several similar illustrations in Bewick, such as the first image mentioned, the “rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray” (14). The third image Jane mentions is, as Michael Mason notes, the most difficult to identify; Jane refers to “the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking” (15), but no illustration in Bewick includes both the moon and a sinking ship, so the image is likely a conflation of several in either Jane Eyre's or Charlotte Brontë's memory. At any rate, Jane's description of each image is loaded with affective association: the first image, the “rock” that is in “a sea of billow and spray” seems to be “alone” (despite birds flying to either side of it); the remains of a boat are “broken” and the coast on which they lie is “desolate” (despite the appearance of an edifice of

¹⁹ See Susan B. Taylor, “Image and Text in *Jane Eyre*'s Avian Vignettes and Bewick's *History of British Birds*,” *Victorian Newsletter* 101 (Spring 2002), 5-12.

some sort in the background). Loneliness and isolation figure again and again: “alone,” “desolate,” “stranded,” “solitary,” and “aloof” are all descriptors Jane uses that are not always justified by the images themselves – probably more properly justified by her feeling that she does not belong in the Reed family. The word “broken” appears twice in the short description. As the sequence of images progresses, Jane’s interest shifts from desolate natural scenes, mostly maritime, toward the supernatural – the apparently “haunted” churchyard, the “fiend” and “black horned thing” that seem to be devils. The natural and supernatural worlds seem to blend, as Jane perceives two becalmed ships as “phantoms.” Not only has Jane emphasized an embellishment – the vignettes – over a metanarrative – the guide to birds; she has also emphasized a very specific selection of embellishments – the lonely and uncanny.²⁰

Provided only with a book of natural history, Jane uses these unusual Vignettes to construct a very different text, almost as though she was reading a Gothic novel, or *The Arabian Nights*, or a collection of folk tales, the fantastic texts that might have been available to other children of her class and time.²¹ The narrative that Jane constructs, mining Bewick for raw materials, is one of fantasy and fairy tale, a world of shipwrecks and monsters. By developing her selective reading process, Jane is able to read a different book than the one she has in front of her, to write the text she reads by emphasizing different aspects of it than those stressed by Bewick as author and illustrator. Yet Jane reads in this manner apparently without knowledge of these other genres, the fairy tale and the Gothic fiction. She is not using Bewick to recreate a previous reading experience; instead, she seems unconsciously attracted to the conventions of genres that she could not possibly know about. Rather than being influenced by her reading, Jane will have a certain type of reading experience – the type typically associated with melodrama and fantasy – no matter what text she encounters. Like David Copperfield, who “knew nothing” of “whatever harm was in some” of the books he read, Jane only finds in the text what she brings to it; like Maggie Tulliver, who pores over Defoe’s *History of the Devil* and Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* alike, she seems drawn to subjects not quite appropriate for a little girl.

But Jane was never really as interested in reading for self-improvement as she might like her readers to believe. She is far more interested in narrating her interaction with Bewick than in gleaning information from him; despite Susan B. Taylor’s intriguing argument that avian imagery provides a structural undercurrent in the novel,²² Jane does not seem consciously to learn anything about the history of birds from *The History of British Birds*. Jane, in other words, is a storyteller, a writer, but a poor reader. Asked by Mr. Rochester if she is well-read, she answers in the negative; she has only read “such books as came in my way; and they have not been numerous or very learned” (140). While this comment smacks of Jane’s usual excessive humility, it would be a mistake to read it as entirely ironic. Part of Jane’s difficulty with reading is that real life can displace or override it so easily. Every morsel of inspiration or information that she could glean from Bewick can be driven out of her mind by John Reed snatching the book from her hand and using it to smack her upside the head. Who needs the fear inspired by a “black, horned thing seated aloof on a rock, surveying a distant crowd surrounding a gallows”

²⁰ Jane’s interpretations of Bewick’s images recall Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

²¹ The first English translation of *The One Thousand and One Nights* directly from the Arabic was made by Edward W. Lane and issued as *The Arabian Nights* in three volumes from 1839-1841. Lane’s translation was, of course, heavily expurgated and intended for popular, perhaps even family, reading. Many English readers were already familiar with the more racy character of the tales through eighteenth-century translations into English via the French version by Antoine Galland. Burton’s unexpurgated edition did not appear until 1885. See Saree Makdisi and Felicity Nussbaum, *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context: Between East and West* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008).

²² See n. 9 above.

(15) when she has a cousin who “bullied and punished” her?

Jane understands John Reed’s behavior through the lens of a slightly different book, Oliver Goldsmith’s *History of Rome*, an authorial abridgement of his *Roman History* intended specifically for the schoolroom. She compares him hyperbolically to the tyrannical Roman emperors: “I had read Goldsmith’s *History of Rome*, and had formed my opinion of Nero, Caligula, &c. Also I had drawn parallels in silence, which I never thought thus to have declared aloud” (17). As in her reading of Bewick, Jane searches the text for tools with which to make sense of her childhood experience. But in this case, it is not embellishment that Jane emphasizes over metanarrative; instead, she emphasizes tone over degree. John Reed’s brutality, selfishness, and sadism are similar in style, if not in substance, to the behavior of the most objectionable Roman emperors. Jane seems to admit this slippage in her use of simile rather than metaphor, and her declarations are interrupted with dashes, emphasizing that she is thinking on her feet, substituting one comparison for another as fast as they tumble from her mind and her mouth: “You are like a murderer – you are like a slave-driver – you are like the Roman emperors!” (17). Not only does Jane characterize John by displacing historical tyranny onto him – she also understands historical tyranny through the tenuous connection of her own suffering at the hands of a childhood bully. In this case, even though it is clear that Jane has actually read the text in question, it is far from certain whether she sees it for what it is, or whether she merely sees it as a mirror in which the events of her life are reflected with some distortion. While a young reader like David Copperfield claims to fail to understand the “harm” in his reading because he has not experienced anything like it, a reader like Jane is familiar with harm, but in a highly particularized way.

Jane’s penchant for historical reading, and for the allegorical mapping of her own life onto history, does not end with Goldsmith’s *History of Rome*. When Mr. Brocklehurst asks Jane whether she reads the Bible, she answers, candidly and critically, by describing her interest in the historical and fantastic books: “I like Revelations, and the book of Daniel, and Genesis and Samuel, and a little bit of Exodus, and some parts of Kings and Chronicles, and Job and Jonah” (42). By contrast, the Psalms are “not interesting” to her (42). Jane’s readiness to differentiate the various books so clearly and to approach religious reading with the eye of a connoisseur is shocking to Brocklehurst, but not nearly so shocking to the reader, who has already watched Jane dabble and flip through Bewick and Goldsmith. Jane’s reading practices are almost dilettantish – she has favorite passages and illustrations, sections that she tends to skip, and feels comfortable asserting the relative merit of different texts or sections of one text.

As she does with Bewick when she attempts to read the Vignettes through connections to “certain introductory passages,” Jane will continue to read syncretically throughout the novel, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. For example, on her first day at Lowood, Jane reads the plaque over the door of the school room with puzzlement:

‘Lowood Institution – This portion was rebuilt AD – , by Naomi Brocklehurst, of Brocklehurst Hall, in this county.’ ‘Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.’ – St Matt. V. 16.

I read these words over and over again: I felt that an explanation belonged to them, and was unable fully to penetrate their import. I was still pondering the signification of ‘Institution,’ and endeavouring to make out a connection between the first words and the verse of scripture, when the sound of a cough close behind me, made me turn my head. I saw a girl sitting on a stone bench near; she was

bent over a book, on the perusal of which she seemed intent: from where I stood I could see the title – it was *Rasselas*; a name that struck me as strange, and consequently attractive. In turning a leaf she happened to look up, and I said to her directly: –

‘Is your book interesting?’ I had already formed the intention of asking her to lend it to me some day.

‘I like it,’ she answered, after a pause of a second or two, during which she examined me.

‘What is it about?’ I continued. I hardly know where I found the hardihood thus to open a conversation with a stranger; the step was contrary to my nature and habits: but I think her occupation touched a chord of sympathy somewhere; for I too liked reading, though of a frivolous and childish kind; I could not digest or comprehend the serious or substantial.

‘You may look at it,’ replied the girl, offering me the book.

I did so; a brief examination convinced me that the contents were less taking than the title: *Rasselas* looked dull to my trifling taste; I saw nothing about fairies, nothing about genii; no bright variety seemed spread over the closely printed pages. (59-60)

At the beginning of this scene, Jane demonstrates excellent readerly inclinations, modeling a variety of productive interpretive behaviors that would please even the most exacting formalist critic. She reads and re-reads, making meaning through repetition – “I read these words over and over again.” She believes that there is more to the words than simple denotative sense – she feels herself “unable to fully penetrate their import.” She addresses this interpretive difficulty: to uncover the connections between seemingly distinct sections of a pastiche inscription (“endeavouring to make out the connection between the first words and the verse of scripture”); and to analyze the meaning of the place she finds herself in through etymology (“pondering the significance of ‘Institution’”). But before she can fully parse the ramifications of her proto-close reading, Jane is distracted by a nearby scene of a very different kind of reading – Helen Burns’ dutiful perusal of *Rasselas*. We are left to complete Jane’s interpretive act, considering the connotations of “Institution” and evaluating the precise level of hypocrisy involved in Naomi Brocklehurst’s self-characterization as an evangelical giver. Meanwhile, Jane skims carelessly through *Rasselas*, dismissing it as soon as she determines it will not entertain her. She acknowledges her taste to be “trifling,” but seems more proud of than apologetic for this quality.

Jane’s reading of the Bible, and her reading of the use of biblical verses by the founders and directors of Lowood Institution, together prepare her for another indirect reading of a biblical text at the very end of the novel. Michael Mason reminds us that we have a “tendency to delete the ending of *Jane Eyre* from our memory of that novel” (ix) – that readers often focus on the sentence that opens the final chapter, “Reader, I married him,” rather than on the sentence with which the novel actually ends, “Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!” It is St. John Rivers who gets the last word, speaking (fittingly, given his name) in the words of the book of Revelation. Jane describes her correspondence with him by imagining the messenger who will inform her of St. John’s death:

I know that a stranger’s hand will write to me next, to say that the good and faithful servant has been called at length into the joy of his Lord. And why weep for this? No fear of death will darken St John’s last hour: his mind will be unclouded; his heart will be undaunted; his hope will be sure; his faith steadfast.

His own words are a pledge of this: –

‘My Master,’ he says, ‘has forewarned me. Daily he announces more distinctly, – “Surely I come quickly!” and hourly I more eagerly respond, – “Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!”’ (502)

Jane already anticipates another text, the future letter written in “an unknown hand,” as she peruses the final letter she will receive from St. John. Jane’s reading of St. John’s letter is colored by a strange juxtaposition of her own determination to remain impassive – “why weep for this?” – and the increasingly frenzied passion of St. John, who “more eagerly” responds to his religious fervor on an “hourly” basis. Coupled with St. John’s intensity, in the place of the absent Jane, is the metaphysical increase that he perceives in the closeness of God, whose voice speaks “more distinctly” to him on a “[d]aily” basis. In contrast to the exponential increase of St. John’s passionate expectation, and to the possible overlay of a *Pilgrim’s Progress*-style narrative,²³ Jane superimposes a different metaphorical paradigm onto the letter. Instead of sharing St. John’s vision, in which God draws ever nearer to him, Jane imposes a different spatial metaphor, suggesting that St. John is being “called” toward God instead of having God “come quickly” toward him. St. John perceives himself as stable and God as moving, while Jane perceives God as stable and St. John as moving. The difference is a minute one (and the eventual result, in which St. John and God are united, is the same), but the implication that Jane operates in a different frame of reference from St. John reminds us of their marital incompatibility. It also suggests that Jane, though a better reader than she was as a child, is still prone to overlaying her own narrative position and generic constraints onto a text she reads. St. John mobilizes a passage from Revelation and his own passion to write about his imminent death with the overtones of an apocalyptic second coming. But Jane does not read his letter as an apocalyptic narrative; instead, she transforms it into a more traditional Victorian deathbed scene in which the loved one is being “called” away from earth and toward heaven. This model is, among other things, much safer; it is tragic to lose someone, but it leaves the earthly realm unchanged and familiar; whereas in St. John’s model, God actually seems to descend upon the earth to collect him, altering everything in his wake. Brontë, however, does not allow Jane to have the last word. The reader is given Jane’s aggressive re-reading of the letter first, and left with the quoted text at the very end, preventing Jane from foreclosing the type and genre of St. John’s story.

The ending of *Jane Eyre* takes place through an embedded text, in this case St. John’s letter, which uses a Biblical quotation – “Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!” – to contain the emotion surrounding a death. St. John’s case is unusual in that he is able to choose his “epitaph” himself and “speak” it to Jane. But Brontë assumes a strong writerly direction over the reader’s response to St. John’s letter through focalization. The Biblical text is “spoken” to Jane by St. John in his own peculiar context; it is then reported by Jane as narrator to her own reader. As we will see, our reading of Jane’s reading of St. John’s reading of Revelation is more troubled – and more controlled – than our reading of another literary epitaph from 2 Samuel at the end of *Mill on the Floss*.

Although Jane will repeatedly define herself through her reading, she carries her childhood tendency for creative misreading with her into adulthood. It is this that enables her to re-read Rochester, rejecting Mrs. Fairfax’s simple sketch of his character as “a gentleman, a landed proprietor – nothing more” (121) and developing her own analysis that “there were excellent materials in him; though for the present they hung together somewhat spoiled and

²³ Spivak notes that the “concluding passage of *Jane Eyre* places St. John Rivers within the fold of *Pilgrim’s Progress*” (249).

tangled” (167).

David Copperfield’s Sympathetic Absorption

David Copperfield, an enthusiastic reader, is more easily absorbed into his reading than Jane Eyre. He has a “greedy relish” for the books left to him by his father, and he finds it “astonishing” that he “found time, in the midst of my porings and blunderings over heavier themes, to read those books as I did” (66). He engages in one-man amateur dramatics, playing all the heroes in turn, and casting his atrocious relatives in all the villainous roles. He concludes his catalog of reading with an intriguing claim: “The reader now understands, as well as I do, what I was when I came to that point of my youthful history to which I am now coming again” (67). David substitutes the description of a library catalog, albeit a private, patrimonial one, for a description of his own interiority. His assumption – and Dickens’ belief – seems to be that knowing what and how David has read and under what circumstances his reading took place is not merely analogous but equivalent to knowing David himself. Thus the reading subject is constituted by the contents of his shelves. David denies the possibility that he could be corrupted by his reading, claiming that the books “did me no harm; for whatever harm was in some of them was not there for me; *I* knew nothing of it” (66). As Ian Duncan observes, “the book can show the reader nothing that, already and potentially, he is not” (202); David is constituted by his reading and, solipsistically, can only truly read that which he already knows and is.

David Copperfield is perhaps less memorable as a reader than he is as an object of reading; one can speak of reading *David Copperfield* or of reading David Copperfield,²⁴ but it is less common to discuss David Copperfield reading. What we “read” of David is, first of all, his name.²⁵ Although he briefly attends a formal boarding school, his most important educational experiences are personal and private. He depicts himself as inheriting only two things from his father: his name, and a small library of books. What he receives, then, is entirely linguistic; but language specifically as it defines his role in the world, either through naming – establishing his heredity and station within society – or through textuality – providing narrative patterns into which the younger David can interpolate himself. David’s name is particularly interesting for critics due to its instability; epithets specific and general, proper and improper, masculine and feminine are applied to David over the course of the novel, some definitively, some speculatively. First there are the permutations of David’s actual given name: David, Davy, Master Copperfield, Mr. Copperfield, Mr. Copperfull, and Doady, to list a few. These indicate his growing status in the world and his class situation – from the young, impoverished child “David,” to the familiar friend of the Peggotys “Davy,” to the privileged upper-middle-class child “Master Copperfield,” to the writer Mr. Copperfield. They also include more than one “corruption,” such as Dora’s affectionate and inexplicably unattractive name for her husband, “Doady” (608), and the misnomer given him by his slovenly landlady Mrs. Crupp, “Mr. Copperfull,” which David speculates that she used “firstly, no doubt, because it was not my name” (406). Julia Mills will abbreviate him as “D.C.” in her journal, reminding us of the C.D. whom he reflects (567); Uriah Heep insolently continues to address him as “Master Copperfield”

²⁴ For example, David becomes legible when his schoolmaster forces him to wear a placard that proclaims “Take care of him. He bites” (90).

²⁵ See Joseph Bottum, “The Gentleman’s True Name: David Copperfield and the Philosophy of Naming,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 49.4 (Mar. 1995): 435-455; and Richard Lettis, “The Names of *David Copperfield*,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 31 (2002): 67-86.

and as “David” long after it is appropriate to do so, assuming a familiarity David wishes to eschew while also infantilizing him. Then there are the names David assumes at the behest of others – for his Aunt Betsey, he becomes “Trot,” short for “David Trotwood Copperfield,” a hybrid of her deceased brother and her nonexistent but still earnestly desired niece (227); for Steerforth, he becomes “Daisy,” a girlish and naive companion (443); and for the villainous Mr. Murdstone, David’s stepfather-to-be, he is euphemized as “Brooks of Sheffield” (35). Beyond the names are the epithets, most importantly “the hero of my own life,” a speculative label arguably left unresolved by the novel (13). The reader continually wonders when this polynomial protagonist will be resolved into the titular *David Copperfield*, and so the repeated re-naming becomes part of a teleological arc. Though David is able to transform his identity temporarily by answering to assumed or applied names, he is finally reduced, or returned, to his given, inherited name – “David Copperfield the Younger of Blunderstone Rookery,” as the oft-neglected subtitle reminds us – and presumably also to a given and inherited station. Third, David is characterized as a linguistic signifier, not as a signified – he is a series of symbols that stand in for identity, rather than a character in his own right. This observation simply reverses the terms in which critics usually discuss David’s reticence within the narrative, or his tendency to project his identity by developing characters around him – such as his displacement of his sexual attraction to Agnes onto Uriah Heep, or his attraction to Emily onto Steerforth.

David’s fantasies of displacement are shown first and perhaps most clearly in his childhood reading practices. As Ian Duncan has noted, the library of David Copperfield, Sr., which becomes the young David’s “bower of reading,” “represents . . . a radically individualist, psychologized patrimony, the material condition of which is estrangement and privation” (200). It is David’s ability to situate his own life within the texts he reads (practice, of course, for writing the text of his life), to find himself *and nothing but himself* within each canonical narrative, that introduces the great paradox of textual subject formation. David catalogs the books available to him – from authors like Fielding, Defoe, Smollet, Cervantes, and LeSage, and, as Jeremy Tambling suggests, probably also Swift and Sterne – and then describes their psychological function:

They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time . . . and did me no harm; for whatever harm was in some of them was not there for me; *I* knew nothing of it. [. . .] It is curious to me how I could ever have consoled myself under my small troubles (which were great troubles to me) by impersonating my favorite characters in them – as I did – and by putting Mr. and Miss Murdstone into all the bad ones – which I did too. (66)

David claims that he finds nothing in the books he reads except what he knows already; the libertinism and violence of some of the protagonists, he tells the reader, do not affect him. In one sense, David is a complete innocent, and therefore, as Ian Duncan argues, “the magic of virginity lies precisely in its sublime narcissism” (202); in another, he already possesses within himself the violent tendencies of Tom Jones and Roderick Random. Yet we must also account for the second part of David’s claim – that he found time to “impersonate” his favorite characters and to project their arch-nemeses onto his oppressive step-father and his step-father’s sister. Instead of acting out a social role, David re-interprets his social role through a dramatic overlay of which he alone is aware. Instead of conforming his life to a pre-existing narrative, David is supposing that his life was *always* such a narrative, and that any discrepancy between life and text is the fault of life. Thus it is simple for David to assert that he finds nothing in the books that he does not know already, for knowledge is textual before it is actual. Like *Jane Eyre*, David uses

the teleology of his reading to structure childish conflicts.

David concludes his description of his “bower of reading” with a scene of pathetic contrast: “the picture always rises in my mind, of a summer evening, the boys at play in the churchyard, and I sitting on my bed, reading as if for life” (67). There are markers of class and literary pride here; David is literally above the common children in the churchyard, embedding himself into the canon while the other boys merely play themselves into their graves. This scene also contrasts with the glimpse David gives us later of the fate of Blunderstone Rookery, now inhabited by “a poor lunatic gentleman” (an avatar for Mr. Dick, perhaps) who “was always sitting at my little window, looking out into the church-yard” (328). The phrase “reading as if for life” has become famous in contemporary popular culture; it is often adopted as an article or lecture title, and captures the imagination of critics and other readers alike. As Bharat Tandon has argued in *Jane Austen and the Morality of Conversation*, “David’s ‘as if’ decently senses the limits of the potential crossover” between fiction and reality (52). At the last moment, Dickens and David both shy away from asserting a true equivalence between text and context.

Like Jane Eyre’s nursemaid Bessie, David quickly transforms the novels he has been exposed to into tales he can recount to those around him. Transplanted to Mr. Creakle’s school, Salem House, David finds favor with the popular boy – not to say bully – Steerforth by becoming a boy-child version of Scheherazade. After David references Peregrine Pickle, Steerforth asks if he has the book. David explains that he doesn’t and describes his childhood reading practices, and then Steerforth proposes that David recount the stories one by one, at night before bed and in the morning before lessons, making “some regular Arabian nights of it” (103):

I felt extremely flattered by this arrangement, and we commenced carrying it into execution that very evening. What ravages I committed on my favourite authors in the course of my interpretation of them, I am not in a condition to say, and should be very unwilling to know; but I had a profound faith in them, and I had, to the best of my belief, a simple earnest manner of narrating what I did narrate; and these qualities went a long way.

The drawback was, that I was often sleepy at night, or out of spirits and indisposed to resume the story, and then it was rather hard work, and it must be done; for to disappoint or to displease Steerforth was of course out of the question. In the morning too, when I felt weary, and should have enjoyed another hour’s repose very much, it was a tiresome thing to be roused, like the Sultana Scheherazade, and forced into a long story before the getting-up bell rang; but Steerforth was resolute; and as he explained to me, in return, my sums and exercises, and anything in my tasks that was too hard for me, I was no loser by the transaction. Let me do myself justice, however. I was moved by no interested or selfish motive, nor was I moved by fear of him. I admired and loved him, and his approval was return enough. (103-4)

This sequence establishes David’s relationship to Steerforth in gendered, eroticized terms, classes David as a storyteller and foreshadows his later authorial career, and links David’s childhood reading to his success in later life. It also makes David into a plagiarist, and Steerforth into an addict; his thirst for narrative, like all his appetites, is rapacious and destructive, cutting into his own and David’s sleeping hours on both ends.²⁶ We also notice the fragility of David’s memory; he remembers enough of the details of the books to refer to them, but forgets and

²⁶ Steerforth’s hunger for narrative hints at his sexual hunger, and his need to keep David up late and rouse him early in order to be sated evokes a less innocent act than storytelling.

embroiders enough that he feels he must be committing “ravages” on his sources. Reading becomes, as David admits, “interpretation,” and retelling a story to make it your own is virtually indistinguishable from criticizing and assigning meaning to that story. Readers of the novel will think of this scene again when David retells and interprets another exciting romance of seduction, betrayal, and loss – the maturation and fall of “Little Em’ly.” Indeed, Steerforth’s role in that story seems over-determined by his interest in the kind of narratives David, as Scheherezade, tells in the bedroom at Salem House. If only David Copperfield, Senior had left a copy of *Pilgrim’s Progress* among his small library at Blunderstone Rookery, then perhaps David Copperfield, Junior would have told a very different story to Steerforth, and formed his character in a different way.

In the penultimate chapter of the novel, we are given another vision of David as a reader, this time reading a letter from that incorrigible correspondent Wilkins Micawber:

‘TO DAVID COPPERFIELD, ESQUIRE,
‘THE EMINENT AUTHOR.

‘My Dear Sir,

‘Years have elapsed, since I had an opportunity of ocularly perusing the lineaments, now familiar to the imaginations of a considerable portion of the civilized world.

‘But, my dear Sir, though estranged (by the force of circumstances over which I have had no control) from the personal society of the friend and companion of my youth, I have not been unmindful of his soaring flight. Nor have I been debarred,

“Though seas between us braid ha’ roared,”

(BURNS) from participating in the intellectual feasts he has spread before us.

‘I cannot, therefore, allow of the departure from this place of an individual whom we mutually respect and esteem, without, my dear Sir, taking this public opportunity of thanking you, on my own behalf, and, I may undertake to add, on that of the whole of the Inhabitants of Port Middlebay, for the gratification of which you are the ministering agent.

‘Go on, my dear Sir! You are not unknown here, you are not unappreciated. Though “remote”, we are neither “unfriended”, “melancholy”, nor (I may add) “slow”. Go on, my dear Sir, in your Eagle course! The inhabitants of Port Middlebay may at least aspire to watch it, with delight, with entertainment, with instruction!

‘Among the eyes elevated towards you from this portion of the globe, will ever be found, while it has light and life,

‘The

‘Eye

‘Appertaining to

‘WILKINS MICAWBER,

‘Magistrate.’

David’s attention is drawn to Micawber’s final letter – at least the final letter that he receives in the disclosed text of the novel – by Mr. Peggoty, who has borne it to him all the way from Australia.²⁷ But, unlike all Micawber’s previous letters to David, this is not a piece of private

²⁷ Ian Henderson has argued that this letter is the culmination of Micawber’s development as a great Australian writer: “Micawber’s qualities throughout the novel prefigure those of a ‘successful’ Antipodean author: he is a man

correspondence. Instead, knowing that Mr. Peggoty will visit David while in England, Micawber publishes an open letter to David in the fictional Australian newspaper the *Port Middlebay Times*. As with all open letters, Micawber's focuses on disclosing the author's opinion of the addressee to the reading public – not on making a private communicative act to the addressee. Apostrophizing David, Micawber actually addresses his readers in Australia, and his excessively laudatory tone begins to take on, for perhaps the first time in the novel, threatening overtones. Micawber assures David that neither he nor anyone else in the exiled emigrant community in Australia has forgotten David's role in the events of the past. Micawber assures David that he is being watched from afar. David, in turn, reads Micawber's letter as part of the newspaper, connecting it with a report of a "public dinner" held to honor Mr. Micawber and a variety of other letters and articles that bear Micawber's peculiar style. Indeed, the majority if not the whole of the newspaper seems to be a Micawber production – Micawber has finally found an outlet for his polyvocality in the miscellaneous medium of the newspaper. But Micawber is also setting himself up as David's rival; he recognizes David as an "eminent author," but does so while inhabiting a variety of writerly roles himself.

Quoting Robert Burns and Oliver Goldsmith, Micawber continues to claim a position of intellectual force, as he has done throughout the novel, by displaying his literary knowledge. Like all of his claims to great authorship, this one ultimately fails.²⁸ Unlike David, who successfully escapes his troubles by reading himself into adventure stories and fantasies, Micawber unsuccessfully attempts to surpass his problems by reading himself and his relationship to David into eighteenth-century poetry. Micawber portrays his friendship with David through the informal camaraderie of Burns' "Auld Lang Syne," already ubiquitous in 1850, unnecessarily drawing attention to the source of his quotation with a parenthetical citation. It is typical of Micawber to emphasize and explain his citations, though perhaps interesting that he names Burns and not Goldsmith. Micawber analogizes his own situation in Australia to that of Goldsmith's *Traveller* (1765). The latter reference hints that Micawber is not as jolly as he purports to be; in the lines that follow Micawber's quotation, the speaker tells us that "[e]ternal blessings crown my earliest friend" but that he is "not destin'd such delights to share" and that he can "find no spot of all the world my own" (11, 23, 29). When he writes that he and his fellow inhabitants of Port Middlebay can watch David's authorial success "with instruction," the lesson he implies they will learn is which kinds of writerly strategies succeed in bringing not only fame but also respect. David and Mr. Micawber are both successful writers, commercially speaking, but only David is both "familiar to the imaginations of a considerable portion of the civilized world" and "soaring" above the common man.²⁹ Even if we take Micawber to be hyperbolic in his praise, David's success surely eclipses his own.

