Akrasia and the Aesthetic: Human Agency and the Site of Literature, 1760-1820

by

Thomas Salem Manganaro

Department of English
Duke University

Date:_______________________
Approved:

___________________________
Thomas Pfau, Supervisor

___________________________
Nancy Armstrong

___________________________
Robert Mitchell

___________________________
Vivasvan Soni

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2016
ABSTRACT

Akrasia and the Aesthetic: Human Agency and the Site of Literature, 1760-1820

by

Thomas Salem Manganaro

Department of English
Duke University

Date:______________________
Approved:

___________________________
Thomas Pfau, Supervisor

___________________________
Nancy Armstrong

___________________________
Robert Mitchell

___________________________
Vivasvan Soni

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2016
Abstract

This study argues that a series of foundational stylistic and formal innovations in eighteenth-century and Romantic literature can be cumulatively attributed to conceptual and representational challenges in representing human action and the will in the modern era. I focus in particular on cases of “acting against better judgment” or “failing to do what one knows one ought to do” – concepts originally theorized as “akrasia” and “weakness of the will” in ancient Greek and Christian traditions. During the Enlightenment, philosophy increasingly conceives of human minds and bodies like systems and machines, and consequently fails to address such cases except as intractable or incoherent. Yet eighteenth-century and Romantic narratives and poetry consistently engage the paradoxes and ambiguities of action and volition in depictions of akrasia. As a result, literature develops representational strategies that distinguish the epistemic capacities of literature as privileged over those of philosophy.

The study begins by centering on narratives of distempered selves from the 1760s. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Confessions and Laurence Sterne’s A Sentimental Journey narrate cases of knowingly and weakly acting against better judgment, and in so doing, reveal the limitations of the “philosophy of the passions” that famously informed sentimental literature at the time. These texts find that the interpretive difficulties of action demand a non-systematic and hermeneutic approach to interpreting a self
through the genre of narrative. Rousseau’s narrative in particular informs William Godwin’s realist novels of distempered subjects. Departing from his mechanistic philosophy of mind and action, Godwin develops the technique of free indirect discourse in his third novel Fleetwood (1805) as a means of evoking the ironies and self-deceptions in how we talk about willing.

Romantic poetry employs the literary trope of weakness of will primarily through the problem of regretted inaction – a problem that I argue motivates the major poetic innovations of William Wordsworth and John Keats. While Samuel Taylor Coleridge interrogates his weakness of will in the genre of philosophy, Wordsworth turns to poetry with The Prelude (1805), revealing poetry’s particular abilities to express the self-deception of indolence and to symbolize the attitude of procrastination. More explicitly than Wordsworth, John Keats identifies indolence as the prime symbol and basis of the aesthetic, characterized by what he calls “negative capability.” In his letters and poems such as “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” (1817) and “Ode on Indolence” (1819), Keats reveals how the irreducibly contradictory qualities of human agency speak to the particular privilege of “disinterested aesthetics” – a genre fitted for the modern era for its ability to disclose contradictions without seeking to resolve or explain them in terms of component parts.
# Contents

Abstract.............................................................................................................................................. iv

Acknowledgements................................................................................................................................... vii

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 1

1. Akrasia and the Account of a Self in Rousseau and Sterne ......................................................... 30
   1.1 The Determinist Passions and the Corrective Role of Judgment: Rousseau’s Julie
       and Burney’s Evelina .......................................................................................................................... 35
   1.2 Confession or Explanation?: Accounting for Actions in Rousseau’s Confessions .... 44
   1.3 Action and the Insufficiency of the Passions in Sterne’s A Sentimental Journey .... 56

2. Free Indirect Discourse and Weakness of Will in Two Novels by William Godwin .... 66
   2.1 The Explicable Will in Political Justice and St. Leon ................................................................. 73
   2.2 Free Indirect Discourse in Fleetwood ......................................................................................... 90

3. The Poetics of Procrastination in Wordsworth’s Prelude ............................................................. 104
   3.1 Coleridge and the Philosophies of Inaction ................................................................................ 110
   3.2 Procrastination as “Deliberate Holiday”: The Prelude Book I .................................................. 116
   3.3 Procrastination and Self-Deception: Books I and VI ................................................................. 124

4. Indolence and the Disinterested Aesthetic in the Poetry of Keats ............................................. 139
   4.1 Endymion ....................................................................................................................................... 145
   3.2 The Influence of William Hazlitt and “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” ................................. 152
   4.3 The Modernity of the Disinterested Aesthetic: the “Ode on Indolence” ......................... 161

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................................ 170

Biography ............................................................................................................................................... 182
Acknowledgements

This dissertation was conceived, born, and raised at the Duke University English Department, which provided both an extraordinary intellectual and social setting as well as secure financial support. I must thank my dissertation committee in particular. Since arriving at Duke I have profited from the scholarly and pedagogical wisdom of Nancy Armstrong and Rob Mitchell, each of whom early on saw potential in and championed my composite interests even when I did not. From Northwestern, Vivasvan Soni agreed to take part in the dissertation committee, and I thank him for his especially enthusiastic interest, astute close-reading, and incisive feedback. All have been dedicated and insightful readers of this work since its early messy drafts, but none more so than Thomas Pfau, whose macro-scale and micro-scale advice informed every stage of the process from the early brainstorming to the late revisions of chapter drafts. I am exceedingly lucky to have had an advisor so fluent in the various scholarly branches associated with the project, but even more so who projects a deep commitment to the idea of humanistic inquiry and the forms of good it offers.

I also thank former Director of Graduate Studies and placement director Kathy Psomiades and graduate secretary Maryscot Mullins for their no less essential assistance with the many complicated stages of the graduate school experience. Special thanks as well to Len Tennenhouse and Sarah Beckwith, the heroic chairs of the English
department between 2010 and 2016, and who have each also provided me with their
own forms of professional and personal assistance, which do not go unrecognized.

There are too many to thank on the personal level – friends from New Jersey,
Chicago, Durham, and elsewhere, and extended family in the States and Lebanon.
Certainly no aspect of my intellectual progression would be possible without my
mother, father, brother, and sister, who have provided me throughout my life with what
I think is an especially rare community of creativity, obsessiveness, curiosity, and
kindness. Lastly, I thank my wife Lidia whose drive inspires me, and who, on top of
everything, has co-authored our other publication of the year – our son Salem (she gets
first authorship). She balks at the idea of being mentioned in an acknowledgements, and
yet I mention her against my better judgment. I do strive to emulate her consistency and
glorious contradictions.
Introduction

In Laurence Sterne’s 1767 novella *A Sentimental Journey*, the protagonist Yorick continually acts against his better judgment. He knows, for instance, that to pursue the “fair fille de chambre” would be to directly betray his principles; yet he continues, while expressing regret at his failure to coordinate his action with his conscience. The fille de chambre gives him her hands, “closed together” into his. He tells us:

I wish’d to let them go, and all the time I held them, I kept arguing within myself against it—and still I held them on.—In two minutes I found I had all the battle to fight over again—and I felt my legs and every limb about me tremble at the idea.¹

Yorick’s condition exemplifies what the ancient Greeks called “akrasia,” and what has alternately been interpreted as “weakness of will” in the theological tradition of St. Augustine. This old concept reflects the peculiar problem of failure in agency or practical reason – not the failure to know the right thing or to be equipped with the proper external means to act, but rather the internal failure to “follow through” with what one regards to be the best course of action. Yorick’s dilemma indeed is not that he is compelled by feelings that determine his bodily movements, or that he is in any way physically incapable of letting the hands go. On the contrary, he explicitly “wishes” to let them go, and is even capable of staging an argument “within [him]self” for letting

them go: judgment, awareness, desire are all equipped to produce the action, and yet the action does not follow.

This scene presents the difficulty—for Yorick, for Sterne, and for the reader—of “accounting for” actions. Indeed, A Sentimental Journey continually raises the question: what does it mean to “give an account” of human mind and action? The novella begins as Yorick declares: “I write not to apologize for the weaknesses of my heart in this tour,— but to give an account of them…” Because we are familiar with Sterne as a figure who makes use of double-entendres, we can identify at least two senses of the word “account” here. On the one hand, it evokes the sense of a philosophical account—an explanation. This usage of the word is common to contemporary analytic philosophy, and gained prominence in the mid-eighteenth century with philosophers like David Hume, who writes in the beginning of his Treatise of Human Nature that he intends to “give a particular account of ideas [and] impressions.” On the other hand, Sterne’s sentence evokes the sense of a literary account—a narrative. One might thus identify this sense of the word in an early eighteenth-century novel like Robinson Crusoe, the Preface of which reads: “If ever the Story of any private Man’s Adventures in the World were worth making Publick… the Editor of this Account thinks this will be so.”

---

2 Ibid., 21.
Sterne’s double meaning is particularly rich because it helps us see the insufficiency of the first usage of “account” and the privileges of the second usage. For Yorick to have given a satisfactory *philosophical* account of his encounter with the *fille de chambre*, he would have needed to explicate the precise mechanisms by which his action came about. He would have needed to say something more like, “I wish’d to let them go, and so I let them go,” or “I wish’d to let them go, but I wish’d more to hold them, so I held them.” But instead he says, “I wish’d to let them go… and still I held them on,” thus twisting our expectations of the causal correlations of belief, desire, and action. Sterne is clearly mocking the philosophical notion of “an account,” but he is also presenting a rival *kind* of account—a narrative account—that derives its strength from its ability to contain contradictions. After all, in maintaining the paradox of his action, Sterne is able to express the condition in which one regards oneself to be a problem, a failure, a betrayal to oneself. Specifically in its capacity as a narrative, *A Sentimental Journey* is able to disclose qualities of what has been historically called akrasia.

This study is centered on cases of akrasia as depicted and interrogated in eighteenth-century and Romantic literature. As we see in the above passage from Sterne, this particular philosophical problem is uniquely able to illuminate the respective limitations and privileges of philosophy and literature. More precisely, the problem of akrasia is uniquely able to illuminate the limitations and privileges of philosophy and literature in the modern era following the intellectual transformations brought about
during the Enlightenment. Indeed, the concept of akrasia assumes a particularly intriguing character during the eighteenth century as the premises and goals of philosophy radically transform. As the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars has written, the modern era has seen the rise in dominance of the “scientific image of man” – the approach to studying man based in the premise that man is essentially a complex physical system, a “thing” like any other “thing” in the world, and only distinct as a particularly complex composite of “things.” According to Sellars, the historically alternative model rooted in ancient Classicism and evident in twentieth-century phenomenology is the “manifest image of man,” in which man is understood as “man-in-the-world,” as an ontologically distinct type: a person. With the Enlightenment, the “scientific image of man” acquired epistemological priority over the “manifest image of man,” not merely residing alongside it, but competing with and replacing it.

Sellars’s story appears particularly helpful as we consider the problem of akrasia in philosophy and literature in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for this problem proved distinctly puzzling to philosophers committed to building a “scientific image” of man. As I mean to show in this study, the qualities of akrasia that render it so difficult for philosophy to think render it a uniquely rich site for literary experimentation – for literature committed to representing human experience with a

---

thickness not available within philosophical discourse. By focusing on such cases in eighteenth-century and Romantic narratives and poetry, we find that, in representing the paradoxes of human volition and action, authors invent a range of new literary styles and techniques that reflect the unique epistemological and representational capacities of this genre called “Literature.”

This literary period is full of depictions of crises in self-governance and autonomy. As authors responded to what they thought to be the excesses of the cult of sensibility, to the intemperate consequences of the French Revolution, and to a culture of indolence brought about by a new “leisure” class, their writing often centers on the particular problem of failure-in-action despite knowing better. In this study, I focus on many of the most well-known and widely-read authors from the period: Laurence Sterne, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Frances Burney, William Godwin, Jane Austen, William Wordsworth, and John Keats. As I show, in their narratives and poetry of akrasia and weakness of will, these authors cultivate literary strategies for characterizing and interrogating the paradoxes of human agency in ways their philosophical counterparts do not. Thus Sterne and Rousseau, departing from the framework of David Hume, invent a new genre of first-person “account” of a self. In their novelistic treatments of character psychology, Godwin and Austen depart from Godwin’s own mechanistic philosophy and cultivate an early version of the technique of free indirect discourse. Wordsworth, departing from Coleridge’s prose writing on the will, produces a poetics of
self-conscious melancholy to depict and cure his procrastination. Lastly, Keats, departing from the models of mind and action by David Hartley and others, contemplates the disinterested nature of human agency and the corresponding aesthetic category of “negative capability.”

In tracing literature from the mid-eighteenth century “sentimental” period through Romanticism, this study approaches a literary period often regarded as challenging the Enlightenment values of the rational, self-governing individual. The eighteenth century more broadly has long been seen as a period in which “self-governance” carries many new political, social, and moral implications—a period in which, to quote J. B. Schneewind, the “established conceptions of morality as obedience came increasingly to be contested by emerging conceptions of morality as self-governance.”\(^6\) Within sentimental literature in particular, the problem of self-governance was increasingly staged in terms of tempering or harnessing the passions. Indeed, a number of recent critical reappraisals of the philosophical notion of autonomy in literature have centered on sentimental plots that foreground the dichotomy between reason and the passions.\(^7\) However, this dichotomy breaks down as we center on

---


\(^7\) For Hina Nazar, sentimental literature offers a newly rich conception of “autonomy” as based in the “flexible and postmetaphysical” character of judgment. Likewise, Nancy Yousef has questioned the Enlightenment conception of “autonomy” by emphasizing the necessarily intersubjective and relational
akrasia, and more generally on the complex depictions of action and the will in this body of literature. Adela Pinch’s *Strange Fits of Passion* (Stanford UP, 1996), for instance, traces the impact in sentimental and Romantic literature of the model proposed by David Hume in which feelings are “autonomous entities that do not always belong to individuals.”8 Pinch astutely demonstrates how works by Charlotte Smith, Wordsworth, and Austen employ the pre-personal and pre-cognitive notion of feelings to destabilize the conception of the self as the source of actions. In this sense, Pinch draws from Hume while contributing to contemporary theorizations of affects and feelings by figures including Rei Terada and Brian Massumi.9 These critical paradigms have marked a significant turn within the humanities towards the sciences and “the ontological”; while based in post-structural arguments for critiquing the “the subject,” they draw from contemporary neuroscience as well as seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers Baruch Spinoza and Hume.

However, these ontological models of feelings and affects are necessarily unable to parse a phenomenon like akrasia, in which a person freely and intentionally acts against held beliefs and judgments. As Ruth Leys has argued, affect theory depends


upon a stipulation of affects as definitively devoid of meaning and intention; if our actions are then understood in terms of the affects that cause them, then there can be no such thing as akrasia at all, because there could be no conflict in intention, but rather merely a cascade of non-intentional processes.\textsuperscript{10} Indeed, by critically approaching eighteenth-century and Romantic literature through the philosophical paradigms of Spinoza, Hume, or more recent process philosophers, we are liable to overlook the degree to which this literature is wholly concerned with “action” as a distinct and meaningful category. Often writing in the tradition of Euripides’s \textit{Medea}, Shakespeare’s \textit{Hamlet}, or Milton’s \textit{Paradise Lost}, authors indeed explicitly engage older literary tropes of conflicted volition mired in a conception of action as form of authorship or disclosure. In this sense, the literature I explore reveal the need to distinguish the mechanics and ethical implications of action from other causal operations in the universe, action as a means by which—to quote Hannah Arendt—“men distinguish themselves instead of

\textsuperscript{10} See Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique” \textit{Critical Inquiry} 37 (Spring 2011): 434-72. William E. Connolly, countering Leys and echoing Massumi, insists that the framework of affect does not eliminate intentionality or imply determinism. See William E. Connelly, “Critical Response I: The Complexity of Intention” \textit{Critical Inquiry} 37 (Summer 2011), 791-8. Massumi writes, “The virtual, the pressing crowd of incipiences and tendencies, is a realm of potential.” Following Spinoza, Bergson, and Deleuze, Massumi conceives of the virtual as “having a different temporal structure, in which past and future brush shoulders with no mediating present, and as having a different, recursive causality; the virtual as cresting in a liminal realm of emergence, where half-actualized actions and expressions arise like waves on a sea to which most no sooner return.” Massumi, 30-31. Without wishing to enter fully into the debate of whether a process philosophy based in emergence is compatible with free will, we can merely observe that even such models do not conceive of intentionality as conflicted for the subject.
being merely distinct,” and the means by which one discloses the “‘who’ in
contradistinction to ‘what’ somebody is.”

In one sense, this study participates in a critical turn away from the discourses of
feelings, passions, and affects, and towards the discourses of action and the will. One
recent study focused on action and causation in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century
literature is Jonathan Kramnick’s *Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson* (Stanford
UP, 2010), which attends to how philosophers (Hobbes, Locke, Hume) and authors
(Rochester, Haywood, Richardson) together treat the differences between mental
causation and non-human causation. Dealing with a range of problems familiar from
analytic philosophy of action, including matters of free will and compatibilism, blame
and responsibility, and the “hard problem of consciousness,” Kramnick’s work has
presented fruitful openings for interrogating today’s pressing philosophical questions
within eighteenth-century literature, for it indeed sees literature as participating in the
same conversations as philosophy. Akrasia remains a curious blindspot in Kramnick’s
study, though also unsurprising, for akrasia as a term was not explicitly taken up by
Enlightenment thinkers themselves. Yet precisely in the crisis it posed for the
philosophy of the period, akrasia demands a different kind of story than Kramnick tells,

---

11 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 1958), 177-179. In her influential discussion of “action” as opposed to “labor” and “work” (as three categories of the *vita activa*), Arendt describes the close relation between “action” and “speech,” and the close relation of both to “beginning”: “the faculty of action… interrupts the inexorable automatic course of daily life [work], which in its turn… interrupted and interfered with the cycle of the biological life process [labor].” Ibid., 246.
for it pries open the stark representational differences of narratives and poetry. Akrasia shows how literature becomes an entirely different kind of pursuit than philosophy.

Sandra Macpherons’s *Harm’s Way* (The Johns Hopkins UP, 2010) has similarly centered on philosophical questions of non-human and mental causation in eighteenth-century literature by illuminating the profound dramatic and formal problems that follow from plots concerning accidents, blame, and limited liability. Yet like Kramnick’s study, it focuses on the curious case of mental intentions producing unintentional consequences rather than focusing on how intentions can directly contradict themselves – how someone can freely and intentionally act against one’s highest held intentions. For Kramnick and Macpherson, like for Pinch, human agency proves a rich theme for the distinct causal properties of beliefs, desires, reasons, passions, and actions, but not because human agency troubles the very premises of causation that went unquestioned in Enlightenment thought.

Problems concerning human agency have also recently occupied nineteenth-century literary studies with works like Stefanie Markovits’s *The Crisis of Action in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (The Ohio State UP, 2006) and Anne-Lise François’s *Open Secrets* (Stanford UP, 2008). Both works interrogate Romantic literature for its attention to inaction. François articulates the posture of reticent disclosure offered by literature as exemplified by figures like Wordsworth and Austen. Markovits centers on the “internalization” of plots of action that we find in literature from Wordsworth to
Henry James, how these works portray narratives of “character, as distinguished from [narratives] of plot” — from the Aristotelian conception of action (praxis) and “external action” towards investigations of feeling. While Markovits interrogates regretful inaction in Wordsworth, more broadly, these two works do not center on weakness of will as a distinct philosophical and literary problem with a rich historical tradition. The trope of indolence in the Romantic era is more fully taken up in Willard Spiegelman’s Majestic Indolence (Oxford UP, 1995); however, that study, like Markovits’s and François’s, does not see matters of action and the will as posing broader problems for philosophy or elemental strategies of explanation in the modern era.

In its attention to the monumental conceptual shifts that attend the eighteenth century, my study takes up similar questions to those posed in Vivasvan Soni’s Mourning Happiness (Cornell UP, 2010), which identifies a transformation in literature and political theory of the conception of happiness during the Enlightenment. Soni traces the modern move away from the Aristotelian framework of happiness through “action” (eudaimonia) towards the conception of happiness as mere “affect,” in this way revealing formal transformations motivated by the distinct epistemological contours of modern thought. The present study also approaches similar issues to those raised in Joanna Stalnaker’s The Unfinished Enlightenment (Cornell UP, 2010), which likewise interrogates the growing role literature places alongside broad epistemological shifts in

12 Stefanie Markovits, The Crisis of Action in Nineteenth-Century English Literature (Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2006), 9 and 85.
philosophy and science. Stalnaker’s attention to “description” during the French Enlightenment tangentially informs the present study’s focus on modern “explanation” and the newly contentious notion of “giving an account.”

Because of its high standards of argumentative clarity and explication, the field of analytic philosophy is uniquely able to reveal the difficulties of “explaining” or “accounting for” akrasia. In a 1969 essay called “How Is Weakness of Will Possible?” the philosopher Donald Davidson reflects on the difficulty modern philosophy has faced in approaching this problem. He responds to the view dominantly held within analytic philosophy of the twentieth century – namely, that, to quote E. J. Lemmon, “akrasia is one of the best examples of a pseudo-problem in philosophical literature: in view of its existence, if you find it a problem you have already made a philosophical mistake.”

Davidson’s tradition of analytic philosophy explicitly departs from the “continental” traditions based in Hegel and phenomenology, instead embracing a notion of language as a transparent medium for representing arguments, language as idealizing symbolic or mathematical argumentation. This use of language must then deal with what is explicable or empirically demonstrable. In light of this, it becomes difficult to accept that akrasia is possible. As Davidson writes, philosophy of action tends to accept these two premises:

P1. If an agent wants to do $x$ more than he wants to do $y$ and he believes himself free to do either $x$ or $y$, then he will intentionally do $x$ if he does either $x$ or $y$ intentionally.

P2. If an agent judges that it would be better to do $x$ than to do $y$, then he wants to do $x$ more than he wants to do $y.$\(^{14}\)

In other words, if someone ultimately judges one thing to be better than the other, then he ultimately wants to do one thing more than the other; further, if he believes himself free in doing the thing he wants, he will intentionally do that thing. P1 and P2 together then would seem to refute the possibility of akrasia or “incontinent action,” defined this way: “If a man holds some course of action to be the best one, everything considered, or the right one, or the thing he ought to do, and yet does something else, he acts incontinently.”\(^{15}\) That is, P1 and P2 would seem to refute the following premise:

P3. There are incontinent actions.\(^{16}\)

However, Davidson wants to defend that P1, P2, and P3 are all true and not inconsistent. Over the course of his essay, he aims to convey how and why weakness of will, akrasia, or incontinence is not only real, but a banal and ordinary phenomenon. As he writes, quoting J. L. Austin’s essay “A Plea for Excuses,” these cases do not require

---

\(^{14}\) Davidson, 23.
\(^{15}\) Ibid., 21.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 23.
the extreme language of “succumbing to temptation into losing control of ourselves”: “We often succumb to temptation with calm and even with finesse,” Austin writes.\footnote{J. L. Austin, “A Plea for Excuses” in \textit{Philosophical Papers} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 102-22, quoted in Davidson, 29.}

Though Davidson discusses the formulations of the problem in Aristotle and St. Augustine, he does not reflect upon the historical conditions for modern philosophy’s perplexity with akrasia. The philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe argued, shortly before Davidson in 1958, that our entire vocabulary for moral philosophy—questions of “ought,” “obligation,” and “right,” and necessarily descriptions of “action,” “intention,” and “the will”—lack intellectual foundation in the modern era under secular conditions. Following Anscombe, intellectual histories by Hannah Arendt, Alasdair MacIntyre, and, more recently, Thomas Pfau have traced how broad shifts in conceptualizing causation and explanation in the modern era resulted in transformations to the very notions of action and the will themselves.\footnote{Hannah Arendt, \textit{The Life of the Mind: Willing} (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978); Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Thomas Pfau, \textit{Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013). An essential counterpart to these studies, though focused more broadly on the transforming conceptions of selfhood than on action and the will, is Charles Taylor, \textit{Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity} (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989).} Such approaches can help illuminate the historical contours to the particular notion of akrasia, the particular conundrum faced by Davidson, and the particular privileges these conundrums provide for literature.\footnote{For extended historical accounts of akrasia and weakness of will see Risto Saarinen, \textit{Weakness of Will in Renaissance and Reformation Thought} (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011) and Tobias Hoffmann, ed., \textit{Weakness of Will from Plato to the Present} (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008). For more extended treatments of akrasia and weakness of will in contemporary analytic philosophy, see Amélie}
Akrasia is originally and most influentially theorized in two separate contexts – in the thought of Aristotle and on the one hand and St. Augustine on the other. Both respond to the position espoused by Socrates in Plato’s Protagoras: that it is logically speaking a mistake to say that a man can act contrary to what he believes to be best. Socrates says: “no one who has knowledge or thought of other actions as better than those he is doing, and as possible, will do as he proposes if he is free to do the better ones.” The idea of “yielding to oneself” or the expression of “weakness” in action, Socrates clarifies, reflects “nothing but ignorance”: acting wrongly must be understood strictly as acting from lack of knowledge. In this way, action for Plato can always be rationalistically explicated in terms of reasons, beliefs, and intentions, and if not, then it is not “action” properly speaking at all.

For Aristotle and Augustine both, action is not strictly convertible to belief, but can itself be a site of struggle. In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle argues that virtue derives not strictly from matters of belief, knowledge, and reason, but also by fostering practical reason and cultivating agency. The akratic or “incontinent” person in this framework is he who knows that he should live according to reason, even though he


acts contrary to reason. True vice is committed “in accordance with choice,” but akrasia exemplifies an “incomplete vice,” for “incontinence is contrary to choice.” The akratic is not “wicked,” but “half-wicked.”21 The akratic person may hold knowledge about the good without precisely incorporating that knowledge into the act either from “impetuosity” or “weakness”22: “the incontinent man is apt to pursue, not on conviction, bodily pleasures that are excessive and contrary to the right rule.”23 For Aristotle, action does not merely convey underlying belief, and is not a mere event, but either an accomplishment or expression of failure.

Augustine’s Confessions likewise responds to Plato while engaging the case of Paul in Romans 7, who says, “The good which I want to do, I fail to do; but what I do is the wrong which is against my will.” For Paul, as Hannah Arendt has written, “the conflict is between flesh and spirit, and the trouble is that men are both, carnal and spiritual.”24 Augustine re-describes the case of Paul through reflecting on his youth, and theorizes the concept of “the will” by contemplating his own weakness of will. “The mind orders the mind to will; it is only one mind, but it does not do as ordered”; he calls this the divided will – “two wills” (duae voluntates) or the “incomplete will” (voluntas non

22 Ibid., bk. VII; ch. 7, 1049.
23 Ibid., bk. VII; ch. 8, 1050
totam non plena), a “sickness of the mind.”

“Whence is this strange situation? and why is it so?” he writes. In Augustine’s framework, the will participates in the divine, and yet, as an expression of man’s fallen nature, can turn away from God and follow love of self.

With Descartes, Bacon and more fully with Isaac Newton, the Aristotelian and Augustinian teleological frameworks were no longer deemed essential for studying the universe. Following Descartes, Newton and other mechanistic philosophers discarded forms of causation that characterized how entities could internally be directed towards a given end – what Aristotle called “formal” causation and “final” causation. All causation became strictly extrinsic or “efficient” causation. Thus as Louis Dupré has written, “any appeal to final causes [were considered] pure speculation, an undesirable intrusion in a self-contained structure. Newton himself avoided using teleological arguments, not in the first place because they interfered with mathematical deduction, but because they escaped observation.” These premises necessarily changed how philosophers investigated the human frame itself. As Pfau has written, with the Enlightenment, we see the “fragmentation of the person into ostensibly unrelated powers or faculties, and [the] conflation of action with sheer mechanical motion.” The very idea of “explaining action” then becomes a matter of stipulating the causes that physically produced the

26 Ibid., 8.9.21, 176.
28 Pfau, 211.
action; as MacIntyre writes, “the explanation of action is increasingly held to be a matter of laying bare the physiological and physical mechanisms which underlie action.”

We see this with particular clarity in Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651) in which, as Michael Oakeshott has written, “a knowledge of causes is the pursuit of philosophy,” with the addendum that “cause” means “essentially that which, previous in time, brings about the effect.” Beginning with Hobbes, then, we can see how such a premise alters the notion of the will and thus the problem of akrasia. “The WILL” is indeed not a site of struggle or potential, but simply the “last Appetite, or Aversion, immediately adhaering to the action.” Hobbes describes acting against better judgment thus: “And though we say in common Discourse, a man had a Will once to do a thing, that nevertheless he forbore to do; yet that is properly but an Inclination, which makes no Action Voluntary; because the action depends not of it, but of the last Inclination, or Appetite.” That which is voluntary or willed can only be defined as that which finally occurred, so to stipulate that someone preferred to do something but did not do it would be to ignore “the last Inclination, or Appetite,” which is the actually effective motive when it comes to voluntary motion.

---

29 MacIntyre, 82. MacIntyre memorably goes on to argue that “the concept of an intelligible action is a more fundamental concept than that of an action.” Ibid., 209.
32 Ibid., 128.
33 See also Thomas Pfau: “Hobbes appears in a principled way uncurious about the myriad ways in which ‘person’ comprises countless ambivalences, inner conflicts, and minute shifts and, consequently, poses profound interpretive challenges for other subjects within its social orbit.” Pfau, 202.
Hobbes’s approach recurs throughout the Enlightenment. For the rationalist philosophes of the French Enlightenment, “Will is a modification of the brain, by which it is disposed to action, that is to say, to give such an impulse to the organs of the body, as can induce it to act…”34 Baron d’Holbach argues that when a person deliberates, it is not properly speaking man that deliberates himself; rather, when we regard man as a “system,” we see that two motives—perceived as brute powers—weigh against each other until one prevails:

Man is said to deliberate when the action of the will is suspended; this happens when two opposite motives act alternately upon him. To deliberate, is to hate and to love in succession; it is to be alternately attracted and repelled; it is to be moved sometimes by one motive, sometimes by another. … but even in the time of deliberation, during the comparison, … he is not a free agent for a single instant….35

This model then helps us see that the changes to conceptions of action do not just characterize the so-called “rationalist” side of the Enlightenment, but also the “counter-Enlightenment” models of Spinoza and Hume who downplay the role of reason in human action. Spinoza’s model of the non-cognitive affects and Hume’s model of the irrational passions, much like d’Holbach’s, undermine and determine reason. In his Ethics (1677), Spinoza writes about someone who commits an awful act while mournfully knowing it to be wrong, yet he does so through the necessitarian language of affects: “For the man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of himself, but

35 Ibid., ch. XI, 100.
of fortune, in whose power he so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse.” The man is “subject” to affects under the control “of fortune” and he is “forced to follow the worse; there is no self-direction that is flummoxed, for he is a mere sufferer of external events like a rudderless boat upon the ocean. He is an unhappy onlooker to an unalterable fate. Likewise, in his Treatise of Human Nature (1738), Hume considers how a man acts knowingly against his best interests, and minimizes the distinctive difficulty of accounting for such an event, writing, “nor is there any thing more extraordinary in this, than in mechanics to see one pound weight raise up a hundred by the advantage of its situation.” That is, one acts against better judgment because the situation at hand makes the causal event more possible than the contrary. To Hume, there is no particular difficulty in describing a person’s acting against better judgment, for the same explanatory tools we can use to discuss Newtonian laws of gravity can be unproblematically fitted to the human domain.

Yet the recurrence of this problem for philosophy indicates the difficulty it poses the systematic models of will and action, and more broadly, to Sellars’s “scientific image of man.” John Locke encountered particular problems describing acting against better judgment, and his revisions on the subject foreshadow approaches by contemporary

---

37 Hume, 2.3.3, 267.
analytic philosophers and reveal the epistemological privileges of “the literary.” Locke indeed wrote entirely new sections in the second edition to the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* while attempting to account for acting against better judgment. In the first edition (1690), the depiction of the will is much like Hobbes’s, defined as that which preceded an action. When he comes upon the topic of wrongdoing, he takes either the Hobbesian route, saying it results “From bodily pains” or takes the Platonic route, saying that they result “From wrong desires arising from wrong judgments.” However, as Stephen Darwall writes, “[t]his raises the obvious problem why people choose to do what will make them less happy than they could be.” Thus in the more well-known second edition (1694), Locke alters his model so “will” is now defined as the faculty or power to command oneself.

However, Locke’s difficulty in the second edition consists in the attempt to make this self-legislating notion of the will compatible with his broader Newtonian premises of causation, in which there can be no uncaused cause. The “will” must be a faculty that commands the self, and yet “the will” cannot be caused by itself. Locke’s solution is to describe the will as caused by “uneasiness,” which is “the great motive that works on the mind to put it upon action, which for shortness sake we will call determining of the

40 Locke, sec. 25, 247.
This notably results in a historically peculiar view of “the will,” for though it is conceived as the power to command the self, it is also “determined” by a prior non-cognitive impulse – namely, uneasiness. In a passage that represents the hermeneutic puzzles and paradoxes of this notion of the will, Locke then attempts to account for acting against better judgment. Recalling the case of Medea who says “I see the better and approve it, but I follow the worse,” Locke wants to explain how someone can go against what is regarded to be best. His discussion then turns upon a narrative: he invents a drunkard who habitually returns to the tavern to drink even though he clearly sees that doing so causes his ruin. Leaving aside that Locke chooses to represent akrasia through a drug-induced addiction, thus diluting the philosophical problem by grounding it in terms more easily parsed by physiology, his portrayal of the condition is notable for its dependence upon storytelling. The drunkard sees…

...that his health decays, his estate wastes; discredit and diseases, and the want of all things, even of his beloved drink attends him in the course he follows: yet the returns of uneasiness to miss... the habitual thirst after his cups, at the usual time, drives him to the tavern... 'Tis not for want of viewing the greater good; for he sees, and acknowledges it, and in the intervals of his drinking hours, will take resolutions to pursue the greater good; but when the uneasiness to miss his accustomed delight returns, the greater acknowledged good loses its hold, and the present uneasiness determines the will to the accustomed action.42

In order to express the case convincingly, Locke does not merely stipulate a syllogism, but tells a story. He tells us not only of the drunkard’s woes in general terms, but also

41 Ibid., sec. 29, 249.
42 Ibid., sec. 35, 253-54.
depicts his life in the hours away from the tavern: in the “intervals of his drinking hours,” he takes “resolutions to pursue the greater good.” This detail adds a special drama to Locke’s plot, for it heightens the significance of the protagonist’s conscience – his beliefs and judgments. The narrative’s tension has thus been introduced, and allows the narrative’s unhappy ending in which “the greater acknowledged good loses its hold.” This phrase indeed carries a particular dramatic force for its imprecision: how does a “good” lose its hold? Who is losing hold? Does a mental state merely get weaker, or does the agent allow it to get weaker?

The scene is moving for its irony; we recognize it as a dramatic scene of weakness of will, and we recognize it because it recalls a range of familiar literary characters – Euripides’s Medea, for instance, who says, “I see the better and approve it; but I follow the worse,” or many an akratic Shakespearean anti-hero. We may recall Brutus who, prior to killing Caesar, proclaims,

Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream:
The Genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council; and the state of man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection.  

---

Locke’s phrase “loses its hold” evokes indeed not a mechanistic but an essentially normative model of man in which one *fails* in action. Like Brutus’s “insurrection,” it indicates a breakdown, with an accompanying dreamlike sense of disarray “or a hideous dream,” in which one’s “acting” no longer feels like one’s own.

Yet as Locke’s passage concludes, the drama is explained away: he tells us, “the present *uneasiness* determines the *will* to the accustomed action.” The will, it seems, never faced a conflict at all, for it was always determined by prior states that are themselves, like Spinoza’s affects, devoid of intentionality or meaning. As the motivational intentional self gives way to the non-rational physical self, we no longer read a drama of an internal insurrection but rather an explanation of a system. A literary account is supplanted by a philosophical account; the “manifest image” of man loses its priority to the “scientific image” of man.

Locke is not the only philosopher who uses narratives to discuss akrasia. In Donald Davidson’s genre of analytic philosophy, narrative “thought experiments” are repeatedly deployed in order to defend the reality of akrasia. Davidson’s essay “How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?” indeed turns to narrative thought experiments repeatedly in order to defend against E. J. Lemmon and others that P3 is true: “There are incontinent actions.” Yet how does one evoke this truth if we have already accepted P1 and P2—that if we judge something best and thus want to do that thing most, and are
free to do that thing, then we will do it? He evokes this truth by shifting from the genre of syllogism to the genre of storytelling.

Davidson paints a scene in which he knows he should not rise out of bed and disturb his slumber, but his habit to brush his teeth gets the better of him, and so he gets out of bed, disturbs his rest, and thus acts against better judgment. Brushing one’s teeth is not normally thought of as an act against better judgment, but Davidson wants to convey that in this case it is starkly against his better reasoning: “Everything considered I judge I would do better to stay in bed.” He concludes his narrative with the line: “wearily I leave my bed and brush my teeth.”

One might recount the case with the following steps: 1. D judges it is better to stay in bed, 2. D feels an impulse to brush teeth, 3. D brushes teeth. Yet told this way, it does not evoke the problem that Davidson wants to defend as real. So it is essential then that Davidson writes, “wearily I leave my bed and brush my teeth.” The adverb carries a certain weight – an important dimension that is left out of a purely symbolic or mathematical argument. With one word, Davidson shows us why “style” may carry special epistemological importance in the modern era’s explanatory regimes. It tells us that an action may carry qualities that betray the outwardly or empirical expression of the action – that an action does not immediately disclose the intention behind it, but rather can be imbued with a range of conflicting intentions that double over each other and maintain a state of difficulty. In

44 Davidson, 30.
making a stylistic choice to avert explication, to add a contrary adverb to the verb, Davidson shows us how the non-explanatory form of writing we call “literary” writing can have actual epistemological privileges – how a literary account can do what a philosophical account cannot. Turning to the era in which this form of explanation became widespread and dominant, literary engagements with akrasia thus help reveal the new role for literature in the modern era.

This study is divided into four chapters, which trace different literary engagements with akrasia and weakness of will from the 1760s to the 1810s, from autobiographies and novels to lyric poetry. Chapter 1 (“Akrasia and the Account of the Self in Rousseau and Sterne”) examines how the theme of akrasia presents new narrative possibilities for accounting for a self in the sentimental period. While works like Rousseau’s Julie (1761) and Frances Burney’s Evelina (1778) pit the reckless passions against the faculty of judgment, I show that akrasia presents a potential threat to these plots. Rousseau’s later Confessions (completed in 1769, published in 1781) and Sterne’s A Sentimental Journey (1767) more self-consciously delve into the problem of akrasia, and in doing so, both transform the genre of a narrative of a self. These latter texts are both retrospective autobiographies that recall and attempt to explain former embarrassing and disgraceful acts. In the protagonists’ repeated attempts to “account for” action, they
call upon the inherently irreducible properties of narrative to foster ongoing interpretation that can never be reducible to a fixed reading.

The problem of constitutional temperance proves a particularly troublesome topic of narration in the form of the Romantic realist novel. As I argue in chapter 2 (“Free Indirect Discourse and Weakness of Will in Two Novels by William Godwin”), the emergent novelistic technique of “free indirect discourse” allows literary writing to capture the ironies and paradoxes of conflicted volition. Seemingly innocuous asides in Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1815) (e.g., “Emma could not resist”) reveal free indirect discourse to be a crucial technique for closing in on the reality of akrasia or “weakness of will.” The same dilemma also pervades and gives dramatic structure to the novels of William Godwin. Wrestling with Rousseau’s *Confessions* and the excesses of the French Revolution, Godwin’s preoccupation with intemperate psychological states illustrates the shortcomings of mechanistic epistemologies that he had espoused early in his career. Abandoning his determinist line of argument in *Political Justice* (1793), which informs much of his novel *St. Leon* (1799), Godwin’s *Fleetwood* (1805) deploys free indirect discourse so as to convey the perplexing nature of conflicted volition.

With the third and fourth chapters, we shift away from cases of failure in action to cases of failure to act – specifically, cases of procrastination and indolence in the Romantic poets. Chapter 3 (“The Poetics of Procrastination in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*”) reinterprets Wordsworth’s poetics of tranquility as instead a poetics of procrastination,
attending to the conditions that prompted the writing of the autobiographical *Prelude*: caught in a state of deadening indolence, Wordsworth sought an easier task to defer his attention. By reading Wordsworth’s “wise passive” mode of walking as instead an anxious mode of putting things off, we can see how the logic of procrastination underlies Wordsworth’s distinctly indirect and impersonal blank verse syntax and his self-interrogating logic of his retrospective narrative.

Chapter 4 (“Indolence and the Disinterested Aesthetic in the Poetry of Keats”) centers on how Keats’s engagement with the trope of indolence leads to his well-known characterization of “disinterested aesthetics.” Unlike Wordsworth, Keats engages indolence not as a problem to be overcome, but as a generative symbol of a contradictory and gestational state. As Keats’s letters reveal, his ideas about paradoxical agency were borrowed from William Hazlitt, who wrote an extended critique of Enlightenment mechanistic metaphysics of action. Hazlitt wrote that individuals are not merely “reactive,” but are “disinterested,” able to occupy an impersonal stance that contains contraries. Keats brings this notion of agency to his thoughts about poetry, summed up in his famous formulation of “negative capability” as the aesthetic value of containing contraries without resolving them. With “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” (1817), *Endymion* (1818), and “Ode on Indolence” (1819), Keats uses the contradictions of human agency as a metonymy of and basis for a conception of aesthetics as “disinterested.” This conception of the “the aesthetic” has endured, and Keats continues
to be able to show us how the site of the aesthetic shares the same privilege as the site of human agency: in refusing causal explanation, it demands continual re-interpretation.
1. Akrasia and the Account of a Self in Rousseau and Sterne

When Yorick tells us in *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1767), “I wish’d to let [her hands] go… and still I held them on,” he in one sense appears to be succumbing to the unruly power of the passions. Considered one of the early works of “sentimental” fiction, Sterne’s novella may indeed be seen as attending to and celebrating the irrational and excessive passions, thereby up-ending “the rigid rules of correct and elaborate decorum typical of the learned hierarchies of early eighteenth century literature.”¹ As Adela Pinch has observed, sentimental literature tends to uphold a model of the irrational self borrowed from David Hume in which feelings function as “autonomous entities that do not always belong to individuals”; thus when Yorick—feeling the onslaught of his sentiments—says, “I felt my legs and every limb about me tremble at the idea,” we may identify the Humean passions at work, causing his movements and general distempered condition.²

But when we regard it as a case of akrasia—in which he knowingly fails to do what he knows he ought—we see that Yorick’s condition is not merely explainable in terms of passions, but rather a puzzle that requires an interpretation of the self. Precisely

---

² Pinch, 3.
because it is a case that reflects the contradictions in conscious action rather than the causation of unconscious passions, it demands a particular narrative form. This chapter centers on a collection of narratives in the sentimental genre from the 1760s and 1770s that interrogate selves whose actions seem to get away from them due to distempered, emotional, or nervous states. Some of these works depict such actions as “caused by” the deterministic passions, then suggesting that the cultivation of education and judgment are necessary for governing one’s self. In Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Julie (1761) and Frances Burney’s Evelina (1778), we find narratives that pit reason against the passions, suggesting in dialogic epistolary modes that the unruly emotions can be kept at bay by avoiding particular circumstances. However, in two self-consciously experimental first-person narratives of selves—Sterne’s A Sentimental Journey and Rousseau’s own Confessions (written in 1769 and published in 1781)—we find that “acting from passions” cannot be so easily explained or remedied. These latter two texts perform the difficulties of explaining, interpreting, and “accounting for” actions committed knowingly against better judgment, and highlight the epistemic privileges of a narrative form.

These latter texts not only depart from the “sentimental” deployment of philosophical and scientific models of passions and nerves, but also depart from the eighteenth-century genre of autobiography. As critics such as G. A. Starr and Patricia Meyer Spacks have noted, the very form of the novel can be traced to the development of the autobiographical genre, as writers like Defoe drew upon the “spiritual
autobiography” in new secular and imaginative contexts. Rousseau’s and Sterne’s quasi-autobiographies from the 1760s reveal a particular self-consciousness regarding the very possibility of an autobiography, or an “account of a self.” Indeed, as they foreground the inherently interpretive demands of a self, they knowingly challenge the philosophical systems of man of the Enlightenment, from Hume to the philosophes.

In order to approach sentimental narratives with an attention to their difficulties depicting actions, we can attend to these very same difficulties in the philosophical and scientific discourses that often informed this literature. As Markman Ellis has observed, “the novels of the sentimental school adapted the vocabulary of the scientists’ model of the workings of the nerves to communicate a deepened range of emotions and feelings. On these foundations is built the repertoire of conventions associated with the sentimental rhetoric of the body: fainting, weeping, sighing, hand-holding, mute gestures, the beat of the pulse, blushing – and so on.” The physiological discourses

---


4 Drawing upon a psychoanalytic tradition, Judith Butler has described “giving an account of oneself” as always “social in character,” because “the terms by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making.” For this reason, Butler writes, even giving a “narrative account of my life… will be disoriented by what is not mine, or not mine alone.” Giving an Account of Oneself (New York: Fordham UP, 2005), 21 and 37. Butler’s discussion also echoes Hannah Arendt who writes, “nobody is the author or producer of his own life story,” because even the disclosure of actions in a life “fall into an already existing web of human relationships”: “In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer.” The Human Condition, 184.

5 Ellis, 19. Similarly, Ann Jessie Van Sant observes how these discourses created a “mixed physiological language… including vibrating nerves and heartstrings, circulation of the blood, and the motion of animal
informed sentimental literature in rather explicit ways: Sterne and Smollett both read closely “the physiological debates of the forties and fifties in England… centering around… ‘sensibility’ and ‘irritability,’”6 and one of the most-widely read contributors to the medical-physiological discourse George Cheyne was the doctor of Samuel Richardson. Cheyne’s widely read study on nervous disorders, The English Malady; or a treatise of nervous disorders of all kinds (1733) posits the existence of “small, transparent, solid, and elastick, or springy Threads or Filaments.”7 These filaments compose “all the solids of the body,”8 and include “nerves,” types of “fibres,” which help produce human actions. Nerves “carry back from [the Seat of the Intelligent or sensitive Principle], the first Tendency of Action to the Muscular Fibres, when they contract or relax.”9

Thus a framework like Cheyne’s explains actions by the same terms with which it explains “fainting… the beat of the pulse, blushing – and so on.” The only descriptive difference is that they derive from “the seat of the Intelligent or sensitive Principle.” The physiological discourses of nerves can then be seen as compatible with the philosophy put forward by David Hume, who famously wrote, “Reason is, and ought only to be the spirits” that informed sentimental fiction. Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 11-12.