At the close of the chapter, David's writing career takes a particularly morbid turn. At the request of Mr. Peggoty, David copies the "plain inscription" on Ham's gravestone. As David copies Ham's epitaph, he must, we presume, reflect on his metaphorical role as its writer. This

who can never reconcile where he fancies he deserves to be . . . with where he actually is, socially, financially, and, at last, artistically" (47). Henderson concentrates on the letter's engagement with eyes, vision, and the reading gaze. See Henderson, "Australian Letters in the London Eye," *Southerly* 67.1-2 (Spring – Summer 2007): 47-68.

²⁸ Laura Rotunno notes that in *David Copperfield* the "position of respected writer" is usually "reserved for the eponymous hero of the novel," but that the juxtaposition of Micawber's writing with David's "complicates the definition of the Victorian literary man" (415). See Rotunno, "The Long History of 'In Short': Mr. Micawber, Letter-Writers, and Literary Men," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 33 (2005): 415-433.

²⁹ See Mary Poovey, "The Man-of-Letters Hero *David Copperfield* and the Professional Writer," in *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989) 89-125.

text, which is not disclosed to the reader, closes the cycle of Mr. Peggoty's global circumnavigation and textual transmission. Just as Mr. Peggoty brought one text from Australia to England – a copy of the *Port Middlebay Times* – he brings another text back from England to Australia – a copy of the inscription on Ham's gravestone, along with “a tuft of grass from the grave, and a little earth” (878). Mr. Peggoty needs David to make a copy of the inscription because he did not choose it himself – Mr. Peggoty goes “to see a little tablet I had put up in the churchyard to the memory of Ham.” As usual, the Peggotys are only too eager to have David give them his own labels for them at secondhand. David re-writes the epitaph that he wrote for Ham. Whether it is a Bible verse, a consolatory phrase, a compliment, or merely a label, Dickens's reader is not to know. Micawber may turn a private letter into a public article, but David turns a public expression of mourning into a private “copy” destined for Emily's hand.

Dickens recognizes the possibility for containing and capping feeling through the use of a Biblical epitaph; he even gives us a scene in which David admits to having summarized Ham's life in this way by erecting a small gravestone with a “plain inscription.” We do not specifically learn that this inscription is Biblical, but given the Victorian conventions surrounding death and burial, it is highly likely that it is. Yet what interests Dickens, and David himself as the narrator of *David Copperfield*, is not that Ham's life is being contained and characterized through Biblical quotation and epitaph; it is the fact that David has chosen the quotation, that Mr. Peggoty wants to have a copy of it, and that David makes this copy. The reproduction and dissemination of Ham's epitaph is therefore more significant than its actual existence – just as the reproduction and dissemination of the stories David reads as a child and retells to his friends at Mr. Creakle's school is more important than the content of the stories themselves. Similarly, it is not the fortunes of Micawber that concern us throughout the novel; it is his constant epistolary narration of them. Once Micawber has been consigned to the colonies, it is not his success or failure that interests David, but his polyvocal reporting of it in the *Port Middlebury Times*. David notes that this Micawber-heavy paper contains a variety of articles and “Letters to the Editor,” all by Micawber, all describing and re-describing the same local events and global relationships. Telling and retelling supplant reading and writing in *David Copperfield*.

Maggie Tulliver's Excessive Sympathy

Maggie Tulliver does not read the classics, as Thomas Hughes's Tom Brown does, or a small stockpile of the cheap out-of-copyright greats of the recent past, as does David Copperfield. Neither the quick and intellectual Maggie nor her truculent brother Tom is nurtured by an apparently omniscient and omnibenevolent schoolmaster, as Tom Brown is; nor are they the inheritors of a small but carefully-selected library of romance and literary quality, as David Copperfield is. Instead, thanks to her father's tendency to judge authors by their names and books by their covers, Maggie reads allegory, satire, and sermon indiscriminately. The reading matter available to her is a collection of books that her father bought as a lot at an estate sale – books that another owner had rebound in matching covers, suggesting to the unsophisticated reader Mr. Tulliver that their moral outlook and suitability for children would be as consistent as their bindings. Asked to expound the meaning of an illustration in a text by her father's friend Mr. Riley, Maggie gives an only-too-detailed description of the medieval murder of a suspected witch:

Mr. Tulliver had listened to this exposition of Maggie's with petrifying wonder.

“Why, what book is it the wench has got hold on?” he burst out at last.

“‘The History of the Devil,’ by Daniel Defoe; not quite the right book for a little girl,” said Mr. Riley. “How came it among your books, Tulliver?”

Maggie looked hurt and discouraged, while her father said,

“Why, it’s one o’ the books I bought at Partridge’s sale. They was all bound alike – it’s a good binding, you see – and I thought they’d be all good books. There’s Jeremy Taylor’s ‘Holy Living and Dying’ among ’em; I read in it often of a Sunday” (Mr. Tulliver felt somehow a familiarity with that great writer because his name was Jeremy); “and there’s a lot more of ’em, sermons mostly, I think; but they’ve all got the same covers, and I thought they were all o’ one sample, as you may say. But it seems one mustn’t judge by the outside. This is a puzzlin’ world.” (62)

Mr. Tulliver’s confusion of the outside with the inside, the physical object with the metaphysical, and the presentation with the content is almost too readily accessible to deconstruction. He introduces superficial personal identification into the reading process, finding himself drawn to an author simply because they share the same first name. For Mr. Tulliver, a disparity of naming is almost as “puzzlin’” as the disjunct between binding and content – shouldn’t all Jeremys share some fundamental quality, just as they share a cognomen?

Underneath the humor surrounding Mr. Tulliver’s foolishness, the reader feels a real sympathy for Maggie, who has studied and learned by heart all the books her father bought indiscriminately. The ambiguous position of the adverb in that last sentence is intentional – the purchase was indiscriminate, and so is the reading. Although, unlike Alice Helmsby in Geraldine Jewsbury’s *The Half Sisters*, Maggie does “carefully con” her lessons, they are not lessons that should have been mastered so thoroughly, nor ought she to be so eager to recite them. Our earliest introduction to Maggie’s reading tendencies comes when Mr. Riley asks her to explicate an illustration from *The History of the Devil*:

O, I’ll tell you what that means. It’s a dreadful picture, isn’t it? But I can’t help looking at it. That old woman in the water’s a witch – they’ve put her in, to find out whether she’s a witch or no, and if she swims she’s a witch, and if she’s drowned – and killed, you know – she’s innocent, and not a witch, but only a poor silly old woman. But what good would it do her then, you know, when she was drowned? Only, I supposed she’d go to heaven, and God would make it up to her. (66-7)

Maggie thoroughly grasps this infamous example of Catch-22 misogyny: the mob establishes life-threatening ordeals for powerful women; those who cannot survive them are those who are most innocuous, while those who do survive only increase the mob’s fear and brutality. After her explanation, her father and Mr. Riley have a telling exchange:

Mr. Tulliver had listened to this exposition of Maggie’s with petrifying wonder.

“Why, what book is it the wench has got hold on?” he burst out, at last.

“‘The History of the Devil,’ by Daniel Defoe; not quite the right book for a little girl,” said Mr. Riley. (67)

Mr. Tulliver’s use of the term “wench” reinforces the not-so-subtle parallel between the “witch” of the vignette and the “wench” who reads about her. It is telling that Mr. Riley’s censoriousness surfaces after Maggie’s explication of the witch’s case. Certainly the two men are, to an extent, simply being protective of the little girl. Perhaps some of Mr. Riley’s chagrin is also related to

Defoe's tone and reputation; while it might be "appropriate," by Victorian standards of parenting, to expose Maggie to books about the gruesome deaths of martyrs or the sufferings of Christ, it is less appropriate to expose her to Defoe's use of wit to treat social violence. But surely Mr. Riley and Mr. Tulliver are most taken aback because Maggie has discovered the no-win situations surrounding misogyny at such an early age. Yet Maggie does not seem to understand the witch's case in abstract terms, as the reader is certainly meant to do by the end of the novel: If one Jeremy is like another, then to what degree is the "witch" in the illustration, who dies by drowning, like the "wench" who will meet her end in the same way many chapters later?

Like her predecessor Jane Eyre, Maggie Tulliver is preoccupied by the illustrations in the texts she reads. Partly, Eliot implies, this is a childish tendency to be attracted to illustrations, especially when the text itself may be too difficult for a young reader. Yet, as for Jane Eyre, reading the pictures seems to provide an opportunity for Maggie to perform more "creative" reading, more "reading into" the texts: "I know the reading in this book isn't pretty," she tells Mr. Riley of Defoe's *History of the Devil*, "but I like the pictures, and I make stories to the pictures out of my own head, you know" (63). While Jane uses her reading of illustrations in Bewick to redirect herself from one genre (naturalism) to another (fantasy), Maggie reads illustrations in order to expurgate the text for herself, making it appropriate for her age and station. David Copperfield claims of the books he reads that "whatever harm was in some of them was not there for me"; perhaps more realistically, Maggie is aware of the "harm" in Defoe, but able to read around it by taking control of the narrative, making "stories to the pictures" out of her own imagination. She is conscious of the text on several levels; she is aware not only of the raw violence in the text, but also of the belief of the adults that she knows that she should be protected from it, and of her own need for such protection.³⁰

Maggie's interest in texts will lead her father, after his accident, to conflate her with one. After falling from his horse on learning that Mr. Wakem now owns the mortgage on his land, Mr. Tulliver can only express his desire for two things: the letter from his own lawyer, Gore, which revealed this catastrophe, and Maggie herself:

When Maggie reached home that evening, in obedience to her father's call, he was no longer insensible. About an hour before, he had become conscious, and after vague, vacant looks around him, had muttered something about "a letter," which he presently repeated impatiently. At the instance of Mr. Turnbull, the medical man, Gore's letter was brought and laid on the bed, and the previous impatience seemed to be allayed. The stricken man lay for sometime with his eyes fixed on the letter, as if he were trying to knit up his thoughts by its help. But presently a new wave of memory seemed to have come and swept the other away; he turned his eyes from the letter to the door, and after looking uneasily, as if striving to see something his eyes were too dim for, he said, "The little wench." (228)

Both of Mr. Tulliver's desires in his injured state are easily explicable by means of the novel's plot. When Mr. Tulliver first receives the letter from Gore, he decides to read it while on horseback to prevent Mrs. Tulliver from reading it also; and he is very concerned to keep its

³⁰ See discussion of Maggie's interest in the Defoe and Bunyan illustrations in Emily Eells, "The Necessary Complement: Collaborative Reading and Writing in *The Mill on the Floss*," In *Collaboration in the Arts from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Silvia Bigliuzzi and Sharon Wood (Aldershot, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006): 33-50.

contents private. Asking after the letter, then, is a natural course of action if he is worried that it has fallen into the wrong hands – i.e. any hands but his own. Mr. Tulliver’s desire for Maggie is also reasonable at this juncture; we have already seen the special connection between Mr. Tulliver and his daughter, and wishing to have her near him for comfort at a time of crisis makes sense. And yet there is more in the design of this passage than a simple reinforcement of Mr. Tulliver’s two driving impulses – privacy in business, and care of/from Maggie. By asking first for the letter, and then for Maggie, Mr. Tulliver reenacts another of his continual drives – to bring together the incomprehensible and offensive legalities of his position with one of his children who is clever enough to understand and redress these difficulties. He asks, that is, for a text and a critic – an object of interpretation and an interpreter. Yet it is not the fulfillment he imagined, in which his son would manipulate laws and business principles in order to build up the Tulliver estate; instead, his daughter will sit by and understand – understand both his business transaction, and his true feelings. When Mr. Tulliver later asks her, as quietly as possible, if she got his letter, he means not only that she received the letter he sent asking her to come home from school, but that she has taken possession of the letter describing his indebtedness to Wakem (250). Maggie becomes a repository for Mr. Tulliver’s private texts, an archive that is never meant to be accessed.

The extent to which Maggie’s textual knowledge is not to be employed in the world she inhabits is reinforced by her interaction with Luke, the family’s hired laborer:

“I think you never read any book but the Bible, did you, Luke?”

“Nay, Miss, an’ not much o’ that,” said Luke, with great frankness. “I’m no reader, I aren’t.”

“But if I lent you one of my books, Luke? I’ve not got any *very* pretty books that would be easy for you to read; but there’s ‘Pug’s Tour of Europe,’ –that would tell you all about the different sorts of people in the world, and if you didn’t understand the reading, the pictures would help you; they show the looks and ways of the people, and what they do. There are the Dutchmen, very fat, and smoking, you know, and one sitting on a barrel.”

“Nay, Miss, I’n no opinion o’ Dutchmen. There ben’t much good i’ knowin’ about them.”

“But they’re our fellow-creatures, Luke; we ought to know about our fellow-creatures.” (80-1)

Maggie’s naïve attempt to convince Luke of the value of reading is forestalled by their different approaches to sympathy and intersubjectivity. Maggie positions reading as valuable because it provides knowledge of other cultures (and in the continuation of the passage quoted above, other natures – foreign flora and fauna). She believes that this knowledge is valuable for its own sake, and her infantine cultural relativism is shared, we feel, by Eliot’s narrator, and indeed by Eliot herself. We ought to learn about other peoples and other environments, Maggie implies, simply because they are there, and we cannot assume that we or our environment are more valuable just because they pertain to us personally. Luke, on the other hand, views reading as, at best, distracting, and, at worst, corrupting. While Eliot’s narrator encourages us to dismiss his xenophobia regarding the Dutch, we also realize that Luke has perceptively identified the problem of the novel – Maggie’s tendency to farsightedness. When it comes to academic knowledge, Maggie is, as her father maintains, “a ’cute wench.” But when it comes to more intimate knowledge of home, and family, and personal associates, Maggie’s reading abilities are not transferable skills, in the way that Jane Eyre’s are. Maggie’s inability to evaluate her brother

Tom with even the slightest modicum of impartiality is only one measure of this problem. Another is that she lacks an understanding of the genre toward which her life seems to be moving – to return to the previous example, although she expounds on the scene in *The History of the Devil* in which the witch must face a murder that proves her innocence or survival that condemns her to execution, she does not seem to realize the extent to which the shape of her own life will align her with this poor woman.

Maggie's final act, before finding herself in the midst of the flood that ends both the novel and her life, is reading Stephen Guest's letter. Like *Jane Eyre's*, Maggie's story ends with an opportunity for her (and the reader) to encounter a narrative of the life not lived and the marriage not made; but in Maggie's case, this is a moment of bitter agony, rather than of relief. The text of the letter and Maggie's reading process are elided by her strong emotional response to its content: "She did not *read* the letter: she heard him uttering it, and the voice shook her with its old strange power" (647-8). For Eliot, this is meant to be a red flag to the discriminating reader; Maggie's lack of awareness of the mediating process involved in reading suggests her own indiscriminate absorption in whatever narrative might come to hand. Maggie's sensitivity to the written word occurs in this instance in the context of Stephen's letter, but we might easily imagine a different scene in which she experiences the same transportive experience while reading something different. The most obvious textual candidate for Maggie to read at this moment would, of course, be the Bible, and we can easily imagine an alternative narrative in which, before the flood, Maggie is calmed and strengthened by religious faith rather than recalled to her emotional turmoil by the letter. Or, to propose another alternative, Maggie might pick up *The History of the Devil* again and meditate on the way that its symbolic shaping runs through her life. The point is that Maggie's elision of the mediation involved in reading primes her for an apotheosis – *any* apotheosis – that might come to hand. To borrow the terminology from an earlier novel, she is all sensibility and no sense. Eliot's genius is to show us Maggie's sensibility and sensitivity with all the power of comparison even though Maggie has no sister or foil to function as her "sense." It is only by considering the high Victorian novel holistically that we can see Maggie in contrast to the sensible *Jane Eyre*.

The text of Stephen's letter itself continues to drive a wedge between Maggie and the reader of *The Mill on the Floss*:

"They have written to me that you are to marry Kenn. As if I should believe that! Perhaps they have told you some such fables about me. Perhaps they tell you I have been 'travelling.' My body has been dragged about somewhere; but *I* have never travelled from the hideous place where you left me – where I started up from the stupor of helpless rage to find you gone.

"Maggie! whose pain can have been like mine? Whose injury is like mine?³¹ Who besides me has met that long look of love that has burnt itself into my soul, so that no other image can come there? Maggie, call me back to you! – call me back to life and goodness! I am banished from both now. I have no motives: I am indifferent to everything. Two months have only deepened the certainty that I can never care for life without you. Write me one word – say, 'Come!' In two days I should be with you. Maggie – have you forgotten what it was to be together? – to be within reach of a look – to be within hearing of each other's voice?" (647)

³¹ Stephen's complaint somewhat inappropriately echoes the rhetorical style and the content of Lamentations: "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the Lord hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger" (1:12 KJV).

Stephen begins by debunking the false narratives that have been told to him about Maggie. In order to do so, he admits their literal reality – he has been “travelling” in the sense that his physical form has moved from place to place – while denying their emotional or spiritual reality. He asserts, not simply a disjunction between feeling and behavior, but a complete divorce between appearance and reality, the external and the internal. Similarly, he rejects the narratives that have been told to him about Maggie, relying on his knowledge of her character rather than on the reports of gossips and busybodies. Fundamentally, Stephen claims his and Maggie’s right to write their own story. His assertion would be more cheering, however, if Maggie claimed this right with him; but she remains caught up in the narrative that has been generated for her. Unlike Jane Eyre, she does not narrate her own story; and unlike David Copperfield, she does not become the hero of her own life.

In the second quoted paragraph of the letter, Stephen appeals to Maggie’s feeling of immediacy – “have you forgotten what it was to be together? – to be within reach of a look – to be within hearing of each other’s voice?” Here he comes closest to conquering her feelings. Yet the reader cannot help comparing him with St. John Rivers. St. John writes to Jane from afar to confirm his religious enthusiasm; on his deathbed, his fanaticism increases, as does his solipsism. Jane reads *about* St. John, becoming an outside observer of his life story, while Maggie is continually solicited by Stephen to re-acknowledge their shared narrative. St. John pleads with Christ to come to him, while Stephen merely pleads with Maggie to ask him to come to her. It is Stephen’s hyperbolic claim that he is nothing without Maggie that seems most disturbing: “I have no motives. I am indifferent to everything.” This is more than a forlorn lover’s rhetoric; Stephen has compromised his own and Maggie’s identity through his careless employment of feeling. In the emotional tumult following her reading of Stephen’s letter, Maggie is finally able to gain a moment of limited omniscience: she realizes that “she should feel again what she had felt . . . when Philip’s letter had stirred all the fibres that bound her to the calmer past” (648). For an instant, at least, Maggie recognizes, not only that her judgment and even her identity have been swayed by reading, but that they might be swayed again, differently, by a different reading experience. It is neither mistake nor evasion on Eliot’s part that, at the moment of this realization, Maggie is swept away by a torrential flood; after recognizing the mutability of her consciousness with respect to the reading process, Maggie’s identity has been subverted and fragmented beyond recovery.

Mill on the Floss, despite its complexity, has, as many critics have noted, the simplest ending. The embedded text of the epitaph, “In their death they were not divided,” complements Maggie and Tom’s brick graves (though, intriguingly, it does not cover them) and completes – indeed curtains – the narrative. But oddly this (the epitaph) is a text without a clear reader – or at least with multiple readers who visit the grave at a variety of different moments. Eliot’s disembodied narrator describes several scenes in which the epitaph is read, but our own reading of the text alongside the narrator’s seems to occur at a different moment:

Near that brick grave there was a tomb erected, very soon after the flood, for two bodies that were found in close embrace; and it was visited at different moments by two men who both felt that their keenest joy and keenest sorrow were forever buried there.

One of them visited the tomb again with a sweet face beside him; but that was years after.

The other was always solitary. His great companionship was among the trees of the Red Deeps, where the buried joy seemed still to hover, like a revisiting

spirit.

The tomb bore the names of Tom and Maggie Tulliver, and below the names it was written,–

“In their death they were not divided.” (657)

Thus we witness Stephen and Lucy Guest visiting the tomb “years after” – presumably both “after” Maggie and Tom’s death and also “after” the moment of the scene which the narrator is describing. We also witness Philip Wakem visiting the tomb; the narrator hints that he is a frequent visitor, since we hear that he is “always solitary,” suggesting multiple visits. Yet the verb tense of the phrase “was always solitary” suggests that, though Philip’s visits are regular, we are not reading a scene that features one of them; we are now outside the regular progress of time in the narrative. We are left to read the epitaph on our own, without the focalization afforded by the presence of a character; Maggie’s reading methods have failed her and us, and Eliot’s narrator leaves us to read the epitaph on our own.

The epitaph itself is, of course, Biblical, a description of the friendship between Saul and Jonathan: “Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided: they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions” (2 Samuel 1:23 KJV). As at the conclusion of *Jane Eyre*, a Biblical text takes on a new resonance from its context. Both St. John’s use of Revelations and the Tulliver monument’s use of 2 Samuel are exemplify conventional Victorian uses of Biblical language passages to encapsulate the complex emotional resonance surrounding death. Yet both are also highly suggestive, challenging our preconceptions as readers by quoting out of context, creating associations between the antique and the contemporary, the sacred and the profane. Are we to assume, for example, that Maggie and Tom “were lovely and pleasant in their lives”? Clearly we are meant to recall that in life they *were* divided, and that it is only death which can bring them together – if only symbolically. And we cannot forget that, in many editions of the novel, this epitaph was also the *epigraph* of the book, appearing on the title page. What effects does this bookending of the novel by the phrase have on the reader of the text – besides, perhaps, spoiling the ending?

Conclusion

Although Jane, David, and Maggie are all capable readers, their skills lie in different areas – Jane in “reading” people around her, David in absorbing himself into his books, and Maggie in formulating exposition. Yet all three of them share a strange anti-Lockean capacity to resist their reading; they all miss aspects of the texts that they are reading and project their own imaginations onto it. That is, the reading child is more likely to read herself into books than to fill herself up with them – to write a new text, rather than to be written by one. In the *Bildungsroman*, the process of maturation for the reading child consists of learning how to balance reading the self onto the world with reading the world (or the text) back into the self. Jane Eyre must consume the narrative of Rochester’s previous life – but she must also learn to maintain her own identity and moral center in relation to that narrative. David Copperfield must learn to see the harm in Steerforth that he (supposedly) never saw in Tom Jones, though too late to help Emily or Ham. Maggie ought to follow the same pattern, learning to critique the narratives around her that she has internalized so enthusiastically, but instead she remains trapped by circumstance and catastrophe.

The reader of the *Bildungsroman*, too, must become better at what she does. At the end of *Jane Eyre*, the reader, like Jane, ends by considering what is likely to be St. John Rivers’s last

letter – the letter he writes while in India on his deathbed. In reading this epistle, Jane reviews the narrative into which she chose not to interpolate herself from the position of the one she did. Brontë’s final test of Jane and the reader is whether they now know how to read St. John – how much to sympathize with him and at what distance to keep his passion. Similarly, the second-to-last chapter of *David Copperfield* ends with Micawber’s letter from Australia. In this case, however, the letter does not function as a glimpse into a “narrative not taken” for the protagonist. Unlike Jane, David is not in a position to consider what his life would have been like if he had left England with his correspondent. Rather, David’s interactions with Micawber are finally made safer, though also duller, through textual mediation; no longer will Micawber keep “turning up” with the same regularity that he expects worldly opportunities to do so. The last glimpse that Dickens gives us is Micawber’s eye looking upward, evoking the recurring image of Agnes in David’s drawing room pointing upward toward Dora’s corpse. If David’s reading skills are sharp enough, he may finally “see the harm” that has been done both to and by Micawber. In contrast, Eliot closes *The Mill on the Floss*, first with an epistle, finally with an epitaph; her final test for the reader is the parsing of the possibilities that this text opens up and those it closes down.

At the heart of my examination of reading children in the *Bildungsroman* is the hypothesis that texts in this genre presuppose their readers to be children in relation to them and work to form these readers in a new way. Every reading experience is another segment of the reader’s own *Bildung*, as it might be for David, or Jane, or Maggie. Stories that feature children are therefore particularly significant for examining reader-text relations because they model for the reader one pattern of reading and education, though not necessarily the one we as readers are meant to adopt. *The Mill on the Floss* is a particular example of such a divergence; clearly Eliot does not intend for her reader to read with the indiscriminate affect of Maggie Tulliver. Thus we can map the relationship between reader and text (such as ourselves as readers and the novel *David Copperfield*) onto the relationship between protagonist and embedded text (such as the character David Copperfield and the book *Tom Jones*). These relationships are additionally fraught because of the conflation and complication between the protagonist and the text named for him – the slippage between *David Copperfield* and David Copperfield. Thus we have a series of relationships that pertain to us as critics and readers reading eponymous novels about children whose process of development begins with reading.

There is a striking disparity between those nineteenth-century *Bildungsromane* that begin with child protagonists and those that begin with adolescents or young adults. It is the difference between *The Mill on the Floss*, which dwells on the youthful experience of Maggie and Tom Tulliver, and *Daniel Deronda*, which gives hardly any attention to the childhood years of Gwendolen Harleth or Daniel himself³² – and which, tellingly, Franco Moretti takes as a

³² Even in the scene from Daniel’s childhood that the reader is asked to “imagine,” in which he receives the first hints that Sir Hugo Mallinger is his father rather than his uncle, he is already an adolescent, “a boy of thirteen” (164). The childhoods of the novel’s heroines are more developed in the narrative. A sketch of Gwendolen Harleth’s childhood appears briefly to establish her dominating personality and sense of feeling “ready to manage her own destiny,” yet she seems trapped, not only by the role she must play on the marriage market, but in characters from children’s stories; she is like “the princess in exile” and “the young lady who professed to like potted sprats” (40, 41, 46). The latter is an allusion to Amelia Opie’s “A Tale of Potted Sprats” in *Illustrations of Lying* (1824). Mirah, despite being introduced as an adult, is continually referred to as a child: she is “like a tired child,” a “childlike creature,” and a “poor child” (194, 200). Mirah’s childishness is perhaps one of the reasons Daniel introduces her into the child-centered Meyrick household; it also continually draws attention to the theatrical commodification of her childhood, performing on stage as early as age nine (213). Her childhood is both persistent – she needs “shelter

representative case of the English novel of growth and development. It is the difference between *Jane Eyre*, in which a full third of the novel is given over to Jane's childhood passions, and *Villette*, in which Lucy Snowe's childhood is appropriately blank and Polly Home's bizarre mixture of insipidity and precocity must substitute for it. This difference – between the novel of growth that begins with a child and the one that begins with a young adult – consists partly of passion; the intense emotional complexity of young Maggie Tulliver and Jane Eyre is rawer than the sensitive depths of Daniel Deronda or the icy repression of Lucy Snowe. It is also an identificatory difference; we get to know Daniel, even as he gets to know himself, as his racial and religious identity develops, and we try to become acquainted with the self-effacing Lucy, but we lose ourselves in the unmoderated emotion of Jane, furious with her cousin John Reed, and the frenetic passion of Maggie, driving nails into the head of her doll in a frustrated childish rage. As Sally Shuttleworth has argued, “The sense of powerlessness, and of fierce injustice, experienced by Jane Eyre or Maggie Tulliver . . . still resonate with us today” (2). Moretti argues that those English *Bildungsromane* which focus on and can be read by children follow the simple ethical logic of the fairy tale; although we have seen numerous ways in which this logic is complicated, particularly in *The Mill on the Floss*, Moretti's claim helps us to understand our response to the “misunderstandings and persecutions” that heroes like David Copperfield, Jane Eyre, and Maggie Tulliver endure. Child protagonists, lacking agency, evoke a potentially more intense and uncomplicated emotional response from readers than young adult protagonists, who are faced with an overwhelming plethora of choices and a developing sense of their own agency.³³

Although Eliot and Charlotte Brontë experiment with initiating the *Bildungsroman* with protagonists of different ages, Dickens, intriguingly, almost always gives us at least one scene from the main character's childhood, not only in his classic *Bildungsromane* *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, but in many of his novels, whatever their type. We see the child Esther Summerson imparting confidences to her doll in the first monthly part of *Bleak House*; we witness young Florence Dombey playing with her baby brother; and we linger in the childhoods of *Oliver Twist* and *Arthur Clennam*. Even Ebenezer Scrooge is humanized when we see him as a “solitary child, neglected by his friends” (55). Dickens's fascination with beginnings seems to move earlier and earlier, reaching back past childhood to infancy and even, in the case of *David Copperfield*, to the antenatal state (an allusion, no doubt, to *Tristram Shandy*). The moment at which David becomes David, and also the focus of the narrative, fascinates Dickens. He will continually propose moments at which the novel could have adopted a different protagonist, or at which it could become double by giving David a sister-lover, in the way that *The Mill on the Floss* holds Maggie and Tom Tulliver together in tension as a protagonist pair. There is the phantom girl-baby to which Clara Copperfield does not give birth, Betsey Trotwood Copperfield; there is “Little Em'ly,” David's childhood companion, first crush, almost-sister and almost-lover; there is Dora, the “child-wife,” to whom David does yoke himself and who must be excised by the narrative. The novel makes constant, and eventually incestuous, attempts to duplicate David with a female twin, attempts that Dickens curtails almost violently. He seems aware that to double the *Bildung* would be to ensure its failure – as the doubleness of *Mill on the Floss* requires a degree of reconciliation and symbiosis between brother and sister that can only

and protection in the fullest sense” (207) – and attenuated – “I was thirteen and I seemed to myself quite old – I knew so much, and yet so little. I think other children cannot feel as I did” (215).