7 George Cheyne, The English Malady: or, A treatise of nervous diseases of all kinds, as spleen, vapours, lowness of spirits, hypochondriacal, and hysterical distempers, etc. (London: Strahan, 1733), 60. Internet Archive. Web.
8 Ibid., 62.
9 Ibid., 65.
slave of the passions.” Hume is traditionally seen as up-ending the Enlightenment model of the rational self. But if we attend to his description of actions, we indeed find how profoundly an Enlightenment figure he really is. In the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1740), a “Self” is described as a “connected succession of perceptions,” which can be parsed as if they were billiard balls that ricochet against each other. The self has no capacity to be a “CAUSE” of passions, but is rather the “object” of passions. Reason is not endowed with the ability to alter the passions: it “can never oppose passion in the direction of the will,” and when passions appear in opposition to each other, they “take place alternately; or if they encounter, the one annihilates the other, as far as its strength goes, and the remainder only of that, which is superior, continues to operate upon the mind.” If reason holds no power “in the direction of the will,” nor does “the will” hold power in the production of actions, for “the will” is “nothing but the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body, or new perception of our mind.” Notably, the will is even less meaningful an entity than it was for Hobbes, for whom it was merely “the last appetite or aversion adhering to the action”; in Hume’s model, the will is not even endowed with the ability for physical

---

10 Hume, 2.3.3, 266.  
11 Ibid., 2.1.2, 182.  
12 Ibid., 2.3.3, 265 and 2.1.2, 182-183.  
13 Ibid., 2.3.1, 257.
causation, but is rather a sheer epiphenomenon that ineffectively accompanies the motion as an “internal impression.”

While these frameworks produced a radically new conception of emotions, passions, feelings, and sentiments, they also imply that actions are explainable in terms of the causation of those non-cognitive states. We see this understanding of action as an “output” of passions or nerves in Rousseau’s Julie and Burney’s Evelina, which then foreground the plots of judgment and education.

1.1 The Determinist Passions and the Corrective Role of Judgment: Rousseau’s Julie and Burney’s Evelina

In the opening pages to Julie, the male protagonist St. Preux expresses his disarray as a result of the increasingly amorous relationship with Julie. Among the first lines we read from St. Preux to Julie are: “No sooner does your hand rest on mine than a tremor goes through me; such sport gives me a fever or rather delirium; I cease to see or feel anything, and in that moment of alienation [aliénation], what can I say, what can I do, where can I hide, how can I answer for myself?”

14 See Norman Kemp Smith’s influential discussion of Hume: “the determining factor in Hume’s philosophy” is “the establishment of a purely naturalistic conception of human nature by the thorough subordination of reason to feeling and instinct” — a quality that subverts his reputation as skeptical philosopher. Norman Smith, “The Naturalism of Hume,” Mind 14.54 (1905), 150. See also David Fate Norton, David Hume: Common Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982) and, more recently Thomas Pfau, for an extended discussion of Hume’s reductionism. Minding the Modern, 283-326.

15 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Julie; or, the New Héloïse, trans. Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 1997), 27.
that Yorick’s “legs and every limb about [him] tremble.” In his fever, delirium, and alienation, St. Preux finds he has lost an ability to account for or “answer for” himself. He continues by saying he cannot proceed with certain actions on his own because he is so crippled by this state of passion: “Show my letter to your parents; have me refused entry to your house; dismiss me in whatever way you prefer; from you I can bear anything; by myself I cannot flee you.”¹⁶ He asks Julie to do what he cannot do of himself; as he writes, “I cannot flee you.”

However, as we will find repeatedly in this novel, St. Preux then reinterprets the relation between his passions and his actions. Instead of describing himself as weak-willed, he declares that he stands by his passions, and that his actions or non-actions are ultimately justified: “You, dismiss me! I, flee you! and why? Why then is it a crime to be so sensible to merit, and to love what one has to honor? No, fair Julie…”¹⁷ As St. Preux and Julie both come to understand over the course of this novel, one must learn to both acknowledge the reality of the passions and to live alongside them. Julie traces the relationship between the two protagonists, who are lovers in Books One and Two, but then proceed in Books Three through Six to learn how to live separate and what they hope to be more virtuous lives. St. Preux’s revision of self-interpretation here rehearses

---

¹⁶ Ibid., 26.
¹⁷ Ibid.
the broader lesson he learns over the course of the novel: one governs oneself not by battling the passions, but by cultivating judgment, which then steers the passions.

As an epistolary novel, the characters necessarily characterize their past actions as part of a dialogue with an interlocutor. For this reason, the characters often re-describe their actions based on the present circumstances. Indeed, in Book Three Julie also thinks back on the love affair with St. Preux and articulates it in ways rather different than she had at the time. After marrying Monsieur de Wolmar, in the longest and arguably her most important letter in the novel, she reconstructs her affair with St. Preux, blaming herself for constitutional weakness and a general inability to act as she knew she ought to:

Like the madwoman I was, I hastened my ruin instead of preventing it, I used poison as a palliative, and what should have made you hold your peace was precisely what made you speak out. … Instead of throwing your first letter into the fire, or taking it to my mother, I made so bold as to open it. Therein lay my crime, and all the rest was inevitable. I meant to refrain from answering these fatal letters which I could not refrain from reading. That frightful struggle impaired my health. I saw the chasm into which I was about to plunge. I was horrified with myself, and could not bring myself to let you leave. I fell into a sort of despair…

I felt my heart was made for virtue and could not be happy without it; I yielded out of weakness and not error; I had not even the excuse of blindness.

I had maxims for believing and others for acting; I forgot in one place what I had thought in the other, I was devout in Church and a philosopher at home. Alas!...

---

18 Ibid., 280-81.
19 Ibid., 282.
20 Ibid., 294.
Julie’s formulations evoke akrasia in its classic sense; in “hasten[ing] my ruin instead of preventing it” and “yield[ing] out of weakness and not error,” she recalls Medea who “sees the better and approves it, but follows the worse.”

A savvy reader, however, recognizes that Julie’s account of herself does not do justice to what appeared to be the case in the first two volumes: it is overly harsh on herself, exaggerated in the aim of self-punishment. Julie’s friend Claire is that savvy reader and corrects Julie in Book Four. That exchange begins with Julie expressing worry that she is too weak and will not be able to withstand resisting an amorous encounter with St. Preux when Monsieur de Wolmar invites him to visit their home while Wolmar is away. Claire assures Julie that weakness of will never was Julie’s central problem to begin with, and insists that Julie not chastise herself for that kind of failing, for she is not liable to infidelity against her better judgment:

The circumspection that you base on your past faults is insulting to your present state; I would never forgive your heart for it, and it is very hard for me to forgive your reason. How did the rampart that defends your person fail to protect you from an ignominious fear? How is it that my Cousin, my sister, my friend, my Julie could confuse the weaknesses of an overly sensible maiden with the infidelities of a guilty wife? … But to answer for my Julie, what need have I to consider what she is? It suffices me to know what she was during the errors she deplores.²¹

Claire argues that Julie’s “weaknesses” were never cases of doing clear-eyed wrong; thus she should not fear that she is of the character to fail to be faithful to her husband. She emphasizes instead Julie’s youth and naiveté as an “overly sensible maiden,” which

²¹ Ibid., 412.
are entirely different kinds of crimes than that of a married woman who succumbs to temptation against better judgment.

Claire’s accurate re-reading of Julie upholds the notion of action as convertible with belief: so long as Julie acted intentionally from her passions, they were not against her better judgment, but rather an expression of her youthful beliefs. Likewise, as St. Preux becomes more steadfastly resilient to constitutional weakness, he also comes to see that it is never accurate to describe his “past faults” through the lens of akrasia or constitutional weakness, but rather to the assent of one set of passions over the embrace of socially accepted principles. In the first correspondence between Julie (now Madame de Wolmar) and St. Preux in seven years, St. Preux tells Julie, “I do not rely on my strength, but on the sentiment that dispenses me from having to invoke it... Since I ceased deceiving myself and the perspicacious Wolmar enlightened me as to my true sentiments I have better learned to know myself, and I am less alarmed at my weakness.” St. Preux’s trajectory has been one of “enlightenment,” a reflection of the cultivation of beliefs and judgment as a means of offsetting the determinative power of the passions.

22 Ibid., 554.
23 In this respect, they revise their respective and mutual understandings of their own passions and passionate actions, they not only become increasingly “stoic” figures, but become increasingly drawn to the descriptive model of passion and action espoused by ancient Stoicism, which regards passions as mental states that are to be “assented to” or “resisted,” a matter which rests ultimately in judgment. As Amélie Rorty writes, Rousseau “echoes the Stoic view that rationality rests on the ability to affirm or to deny the representational claims of impressions and judgments,” and the site of responsibility for the agent ultimately lies in this affirming or denying. Amélie Rorty, “The Two Faces of Stoicism: Rousseau and Freud”
Thus *Julie* suggests a relation between passion and action that is ultimately remedial, and remedial specifically through writing. Improvement can be traced in dialogic and dialectical form, allowing for its readers as well as its characters a view of progression and improvement that avoids the more troublesome self-contradictory concept of akrasia. It will be in the autobiographical form of the *Confessions* that Rousseau would more fully challenge this dichotomy of reason and passion, by which belief converts to action. In its rather more exhibitionist than remedial mode, the *Confessions* does not reach resolved explanations of “past faults,” but rather sees such cases as demanding the need for the unresolvable task of interpretation.

Frances Burney’s *Evelina* is likewise full of episodes in which the protagonist’s capacity for intentional action is compromised by a struggle for agential autonomy. Evelina’s moments of nervousness in particular make for rich rhetorical moments of retrospective depiction in epistolary form; as Margaret Doody has written, Evelina is “so often speechless yet always an author,” speaking about being speechless and continually

striving to characterize her own prior states of confusion. Speaking about being speechless and depicting being in disarray present us with self-characterizations that carry the often comical sense of irony that a case like constitutional disorder can induce. At Evelina’s first private ball at which she meets Lord Orville for the first time, she describes herself: “I was seized with such a panic, that I could hardly speak a word, and nothing but the shame of so soon changing my mind, prevented my returning to my seat, and declining to dance at all.” Somewhat later she continues: “I found it absolutely impossible to keep my seat, because I could not think of a word to say for myself, and so I rose, and walked hastily towards the card-room…” When Orville asks her if he had offended her, “I said no, before I knew I had answered at all,” continuing, “I was too much confused to think or act with any consistency.” Orville proceeds to attempt to engage in conversation about living in the country, her response to which Evelina amusingly recounts: “It now struck me, that he was resolved to try whether or not I was capable of talking upon any subject. This put so great a constraint upon my thoughts, that I was unable to go further than a monosyllable, and not even so far, when

---

24 Margaret Anne Doody, “Beyond Evelina: The Individual Novel and the Community of Literature,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 3.4 (July 1991), 365. Helen Thompson also crucially notes that discussions of agency in must take into account “what qualifies, for present-day readers, as agency at all” for Evelina, and what it means “to find inside Burney’s protagonist” particularly as a woman in the often threatening public sphere, “the ‘distinct agent’ that is a will to resist.” Thompson, 4.
26 Ibid., 32.
27 Ibid., 33.
I could possibly avoid it.”28 When Orville asks at the end of the ball who she is: “This again disconcerted me, and the spirits I had determined to exert, again failed me.”29 In all of these sentences, the phrases “I could hardly...”, “I found it absolutely impossible...” “I could not...” and “I was unable...” carry the idiomatic sense of confusion in action, conveying the familiar condition of feeling frozen in baffling contradiction with oneself. The sense of contradiction is accentuated by Evelina’s use of the words “spirits,” which recalls the physiological discourses of the determinative nerves, fibres, and filaments.

Because Evelina is tasked with navigating the world of London after a rural and secluded upbringing, she brings with her qualities of the “natural” or “pre-social” self evoked by her name’s relation to the Biblical “first woman.” Evelina’s “unfinished” or “unacculturated” nature simultaneously gets her in trouble, but also gets her out of trouble. In a particularly memorable moment, Evelina sees a young Scot named Macartney distressed and speaking to himself while looking at his pistols, and Evelina believes (mistakenly) that he is contemplating suicide:

Struck with the dreadful idea, all my strength seemed to fail me;—I sat motionless;—I lost all power of action,—and grew almost stiff with horror... 

... I then trembled so violently, that my chair actually shook under me;—till, recollecting that it was yet possible to prevent the fatal deed, all my faculties seemed to return, with the hope of saving him.

My first thought was to fly to Mr. Branghton, but I feared that an instant of time lost, might for ever be rued; and therefore, guided by the impulse of my apprehensions,

28 Ibid., 34. 
29 Ibid., 36.
as well I was able, I followed him up stairs, stepping very softly, and obliged to support myself by the banisters.³⁰

Evelina loses “all of power of action,” and like Yorick and St. Preux “tremble[s] violently” while her “faculties” fail her. Yet precisely the automaticity of her uncontrollable reactions reveals Evelina’s true character, which “amazes” Macartney in its goodness. Thus Evelina’s reactions prove contagious, as Macartney’s own agency breaks down, saving his life:

Unwilling to leave [the pistols], and, indeed, too weak to move, I leant one hand on the table, and then stood perfectly still: while he, his eyes cast wildly towards me, seemed too infinitely amazed to be capable of either speech or action.

Because her actions arise despite herself and before she has time to reflect, they prove heroic.

Thus the deterministic dimensions of the nerves or spirits prove useful in some scenes while they need to be kept at bay in others. As Reverend Arthur Villars writes her, she needs to “learn not only to judge but to act for [he]rself.”³¹ Evelina thus needs to learn the skill of performance: “These people in high life,” she writes, “have too much presence of mind, I believe, to seem disconcerted, or out of humour, however they may feel.”³² They have practiced the skill of action regardless of feeling. If one the one hand the benevolent feelings automatically produce actions that disclose her true character, on

---

³⁰ Ibid., 183.
³¹ Ibid., 166.
³² Ibid., 33.
the other hand, the disruptive tendencies need to be harnessed through the educational process of proper performance. Villars tasks her, not primarily with the need for constitutional strength, but with the “avoiding” of evils: “exert yourself resolutely in avoiding [improper engagements],” he tells her emphatically in a letter, and later repeats to her: “exert yourself to avoid... evils.” This sense of “exertion” is not “exertion of the will,” but rather the exertion of careful judgment that allows one to avoid improper circumstances.

_Evelina_ and _Julie_ alike then characterize action as either following from bodily impulse or from cultivated judgment; what is thus left out or disallowed from these plots is the possibility of freely acting against better judgment. Rather than attending to conflicts within conscious intention, these novels attend to conflicts between conscious reason and the unconscious passions. Moving away from the dialogic mode of the epistolary novel towards the introspective genre of the autobiography, we find that the question of action opens up new contours for “accounting for a self.”

### 1.2 Confession or Explanation?: Accounting for Actions in Rousseau’s Confessions

Rousseau’s _Confessions_ is frequently thought of as the first modern autobiography – a text that aims to “display to my kind a portrait in every way true to

---

33 Ibid., 166.
34 Ibid., 309.
nature” and “make my soul transparent to the reader’s eye.” In its famous characterizations of the many disgraceful deeds over the course of his life—including giving away his children to various orphanages—the *Confessions* opens itself to the judgment of its readers. As he writes on the first page, “Let the trumpet of judgement sound when it will... I will say boldly: ‘Here is what I have done, what I have thought, what I was....’"

However, to say “what I have done” is quite different than to say “what I have thought” or “felt.” To give an account of oneself by focusing on one did is quite different than to give an account of oneself by focusing on what one thought or felt. The *Confessions* exposes that difference due to its double approach to self-accounting. In one sense, it emulates Augustine’s fourth-century *Confessions*. As Augustine’s text has famously shown, a “confessional” is a particularly fitting genre for depicting constitutional weakness: for in confessing, the speaker displays his prior failures as his own fault, a matter not merely of ignorance or brute compulsion, but weakness. Augustine emphasizes that the problem lies within his own failure to orient himself in the way he knew was necessary; as a result, weakness of will proves difficult to explain except as a conflict. As Hannah Arendt has put it, for Augustine, “the split within the

---


36 Rousseau, *Confessions*, 17.
Will is a conflict, and not a dialogue.”37 Explaining the action can mean nothing more than identifying the weakness and dysfunction of the will. One overcomes the paradox then through confession and the assistance of grace.

Rousseau often presents himself as Augustinian: his most significant confessions are, after all, cases in which he acts in ways he knows at the time to be wrong, not from ignorance or incorrect principles, but from constitutional disarray. He writes in Book One, “My passions are extremely strong, and while I am under their sway nothing can equal my impetuosity. I am amenable to no restraint, respect, fear, or decorum. I am cynical, bold, violent, and daring.”38 Perceptive of his own qualities, and condemning in his self-evaluation, Rousseau presents himself as an Augustinian confessor able to look back and reconstruct the disorder and dysfunction in his constitution: “I can only see clearly in retrospect,” he writes; “it is only in my memory that my mind can work. I have neither feeling nor understanding for anything that is said or done or that happens before my eyes. … But afterwards it all comes back to me, I remember the place and the time, the tone of voice and look, the gesture and situation; nothing escapes me.”39 In such a moment, Rousseau depicts his former self as acting contrary to what he knows to be best—“It is as if my heart and my brain did not belong to the same person,” he

37 Arendt, The Life of the Mind, 95-96.
38 Rousseau, The Confessions, 44.
39 Ibid., 114.
writes—and in writing a confessional, he is able to vividly depict his prior failures of self-mastery.  

However, if Rousseau presents himself as Augustinian confessor on the one hand, he also declares that he aims to “make my soul transparent to the reader’s eye.”  

If for Augustine, the narrative required an admission of opacity of the self, Rousseau’s stated goal at first glance looks closer to the one stipulated by Locke at the beginning of his Essay concerning Human Understanding: to shed “all the light we can let in upon our own minds.”  

In this latter sense, Rousseau often describes himself not merely through what he did but also through what caused him to do what he did—more specifically, what he thought or felt.  

Throughout the Confessions, the difficulties in accounting for constitutional disarray in terms of value-neutral explanatory language become apparent to Rousseau the narrator. In Book Four, he claims he wants to portray his behaviors “from all points of view,” showed “from all lights,” suggesting that a “neutral” perspective on himself is possible; but in Book Eight he finds this to be a problem, writing, “Here I am once more at one of those critical moments in my life in which it is difficult to confine myself to a narrative because it is almost impossible that even the narrative will not carry some hint of censure or apology. I will try, however, to convey how and with what motives I

[^40]: Ibid., 113.  
[^41]: Ibid., 169.  
[^42]: Locke, I.i.1, 43.  
[^43]: Ibid., 169.
acted, without adding praise or blame.”44 Here he reveals the illusory nature of the ideal that one could write an action “truthfully” from a neutral vantage that is separated from qualitative evaluations. Notably, he uses the words, “with what motives [motifs] I acted” rather than “with what reasons [raisons] I acted,” allowing him to construe his mobile behavior as potentially reducible to the laws of efficient causation, quantifiable and comprehensible from this neutral vantage.45 But his worry that “even the narrative” might “carry some hint of censure or apology” indicates a recognition that some of his confessions may require depicting how agency fails in following good judgment – that his constitution has been a site of struggle, internal dispute, and indeterminacy rather than a series of explicable events. This results in contradictory approaches when discussing his akratic behavior: in one (Augustinian) sense, he wants to display the ways his actions confusingly get away from him, but in another (more properly Enlightenment, indeed Humean) sense, he also seeks to re-explain his actions by delineating the “inner” feelings that caused them.

Some of the most significant critical readings of the text have observed the way Rousseau eliminates the properly “confessional” role of the narrative by over-explaining, justifying, or “excusing” himself; as Marcel Raymond has written, “...it appears that after having stigmatized his misdeed he gradually begins to justify it. The

44 Ibid., 352.
45 Brackets and translation added.
same gliding and swerving motion can be observed more than once in the *Confessions*…

He is always led to distinguish the intent from the act.” Paul de Man has likewise famously elaborated on the self-contradicting function of “excuse” in the text, which follows from the way Rousseau frequently returns to explain how his feelings led him to the act in question. In turning to two memorable examples from the *Confessions*, we can discern how Rousseau’s tendency to enumerate feelings as causes plays out in the narrative as a failed strategy in interpreting the self, which helps the narrative draw further attention to the ongoing process of narrative interpretation.

In Rousseau’s very first confession, he discusses a case of stealing money, even when he had no desire for the money itself. “The incident is worth the telling,” he says, “for it involves such an absurd mixture of boldness and stupidity that I should find it most difficult to believe if it concerned anyone but myself”:

   It was in Paris. I was walking, at about five o’clock, with M. de Francueil in the Palais-Royal when he took out his watch, looked at it, and said, ‘Let us go to the Opera.’ I agreed, and we went. He bought two tickets for the amphitheatre, gave me one and went on ahead with the other. I followed him in, but on reaching the doorway found it congested. When I looked in, I saw that everyone was standing. So, thinking I might easily be lost in the crowd, or at least make M. de Francueil think so, I went out again, presented my ticket, asked for my money back, and walked away. But what I had not

---


47 “At first sight,” de Man writes, “there should be no conflict between confession and excuse. Yet the language reveals the tension in the expression: craindre [fear to] de m’excuser. The only thing one has to fear from the excuse is that it will indeed exculpate the confessor, thus making the confession (and the confessional text) redundant as it originates. Qui s’accuse s’excuse; this sounds convincing and convenient enough, but, in terms of absolute truth, it ruins the seriousness of any confessional discourse by making it self-destructive…” De Man, 280 (brackets and translation added).
suspected was that the moment I got to the door everyone sat down and M. de Francueil clearly perceived that I was no longer there.

Nothing could have been so far from my natural disposition as this act. But I note it as a proof that there are moments of a kind of delirium, in which men cannot be judged by what they do. I did not exactly steal that money. What I stole was the use of it. But it was a theft and, what is more, it was a disgraceful one.”

This episode recalls Augustine’s famous confession of stealing pears from a pear tree:

Augustine writes, “But it was not poverty that drove me to conceive the desire to steal, and to act upon that desire. I lacked only righteousness, and my stomach turned at it; I had grown fat on wickedness. What I stole, I already had in abundance, and of much better quality too. I did not steal so as to enjoy the fruits of my crime, but rather to enjoy the theft itself, and the sin.” As in that episode, Rousseau asks us to recognize that it is not the object of the theft that he wanted. It is unclear in this case that Rousseau wanted to escape the busy and noisy crowds, or if he privately decided he did not want to see the opera, and was too embarrassed to tell M. de Francueil. Like so many of Rousseau’s actions in the Confessions, and like Augustine’s theft of the pear, it strikes one not merely as antisocial or self-serving, but pointless, committed in confusion and in a tendency to be contrary.

However, while Rousseau does tell us he acted “disgracefully” in a way he knew to be wrong at the time—from a place of “delirium” and “far from my natural disposition”—he also seems to want to highlight the sense that in cases like these, “men

48 Rousseau, The Confessions, 46.
49 Augustine, 2.4.9, 36.
cannot be judged by what they do.” Indeed, in its use of “delirium” (délire), the passage recalls St. Preux whose “delirium,” “fever,” and “alienation” leads him to ask: “what can I say, what can I do, where can I hide, how can I answer for myself?” Rousseau’s act seems then to not be a case of clear-eyed akrasia—acting against better judgment—but reinterpretable as compelled by passions that do not properly characterize him. Indeed, Rousseau frames this incident by describing his dispositional qualities that can perhaps help explain his act:

...as the reader learns more of my life, he will get to know my disposition and feel all this for himself without my needing to tell him.

Once this is clear, he will have no difficulty in understanding one of the apparent contradictions in my character: the combination of an almost sordid avarice with the greatest contempt for money.50

In this way, the action is now explained in terms of qualities of his character; his actions can be explained by traits.

Along these lines, we might follow Starobinski’s characterization that “Rousseau occasionally begins with an admission of ignorance about himself, but he never ends with one. ... In this respect he is unflaggingly optimistic, sure of his firm grasp on the inner truth.”51 We might understand this explanation as offering us a “truth” about Rousseau’s inner feelings, which upholds an understanding of causality that minimizes the importance of and potentially eliminates the concept of the will. Still, what Rousseau

50 Rousseau, The Confessions, 45.
hopes to clarify for us in pointing to his character is itself a “contradiction”: “the combination of an almost sordid avarice with the greatest contempt for money.” The gesture towards isolating a static “quality” of the “self” that explains it only further reveals the dysfunctions of the “self” that resist explanation.

By attempting to account for his action by providing an account of his character, Rousseau then further reveals the difficulty of accounting for character or the relation between character and action. Such moments have been commonly understood as essential to the novelty of the *Confessions*; Starobinski argues that Rousseau gives up “truthfulness,” which is historical and factual in nature, for a more malleable conception of “authenticity,” Lionel Trilling has held up the importance of Rousseau in terms of his quintessential “sincerity,” and Peter Brooks identifies in the *Confessions* a resistance through narrative to the model of an “analytic topography of a person,” otherwise construed as an ideal in the eighteenth century.52 What we find in a case like the one above is that this new form of “authenticity” or “sincerity” or “account” is precisely made available by the difficulty of conceptualizing conscious and intentional actions.

52 Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1972); Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984). Brooks’s formulation is particularly apposite to the broader claim of this chapter: “No analytic moral logic will give the answer to the question, why did I behave that way? … Questions such as these cannot be addressed—as they might have been earlier in Rousseau’s century—by a portrait moral, a kind of analytic topography of a person. The question of identity, claims Rousseau—and this is what makes him at least symbolically the *incipit* of modern narrative—can be thought only in narrative terms, in the effort to tell a whole life, to plot its meaning by going back over it to record its perpetual flight forward, its slippage from the fixity of definition.” Brooks, 32-33.
Thus we can turn to what is arguably Rousseau’s most famous confession and identify it as a classic case of akrasia or weakness of will in the Augustinian model. In this scene from book 2, young Rousseau steals a ribbon from the home of Mme de Vercellis, and then adamantly blames the disappearance on the innocent young cook Marion:

I boldly accused her. She was confused, did not utter a word, and threw me a glance that would have disarmed the devil, but my cruel heart resisted. In the end she firmly denied the theft. But she did not get indignant. She merely turned to me, and begged me to remember myself and not disgrace an innocent girl who had never done me any harm. But, with infernal impudence, I repeated my accusation, and declared to her face that she had given me the ribbon.53

From the outset, the scene conveys the Augustinian picture of a weak-willed wrongdoer. He evokes the sense of sin by describing his accusation as committed “with infernal impudence.” To portray the sense in which he feels estranged from himself as he acts, he states the actions factually, without rationale, as if they were from another individual and he is merely an onlooker: “I repeated my accusation, and declared to her face that she had given me the ribbon.”

Like in the scene at the opera, Rousseau turns to a mental quality that is at once an explanation of his repeated accusation of Marion, and itself resisting self-understanding:

I was not much afraid of punishment, I was only afraid of disgrace. But that I feared more than death, more than crime, more than anything in the world. I should have

rejoiced if the earth had swallowed me up and stifled me in the abyss. But my invincible sense of shame prevailed over everything. It was my shame that made me impudent, and the more wickedly I behaved the bolder my fear of confession made me… Utter confusion robbed me of all other feeling. 54

Like his “sordid avarice,” here fear of disgrace and overpowering shame have the perverse qualities of guiding intentional action towards what he knows to be wrong. Though phrased as a “cause” (“my shame made me impudent”), the shame is itself a quality of confusion, a product of Rousseau’s own disapproval and distance from himself.

However, the dimension of Rousseau’s re-telling of his theft and accusation that most complicates his “self” and which thus highlights the particularity of his narrative interpretive genre, is the “excuse” he puts up for himself as to why he spoke Marion’s name in the first place. In what is perhaps the most frequently discussed passage in the *Confessions*, Rousseau shifts into explanation of his actions by turning to his “inner feeling” of “friendship” for Marion:

> But I should not fulfil the aim of this book if I did not at the same time reveal my inner feelings and hesitated to put up such excuses for myself as I honestly could. Never was deliberate wickedness further from my intention than at that cruel moment. When I accused that poor girl, it is strange but true that my friendship for her was the cause. She was present in my thoughts, and I threw the blame on the first person who occurred to me. 55

54 Ibid., 88-89.
55 Ibid., 88.
Unlike the prior examples of his identification of his feelings and character traits, here stating the “inner feeling” is a way of altering our initial interpretation of the confusing action through what de Man calls a kind of self-exculpation. However, the peculiar aspect of this explanation of his action is that, though it is initially meant to clarify qualities of Rousseau so that we might see his “inner” nature as kind-hearted, his explanation makes visible how all the more splintered and unmastered his agency is. The turn to “inner feelings” is indeed clarifying as to Rousseau’s “self,” but not because it presents a solution to the puzzle of his action, but rather because the exposed failure of explaining makes his self-blindness all the more transparent.

Unlike claiming that shame or avarice is a “cause” to a disgraceful action, the identification of “friendship” as the “cause” allows us to see a disconnect between “intent” and “act” that calls more pressingly for interpretation. Stipulating “friendship,” after all, begs many more questions about the connections between his intentions, volition, and action: how does a feeling of fondness cause him to pronounce her name, not mindlessly or instinctively, but “boldly” with “infernal impudence”? How does his fondness for someone translate into this vicious steadfastness: “I repeated my

*De Man continues by positing that “What Rousseau *really* wanted is neither the ribbon nor Marion, but the public scene of exposure which he actually gets.” De Man, 285. J. M. Coetzee elaborates on de Man’s argument to demonstrate the way that language manifests its own truth. See J. M. Coetzee, “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky” *Comparative Literature* 37.3 (1985): 193-232. Leo Damrosch, on the other hand, rejects de Man’s argument as too simple: “There was no one thing that he ‘really’ wanted, and in brooding on memories that wouldn’t go away, he brought the past to life in all its fullness.” Damrosch, 438.
accusation, and declared to her face that she had given me the ribbon”? What avenues of causality produce an effect so opposite from the cause? Far from resolving his internal map, Rousseau has exposed it as an irreducible maze that invites interpretations but cannot substantiate them. The narrative form that performs the attempts and failures at self-understanding are in this regard privileged in investigating the site of akrasia, and by confronting akrasia, the genre of a narrative of a “self” requires a contorted epistemology in which opacity is a premise at the outset.

1.3 Action and the Insufficiency of the Passions in Sterne’s A Sentimental Journey

Like Rousseau’s Confessions, Laurence Sterne’s sentimental travelogue A Sentimental Journey is framed as a study of a self by documenting feelings, a “chronicle of [Yorick’s] body’s pulsations,” in the words of John Mullan. Much Sterne scholarship has concerned itself with the ways his fiction dismantles Enlightenment philosophical models of the “self.” The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy famously mocks the Lockean and Humean conceptions of a self by taking the “billiard-ball” model of the human mind to its logical conclusion, resulting in a narrative that is structured around mental digressions rather than a linear temporal sequence of events. Though regarded

57 Mullan, 190.

56
as a more sincere and pedagogical work than *Tristram Shandy*, *A Sentimental Journey* has also been understood to mock Enlightenment metaphysics and the coherence of novelistic realism, though its primary method for doing so is by focusing on the strange powers of feelings. John Mullan writes that the central role for sentiments in the novella demands a different kind of readership not based on empirical verisimilitude as such: “while feeling is supposed to transcend words,” he writes, “it takes words (at once judicious and inaccurate) to translate sentiment.” The “inaccuracy” of words about emotions and sentiments is brought out in a reflexive moment in the text when Yorick says, “I felt such undescribable emotions within me, as I am sure could not be accounted for from any combinations of matter and motion,” suggesting that a literature concerned with emotions requires language that does not flatten out into Newtonian terminology. Mullan continues, “Richardson attempted to produce the poignancy of sentiment in

---


59 The reading in Ian Watt’s seminal *Rise of the Novel* argues that, though Sterne is more a parodist of novels than a novelist, he nonetheless borrows “Richardson’s realism of presentation,” paying careful attention “to the particularisation of time, place, and person; to a natural and lifelike sequence of action; and to the creation of a literary style which gives the most exact verbal and rhythmical equivalent possible of the object described.” Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 290-91. Watt has been famously criticized for the extension of “formal realism” to Sterne by Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1987).

60 Mullan, 161. Mullan continues later, “The text constitutes all who read as those who ‘feel’, those who are admitted to a complicity with the body’s spontaneity, and are fitted to translate the vibrations of sentiment.” Ibid., 192.

61 Sterne, 151.
'writing to the moment,'” while Sterne, in taking interest in sentiment, “is writing away from the moment.”*\(^{62}\)

However, in calling his emotions “undescribable,” Yorick appears to be upholding a model familiar from Hume in which the passions are mysterious forces that arrive from without, and this kind of model—as we have seen—fails to characterize his akrasia. Indeed, if we took Yorick at his word and understood his feelings to be “undescribable,” then we allow him to absolve himself of responsibility. To uncritically believe Yorick that he is a Humean self is to go blind to the joke that the Humean system allows Yorick to do just about whatever he likes. Yorick’s language throughout the novella asks us, as James Chandler puts it, to conflate the vocabularies “of moving and being moved,” which is to say questions of action and questions of feeling.\(^{63}\) What might be seen as an action is written so as to convey the sense that it is a mere movement, caused by the external forces of sentiments, a case of “being moved.” In Chandler’s account, by “develop[ing] the twin themes of travel and affection by means of a single vocabulary,” Sterne helps initiate the genre of the sentimental journey, a journey in which two ideas of “movement” become one.\(^{64}\) Yet this conflation clouds Yorick’s and potentially the reader’s own ability to see actions as distinct from causal happenings,

---

\(^{62}\) Mullan, 160.


\(^{64}\) Ibid., 186.
and this is a conflation that ultimately works in Yorick’s favor. Yorick wants reason to be the slave of the passions, and so defends a metaphysics in which it is.

The comical insufficiency of the Humean model comes through in scenes in which language struggles to characterize movement. In an early episode, Yorick holds the hand of a lady in his chaise and describes the estranged quality of his movements:

The pulsations of the arteries along my fingers pressing across hers, told her what was passing within me: she looked down—a silence of some moments followed. I fear, in this interval, I must have made some slight efforts towards a closer compression of her hand, from a subtle sensation I felt in the palm of my own—not as if she was going to withdraw hers—but, as if she thought about it—and I had infallibly lost it a second time, had not instinct more than reason directed me to the last resource in these dangers—to hold it loosely, and in a manner as if I was every moment going to release it, of myself; so she let it continue...\(^6^5\)

The passage reads as if from the perspective of a voyeur to these actions: first, it is the “pulsations of the arteries” that are the subject of the clause, and which “press across hers.” Then, upon switching to the first-person voice, the “I” observes, “I must have” made some slight efforts, as if the efforts preceded him and he is only now attempting to catch up with and account for them. He attributes his “instinct” over his “reason” with “direct[ing]” him to his next course of action. He considers the motives of the lady with the same causal guesswork as his own movements, mirroring the phrases about her—“as if she was going to withdraw hers… as if she thought about it”—with the phrase

\(^6^5\) Sterne, 25.
about himself: “as if I was every moment going to release it, of myself…” The passage
evokes how “moving” can feel merely like “being moved,” as if one is a passive
recipient of the causal forces of the universe, being made to react, rather than act
proper.

However, the question of responsibility is hidden here as an unacknowledged
joke. If Yorick can be an observer and accurate narrator of his actions, then he can also
alter them. While the scene might seem to uphold a Lockean or Humean picture of
human mind and action, in which “states of uneasiness” or “passions” cause bodily
movements, there is an additional quality to Yorick that would not be found in Lockean
or Humean thought experiments – namely, Yorick’s recognition of his own impotence
that implies he could shift his agential status from onlooker to doer, from being moved
to mover.

We see the insufficiency of language in grappling with the will and agency most
powerfully in Yorick’s more paradigmatically akratic scenes. Unlike in Rousseau,

---

66 There is a rich body of criticism on the significance of gestural movement in Sterne. Following Shklovsky, who writes, “Sterne was the first to introduce descriptions of poses into the novel,” Mullan has discussed the way gestures function as subtle signals of sociality and community that allow individuals to feel privately in touch with Sterne’s social world. Shklovsky, “A Parodying Novel,” 61-79. More recently, Alexis Tadié has extended that analysis in considering a wide range of non-linguistic modes of “conversation” in the novella, including centrally, the mode of body language; he writes, “Words, because they had lost their natural link with ideas and passions, were deemed inferior to gestures. Body language, being universal, was seen to express passions with an accuracy that ordinary language had forsaken, and the universality of passions ensured in turn that the beholder of gestures understood their meaning.” Alexis Tadié, Sterne’s Whimsical Theatres of Language: Orality, Gesture, Literacy (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 61.

67 I borrow the terminology of a “reactive” versus “active” self, which one finds increasingly in the Enlightenment from Thomas Pfau who writes that Locke in a legacy with Hobbes “had embraced the in essence mechanistic view of mind as inherently reactive and incapable of inner causation.” Pfau, Minding the Modern, 223.
akrasia is portrayed light-heartedly; in his akratic mode, Yorick finds himself somewhat like Evelina in sincere and heart-warming circumstances, so that one detects in Sterne a sincere approval of the idea that reason ought to be the slave of the passions. Thus Yorick will often happily describe how his judgments do not result in corresponding actions. In the following scene, he wonders whether he shall ask a lady if she will accompany him in his chaise in her trip to Amiens:

— Now where would be the harm, said I to myself, if I was to beg of this distressed lady to accept of half of my chaise?— and what mighty mischief could ensue?

   Every dirty passion, and bad propensity in my nature, took the alarm, as I stated the proposition—It will oblige you to have a third horse, said AVARICE, which will put twenty livres out of your pocket.—You know not who she is, said CAUTION—or what scrapes the affair may draw you into, whisper’d COWARDICE—

   Depend upon it, Yorick! said DISCRETION, ’twill be said you went off with a mistress, and came by assignation to Calais for that purpose—

   — You can never after, cried HYPOCRISY aloud, shew your face in the world—or rise, quoth MEANNESS, in the church—or be any thing in it, said PRIDE, but a lousy prebendary.

   — But ’tis a civil thing, said I—and as I generally act from the first impulse, and therefore seldom listen to these cabals, which serve no purpose, that I know of, but to encompass the heart with adamant—I turn’d instantly about to the lady—

These “dirty passion[s]” and “bad propensit[jes]” may also be called faculties of judgment and circumspection – the rational checks upon impulsive decision-making. Though phrased as devils on his shoulders, we may also reasonably see them as his better angels, suggesting modes of decorum that Yorick will gleefully ignore. Indeed, the glee of this passage derives from the sense that these judgments do not have effective power when it comes to actions. These personified expressions of temperance

68 Sterne, 28-29.
do not equal the “I”; rather, the “I” is merely a separate speaker in the conversation. Indeed, Yorick celebrates the specifically contradictory and irresponsible mode of akrasia by explicitly remarking, “as I generally act from the first impulse, and therefore seldom listen to these cabals... I turn’d instantly about to the lady,” thus humorously promptly negating the relevance of the precautions given that he only follows his impulses to begin with.

Yorick’s anti-normative celebration of akrasia then mirrors Sterne’s own celebration of akrasia as a subject of writing. Indeed, precisely because akrasia cannot be sufficiently described in terms of Humean or broader Enlightenment ontologies, because Yorick cannot explain or articulate the weakness of his will—indeed he clearly repeatedly fails to do so—and because it reflects a certain inarticulable splendor in the human spirit, Sterne’s text thrives in depicting akrasia.

In the scene quoted in the introduction to this study, Sterne then asks us to recognize the wondrous ways the human constitution thwarts “explanation,” the ways that the human constitution demands a “literary” rather than “philosophical” account. Yorick encounters the young fille de chambre to whom he had previously, in the first volume, urged that she maintain her “innocence” (“foul befal [sic] the man who ever lays a snare in its way!” he had said). Here, however, he struggles to uphold his former principles and to allow her to uphold hers. As he fails in this respect, we find in the

69 Sterne, 89.
writing not a Rousseauvian seriousness or despair, but rather a gleeful depiction of evoking what cannot be clearly stipulated:

...—I felt something at first within me which was not in strict unison with the lesson of virtue I had given her the night before—I sought five minutes for a card—I knew I had not one.—I took up a pen—I laid it down again—my hand trembled—the devil was in me.

I know as well as any one, he is an adversary, whom if we resist, he will fly from us—but I seldom resist him at all; from a terror, that though I may conquer, I may still get a hurt in the combat—so I give up the triumph, for security; and instead of thinking to make him fly, I generally fly myself.70

This is a clear performance of “weakness of will,” evoking in Augustinian language the way that one might not be in control of oneself because “the devil was in me.” Yorick’s active verbs “I sought...,” “I knew...,” “I took...,” and “I laid...” are not only disconnected from each other by dashes, but also from the action that follows, presented in passive construction: “my hand trembled.” Yorick calls his estranged movements the work of “the devil,” recalling Augustine; however, we are asked to regard the scene as anything but sinister (in this sense alienating any pruder reader). Indeed, the reader is asked to forego the careful processes of judgment that one might find guiding virtuous characters in texts like Richardson’s Pamela or Rousseau’s own Julie. Here the akratic is celebrated.

70 Ibid., 122.
As the passage continues, silences and gaps in explanation become more central to evoking Yorick’s state, but though these are gaps that resemble Augustinian dysfunction and paradox, they are imbued with a rather opposite moral valence:

...I took her by the hand, and led her to the door, and begg’d she would not forget the lesson I had given her—She said, Indeed she would not—and as she utter’d it with some earnestness, she turned about, and gave me both her hands, closed together, into mine—it was impossible not to compress them in that situation—I wish’d to let them go; and all the time I held them, I kept arguing within myself against it—and still I held them on.—In two minutes I found I had all the battle to fight over again—and I felt my legs and every limb about me tremble at the idea.

The foot of the bed was within a yard and a half of the place where we were standing—I had still hold of her hands—and how it happened I can give no account, but I neither ask’d her—nor drew her—nor did I think of the bed—but so it did happen, we both sat down.71

Throughout, Yorick does not comprehend his own movements: “I felt my legs and every limb about me tremble...” First he sees the “foot of the bed” a “yard and a half” away, shifts focus to their hands, and then somehow they “both sat down.” He can “give no account” of it, but only in the Humean sense: for none of the motives that would seem to lead to that act in fact happened. However, Sterne’s non-account is itself an account: for literature has become anti-philosophy, and indeed finds its purpose in its capacity as anti-philosophy. That is, not only does the literary mock philosophy, but it uses the incoherence of philosophy as a means of expressing the irreducible ambiguities of human agency. Sterne maintains the paradox and preserves the gaps in explanation—indicated by dashes—precisely because this gets us closer to the experience of acting

71 Ibid., 122-23
against oneself, finding oneself to be incoherent, occupying the role of mover and one who is moved.

In Rousseau’s repeated revisions of self-interpretations and in Sterne’s celebration of non-explanation, these non-accounts of selves represent a departure from both the genre of sentimental literature and from the genre of autobiography. These texts both foreground the inconclusive practice of interpreting a self in a narrative by performing the inconclusive practice of interpreting actions; in so doing, they will inform the literature of Godwin, Wordsworth, and others who similarly interrogate the tenuous relations between thinking, feeling, and wanting on the one hand, and doing on the other.
2. Free Indirect Discourse and Weakness of Will in Two Novels by William Godwin

In his discussion of *Emma* (1815) in *Jane Austen; or, The Secret of Style*, D. A. Miller draws our attention to a particular ambiguity allowed by free indirect discourse. By focusing on a single sentence repeated before and after the chapter break of volume II chapters 2 and 3—“She could not forgive her.” —Miller observes that the repetition of this sentence allows us to see the two ways in which it may be read, which provide two perspectives simultaneously allowed by free indirect discourse: “the indirect and impersonal performance of Emma’s consciousness” and “the mere matter-of-fact notation of that thought.” It is able to “perform” what Emma’s consciousness would phrase about Jane Fairfax, in the sense that she might say “I cannot forgive her,” and is also able to denote a fact about Emma’s state of mind as a third-person omniscient narrator. In its “free indirect” capacity, it emulates the “direct speech” that Emma might deliver in the guise of the narrator, though it is also openly interpretable as simple “indirect speech,” or description of a character’s mind. Miller’s observation draws from standard accounts of narrative perspective in *Emma*; as Wayne C. Booth wrote in 1961, there is a “double vision that operates throughout [Emma]: our inside view of Emma’s worth and our

3. In her seminal account, Dorrit Cohn refers to instances of indirect speech as “psycho-narration” (“the narrator’s discourse about a character’s consciousness”), direct speech as “quoted monologue” (“a character’s mental discourse”), and free indirect speech as “narrated monologue” (“a character’s mental discourse in the guise of the narrator’s discourse”). *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978), 11-14.
objective view of her great faults." In its "double vision," or what Roy Pascal later called "the dual voice," free indirect discourse then stands out as a privileged strategy in allowing us to momentarily embody the protagonist’s consciousness as well as stand apart from it and judge it.

However, there is an added dimension to the above sentence from *Emma* that has received less attention in standard accounts of free indirect discourse. This becomes apparent when we focus in closer detail on the words “She could not,” and the difference in meaning they convey when considered from an “inside” and from an “outside” perspective. These words call our attention because they express something peculiar about Emma’s volition and her capacity to exert herself: when we read them as vocalized by Emma herself on the one hand and as third-person matter-of-fact notation on the other, we simultaneously register two very different conceptions of the will.

This becomes clearer when we consider a separate but similar example from *Emma*. Here, immediately before Emma lets loose her infamous unkind remark to Miss Bates in the company of Mr. and Mrs. Elton, Harriet Smith, Frank Churchill, Jane Fairfax, and Mr. Knightley, we are given a paragraph break comprised of a single sentence: “Emma could not resist.” Unlike the previous example, this sentence is not delivered in the context of Emma’s train of thought, but rather in the middle of an

---

5 Austen, 291.
extended quoted conversation; we are then liable to read it strictly as a “notation” of
Emma’s mind. Nonetheless, its peculiar positioning as a stand-alone sentence begs us to
consider its double meanings. Indeed, much like “She could not forgive her,” this
sentence can be read as reflecting both a “performance of Emma’s consciousness” as
well as a “matter-of-fact notation of the thought,” and the difference is significant. If we
read the sentence as a mere notation, we understand Emma as being sincerely unable to
act any differently than she did, taking the words “could not” literally: it was not within
the range of available possibilities for her mental capacity at that point and time.
Alternatively, when we read the sentence as a “performance of her consciousness,” we
discover quite the opposite: if “I cannot resist” were a sentence Emma speaks privately
in her mind, we understand instantly that Emma can resist. Just as we may say in
passing “I cannot resist having one more chocolate,” we mean something more like “it is
very hard for me to resist,” which implies exactly that “I can resist,” with the added
qualifier that I say I cannot resist so as to justify my action that I know I should not be
warranting. After all, Emma would not say “I cannot resist” to her immediate social
surroundings precisely because she would be opening herself up to condemnation: “Yes
you can resist, Emma. You must resist,” a friend might say. This is exactly the basis by
which Mr. Knightley chastises her afterwards. Emma attempts to defend herself: “Nay,
how could I help saying what I did?—Nobody could have helped it.”