³³ On the particular powerlessness of children in Dickens, see Amberly Malkovich, *Charles Dickens and the Victorian Child: Romanticizing and Socializing the Imperfect Child* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

be found in death and apocalypse.

The reading practices of the young Jane Eyre, David Copperfield, and Maggie Tulliver represent realistic, or at least plausible, depictions of the literary ventures of nineteenth-century middle-class children. We know this partly because of the autobiographical elements in each of the novels. As Jerome Buckley points out, Maggie's reading of Defoe's *History of the Devil*, to take just one example, is derived from the real-life experience of Marian Evans (96). John Forster, in his *Life of Dickens*, reveals that the passage about David Copperfield "reading as if for life" is "literally true": "Every word of this personal recollection had been written down as fact, some years before it found its way into *David Copperfield*; the only change in the fiction being his omission of the name of a cheap series of novelists then in the course of publication" (qtd. in Tambling, 883-4). Likewise, Jane Eyre's exploration of *The History of British Birds* is based on Charlotte Brontë's own perusal in childhood; she and her siblings practiced their sketching by copying Bewick's engravings. Beyond this small circle of authors, other Victorians record their reminiscences about childhood reading in their autobiographies; as we shall see in a subsequent chapter, John Stuart Mill and John Ruskin in particular recall reading many different kinds of texts in the libraries of their fathers. But these incidents are not, or not merely, the unusual behavior of a few childhood geniuses who became celebrated Victorian authors. As historians of childhood such as Hugh Cunningham and Harry Hendrick have described, "reading became one of the most popular forms of leisure [for children] during the late Victorian years" (Hendrick 86).

What is more difficult to determine is which books were in the hands of this new market of child readers in the early- to mid-Victorian period. The explosion of printed children's literature, periodicals, and "penny dreadfuls" in this era certainly supports the view that many children, of increasingly lower social class, were reading texts specifically written with them in mind as an audience. But these developments were most prominent, as Hendrick's comment above suggests, in the latter half of the century – the years after the publication of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and the passage of the Elementary Education Act (1870), which came to be known as the "first Golden Age" of children's literature. Although the English-language publishing market for children had existed since at least John Newbery's *Little Pretty Pocket-Book* in 1744, a fair number of children – if the main characters in our primary texts here are any indication – were also or instead reading "adult" literature, the novels, histories, travelogues, and books of theology that their parents kept on hand. David characterizes the library that he inherits from his father as a selection of the inexpensive, out-of-copyright novels of a bygone era; like his literary predecessor Edward Waverley, he "read, and stored in a memory of uncommon tenacity, much curious, though ill-arranged and miscellaneous information" and suffers to an extent from "the dissipation of mind incidental to such a desultory course of reading" (48, 49-50). In fact, it seems likely that the increase in publishing children's literature was influenced by the greater number of literate children and the concern that they would read the wrong texts. Even a seemingly innocuous set of handsomely-bound religious books that an upright parent like Mr. Tulliver might buy to stock his shelves could turn out to have some radical Defoe hiding in their ranks; David Copperfield's claim that his child self misses the sexual overtones in the rakish novels he reads belies a bourgeois concern that he might understand them (and the avid listening of Steerforth and the other boys at Mr. Creakle's school suggests that he did).

It seems likely, then, that Jane, David, and Maggie – and, behind them, Charlotte, Charles, and Marian – grow up in households where children were taught to read and encouraged or allowed to do so, but where there was no sense that it was necessary to spend money on

buying special books geared toward child readers. In the early- to mid-nineteenth century, children learn to read in order to undergo schooling and to solidify their middle-class status; the other uses they might make of this skill for entertainment and subject-formation are hardly anticipated, neither cultivated nor forbidden. In subsequent decades, more concern will be devoted to considering the age-appropriateness of texts; but luckily for our authors, and intriguingly for their protagonists, these concerns seem to have influenced the book-buying patterns of many parents in the mid-century only sporadically.

Jane Eyre, David Copperfield, and Maggie Tulliver are children reading, but they overwhelmingly do not read about children – they have to identify with adult protagonists. There is no barrier of narrative representation that separates them from adult experience. They are allowed to associate their own passions, desires, frustrations, and emotional depths with the greatest tragedies, the raciest adventure stories, and the driest nonfiction that the libraries of their families and schools have to offer. The effect is twofold: they make humorous misidentifications of the complexity of their own emotional lives (as when Jane compares John Reed to Nero), but they are also free of the infantilization created by texts that purport to represent the depths of the child mind. The flowering of the literature of child development that Sally Shuttleworth has identified in the period from the 1840s to the 1860s is the direct result of a generation of authors who understand childhood reading as the process by which children come to perceive their mental life as fundamentally analogous to that of the adults around them; and these authors propose, by forcing adult readers of the *Bildungsroman* to identify with these children, to reexamine their own claims on adult subjectivity. Is Maggie's reading of Defoe perhaps better than Mr. Riley's? Is our reading of Bewick any better than Jane's? These are questions that the novels press us to feel we cannot and should not be able to answer – because the novels resist a hierarchical relationship between the child and the adult mind.

Why do *David Copperfield*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Mill on the Floss*, arguably three of the greatest novels of the mid-Victorian period, begin with children? Because, for the nineteenth century, the figure of the child stands at the crux of social and intellectual progress. Children are at the center of the Enlightenment's educational discourse; they are Romanticism's symbol of sublime receptivity; they are a significant part of Victorian industry's laboring underclass. They are the objects of fantasy, both literary and cultural. Over the course of the nineteenth century, their intellectual and emotional depths gradually come to be fully appreciated by psychiatric and psychological discourse. They are in need of protection, from long hours of work and terrible conditions, from over-sexualization, from corruption, from ignorance, from deprivation. Yet they are also what the Victorians seek to be: curious, whimsical, supposedly pure, able to immerse themselves in experience with a pure autotelic joy. Childhood, as the Victorians imagine it to symbolize in Romanticism, must be sheltered, in order that it may be glorious. The protected experience of the middle-class child in the nursery and schoolroom must be extended to cover the neglected, abused, too-early-aged working-class child. Children who are reading, like Jane, or David, or Maggie, are in some way removed from the abusive spheres suffered by many of their less fortunate counterparts. If we can read about children who are reading, we can be sure to find that most palatable of archetypes, the Wordsworthian child, who will lead us back to the "clouds of glory" from which we come, rather than a Blakean child, who will reveal that this heavenly fantasy is still "lock'd up in coffins of black."

Chapter 3

Reading Curiosity: Natural History in the Victorian Child Fantasy Novel

[H]e was treated more or less as an equal by his parents, who sensibly thought it a very fair division of labour that they should supply the practical knowledge, and he the book-learning. They knew that book-learning often came in useful at a pinch, in spite of what their neighbours said. What the Boy chiefly dabbled in was natural history and fairy tales, and he just took them as they came, in a sandwich sort of way, without making any distinctions; and really his course of reading strikes one as rather sensible.

– Kenneth Grahame, “The Reluctant Dragon”

Introduction

British fantasy novels for children and young adults famously emerged in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Authors such as Charles Kingsley, Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald, Jean Ingelow, Kenneth Grahame, and Edith Nesbit fused fairy tale and folktale motifs with the sustained narrative of the novel and established a new subgenre of literature for children that was more entertaining than didactic, more imaginative than prescriptive. When the first examples of these Victorian child fantasy novels appeared in the 1860s,¹ children had already been reading a variety of literary fantasies, including both redacted and unexpurgated versions of many popular novels, for over a century. Many middle- and upper-class children in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries read whatever was available in the libraries of their parents, schools, and acquaintances, co-opting works intended for adult readers.² Works shared by both parents and children frequently included the Bible, chapbook editions of romances and fairy tales, popular novels, ballads, religious poetry, and didactic nonfiction.³ In addition to reading works written for adults, children were also exposed to versions of adult stories repackaged specifically for them. Savvy publishers identified works with fantastic or adventurous elements, such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver’s Travels*, as especially appealing to child readers, producing edited, simplified, and illustrated editions marketed to the young or to their parents.⁴ Along with

¹ Kingsley’s *Water-Babies* was serialized from 1862-3; Carroll’s first *Alice* book appeared in 1865. Precursors to these fully-developed child fantasy novels include Ruskin’s fairy tale *The King of the Golden River* (1841), Thackeray’s *The Rose and the Ring* (1855), and the publication of English-language versions of German fairy tales in the 1820s and H. C. Andersen’s works in the 1840s. See Michael Patrick Hearn, Introduction to *The Victorian Fairy Tale Book* (New York: Pantheon, 1988): xv-xxvii. On the tradition of children’s fantasy in the nineteenth century, see U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *Ventures into Childland: Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998).

² As M. O. Grenby notes, “a majority of young people probably never encountered the ‘new’ children’s literature, even by the nineteenth century. . . . [O]ften children of all classes continued to rely for entertainment on material designed primarily for adults” (286). See Grenby, *The Child Reader, 1700-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011).

³ See Grenby, 93-128.

⁴ On the adaptation and retelling of *Robinson Crusoe* for child readers, see Anne Lundin, “Robinson Crusoe and Children’s Literature,” in *Approaches to Teaching Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Maximillian E. Novak and Carl Fisher (New York: Modern Language Association, 2005) 198-206, and Andrew O’Malley, *Children’s Literature, Popular Culture, and Robinson Crusoe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). On editions of *Gulliver’s Travels* for children, see Haifeng Hui, “The Changing Adaptation Strategies of Children’s Literature: Two Centuries of

the adoption of adult books by children, the eighteenth century also saw the beginning of a tradition of didactic literature produced for child readers, primarily by women.⁵ Authors such as Anna Letitia Barbauld, Maria Edgeworth, Charlotte Smith and Sarah Trimmer composed fables and fictions intended to foster children's moral development, while others, including Priscilla Wakefield, wrote instructional nonfiction describing the natural world and contemporary scientific developments.

In the mid-nineteenth century, a new form of children's literature gained prominence: children's fantasy. Although imaginative literature in English for child readers was not new in the nineteenth century, it greatly increased in popularity and developed in sophistication.⁶ Fantasies for children included not only original and retold fairy tales, such as Dinah Mulock Craik's *The Fairy Book* (1863), but also fantasy novels with child protagonists, such as Lewis Carroll's famous *Alice* books (1865, 1871).⁷ Literary critics have generally seen the appearance of British children's fantasies by male authors in the mid-nineteenth century as a reaction against and turn away from the didactic children's literature by women that had dominated the market. U. C. Knoepfelmacher, for example, has argued that the authors of mid-nineteenth century child fantasies, Ruskin, Kingsley, Carroll, and Thackeray, drew more on the Romantic idealization of childhood by Blake and Wordsworth than on the tradition of didactic children's books.⁸ However, this construction of literary history overlooks many of the direct thematic, generic, and structural connections between late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century didactic literature for children and mid-nineteenth century children's fantasies. To understand the ways in which mid-century child fantasists imagine their youthful protagonists and readers, we must interrogate not only the legacy of Romantic childhood, but also the literary consequences of didactic fiction and instructional nonfiction. Victorian child fantasies owe as much to children's nonfiction and natural history as they do to Romantic poetry.

In the last two chapters, we have seen the gradual introduction of educational motifs and a preoccupation with childhood into British fiction, particularly in the Romantic novel and the Victorian *Bildungsroman*. The works of Edgeworth and Scott unite Lockean educational discourse and Rousseauian fictional strategies, while those of Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens,

Children's Editions of Gulliver's Travels," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 17.2 (Fall 2011): 245-262, and Ma Pilar González Vera, "Gulliver's Travels: The World of Adaptations" in *Crossing Textual Boundaries in International Children's Literature*, ed. Lance Weldy (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars, 2011): 25-44.

⁵ See Bette P. Goldstone, *Lessons to Be Learned: A Study of Eighteenth-Century English Didactic Children's Literature* (New York: Lang, 1984).

⁶ In his genealogy of English-language children's literature, M. O. Grenby notes early examples going back as far as the late fifteenth century. See Grenby, Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*, 4.

⁷ *Water-Babies* and the first *Alice* book, which appeared in the mid-1860s, are the earliest examples of the fully-developed "child fantasy novel," as I term it here, though, as discussed above, they are not completely unprecedented. In addition to the works of Carroll and Kingsley, other mid-nineteenth century British child fantasies and adventure stories include Jean Ingelow's *Mopsa the Fairy* (1869), George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), and *The Princess and Curdie* (1883), and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1884). The works of E. Nesbit, J. M. Barrie, Rudyard Kipling, and Kenneth Grahame at the turn of the century are sometimes considered an extension of this tradition, and sometimes classified as a second "golden age" of children's literature. A complete discussion of the relationship between nineteenth-century American and British children's literature is beyond the scope of this chapter; however, it is notable that, although American children's literature also "flowers" in the mid-nineteenth century, with the appearance of works by Alcott, Twain, Horatio Alger, and Susan Coolidge, it tends to be realistic rather than fantastical. See also n. 10 below.

⁸ See Knoepfelmacher, *Ventures into Childland: Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998): xi-xvii.

and George Eliot explore how children read and how to read children as fictional characters. All of these novels, however, were directed at adult readers; though they would certainly have been incorporated into the heterogeneous reading of nineteenth-century children who perused whatever came to hand, they took the reading child as a subject, and not an audience. The authors of child fantasies, particularly Charles Kingsley and Lewis Carroll, did both: children are the subjects (in two senses) of their works and the audience for those works. As Kingsley and Carroll depict the influence of reading on their child protagonists, they also attempt to influence their child readers. As we see Carroll's Alice mis-remembering and mis-reciting didactic children's poetry, and Kingsley's Tom learning his own lesson by reading the story of the "doasyoulikes," we are also aware that the authors of *Alice* and *Water-Babies* are anxious to direct child readers' responses to their works. Kingsley encourages his child reader to learn moral lessons from *Water-Babies*, just as Tom learns from a fable, but complicates didacticism by conveying it through a heterogeneous, difficult text with a sardonic tone. Carroll, by contrast, undermines didacticism, depicting Alice unconsciously rewriting her lessons as playful nonsense, and presenting his reader with equally facetious fantasies that resist allegorical interpretation. The reading children of these fantasy novels – both the depicted protagonists and the imagined readers – are nonlinear, creative, intelligent, and amoral.

The refashioning of didacticism that takes place in British children's fantasies contrasts with the legacy of informational and instructional literature that paved the way for these fantasies. Critics frequently overlook the ways that both *Water-Babies* and the *Alice* books repeatedly associate child fantasy with natural history. Natural history books, including simple picture books of animals, books describing walks and rambles through woods and along the seashore, gift books of nature fables, and field guides, represented one of the largest publishing sectors for child readers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁹ The subject matter of *Water-Babies* includes life on the riverbank and in the ocean as well as contemporary whispers of a developing evolutionary theory. Carroll's Alice, too, has adventures that, while they are structured by highly organized games of cards and chess, nevertheless consist of rambles through woods, fields, and gardens. Half a century later, Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) will echo many of the themes of *Water-Babies* in a conservative and comic mode. Natural history and the fairy tale are explicitly comingled in Grahame's *fin-de-siècle* fairy tale "The Reluctant Dragon," which features a boy hero who reads indiscriminately among the two genres "in a sandwichy sort of way, without making any distinctions" (327). The Boy's childish intercalation of fantasy and science recalls the "desultory reading" of Edward Waverley, mixing romance and history. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, authors like Kingsley, Carroll, and Grahame expect and encourage children to read heterogeneously, and to remake the books they encounter according to their own imaginative whims, much as Jane Eyre does with the eclectic selection of books available to her.

This chapter considers child readers of nineteenth-century fantasy novels and the child protagonists of those novels as they read both actual books and the figurative "book of nature" around them. The Victorian fantasy novel encourages its child reader to misread creatively by presenting examples of productive misreading by the child protagonists. At the same time, the child's ability to understand normative readings of both texts and situations is grudgingly upheld as an important educational goal. Nineteenth-century children's fantasy bears a complex relationship to didacticism, sometimes undercutting instructional goals by lauding the child's

⁹ The first such work is of course Charlotte Smith's *Rural Walks* (1795), which inspired many imitators and supplied many plagiarists.

facility at “reading into” books, while at other times teaching the importance of receptive reading. In *Water-Babies* and *Alice*, we witness authors simultaneously writing to children and imagining (or recalling) the ways in which children tend to misread the works directed toward them. Misreading is depicted as normal and natural for children, and Carroll practically recommends it to his readers. At the same time, both authors imagine the child readers of their texts as needing an education in language and in life. Carroll and Kingsley use puns, satire, and humorous associations to critique Victorian society, and assume that their child readers will either be intelligent enough to decode their allusions, or that, like David Copperfield, they will find no harm in references they do not understand.

Eighteenth-century children’s books of natural history significantly influence the British child fantasy novel as it emerges in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰ Educational philosophers such as Isaac Watts and Maria Edgeworth insisted on the importance of natural history as a subject for child readers, and writers and publishers of children’s literature from the 1770s onward understood scientific advances and the natural world as especially relevant and appropriate topics for children’s literature. Two of the most influential and enduring books of children’s natural history, Sarah Trimmer’s *Easy Introduction to the Knowledge of Nature* (1780) and Charlotte Smith’s *Rural Walks* (1795), demonstrate that the literature of naturalistic education functions to create adult-child discourse communities and to link scientific progress to geographic progress. In other words, because natural education is frequently presented as experiential and itinerant, it lends itself to adaptation in adventure stories. Various manifestations of the magnifying lens and popular scientific discourse surrounding magnification moderate both the Victorian perspective on childhood and the narrative uses to which the child’s perspective may be put.

Natural history also provides a taxonomic framework for the child’s juvenile body and mind,¹¹ and we repeatedly see children put under literal and figurative lenses by the narratives in which they appear. While these narratives celebrate the creative misreading that child characters perform, they also imply that children should be read through the logic of the lens. Characters like Alice and Tom are particularly notable for regularly changing in size, shape, and possibly even nature, shrinking and growing as they morph into new creatures with unknown potential – gross exaggerations of normal childhood development. They are also regularly seen through and in relation to literal lenses, whether of microscopes, telescopes, field glasses, or spectacles – all playful attempts to bring the child, who is out of scale with adults both physically and mentally, into focus through narrative manipulation. Contrasting the size and scale of the child’s experience with the technology of the magnifying lens, these authors develop a narrative strategy that I call “diminutive omniscience” – an expansive narrative viewpoint catalyzed by experiencing the world in miniature.¹² Thus, as *Alice* and *Water-Babies* ask us to consider the

¹⁰ In this chapter, I confine myself to discussions of British texts, largely because the child fantasy novel emerged later and less forcefully in American literature; cf. John Rowe Townsend’s comment that “In English-language children’s literature, fantasy has tended to be a British specialty; newer countries have gone in more for stories of contemporary life” (64).

¹¹ Sally Shuttleworth has demonstrated that “[f]ollowing the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) there were marked shifts in constructions of childhood as forms of evolutionary psychology and psychiatry began to emerge. The long-standing popular notion that the child is like an animal or savage was given apparent scientific validation in theories of recapitulation, in which the child was seen to mirror in its early years ancestral forms of the species, both human and animal” (4). See Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840-1900* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010).

¹² Audrey Jaffe has argued that omniscience is “a fantasy: of unlimited knowledge and mobility; of transcending the boundaries imposed by physical being and by an ideology of unitary identity” that “dominates nineteenth-century narrative . . . because it expresses both structurally and thematically tensions present within Victorian culture”

potential of the child's tendency to misread creatively, they also suggest that we can read children increasingly accurately through the language and technology, especially the optical technology, of contemporary natural history. Alice's and Tom's imaginative methods for "reading into" the world are counterpoised by narratorial suggestions that we should attempt to read, or see, children as they really are. Accuracy is therefore both productive (of psychological insight into the child mind) and destructive (of the child's imaginative misreading). As the tradition of the child fantasy novel develops over the latter half of the nineteenth century, authors such as George Macdonald and Edith Nesbit will continue to negotiate the relationship between the realistic depiction of children as unpredictable agents of mischief and the use of child characters as exemplary instructional devices.

The contemporary rise of amateur naturalism illuminates the paradox of physical reduction and figurative expansion in Victorian children's fantasy. Just as it was becoming popular to approximate an understanding of new scientific developments by examining the minute details of natural "curiosities" under the lens of the microscope, fantasy writers sought to approximate an understanding of new social developments by taking on the miniaturized perspective of the "curious" narrated child. Charles Kingsley and Lewis Carroll both explicitly connect the magnifying lens and the child's perspective (or the reader's perspective on the child): in *Wonderland*, Carroll's Alice wishes she could fold up like a pocket telescope, and in *Looking-Glass* she is studied through a microscope, telescope, and opera glasses; Kingsley's Tom sees objects as one hundred times their "regular" size, which Kingsley explicitly compares to the perspective afforded by the microscope. Six years after Carroll's first *Alice* book, George Eliot in *Middlemarch* would compare the narrative project of the novelist to the examination of a water droplet under a microscope lens¹³; in the same way, Victorian fantasists fixate on the child partially in order to bring a "stronger lens" to problems of the human condition.

Moderating Curiosity

Natural history books for children emerged at the earliest stages of children's publishing, concurrently with storybooks and redacted editions of popular adventure stories such as *Robinson Crusoe*. Nineteenth-century examples include Edward Langley's *History of the Beasts* (c. 1805), Priscilla Wakefield's *Domestic Recreation* (1805), and Mrs. Sherwood's *The Story Book of Wonders* (1849). The belief that animals and nature are an appropriate subject for children, the desire to educate children about current scientific advances, and the sense that nature provides religious and moral lessons all combined to make natural history an appealing topic for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors writing for child readers. Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth confirmed and reinforced this appeal, writing in *Practical Education* (1798) that:

(Introduction, para. 9). See Jaffe, *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991). In this sense, my term "diminutive omniscience" refers to the narrative generativity of the troubled boundaries between adult and child experience in nineteenth-century Britain.

¹³ "Even with a microscope directed on a water-drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom. In this way, metaphorically speaking, a strong lens applied to Mrs. Cadwallader's match-making will show a play of minute causes producing what may be called thought and speech vortices to bring her the sort of food she needed" (53-54).

The history of realities, written in an entertaining manner, appears not only better suited to the purposes of education, but also more agreeable to young people than improbable fictions. We have seen the reasons why it is dangerous to pamper the taste early with mere books of entertainment; to voyages and travels, we have made some objections. Natural history, is a study particularly suited to children: it cultivates their talents for observation, applies to objects within their reach, and to objects which are every day interesting to them. The histories of the bee, the ant, the caterpillar, the butterfly, the silk-worm, are the first things that please the taste of children, and these are the histories of realities. (Vol. 1, Ch. 10)¹⁴

The Edgeworths, taking their cue from Locke's dual emphasis on instruction and amusement, tend to argue both that natural history is "suited" to child readers and that it will "please" them and pique their interest. Most importantly, it "cultivates their talents for observation," provoking them to take notice of natural detail and phenomena. A well-educated child, in the Edgeworthian formulation, is not only one who has mastered content, but who can "read" the world around him.

Sarah Trimmer cites a similar passage from Isaac Watts' *Discourse on the Education of Children and Youth* (1754) in her preface to *An Easy Introduction to the Knowledge of Nature*: Almost every thing is new to children, and novelty will entice them onwards to new acquirements: Shew them the Birds, the Beasts, the Fishes, the Insects, Trees, Fruit, Herbs, and all the several parts and properties of the vegetable and Animal World. Teach them to observe the various occurrences of Nature and Providence, the Sun, Moon, and Stars, the Day and Night, Summer and Winter, the Clouds and the Sky, the Hail, Snow, and Ice, Winds, Fire, Water, Earth, Air, Fields, Wood, Mountains, Rivers, &c. Teach them that the Great God made all these, and that his Providence governs them. (16-17, qtd. in Trimmer vi-vii)¹⁵

Like the Edgeworths, Watts argues for the use of natural history to education children, but reasons slightly further. He speculates that natural history interests children – perhaps more than it interests adults – because they find the simple realities of nature and the animal kingdom novel and surprising. Their wonder can be transformed, not to an empirical power of observation, but to religious awe at the "Grand Design" around them. Nature here is the "book of Nature," a complement to scripture in its revelation of divine teleology.

The books written in response to the adjurations of Locke, Watts, and the Edgeworths were highly varied. Many natural history books for children from the eighteenth and nineteenth century are simply field guides, encyclopedias, or illustrated catalogs of animals and (more rarely) plants directed at young readers; others are contemporary fables in the manner of Aesop, using nature to moralize and instruct. Aside from the field guides and the "parables from nature" (to borrow the title of Mrs. Alfred Gatty's 1855 work), a particularly interesting subset of natural history books for children are fictionalized dialogues. The child's book of natural history typically presents an adult and one or more children exploring the natural world together, using

¹⁴ This was a passage that did not escape the attention of authors of natural history books for children; it was widely quoted in epigraphs, prefaces, and introductions, such as William Fordyce Mavor's *Natural History, for the Use of Schools* (1800), which cites this section on its title page.

¹⁵ Similar sentiments are later expressed in William Paley's *Natural Theology* (London: R. Faulder, 1802; rpt. Oxford UP, 2006), which argues that "amongst the invisible things of nature, there must be an intelligent mind, concerned in its production, order, and support" (280). Cecil Francis Alexander's well-known hymn "All Things Bright and Beautiful," first published in *Hymns for Little Children* (London: J. Masters, 1848), encapsulates the teleological argument by design for child audiences.

this hypothetical depiction of adult-child interaction to teach the parents and children who are reading the books how to learn natural science. Sometimes the fiction is presented in the form of a dialogue, almost as though it were intended to be read as drama. Many of these books are framed as itinerant walks or rambles through the countryside, exploring riverbeds, fields, beaches, and hills; Sarah Trimmer's *Easy Introduction to the Knowledge of Nature* (1780) and Charlotte Smith's *Rural Walks* (1795) are the earliest and most successful of the genre, widely reprinted and plagiarized.¹⁶ Those that do not depict walks might be presented as talks given by a teacher or scholar to children, or in epistolary form. Other notable examples of this subgenre include Priscilla Wakefield's *Domestic Recreation* (1805) and *Instinct Displayed in a Collection of Well-Authenticated Facts* (1817), John Sharpe's *A Present for the Young Curious* (1824), Edith Dymond's *Eight Evenings at School* (1825), B. H. Draper's *The Juvenile Naturalist* (c. 1839), Jane Loudon's *The Young Naturalist's Journey* (1840), Robert Edgar's *Uncle Buncl's True and Instructive Stories About Animals, Insects, and Plants* (ca. 1841), and William Houghton's *Country Walks of a Naturalist With His Children* (1870). Notably, the majority of the writers of fictional books of natural history for children are women; it is also the case that they seem to anticipate more girls than boys as their readers. Such books participate in drawing-room, rather than schoolroom, instruction.