6 Ibid., 294.
ignores this point; he takes it for granted, as do we, that her very saying this exposes her
capacity to have acted differently. “Emma could not resist” plays both meanings at once,
asking us to recognize the difference between saying a person cannot in actuality
“resist” an action and saying that that person tells herself she cannot resist in order to
have an excuse for proceeding with that action. It thus is able to evoke a distinct quality
of the way we talk about the will – namely, the way we frequently want to speak of it as
causally explicable and at the same time as under our power and responsibility.

In this chapter I argue that an early version of free indirect discourse (FID) was
invented in the work of William Godwin as a way of depicting the condition of acting
against better judgment. Godwin indeed proves a particularly intriguing figure in this
regard, for his novels—particularly *St. Leon* (1799) and *Fleetwood* (1805)—center on
characters that struggle to get themselves to do what they know they ought. However,
insofar as he draws upon his philosophical models of human action and volition,
Godwin’s novels tend to construe the will as a mechanistic entity and tend to depict the
mind strictly through what D. A. Miller calls the mode of “matter-of-fact notation.”

*Fleetwood* holds our attention for its experimentation with “performing” a character’s
consciousness, thus fusing the voices of narrator and character. Employing an early
version of FID allows Godwin to evoke the multivalent dimensions of the will as capable
of both “moving” and “being moved.” FID then not only helps Godwin approach a
philosophical problem, but it helps him—and indeed us—to see the epistemological privileges of the novel form.

Critical discussions of FID like Miller’s frequently emphasize its unique ability to evoke irony; as Dorrit Cohn has written, because such instances “cast the language of a subjective mind into the grammar of objective narration, they amplify emotional notes, but also throw into ironic relief all false notes struck by a figural mind.” Yet these observations have not been incorporated into the dominant historical accounts of FID in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels. The dominant historical accounts of FID tend to locate its invention in the eighteenth century; Pascal suggests that the enclosed social settings of eighteenth-century novels demand the narrator’s ability to “to evoke thought-processes as the characters themselves know them,” whereas Ann Banfield argues that FID’s deep linguistic structure only manifested itself with the emergence of “written narrative” in an increasingly literate eighteenth-century culture. These accounts have not addressed, however, why FID becomes so important in plots concerning characters’ struggles with self-governance and reliance on self-deception. Nor do they consider its

7 Cohn, 117. Monika Fludernik, following the earliest sustained scholarly account of “le style indirect libre” by Charles Bally in 1912, also notes the caricaturing and parodic elements associated with the style, which “can condense and exaggerate a character’s utterance or attitudes with the intention of implicitly criticizing those speech acts and beliefs.” The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction: The Linguistic Representation of Speech and Consciousness (London: Routledge, 1993), 80.

8 Roy Pascal, The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and Its Functioning in the Nineteenth-Century European Novel (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977), 45; Ann Banfield, Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982). Disputing the notion that FID has its roots in the eighteenth century, Monika Fludernik posits that it is rooted in oral habits and literary traditions that can be traced to antiquity.
relation to broader conceptual transformations in treatments of the mind and agency during the Enlightenment. While Godwin did not invent FID, his novel *Fleetwood* includes particularly early non-epistolary English examples of the “intertwining of objective and subjective statement, of narratorial account and free indirect speech” – examples which have indeed gone undiscussed in critical discussions of either Godwin or FID.

Godwin scholarship tends to focus either on political questions alongside *Political Justice* (1793) and *Caleb Williams* (1794), on cultural issues such as education and domesticity by focusing on *The Enquirer* (1797) and his middle novels *St. Leon* (1799) and *Fleetwood* (1805), or on Godwin’s sense of history by focusing on the historical tract *History of the Commonwealth* (1828) and historical novels *St. Leon, Mandeville* (1817), and *Cloudesley* (1830). I focus here on the middle group of texts, which have been taken up in rich studies by Gary Kelly, Mark Philp, Tilottama Rajan, Jon Klancher, Gary Handwerk, and Hina Nazar. These studies illuminate the wide range of changes in Godwin’s thought in this middle period, visible in his philosophy of education, metaphysics and epistemology, and moral and political discourse. However, in none of this critical work do we find a special focus on agency, or Godwin’s favored term “intemperance” – a

---

9 In a very brief exception, Banfield discusses FID in the context of Descartes’s epistemology – namely, the distinction between reflective and non-reflective consciousness. Banfield, 197-199.

10 Pascal, 107. Pascal’s essential study begins with Goethe and Austen; for a brief note regarding first-person free indirect speech in eighteenth-century epistolary novels, see Fludernik, 88. There are no sustained treatments of FID in Godwin studies that I know of, nor has there been sustained attention to representational approaches to depicting the will in *St. Leon* and *Fleetwood*. 
problem that, as Godwin comes to realize, requires different epistemological approaches to philosophy and literature. Godwin writes very explicitly at the end of the Preface to his 1797 collection of philosophical essays The Enquirer, the French Revolution brought about a “contagion,” and that now some have “moderated their intemperance, and [Godwin] has accompanied them also in their present stage. With as ardent a passion for innovation as ever, he feels himself more patient and tranquil. He is desirous of assisting others, if possible, in perfecting the melioration of their temper.” Here I ask us to see it as particularly significant that, after the revolution had taken its course, Godwin’s novels focus explicitly on “intemperate” subjects, and more specifically, on cases of outright akrasia. While the critical tendency has been to understand Godwin’s protagonists’ intemperance through the discourses of feelings, we are able to see the broader epistemological transformations at work in the form of the Godwinian novel if we focus on the unarticulated philosophical problems behind theories of action and the will.


12 We can note two examples of literary work on akrasia in nineteenth-century studies, which pertain to the ways novels depict characters’ tactical shifts towards understanding moral calculations in the third-person rather than first-person in Andrew H. Miller, The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008), especially 54-91 (on Dickens and Eliot), and Patrick Fessenbecker, “Anthony Trollope on Akrasia, Self-Deception, and Ethical Confusion,” Victorian Studies 56.4 (Summer 2014), 649-74.
2.1 The Explicable Will in Political Justice and St. Leon

In the early pages of *St. Leon*, the narrator—an older St. Leon looking back with a tone of repentance—tells us how he arrived at Paris and succumbed to his old gambling addiction. “All the demon seemed to make his descent upon my soul,” he writes. “This was the first time that I had ever felt the struggle of conscious guilt and dishonour. … I did not take into the account the ungovernableness of my own passions.”¹³ *St. Leon* tells the story of a sixteenth-century aristocrat who, after recklessly gambling away his money, encounters a stranger who imparts on him the philosopher’s stone, endowing St. Leon with the capacity for endless riches and immortality. Most of the novel depicts his fall from happiness with the acquisition of the elixir—the effects of his secrecy on the stability of his family, his persecution on account of his mysterious abundance of wealth, the early death of his wife, and more. At the center of the novel is St. Leon’s battles with himself—his struggles with his inclinations towards greed and his gambling addiction.

As Gary Kelly has written, *St. Leon* is “about the adventures of a man wholly unable to govern his life by reason.”¹⁴ However, Godwin’s novel nonetheless also places great trust in the narrator’s capacity for reason. As the narrator writes, “I did not take into the account the ungovernableness of my own passions,” we indeed find that the narrator strives for straightforward and transparent descriptions of his former self’s

---

intemperate state. A particularly telling example of this stylistic tendency can be found in a single sentence, which bears structural similarities to the sentence considered earlier from *Emma*. As St. Leon approaches the gambling tables, the narrator tells us: “I resisted—I yielded.”¹⁵ Recall that in *Emma* we are told that she “could not resist,” which we understand as both a notation of her inability to resist and as a performance of Emma’s mind that ironically suggests the opposite. Here Godwin’s narrator has used the verbs “resisting” and “yielding” as mere events. They are presented as two separate actions, divided grammatically by a dash that indicates temporal division. What is peculiar about this sentence as opposed to Austen’s then is that it tells us nothing about the experience of “resisting” itself, no expression or evocation of the struggle inherent to the action of “resisting.” Instead, “resisting” is grammatically treated like any other action that follows from a clear and explicable cause: it is pure “matter-of-fact notation.”

Throughout, the novel depicts St. Leon’s recurrent “failures to resist” by employing physiological descriptions and explaining his actions as consequences of his inevitable feelings and sensations. “Will it be accounted strange,” he asks in the same section, “that, in Paris... I found myself under the influence of other feelings, than any I had lately experienced?”¹⁶ The narrator seemingly encourages the sense that his symptom is liable to befall people who have a certain kind of mind and are put in a

---

¹⁵ Godwin, *St. Leon*, 95.
¹⁶ Ibid., 94.
certain kind of setting: this is perfectly “natural.” The narrator thus describes his former self’s “mind” and “thoughts” as entities that respond to stimuli and operate as predictable mechanisms. After winning “a considerable sum” while gambling, the narrator tells us, “[t]his incident produced a strong impression upon me, and filled my mind with tumult and agitation”\(^17\); he continues, “the very tumult of my thoughts operated strongly to lead me once more to the gaming-table,” and “[t]his frame of mind led me on insensibly to the most extravagant of adventures. It threw me in the first place into the hands of notorious gamblers.”\(^18\) In each of these phrases, “me” is the passive object that which has been the recipient of a “strong impression,” which has been “led” to one or another location.

On the one hand, the difference from Austen resides in the use of first-person retrospective narration rather than third-person omniscient narration. In its retrospective mode, Godwin’s novel indeed more clearly borrows from the epistolary tradition, in which thoughts and actions are simply reported to an interlocutor.\(^19\) But this narrative commitment to explicating physiological causation also speaks to Godwin’s own philosophical commitments which he laid out in the *Enquiry concerning Political...*

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 95.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 98.
\(^{19}\) Dorrit Cohn classifies first-person retrospective instances of FID (what she calls “narrated monologues”) as “self-narrated monologues.” In cases of “retrospection into a consciousness,” she writes, “[t]he same basic types of presentation appear, the same basic terms apply, modified by prefixes to signal the modified relationship of the narrator to the subject of his narration: psycho-narration becomes self-narration..., and monologues can now be either self-quoted, or self-narrated.” Cohn, 14.
Justice. In the first edition of that text, Godwin writes that the “theory of the human mind”…

...is properly, like the theory of every other series of events with which we are acquainted, a system of mechanism; understanding by mechanism nothing more than a regular connexion of phenomena without any uncertainty of event, so that every incident requires a specific cause, and could be no otherwise in any respect than as the cause determined it to be.²⁰

Like Locke and Hume, Godwin depends upon the Newtonian premises that the universe, human frame included, operates by necessary and universal laws that can be systematized by mechanistic logic. In this respect, he is diametrically opposed to his German contemporary Immanuel Kant, who had argued in his Third Antinomy of the Critique of Pure Reason and (more thoroughly) in the Critique of Practical Reason that the sheer fact of human freedom requires us to let go of the task of metaphysical explication of causality and take on an entirely different epistemological premises. Kant advocates two different approaches to philosophy that together form an antinomy: one that starts from the premises of the comprehensible causality of nature, and one that starts from the premise of the freedom of the human will.

In contrast, Godwin argues that the qualities of the human will are not so peculiar that he needs to make room for a different methodology,²¹ writing:

²¹ Godwin is in this sense what contemporary philosophers call a “compatibilist” who argues for the compatibility between a (mild) form of determinism (that is necessitarianism) and a tenuous form of
When the science of the material universe was in its infancy, men were sufficiently prompt to refer events to accident and chance; but the farther they have extended their enquiries and observation, the more reason they have found to conclude that every thing takes place according to necessary and universal laws. / The case is exactly parallel with respect to mind.  

Godwin wants to emphasize that, despite what it may look like, there is nothing inherently different about the causality of the mind and the will. Indeed, the explanatory and explicating approaches to thought only need to be embraced more dogmatically. 

In the first edition of Political Justice, then, Godwin eliminates and explains away the notion of human agency containing inherent contradictions. Thus he writes about mental “exertion” not as a phenomenon that is unique to human experience, but precisely akin to the exertion of a wheel that needs to carry a heavy machine up a hill: 

According to [necessitarian] doctrine it will be absurd for a man to say, ‘I will exert myself,’ ‘I will take care to remember,’ or even ‘I will do this.’ All these expressions imply as if man was or could be something else than what motives make him. Man is in reality a passive, and not an active being. … The operations of his mind may be laborious, like those of the wheel of a heavy machine in ascending a hill, may even tend to wear out the substance of the shell in which it acts, without in the smallest degree impeaching its passive character. 

freedom. The discourse of “compatibilism,” however, may be misleading, for Godwin’s context of discussing necessitarianism is “tied up with a whole range of other debates,” for instance, “about the nature of God and His relation to the human and natural world.” Philp, 90.

22 Godwin, Political Justice, IV.v.159.

23 Ibid., IV.vi.168 (emphasis added). Much of the treatise (especially book IV chapters v to vii) is geared towards arguing for a compatibility between his metaphysical claims and his normative claims, so that Godwin can maintain that the domains of human mind and action do not require different methodological approaches. Peter Marshall has argued that Godwin’s necessitarianism is “not a dogmatic determinism,” but ought to be seen in relation to the “vast… middle ground” between “pure determinism or fatalism at one end and a random bouncing about of free will… at the other,” a middle ground represented by much Protestant thought. Peter H. Marshall, William Godwin (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984), 94. As Robert Manquis
To the extent that man is “capable of exertion” and not purely a “passive being,” it is merely in the sense that a wheel exerts pressure in carrying a machine up a hill. In this sense, the old notion of akrasia or weakness of will makes little sense here. As Godwin explains, if a person’s motives are divided, “it is equivalent to the putting equal weights into the opposite scales of a balance. If one of them have a greater tendency to preference than the other, that which has the greatest tendency must ultimately prevail.”24 This recalls if not replicates Hume’s explanation of how a man may cause his “total ruin” from pursuing a “trivial good.” Hume wrote: “nor is there any thing more extraordinary in this, than in mechanics to see one pound weight raise up a hundred by the advantage of its situation.”25

Notably, by the late 1790s, Godwin became increasingly aware of the paradoxes and tensions that follow from such a model of the will. The 1796 edition to Political

writes, “In practical terms, for Calvin and for the necessitarian Godwin, both of whom formally denied free will, individual actions were efficiently causative, morally valued, and judged.” Robert M. Maniquis, “Godwin’s Calvinist Ghosts: Political Justice and Caleb Williams” in Godwinian Moments: from the Enlightenment to Romanticism, ed. Robert M. Maniquis and Victoria Myers (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2011), 36-7. The impact of Calvinism and predestination on Godwin’s necessitarian thinking is emphasized by Marshall, William Godwin. 24 Ibid., VI.v.163-64.

25 Hume, 2.3.3, 267. However, there are significant differences between Godwin and Hume, most notably Godwin’s faith in the power of reason as being sufficient to cause one to act: “[T]he perception of something true, joined with the consciousness of my capacity to act upon this truth,” Godwin writes, is “of itself sufficient to produce motion in the animal system.” As Mark Philp has written, for Godwin, “Knowing a moral truth, and recognising that it applies in a particular case and that one has the capacity to perform the required action, provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for the performance of that action. … Truth alone motivates us.” Mark Philp, Godwin’s Political Justice (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1986), 31.
Justice, takes on the problem of describing constitutional struggle in a more sustained manner. Likely increasingly concerned with intemperance as the chief practical and political problem of the moment, Godwin in 1796 seems to consider such a problem requires different explanatory methods. In a new chapter in Book I entitled “The Voluntary Actions of Men Originate in their Opinions,” Godwin adds a third category of action to the two he had established in the 1793 version, which were “voluntary action”—action that proceeds from mental intentions—and “involuntary action”—action from causes not related to the mind, such as an infant’s cries or a sneeze. He calls the third category “imperfectly voluntary action,” and it means to characterize cases in which people act in voluntary, but not entirely voluntary ways. With this chapter, it seems Godwin is growing increasingly suspicious of the idea that most voluntary actions are “purely” voluntary in the sense he had described in 1793— that is, resulting directly from perception, knowledge, and consciousness. He thus begins to draw from everyday life experience to accommodate more banal cases of habituated actions, or actions that are not fully thought through. He writes, if all of actions were purely “voluntary action,” then…

…the human mind would then be a very simple machine, always aware of the grounds upon which it proceeded, and self-deception would be impossible. But this statement is

26 Philp argues that “the later editions seem to abandon the rationalism of the first edition in favour of a more Humean scepticism, and some critics have argued that this shift undermines the cogency of Godwin’s argument for the inevitability of moral and political improvement.” Philp, 8. However, Philp’s Godwin’s Political Justice aims to minimize these differences as only seeming to provide inconsistencies, which instead highlight critical problems in interpretation.
completely in opposition to experience and history. Ask a man the reason why he puts on his clothes, why he eats his dinner, or performs any other ordinary action of his life. He immediately hesitates, endeavours to recollect himself, and often assigns a reason the most remote from what the true philosophy of motive would have led us to expect. Nothing is more clear, than that the moving cause of this action was not expressly present to his apprehension at the time he performed it. Self-deception is so far from impossible, that it is one of the most ordinary phenomena with which we are acquainted.  

... Here then we are presented... with a striking instance of men’s acting from motives diametrically opposite to those which they suppose to be the guides of their conduct. ... Are not these facts in express contradiction to the doctrine, that the voluntary actions of men in all cases originate in the judgements of the understanding?27

This is a significant revision, not only in the sense that the conception of “direct action” resulting from “truth” is now deemed somewhat ridiculous, but that the philosophical method begins by turning to real-life examples construed in (albeit brief) narrative form. He proceeds to discuss the way that individuals often “forget” or “neglect” their reasons for acting:

... the understanding fixes for itself resting places, is no longer a novice, and is not at the trouble continually to go back and revise the original reasons which determined it to a course of action. Thus the man acquires habits, from which it is very difficult to wean him, and which he obeys without being able to assign either to himself or others, any explicit reason for his proceeding. This is the history of prepossession and prejudice.28  

Godwin’s central concern here is notably no longer ignorance or lack of reason, but rather constitutional mismanagement and forms of mental laziness and neglect. The constitution is now notably more complex as it approaches the problem of “bad habits,” and it has moved towards narratives and away from writing from first principles.  

28 Ibid., I.v.44 (emphasis added).
In shifting away from his original metaphysical principles, Godwin thus inquires into self-deception, a variation on what Jean-Paul Sartre has called “bad faith” (mauvaise foi), in which man is both deceived (“the moving cause of this action was not expressly present to his apprehension at the time he performed it”) and deceiver.29 This 1796 version and his 1797 short essays reveal a Godwin shifting his epistemological outlook. The Enquirer advertises a turn away from the form of the systematic “treatise” towards the form of “essays,” writing in the Preface that the approach of asserting “simple principles” and constructing from them “a system consentaneous to itself … is liable to many disadvantages; and… is perhaps a method of investigation incommensurate to our powers.”30 Thus we find a Godwin more interested in “inconsistencies”: the author of The Enquirer, he writes, “has not been severely anxious relative to inconsistencies that may be discovered, between the speculations of one Essay and the speculations of another. … The intellectual eye of man, perhaps, is formed rather for the inspection of minute and near, than of immense and distant objects.”31

30 Godwin, The Enquirer, v-vi.
31 Ibid., vii. As Jon Klancher has written, Godwin was to “relinquish the overarching ambition of the original Political Justice—the task of philosophical totalization that by 1797 he was reluctantly calling ‘incommensurate to our powers’—so that instead of high theory, Godwin now pursued local ‘investigations,’ open-ended inquiries into ‘education, manners, and literature,’ which demanded questioning the method, the motive, and the reflexive position of the cultural inquirer himself.” Jon Klancher, “Godwin and the Republican Romance: Genre, Politics, and Contingency in Cultural History,”
We can return to *St. Leon* then with an attention to Godwin’s ongoing interest in inconsistencies, “the inspection of minute and near… objects,” and particularly the problems of self-deception and intemperance. *St. Leon* indeed stages the exact tensions between holding a mechanistic and necessitarian ontology of the human frame and expressing failure-in-action. When St. Leon’s intemperate deeds are described, they are also always causally explained in the language of physiological states and processes. Throughout this chapter on St. Leon’s return to gambling, the narrative voice indeed evinces much authorial awareness about the causation of his mind and body. It is not lost on the narrator why he as a younger man acted this way – that is, why, causally speaking, he gave to the addiction of gambling. There is little opacity on the part of the narrator. The “resisting” is an event that denotes causal confrontation of the rational mind with habituated desires and the “yielding” is an event that denotes the rational mind losing out to the habituated desires. “Will it be accounted strange,” he asks, “that, in Paris… I found myself under the influence of other feelings, than any I had lately experienced?”32 The sense we have is that this is the kind of thing that happens to people

---

32 Godwin, *St. Leon*, 94.
that have a certain kind of mind and are put in a certain kind of setting, and that what occurred can be deemed “natural,” explainable in traditional causal terms. There is nothing “strange” about it. He describes his “mind” and his “thoughts” frequently as responding to stimuli, that is, operating as predictable mechanisms: after winning “a considerable sum” while gambling, the narrator tells us, “This incident produced a strong impression upon me, and filled my mind with tumult and agitation;”33; he continues, “the very tumult of my thoughts operated strongly to lead me once more to the gaming-table,” and “This frame of mind led me on insensibly to the most extravagant of adventures. It threw me in the first place into the hands of notorious gamblers.”34 In each of these phrases, “me” is the passive object that which has been the recipient of a “strong impression,” which has been “led” to one or another location. “Resisting” and “yielding” are thus perfectly explicable causal events.

The narrator seems not only aware of causal continuum that led to—and indeed “explain”—his akratic gambling, but also simultaneously aware that what happened was wrong. “All the demon seemed to make his descent upon my soul,” the narrator writes in a reflective and condemning stance; “This was the first time that I had ever felt the struggle of conscious guilt and dishonour.”35 In a sense very reminiscent of Rousseau’s Confessions, the narrative wants to causally explicate the wrongs that have

33 Ibid., 95.
34 Ibid., 98.
35 Ibid., 97.
“been done” and then, in order to compensate for the sense that he is trying to absolve or justify himself, proceeds to judge himself harshly and articulate the “wrongness.” Thus the same tension we found in Rousseau is apparent here: if the events are causally explicated and imply a necessitarian logic, then our ability to judge the person is severely diminished.

Indeed, Godwin’s early novels tend to eliminate any doubt as to what the connections are between events, and the reasons for characters’ decisions are on general principle made visible. As the past is always thoroughly explained in these novels, the only mystery that is remaining is what the future holds, which is the structural source of the novels’ tendency to evoke suspense. However, the distinct conceit of St. Leon is to have a theme that is not to be—indeed cannot be—naturalistically explained – namely, the “philosopher’s stone,” the components and use method of which, as we are told repeatedly, the narrator is forbidden from revealing. The “non-explainability” of the “philosopher’s stone” at the center of the narrative not only absolves Godwin the author from the impossible task of explaining how a supernatural entity has been discovered and is used; it also allows the narrative to function so that there is always something that St. Leon is forbidden from explaining, which is in turn always the cause of another tribulation.