Trimmer's *An Easy Introduction to the Knowledge of Nature* (1780), one of the earliest works in this vein, picked up on Anna Laetitia Barbauld's methodological innovations in writing for children and responded to Isaac Watts' call to educate children by stimulating their curiosity. Trimmer's book is written in the form of a first-person monologue, delivered by a mother to her two young children, Charlotte and Henry, as they take walks together through the countryside. The narrator explains to Charlotte that "at the same time that we are benefiting our Health, by Air and Exercise, [we] might improve our Minds" through the study of nature, which will "afford us both Instruction and Amusement" (1-2). Their first walk takes them to a meadow, where the narrating mother encourages her son to explore:

Run about, and try how many different Sorts of Grass you can find, for it is now in Blossom. – One, two, three, – bless me, you have got eight Sorts! – carry them home, that we may compare them with the Herbal, for they are all described there. [. . .] I need not tell you what is the Use of Grass, because you have frequently seen the Cows, Horses, and Sheep, eating it; but they do not eat it all, – no; a great Quantity of the Grass that grows is cut down with a Scythe, like what our Gardener uses, which is called mowing. . . . (4-5)

The embedded lessons in this passage are representative of Trimmer's objectives throughout the book: her narrator points out distinct features of the natural world, as in the variety of species, encourages children to use reference works ("the Herbal") available to them to identify flora and fauna, teaches specialized vocabulary ("mowing"), and connects the natural world to human activities and cultivation. Although we can imagine a parent or caregiver reading this book to an eighteenth-century child, it not only conveys lessons to children but also provides a model for adults in how to speak to young children in casual, family situations. Trimmer's narrator models speaking to children continuously about their surroundings, pointing out features they may not have noticed and making connections to phenomena with which they are already familiar ("like what our Gardener uses"). This education is to take children beyond the denotative knowledge of the schoolroom; as Trimmer's narrator tells her son Henry, who has apparently gone through his

¹⁶ For example, Richard Johnson's *Juvenile Rambles Through the Paths of Nature* (ca. 1803) is directly plagiarized from Trimmer.

“breeching” quite recently, “I suppose now you are dressed like a Man, you begin to fancy that you are one; but tho’ you can read and spell, spin a Top, and catch a Ball, I do assure you there are a great many Things for you to learn yet” (2-3). She teaches Henry and Charlotte applied rather than abstract knowledge, and encourages a sense of wonder, which, Trimmer hopes, will lead from “a kind of general survey of the Works of Providence,” i.e. the natural world, to “the knowledge of the Supreme Being” (vii). In this sense, Trimmer explains in her Preface, her book serves as a religious education for children too young to read the Bible for themselves; the book of nature will prepare the way for the book of scripture.

Fostering curiosity and finding occupation are explicit concerns in *An Easy Introduction*: “Now you see, my Dears,” interjects the narrator, “that every Thing, when we examine it, is curious and amusing” (40). But curbing excessive curiosity is just as necessary. Trimmer’s speaker incorporates grisly cautionary tales into her monologue about man’s domestication of nature, telling her children of little boys who poison themselves by eating the wrong berries, make themselves sick by gorging on unripe fruit, or die after being thrown from horses they attempt to ride without the requisite skill. Other cautionary tales remind the children that cruelty to animals is morally undesirable; the narrator recounts the story of a little boy who left traps out for birds, then forgot them when he went away to school, resulting in the deaths of several. Indeed, Trimmer’s narrator is careful to remind her children that, although domestic animals must be slaughtered and used for food, it is unacceptable to mistreat them. She decries cockfights and excessive whipping of horses, and even admits that it is “a Pity” to slaughter sheep (48). These encomiums against animal cruelty appear throughout the work, tagged on to more factual narratives of animal behavior, appearance, and husbandry.¹⁷

Trimmer’s *Easy Introduction* also teaches children to begin using reference works available to them, and encourages parents to familiarize children with the nonfiction books in their libraries. Trimmer’s narrator mentions “the Herbal” that she keeps at home (5), the “books of Natural History” that she expects her children to read as they get older (32, 71), the Newbery storybook owned by her daughter Charlotte (62), and the home library in which she knows she will be able to find pictures of exotic animals like elephants (62). In each case, the mention of a book is connected to a suggestion for its use – something that the children cannot learn from their immediate environment can be found in a book. The narrator also implicitly admits the limits of her own knowledge to her children, and coaches them in how both children and adults might use reference works to supplement their own observation. Books are not the only contemporary technology she employs; she also mentions the microscope (79, 83) and magnifying glass (81), which her children might use to examine insects and smaller creatures. The microscope had been an affordable commodity, an amusing toy, for middle-class households for several decades.¹⁸

Strikingly, neither Charlotte nor Henry, the children addressed by Trimmer’s narrator, are given any chance to respond to their mother’s long monologue on the flora and fauna in their rural environment. Throughout *An Easy Introduction*, only the parent’s voice is present; there is no sense that the children volunteer questions or observations of their own, or that they make

¹⁷ On the gradual condemnation of cruelty to animals in eighteenth-century Britain, and the advent of groups such as the RSPCA, see Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800* (London: Allen Lane, 1983), also published as *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).

¹⁸ See, for example, Catherine Wilson, *The Invisible World: Early Modern Philosophy and the Invention of the Microscope* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995).

connections between what their mother is telling them and what they already know. It is a domineering narrative, one in which the children are expected to follow and observe in a respectful silence. The children's personalities are only glimpsed in the moments at which they fail to live up to their mother's expectations: "Are you not ashamed of yourself, you little lazy Boy, for lying in Bed so late?" she asks Henry (41). It is not until the child fantasy novel develops decades later that we see children responding to such criticisms.

Ultimately, Trimmer's text attempts, not simply to stimulate, but to moderate juvenile curiosity, highlighting occasions on which children should or should not be inquisitive. Trimmer models this moderation, not primarily for the child, whose voice is not represented in the *Easy Introduction*, but largely for the parent, who will learn from Trimmer's narrator when to supply information and when to suppress it. From Trimmer, children learn information about the natural world, but parents and teachers learn how to expose children to this information. The content of the work is for the child, while the form and narrative strategies are for the adult. The text therefore represents one early type of co-reading in which children are meant to approach the text as a didactic tool and parents are meant to approach it as a rhetorical example.

Smith's *Rural Walks* (1795), perhaps the most famous of the subgenre of children's natural history as realist fiction, also provides children with didactic content, but models rhetorical strategies for both adults and children in a domestic pedagogical situation. It therefore anticipates and encourages a more sophisticated type of co-reading in which the child is presumed to learn from both content and form. *Rural Walks* was published in two volumes, with each volume consisting of six semi-dramatic "dialogues" between country-dwelling Mrs. Woodfield, her daughters Elizabeth and Henrietta, and their bored cousin Caroline, originally from London, now orphaned and living with her aunt. Including the questions, exclamations, and emotional reactions of the children to their "lessons" not only provides the child reader or listener with rhetorical models, but also acknowledges the realities of child behavior. Distraction, boredom, rudeness, and creativity feature as possible responses that the child might give to the didactic parent. For example, during the first of the "walks," the narrator reveals Caroline's peevish feelings:

A frost, which followed the heavy rain of the preceding evening, made the short walk they now undertook less disgusting to the delicacy of Caroline, who dreaded the dirt, and still trembled at the cold they must encounter in crossing the common: but any thing was to her less irksome than being alone, and she determined, since it was her hard fate to be shut up in the dreary solitude of the country, to accustom herself to go out as well as she could. (12)

By showing us Caroline's dislike of the minor inconveniences of weather, filth and cold, as well as her tendency toward loneliness, the narrator humanizes her more thoroughly than was customary in the presentation of child characters. Caroline is more like Jane Eyre (who also, it must be remembered, dislikes walking in the cold)¹⁹ or Alice (who feels too lazy to get up and pick daisies)²⁰ than like Sarah Trimmer's perfect Charlotte in the *Easy Introduction*. Smith's *Rural Walks* represents significant movement on the spectrum from the flat, idealized child characters of eighteenth-century children's literature to the naughty, creative, psychologically

¹⁹ Jane tells the reader "I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes" (13).

²⁰ At the beginning of *Alice's Adventure's in Wonderland*, Alice is "considering, in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies" (11).

developed children of mid-nineteenth-century fantasy.

In *Rural Walks*, Mrs. Woodfield takes her daughters and her niece to visit poor cottagers, teaches her daughters and niece about their charitable duties, and tries to impress upon them the responsibilities that come with their comfortable, privileged station in life. She responds to Caroline's unspoken distaste for walking in cold, wet conditions with an attempt at contextualization:

The discontent that hung upon her features did not escape the observation of [Caroline's] aunt, who was glad of this opportunity of shewing her what real misery was, and checking this disposition to repine, which makes so much of the artificial calamity of life. (11)

Although *Rural Walks* allows Caroline the subjective space in which to dislike healthy, proper activities for a young woman of breeding, it also insists on reforming her. Mrs. Woodfield gradually teaches Caroline how to find enjoyment in proper things, such as exercise, charity, and instructive literature, rather than in clothing, dances, and other frivolities. Some child fantasy novels, such as *Water-Babies*, retain this didactic tendency to re-educate their child protagonists, while others, such as the *Alice* books, acknowledge this tendency but make a mockery of the reform project. In both forms, however, the fantasy tradition takes didacticism as the foundation of childhood experience, acknowledging its continuing ascendancy in children's lives and in their literature.

In *Rural Walks*, Mrs. Woodfield – and, behind her, Smith – supplements Caroline's practical lessons with readings from respected eighteenth-century poets such as Thomson, Langhorne, and Prior. The focus here is on the countryside as a landscape of economic variety, and the girls' excursions into the world around them are oriented, not around nature, but civilization and the betterment of those around them who are less fortunate. Smith's avowed purpose is to “repress discontent; to inculcate the necessity of submitting cheerfully to such situations as fortune may throw them into; to check that flippancy of remark, so frequently disgusting in girls of twelve or thirteen; and to correct the errors that young people often fall into in conversation, as well as to give them a taste for the pure pleasures of retirement, and the sublime beauties of nature” (iii-iv). Her morals, then, are typical of the period, and her sense of girls in particular as in need of some “check” on their behavior is entirely consistent with eighteenth-century didacticism. The work's originality derives from its form, which Smith describes thus: “to unite the interest of the novel with the instruction of the schoolbook, by throwing the latter into the form of dialogue, mingled with narrative, and by giving some degree of character to the group”; each section is also closed with “some lines of poetry” by an author suitable for young readers, whose style might be imitated easily (iv). Thus Smith, like the writers of dialogues in classical philosophy, works to explicitly connect didactic instruction, both in morals and in scientific knowledge, with the appeal of plot and character. It is this innovation that paves the way for later exploratory fictions both about and for children. When Smith does dwell on the natural world, she treats it more as landscape and less as laboratory.

Many children's natural history books considered the potential of new scientific technologies to amuse and excite children, particularly the microscope, which was quickly becoming more affordable as a luxury item for middle-class households due to developments in lens-making. The appeal of the microscope was no doubt linked to the popularity of optical toys, and authors of natural history books for children often include descriptions of the difference between optical tools and toys, insisting that microscopes (and telescopes) needed to be used under supervision. The lens is frequently lauded by authors for its power to reveal the grand

scale of creation, from astronomical bodies to amoebas. For example, Priscilla Wakefield's protagonist in *Domestic Recreations*, Mrs. Dimsdale, revels in the power of the lens while teaching her daughters Lucy and Emily to use a microscope in order to examine "animalcules":

By every improved telescope, new stars are discovered; and as the powers of the microscope are increased, more minute races of living creatures become perceptible. Here let us contemplate the infinite power of the Great Creator, that is as much displayed in the formation of the smallest of these animalcules, imperceptible to the keenest sight, without the assistance of the highest magnifiers, as it is in the structure of a world; for nothing short of omnipotence can effect either the one or the other. (76)

Although the movement from microscopic gaze to religious awe is a common one in children's natural history books from the period, it is not always made; some of the works simply present information, leaving any moralizing to the adult who is reading the book to or with the child, or focusing on technical instead of ethical instruction. Books from the eighteenth or early nineteenth century are more likely than later works to provide moral justifications for natural history, and specifically microscope play, as a pastime.

Fictions like *Rural Walks* or *Domestic Recreations* prepared the ground for the classic British fantasy novels for children by authors such as Kingsley, Carroll, and MacDonald; they presented the idea of children going on (rather than simply reading about) journeys and adventures, of children interacting with mysterious and unusual creatures, and of children participating in both the microscopic and the telescopic gaze – playing with scale, even as they played at being scientists. Scale and size quickly became particularly important mechanisms by which to understand childhood, partly because children had access to new perspectives on the relationship between the scale of the human world and that of the cosmos or the water droplet, but also because the adult world came to be seen as out of scale with the child's body. These works also encouraged children to see themselves as readers – or, perhaps more accurately, as co-readers with their parents of the entertaining but instructive natural history fantasies.

The curiosity of children provides the strongest link between the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century children's natural history book and the mid- to late-nineteenth century children's fantasy novel. Alice's intense desire to find her way into the beautiful garden behind the tiny locked door, and her earlier desire to understand why a rabbit was dressed, speaking English, and consulting a pocketwatch, seem natural to us as the interests of a curious child; Tom's interest in the upper-class world of luxuries and religious images that he sees in Ellie's bedroom, and his desire to see the world and understand its physical and moral foundations, are similar manifestations of what seems a normal degree of childhood curiosity.²¹ Tom is described as a "curious little rogue" (73); when he witnesses a man (who will turn out to be his old master, Grimes) drown, he "grew more and more curious, he could not tell why" (74). Yet this very curiosity is something that earlier authors of children's natural history books will do their best to inculcate, making it a pedagogical imperative, and Carroll's and Kingsley's fantasy novels continue this impulse to teach inquisitiveness and foster it in the child reader.

We now think of curiosity or inquisitiveness as undeniably an inherent and common childhood trait; but the exploratory behaviors of fictional children like Tom and Alice are not only reflective of the behavior of actual children the authors knew, but demonstrate a social desire to believe in the curiosity of children, and to reinforce it by providing fictional examples.

²¹ A similar scene occurs in *Wuthering Heights*, where Heathcliff and Catherine, as children, "look in" on the richness and splendor of Thrushcross Grange while "standing on the basement, and clinging to the ledge" (38).

The curiosity Tom and Alice show about the fantastic situations in which they find themselves is modeled on the curiosity of the one-dimensional child characters in natural history books, who must learn to care about the world around them, about scientific advances, and about their own ability to intervene in or interfere with nature. Curiosity appears in these books as a pedagogical function, rather than an assumed trait of child readers.²² For example, in Trimmer's *Easy Introduction to the Knowledge of Nature* (1780), the narrating mother explicitly tells her daughter and son that "I have only shown you these [plants and animals under the microscope], to convince you that a curious Search may discover new Wonders; and were you to keep on to the end of a long Life, you would not see them all" (93). Trimmer's narrator anticipates that children will need to be "convince[d]" to be curious about the world around them. Similarly, Priscilla Wakefield describes her purpose in *Domestic Recreations* (1805) as "to cultivate a love for the works of nature, and a habit of reflection" (iv) in the child, who is to become "a curious admirer of nature" (71). John Sharpe's *A Present for the Young Curious* (1824), also couched as a discussion between a mother and two children, that "Mama" has an "inquisitive family circle" to whom she must explain "Birds, Beasts, &c."

Both the *Alice* books and *Water-Babies* also play on the double meaning of "curious" that has existed in English since Chaucer – both "inquisitive" (of persons) and "interesting" (of things).²³ Alice's exclamations on first shrinking, then rapidly growing – "What a curious feeling" (17) and "Curiouser and curiouser" (20) – evoke this second sense of the curious as that which is unusual, and therefore by implication provokes interrogation and interest. Tom's foil Ellie is given the benefit of a natural history professor's full attention: "he was showing her about one in ten thousand of all the beautiful and curious things which are to be seen there" (84). Most of the uses of "curious" in natural history books for children will follow this pattern; Wakefield refers, for example, to "the curious structure of the wing" of a butterfly (15), "the curious habits and structure" of insects (23), and the "curious habitation" of the beaver (28), while Trimmer's narrator confides to her children that "every thing, when we examine it, is curious and amazing" (32). Of course, here "curious" implies not only "interesting," but also intricate, ingenious, and well-wrought – qualities of something that has been crafted, which imply the religious and teleological foundation of the world that many authors of natural history books for children claimed to reveal.²⁴

²² The Romantic novels that take up educational discourse also mobilize curiosity, though in varying ways; Scott's *Waverley* embarks on his journey into the Highlands because of his "curiosity to know something more of Scotland" (32), while Edgeworth's *Belinda* has a "provoking want of curiosity," according to her wayward friend Lady Delacour (454).

²³ The term "curious" functioned both as "a subjective quality of persons" and "an objective quality of things" from its first appearances in Middle English in the fourteenth century. As it applies to persons, the senses of "careful," "particular," and "inquisitive" were all in general and parallel usage from the fourteenth century on, though the latter sense gradually became dominant. As it applies to objects, the term originally meant "made with care or art," only shifting to mean "interesting" in the late seventeenth century. The sense "made with care" evokes the term's Latin root, *cūriōsus*, "full of care or pains." See "curious, adj." *OED Online*. March 2013. Oxford University Press. 28 May 2013 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46040?rskey=g7UzWm&result=1&isAdvanced=false>>.

²⁴ Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841) is another nineteenth-century example of this usage of "curious" as "interesting" and a "curiosity" as an intriguing item. Some of the "old and curious things" that Dickens's narrator notices in Nell's grandfather's shop – notably all man-made – are "suits of mail standing like ghosts in armour here and there, fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters, rusty weapons of various kinds, distorted figures in china and wood and iron and ivory: tapestry and strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams" (4-5). The old man himself, of course, is the greatest curiosity: "The haggard aspect of the little old man was wonderfully suited to the place. . . . There was nothing in the whole collection but was in keeping with himself, nothing that looked older or more worn than he" (5). Nell, unlike Alice, is not overly "curious" or inquisitive, though she shows

Of course, curiosity in literature for and about children also has another lineage through the instructional fable, but here the stories tend to caution against being overly curious, to demonstrate the dangers of over-reaching one's sphere of knowledge, or of poking one's nose into things best left alone. Here oral folktales dovetail with myth; we think of Psyche's disastrous attempt to glimpse the forbidden face of her husband and Pandora's compulsion to open the mysterious box. In the nineteenth century, retellings of fairy tales such as Bluebeard cautioned both women and children to avoid indulging their curiosity.²⁵ Original tales such as H. C. Andersen's "The Silver Shilling" (1865) also warned children that they would "pay the penalty for being curious" (816). In the folkloric tradition, curiosity is a minor immorality that leads to dangerous yet productive consequences; by contrast, in children's books of natural history, curiosity is the precursor to scientific exploration, intelligence, and morality.

Fantasy Children as Curious Readers

Earlier and perhaps stranger than Carroll's famous *Alice* books, Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby* (1862-3) is a heterogeneous fantasy novel in which fairy-tale motifs and language are juxtaposed with poetry, catalogs, and embedded narratives. Since its first publication, *Water-Babies* has been frequently expurgated and bowdlerized in order to make it appropriate – or indeed comprehensible – to child readers. The overall plot is straightforward enough, if fairly dark. A young chimney sweep named Tom becomes lost while cleaning the chimneys of a grand country house and stumbles into the bedroom of the lord's young daughter. Alarmed by the contrast between her clean, lovely innocence and his own dirty, disheveled appearance, he flees the grounds, precipitating a cross-country chase in which his abusive master and the kindly lord join together to track him down. Exhausted, starving, and sick, Tom dies at the edge of a stream, and the pursuers find his body, but Tom's soul has metamorphosed into a tiny "water-baby" and begun a new life, first in the river, then in the ocean. Although his body has changed, his mind is the same; he is still corrupt, with no religious or moral knowledge and a taste for bullying and violence. He comes to the attention of a trinity of maternal fairies or goddesses, one of whom is retributive (Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid) and one of which is merciful (Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby), while the third represents mother nature (Mrs. Carey). Alternately punished for his excesses and treated kindly for the sake of kindness, Tom gradually learns, not only to behave well, but to *want* to behave well. Eventually he asks to be fully redeemed and is sent on a quest to the end of the world in order to earn grace.

This basic plot summary of the novel captures Kingsley's use of pilgrimage and reform in the best traditions of didactic moral tales, but does not convey the work's overabundant interest in the marvels and wonders of nature or the narrator's constant satirical interjections. Affection for the natural world mingles with the redemptive moralism of the fairy tale and a disdain for mechanistic forms of scientific research. Tom's redemption is galvanized by reading alongside the angelic, upper-class girl Ellie. The object of their co-reading is Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid's

a moderate amount of curiosity in the people and situations she encounters. For one discussion of the role of "curiosity" in the novel in relation to educationalism, see Sarah Winter, "Curiosity as Didacticism in *The Old Curiosity Shop*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 34.1 (Fall 2000): 28-55.

²⁵ For an in-depth discussion of women's curiosity in realist fiction, particularly in the nineteenth century, see Hilary Schor, *Curious Subjects: Women and the Trials of Realism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013). Schor argues "that the dialectical relationship between . . . kinds of curiosity was present at the creation of the novel, that this dynamic sense of curiosity is peculiarly fitting to the formal requirements of the realist novel, and that curiosity is a powerful engine of plot-making and readerly desire" (5).

fable *The History of the Great and Famous Nation of the Doasyoulikes*, illustrated with magical photographs. In this fairy tale of Lamarckian degeneration, a population who shirk hard work and embrace hedonism and self-indulgence gradually regress from human to ape form. Each page of the book represents centuries – as Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid turns the pages for Tom and Ellie, the narrator tells us she “turned over the next five hundred years” (133) – and each photograph (apparently not accompanied by any text) enables Tom and Ellie to “read” the moral state of the Doasyoulikes. Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid, mimicking the guidance of a parent or tutor, encourages Ellie and Tom to construct their own reading of the story, interjecting information they could not know, answering their questions, and correcting any misconceptions. At the end of the shared reading experience, Tom has made up his mind to go on the quest he has been shirking. It is his ability to understand the analogy between his own situation and that of the Doasyoulikes that gives him control over the narrative of his own life. Direct moral instruction, in his case, is not as effective as indirect instruction through identification with the characters in books.

The power of the *History of the Doasyoulikes*, however, should not imply that Kingsley lauds reading in general. In fact, *Water-Babies* is loaded with scathing criticism of the limits of book-learning and the tendency of the publishing world to generate masses of inaccurate, misleading, boring, or corrupting information. In the most Swiftian of Tom’s adventures, he must travel through “Waste-paper-land, where all the stupid books lie in heaps, up hill and down dale, like leaves in a winter wood; and there he saw people digging and grubbing among them, to make worse books out of bad ones, and thrashing chaff to save the dust of it; and a very good trade they drove thereby, especially among children” (163). Later Tom sees “all the little people in the world, writing all the little books in the world, about all the other little people in the world; probably because they had no great people to write about”; Kingsley alludes to the popularity of sentimental American bestsellers (163). Tom, however, has learned to be a discriminating reader: “he would sooner have a jolly good fairy tale, about Jack the Giant-killer or Beauty and the Beast, which taught him something that he didn’t know already” (164). Thus, like Grahame in “The Reluctant Dragon,” Kingsley implies that children will most effectively learn “truth” through a combination of fairy tales and natural history – provided that the natural history leaves room for the miraculous.

The most dangerous books described in *Water-Babies* are the ones written by the naturalist Professor Pthmlnsprts: the book that he wants to write about Tom, which would require kidnapping Tom and turning him into a specimen; and the book he eventually writes after being driven insane by the impossibility of a water-baby’s existence, which completely throws off reason and argues everything “exactly contrary to his old opinions” (97). Books may be the product of fetishizing and dissecting the natural world without regard for the magical or the fantastic; and they may also be entirely nonsensical, the product of madness. The fable resists both of these errors. By definition, it uses the natural world to illustrate moral truths through fantasy, rather than simply to outline facts of natural existence in a manner divorced from the moral (and religious) order. It also resists falling into madness by embracing its nonsensical and fantastic elements, normalizing them within a stable generic framework: “if my story is not true, something better is” (190). When Tom finally reaches the end of his quest and comes face-to-face with a composite goddess of nature, he, along with his sometime companion Ellie, must complete his quest by reading the fairy’s name in her eyes. This final act of epiphanic reading is impossible: “the children could not read her name, for they were dazzled, and hid their faces in their hands” (188). Yet the attempt to read this fundamental truth is enough: from this point on,

Tom is worthy of going “home” with Ellie – visiting Heaven – and of developing into a gentleman and man of science and industry.

By contrast, the *Alice* books explicitly interrogate the reading practices taught to children and model a variety of subversive reading strategies and opportunities for misreading or reading “against the grain” of approved didactic texts. As the preceding discussion of works by Trimmer, Smith, and Kingsley demonstrates, Carroll’s child fantasy novels were not entirely unprecedented. While the *Alice* books are not necessarily the sharp turning point that critics once depicted them as, they are certainly the most visible and enduring works of Victorian children’s literature, and the most invested in breaking down how and what middle- and upper-class children were reading. *Wonderland* opens with Alice’s cheeky thoughts about her sister’s reading; as she sits, bored, on the riverbank, we learn that “once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, ‘and what is the use of a book,’ thought Alice, ‘without pictures or conversations?’” (9). This pushes us, with typical Carrollian logic, to ask the inverse of her question – what is the use of a book *with* pictures or conversations? – as well as to formulate the opposite of her implied statement – a book *with* pictures or conversations is useful. We are forced to consider whether *Wonderland* itself, a book filled with both pictures and conversations, is potentially useful, or more useful than other literature. Alice’s rhetorical question also implies, counterintuitively and playfully, that fiction (usually the only genre that incorporates dialogue)²⁶ is more “useful” than nonfiction. Words are dismissed as less effective, or at least less appealing, than images, and books are to entertain, rather than to instruct. If Charlotte Smith’s disagreeable young Caroline wondered about the “use” of an expository book without illustrations, the narrating adult Mrs. Woodfield would immediately intervene, humorlessly, to explain it. In *Wonderland*, by contrast, Alice’s observation is a throwaway comment, not addressed by the narrator and not explicitly followed up on by the text itself. In other words, *Wonderland*, from its opening sentence, allows Alice to question the usefulness of adult institutions (such as expository books of nonfiction) and does not insist on supplying immediate answers to her questions.

When Alice wishes to establish her own identity, she chooses to recite “Against Idleness and Mischief” from Isaac Watts’ popular *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (1715). How well she remembers what she has read, or what has been read to her, will definitively establish who she is. Comparing herself to other children she knows, she believes that her selfhood is bound up in the quality of her recitation; and by the manner in which she repeats the poem she has memorized, she thinks she will be able to identify herself – and hopes she will not be the dullard Mabel. When, instead of reciting the didactic poem that begins “How doth the little busy bee / Improve each shining hour,” she instead spontaneously and apparently unconsciously composes a new poem about the exploits of a crocodile, she concludes that because “those are not the right words” she “must be Mabel after all” (19). Of course, Carroll’s readers, child and adult, laugh at Alice’s misunderstanding of identity; of course her memory for what she has read in the past does not define who she is; she will always be Alice, and never Mabel, no matter what she remembers or forgets. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice will shift from listening to and giving recitations of poetry to reading and asking for exposition of what she reads. Looking-Glass world is defined by its reversal of everything normal, and Alice quickly notes that this has consequences for literature: “the books are something like our

²⁶ Although imagined dialogues occur outside of narrative fiction, they are always fictionalized, except for transcripts of real-life conversations. Thus dialogue is typically a marker of fiction, whether in the novel, the philosophical treatise, or the pedagogical instruction manual.

books, only the words go the wrong way: I know that, because I've held up one of our books to the glass, and then they hold up one in the other room" (142). Here Alice tests both the nature of print and the nature of the mirrored image of reality. By using reflection, rather than reading, to decode print, she mismatches a technology and its object, prefiguring the ways that lenses and mirrors will later fail to comprehend her. By testing the books of the looking-glass land with a book of her own, she reminds us that every world is reflected most clearly in its self-narration.

Fantasy Children as Objects of the Naturalist's Gaze

While Tom and Alice are both formed through their reading material, they are examined by the narrative with a naturalist's gaze, through microscopes and telescopes, magnifying glasses and spectacles. These lens-mediated visions of the Victorian child correspond to the shrinking and growing that these child protagonists endure. Consider Kingsley's Tom, whose transformation from a little chimney sweep into a tiny "water-baby" is foolishly mistaken for his death by the adults he once knew:

[T]he keeper, and the groom, and Sir John made a great mistake, and were very unhappy (Sir John at least) without any reason, when they found a black thing in the water, and said it was Tom's body, and that he had been drowned. They were utterly mistaken. Tom was quite alive; and cleaner, and merrier, than he ever had been. The fairies had washed him, you see, in the swift river, so thoroughly, that not only his dirt, but his whole husk and shell had been washed quite off him, and the pretty little real Tom was washed out of the inside of it, and swam away, as a caddis does when its case of stones and silk is bored through, and away it goes on its back, paddling to the shore, there to split its skin, and fly away as a caperer, on four fawn-coloured wings, with long legs and horns. [. . .]

But good Sir John did not understand all this, not being a fellow of the Linnaean Society; and he took it into his head that Tom was drowned. (43)

Here Kingsley conflates a metaphysical idea, the posthumous emission of the soul from the mere superstructure of the physical body, with a biological phenomenon, the post-metamorphosis emergence of a caddisfly from its chrysalis.²⁷ The former dates back at least to Plato's *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates claims that "we [souls] are imprisoned in the body, like an oyster in his shell." The latter had long been observed but was newly fascinating in the nineteenth century due to the development of Darwinian evolutionary biology and the rise of amateur natural history.²⁸ For Kingsley, a clergyman and naturalist who was inclined to syncretize his interests, relating the two was irresistible. He both is and is not joking when he suggests that the aristocrat Sir John misunderstands death because he is "not . . . a fellow of the Linnaean Society." On the one hand, this is a jab at abstruse misinterpretation by pompous intellectuals; we, like Sir John, know that death is death, no matter how a biologist theorizes the animation and decay of organic matter. On the other, it represents one of Kingsley's most deeply-held beliefs: that understanding biological detail illuminates spiritual realities. In other words, this half-joke is also a thinly-disguised

²⁷ Richard D. Beards notes that Kingsley had written a detailed description of the caddisfly's life cycle in "Chalk-Stream Studies." See Beards, Richard D., ed., *The Water Babies* (New York: Penguin, 2008), p. 193, n. 16. "Chalk-Stream Studies," an excomium on fishing in the English countryside originally published in *Fraser's Magazine* in September 1858, was republished as Chapter II of Kingsley's *Prose Idylls New and Old* in 1873.

²⁸ On the "imaginative consequences" (2) of Darwin's work for literature, see Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2009).

manifestation of the teleological argument by design.

The teleology in question, however, is not progressive. Instead of self-improving, as Maria Edgeworth's child heroes and heroines do in the tales of *The Parent's Assistant*, Tom devolves from a land mammal with lungs to an amphibian with gills, and from boy to baby.²⁹ His metamorphosis happens in reverse, as though the caddis-fly could turn back into a larva. Kingsley merges the philosophy of the body-as-shell with the biology of metamorphosis by focalizing the narrative through an immature human being – a child. Not just any child, but a dying child; and not just any dying child, but a dying child from the working class who lacks both religious redemption and moral grounding.³⁰ As Tom transforms spiritually and physiologically, he is also diminished. He shrinks. The narrator clarifies Tom's reduced size and the new world he perceives by referencing the newly-widespread technology of the magnifying lens: "Tom, you must remember, was so little that everything looked a hundred times as big to him as it does to you, just as things do to a minnow, who sees and catches the little water-creatures which you can only see in a microscope" (49). If we can only become small enough, Kingsley posits, then we will be able to see the world in a drop of water without technological assistance. As Tom perceives the subtle flora and fauna living in the "water-forests," which to the naked eye are "only little weeds," he undergoes a more radical shift in perspective: "he found that there was a great deal more in the world than he had fancied at first sight" (49). His new understanding of the complex and beautiful underwater ecology provides the groundwork for his gradual ethical transformation from an amoral sower of discord to a "great man of science" who is able to subdue his desires to his will (188).

Tom's development juxtaposes and frequently conflates narrative progress, intellectual and ethical progress, social advancement, and physical regression. At the beginning of *The Water-Babies*, he is a small child, subject to the physical abuse of his master Mr. Grimes and the casual neglect of a world that has never taught him reading, writing, hygiene, or religion. He dreams of escaping his victimization by growing up and becoming just like his master: drinking, playing cards, breeding bulldogs, and beating apprentices. Yet it is not through growth that Tom triumphs in the end. Kingsley redeems his chimney sweep in a Blakean move – a seeming death, subsumed by a fantastic heavenly adventure. But where Blake tinges the dream in which the sweeps "wash in a river and shine in the sun" with his characteristic distrust of ideology, Kingsley presents a much more idealistic view (16). By becoming even smaller than his child self, Tom can discern the workings of the natural world, and, in an environmentalist's dream, his awareness of ecological detail catalyzes a secondary awareness of the grandeur of the world and, eventually, of ethical values. Tom's ideas are broadened by first being narrowed; he grows large morally by growing small physically. He gains a knowledge of everything, or at least everything that matters to Kingsley, by becoming microscopically tiny. In turn, Kingsley's narrator is able to turn from the gritty realities of Tom's life as a chimney sweep to the spiritual beauty of nature by following the metamorphosis – magnifying the microscopic world and conflating it with the

²⁹ Indeed, Tom's watery, miniaturized state is in many ways more suggestive of the embryo than of the infant. Three years before Kingsley began writing *Water-Babies*, Darwin had argued in *The Origin of Species* (1859) that "community in embryonic structure reveals community of descent" and that the embryo can be seen as "a picture, more or less obscured, of the progenitor, either in its adult or larval state, of all the members of the same great class" (617, 619). Accordingly, Tom's devolution into an embryo-like creature suggests the erasure of his recent personal history and a return to an earlier form of pre-human existence.

³⁰ Tom is also described as "a little ugly, black, ragged figure," a "little black ape" (14); his coating of soot marks his class status in a racialized way. Cf. Blake's "Chimney Sweeper," who is a "little black thing among the snow," as well as his "Little Black Boy," whose "soul is white" within his black body.

ethereal one in order to ignore the social conditions of the macrocosm. As Tom's body shrinks, Kingsley's scope expands beyond the "Condition of England Question" hinted at by Tom's labor, Mr. Grimes's abuse, and the class distinctions of Harthover House.³¹ As the "water-forests" become large enough for us to see, social challenges are minimized, not to say belittled, overlooked, and figuratively diminished.

By contrast, Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Little Land," one of many poems in *A Child's Garden of Verses* that explore the satisfaction the child gains from performing his own interiority,³² envisions a different relationship between the micro- and macroscopic levels. The poem's child narrator frees himself from his oppressive "actual size" surroundings by imagining that he can shrink to the size of a fairy and explore the minute worlds among the clover and raindrops. Here the fantasy is acknowledged as such; the poem postulates making the child speaker small as a hypothetical case, but does not actually narrate the transformation. If the speaker could become even smaller and "on high / See the greater swallows pass / In the sky, / And the round sun rolling by," then he would be able to look on these things without being perceived in return; he would see them "Heeding no such things as I" (26-30). Yet he would also, he imagines, have newfound freedoms and capabilities, which he asserts with first-person anaphora: "In that forest to and fro / *I can* wander, *I can* go" he tells us, and "Through that forest *I can* pass" (17-18, 31, emphasis added). The disruption of the dream, however, is the most striking, as the child speaker is recalled to his surroundings:

When my eyes I once again
Open, and see all things plain:
High bare walls, great bare floor:
Great big knobs on drawer and door;
Great big people perched on chairs,
Stitching tucks, and mending tears,
Each a hill that I could climb,
And talking nonsense all the time—
Oh dear me,
That I could be
A sailor on the rain-pool sea. (51-61)

We realize that the fantasy of becoming tiny is a fantasy of accessibility, of finding a world sized to fit the child's body, a world in which the knobs on the furniture are not oversized, the room does not seem cavernous, and conversation and interaction are simple – the marching of ants, rather than the incomprehensible conversation of adults. Being small enough that clover and daisies take the place of trees and puddles the place of oceans would, in the mind of the speaker, enable both anonymity and freedom. No longer perceived on the cosmic scale (unheeded by the sun), the child would be able, he believes, to explore with abandon. Yet, even though he does not

³¹ Compare, for example, Dickens's incisive critique of child labor in the early chapters of *Oliver Twist*. Kingsley's abusive chimney sweep master, Mr. Grimes, is reminiscent of Dickens's Mr. Gamfield, who is "under the slight imputation of having bruised three or four boys to death" and "whose villainous countenance was a regular stamped receipt for cruelty" (20-1, 24).

³² See, for example, "Young Night Thought," in which the child speaker describes his waking fantasy of participating in a procession of powerful adults merging into a dream; "The Land of Counterpane," in which the child speaker, lying sick in bed, perceives himself as "the giant great and still / that sits upon the pillow-hill" and creates imaginary battles and cities; "The Land of Nod," in which the child speaker relishes the solipsism of the dream-state; and "Escape at Bedtime," in which the child speaker asserts that adults may be able to control his physical body: "But the glory kept shining and bright in my eyes, / And the stars going round in my head" (15-16).

actually undergo a fantastic metamorphosis, he gleans satisfaction from his ability to imagine one; the Wordsworthian “inward eye” in this instance provides not only a memory but a substitute for the original experience.

Later in the same volume, another poem, “My Kingdom,” features a child speaker who develops his sense of autonomy by situating himself in a landscape scaled to his own body. Coming upon “a very little dell” that he tells us is “No higher than my head,” he describes a process of classification, exploration, and domination that unsurprisingly reflects Victorian colonialism:

I called the little pool a sea;
The little hills were big to me;
For I am very small.
I made a boat, I made a town,
I searched the caverns up and down,
And named them one and all.

And all about was mine, I said,
The little sparrows overhead,
The little minnows, too.
This was the world and I was king;
For me the bees came by to sing,
For me the swallows flew. (7-18)

By deliberately limiting, or pretending to limit, his awareness of the wider world, the child speaker gains imperial mastery over his surroundings. But like the speaker of “The Little Land,” he never believes his own fantasy. He is continually – one might even say melancholically – aware that although he “*played* there were no deeper seas / Nor any wider plains than these / Nor other kings than me,” that, in fact, there were and are (19-21, emphasis added). In spite of this irony, because he finds a landscape that literally *fits* him, he has two opportunities unavailable to the Victorian child within a normative middle-class home or school life: to dominate the world and creatures around him, and to conceive of a social and cultural system *in toto*, complete with monarch, subjects, city, transit, and entertaining arts.³³ This is his diminutive omniscience; as a child at home, he feels the world to be “great” and his nurse to be “very big” (30, 29); but when he metonymically replaces the whole world with a “little dell,” he can not only conceive but manipulate an entire social system with great facility (2). Although the child himself does not shrink, as Tom does in *Water-Babies*, he has the similarly contrasting experiences of scale. In one world, he is an undersized interloper; in the other, the scene fits him. The difference is in the reference point: the child speaker of “My Kingdom” imagines that he has expanded, so that scaling the world properly to himself would make him into its monarch, while Kingsley imagines that his child protagonist Tom has shrunk, so that scaling the world properly to him would magnify natural detail.³⁴

³³ Compare the fantasy of Maggie Tulliver, who “was fond of fancying a world where the people never got any larger than children of their own age, and she made the queen of it just like Lucy, with a little crown on her head, and a little sceptre in her hand . . . only the queen was Maggie herself in Lucy’s form” (103).

³⁴ Here Kingsley and Stevenson both experiment with literalizing the evolutionary development of an optimum relationship between a species and its environment, which Herbert Spencer, summarizing Darwin, would describe in 1864 as “the discovery that natural selection is capable of producing fitness between organisms and their circumstances” (*Principles of Biology* 446).

This brings us back to Alice, with her ever-changing size and her careless consumption of magical comestibles.³⁵ Martin Gardner has suggested that Alice's size changes expose Carroll's sense of the conflict between the small Alice whom he desires and the large Alice she is fast growing to be.³⁶ Although this interpretation is plausible, Gardner, by focusing on the real-life Alice Liddell, overlooks the question of the character Alice's agency in the text. It is noteworthy that all of Alice's metamorphoses in *Wonderland*, with one crucial exception, are caused by her own actions (typically by eating or drinking), and that she moves from an unconscious and haphazard series of transformations to a conscious and deliberate series.³⁷ Alice's first series of changes is caused by experiments, accidents, and *deus ex machina* events: gulping down the contents of the bottle labeled "DRINK ME," eating the cake labeled "EAT ME," fanning herself with the White Rabbit's fan, drinking the White Rabbit's cordial, and gobbling down the pebbles-turned-cakes that the Rabbit and his friends cast through the window at her. Although Alice acts freely on each occasion, she rarely knows what the consequences of her actions will be, and sometimes doubts that there will be any aftereffects at all. The resulting changes in her size, during this first series of transformations, cause vaudevillian inconvenience; while in the hall of doors, she is first too large to get through the door into "the loveliest garden you ever saw" (16), then too small to reach the key, then again too large to get through, then so small that she nearly drowns in her own tears. It is little better once she makes it to the Rabbit's house; first she is so large that she is trapped, then so small that she fears reprisals after escaping. But once Alice meets the Caterpillar and learns how to control her size by eating from different sections of the mushroom, she retains her capacity to change size but gains control over it. Armed with chunks of the mushroom in each pocket, she is able to adjust her size in order to be small enough to enter the house of the Duchess, large enough to feel confident approaching the Mad Tea Party, and finally small enough to go through that first small door "and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains" (16). Thus what is most important for Alice is not specifically to shrink, nor to grow, but to maintain an elastic nature, becoming as small or as large as any given situation requires, and exercising a mature control over this ability. The crucial exception, of course, is Alice's final transformation: her sudden and seemingly causeless growth spurt at the conclusion of the story. The Dormouse, one of Carroll's self-parodies, admonishes Alice, "You've no right to grow *here*" (114) – that is, she has no right to literally *grow out of* the story. Alice makes the only two possible objections: first, "I ca'n't help it," and second, "you know you're growing too" (114). As is so frequent in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the unwritten joke is about death: Alice's juvenile growth spurt reminds the Dormouse, Carroll, and the reader that the process of maturation leads inevitably to the grave.³⁸

³⁵ See Goodacre, Selwyn H, "Alice's Changes of Size in Wonderland," *Jabberwocky: The Journal of the Lewis Carroll Society* 6 (1977): 20-24.

³⁶ Gardner explains that "Richard Ellmann has suggested that Carroll may have been unconsciously symbolizing the great disparity between the small Alice whom he loved but could not marry and the large Alice she would soon become" (Carroll 17, n. 10). On the eroticization of the child in Victorian literature, see James Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

³⁷ Knoepflmacher phrases the contrast slightly differently, suggesting that as Carroll changes Alice's size he "compels her to undergo mutations she eventually transcends through sheer biological (rather than magical) growth" (174). The interpretation of Alice's changes as "mutations" contrasts intriguingly with the evolutionary discourse Kingsley uses to describe Tom's metamorphosis. In another vein, Nancy Armstrong has argued that "Alice demonstrates that an enlarged or distorted body is, like her appetite, not really her own" (242). See Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999).

³⁸ William Empson notes that "Death is never far out of sight in the [Alice] books" (*Some Versions of Pastoral*, 287). Knoepflmacher writes that "there are always two distinct threats of death present in his [Carroll's] Alice

When he revisits Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, Carroll is careful to keep her growth conceptual rather than actual and under the control of subsidiary characters and the narrative itself.³⁹ Rather than a growing or shrinking Alice, we see Alice reflected in the Looking-Glass, instrumentalized as a pawn in the game of chess, and magnified only by the technology around her. Instead of being an instrument of magnification – “shutting up like a telescope” or “opening out like the largest telescope that ever was” – Alice is perceived through several such instruments by the railway-guard: “All this time the Guard was looking at her, first through a telescope, then through a microscope, then through an opera-glass. At last he said ‘You’re traveling the wrong way,’ and shut up the window, and went away” (17, 20, 170). The Guard’s experiments with different technologies of magnification imply that Alice’s size and status are unclear to him: is she very far away (a celestial body best viewed through a telescope) or very small (a minuscule organism best viewed through a microscope) or simply an entertaining spectacle (best viewed through an opera-glass)? Carroll has re-conceived Alice, not as shrinking in order to enter a fantastic miniature kingdom, but as a static small person who can be enlarged, or not, by the technology of his narrative. She has shifted from being metaphorically equivalent to a lens to being the object of the lens-supplemented gaze.

A similar but more extended image of perception through multiple lenses occurs in *The Water-Babies*. As Tom pursues his quest to find the “Other-end-of-Nowhere,” he comes across “a poor, lean, seedy, hard-worked old giant,” one of Kingsley’s self-parodies, who “had a great pair of spectacles on his nose, and a butterfly-net in one hand, and a geological hammer in the other; and was hung all over with pockets, full of collecting boxes, bottles, microscopes, telescopes, barometers, ordnance maps, scalpels, forceps, photographic apparatus, and all other tackle for finding out everything about everything, and a little more too. And, most strange of all, he was running not forwards but backwards, as fast as he could” (168). Like Carroll’s railway guard, Kingsley’s giant views the world through not one lens but several – in this case, not only his spectacles, but potentially a microscope, a telescope, or even the lens of a camera. While the guard accuses Alice of regressing, telling her that she is “traveling the wrong way,” Kingsley’s giant himself is regressing, “running . . . backwards, as fast as he could.” But Kingsley’s giant is more obviously a parody of a well-equipped naturalist, hung about with every possible piece of new technology that he is convinced will enable him to collect, catalog, and comprehend the world around him. And yet Tom notices that the giant, for all his gadgets and gizmos, “had to take his spectacles off . . . in order to see him plainly” (168). Mediating lenses may provide intriguing information about detail, but they cannot substitute for the plainness, the ordinariness, the supposed authenticity that comes from direct perception by the eye.

In these examples, we see Carroll and Kingsley interrogating the smallness and otherness of the child by compounding it with the smallness and otherness of the microscopic world.⁴⁰ The

books. [. . .] If she [Alice] were to become absorbed by Wonderland’s illogic and cast her lot among its chimerical inhabitants, she would forever be someone else’s toy. Yet her decision to waken into a world where trees periodically shed their leaves and mortals, just as predictably, shed their lives is intensely painful” (186-7).

³⁹ Knoepfelmacher argues that the first *Alice* book “contains the greater amount of fiction and strife” (166).

⁴⁰ In this chapter I emphasize the similarities between Alice and Tom: both are curious protagonists in 1860s children’s fantasies, both investigate the natural world, both frequently change size, and both are inheritors of the children’s natural history book tradition. However, they are also strikingly different in gender and class. Of relevance to any discussion of Alice is the extensive critical commentary on the sexual dynamics that instrumentalize young girls as vehicles for the fantasies of Victorian gentlemen, and of the frequent conflation of girlhood with childhood in the nineteenth century; see especially Claudia Nelson, *Boys Will Be Girls: The Feminine Ethic and British Children’s Fiction, 1857-1917* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1991); and Catherine Robson,

narrative itself “magnifies” the child protagonist through heightened ethical scrutiny, showing Alice’s bad study habits and Tom’s ignorance of religious duty. It also enlarges the child’s small world for exploration by adult readers; we can follow Alice through the tiny door and Tom into a lobster trap. At the same time, the trope of the lens provides a more literal form of magnification; we see peripheral characters studying the child protagonists through spectacles and microscopes, attempting to make sense of childhood by enlarging it so that it can be perceived on an equal footing with the adult or natural world. Intriguingly, however, both Carroll and Kingsley show the lens as a failure in assisting perception of the child. The railway-guard can’t decide what level of magnification to use on Alice; the giant must eventually disavow all his tools and look at Tom without the mediation of a lens. In the final analysis, the child’s difference from the adult is a matter of scale – but a scale that cannot be adequately expressed or resolved.

Isobel Armstrong has argued in *Victorian Glassworlds* that the microscope – and, to an extent, the telescope, which also operates by “[e]xtreme nearness, and endless varieties in close-up” – frees objects from their “relational coordinates” (317). Looking through the lens of a microscope or telescope *replaces* an actual-size image with a magnified one, rather than providing a “dissolving view,” and therefore resituates the object in an “atopic space” where “[s]cale retreats” and large and small “become incomparable” (317-8).⁴¹ This, according to Armstrong, is the reason that Alice sees a goat and a beetle of equal size on her railway-journey: the technology of the magnifying lens disrupts our ability to perceive norms of spatial relationship. In Kingsley’s *Water-Babies*, we see an extreme example of this tendency to allow the microscopic world to displace the macroscopic one. As Kingsley delves into the world in a drop of water the “real world” drops away. Social problems such as child labor and abuse, industrial pollution, socioeconomic difference, and access to education disappear as we contemplate the grandeur of natural ecology, on the one hand, and of theological principle, on the other. It is not only Blake’s “world in a grain of sand” but also his “heaven in a wild flower” (“Auguries of Innocence” 1-2). But in the *Alice* books, we see a juxtaposition of micro- and macroscopic scales, rather than a displacement of the latter by the former. Instead of providing an escape from the macroscopic world, the microscopic world invades and complicates it. Alice herself may grow and shrink, but she is never in perfect relation to the world around her; there is always a door too small, or a table too large, or an incongruous pairing of creatures and things without regard for size. Our newfound ability to see detail magnified to the size of abstraction creates absurdist confusion. In Stevenson’s “The Little Land,” brief as it is, we see an awareness of both possibilities: the child speaker imaginatively conjures an ability to escape his everyday surroundings by inhabiting the natural world in miniature, as Kingsley’s Tom does, but is recalled, like Alice, to the macroscopic level. Ironically, for Stevenson, it is in the “real world”

Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001). Of relevance to Tom are discussions of child labor in the nineteenth century; see Monica Flegel, *Conceptualizing Cruelty to Children in Nineteenth-Century England: Literature, Representation, and the NSPCC* (Burlington, VT and Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2009); and Lionel Rose, *The Erosion of Childhood: Child Oppression in Britain, 1860-1918* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁴¹ Of course, although Isobel Armstrong has persuasively argued that the cultural force of the microscope was consolidated during the Victorian period, microscopy had been not only an established scientific technology but a literary fascination for several centuries previous. See, for example, Catherine Wilson’s *The Invisible World: Early Modern Philosophy and the Invention of the Microscope* (Princeton UP, 1995) and Julia Schickore’s *The Microscope and the Eye: A History of Reflections, 1740-1870* (U of Chicago P, 2007). Of continuing relevance is Marjorie Nicolson’s 1935 monograph on microscopic tropes in *Gulliver’s Travels*, “The Microscope and English Imagination,” *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages* 16.4: 1-94, reprinted in *Science and Imagination* (Ithaca: Great Seal Books, 1956), p. 155–234.

that the child speaker is out of scale – the “real world” where furnishings are too large and conversations too refined for him.

Armstrong explores the conflict between naturalists who use the microscope to provide evidence of the “argument by design, in which a well-ordered universe indicates divine creation, and divine creation indicates a well-ordered universe” and those (such as Kingsley and Philip Henry Gosse) who view the complex realms of microscopic life as “a world of terror, pain, and violence” that becomes “increasingly violent and voracious” (321). For Kingsley, the conflict between the “terror, pain, and violence” that he perceives in the microscopic world and the divine order that he attempts to wring from it is framed in *The Water-Babies* as a *Pilgrim’s Progress*-style narrative journey for his protagonist, Tom. Initially, as an untutored and primitive creature, Tom both perceives and reproduces an impersonal violence in the underwater world. Kingsley’s narrator tells us that “like some other little boys” he was “very fond of hunting and tormenting creatures for mere sport” and that he “pecked and howked the poor water-things about sadly, till they were all afraid of him, and got out of his way, or crept into their shells” (50). The narrator refuses to pass judgment on whether such cruelty is natural or learned behavior, sidestepping the question by bringing Tom under strict ideological control by a seemingly impersonal force: the retribution of Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid, who mechanically metes out punishments fitting offenders. “If I tried not to do it,” she tells Tom, “I should do it all the same. For I work by machinery, just like an engine; and am full of wheels and springs inside; and am wound up very carefully, so that I cannot help going” (112). Thus Kingsley holds both teleology and the struggle for life in tension as natural forces. When we “zoom in” on the microscopic world, we are confronted with its brutality; Kingsley admits this, but counters it with strong narrative control, redirecting Tom into a world of divine order that he characterizes as equally “natural” with, or more “natural” than, the cruelty of boys.

Carroll’s use of the lens as a trope functions somewhat differently; the microscope challenges the categorical boundaries of the hierarchy of organized life.⁴² It is not only that Alice sees goats and beetles of the same size, but that Carroll’s treatment of her status as a child creates such conflicts: is she an immature specimen of an adult, or a creature in her own right? Does her maturation depend upon physical size or behavior or some combination of the two? What does it mean for her maturation if she can shrink as easily as she can grow? In what world does she belong – human or animal, realistic or fairy-tale, chaotic or organized by the rules of a game? Alice’s constant desire to produce accurate knowledge in order to confirm her own identity (using epistemology to affirm ontology) only further troubles the issue of whether she can or cannot be taxonomized. Carroll’s own formulation of the problem shifts between the two *Alice* books: in *Wonderland*, Alice’s size and status change and she is identified with the lens, while in *Looking-Glass*, she remains stable while viewing and being viewed through a variety of lenses.

Of course, the microscope had a long history in European culture prior to the nineteenth century. Although Armstrong is correct to point out that microscopy gains new prominence and popularity in Victorian Britain due to a variety of factors – such as the new, inexpensive, industrial means of the production of glass and lenses and the intriguing, well-publicized developments in the life sciences associated with Darwin, Spencer, and others – the capacity of the microscope to open up infinity had long been noticed in both scientific and literary circles.⁴³

⁴² Armstrong describes a longstanding conflict between those who argue that “[t]he microscope confirms the hierarchy of organized life” and those (like George Henry Lewes) who use microscopic investigation to challenge and revise “categorical boundaries” (322).

⁴³ See Lois N. Magner, *A History of the Life Sciences* (New York: Marcel Dekker, 2002).

We need only look to Robert Hooke's *Micrographia*, with its narratives of microscopic imagery, or to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, with its manipulations of scale in Lilliput and Brobdingnag, to find seventeenth- and eighteenth-century examples. In *Georgic Modernity and the History of British Romanticism*, Kevis Goodman has offered a reading of the "microscopic eye" as it develops in seventeenth-century natural philosophy and is inherited by eighteenth-century literature. Goodman argues that the microscopic eye "extends the spectatorial model of intellectual labor from the laboratory scrutiny of the natural world to public-sphere institutions and scrutiny of the social world" (40). In her reading of eighteenth century texts, the microscope catalyzes "the fantasy-nightmare of what it would be like if we were to live in such a state of enhanced sensation that our eyes could not help but function as acute . . . microscopes," making us continually aware of our position as part of the crowd. In my reading of nineteenth century fantasy literature, however, the hyper-awareness enabled by the microscope functions differently, lifting us out of the crowd so that we can view society holistically, as an organism in its own right. Instead of making us aware of "the problem of presentness," as Goodman argues it does in the eighteenth century, the nineteenth-century microscopic eye makes us aware of the problems of infinity and omniscience. An ahistorical, atopic image becomes a site of spectacle.