Thus the secrecy from his family of his affairs with the stranger and the elixir result in his son Charles’s furious disgust at his father’s lack of honesty, insisting,
“Furnish me with a direct and unambiguous explanation,’” insisting that “to bear the insults of my fellows unanswered, or to live beneath the consciousness of an artful and fictitious tale, no consideration on earth shall induce me,’” and when St. Leon offers no such explanation (“I was silent”), Charles bids adieu to his family and family name. As in Caleb Williams, the impossibility to causally explain the protagonist’s predicament when faced with a trial and a judge is precisely his downfall. When St. Leon is confronted with a magistrate in France in order to explain the identity and subsequent disappearance of the stranger who had given him the elixir, St. Leon merely stresses, “‘I cannot inform you,’” and the magistrate proclaims, “You know your destination, unless you are prepared immediately to give a satisfactory account of yourself and your proceedings,” an account which St. Leon does not—cannot—provide. When a legal representative named Monluc appears at the aid of St. Leon, our protagonist again is unable to exculpate himself, and Monluc stresses that St. Leon’s silence about the disappearance of the stranger’s body while at the residence of St. Leon demands an explanation and a “motive”: “‘What intelligible motive, except a guilty one, can I assign for that?’” Monluc asks, and states, “‘The chain and combination of events, that proceeds systematically from link to link, is the criterion of guilt and the protector of

---

36 Ibid., 209.
37 Ibid., 211.
38 Ibid., 212.
39 Ibid., 234.
40 Ibid., 237.
reputation.”

St. Leon mourns his ill-fated conundrum: “particulars have been reposed in my fidelity, which I am not at liberty to communicate, but which, if communicated, you would not regard as dishonourable... that which you demand from me never can be confided to any mortal ear!”

Within the logic of this novel, nothing can be taken on faith.

We find the novel’s conception of “truth” and what it means to tell a “neutral history” also replicated in Godwin’s choice of narrative style, which, like Godwin’s other novels, follows the perspectival logic of Rousseau’s Confessions in embodying a first-person recollecting perspective that means to relate the facts rather than justify his guilty acts. As the narrator emphasizes repeatedly throughout the novel, “it is not my intention in this history to pass myself for better than I am. I have laid down to myself the sacred maxim of absolute truth and impartiality... I am concerned only with the statement of facts.” This is a commitment we find with the narrative voice of Fleetwood, and in both cases the admission of guilt is understood as sufficiently practiced by relating a neutral account. Godwin, who had recently reread Rousseau’s Confessions, which he had begun to translate in 1789, appears committed to the Rousseauvian conception that there is no access to the truth of a person’s experience like explicating

---

41 Ibid., 241.
42 Ibid., 242.
43 Ibid., 88.
one’s memory of oneself. The first-person recollecting style thus implicitly upholds the view that we saw Rousseau nominally uphold in the *Confessions* in which that the accumulation of thoughts, sensations, and feelings can *explain* with more epistemological validity than other approaches.

With such an approach, we find that, while Godwin has signaled in *The Enquirer* that he is interested cultivating a more epistemologically modest approach to understanding human action, *St. Leon* still operates on the assumption that developing a causal catalogue of feelings, sensations, and thoughts can help describe action. Thus when we turn to St. Leon’s most akratic moments, we find a similar problem as we found in Rousseau’s autobiography: the narrator tells us of the sensations that arrive to mind and which “compel” him on, which in turn poses some problems to the idea that we are to hold him responsible, which he nominally wants us to do.

In what signifies Godwin’s growing realization that the human mind is a site that thwarts all pretensions for linguistic representational capacities, the novel occasionally proclaims that characterizing St. Leon’s state is “impossible.” “[N]o reading of my story, no mere power of language and words,” the narrator tells us at one point, “can enable a

---

by-stander to imagine” his condition. In a particularly exemplary passage, the narrator’s excessive descriptions appear to serve as compensation for what causal physical language ultimately can never do: convey how a person can be diametrically at odds with himself:

No man who has not felt, can possibly image to himself the tortures of a gamester, of a gamester like me, who played for the improvement of his fortune, who played with the recollection of a wife and children dearer to him than the blood that bubbled through the arteries of his heart, who might be said, like the savages of ancient Germany, to make these relations the stake for which he threw, who saw all my own happiness and all theirs through the long vista of life, depending on the turn of a card! … Never shall I cease to recollect the sensation I have repeatedly felt, in the instantaneous sinking of the spirits, the conscious fire that spread over my visage, the anger in my eye, the burning dryness of my throat, the sentiment that in a moment was ready to overwhelm with curses the cards, the stake, my own existence, and all mankind. How every malignant and insufferable passion seemed to rush upon my soul! … My mind was wrapped in a gloom that could not be pierced! My heart was oppressed with a weight that no power human or divine was equal to remove! My eyelids seemed to press downward with an invincible burden! My eyeballs were ready to start and crack their sockets! I lay motionless, the victim of ineffable horror!

Godwin paints an evocative scene of interior violence with striking physiological descriptions (“conscious fire,” the “anger in my eye, the burning dryness of my throat,” “sentiment,” “passion,” “blood,” “mind,” “heart,” “eyelids,” “eyeballs”). The sentences notably depict St. Leon as the passive recipient of physical onsloughts: “seemed to rush upon my soul,” “[m]y mind was wrapped in gloom,” “[m]y heart was oppressed,” “[m]y eyelids seemed to press downward,” “I lay motionless, the victim of ineffable

45 Godwin, St. Leon, 266.
46 Ibid., 99-100.
horror!” However, at the same time, the passage begins by noting that “No man who has not felt [the tortures of a gamester] can possibly image [them] to himself.”

In a later moment, when Marguerite is ill and dying, St. Leon continues to stay obsessively occupied with his secret pursuit of alchemy despite his awareness that he ought to be allocating his time and attention elsewhere. The narrator tells us:

There are habits of the mind and modes of occupying the attention, in which, when once we have engaged, there seems a sort of physical impossibility of ever withdrawing ourselves. This was my case in the present instance. My habit was of no long standing. But no reading of my story, no mere power of language and words, can enable a by-stander to imagine how deep it was sunk into my heart, how inextricably it was twisted with all the fibres of my bosom. That he may in some degree enter into my situation, I entreat the reader to consider what are the most imperious passions of the human mind.47

Akrasia is thus something that “no reading of my story, no mere power of language and words, can enable a by-stander to imagine.” What St. Leon stages for us in these examples then is an ambivalence between the premises of Political Justice—the faith in systematic and explicit delineation of causes in order to fully account for the causation of human action—and the premises of The Enquirer—the concern with the theme of intemperance that motivates greater epistemological humility. In encountering the problems with the older Godwinian epistemology when it comes to the case of intemperance, St. Leon can be seen as a transitional work that clarifies the necessity for

47 Ibid., 266.
modes of narration and perspective that depart from “matter-of-fact notation of the thought.”

In Fleetwood, we begin to see the development of alternative techniques more adequately able to represent the perspectival problems inherent in cases of problematic agency and intemperance, techniques able to speak to the inner and outer experiences of agency at one and the same time, and which we can recognize to be among the earliest examples of FID in English novels.

2.2 Free Indirect Discourse in Fleetwood

Like St. Leon, Fleetwood centers on a distempered and irresolute individual who frequently holds reasonable views and judgments while acting in diametric opposition to them. The first half of the novel (Volume I and the first half of Volume II) describes Fleetwood’s Rousseauvian education, his childhood years communing with nature, his education at Oxford, his life as a libertine in Paris, followed by sincere declarations of repentance at the errors of his ways, promising to live a more virtuous life:

From this period I became an altered man. The ebriety and extravagance of youth were at an end with me. The sobriety, the delicacy, the sentimental fastidiousness of my childish days, revived in my bosom; and I looked back with astonishment at my adolescence, that I could ever have departed so widely from my genuine character. … My heart was henceforward pure, my moral tastes revived in their genuine clearness, and the errors I committed were no longer those of a profligate.48

48 William Godwin, Fleetwood; or, the New Man of Feeling, ed. Gary Handwerk & A. A. Markley (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Literary Texts, 2001), 213-215
If the recognition of his past errors results in “moral tastes revived,” one might expect Fleetwood to then become a more tolerable and genial member of human society. But as he tells us shortly thereafter, “I ‘repented’, but I was not ‘made whole,’” a statement that will acquire more meaning as Fleetwood’s temperamental antics increase in intensity over the course of the third volume.\footnote{Ibid., 216.} In Volume III, Fleetwood proves to be a suspicious and irritable husband to the young Mary Macneil despite his awareness that his outbursts are wrong and unnecessary, nearly ruining his marriage and killing Mary with his impossible demeanor. As several critics have discussed at length, the novel presents itself as an inversion of the novel of development and the sentimental novel genre (as indicated in the novel’s subtitle, a reference to Henry Mackenzie’s \textit{Man of Feeling}). An elaborate “upbringing” or \textit{bildung} results in quite the opposite of what we would expect: an uncultivated and maladjusted adult. What begins by resembling Rousseau’s \textit{Emile} indeed ends up looking more like Rousseau’s \textit{Confessions}.\footnote{Godwin had indeed begun translating Rousseau’s \textit{Confessions} in 1789 and had recently re-read at the time of writing \textit{Fleetwood}. Kelly, 243.} As Gary Kelly has written, \textit{Fleetwood} subverts the “literary types found in earlier Jacobin novels” with its focus on an intemperate misanthrope.\footnote{Godwin, \textit{Fleetwood}, 250.}

As a number of critics have observed, the dramatic arc of Fleetwood’s “history” makes for a clever indictment of both the “sentimental” and the “educational” novel, for in this narrative, a long and elaborate “upbringing” or \textit{bildung} results in quite the
opposite of what we would expect: a distempered paranoid misanthrope. Indeed, by employing the language and logic of a “confessions,” the novel borrows from Rousseau’s *Confessions*, which Godwin had recently reread and had begun translating in 1789, but in taking up this form, the novel also presents a critique of the educational model of *Emile.* Yet in this way, most criticism has thus focused on *Fleetwood* as a novel that upends the “educational” or “sentimental” genres, eliding the less articulable discourses of agency, action, and the will. More central to this novel than malicious feelings that “take him over,” is the problem of failing to act upon the good feelings he has, succumbing out of weakness to his worse tendencies that he himself knows are wrong. In this sense, the novel’s structure reflects the strange logic of Aristotle’s conception of akrasia, for it reveals that a thorough theoretical education does not necessarily translate into the field of action – the field in which virtue ultimately reveals itself.

The novel’s formal experimentations appear most notably in Volume III after Fleetwood has married and is presented with the task of living amicably with his wife.

---

52 Gary Handwerk has persuasively argued for the sense in which *Fleetwood* is a critique of the Rousseauvian education in *Emile*, especially in the sense of that educational tract’s implicit and explicit misogyny; as Handwerk writes, the novel “marks the way in which its author seeks to map misogyny, tracing its origins to the whole framework of natural education” modeled by Rousseau’s *Emile*. Gary Handwerk, “Mapping Misogyny: Godwin’s ‘Fleetwood’ and the Staging of Rousseauvian Education,” *Studies in Romanticism* 41.3 (Fall 2002): 397-8. Hina Nazar follows Handwerk, discussing how “Godwin’s critique of Rousseau builds on the earlier critique developed by Mary Wollstonecraft in her novels and educational writings,” which emphasize how “Rousseau’s structuring norm of nature [exposes] its fundamental arbitrariness and injustice to women.” Nazar, 107. However, Nazar reads the novel more broadly as a critique of not merely the “gendering of virtue,” but the broader “cast of [Rousseau’s] sentimentalism.” Nazar, 84.
At times, the novel veers closely to the techniques of *St. Leon* in which the narrator (present-tense Fleetwood) stipulates physiological and physical causes to past-tense Fleetwood’s actions; “[t]he reader must recollect my character, as an old bachelor, as a man endowed with the most irritable structure of nerves,” he tells us at one point. In this way, past-tense Fleetwood is intermittently presented as an object of knowledge whose tendency to act and react in given ways can be predicted given a set of physical conditions. However, more frequently, the novel presents Fleetwood’s thoughts without supplemental explanation of the mental processes that preceded them. In some cases, the novel presents Fleetwood’s erratic and anxious mind by presenting his thoughts as speech-acts in quotation marks. In one scene, Fleetwood discovers that the young Mr. Matthews has visited his house, and this briefly sends Fleetwood into a spin of paranoia regarding Mary’s fidelity. He then periodically tempers his suspicions with his certainty that Mary is innocent:

> At first I felt in the higher degree irritated against her behaviour. “What chance,” said I, “have we for happiness, if, supposing me to be in the wrong,—it is impossible I should be wrong!—she, instead of soothing my weakness, thus answers me with taunting and retort?”

> Soon, however, I came to see the subject in a different light. “Fleetwood! Fleetwood!” said I, striking my forehead with my hand, “what is it you are doing? I have entered upon a serious and weighty task, the guardianship of the felicity of a young woman, who, without reserve, or defence, or refuge against me, has thrown herself into my power. What engagements did I form to her father! with how solemn protestations did I undertake to remove all uncertainty from his mind! … Look upon this young creature! Soft, and tender, and winning as she is, shall I be her destroyer? Do I doubt her innocence? Truth and honour are written in her front, in characters which folly itself

53 Godwin, *Fleetwood*, 301.
cannot mistake. ... What a brute am I, to misuse, and give uneasiness to so much excellence! I will throw myself at her feet, and with tears of anguish confess to her my fault."

Full of these sentiments of remorse, I hastened back by the way I came, and entered the house.\textsuperscript{54}

In this passage, the inner disputes are vocalized and can thus be portrayed as reportable actions. This strategy allows Godwin to evoke the scene of internal conflict while borrowing from the tools of theater, insofar as the mode of soliloquy proves particularly fruitful for expressing the dilemma of a self-loathing state. Godwin is likely inspired by Shakespeare in this regard, whose weak-willed protagonists offer rich models as they reflect through soliloquy on their own failures. Fleetwood’s “What a brute am I” echoes Hamlet’s “Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I”: Godwin clearly recognizes the dramatic irony of characters who reflect aloud on matters of the self that ought to be fully in one’s control.

However, \textit{Fleetwood} is a novel and not a stage drama: Godwin’s internal dialogue through quotation marks indeed reads not as a conflict before our eyes, but as a past-tense series of events bracketed with the words “said I.” Elsewhere in Volume III, the novel presents past-tense Fleetwood’s thoughts, but does so without the use of quotation marks, instead moving seamlessly between the voice of present-tense Fleetwood-the-narrator into the mind of past-tense Fleetwood-the-character. In one of

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 314.
many such instances, Fleetwood grows angry with Mary for requesting the chance to
attend social gatherings and make acquaintances of her age:

   Our discussion terminated in the formal churching, and the commencement of a
tremendous series of wedding visits. Artful hussy! In the way she put it to me, could I
refuse? Could I refuse a thing upon which, in this mild and specious temper of mind, her
heart appeared to be set?—I wrong her. There was no art in what she did; it was all the
most adorable ingenuousness and sincerity...\textsuperscript{55}

The transition between the first sentence, simply the narrator’s description of events, to
the second sentence (“Artful hussy!”) proceeds, to quote Monika Fludernik, “without
any noticeable shifting of gears.”\textsuperscript{56} This sentence and the two that follow—“In the way
she put it to me, could I refuse? Could I refuse a thing upon which, in this mild and
specious temper of mind, her heart appeared to be set?”—then allow a range of different
interpretations. We can identify at least these three: they could be 1) the exclamations of
the present-tense narrator himself, 2) the quoted direct speech of the past-tense
character, or 3) a “free indirect” performance of the past-tense character’s speech in the
guise of the narrator’s speech. This triple-reading is possible because of an ambiguity we
did not find in \textit{Emma}: the first-person pronoun “I,” which does not help us distinguish
between narrator and character. Further, the verb “could” can function as past and
present tense, which also does not help distinguish the speaker.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 297.
\textsuperscript{56} Fludernik, 73.
The perspective of the speaker becomes clearer with the fifth sentence: “I wrong
her.” Resolutely in the present tense, the sentence can then be clearly interpreted as the
direct speech of the past-tense character. (Although the grammar leaves open the
contextually unlikely possibility that this is the narrator’s own repentant reflection that
he continues to “wrong her” in his narration.) In the fifth and sixth sentences then
Godwin performs past-tense Fleetwood’s direct speech without using quotation marks,
eliminating “I said” or “I thought.” This offers him dramatic advantages, for it allows us
to see how Fleetwood’s states of mind compete with rather than competed with each
other. Intemperance is evoked rather than described.

Yet in this converging of narrator’s and character’s voices, we also see a new
sense of the narrator’s sympathy for the character, as if the narrator is prepared to re-live
and re-embody the state of mind of his former self. While sentences five and six do not
classify strictly as FID, the nearness between narrator and character achieves what Dorrit
Cohn called FID’s ability to “throw into ironic relief all false notes struck by a figural
mind.” We register past-tense Fleetwood’s thoughts and actions without the
condemning judgments of the narrator, for the narrator mimics those “false notes”
himself.

Thoughout Volume III, Godwin employs further strategies for conflating the
perspectives of narrator and character in order to “throw into ironic relief” Fleetwood’s
self-deceptions. These becomes especially clear in cases in which past-tense Fleetwood
tells himself he is “incapable” of doing or thinking otherwise. Volume III begins with one such scene in which Fleetwood grows furious with Mary while recognizing the reason for his anger is rather negligible. Fleetwood has introduced Mary to his mansion for the first time, and in touring the house, she selects a closet that she would like to have for herself. However, Fleetwood had privately cherished the closet, hoping it would remain his own. In what he recognizes is over-compensated frustration, he takes a walk in his garden and mulls over his situation:

I will go, and tell Mary what she has done. I will confess to her all my weakness. Nothing could be further from her thought than to occasion me this disturbance, and it will afford her the purest pleasure to repair it. May I perish, if ever I breathe a syllable on the subject! What, shall I paint me thus pitiful and despicable in her eyes? Shall I tell her, that I love nobody but myself, and regard her gratifications with indifference? I will not tell her so! … …

I was incapable, however, of passing a just judgment in the case, and the transaction had an unfavourable effect upon my mind.”

The final sentence, “I was incapable, however, of passing a just judgment in the case,” presumably returns us to the voice of the present-tense narrator. However, these words appear particularly dubious in the light of the internal dialogue we have just read. For one thing, because we have just read a prolonged period of deliberating and judging, thus revealing that Fleetwood was indeed quite “capable” of “passing a just judgment in the case,” but simply did not. Even further, because we have just immersed ourselves (without quotation marks) into past-tense Fleetwood’s consciousness, the narrator

57 Ibid., 294-95.
appears to be sufficiently able to embody and perform the character’s language. Thus “I was incapable… of passing a just judgment” can function as FID: a sentence that performs what past-tense Fleetwood would say to himself. It can function as a matter-of-fact notation and also a performance of what past-tense Fleetwood might have said to himself: “I am incapable of passing a just judgment.” Like in the case of Emma, we then read this latter phrase as a way of saying, “I will not pass a just judgment, but I just say I am incapable of it in order to relieve my conscience.”

In this way, the narrator’s nearness to the character produces particular moral ambiguities, for it is not clear if the narrator is justifying, explaining, judging, or simply presenting the thoughts and behaviors of the protagonist. Depending on whether we read the narrator as describing Fleetwood’s causally-determined will or rather as evoking Fleetwood’s failures, our view of the narrator’s authority is very different. In a moment of calm after several of Fleetwood’s vicious outbursts, he reflects upon the character of his wife Mary:

Deeply in love as I was, I could not help speculating, with no agreeable reflections, from the new lights I had derived on the character of my wife. Fickle and capricious I judged her; and, thus judging, I could not avoid sometimes viewing her under the notion of a beautiful toy, a plume of costly feathers, or a copious train of thinnest gauze, which nods gracefully, or floats in a thousand pleasing folds, but which is destitute of substance, firmness, or utility. There must be something, I thought, radically defective in so fluctuating a character. She acted (thus I construed her demeanour) inconsiderately and idly; she could be induced to no fixed spirit of attention; she was at one moment sunk in the lowest depths of misery, and at another wild with extravagant gaiety, with no interval to qualify the transition, with no self-government to give propriety or moderation to either. A being acting thus, was it entitled to be ranked in the scale of
moral existences? What dependence could be placed upon the consistency of any thing so versatile? What principles could dwell in the bosom of so mere a woman?

We may begin to read this passage as a distanced depiction of a character’s thoughts. However, as it proceeds, the narrator increasingly inhabits past-tense Fleetwood’s consciousness. The first three sentences tell us how Fleetwood “speculat[ed],” “judged,” and “view[ed]” her. Then it continues, “There must be something, I thought, radically defective in so fluctuating a character. She acted (thus I construed her demeanour) inconsiderately and idly; she could be induced to no fixed spirit of attention...” Here the modifier “I thought” moves from being a part of the core grammatical sentence towards being embedded within parentheses as “(thus I construed her demeanour).” Eventually, the notations of past-tense Fleetwood’s thoughts disappear entirely, as the clauses following semicolons are no longer given a speaker.

In this paradigmatic case of free indirect discourse, many new questions arise regarding the levels of awareness available to both the character and the narrator. The sentence that ends the paragraph—“What principles could dwell in the bosom of so mere a woman?”—leaves open the question whether the narrator, out of sympathy, continues to voice such questions himself, or if it is the direct speech of the past-tense character. With this ambiguity, we return to the earlier sentences in the paragraph with new questions: “Fickle and capricious I judged her; and, thus judging, I could not avoid

\footnotetext{58}{Ibid., 325-326.}
sometimes viewing her under the notion of a beautiful toy…” We may ask, which
Fleetwood here is doing the judging? Who is doing the viewing? As we do as the
narrator does and “judge” and “view” the character and the narrator together, we
recognize not only that his observations of his wife are divorced from reality, but also
that they accurately describe himself. “Fickle,” “capricious,” “radically defective,"
“fluctuating,” “inconsiderate,” “idle,” “no fixed spirit of attention,” “no self-government
to give propriety or moderation”: Fleetwood is building a fictional picture of Mary as a
way justifying his inattention to himself.

In this way, the porous relationship between narrator and character allowed by
the impersonally performative mode of FID complicates our idea of moral conflict.
Whereas Godwin’s first novel, The Adventures of Caleb Williams (1794), for instance,
concerned the tyrannical and oppressive Falkland who villainizes Caleb the victim,
Fleetwood concerns a tyrannical relationship while focusing on the oppressor’s
oppressive relationship to himself. FID plays a crucial role in this shift. When we
consider phrases from the above paragraph—“I could not help speculating” and “I
could not avoid… viewing her”—we see on the one hand that Fleetwood is Mary’s
oppressor. However, on the other hand, the double meanings of the above phrases
reveal Fleetwood to be oppressor and oppressed. Fleetwood is our Falkland insofar as
he willfully speculates about Mary and views her in knowingly malicious ways, making
up excuses that he has no choice. But he is also our Caleb insofar as he “cannot avoid”
the miserable fate that comes his way.