In *The Invisible World: Early Modern Philosophy and the Invention of the Microscope*, Catherine Wilson details the intellectual history accompanying the introduction of microscopes to Europe in the scientific revolution of the early seventeenth century. Like other critics, Wilson identifies a "sense of dislocation induced by the discovery of the microworld" that is counterbalanced by the enthusiasm of philosophers and naturalists for "images of an infinite complexity, regularity, and variety" (251). Yet Wilson cautions that, when it was initially introduced, the microscope allowed naturalists to map and diagram plant and animal tissues, it did not always provide deeper insight into biological processes. Referencing Gaston Bachelard, Wilson argues that, in some ways, the microscope was "an actual impediment to knowledge in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, because it revealed things that were beautiful but that could not lead to the formation of new theories and things that suggested to observers theories of the wrong sort" (251). When nineteenth-century fantasists begin using the microscopic as a distraction from the historical present or from social pressures, or when they segue from the miniature into the dream-state, they are following conceptual patterns established one and even two centuries earlier by scientists. Thus when Armstrong argues that the "glassworld" of the Victorian microscope "brought four disputed accounts of the world close up against the eye," she is referencing, not only contemporary concerns about the microscope made more frequent by the accessibility of the lens, but a series of longstanding debates that reached a climax in the nineteenth century (318). As I have shown, these debates come into focus in relationship to the figure of the child. Not only is the Victorian child another locus for scientific and social controversy, as Sally Shuttleworth has recently demonstrated in *The Mind of the Child*, but the newly strengthened perception of children as different from adults while simultaneously being immature forms of them makes children especially resonant figures when considering the subvisible, miniature, or microscopic. Perhaps this goes a little way toward explaining the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reception of *Gulliver's Travels* as a children's text; there is a sense, not simply that fantastic creatures and adventures are material for child readers, but that radical differences in scale and perception between different versions of humanity are symptomatic of the relationship between children and adults.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ F. J. Harvey Darton, in his seminal history of English children's literature, *Children's Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life*, has argued somewhat romantically that *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe* "always

Conclusion

Novels written for adults, both expurgated and unexpurgated, and didactic literature written for children, including fiction and nonfiction, influenced the development of the child fantasy novel, which emerged in the 1860s. Children's fantasy draws not only on Romantic idealization of childhood, but also on natural history books for children. In children's fantasy novels, we see children functioning both as objects and subjects of reading – as fully-developed readers with a perspective distinct from that of adults, within and outside of the narrative. The *Alice* books and *Water-Babies* associate fantasies of child development with both the subject matter and the form of natural history books for child readers. Natural history is particularly important for our consideration of the child as a reading subject because we see children conflating their reading of the “book of Nature” around them with their reading of literature. Eighteenth-century children's authors and publishers had emphasized the usefulness of natural history as a topic for child readers. As Sally Shuttleworth has argued, developments in nineteenth-century natural history also provided a new medical, psychological, and evolutionary framework in which to examine childhood as a physical and mental condition. As Kingsely and Carroll (and also, to an extent, Robert Louis Stevenson) manipulate the size, scale, and perspective of their child protagonists, they invoke evolutionary discourse. Magnification is particularly generative in this context, as it artificially “grows” a curious specimen *without* developing it – enlargement without maturation, which provides access to minute detail that would otherwise be invisible. This is also the function of nineteenth-century children's fantasy, which attempts both to provide and to gain access to the “miniature” perspective of the child, where previous literature for children had attempted to develop them into rational, moral, informed adults.

Both Victorian interpretations of microscopic images and Victorian textual experiments with child subjects show the same conceptual pattern: epistemology seems to expand in inverse proportion to the scope of perception. That is, the more narrowly and specifically we can know, the more infinite seem the worlds revealed. The figure of the child therefore becomes particularly evocative because the child's nature and experience are delimited subsets of the adult's, yet full of unique potential for a narrow and specific explication of details “invisible” to adults, giving the child an almost technological function as a “focus.”⁴⁵ The minute, textual worlds that can be viewed by the reader through the child are, however, intriguingly different from the natural worlds viewable through the microscope. While the microscope allowed first professionals and then amateurs to see the complexity and voracity of nature on a previously unimaginable scale, the nineteenth-century textual child subject allows authors and readers to travel outside the scope of domestic experience. I have argued here that this property of the child fantasy (and, indeed, the nineteenth-century literature of microscopy) is a “diminutive

were” children's books because “they are . . . straightforward stories told with such superb ease and simplicity, with such absorption of the writer in the subject, that the mere telling is their strength, the secret of their power over young minds” (107). More pertinently, Darton suggests that the interest of the adventure story and the romance contribute to child readership of these texts, and notes that *Gulliver's Travels* was not only redacted but summarized in chapbook form early in its publishing history.

⁴⁵ Cf. Wordsworth's “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” in which we see the child with “at his feet some little plan or chart / Some fragment from his dream of human life, / Shaped by himself with newly-learned art” (7.6-8). It is the child's refraction and condensation of adult modalities that allows him to become the ode's “Mighty prophet! . . . / On whom those truths do rest, / Which we are toiling all our lives to find” (8.7-9).

omniscience,” a universal knowledge catalyzed by a minute focus – a perspectival version of a synecdoche. Becoming more specific paradoxically allows the narrative to increase its “distance” from the objects considered. This diminutive omniscience functions variously as an escape from quotidian concerns, a window into a previously unknowable world, and an opportunity to view adult subjectivity from without.

The diminutive omniscience of *Water-Babies* and the *Alice* books enables readers to participate in the creative reading and misreading of protagonists such as Tom and Alice. For Carroll, the misreading child is creative but chaotic; although misreading results in delightful fantasies and carries a special illogic of its own, it is unsustainable and frequently a source of distress. Readers, both child and adult, enjoy Alice’s amusing misapprehensions, but only from an ironic distance. Alice’s inability to recall her childhood reading accurately, as in her failed recitations of didactic poetry, causes her great anxiety; yet when she is called on to listen to recitations, she often finds them boring and tedious. Carroll imagines a child who can neither fully receive literature nor accurately recapitulate it, but who is a clever reader of the people and situations around her. Though frequently baffled by her circumstances and surroundings in both *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*, Alice quickly deduces the character of each of the strange “people” she encounters. She reads texts poorly, but the world well. Simultaneously, Carroll imagines the child reader of Alice’s story as alternately absorbed and disinterested, and he writes episodically in order to stimulate attention. His love of puns, word-play, and riddles also serves to teach the child reader new forms of decoding, association, and inference – how to be a clever reader.

Kingsley’s Tom in *Water-Babies* is very different from the middle-class Alice; as a chimney-sweep, he is illiterate and inexperienced. His redemption must include the cultivation of literacy, literally and figuratively, and climaxes with his nonlinguistic “reading” of the pictographic fable of the “doasyoulikes,” in which he experiences absorption, sympathy, and identification – all the marks of a proficient Victorian child reader. His education is accompanied by a regression from civilization to nature, from boy to water-baby, and from life to death. Tom’s entrance into language parallels his entrance into nature, and his understanding of his own place in the natural world (and the supernatural world) must be preceded and enabled by his ability to read a fable and understand its moral. While Tom is taught to be a good little water-baby by reading Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid’s moral tale, however, the child reader of *Water-Babies* experiences Kingsley’s much more sarcastic, heterogeneous, and self-undermining narrator as an ironic filter. Although Kingsley’s child protagonist moves from defiance to obedience, and from ignorance to knowledge, the child reader of *Water-Babies* is encouraged to move from educated skepticism to childlike wonder and from faith in civilization to doubt of its effects. In other words, as Tom is civilized by being turned into a reader, the child reader is de-civilized, returned to a more “naturally” childish state (belief in the fantastic) and to a pre-industrial state of nature (nostalgia for a pastoral age). Hence the great paradox of *Water-Babies*, and the reason it has often been censored or expurgated for child readers: its content is didactic, religious, and conservative, but its form is fantastic, irreverent, and playful. Kingsley imagines his child reader capable of recognizing the moral while ironically disdaining its simplicity.

It should be clear by now that both Kingsley and Carroll have high expectations for their child readers, and indeed it is difficult to say to what extent Victorian children would have understood the complicated narrative appeals of *Water-Babies* and the *Alice* books. M. O. Grenby’s recent research on the history of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century child readers, however, suggests that children were “very active” and “regulated readers” of both educational

and entertaining works (252-3). Grenby demonstrates that children's reading, even when casual, tended to be chosen by adults and worked through in small groups or under adult supervision: "[t]he supervising adult was widely understood as vital in mediating the text to the child, becoming in effect its co-creator" (252). Thus the reading behavior of fictional children such as Jane Eyre, David Copperfield, and Maggie Tulliver – and its basis in the actual childhood reading behavior of Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot – would have been perceived as "transgressive" (252). Authors such as Kingsley and Carroll, therefore, would likely have expected that a "mediating adult" would have been present to guide the response of the Victorian child reader to their works – especially because each of them functioned, for the children in his own life, in this mediating role. The creative misreading that is depicted in and encouraged by fantasies like *Water-Babies* and *Alice* is therefore less revolutionary than it seems – noting the tendency of children to remake texts for themselves, as we see Jane, David, and Maggie do, authors and parents alike work to institutionalize this creative reading behavior, to normalize and control it. Misreading becomes the appropriate form of reading for the imagined Victorian child, losing some of its transgressive power as it enters the cultural mainstream. By teaching how to misread, the child fantasy novel directs the form of their misreading into "appropriate" whimsical channels – yet also inculcates a resistance to its own mechanisms of control.

Yet, by the end of the nineteenth century, the most successful fantasists are those who reject this strategy. In J. M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* (1911), it is not the child subject whose preoccupation with the small and surprising enables psychological expansion for the adult reader; rather, it is the adult – specifically the mother – who is able to penetrate and manipulate the subjectivity of children:

It is the nightly custom of every good mother after her children are asleep to rummage in their minds and put things straight for next morning, repacking into their proper places the many articles that have wandered during the day. If you could keep awake (but of course you can't) you would see your own mother doing this, and you would find it very interesting to watch her. It is quite like tidying up drawers. You would see her on her knees, I expect, lingering humorously over some of your contents, wondering where on earth you had picked this thing up, making discoveries sweet and not so sweet, pressing this to her cheek as if it were as nice as a kitten, and hurriedly stowing that out of sight. When you wake in the morning, the naughtinesses and evil passions with which you went to bed have been folded up small and placed at the bottom of your mind; and on the top, beautifully aired, are spread out your prettier thoughts, ready for you to put on.
(72-3)

Mrs. Darling's ridiculous yet disturbing intrusion into the minds of her children reverses the terms of "diminutive omniscience" as I have laid it out. Rather than taking on the child's perspective in order to broaden the narrative, Barrie shows us a tableau of parental surveillance and psychological domination that creates order and structure. Manipulation of the unconscious child's mind and personality takes on the character of a domestic chore, "tidying up drawers," and involves a certain degree of subservience, perhaps even condescension, on the part of the adult – Mrs. Darling is "on her knees." The child cannot resist this intrusion – "of course you can't" keep awake, the narrator tells us. Yet the invasion of the child's mind by "every good mother" involves, not the planting of thoughts, but the reshuffling of thoughts already there. In the most generous interpretation, the mother in this passage is helping the child to become his or

her best self by bringing intelligent, sweet, and positive thoughts to the forefront – although from our post-Freudian perspective we might balk at the idea that the best thing to do with “naughtinesses and evil passions” is to hide them away.

Mrs. Darling’s ventures into the minds of her children, and the narrative as it follows her, represent a twentieth-century turn away from the technique I have been calling “diminutive omniscience.” No longer do fantasists look at the world through the lens of the child; now they delve *into* the child’s thoughts, subtly or not so subtly establishing emotional and intellectual order that will fit the child for adult participation in society. We cannot not look “through” Wendy Darling (or Dorothy Gale, or Lucy Pevensie, or any number of early twentieth-century child fantasy protagonists) in the same way that we look through Kingsley’s Tom, Carroll’s Alice, or Stevenson’s unnamed child speakers. Instead, we look *at* them; they have become the objects of psychological scrutiny, and their possession of surnames helps to identify them as individual cases, rather than fairy-tale types. The “glassworld” has been replaced by the domestic interior, moving us from transparency to opacity. Yet we must realize that, in the first “golden age” of children’s literature in the mid-nineteenth century, children’s fantasy mobilized a completely different series of narrative connections – between magnification and growth, the microscopic and the infinite, the lens and the world.

Chapter 4

Autobiography as Anthology: Re-Reading Victorian Childhoods

Often when her mother was too busy or too irritated to attend to her, she would sit and gaze on a page that might as well have been printed in Hebrew for all she could make of it, frowning and poring over the print as though she would wring out the meaning by force of concentration.

After weeks of this, there came a day when, quite suddenly, as it seemed to her, the printed characters took on a meaning. There were still many words, even in the first pages of that simple primer, she could not decipher; but she could skip those and yet make sense of the whole. "I'm reading! I'm reading!" she cried aloud. "Oh, Mother! Oh, Edmund! I'm reading!"

– Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford*

Introduction

The foregoing chapters have interrogated the relationship between how fictional Victorian children read and how we as readers respond to them. In the Romantic novels of Maria Edgeworth and Walter Scott, pedagogical strategies intermingle with fictional strategies, making childhood education not only the beginning of a narrative, but the mode in which it progresses. In the *Bildungsromane* of Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot, childhood reading becomes an occasion for creativity, as misreading, misremembering, and manipulating books encountered in childhood provide the opportunity for the creation of new narratives. In the child fantasy novels of Lewis Carroll and Charles Kingsley, the reading strategies invoked by eighteenth-century nonfiction works for children, particularly natural history books, culminate in new forms of imaginative childhood experience. In this final chapter, I turn from fiction to nonfiction, considering three real, if unusual, Victorians who reflect on their childhood reading practices in their autobiographies: John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin, and Edmund Gosse.¹ Like Brontë, Dickens, and Eliot, who lightly fictionalized their own childhoods as they developed new relationships between the first-person narrator and the reader, Mill, Ruskin and Gosse use their memories of childhood to fashion new relationships between their past and present selves.² The

¹ Notably, the autobiographers treated in this chapter are all male and all participate in the dominant British autobiographical tradition that descends, according to Linda Peterson, "from Bunyan to the Victorians . . . through a series of minor but popular practitioners of the spiritual autobiography in the eighteenth century" (*Victorian Autobiography* 3). Peterson's second book, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography*, discusses "possible self-representational modes available to, acknowledged, or created by women writers" while rejecting a simple binary between men's and women's autobiographical traditions (3). See Peterson, *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), and *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography: The Poetics and Politics of Life Writing* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1999).

² The question of whether to treat the semi-autobiographical novels of the nineteenth century as versions or extensions of autobiography is a fraught one. Linda Peterson notes that although "there is a convergence of the novel and some forms of the autobiography at the end of the nineteenth century," nevertheless critical treatment of autobiography as novel or vice versa is often a "mistake" (*Victorian Autobiography* 5, 6). In particular, Peterson argues that "the novelist takes primary delight in the telling of his tale" while the autobiographer "often summarizes or curtails his narrative" because he is interested "in interpretation rather than in narrative self-expression" (6). For

strange ways that these Victorian sages played as children come to represent the strange ways that we should read them – a strangeness encoded in their childhood experience of learning to read, and in the way that they craft this experience in narrative.

In approaching “Victorian autobiography” as a coherent genre, I am confronting the difficulty in distinguishing autobiography from other forms of life writing such as memoir, diary, or compiled papers,³ and the slippery boundary between autobiography and the use of autobiographical motifs in first-person fiction.⁴ Following Clinton Machann, I understand autobiography through Phillipe Lejune’s definition: “[r]etrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (trans. Leary, qtd. in Machann 3). Most importantly for this project, the qualification “retrospective” implies that autobiography includes “aesthetic distance between the narrator and the protagonist,” the collapsing of which is part of the autobiographical project (Machann 8). I am interested in the way that this aesthetic distance is complicated when the narrator-author is an adult and the protagonist is a child. Accordingly, the nineteenth-century autobiographies discussed in this chapter are those which devote considerable attention to the writer’s child self. Moreover, in keeping with the focus of this project on “reading children,” I am specifically interested in autobiographers who narrate their process of becoming literate in detail. Thus even autobiographers who record poignant childhood memories, such as Anthony Trollope and Harriet Martineau, are omitted here because they do not give us sustained insight into the relationship between children and their books.⁵

In *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation*,⁶ Linda Peterson examines the significance of reading for nineteenth-century British authors engaged in the project of self-definition. Peterson argues that “the history of autobiography as a genre begins with either a mirror or a book,” that is, that critics approach the genre either as “one of self-presentation,” taking Rousseau’s *Confessions* as the quintessential example, or one of “self-interpretation,” taking Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding* as the model (2-3). The works of Victorian autobiographers participate in the latter tradition, in which “autobiography begins . . . in the act of reading, initially the book of Scripture but later other books of autobiography, and this act of reading provides the versions of history that autobiographers then use to interpret the lives they

the purposes of this chapter I treat autobiography as distinct from, though closely related to, the autobiographical novel, not only because of this difference in narrative style, but because the significance of child reading is different. See also n. 4 below.

³ A traditional distinction suggests that autobiography is internally focused on the development of the self, while memoir is externally focused on the subject’s participation in history. Obviously this distinction is rarely maintained with exactitude in any given text. Both autobiography and memoir are understood to be retrospective, while diary and collected letters or papers give textual evidence produced contemporaneously with its documentation. See Machann 3-4.

⁴ Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* are often read as autobiographies, or with particular regard for their autobiographical elements. See, for example, Robert L. Patten, “Autobiography into Autobiography: The Evolution of *David Copperfield*” in *Approaches to Victorian Autobiography* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1979): 269-291, and Linda H. Peterson, “‘The Feelings and Claims of Little People’: Heroic Missionary Memoirs, Domestic(ated) Spiritual Autobiography, and *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*” in *Traditions of Victorian Women’s Autobiography: The Poetics and Politics of Life Writing* (University Press of Virginia, 1999): 80-108.

⁵ However, it is worth noting that both Trollope and Martineau mention childhood reading in passing and acknowledge its importance. Trollope discusses his youthful reading of Shakespeare, Scott, Austen, and Milton in conjunction with his ability to construct narrative fantasies, the root of his capacity as a novelist (*Autobiography* Ch. 3). Martineau remembers finding a copy of *Paradise Lost* as “one of the leading incidents of my life,” although she generally describes composing juvenilia more frequently than childhood reading (61, 41).

⁶ New Haven: Yale UP, 1986.

tell” (3). However, Victorian autobiographers, resistant to biblical typology, vary the genre to “create space within the form for individual differences” and thus “the Victorian autobiographer tended to subvert his literary heritage or hide it” (19). My reading of the autobiographies of Mill, Ruskin, and Gosse explores one form of this subversion, the association of literary influence with childhood reading. For each of these authors, childhood reading forms an adult writing subject. By conflating literary influence with childhood experience, they acknowledge the formative input of canonical literature while also subverting it as part of immature experience. Peterson’s *Victorian Autobiography* focuses on two autobiographers who engage in formal experiments, Ruskin and Carlyle, and three who “establish new directions for autobiography,” Newman, Martineau, and Gosse (28). Peterson’s analysis omits John Stuart Mill, whose *Autobiography* exhibits greater continuity with literary tradition, drawing especially heavily on Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding* and on Wordsworth’s *Prelude*. By placing Mill in conversation with Ruskin and Gosse, I illuminate the significance of childhood experience for nineteenth-century prose autobiographers, and of childhood reading for the narration of the self.

As Luann Walther has noted, the Victorian period is the first age in which English autobiographers are typically interested in recording their childhood memories in detail, and establishes our contemporary expectation that life writing include a childhood narrative.⁷ In this sense, Walther argues, “the Victorian autobiographical childhood is . . . a literary one,” and the child is put to dueling “literary uses” as “both an ideal innocent and a selfish fallen creature” (65, 69). Walther does not discuss Wordsworth’s influence, which cannot be understated here. The 1850 publication of *The Prelude*, in which Wordsworth describes how he “held unconscious intercourse with beauty” during his childhood, demonstrated and encouraged the incorporation of youthful memories into autobiographical reflection (ln. 562., 1850 ver.). Elizabeth K. Helsinger has argued that Victorian prose autobiographers, except Ruskin,⁸ tended to participate in the same tradition with Wordsworth, while poets such as Tennyson, Arnold, and Browning “expressed their discontent with Wordsworth’s sublime egotism” and used formal experimentation “to explore a different concept of selfhood” (4). Mill and Gosse explicitly identify with Wordsworth and acknowledge his influence. For Mill, Wordsworth’s poems are “the very culture of the feelings, which I was in quest of” (121), and Wordsworth’s acknowledgement that “the first freshness of youthful enjoyment of life was not lasting” (122) is an enormous relief.⁹ For Gosse, Wordsworth is a kindred spirit, who began to experience “unconscious intercourse with nature” (99) at a similar moment in his childhood,¹⁰ but whose works are more profitably read as an adult than as a child (230).¹¹

Yet the connection between nineteenth-century autobiography, childhood, and literariness goes far beyond the fact that English-language autobiographies begin to include narratives of childhood as a matter of course during this period. As this chapter will show, in the memoirs of Mill, Ruskin, and Gosse, autobiographical reflection is dominated by childhood memories, and

⁷ See Walther, “The Invention of Childhood in Victorian Autobiography” in *Approaches to Victorian Autobiography*, ed. George P. Landow (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1979): 64-81.

⁸ Helsinger argues that Ruskin’s *Praeterita* is fundamentally different from Wordsworth’s *Prelude* because *Praeterita* “portrays introspective journeying as isolated, self-involved, and finally fruitless” (12). See Elizabeth K. Helsinger, “Ulysses to Penelope,” in *Approaches to Victorian Autobiography*, ed. George Landow (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1979) 3-25.

⁹ Mill notes that he is reading Wordsworth’s “miscellaneous poems, in the two-volume edition of 1815” (120).

¹⁰ In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth feels himself communing with nature aged ten; Gosse, bizarrely competitive in his record of self-awareness, claims that he had the same feeling at age nine. See Gosse 99.

¹¹ Gosse writes that, at age sixteen, he was “still too young” for the “exercise” of Wordsworth’s “magic” (230).

childhood is dominated by the memory of becoming literate. Childhood is not merely included in the autobiographies of these three men, but overshadows them, and is itself defined by literacy and literariness. Two dimensions of literacy are narrated by each of these autobiographers, which I will refer to as basic literacy and canonical literacy. Basic literacy consists of learning to decode written language through skills such as learning the alphabet, recognizing letters on the page, reading aloud, and writing.¹² Canonical literacy, by contrast, consists of reading widely in the celebrated literature of the culture at hand and becoming familiar with texts that are known to all educated men¹³ – in nineteenth-century Britain, this canon necessarily includes works such as Shakespeare’s plays, *Robinson Crusoe*, the novels of Walter Scott, Romantic poetry, and the Bible.¹⁴ For Mill, Ruskin, and Gosse, basic literacy is conflated with the affective states of early childhood, while canonical literacy is conflated with the development of the self over time. In other words, these autobiographers tend to substitute their memories of learning how to read for their memories of how it felt to be a child, and they tend to substitute the catalog of works that they have read for their construction of an adult self. The subject of the autobiography becomes not only a character, but an anthology – a summation of all his childhood reading.

Mill’s *Autobiography* (1873), which recounts his rigorous intellectual tutelage by his Benthamite father, is one of the most famous and most influential Victorian prose memoirs, and substantially influenced the composition of Ruskin’s *Praeterita* (1885-89) and Gosse’s *Father and Son* (1907). Writing in the 1850s and 1860s, Mill, born in 1806, reflects on his childhood in the 1810s. His demanding education, which included learning Greek from the age of three and Latin from the age of eight, studying geometry and algebra, reading widely among classical and English literature and history, composing in both prose and verse, and tutoring his younger siblings, was “unusual and remarkable” for his or any time (25). The utilitarian philosophy with which he was raised precipitated an intellectual and emotional crisis for him as a young adult, resolved by his reading of Romantic literature. His account of this unusual education comes to dominate autobiographers in subsequent decades. Many features of Mill’s memoir recur in the autobiographies of Gosse and Ruskin, including the dominance of childhood over the rest of the author’s life and the formative nature of the author’s childhood reading. Gosse in particular owes a great deal to Mill, as he models his conflict with his own father, and his decision to move out from under his father’s intellectual shadow, on Mill’s. Like Mill, Ruskin and Gosse both develop

¹² “Basic literacy” is therefore not the same as “functional literacy,” which consists of mastering reading and writing skills to the level necessary for participation as a regular adult member of a culture.

¹³ E. D. Hirsch, Jr.’s concept of “cultural literacy,” which treats literacy as a form of “acculturation” that “requires the early and continued transmission of specific information,” is similar (xvii). For Hirsch, however, cultural literacy should be cultivated by all citizens in order to improve the quality of public, national discourse, whereas the “canonical literacy” that I describe is an initiation into a semi-private, privileged, intellectual and aesthetic discourse. See Hirsch, Jr., E. D., Joseph F. Kett, and James S. Trefil, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

¹⁴ In *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, William St. Clair has described the crystallization of “the old canon” in the late eighteenth century, when the expiration of copyright restrictions enabled publishers to reissue the works of many out-of-print authors in affordable editions, compile anthologies, and use excerpts in schoolroom readers. The works of contemporary writers, still subject to copyright, were more expensive and therefore not as easily accessible to middle- and lower-class readers or as thoroughly integrated into compilations. In terms of poetry, “[t]he old canon began with Chaucer and ended with Cowper,” and its “core” was “Samuel Butler, some works of Chaucer, Collins, Cowper, Dryden, Falconer, Gay, Goldsmith, Gray, Milton, Pope, Shakespeare, Spenser, Thomson, and Young” (128). Prose fiction was represented by “*Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, the many works of Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett, Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Johnson’s *Rasselas* and Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, and . . . many translations from French, Spanish, and German” (130). See William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2004).

an expansive sense of intellectual play in the narratives of their lives by characterizing their childhood play as a peculiar combination of deprivation and richness.

Ruskin, remembered now primarily for his aesthetic criticism, composed his autobiography *Praeterita*¹⁵ gradually over the course of five years, partly from occasional recollections, partly by anthologizing fragments from his other personal and published writings. Suffering from increasingly severe mental illness, he finally abandoned the project in 1889, four chapters into the third volume, when he was no longer capable of writing. Reflecting on his 1820s childhood, Ruskin recalls harsh discipline and few toys, and being severely whipped if he caused any disruptive noise or accident; the discipline meted out by his parents must have been extreme even by relative Victorian standards, as he was able to remain motionless and silent at age three to have his portrait painted.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Ruskin finds pleasure in the minutiae of interior design – the knots in a wooden floor, the patterns in wallpaper and bedspreads, the brick facade of a wall outside his window. He describes learning to amuse himself by observing patterns in nature and man-made objects, playing in the family garden, and reading. He is particularly fond of re-reading, boasting of his ability to forget the texts he has read in the past and revisit them with the same eagerness and interest as before. All of these forms of quiet concentration, he suggests, leave him with a peaceful disposition and significant intellectual stamina.

Gosse, son of the naturalist Philip Henry Gosse, survives in the literary canon today as the author of *Father and Son*, in which he builds the mythology of Victorianism by casting himself as the representative of a new age, his father as the last of an idiosyncratic old guard. Like Mill, Gosse must contend with a father whose private affections are often subordinated to his role as a public intellectual. In *Father and Son*, which combines biography and autobiography while claiming to be neither, Gosse narrates only the portion of his life during which he interacted with his father; when he throws off his father's religious and intellectual domination at the significant age of twenty-one, the text ends. The young Edmund Gosse seems to have had fewer toys even than Ruskin; living entirely in the company of his parents and their adult friends, he looks back in 1907 on his nineteenth-century childhood to record that he had “no young companions, no story books, no outdoor amusements, none of the thousand and one employments provided for other children in more conventional surroundings” (53).¹⁷ Writing of his childhood in the 1850s, Gosse remembers isolation from other children and families, strict religious scruples, and a complete absence of childish games and, in his earlier years, fictional reading. The few books to which he does have access are his passion, and his interest is absorbed by the poetic sound of language, whether in the cadence of Bible verses and sermons or in the works of Shakespeare. Gosse reads widely, if not well, in the natural history and travel literature

¹⁵ According to Tim Hilton, Ruskin told Kate Greenaway that “the title [*Praeterita*] ‘means merely past things’” (ix). Clinton Machann glosses it as “what is past” (81). There is also presumably an allusion to the rhetorical device *praeteritio*, also known as paralipsis, “by which a speaker or writer feigns to ignore or pass over a matter and thus draws attention to it” (Cuddon 637).

¹⁶ Luann Walther has commented on the odd combination of the “denial and deprivation” which Ruskin experienced in childhood and his contrastingly pleasant recollections of that time: “Victorians, for whom the realities of early life were sometimes brutal or at least unpleasant, nevertheless participated in a culture which regarded childhood so ambivalently that many autobiographers praised parents whom they might have blamed, and recalled comfort and happiness when they had reason to remember otherwise” (65). Walther identifies an emphasis on childhood adversity as one of two defining characteristics of nineteenth-century British autobiography (69).

¹⁷ Compare Dickens's Nell, whose grandfather reminds her that she has spent her life “knowing no companions of thy own age nor any childish pleasures” (*Old Curiosity Shop* 32). See Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, 1841 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008).

approved by his strict Calvinist father, finding interest in the sound even when he does not understand or care for the sense.

All three of these Victorian autobiographers characterize the ways that they played as children as private, individualized, and intellectualized experience. Mill, Ruskin, and Gosse each remember developing creative forms of play in response to a series of deprivations: the absence of other children, a lack of normal toys, and religious or philosophical strictures that prevent many regular forms of entertainment.¹⁸ In each case, the creative varieties of play these young men develop center around their reading process – how they learn to read, how they become familiar with the body of imaginative literature to which their parents have restricted access, and how they make use of re-reading to comfort or stimulate themselves. The entrance into language is both a social skill and a private escape, offering opportunities to learn about the world beyond the family unit, but also providing access to a private fantasy realm. Mill learns to read not once but twice, first being drilled in basic literacy not only in English but in Greek and Latin, but later re-learning to read when he discovers the affective quality of literature as a young man. Gosse privileges sound over sense, finding seductive magical power in poetic language, and sometimes missing the meaning of passages altogether when he finds himself enraptured by prosody. Ruskin emphasizes the pleasure of re-reading, which is, for him, simultaneously surprising and serene.

Re-reading is a particularly important trope to explore in the generic context of autobiography, because autobiographies necessarily present us with the opportunity to re-read the life of the author along with him. When Ruskin and Gosse show us their child selves reading the same texts over and over again, they are also showing us the strategies they use to interrogate their own childhood experience. Gosse uses re-reading to change the tenor of the reading experience, varying from quick to slow, from reading for plot to reading for prosody. Ruskin uses re-reading to soothe himself, revisiting familiar works, but also to recreate the initial surprise and suspense of the first reading experience. Mill, by contrast, does not depict himself re-reading in the early stages of his *Autobiography*, but merely enumerates the many different forms of reading that comprise his experience. The child Mill is meant to be, in his father's educational scheme, the summation of the many books which he masters; his revelatory experience of literature consists not simply of fiction and affect, but of the pleasure and power of re-reading. Ruskin and Gosse, like the adolescent Mill, show the development of their childhood subjectivity as the deepening that comes from repeated experience of the same books.

Delight and Re-Reading in Mill

John Stuart Mill's 1873 *Autobiography* is famous for two things: the incredible rigor and breadth of Mill's education under the supervision of his father, and the emotional crisis Mill faces as a young adult equipped with nothing but utilitarian philosophy to support him. Both of these aspects center on Mill's relationship to reading: first, reading functions as a schoolroom exercise in which the child Mill engages in order to build up a useful stockpile of knowledge, and later reading comes to function in addition as a therapeutic exercise in which the young adult Mill engages in order to establish affective meaning. As a child, Mill becomes a sort of anthology for historical and classical reading, building up his own consciousness and identity by accruing the experience of one text after another. Guided in all things by what is useful, his

¹⁸ Walther suggests that both Ruskin and Gosse deliberately establish connections between the harsh treatment they endure as children – that, in fact, their parents' restrictions cause, rather than impair, their adult creativity (73).

father James Mill puts him on a schedule of reading, summarizing, and synthesizing, which develops his capacity for memorization and his familiarity with languages, history, philosophy, political theory, and mathematics. Mill claims, with apparently innocent modesty, that he does not see his own intellectual capacity as unusual, but that he writes about it for the public in order to record his father's educational strategies.

The earliest educational experience Mill describes is not learning to read English, but learning to read Greek; his memory of infant literacy is displaced from the vernacular onto the antique language and separated from language as speech. In fact, what he records is not being introduced to Greek, but the fact that he has been told he was taught Greek from the age of three – he himself does not recall the beginning of the lessons.¹⁹ In order to teach his son Greek, James Mill turns himself into a living cross-language dictionary, stationing the young John Stuart Mill beside his desk as he writes and allowing the boy to interrupt him every time he needs to know the translation of a word (28).²⁰ “I was forced to have recourse to him,” Mill writes, “for the meaning of every word which I did not know” (28). This substitution of the individual mind for a printed volume will continue throughout the young Mill's education. From ages four to seven, he goes on morning walks with his father, during which he summarizes he previous day's reading. Here the young Mill becomes like the histories that he has read, recounting narratives – just as each book reveals its story to John Stuart Mill, “I told the story to him [my father],” he recalls (29). Father and son not only occupy themselves with books, but become like reference works themselves.

Perhaps even more impressive than the quantity of literature Mill read as a child, or the very young age at which he read it, is his ability to recall so many of the books forty years later. Mill's detailed reading list forms most of the first chapter of his autobiography. At this early age, the young Mill is able to distinguish between adult and children's books, and to understand that he is moving between several literary canons. Most of the books his father gives him to read are histories, with some travel narratives thrown in. He lists more than a dozen historical works, covering England, Europe, Greece, and Rome, each of which becomes the subject of a detailed conversation with his father. Mill must “restate . . . in my own words” the substance of each book, and in these conversations his father, like an editor, provides additional background for the books and corrects any misapprehensions Mill might have (30). For example, when Mill first reads about the American Revolution, he takes “the wrong side, because it was called the English side,” and his youthful patriotism must be corrected and transformed into a more thoughtful political stance – or, at least, an imitation of his father's political stance (30). Some of the books that his father assigns him are uninteresting, and he admits that he would not have read them unless he had been told to; others, especially travel literature, he “never wearied of reading” (30). All of these, however, are regular or adult literature in Mill's opinion; the children's literature he reads is more select:

Of children's books, any more than of playthings, I had scarcely any, except an occasional gift from a relation or acquaintance: among those I had, *Robinson Crusoe* was preeminent, and continued to delight me through all my boyhood. It was no part of my father's system to exclude books of amusement, though he

¹⁹ Mill's inability to remember his earliest instruction in the basic skills of literacy will be echoed by Edmund Gosse, who tells the reader that he “cannot recollect a time when a printed page of English was closed to me” (47); by contrast, autobiographers such as Harriet Martineau, John Ruskin, and Flora Thompson describe learning to decode individual letters and words in great detail.

²⁰ At this period James Mill was composing his *History of British India*. See Mill 26.

allowed them very sparingly. Of such books he possessed at that time next to none, but he borrowed several for me; those which I remember are, the *Arabian Nights*, Cazotte's *Arabian Tales*, *Don Quixote*, Miss Edgeworth's *Popular Tales*, and a book of some reputation in its day, Brooke's *Fool of Quality*. (30)

Mill's catalog of the "books of amusement" to which he has access echoes the reading of other middle- and upper-class Victorian children. David Copperfield, like Dickens himself, reads and retells the *Arabian Nights*; Ruskin remembers reading *Don Quixote* and some of Edgeworth's tales; Jane Eyre's nurse tells her stories cribbed from *The Fool of Quality*. *Robinson Crusoe*, the *Arabian Nights*, and Edgeworth's tales were all standard offerings for young readers in the early and mid-nineteenth century.²¹ Mill, like the reading community around him, does not clearly distinguish between "children's books" and "books of amusement," mixing all forms of fiction together, whether they are short stories written specifically for children (Edgeworth), or sprawling prose narratives (Cervantes), or didactic novels (Brooke), or fantastic stories bowdlerized and prized for their exoticism (*Arabian Nights*). Mill also associates "children's books" and "playthings"; as we will see in the cases of Ruskin and Gosse, Victorian parents who restrict access to one of these commonly restrict access to both, apparently believing that children's books are more like toys than they are like adult literature.

Two distinctions regarding his early education are important to Mill. One is the difference between "voluntary" and "compulsory" exercises; the other is the difference between various kinds of reading experiences – shared and private, entertaining and dull. Many of Mill's "voluntary" reading and writing activities are simply extensions of the projects enjoined by his father. He summarizes his previous night's reading during morning walks as "a voluntary rather than a prescribed exercise" (29); he "voluntarily" reads all of Livy rather than simply the selection his father gives him (31); and he composes historical essays as a "voluntary exercise" (33). In each case, Mill voluntarily extends, reflects on, or imitates the reading that he is most comfortable with and has done most extensively – prose history. "[C]ompulsory" and "disagreeable" activities to which he is subjected include teaching his younger siblings (30-31), composing English verse (34), and reading aloud in Greek (39-40). In these activities, Mill is out of his comfort zone; he is asked to write English verse before he has read extensively in it, to read aloud in Greek without being given examples of the inflection that he should use, and to teach his sisters to recite Latin passages that he himself may not have fully mastered.

The second distinction Mill recognizes is between shared and private reading experiences. His default experience of texts as a child is shared; his father carefully curates the books to which he is exposed, giving the young Mill specific volumes to read and master, frequently keeping the boy at his side while lessons are read, and establishing continuing dialogues between them about the reading. As we will see, the interactive co-reading that James and John Stuart Mill engage in substantially differs from the solitary reading experiences of Gosse, who privately stumbles across interesting volumes left on shelves within his reach, or Ruskin, who overhears his father read aloud to his mother. James Mill creates a deliberate, and, as John Stuart Mill depicts it, uninterrupted tutor-student relationship between himself and his son. Mill even goes so far as to refer to his father as his "schoolmaster" (44). In their reading dyad, each book functions as a third term mediating their relationship. The young Mill rarely reads in manner that is truly alone or unsupervised. Even when he reads for amusement, he is reading books that his father "borrowed" (30) or "put into my hands" (35), and he "hardly became acquainted" with contemporary poetry, which his father disliked, until adulthood (35).

²¹ See M. O. Grenby, *The Child Reader 1700-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011).

Their reading relationship also extends to James Mill's composition of his *History of India*, the manuscript of which John reads aloud to him while he corrects the proofs. James Mill's willingness to turn his own authorial practices into a shared reading experience with his young son (John was twelve when the *History* was published) attests to the reciprocal nature of the relationship.

In his early youth, the emotion that Mill associates with pleasurable reading is repeatedly described as "delight." He tells us, for example, that "*Robinson Crusoe* . . . continued to delight me through all my boyhood" (30), that Pope's verse translation of the *Iliad* was "one of the books in which for many years I most delighted" (31), that "Roman history . . . continued to delight me" (32-33), and that he was "intensely delighted with" Scott's novels (35). By contrast, when Mill describes to the reader of the *Autobiography* the pleasure that his father took in reading, James Mill is described as "admiring" (or not admiring) the works in question. James Mill, John tells us, "never was a great admirer of Shakespeare" and "had the highest admiration" for Milton (35); he assigns his son to read "Ricardo's admirable pamphlets" on economics (43). The difference between "admiration" and "delight" in the responses of these two readers is, Mill implies, the difference between their intellectual temperaments. Mill enjoys reading that brings him pleasure; his father enjoys reading that causes him to respect an author or the author's skill in composition. For Mill, a text can bring enjoyment and be an end in itself; for his father, texts provide opportunities for disciplined engagement with ideas and authors on a strict hierarchy.

The younger Mill's ability to "delight" in his childhood reading, and his attachment to this feeling of delight, will prepare him both for his emotional crisis as a young man and for its resolution. He will identify the problem of his education as the fact that it prepared him to take "no delight in virtue or the general good, but also just as little in anything else" (115). For Mill, delight is an essential component of living, but is also something that he has been trained not to experience, even in the principles that he was raised to value most highly. Although delight was a spontaneous response to his childhood reading, he seems unable to recreate it as an adult until it is once again initiated in response to literature. When he begins to take solace in Romantic literature, he will record "the delight which these [Wordsworth's] poems gave me" (121). In his reading of Carlyle, he unites both his own and his father's forms of readerly pleasure, telling us that he reads *Sartor Resartus* "with enthusiastic admiration and the keenest delight" (139). At this moment, Mill is finally able to balance the two impulses – delight, or autonomous joy, and admiration, or joy with an object.

Mill's readerly pleasure expresses itself in the desire to re-read. The travel narratives that his father gives him are "[t]wo books which I never wearied of reading," and *Robinson Crusoe* "*continued* to delight me through all my boyhood" (30, emphasis added). When Mill encounters Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, he returns to it over and over again for "many years" and tells us that he "read it from twenty to thirty times through" (31). He also relives favorite texts, reciting or singing Scott's songs "internally, to a music of my own" (35). While the histories and philosophical treatises that his father assigns him are good for one reading, so that the information they contain can be assimilated into Mill's mind, his pleasurable reading bears repetition. His intellectual and emotional crisis reaches its peak when re-reading ceases to sustain him, when his "favorite books" no longer bring him "relief" or "comfort" (113). Along with his philosophical revelation – that happiness must be the indirect, rather than the direct, end of human endeavor – Mill undergoes a readerly revelation: that the pleasure of the "imaginative arts" such as poetry is itself a kind of meaning (118). That is, he learns that delight is an end in itself. Notably, he is strongly affected by Wordsworth, not on a first reading, but on a re-reading,

which takes place during a period in his life at which he is fitted to sympathize with Wordsworthian sentiments (120).

As a child, Mill demonstrates two very different tendencies as a reader: the ability to progress through one book after another under his father's guidance, and the inclination to repeatedly revisit the books that he finds entertaining and emotionally satisfying. His linear progress through a library of classic and scholarly texts turns him into a walking anthology or library – a compendium of information that supplies him with the raw material for philosophical analysis. Yet, at the same time, his re-reading of favorite texts creates a space in which to generate delight over and over again – a space in which narratives are never ended and reading is never complete. Importantly, Mill finds delight in re-reading both fiction and nonfiction, both prose and poetry, both adult literature and children's books. Delight, and the impulse to re-read, are entirely subjective and are not constrained to any particular genre or intended audience, and require no specific degree of verisimilitude. By contrast, Edmund Gosse will experience the effects of reading, not as joyous identification, but as mystical rapture.

Gosse's Transcendent Reading

Subsequent Victorian autobiographies will in many cases follow Mill's precedent of including, not only a narrative of childhood experience, but a detailed description of childhood education, particularly literary education. The Victorian child comes to be defined by his books: the library to which he has access, the books with which he engages deeply and repeatedly, and the emotional response he has to reading. Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*, in particular, revisits Mill's emphasis on childhood education, his depiction of the father-son relationship as a schoolroom dynamic, and his characterization of childhood as emotionally deprived. In Gosse's case, however, the deprivation stems, not only from emotional distance, but from his parents' religious fervor. Though Gosse's reading is far more restricted than Mill's, his gradual discovery of the range and power of imaginative literature follows an extremely similar trajectory. In both works, the religious conversion of the spiritual autobiography is inverted to become an epiphany, not of theological revelation, but of the Romantic sublime. For Mill, the Wordsworthian imagination is the height of this experience; for Gosse, the aesthetics of poetic language, divorced from meaning, result in transcendent readerly pleasure.

Gosse recalls his 1850s London childhood²² as one of “perfect purity, perfect intrepidity, perfect abnegation; yet there was also narrowness, isolation, an absence of perspective, let it be boldly admitted, an absence of humanity” (43). Raised by genteel, well-educated, middle-class parents who were drawn together by their extreme Calvinism, the young Gosse was surrounded by adults. He encountered very few other children and existed on the margins of his parents' intellectual lives. Emily and Philip Gosse met late in life – she was forty-two and he was thirty-seven when they married in 1860 – and both had already established themselves as authors, Philip of natural history books and Emily of “religious verse” (37). Gosse portrays his parents as dour, serious people who avoided “current literature” and for whom “pleasure was found nowhere but in the Word of God” (38). Although reading and writing were their primary occupations, they frowned on contemporary poetry and nearly all fiction, confining themselves to Scripture, religious writings, and in Philip's case scientific writings on zoology and natural history. “In this strange household,” Gosse claims, “the advent of a child was not welcomed, but

²² At Gosse's birth in 1849, the family lived in Hackney; they moved to Islington in 1853. In 1858, following Emily's death from breast cancer, Philip and his son moved to Devonshire (Abbs 7).

was borne with resignation” (38). His 1849 birth made him, in some ways, simply one more curiosity among the many in which his father was interested.

In *Father and Son*, which combines Gosse’s biographical recollections of his father Philip Henry Gosse with his own autobiography, Gosse wryly reports his father’s diary entry from the day of his birth: “E. delivered of a son. Received green swallow from Jamaica” (38). Gosse carefully directs our reading of this passage, cautioning against the interpretation that Philip was “as much interested in the bird as in the boy”; rather, he tells us, his father was keeping to a strict chronology of events in the day – the baby, born first, appeared first in Philip’s list of events. This terse record is counterpoised by the private story that his father later told him orally but apparently did not consider important enough to record in his diary:

Long afterwards, my Father told me that my Mother suffered much in giving birth to me, and that, uttering no cry, I appeared to be dead. I was laid, with scant care, on another bed in the room, while all anxiety and attention were concentrated on my Mother. An old woman who happened to be there, and who was unemployed, turned her thoughts to me, and tried to awake in me a spark of vitality. She succeeded, and she was afterwards complimented by the doctor on her cleverness. My Father could not – when he told me the story – recollect the name of my preserver. I have often longed to know who she was. (38)

The narrative of Gosse’s life opens with a double birth story – his father’s officially recorded version, in which the birth becomes one notable incident undifferentiated from many others, and his father’s private oral story, in which the birth threatens Emily Gosse’s health and only incidentally results in her son’s appearance in the world. Both versions place Gosse on the sidelines of his own life. We might think here, by contrast, of the opening chapter of *David Copperfield*, in which the stories David has been told about his birth set him up to be the hero of his own life – he is born on the stroke of midnight, humorously prophesied over by locals, and his caul becomes a talisman for a superstitious old woman. David’s birth makes him central to the narrative; Edmund Gosse’s birth emphasizes that he is superfluous. Gosse owes his life, and the opportunity for his memoir, to a nameless benefactor. His rescuer forgotten, how could he hope to be remembered?

Although Gosse perceived himself as “the center” of his mother’s “solicitude,” he claims that he was always separated from his father, who was “for ever in his study, writing, drawing, dissecting; sitting . . . absolutely motionless, with his eye glued to the microscope, for twenty minutes at a time” (39, 41). Later reminiscences about being read to by his father, copying illustrations under his father’s direction, and discussing theology with both parents belie this attempt to claim his perennial independence from paternal influence. Indeed, his parents’ ascetic lifestyle meant that they were his only friends; he “had no young companions, no story books, no outdoor amusements, none of the thousand and one employments provided for other children in more conventional surroundings” (53). Nevertheless, he claims that he did not feel any lack because he did not know that such things existed. He felt himself to be “a mere part of them [his parents], without individual existence, and swept on, a satellite, in their atmosphere” (53). His awareness of being lonely is, he tells us, entirely retrospective, though the reader might well doubt this claim.

Looking back, Gosse perceives his parents’ separateness from their society and his own isolation, figuring the narrowness of his family life in early childhood with striking spatial metaphors.

They [my parents] lived in an intellectual cell, bounded at its sides by the walls of

their own house, but open above to the very heart of the uttermost heavens.

This, then, was the scene in which the soul of a little child was planted, not as in an ordinary open flower-border or carefully tended social *parterre*, but as on a ledge, split in the granite of some mountain. The ledge was hung between night and the snows on one hand, and the dizzy depths of the world upon the other; was furnished with just soil enough for a gentian to struggle skywards and open its stiff azure stars; and offered no lodgement, no hope of salvation, to any rootlet which should stray beyond its inexorable limits. (44)

Gosse envisions his parents' home as a conduit to heaven, walled off from the secular world but exposed to limitless divinity above. The vertical axis in this metaphor – the open channel between God and Philip and Emily Gosse – represents the “purity” and “intrepidity” that Gosse celebrates in his childhood experience, while the horizontal axis – the blocked channel between the Gosse family and everyone and everything else on earth – represents the lack of “humanity” that the adult Gosse can perceive. Purity develops through a hierarchical relationship, while humanity develops through a democratic one; normal childhood play (which Gosse lacks) is understood as a democratic impulse, tending to establish non-hierarchical imaginative connections to the natural and social worlds. Yet when Gosse figures his young self as a struggling gentian violet, he implies that his parents, instead of cultivating him, are leaving him to the mercies of meager nature.²³ If the typical Victorian child, in Gosse's metaphor, is a deliberately planted flower in a border or bed – an organism situated according to a plan that places it in relationship with other organisms – then he himself as a child was like a wild seed that lit by chance on thin precarious soil. Gosse's ledge with “just enough soil for a gentian to struggle skywards” also alludes to the parable of the seed-sower, an oblique criticism of the elder Gosses, who have sown their seed “upon stony places, where they had not much earth” (Matthew 13:5). Philip and Emily have not provided Edmund with sufficient emotional and intellectual nourishment for him to flourish beyond the strict confines of their private intellectual and domestic spheres.

There is much, therefore, that the young Gosse, like Dickens's pathetic child protagonists Oliver Twist or Nell, does not have: child companions, opportunities to play outside, or plentiful toys. What he does have is an early and deep immersion in language; he tells the reader that “I found my greatest pleasure in the pages of books” (48). Although he learns to read early, he learns to speak late, which he attributes to the fact that “I never heard young voices” (45). In fact, he resists being coached to speak as most infants would: “having met all invitations to repeat such words as ‘Papa’ and ‘Mamma’ with gravity and indifference, I one day drew towards me a volume, and said ‘book’ with startling distinctness” (47). Gosse brandishes this anecdote at the reader, implying that books are his progenitors more than his parents are. “I cannot recollect a time,” he writes, “when a printed page of English was closed to me” (47) – though his parents are in many ways “closed” to him, literature remains open.

Although reading is crucially important for the young Gosse, representing an avenue for otherwise repressed instincts to imagine and a source of identity, he claims that he does not remember learning to read. His failure of memory here results in the omission of an early

²³ Gosse's figuration of himself as a “gentian” recalls Wordsworth's Lucy, “A violet by a mossy stone / Half-hidden from the eye”; Lucy “lived unknown” but made a “difference” to Wordsworth's speaker, while Gosse perceives the struggles of his child self as apparently unknown to his parents, though of great significance to his adult self (and presumably to the reader). See Wordsworth, “Song (She dwelt among th'untrodden ways),” in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works* 147-148.

connection to his father, who he imagines must have been the one to teach him, because his mother disliked teaching. At the moment in the narrative when Gosse ought to describe learning to read – the moment between his speculation that his father taught him his letters, and his description of the joy he took in reading – he instead describes learning geography from his father by drawing maps of ever increasing scale, starting with a map of the carpet, then of the furniture, then slowly expanding out to whole cities, nations, and continents. The image of Gosse surveying his world, from the local to the global, works to penetrate the walls of the “intellectual cell” in which his parents live. At the same time, spatial relationships substitute for narrative relationships; the child Edmund can conceive of himself as geographically related to the natural world and to civilization, but not as part of a social story. Gosse’s repression of his process of learning to read is paralleled by what he hypothesizes as his mother’s repression of her own novelistic instinct, which she quashes in order to satisfy her religious conviction against fiction. Both are implicitly associated with, though not explicitly blamed on, Philip Gosse’s strict religious scruples. Emily Gosse’s childhood “passion for making up stories,” about which Edmund Gosse learns as an adult, contrasts strongly with his own childhood inability to memorize, and his facility in reading aloud without thinking about the content of what he reads.

The literature available for the young Gosse to exercise his readerly prowess on is substantially different from the usual fare of middle-class Victorian children. Not for Gosse the fairy tales, adventure stories, or co-opted adult novels that readers like David Copperfield delighted in. “I was told about missionaries,” he records, “but never about pirates; I was familiar with humming-birds, but I had never heard of fairies” (50). Gosse’s analogy in this sentence works both to emphasize his lack of exposure to fiction – he knows about religious and biological realities, but not about adventure and fancy – but also breaks down the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction by subtly suggesting that the “real” world in which his parents live is itself a kind of fantasy. Separating themselves from the mass of men, they substitute the outlandish escapades of missionaries in foreign countries for the perhaps no more outlandish exploits of fantastic pirates, and the exotic beauty of the real hummingbird for the equally exotic splendor of the unreal fairy. Although Gosse’s parents “exclude the imaginary” from the stories he hears and reads, they do not exclude the outlandish, the strange, the unusual, or the unique. Gosse laments the fact that “[n]ever in all my early childhood, did anyone address to me the affecting preamble, ‘Once upon a time’” (510) – and yet his parents’ idiosyncratic lifestyle functions as a fantastic backdrop to his life just as effectively as any fairytale tropes function as the conditions under which a fantastic narrative might develop.

Gosse presents himself as taking easily to the mechanical process of reading, yet only capable of understanding and retaining certain kinds of concepts from the texts to which he is exposed. His library includes “a queer variety of natural history . . . many books of travels . . . some geography and astronomy . . . and much theology” (50). But he does not enjoy all these genres equally. The natural history is “quite indigestible,” and he confides to the reader that “my eye and tongue learned to slip [over theology] without penetrating, so that I would read, and read aloud, and with great propriety of emphasis, page after page without having formed an idea or retained an expression” (50). He enjoys the scientific travelogues that his father owns, but understands them only partially, remembering that his “brain was dimly filled with splendour” when he read them (50). Geography and astronomy, however, he “sincerely enjoyed” (50). Though the young Gosse has mastered the rhythms of syntax and the functional process of reading, the books that are available to him do not make him truly literate, partly for the simple reason that they are not age-appropriate (he cites his “undeveloped mind” as an obstacle to

understanding), but also because his parents have not prepared him for an absorptive, sympathetic reading experience. Their constant interrogation of Biblical texts takes on “a rigid and iconoclastic literalness,” and Gosse suggests that both of his parents “were devoid of sympathetic imagination” (78). The young Gosse, brought up in this atmosphere of rationalism, finds “all information . . . equally welcome, and equally fugitive” and reads encyclopedia articles “on such subjects as Parrots, Parthians, Passion-flowers, Passover, and Pastry, without any invidious preferences” (88). Without imagination, he absorbs knowledge without likes or dislikes. His inability to discern the value of different subjects and different books in accordance with social norms is, he tells us, the fault of his parents. By raising a bad reader, they have also handicapped his attempts to be a cultured gentleman.

Gosse’s first intimation that reading can be a transcendent experience comes at age eight, when he and his father read the New Testament epistles together and Philip Gosse explicates the Epistle to the Hebrews verse by verse. “The extraordinary beauty of the language,” Gosse writes, “for instance, the matchless cadences and images of the first chapter – made a certain impression upon my imagination, and were . . . my earliest initiation into the magic of literature” (92). It is not the meaning of the work but its sound and rhythm that interest the young Gosse, and his response is not intellectual but affective: “I was incapable of defining what I felt . . . a purely aesthetic emotion” (92). Although his father does not sufficiently explain the theological significance of the epistles, or at least does not make it comprehensible to an eight-year-old, Gosse is captivated by poetic syntax and his father’s impassioned declamation. Two years later, his susceptibility to the affective qualities of language will be strengthened by exposure to Virgil, whose lines make him feel “the incalculable, the amazing beauty which could exist in the sound of verses” (144). Significantly, it is hearing his father repeat the verses in Latin and being able to hear without understanding them that captivates the young Gosse. Although his father translates and explains the lines he is reading, Gosse confesses that “his exposition gave me little interest” (143). It is the cadence and not the meaning of the poetry that makes Gosse feel that his “prosodical instinct was awakened” (144). For Mill, the sublimity missing from his childhood experience of reading can be rediscovered in the philosophy Romantic imagination; for Gosse, there is already a superfluity of the sublime and of philosophy in his childhood religious experience, and the power of reading is to separate him from ideology and embody him as a listening subject in the moment, experiencing senseless but beautiful sound.