In wavering between perspectives and allowing multiple ambiguous moral
interpretations, Godwin’s third novel is notably not explicit about its aims and
techniques. This lack of explicitness troubled a number of readers and critics upon the
novel’s publication. Reviews of the novel indeed claimed that the character of Casimir
Fleetwood was “insufficiently motivated” and “implausible.”59 Walter Scott wrote in the
*Edinburgh Review* in 1805 that Fleetwood is quite simply a “selfish madman” to whom
we cannot relate:

> But a man who is transported with rage, with despair, with anger, and all the furious
impulses of passion, upon the most common occurrences of life, is not a man of
sentiment, but a madman; and, far from sympathising with his feelings, we are only
surprised at his having the liberty of indulging them beyond the precincts of Bedlam…
We have been accustomed to associate with our ideas of [the man of feeling] the amiable
virtues of a Harley, feeling deeply the distresses of others, and patient, though not
insensible of his own. But Fleetwood, through the whole three volumes which bear his
name, feels absolutely and exclusively for one individual, and that individual is
Fleetwood.60

The *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* agrees, describing the sequence of the plot as
“absurd” and ultimately unrealistic and implausible:

> …some of these adventures are such, we are persuaded, as never occurred to a human
being… The truth is, that the views of life and manners exhibited in these volumes, are,
in various instances, unnatural and false; while the sentiments and actions ascribed to the

---

59 Handwerk, 376.
60 Godwin, *Fleetwood*, 523.
principle character, are, in many cases, not only extravagant, but ridiculous. Our author, however, seems fully convinced that his sketches are copied from real life….\textsuperscript{61}

These observations make a sharp point insofar as it is difficult to understand if the narrator is justifying or explaining (or both, or neither) the behaviors of the protagonist. Yet Godwin’s imprecision is a way of departing from the causally explicit conception of human agency – the notion that actions can be readily discernible by referring to education, mental states, thoughts, and judgments. As a result, the very form of the novel presents agency as a difficult question by performing its conceptual difficulties.

Like Godwin’s critics, we are unsure what to make, for instance, of the scene in which Fleetwood is full of unreasonable jealousy after a public dance and lashes out at Mary: “I felt irresistibly prompted to avenge my sorrows by inveighing against the neighbourhood, the evening….\textsuperscript{62} The words “I felt irresistibly prompted” again offer several interpretations, and we may read this imprecision as a mark of Godwin’s shortcomings as a novelist: he is no longer the author of “plausible” realist novels that he had previously aspired to be. Yet the ambiguity is essential: it is phrased just so that it may be interpreted either as an irresistible compulsion or as a free and intentional act operating on the false excuse that it is based in an irresistible compulsion. The words “I felt” indeed can be read in the sense of past-tense “matter-of-fact notation” that indicates that a “feeling” arrived to him (he as the passive recipient) by “irresistible prompts.” At

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 524.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 310.
the same time, “I felt” not only allows this passive meaning, but also the
phenomenological meaning of “I felt as if.” We may then read the sentence as a free
indirect performance of past-tense Fleetwood’s mind, as he might say to himself, “I feel
*like* I am irresistibly prompted,” implying then that he is not actually irresistibly
prompted.

Godwin thus experiments with what Austen would master. He learns that the
form of the novel can train one to simultaneously observe individuals empirically and to
embody their consciousness, to view their behaviors and internalize their utterances. As
*Fleetwood* reveals, FID opens up these two sides of the will, the way an individual can
appear to be causally explainable but also a source of new-ness, potential, and
indeterminacy. As Godwin finds, this capacity becomes a particular asset to the form of
the novel, a form which cannot be reduced to a mere presentation of events – a kind of
“account” that could be compatible with a philosophical “account” or “explanation.” A
novel can ask us to read the minds of individuals from without and from within: it can
include the words “I could not resist,” and in so doing, imply the opposite.
3. The Poetics of Procrastination in Wordsworth’s Prelude

Few literary moments evoke the Christian model of a dysfunctional will so clearly as the senseless killing of the albatross in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). As a number of critics have recognized, the mariner’s deed evokes if not allegorizes man’s fall from grace: the knowingly hubristic act betrays the conscience and disrupts the metaphysical foundations of the mariner’s world.¹ Yet while akrasia plays a vital role in the literature of the Romantic poets, it less frequently emerges with such stark moral overtones. More often than depicting the problem of failing in action—as in Coleridge’s poem and the narratives of Rousseau, Sterne, and Godwin—Romantic poetry tends to dwell on the problem of failing to act. While akrasia in the literature discussed thus far tends to follow the model of Medea, who directly acts against her principles from a state of passion, akrasia in Romantic poetry tends to follow the model of Hamlet, who knows the deed to be done but delays and delays and delays. In this sense, Coleridge’s depiction of the mariner’s sinful deed is a less indicative image of the issues that broadly concern the Romantics than Coleridge’s depiction of himself as a mournful procrastinator:

But now afflictions bow me down to earth:

Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;
But oh! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,
My shaping spirit of Imagination.²

These lines from “Dejection: an Ode” evoke a different kind of distortion of the will: not a sinful lashing out to others, a violent intrusion in the public sphere, but a heavy impotence, a failure to present oneself at all.

A tradition of Romantic criticism has interpreted the Romantic period as reflecting an “internalization” of action – from Harold Bloom’s “internalization of the quest romance” to, more recently, Stefanie Markovits’s claim that in the Romantic period questions of action transform into questions of feeling.³ Thus cases such as procrastination and indolence have been perceived as secondary or exceptional themes for Romantic poetry. One important book-length exception is Willard Spiegelman’s Majestic Indolence, which attends to the many interrogations of idleness and indolence among the Romantic poets; that study, however, does not consider the dilemma of inaction as indicative of broader conceptual crises concerning action and the will. Though it offers rich analyses of the intertwining implications of mournful inaction—economic, social, political—it does not emphasize the particularly modern explanatory difficulties of the dilemma, difficulties which present unique opportunities for literature.

² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Dejection: an Ode” in Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), ll. 82-86. All in-text references to Coleridge’s poetry are cited from this collection.
³ Markovits, 85.
The poetry of William Wordsworth and John Keats in particular delve into the often paradoxical dynamics of indolence and procrastination, and indeed can be understood as centrally structured around these problems. Attending to these themes in some of the most well-known works of Romantic poetry will help us see how this work is profoundly informed and motivated by the modern philosophical conundrums with conceptualizing action and the will, and more specifically by the causally enigmatic condition of trying to get oneself to do something.

Wordsworth is not frequently seen as the weak-willed poet, but rather as the stoic and tranquil counterpart to the anxious Coleridge. Indeed, Wordsworth often carries the symbol of “Romantic aesthetics” as a site for celebrating passiveness or inaction – an “ethics,” as Jacques Khalip has written, “of engaged withdrawal or strategic reticence,” or a conception of “aesthetic experience,” as Anne-Lise François has written, “as a respite from the rushed action of a modernity so bent on bringing about the future that it leaves no time for the taking... of time.” Wordsworth is indeed often seen as the poet who “takes” his time, meaning not “taking” or “seizing” time in a possessive sense, but rather “taking part in” time or allowing time. This Wordsworth is

---

perhaps best exemplified in “Expostulation and Reply” from the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*,
which begins with an expostulation to “William”:

> “Why, William, on that old grey stone,
> Thus for the length of half a day,
> Why, William, sit you thus alone,
> And dream your time away?”

Lest we begin to think that William’s dreaming of his time away induces a sense of embarrassment or reflects a state of disappointment, he offers a reply several stanzas later:

> “The eye it cannot chuse but see,
> We cannot bid the ear be still;
> Our bodies feel, where’er they be,
> Against, or with our will.

> Nor less I deem that there are powers,
> Which of themselves our minds impress,
> That we can feed this mind of ours,
> In a wise passiveness. …”

William appears to defend a truth about the human frame: that the “will” has no role in the matter of “feeling,” or in the matter of what “our minds impress. William’s paradigm recalls those of Spinoza and Hume in which bodily states preexist and determine choices. Further, like Hume, William not only defends this model as an

---

ontological fact, but also as a normative matter: reason not only is but also ought to be the slave of the passions, impressions, and sensations.

But the “wise passive” Wordsworth is not the only version of Wordsworth. There is also the Wordsworth who, between the years 1805 and 1850, meant to write and complete *The Recluse*, and yet could never get himself to do it, and remained consistently frustrated with his unproductivity. This is the Wordsworth who wrote in the “Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads* that indolence is “one of the most dishonourable accusations which can be brought against an Author, ... which prevents him from endeavouring to ascertain what is his duty, or, when his duty is ascertained, prevents him from performing it.”

This then is not the poet who takes his time, but rather the poet who fears that he is wasting time and losing time: the poet who has absorbed Benjamin Franklin’s mantra that “time is money,” dreading that he is not spending his time profitably.

Wordsworth’s autobiographical thirteen-book *Prelude* helps us see this second Wordsworth. This epic poem has been traditionally read as a narrative of discovery, growth and rehabilitation – as “work which valorized mental labor.” But we might instead read its structure as throughout steeped in the guilt of unproductivity and as a melancholy deferral of responsibility – not, to quote Jerome McGann, as “a religious and

---

spiritual success” along M. H. Abrams’s “Christian (Protestant) model,” or Harold Bloom’s model in which the poet’s self-doubt overcomes itself in authorial “strength.”8 I read Wordsworth instead as closer to what Laura Quinney has called “the poetics of disappointment” – as a “testimony of chagrin over the broken promises of the self.”9 In particular, I see procrastination as Wordsworth’s chief emblem of the self’s promise-breaking, his primary figure of disappointment. The Prelude thus presents a view of Romantic poetry itself, not as a respite or refuge from the busy rush of modernity, but specifically as a deferral of responsibility and a waste of time.

The Prelude indeed invites a particularly rich lens through which to think about the function of literature as steeped in akrasia, not least because it is richly informed by both Rousseau’s and Augustine’s Confessions, and like those and Godwin’s narratives, continues the genre of first-person self-interrogation. In this sense, The Prelude continues to interrogate the differences between a narrative “account” and an explanatory “account” of a self – the type of account that Coleridge yearned to provide. Yet unlike the works of Rousseau and Godwin, the theme of weakness of will in The Prelude informs and gives structure to specifically poetic modes – namely, the indirect syntax of Wordsworth’s blank verse style and the very idea of poetry as a site of self-deception,

9 Laura Quinney, The Poetics of Disappointment: Wordsworth to Ashbery (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1999), xii.
interpretive difficulty, and “mystery … where darkness makes abode” (V, 621-622). Responding to, and partly inspired by, Coleridge’s struggles with dejection, indolence, and procrastination, *The Prelude* discloses by formally mimicking the difficult phenomenon of weakness of will.

### 3.1 Coleridge and the Philosophies of Inaction

Just as the philosophical limitations of Hume and Godwin presented opportunities for Sterne’s, Rousseau’s, and Godwin’s literary experimentation, these same philosophical limitations frame Wordsworth’s poetic explorations of human agency. Wordsworth himself was not philosophically engaged as were Rousseau, Sterne, or Godwin, though he approached the issue of weakness of will through his friend and partner Coleridge, the perennial procrastinator and sufferer of dejected spirits. In his autobiography the *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge describes his “constitutional indolence, aggravated into languor by ill-health; the accumulating embarrassments of procrastination; the mental cowardice, which is the inseparable companion of procrastination….” In his notebooks, he reflects on his tendency to neglect what he knew he ought to do, describing that condition as a “deep and wide disease in my moral nature… Love of Liberty, Pleasure of Spontaneity, these all express, not explain, the

---


Indeed, for Coleridge, sloth—and the older conception of *acedia*—is not merely a vice, described by Thomas Aquinas as “sorrow for spiritual good.” It also poses problems to “explanation”: as he says, he can “express, not explain, the fact.” As Thomas McFarland has put it, the “unexplainable fact of a diseased volition was the most mysterious and destructive of the ills under which Coleridge labored.”

In his early life, Coleridge embraced the philosophy of associationism theorized in David Hartley’s *Observations on Man* (1749). Hartley’s doctrine of vibrations and associations of the brain could explain how the causation of nature could be compatible with the causation; indeed, though Hartley meant to study the mind as a scientific object, he also meant to show how religious and moral questions were grounded in the same philosophy as physical and scientific questions. In 1796, Coleridge thus thought of David Hartley as “the great master of *Christian Philosophy*” in the sense that it provides a connection between the dynamic and the material. It could also then explain how thoughts appear to arise unbidden as we find in Coleridge’s “Effusion XXXV: The Aeolian Harp” (1795). When, sitting passively “behold[ing]” the outer world,

---


...many a thought uncall’d and undetain’d,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain.¹⁶

Outer forms directly cause his mind to become active and inspired. In that mode of thought, activity in the world feeds causally into an individual’s impressions and bring about mental changes.

Yet he would find this conceptual correlation between nature and the will to be profoundly limiting. Thus by 1805, in “Dejection: an Ode,” he would articulate the explanatory disconnect between a metaphysics that describes “outer forms” and the “inner” reality of the will:

...  
I may not hope from outward forms to win  
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

IV  
O Lady! we receive but what we give,  
And in our life alone does nature live...¹⁷

These consecutive couplets express how the poet has been permitted to sit idle while expecting nature to do the work of moving him into action; as he would write in the Biographia Literaria, if Hartley’s “theory of the will” were accurate, then “our whole life would be divided between the despotism of outward impressions, and that of senseless and passive memory.”¹⁸ Indeed, “Dejection” sees dejection as exacerbated by precisely

¹⁸ Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, ch. VI, 111.
this impoverished modern philosophy: associationism represents a justification of inaction. It is a philosophy of indolent subjects.

As Coleridge recounts in the *Biographia Literaria*, he would not merely find Hartley’s philosophical model to be mistaken, but also the materialist and mechanistic philosophical frameworks that dominated Enlightenment philosophy more generally—from Hobbes’s materialism, which understands all causal events in human nature as “purely physiological,” to Hume’s reductionism, which “degraded the notion of cause and effect into a blind product of delusion and habit.”[^19] As Laurence Lockridge has written, Coleridge came to believe that “if we were as subject to the mechanical whims of motives and impulses as [the ‘mechanico-corpuscular philosophers’] assert, we would suffer a chaotic unpredictability of character, going to bed benign and waking up vicious.”[^20] Thus in his philosophy of the autonomous will, Immanuel Kant offered a path for Coleridge to transcend the implications of what he called the “Epicurean” philosophy of the eighteenth century; Coleridge lauds how “in his moral system [Kant] was permitted to assume a higher ground (the autonomy of the will) as a POSTULATE deducible from the unconditional command, or... the categorical imperative, of the conscience.”[^21] The concept of the “free will” as first principle—irreducible to the causality of nature—resonated powerfully with Coleridge, and would indeed remain an

[^19]: Ibid., ch. V, 95; ch. VII, 121.
a priori conviction for the remainder of his life. From the *Biographia Literaria* forward, Coleridge defended not only the will as a matter of metaphysical truth but as the ground of the very notions of moral thought and of the human itself.

Wordsworth was well aware of Coleridge’s personal struggles and lapses into opium addiction. Indeed, while Coleridge explored questions of the will by turning to theology and philosophy, Wordsworth explored these questions in poetry. While Coleridge repeatedly returned to the matter of “explaining” qualities of the will, Wordsworth sought to “express” them. Wordsworth’s *Prelude* was dedicated to Coleridge, originally titled “Poem to Coleridge,” referring to him directly at times:

...Throughout this narrative,  
Else sooner ended, I have known full well  
For whom I thus record the birth and growth  
Of gentleness, simplicity, and truth,  
And joyous loves that hallow innocent days  
Of peace and self-command.” (VI, 269-274)

---

[22] However, in seeking to “explain” weakness of will, Kant does not prove the most useful thinker, for the spontaneity of Kant’s free will itself does not have much to say about weakness. Thus in a growing transition from Unitarian to Trinitarian belief system, Coleridge would increasingly embrace an Augustinian notion of the will as an inherently spiritual entity — indeed “pre-eminentely the spiritual Constituent in our Being,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), 75. See Pfau, *Minding the Modern*, 468-503. While inspired by the Germanic thought of Kant and Fichte, Coleridge departs from them in seeing the will as essentially spiritual in origin. Unlike Kant who allowed the will to remain within the realm of the “noumenal,” Coleridge identified the will through its relationship to the divine. As Thomas Pfau writes, Coleridge “seemingly endorses the modern, Kantian view of human agents as strictly self-legislating and self-legitimating,” but at the same time he also “conceives the will in distinctly Augustinian and Scholastic terms as uniquely spiritual and indexed to the normative (divine) authority of the Platonic logos.” Pfau, *Minding the Modern*, 471. See also Murray J. Evans, *Sublime Coleridge: The Opus Maximum* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[23] In the *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge notably expands upon Augustine’s notion of the will as the sole source of sin: Inasmuch as sin “is evil,” he writes, “in God it cannot originate: and yet in some Spirit (i.e. in some supernatural power) it must. For in Nature there is no origin. Sin is therefore spiritual Evil: but the spiritual in Man is the Will … the corruption must have been self-originated.” Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 273.
Thus after hearing Wordsworth’s oration of the 1805 version of the poem, Coleridge would describe in his own poem “To William Wordsworth” the particular strength and efficacy of Wordsworth’s modes of expression:

...thou hast dared to tell
What may be told, to the understanding mind
Revealable; and what within the mind
By vital breathings secret as the soul
Of vernal growth, oft quickens in the heart
Thoughts all too deep for words!—

Wordsworth’s poem in Coleridge’s account “tell[s]” / “What may be told, to the understanding mind,” not by means of explanation or explication but specifically by “vital breathings secret.” Wordsworth’s Prelude functions for Coleridge not as a lesson, but as a secular form of sermon that has a “quicken[ing]” effect on his spirits, prompting inspiration—“Ah! as I listened with a heart forlorn … The pulses of my being beat anew” —as well as empathy, evident in Coleridge’s imitation of Wordsworthian phrases – “Thoughts all too deep for words” recalling “Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” from the “Intimations of Immortality” ode.25

Coleridge’s poem thus invites us to approach Wordsworth’s Prelude, not as a work that cures indolence, but itself as a kind of representation of indolence. It garners Coleridge’s empathy not because it represents a form of strength, but rather because it

---

25 Ibid., 61-62. As M. H. Abrams has written, “the poet’s solemn voice seized upon Coleridge as though it were itself a great wind which, like the literal storm in Dejection, fanned his torpid spirit… into a momentary and painful rebirth.” M. H. Abrams, “The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor” The Kenyon Review 19.1 (1957), 118.
represents a form of weakness. Indeed, by responding to the problem of indolence with the ineffective strategy of procrastination, *The Prelude* opens up avenues of self-interrogation that do not resolve the contradictions of the self. Thus it produces a poetics grounded in the acknowledgement of impotence, and foregrounds the privileges of poetry itself in investigating the inconsistencies and paradoxes of human agency.

3.2 Procrastination as “Deliberate Holiday”: The Prelude Book I

We tend to regard *The Prelude* as a kind of poetic *bildungsroman* that traces a journey of the poet’s recognition of his poetic capacities. Yet the poem begins by reflecting on a condition that is never resolved or fully overcome: a sense of the poet’s unproductivity, ineffectiveness, and wastefulness. At the start of Book I, the poet tells us of his failed ambitions:

\[\text{I yearn towards some philosophic song} \]
\[\text{Of truth that cherishes our daily life,} \]
\[\text{With meditations passionate from deep} \]
\[\text{Recesses in man’s heart, immortal verse} \]
\[\text{Thoughtfully fitted to the Orphean lyre; (I, 230-234)} \]

Wordsworth conceived of this “philosophic song” as a work that would surpass Milton’s *Paradise Lost* both in length and in greatness. *The Recluse*, as he would come to call it, would represent for him the culmination of his poetic powers. But as Book I recounts, he could not get himself to start it; so intimidated by the prospect of beginning it, he instead turned to an easier task – writing about himself:

\[\text{But from this aweful burthen I full soon} \]
Take refuge, and beguile myself with trust
That mellower years will bring a riper mind
And clearer insight. Thus from day to day
I live a mockery of the brotherhood
Of vice and virtue, with no skill to part
Vague longing that is bred by want of power,
From paramount impulse not to be withstood;
A timorous capacity, from prudence;
From circumspection, infinite delay. (I, 235-244)

The poem thus begins with a crisis of action, or what Geoffrey Hartman has called “an experience of aphasia” (incapacity to articulate). In this way, it represents a stark departure from the ethic held up in “Expostulation and Reply”—inaction is now the “vice” and action the “virtue”—and instead represents a dilemma akin to Hamlet who dreads that he “lose[s] the name of action.”

However, while Hartman describes The Prelude as a triumph in overcoming this aphasia, we might also identify the poet’s sense of disappointment in himself as structuring the poem more broadly. In this stanza, the poet introduces a half-justification for the composition of the poem: he tells us he “beguile[s] himself with trust / That mellower years will bring a riper mind / And clearer insight.” He is here articulating a philosophy that the future will take care of things: it will bring about a better state of mind for him. With a “riper” mind, he wants to see himself like a plant or fruit that merely requires time. He is in this sense embracing the philosophy from Matthew 6:

“Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the

things of itself.” This strategy of banking on the future, however, is only a half-strategy, for it is self-consciously a means of self-deception: he “beguile[s] himself with trust.” In this way, he is articulating the familiar half-strategy we call procrastination, in which we tell ourselves that time will solve the problem, while knowing that to be untrue. Like any procrastinator, Wordsworth tells himself this as an excuse to proceed to easier things; yet because he knows it is a lie, he also carries that anxiety, that sense of regret. In “putting off” his task (“pro” meaning forward, and “crastinus” meaning pertaining to tomorrow), he is seeking a relief that only further accentuates his failure.

This strategy of “self-beguiling” plays out in numerous scenes throughout the thirteenth-book Prelude, including in the very next stanza. The poet seeks a way to diffuse his anxious lack of confidence, and does so by going for a walk:

Ah, better far than this to stray about
Voluptuously through fields and rural walks
And ask no record of the hours given up
To vacant musing, unreproved neglect
Of all things, and deliberate holiday. (I, 252-256)

Wordsworth is here performing what he will do countless times over the course of The Prelude: take the easier action over the harder one, focus on the lightness of the present rather than the heaviness of the future. This walk functions exactly like the writing of The Prelude: it serves as a way to displace the more important action. As in any case of procrastination, Wordsworth takes the energy he would have used for the “real thing,” and directs it to something else – a something else that does not carry the sense of
burden, responsibility, or high stakes. The new activity bears a similar shape to the action he should be doing—in this case, writing *The Recluse*—for it requires similar talents and energies. It is a seemingly lightweight version of the task itself, a “practice” action, a simulation of the real thing. Yet to say it is practice is also to help justify doing it, while part of the anxiety in procrastination is always the suspicion that it’s not useful, not a “warm-up” or practice, but just a waste of resources.