It is not until about a year later that, aged eleven, the young Gosse reads his first work of fiction, Michael Scott’s *Tom Cringle’s Log* (1829-33), a maritime adventure story that recounts a voyage to Jamaica, and which found its way into his father’s library because it evokes the elder Gosse’s memories of the Jamaican landscape. Although his father recommends that he read only the factual, descriptive passages, Gosse finds that the “imaginary adventures and conversations” are “the flower of the book . . . and they filled my whole horizon with glory and with joy” (170). Gosse reads and re-reads this “noisy amorous novel of adventure,” feeling that it promises he will “escape at last from the narrowness of the life we led at home” (171). Although it is the unreality of the book that fascinates him, he also imagines that he might encounter adventures of a similar sort, although he is too shy even to speak to strangers. The improbable fictions of *Tom Cringle’s Log* provide Gosse with “a little window” and “a powerful telescope” through which he might see out of the “tower” in which he has metaphorically been confined (172). Later in this same year of his life, Gosse briefly attends a local school, where, at the instigation of a visiting playwright, he coaxes the schoolmaster into teaching *The Merchant of Venice*. Although the class covers little more than the first act of the play before the readings are halted, Gosse is

briefly “in the seventh heaven of delight” on this occasion of his first exposure to Shakespeare – whose name he had not even heard before (177). Enacting “delight” in the reading of Shakespeare, whether authentic or not, is a necessary step for Gosse as he positions himself as canonically literate.

As he nears age twelve, Gosse gains a new stepmother, Eliza Brightwen,²⁴ whose small personal library vastly enriches his literary experience. In deference to Eliza’s tastes, Philip reads aloud to her from the poetry of Walter Scott; the young Edmund Gosse is “not considered in this arrangement” but is “present” and quickly fascinated by the “sublime romance” of the lines (189, 190). Unlike Mill, who describes himself as a highly regulated and supervised reader under his father’s direction, Gosse characterizes himself as an eavesdropper, an interloper in the adult world and in the literary canon. His development of canonical literacy continues as Philip denies Eliza’s request that his son be allowed to read Scott’s novels as a follow-up to the poetry, but rather erratically agrees to let him read Dickens instead. Eliza buys Edmund a copy of *The Pickwick Papers*, which he reads with “rapture” and “unresisting humorous appreciation” (191). As with *Tom Cringle’s Log*, Gosse reads and re-reads, absorbing the language of fantasy over and over. In the case of *Pickwick*, he “reads” each chapter three times, first reading quickly and then reading slowly, and then closing his eyes to imagine the scenes. His practice of devoting one reading – and one kind of reading – to the apprehension of plot, and another to the appreciation of language, implies that he continues to divorce sound from sense. Gosse’s new stepmother also contributes to the household a collection of volumes of poetry. Gosse is attracted, not by the Romantic verse of Burns, Keats, or Byron, but by an odd little volume of eighteenth-century poems about death and resurrection that he calls, tongue-in-cheek, his “charnel poets” (200). An amusing mishap occurs when, attending a party at the home of some acquaintances, the young Gosse is called on to join his fellow children by reciting a “pretty piece” for the amusement of the adults. While the others know works by Felicia Hemans and Wordsworth, Gosse’s attempt to recite verses from Robert Blair’s “The Grave” lasts only four lines before the appalled hostess stops him.

In his teenage years, Gosse remains curious primarily about “words, as instruments of expression,” but continues to acquire a poet’s ear before a poet’s mind. He relates that “the exercise preceded the employment” – he learns new vocabulary words before he has “any ideas to express with them” (220). This passion for language as an object in its own right, without a purpose of expression, baffles Philip Gosse, who responds to his son’s forays into the *Etymological Dictionary* by assigning him to write essays about his rural excursions. Gosse admits that, although he hated this exercise at the time, he now recognizes that it was “the most practical piece of training which my Father ever gave me,” improving his powers of observation and expression (221). Notably, Gosse only admits his father’s influence when he himself is the author, his father merely the inspiration.

At age fifteen, Gosse manages to acquire several of Shakespeare’s plays, beginning with an annotated “school edition” of *The Tempest*, which “filled my whole being with music and romance” (221). Once again re-reading becomes a crucial technique for his enjoyment of the text, as he reads “through and through” and studies the notes carefully. As with *Pickwick Papers*, he pictures the action of the plays; his ignorance of theatrical conventions means that he imagines “real people moving in the open air . . . in the natural play of life,” rather than a stage populated by actors (221). Borrowing editions of other Shakespeare plays, Gosse feels as though he falls “under the full spell of the Shakespearean necromancy” (222). Indeed, he worries that

²⁴ Emily Gosse had died of breast cancer three years earlier (Abbs 7).

the bewitching nature of the plays is ungodly, and is dismayed when he hears a man preaching against the celebration of Shakespeare's birthday, on the grounds that Shakespeare was "a lost soul" (222). When his father refutes this accusation, speculating that the state of Shakespeare's religious feelings is not clearly attested in the historical record, Gosse feels deeply relieved that his beloved reading does not directly conflict with his religious convictions – yet he still suspects that there will be a clash between them in the future. Where Mill finds relief from the intellectual dominance of his father in his sympathy with Wordsworth, Gosse continues to show the influence of his father's religious strictures in his anxieties about the bewitching sound of poetic language.

As soon as Gosse is able to work, he uses his small income to buy books of contemporary poetry, which were not as easy to purchase in inexpensive editions when he was a child as they would later become. A damaged edition of Coleridge's poems becomes the occasion for a glorious memory, as he and a friend "read aloud from the orange-coloured volume, in turns, as we strolled along . . . in a sort of poetical *nirvana*, reading, reading, forgetting the passage of time" (227). Once again his reading experience stimulates him to re-read and gives him a sense of enchantment. Here also reading is coupled with walking, and traversing literature happens in tandem with traversing the countryside, so that there is a geographic progress associated with Gosse's literary education. Practically, reading while he walks keeps his choice of reading matter away from the supervision of his father. When Gosse buys himself an edition of Jonson's and Marlowe's plays, he will continue this trend, reading "as I trod the desolate road that brought me along the edge of the cliff on Saturday afternoons" (227). He is enraptured by Marlowe as he "paced along that lonely and exquisite highway" and is inspired to read aloud (227). Here reading is not just spellbinding but "intoxicating" (228). Unfortunately, when he reads from Marlowe to his stepmother to share his passion, she confiscates the volume and gives it to Philip Gosse, who burns it. Like David Copperfield, he claims that his youth protects him from any potential corrupting influence in the adult works to which he is exposed: "it seems to me now that the fact that I had so very simply and childishly volunteered to read the verses to my stepmother should have proved to my Father that I connected it with no ideas of an immoral nature" (229).

Gradually, Gosse expands his repertoire of reading to include more Shakespeare, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Southey. He reads "with unchecked voracity," although he does not find the same "magic" in everything – Southey, in particular, he finds impenetrable (230). At age sixteen, he has syncretized in his imagination the religious principles of his father and the co-opted paganism of Elizabethan drama and Romantic poetry, "a confused throng of immature impressions and contradictory hopes" (233). He begins writing imitations of the material he reads, using Christian subject matter and the forms of Shakespeare and Shelley. He depicts this synthesis as the moment of "climax" at which his faith reached its peak – "the highest moment of my religious life" – and then began to dissipate – "the artificial edifice of extravagant faith began to totter and crumble" (234, 235). He attributes both the climax and the denouement to the way that his imagination has been stimulated by the combination of strict Christian doctrine and sensuous literature.

As Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot do in their child-centered *Bildungsromane*, Edmund Gosse closes his memoir with an excerpted letter, which he invites the reader to peruse along with him. The letter, from his father, summarizes Gosse's relationship to faith through his childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, characterizing Gosse's more moderate adult perspective on religious matters as "a rapid progress toward evil" (250). Gosse

himself portrays the letter as a black-and-white choice before his twenty-one-year old self: “[e]ither he must cease to think for himself; or his individualism must be instantly confirmed” (251). In the final words of *Father and Son*, Gosse characterizes his final break from his father as “a human being’s privilege to fashion his inner life for himself” (251). The inner life of which he writes is, of course, the life that was kindled in him by reading, and particularly by reading in the ways that he describes throughout the memoir: re-reading, privileging sound over sense, imaginatively picturing fictional scenes, and synthesizing romance with real life. Yet his recourse to self-quotation at the end of his memoir, inserting his letter within his narrative, evokes novelistic conventions and emphasizes the shaping influence Gosse exerts on his own life, transforming it into an autobiography that is almost a *Bildungsroman*.

Ruskin’s Serene Re-Reading

Ruskin’s autobiography *Praeterita* (“past things”), written in the late 1880s and left unfinished, is more loosely structured than Gosse’s *Father and Son*, attempting to define its own genre rather than drawing on the historical traditions of autobiography and the novel. *Praeterita* is heterogeneous and unfinished, moves associatively rather than chronologically, and has no overarching narrative or driving plot except Ruskin’s stated aim of “speaking, of what it gives me joy to remember, at any length I like” (11). Tim Hilton writes that “*Praeterita* could be anything: a travel book, an elegy, a filial memoir, a tour around the author’s library, a selection from diaries or a series of letters to old friends” (x). However, if we read *Praeterita* with attention to Ruskin’s accounts of his 1820s childhood, and particularly to the influence of his childhood reading and process of learning to read, we discover that his relationships to reading and to play are quite similar to those of Edmund Gosse decades later. Ruskin, like Gosse, reflects on a combination of deprivation and richness in his childhood, which drove him to creatively reinterpret the texts and toys available to him. Their family situations are similar: like Gosse, Ruskin was intended by his parents to be a clergyman and, though he turned away from this path as an adult, was overshadowed by the apprehension of his pious future while a child. Also like Gosse, Ruskin had few of the companions or accoutrements of what, looking back, he imagines to be an ordinary nineteenth-century childhood. “[W]hat powers of imagination I possessed,” he writes, “either fastened themselves on inanimate things . . . or caught at any opportunity of flight into regions of romance” (34). Without many close child friends, and without elaborate toys, Ruskin developed intellectual and even emotional relationships with his everyday surroundings.

Ruskin was somewhat less sheltered and restricted than Gosse; he often played outside, was close to several cousins, and was exposed to his father’s business discussions and associates. While Gosse was restricted to a very few forms of approved entertainment, Ruskin writes that he was allowed to “amuse myself as I liked, provided I was neither fretful nor troublesome” but that he had to “find my own amusement. No toys of any kind were at first allowed” (19). The young Ruskin has perfect liberty, but is thrown entirely on his own internal resources. Appropriately, given his future career, he fixates on the architectural and decorative details of his surroundings, “tracing the squares and comparing the colours of my carpet;--examining the knots in the wood of the floor, or counting the bricks in the opposite houses” (19). Ruskin’s attention to the designs, patterns, and textures around him is primarily visual – he is “examining” and “counting” them, rather than feeling them with his hands or drawing imitations of them. His appreciation of visual detail leaves no mark on the world around him, takes place silently, and cannot be disrupted because it is completely self-contained. His childhood interest in design helps him to

make “resources” of quotidian objects and surroundings, and gives him a “serene and secure” method for living in a seemingly barren environment. Although the young Ruskin gradually acquires a few common, if basic, toys: “a bunch of keys . . . a cart, and a ball; and . . . two boxes of well-cut wooden bricks,” these “modest” toys do not necessarily suggest games or narratives in themselves, as would the “radiant Punch and Judy . . . all dressed in scarlet and gold” that his mother confiscated after they were presented by his aunt (19). Instead they are toys guaranteed to require imagination and creativity, toys that force him to build and invent.

Ruskin also depicts his child self creating meaning by tracing the patterns that appear around him in nature. He spends most of his childhood afternoons in his family’s garden, digging or building small bridges over streams while his mother or the gardener works nearby. While Gosse figures his parents’ household as a walled citadel open to the heavens above, Ruskin characterizes his family’s garden as a new Eden: “the little domain answered every purpose of Paradise to me” (32).²⁵ Here his attention is fixated on natural patterns in “the sky, the leaves and pebbles” and the paths of ants (34). In the garden, as in his own bedroom, Ruskin passively regards the things around him without becoming involved with them. He is not interested in planting seeds or cultivating flowers or fruits, but in “close watching of the ways of plants,” and he finds himself “staring at them, or into them . . . in admiring wonder” (53). When allowed to roam further afield on walks, Ruskin gives his attention to surface patterns in the same way, watching “bricklayers, stone-sawyers, or paviours” as they create structures (53). On the few occasions when he does try to intervene in his environment, his parents’ strict rules prevent him; he is not allowed to pick fruits or flowers or harvest vegetables from the garden except at very specific times; his favorite activity, purposeless digging, is forbidden; and when he tries to help the gardener sweep the walks, he is humiliated because the work has to be done over again. In response to these limitations he finds himself returning to a state of “merely contemplative mind” (54).

When Ruskin learns to read, his passive “contemplative mind” gains a new outlet. Like Gosse, Ruskin views his process of learning to read and his first reading material not only as deeply formative for him, but also as avenues through which his instincts for play, otherwise curbed, can be expressed. Unlike Gosse, Ruskin clearly remembers learning to read, because he remembers being strongly resistant to his mother’s attempts to teach him by what we would now understand as a phonetic method – first letters, then syllables, and eventually putting syllables together into increasingly longer words. Rejecting this strategy, the child Ruskin insisted on learning to read only by memorizing “sight words,” one at a time, as whole units of sense, resisting nonsensical parsings of language and insisting on the integrity of the morpheme, the smallest sense-making unit. He also insists on learning to read only by reading actual texts, not by looking at individual words written down for the purposes of instruction; he refuses to read any word that does not have a prose context. He tells us that “This effort to learn the words in their collective aspect, was assisted by my real admiration of the look of printed type, which I began to copy for my pleasure, as other children draw dogs and horses” (22). Printed text itself becomes a fetishized aesthetic object, privileged for its own sake as well as for its symbolic function. The written word matters both because it has an artistic appearance on the page and because it corresponds to a narrative idea; if either of these aspects were missing, it would no longer be meaningful to Ruskin. He thinks of learning to write as a process of drawing printed words; drawing the word “horse” gives the young Ruskin the same satisfaction that drawing an

²⁵ Ruskin’s description of his childhood garden as a form of paradise is not unique; Walther characterizes the “desire to present childhood as an Edenic, blissful state” as a recurring motif in Victorian autobiography (69).

actual horse would give another child.

While learning to read and to write inspire Ruskin with a sense of the aesthetics of the whole word as a unit, he tends to be exposed to the content of literature not only through the printed page, but through oral transmission. As a child, Ruskin often sits in a recessed nook in his parents' drawing-room to have his evening tea and then, when tea is over, to amuse himself or do work assigned by his mother. Set back into the wall beside the fireplace "as an Idol in a niche," hemmed in by a small table, he listens as his father reads aloud to his mother from the *Waverley* novels, Shakespeare, *Don Quixote*, or a volume of poetry (35, 56). The young Ruskin pays attention intermittently as "the best poetry and prose" form the background noise of his evenings (56). His mornings, by contrast, are organized around "resolutely consistent" Bible lessons with his mother, who takes him "straight through" from Genesis to Revelation over and over again, from the time that he can read aloud fluently until he leaves for Oxford (36). While his evenings consist of passively listening to his father, who is "an absolutely beautiful reader," in the mornings Ruskin and his mother (and, for a time, his orphaned cousin Mary) "read alternate verses" of the Bible together (56, 36). Thus much of Ruskin's early exposure to literature was oral; he heard it spoken aloud, and was schooled carefully in "every intonation" to ensure that he understood what he was reading (36).

Ruskin's unusual upbringing, he claims, teaches him first and foremost "the perfect meaning of Peace" (39). He attributes his "serene and secure" temperament in early childhood to his parents' combination of few unnecessary possessions and strong physical discipline (19). Instead of engaging in rowdy play, the young Ruskin, even at the age of three, shows a "formed habit of serenity" and demonstrates the ability to remain "contentedly motionless" for long periods (21). His stillness is connected to a love of repetition, an "inconceivable passive . . . contentment in doing, or reading, the same thing over and over again" (52). Ruskin connects the desire to re-read with the desire to repeat an action in play (specifically, in this passage, the building and "unbuilding" of a model bridge in his garden), and both of these with his adult success in critical thinking and with a quiet temperament. The re-reading that he underwent in childhood was, more than of any other text, Biblical re-reading; every time he and his mother finished going through every verse in every book, they would begin again with Genesis 1:1. Ruskin learns from this that a text is an endless cycle, with the end leading back to the beginning, and that the reading process is never-ending; he finds this constancy reassuring: "The partly childish, partly dull, or even . . . idiotic way I had of staring at the same things all day long, carried itself out in reading, so that I could read the same things all the year round" (126). Some of Ruskin's pleasure in re-reading is enabled by his ability to forget the plots of fictions; he boasts that he could read his favourite stories "twenty times a year" as a teenager, getting the same charge from the "zest of the tales" each time (126). Re-reading is not always a deepening of the reading experience, but, if forgetting can be effected, a genuine repetition of it.

Recreating the looped narrative structure that Ruskin experienced in his childhood reading of the Bible, the chapters of *Praeterita* return again and again to Ruskin's early childhood. The same incidents are mentioned repeatedly, disconnectedly, in different chapters. For example, John James Ruskin's practice of reading aloud to his wife, and incidentally to his son, is mentioned in chapters two, three, seven, and eight, often in the same few words. Ruskin also frequently breaks in to correct his account of the order of events, or to admit that he no longer knows in what order things happened during his childhood. For example, trying to recall the ways that his mother tutored him in Latin, he writes that "It was only, I think, after my seventh year had been fulfilled . . . I can't recollect now what used to happen first in the morning

. . . That must have been later on, though” (51-2). Likewise, the child self that Ruskin recalls in his first chapter, “The Springs of Wandel,” is aged four at first mention, then aged five or six, three and a half, five, and three in subsequent passages (18, 19, 20, 21, 27). The next chapter continues this back-and-forth movement, “return[ing]over the ground of these early years, to fill gaps, after getting on a little first” (45). Other chapters have similar asynchronous narrative, ranging freely across Ruskin’s memories and blurring together different stages of his childhood and later life. Some of these effects are the result of his deteriorating mental state in the last years of his life, while *Praeterita* was being composed; some are the natural fading of memory over time; and some are the result of the different occasions for which various chapters were written; but the work also inspires in the reader the same “passive . . . contentment in . . . reading the same thing over and over again” that Ruskin himself felt as a child. Although each chapter introduces new memories, it revisits old ones, so that the reader comes to feel as though she is not only reading Ruskin’s life, but re-reading it along with him.

Ruskin also describes his interest in reading as an entirely vicarious pleasure. “[E]ven from earliest days,” he writes, “I cared to listen to the adventures of other people, though I never coveted any for myself” (91). In this, Ruskin is subtly different from Gosse, who felt a desire for his life to imitate his fictional reading, but was too shy to make these daydreams into realities,²⁶ and significantly different from Dickens’ David Copperfield, who imposes the templates of fiction on his own life.²⁷ Neither fiction nor non-fiction inspires Ruskin to imitation or carries with it any danger of inducing him to re-create the stories he reads:

I read all Captain Marryat’s novels, without ever wishing to go to sea; traversed the field of Waterloo without the slightest inclination to be a soldier; went on ideal fishing with Izaak Walton without ever casting a fly; and knew Cooper’s *Deerslayer* and *Pathfinder* almost by heart, without handling anything but a pop-gun, or having any paths to find. . . . (91).

For Ruskin, the pleasure of reading, like the pleasure of sightseeing, does not depend on identification, and need have no connection to his real life. As a child, he is able to be interested in events and people completely unrelated to him, simply because he finds them entertaining. Actual history – the battle of Waterloo – is no more or less intriguing than lyrical nonfiction, maritime adventure, or the historical novel. Fiction provides the same opportunities for entertainment that nonfiction does. Ruskin’s detachment from the subjects of his reading belies our common assumption that identification, sympathy, and imitation are natural aspects of childhood reading, and his conflation of history with adventure continues the relationship we have seen between children’s reading practices and the transgression of generic boundaries.

Conclusion

Unlike the children discussed in previous chapters, Mill, Gosse, and Ruskin were real individuals, and their childhood reading is a matter of personal history as well as of literary construction. Although the reflections of these three men are hardly enough evidence on which to base generalizations about Victorian childhood experience, their autobiographies do reflect

²⁶ Gosse writes that “after reading *Tom Cringle’s Log* those expeditions were accompanied by a constant hope of meeting with some adventures. I did not court events, however, except in fancy, for I was very shy of real people, and would break off some gallant dream of prowess on the high seas to bolt into a field and hide behind the hedge, while a couple of labouring men went by” (172).

²⁷ “I . . . consoled myself . . . by impersonating my favorite characters” (*David Copperfield* 66).

many of the prevailing historical trends for child readers in the early to mid nineteenth century: children's reading material is typically chosen by adults; when children choose their own reading material, this choice is figured as transgressive; imaginative "adult" literature is often co-opted for child readers by both children and adults; adults, particularly parents, frequently mediate the child's reading experience; and careful re-reading of a few prized texts is more typical than wide, casual reading through many texts.²⁸ Where these autobiographers depart from the trends of the period, and where they hint at the way that reading behavior changes in later decades, is in the extent of their independent reading choices and activities. Gosse in particular prizes the ability to choose his own reading material, sometimes secretly, and to fashion a relationship to books that is not moderated by his parents. For Gosse and, before him, Mill, choosing one's own books metonymically represents the process of separating oneself from the father and establishing a personal identity. For all three authors, reading provides a counterweight to the deprivations that they faced in early childhood. Here we see the roots of the contemporary belief that the child's ability to immerse himself in imaginative literature can provide an escape from difficult circumstances, and can substitute for other kinds of emotional support and social opportunities.

Mill, Ruskin, and Gosse each describe the affective charge of reading in slightly different terms. Mill describes readerly enjoyment as "delight," Ruskin as "seren[ity]," and Gosse as "enchantment." The subtle differences between these responses outline a range of possible ways for Victorian children to take pleasure in their books. For Mill, the movement from admiration – a public, intellectual response to the literary and historical quality of a work – to delight – a private, emotional response to the imaginative dimensions of the work – enables him to recapture the ability to read childishly, which his intensive education never permitted. Mill depicts his delight in certain books as a natural and inexhaustible reader response in childhood. Some texts inspire delight, while others do not; the reader cannot learn to take delight in a work, in the way that he could learn to admire it. Yet when a text does inspire delight, it dependably and predictably does so every time, so that he can re-read a book dozens of times and create within himself the same feeling every time. Even this unquantifiable emotional response therefore has a mechanistic dimension. For Ruskin, reading induces, not an extreme joy, but a feeling of peace and serenity. Moving through the same texts over and over, blurring their endings together with their beginnings, induces a feeling of endless contentment. This feeling is not spontaneous but learned, something that Ruskin masters after being taught to read and experience language as an aural and visual artistic form. Even though his readerly pleasure is a learned behavior, it cannot be re-created with the same text until the reader has forgotten his previous experience. Mill's delight is unaffected by familiarity; Ruskin's serenity, however, depends on novelty. His readerly contentment is therefore dependent on a continual literary amnesia. For Gosse, reading is enchanting; it casts a spell over him, so that he feels bewitched by the beauty of the language. His continual recourse to supernatural metaphors to describe his pleasure in reading suggests that secular books have displaced his spiritual convictions. Yet describing the joy of reading as a kind of spell also hints at his distrust of lyrical beauty, and his sense that literary pleasures are a form of deception.

For all three men, the pleasure that their child selves take in reading has a transgressive aspect. Mill's father carefully schools him in reading through a library of weighty classics, building up a repertoire of historical and literary knowledge, and participating in his son's reading experience through daily conversations. Yet at the same time that Mill is using reading as part of a schoolroom relationship, he is also privately experiencing delight in imaginative

²⁸ See Grenby 251-253.

texts, re-reading them to spur the same feelings within himself. Ruskin juxtaposes his daily Bible lessons, for which his mother is his schoolmistress, with his experience eavesdropping on his father's reading of novels. Later, the satisfaction of the eavesdropper will resurface when he reports being able to take vicarious pleasure in books about places, professions, and activities that he does not understand. Gosse, supposedly restricted to dry theological and historical reading, sources books for himself, delving deeper and deeper into fiction and poetry. His private world of literary fantasies will eventually give him the perspective he needs to take a stand against his intellectually domineering father. For Mill and Gosse, the reading child becomes a defiant child, using literature to break with paternal philosophy. For Ruskin, private reading is one method of maintaining peace and serenity without leaving the family unit.

Child reading is depicted significantly differently in these three autobiographies than in their contemporary fictional counterparts, the semi-autobiographical novels of Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot. We might think of Dickens's David Copperfield in particular as a natural counterpart to the young John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin, and Edmund Gosse. Like Mill, Ruskin, and Gosse, David uses imaginative literature to combat the difficult circumstances of his childhood. It is not, as we might be tempted to think, that he uses reading to escape from his circumstances. Rather, he uses the plots of his reading to refashion his relationships with the people around him, vilifying his unpleasant relatives and captivating his school friends. Instead of retreating into the books he reads, he casts the books themselves outwards onto the world around him. The effect of this creative reading is to absorb David and his life into the world of the text. By contrast, Mill, Ruskin, and Gosse do not record in their autobiographies that their enjoyment of texts is founded on sympathetic connection to the plots of their favorite books, perhaps because their parents are not nearly as malicious as David's stepfather and they do not need to engage in the same kind of intensive rewriting of their experiences in order to survive. Indeed, Ruskin deliberately denies such a connection, insisting that he is able to enjoy literature without wanting to imitate it or needing to sympathize with the protagonists. While the fictional child protagonists of the Victorian *Bildungsroman* show us how the child can use his reading to reshape the world around him, the child figures in Victorian autobiography show us how the child can use his re-reading to create a new world of fantasy. By continually re-reading favorite texts, the autobiographical child re-inscribes his own emotional response to the text, creating a feeling of reading that never ends.

As Mill, Ruskin, and Gosse describe their childhood experiences of re-reading, they are also giving us the opportunity to read over their childhood narratives. In the act of composing autobiographies, they narrate their childhood experience. For them as authors, this narration is the performance of a reading of their childhoods, a re-reading that gives meaning in retrospect. For us as readers, the autobiographical childhood – the period in the autobiography when the distance between protagonist and narrator is greatest – can be both a first and a second reading, as we encounter the author's childhood for the first time, yet simultaneously encounter the author re-living his childhood. The experience of reading about an autobiographer's childhood is therefore particularly uncanny because it is never wholly a first reading, but always a form of re-reading, thanks to the layering of the adult author's perspective onto the child's.

These three autobiographies also introduce us to the conflation of basic literacy with canonical literacy, and of both of these forms of readerly experience with childhood development. Mill, Ruskin, and Gosse need to position themselves as canonically literate in order to consolidate their roles as men of letters. Having the right childhood, and especially having the right experience of literature in childhood, comes to be a marker of class and

intellectual status. Mill's list of works read in childhood encompasses more works of classical literature, an indicator of elite status, than books from the developing English-language canon, which he reads later, as an adult, and for personal fulfillment, rather than for educational purposes. Gosse, by contrast, is particularly anxious to assure the reader that he is not only familiar with but appreciative of all the great books of English literature, a more fluid, democratic space of canonical literacy. At the same time, these works stress the description of basic literacy, of the acquisition of simple decoding skills in very early childhood. In Mill's *Autobiography*, the earliest of the three, basic literacy is narrated only insofar as it dovetails with classical education: Mill tells us about learning Greek, not English, and about reading, not speech. Mill's interest is with the ways in which his education is exceptional, not the ways in which most children come to be inculcated into language. As the Victorian period progresses, autobiographers like Ruskin and Gosse demonstrate a psychological interest in the child's intellectual development, and the ways in which the early stages of learning a vernacular language shape the reader's mind. In this, they prefigure Joyce's depiction of Stephen Dedalus at the beginning of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, correlating his own first moments of self-awareness with his first experiences of hearing children's books read aloud. Thus, Victorian autobiographical recollections on childhood reading lead into the Modernist interest in self-definition through linguistic experience.

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