Wordsworth’s walking, like writing *The Prelude*, thus presents itself as tranquil and rehabilitating, though it is practiced in the half-aware anxiety of waste and delay. Rather than representing “wise passiveness,” the poetic style represents a “deliberate holiday,” with an emphasis on “deliberate.” In this way, his sauntering expresses particular anxieties inherent in the modern idea of “holiday” as such. By the turn of the nineteenth century, holidays had become increasingly available for a new middle class by the turn of the nineteenth century. As J. H. Plumb, Willard Spiegelman, and others have observed, with the rise of the market economy, the eighteenth century saw the widespread expansion of the “leisure industry,” including seaside resorts and casual shopping.27 With a new availability of “leisure,” the prospect of “idleness,” as

---

Spiegelman has argued, no longer reflects negative connotations of “sloth” and *acedia*, but also “morally defensible.”\(^28\)

Yet if leisure becomes morally defensible in one sense, its dependence on the market economy necessarily implies that it is simultaneously counter-productive and thus cause for anxiety. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith writes, “Wherever capital predominates, industry prevails: wherever revenue, idleness.”\(^29\) In acquiring revenue, one is likely to then turn unproductive, so in order to be able to afford leisure again, one needs to maintain an industrious ethic. Thus any possibility of leisure is undergirded by the sense of wasting the very time that it made the leisure possible in the first place. The poet of Book I indeed wishes to “ask no record of the hours given up / To vacant musing, unreproved neglect / Of all things,” but of course the capacity to wish such a thing reveals a deeper awareness of “the hours” and the potential existence of a “record.” If, to quote Benjamin Franklin, “time is money” in this new context, then “free” time it is not, for one needs to be able to afford free time. Isolated moments of seeming exemption from the “work-clock” – these too come at a price.

Thus while leisure become “widespread, economically feasible, and morally defensible” for Wordsworth and the English middle class, it derives out of a culture memorably described by Max Weber rooted in a “protestant work ethic.” In his

\(^{28}\) Spiegelman, 11.

discussion of the moral shifts that accompanied nascent capitalism, Weber describes the seventeenth-century theological view that “Wasting time is... the first and most serious of all sins” and “Loss of time through socializing, ‘idle talk’, luxurious living... is morally, absolutely reprehensible... when it is engaged in at the expense of labor in a calling.” If idleness becomes “morally defensible” on the one hand, it also becomes the profoundest source of guilt on the other.

In yearning to “stray about / Voluptuously” and to “ask no record of the hours given up / To vacant musing” and “deliberate holiday,” Wordsworth does not merely characterize a personal crisis of indolence that prompts the unhelpful strategy of purposeful procrastination, but he also evokes what he found to be a broader social ill. As he wrote in the “Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads*, “For a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor.”

Thus we can understand Wordsworth’s walks as both tranquil and anxious. This double quality of the leisurely mode—leisure-as-procrastination—can then be discerned

---

31 In *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, Joseph Pieper understands the modern notions of “work” and “worker” as signifying a “new and changing conception of the very meaning of human existence.” Thus Pieper aims “to maintain and defend, or even to reconquer, the right and claims of” a conception of leisure “in its ideal form” – as “the preserve of freedom, of education and culture, and of that undiminished humanity which views the world as a whole” in face of “the claims of ‘total labour’ that are invading every sphere of life.” Joseph Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952), 59.
in Wordsworth’s very syntax. The poem’s blank verse rhythm appears to replicate the mode of “wise passiveness,” in which one does not “move” but “is moved.” The following passage from Book I exemplifies this style:

Thus occupied in mind I lingered here
Contented, nor rose up until the sun
Had almost touched the horizon; bidding then
A farewell to the city left behind,
Even with the chance equipment of that hour
I journeyed towards the vale which I had chosen. (I, 95-100)

The subject lingers and so does the syntax. We may notice that, while there are several direct actions in this sentence (“I lingered” and “I journeyed”), the clauses do not begin with these actions. Rather, they begin with the subordinate clauses “Thus occupied in mind” and “bidding then / A farewell to the city left behind, / Even with the chance equipment of that hour…” Thus we register that the self is always already in a flow when the action comes: actions always follow from pre-existing states rather than from a discrete sense of the subject.

But rather than understanding this stylistic choice as a sincere depiction of a “wise passive” mode, we can read it as a strategic way of forgetting responsibility, of “putting off.” We may note how the subject does not “rise” up of his own accord. Instead, the verb is delivered in the negative: “nor rose up until…” The sentence then, like the subject, relies on a passive object (the sun) to signify or prompt his rising.

122
waiting for objects of the natural world to provide the means for movement, the syntax and the subject exemplify an ethics of procrastination – a poetics of delay.\textsuperscript{33}

Elsewhere in Book I, the poet projects a mode of calm passivity by strategically concealing the reality of the will. Indeed, we find telling moments that remain purposely ambiguous regarding the subject’s capacity to “do” something. In the very first stanza of the poem, the poet declares that he is set “free” from the confines of the city:

Now I am free, enfranchised and at large,
May fix my habitation where I will. (I, 9-10)

This all-important sentence carries two meanings where we might ordinarily intuit there is one. Given the context, we are led to believe that, by the words “where I will,” the poet means “wherever it may be that I will be,” using “will” as a future-tense modifier. Yet read more literally, the phrase means precisely the opposite: “will” may just as well operate as a direct verb, conveying the meaning “where I will myself to go.” The first reading conveys the strategic sense of being without agency as a mere voyeur to the necessitarian movements, whereas the second reading conveys the Kantian sense of freedom in choice.

\textsuperscript{33} By emphasizing Wordsworth’s frequent use of the word “nor,” Geoffrey Hartman has distinguished the poet’s quintessential style of “surmise,” in which “the distinction is less between false and true than between surmise and surmise.” Hartman, 10-11.
This irony in which rest also simultaneously indicates guilty deferral pervades *The Prelude*. We can center especially on Wordsworth’s use of litotes or double-negatives, which conceal any possibility of decision-making:

Whereat, being not unwilling now to give  
A respite to this passion, I paced on  
Gently, with careless steps, and came erelong  
To a green shady place where down I sate... (I, 68-71)

The double negative allows a poetics of calm and serenity, but also a strategic abdication of agency, an allowing oneself to waste time in the acknowledgement of guilt. Instead of declaring himself “willing... to give / A respite to this passion,” the poet conceals his sense of agency in declining to “not will.” With this manner of conceiving of one’s will, one could never be effectively blamed for anything: “I never said I was *willing*, I merely said I was *not unwilling*,“ he might say.

In beguiling himself that “mellower years will bring a riper mind / And surer insight,” and concealing from himself the reality and efficacy of his will, the poet then reveals a form of self-deception and self-blindness that motivates the investigation of the self in *The Prelude*. In distinct moments in the remainder of the poem, it—much like the narratives of Rousseau, Sterne, and Godwin—uses scenes of weakness of will as exemplifying the incoherence of the self.

**3.3 Procrastination and Self-Deception: Books I and VI**
Imagination!—lifting up itself
Before the eye and progress of my song
Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,
In all the might of its endowments, came
Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,
Halted without a struggle to break through,
And now, recovering, to my soul I say
‘I recognise thy glory’. In such strength
Of usurpation, in such visitings
Of awful promise, when the light of sense
 Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us
The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
There harbours whether we be young or old.
Our destiny, our nature, and our home,
Is with infinitude—and only there;
With hope it is, hope that can never die,
Effort, and expectation, and desire,
And something evermore about to be. (VI, 525-542)

In this well-known passage, the poet celebrates the “glory” of blindness, and the gap that resides between the inner world of expectation and the outer world. Immediately preceding this effusion, the poet depicts how the young Wordsworth realizes in disappointment that he had crossed the Alps on his climb without having realized it. As Geoffrey Hartman has discussed, in this moment the poem’s shifts attention from the subject to the poet, for the poet has here retroactively understood something about the moment he did not realize at the time as Hartman writes, “His failure of 1790 taught him gently what now (1804) literally blinds him….”

34 “Not until the moment of composition, some fourteen years after the event, does the real reason behind his upward climb and subsequent melancholy slackening strike home; and it strikes so hard that he gives to the power in him, revealed by the extinction of the immediate external motive (his desire to cross the Alps) and by the abyss of intervening years, the explicit name Imagination…” Hartman, 40-41. The most notably provocative counter-reading of Hartman is Alan Liu’s, which identifies the “history” in between the
This passage has been traditionally read as evoking the poet’s triumphant—if melancholy—recognition of the power of his mental capacities as separate from those of the outer world. It is when “the light of sense / Goes out in flashes” that one is able to recognize the “greatness” that inheres in “the invisible world.” This is the world of imagination, of “Effort, and expectation, and desire” – the world of what-is-to-be rather than the world of what-is.

In this moment, Wordsworth does indeed seem to be celebrating the activity of looking-forward rather than accommodating to the world’s actual demands, but this solace of the imaginative stance—the stance of the poet—is coupled with the inevitable sense of disappointment that this stance implies missing opportunities and failing one’s stated goals. In order to interpret this passage through the conception of melancholic and disappointed procrastination, we will first need to examine more generally the use of the retrospective self-interrogations in the text that Wordsworth calls his “spots of time” (XI, 257). Such scenes have been examined through psychoanalytic discourses; thus for Jonathan Bishop, Wordsworth’s self-analysis of childhood reveal “his chief categories of “nature” and “self,” arguing that imagination in the passage concerned “is the haunt of Napoleon,” whose 1800 passage through the Swiss Alps is mimicked by the progress of Imagination in book VI. Wordsworth: The Sense of History (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989), 23-31.
motivations, form of neurosis, and emotional problem.”35 Countering such a strictly psychological reading, James Chandler has proposed that “the spots of time serve The Prelude by proving the power of his discipline,” not just reflecting Wordsworth’s psychology, but also “a national character and a native tradition,” or “discipline-as-tradition, a discipline grounded on what Burke calls prejudice.”36 Yet we can also see the most significant retrospective moments of The Prelude as revealing the melancholy of self-deception that follows specifically from the personal problem of “putting off” – a problem Wordsworth understood as not merely a psychological idiosyncrasy, but as a condition that characterized middle-class society more broadly. This becomes clearest when we trace the imagery of “darkness” in these scenes, which then will help us reinterpret the “imagination” passage from Book VI.

Like Rousseau’s Confessions, The Prelude dips into past moments in a quasi-confessional mode, thus not only expressing akrasia in the act of writing, but also reflecting on incidents that can be properly called akratic. Indeed, notably, the most significant episodes of his childhood narrated in Book One reflect a subject with a disordered will, a young man who knowingly commits acts against his better judgment. Young Wordsworth is depicted as frequently on his own committing minor crimes and, with the ministries of Nature, eventually being guided towards a more steady and

harmonious life. On a first reading of Wordsworth’s childhood episodes, the parallels to
the *Confessions* stand out, as these episodes represent the kinds of gratuitous and
needless thefts famously displayed in Book Two of the *Confessions*. When the poet
describes his youthful crimes as a “plunderer” (I, 336), the poem evokes some of the
classic language of a confessional’s akratic subject:

...Sometimes it befel
In these night-wanderings, that a strong desire
O’erpowers my better reason, and the bird
Which was the captive of another’s toils
Became my prey... (I, 324-28)

The language of “desire / O’erpowers[ing] ... better reason” specifically recalls Augustine
in stealing the pears from the pear tree. “I did not steal so as to enjoy the fruits of my
crime, but rather to enjoy the theft itself, and the sin,” he writes; “there was no reason
for my evil save evil itself. My evil was loathsome, and I loved it...”

Moments of “plundering” carry special importance for Wordsworth throughout
his corpus; thus he describes in “Nutting”:

...Then up I rose,
And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash
And merciless ravage: and the shady nook
Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower,
Deformed and sullied, patiently gave up
Their quiet being: and, unless I now
Confound my present feelings with the past;

37 Augustine, 2.4.9, 36.
Ere from the mutilated bower I turned
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings,
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees, and saw the intruding sky. —

Much like the ancient mariner’s murder of the albatross, young Wordsworth’s act represents an explicit betrayal of judgment for the sake of enjoying destruction itself. There is no gain here except in the capability to destroy. He in this sense embodies the mankind he describes in which “Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.”

Evoking too the lustful imagery, young Wordsworth in Book I of The Prelude also “lustily” (I, 401) steals the shepherd’s boat, and then is overtaken by a “darkness” and “blank desertion”:

...for many days my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts
There was a darkness—call it solitude
Or blank desertion... (I, 417-22)

These passages indeed pick up on Augustine’s language of “darkness” or opacity that accompanies guilty actions. Here it is “darkness” and “blank desertion,” while Augustine describes in Book Two, “wherever my inclinations took me, a dark cloud came between me and the clear skies of your truth” [et in omnibus erat caligo intercludens

---

The “dark cloud” [caligo] in Augustine indicates the distance between himself and God, as well as the distance between his mind and his will; thus Augustine would elaborate later, “The mind orders the mind to will; it is only one mind, but it does not do as ordered. Whence is this strange situation? and why is it so?”\(^{40}\)

Yet darkness plays a different function here. Indeed, sin and grace have little roles in Wordsworth’s narrative, rather unlike Coleridge’s *Rime*. More like Rousseau, this gap that attends his paradoxical self-deception informs the very literary qualities of the work itself. The motif of “darkness” appears memorably in Book One as the “dark / Invisible workmanship” (I, 352-53), which is, the invisible ministry of Nature, but also simultaneously the “dark / Invisible workmanship” of words, the unique capacity for particular forms of writing to construe the workings of the human condition.

Wordsworth picks up on this usage in Book Five:

```
Visionary power
Attends upon the motions of the winds
Embodied in the mystery of words;
There darkness makes abode, and all the host
Of shadowy things do work their changes there
As in a mansion like their proper home. (V, 619-24)
```
This passage appears at first to center on natural outer phenomena—“the motions of the winds”—and then encloses them within “the mystery of words” – what might have appeared to reflect the unknowable qualities of Nature in fact are the unknowable qualities of meaning itself. As Mary Jacobus has written about the passage above, “if the mystery of words must remain inefable, still, the veil of poetry irradiates and makes strange the objects it obscures… The gap between word and thing, once opened, typically proves Wordsworth’s richest source of meaning (‘all the host / Of shadowy things do work their changes there’) and by a sleight of hand it is enshrined in the intertext rather than the text.” By putting forward words or text, the passage draws attention to the non-words and the intertext. This then is the prevailing meaning of the “darkness” we encounter in Wordsworth’s akratic moments.

In his youthful “night-wanderings,” the “darkness” in his “thoughts” (“call it solitude / Or blank desertion”), then characterizes not only Augustine’s sense of sin, but also a quality imposed by the author himself. As Thomas McFarland has argued, the intensity of these “spots of time” are characterized not only “in the structure of the episode; a still larger part emanates from the achievement of reclaiming the ‘chronotope’… from absence in the past to presence” – in the writing itself. These moments then shift the dramatic emphasis of akrasia from its sense as moral darkness

and sin to the role it plays in textual production. Akrasia turns from expressing personal failing to expressing the poetic promise that inheres in interrogating the opaque self.

The poet’s moment of blindness brought about by the “usurpation” of imagination in Book VI participates in this imagery of darkness. Wordsworth’s “unfathered vapour” which came “Before the eye and progress of my song,” and which causes him to be “lost as in a cloud,” recalls Augustine’s “dark cloud” [caligo], which “came between me and the clear skies of your truth.” Indeed, Wordsworth’s cloud is presumably caused by a specific poetic faculty called “imagination,” but if we consider the broader context of Book VI, we see that this word reflects more generally his perennial mental tendency to remove himself from reality. Indeed, if we backtrack from this moment in Book VI to consider his journey to the Alps and the cause for that journey, we see that the broader theme of the book is indeed nothing other than procrastination.

The walk to the Alps is arguably the most well known in Wordsworth’s corpus, and is frequently read as a rehabilitative journey, a synecdoche for the broader journey of The Prelude itself. However, in what tends to go unacknowledged, it was prompted by a state of indolence and is explicitly described as a strategy of procrastination. “An open slight / Of college cares and study was the scheme,” he tells us (VI, 342-43): he walks in order to escape his studies at Cambridge.
Indeed, as Book VI begins, young Wordsworth finds himself in a condition almost exactly like that of Wordsworth the poet in Book One. He finds himself in a state of excessive freedom or leisure, which then becomes a form of bondage:

But let me add at once that now, the bonds
Of indolent and vague society
Relaxing in their hold, I lived henceforth
More to myself, read more, reflected more,
Felt more, and settled daily into habits
More promising. …

Escaping the “indolent and vague society” of Cambridge leads him to another form of indolence, one best described as resulting from an “over-love / Of freedom”:

... I was detached
Internally from academic cares,
From every hope of prowess and reward,
And wished to be a lodger in that house
Of letters, and no more…
... This bastard virtue—rather let it have
A name it more deserves, this cowardise—
Gave treacherous sanction to that over-love
Of freedom planted in me from the very first,
And indolence, by force of which I turned
From regulations even of my own
As from restraints and bonds. (VI, 20-48)

Escaping the “bonds” of Cambridge’s “indolent and vague society,” and living more to himself, leads him to new “restraints and bonds” that come from “regulations… of [his] own.” In hoping that self-removal from the social world will cause a new freedom, young Wordsworth thus plays into the same false belief that motivated the poet in Book I, who, leaving the city, hoped he could undertake his grand “philosophic song.”
Likewise, the young Wordsworth of Book VI then takes on a strategy that replicates the strategy of Book I – a strategy of self-beguiling, in which he directs his energies and attention to an easier and more manageable task. In this case, young Wordsworth’s procrastinatory exercise is an excursion to the Alps. Indeed, much like in Book I, the act of walking allows our protagonist to conceal his sense of agency, to proceed by regarding himself as one who “will be wherever he will be” rather than as one who “wills.” His walking indeed mimics the causation of rivers, breezes, streams, gales, birds, and fish:

Upon the bosom of the gentle Soane
We glided forward with the flowing stream:
Swift Rhone, thou wert the wings on which we cut
Between thy lofty rocks... (VI, 385-388)

...Like a breeze
Or sunbeam over your domain I passed
In motion without pause. (VI, 605-607)

...Finally, whate’er
I saw, or heard, or felt, was but a stream
That flowed into a kindred stream, a gale
That helped me forwards, did administer
To grandeur and to tenderness... (VI, 672-676)

I seemed to move among them as a bird
Moves through the air, or as a fish pursues
Its business in its proper element. (VI, 697-699)

Just as he “wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o’er vales and hills,” Wordsworth characterizes walking as if it were a non-human process, continuous with
the ongoing flow as in Schelling’s vitalist philosophy. But of course in thinking of himself like a stream, a breeze, a bird, a fish, a cloud, he can thus avoid thinking of himself as a person—a person with responsibilities and goals. He wants to characterize himself as going “where I will” in the sense of “wherever I will go,” rather than “where I will myself to go.”

As we recognize the ongoing dilatory and “self-beguiling” nature of his walk, the “Imagination!” epiphany appears with renewed clarity. The “greatness” of imagination reflects the “awful promise” of escaping one’s studies at Cambridge. Wordsworth indeed finds that the moment of poetry, like the moment of an excursion to the Alps, is not merely a way of wasting time: for to waste time is also a way to find time or to make time. This celebratory moment then holds up the triumphal qualities of the literary as a site of “something evermore about to be” that radically undoes the sense of temporality that had weighed him down at Cambridge.

But this reading is insufficient, for the poet remains—in Book I, in Book VI, in Book XIII—heavily aware of time and the sense of waste. The liberatory qualities of this revelation are paired with the sense of disappointment that follows directly from the poet’s failure to live up to what he set out for himself. Embracing a radically different temporality is knowingly a strategy of putting off, taking a deliberate holiday from the demands that will surely and unavoidably return after the holiday comes to an end as ________________.

all holidays do. The emphasis on “Effort, and expectation, and desire, / And something
evermore about to be” reflects not only a celebration, but also a recognition of
unachieved promises – the exact unachieved promises that frame Book VI and, in Book
I, frame The Prelude more broadly.

With the end of The Prelude in Book XIII (Book XIV in the 1850 version), the poet
reflects this sense of unachievement through the same kind of ironic presentation of
seeming success. The poet appears to project confidence that he has been reinvigorated
and is prepared to tackle the grander task of The Recluse:

...We have reached
The time, which was our object from the first,
When we may (not presumptuously, I hope)
Suppose my powers so far confirmed, and such
My knowledge, as to make me capable
Of building up a work that should endure. ([1805], XIII, 273-278)

He is expressing confidence not only that he is capable of writing the great work, but
also that this long task of writing The Prelude will “pay off.” Yet how sincerely do we
read this passage? Is the poem indeed a work of rehabilitation and triumph? Is it a way
of exemplifying to Coleridge the mode of successful work and manly labor?

A comparison with the 1850 version can help suggest why not. Forty-five years
later, after Wordsworth’s many revisions, he indeed does not alter the basic sense of this
passage:

...we have reached
The time (our guiding object from the first)
When we may, not presumptuously, I hope,
Suppose my powers so far confirmed, and such
My knowledge, as to make me capable
Of building up a Work that shall endure. ([1850], XIV, 306-311)

Notably, despite having failed to complete *The Recluse*, Wordsworth chose not to alter the stated goal of *The Prelude*. There are some corrections, which do not substantially change the meaning of the passage. Yet what corrections there are only seem to ironically emphasize the failure between what the poems hoped to achieve and what it did. He removes the parentheses from “not presumptuously I hope,” as if to further emphasize his insufficiency; additionally, he replaces the second-last word “should” with the rather more confident “shall.” He chose to allow this poem to remain as a work of disappointment, openly interpretable as a means of deferral, as a form of delay, and as a waste of time.

In this way, the poem does not finish its journey, but rather achieves a knowing capacity to display its own incapacity. The poet thrives as weak-willed, for it opens a space for representing what is unfixable about both the self and poetic expression. *The Prelude* then invites procrastination just as it performs it. It exemplifies a mock reality in which a reader can be immersed instead of coping with problems in the “real world.” Reading, as Coleridge found, becomes a form of displacement, a way of redirecting energies towards the mock world of someone else’s troubles rather dealing with one’s own. Coleridge could not help but see that, in its sense of possibility and waste, poetry
could be something vital in its unimportance, representing and embodying the idea of a guilty pleasure.
4. Indolence and the Disinterested Aesthetic in the Poetry of Keats

By recasting Wordsworth’s poetry as concerned, not with authorial strength and wise passiveness, but with procrastination and weakness of will, we are able to see how the conceptual difficulties of human agency prompt his indirect syntactical mode and self-interrogating poetics. It is with the poetry of John Keats, however, that we find a more explicit engagement with the problem of indolence, and specifically indolence’s relation to aesthetic creation and contemplation. Keatsian criticism has long associated his sensual effete performatives with his self-stated struggles with “delicious, diligent indolence.” 1 The centrality of indolence to Keats has been most thoroughly examined by Willard Spiegelman, who observes that Keats’s paradoxical passiveness “serves as an equivalent to Kant’s notion of the aesthetic as ‘purposefulness without purpose.’” 2 This chapter builds upon that observation, and argues that Keats contributes to the modern conception of “disinterested aesthetics” through his specifically modern version of indolence. Indeed, in Keats, the trope of akrasia or weakness of will changes; it discards the older sense as a personal crisis, which continued to motivate the writing of Sterne, Rousseau, Godwin, and Wordsworth. Far more explicitly with Keats, due to his particular self-conscious and, as I shall argue, “belated” stance, weakness of will

2 Spiegelman, 94.
represents the generative beginning to any aesthetic enterprise. Keats presents a culmination of the separation of the realm of “the literary” or “the aesthetic” as a category that thrives in contradiction, non-explanation, failure, and guilt.

In order to recognize what is distinctly “modern” or “belated” about Keats’s approach to the trope of indolence, we can consider a collection of letters dated May 1817. He writes to B. R. Haydon about his miserably unproductive condition:

….I cannot write while my spirit is fe[a]vered [sic] in a contrary direction and I am now sure of having plenty of it this Summer—At this moment I am in no enviable Situation—I feel that I am not in a Mood to write any to day; and it appears that the loss [sic] of it is the beginning of all sorts of irregularities... truth is I have a horrid Morbidity of Temperament which has shown itself at intervals—it is I have no doubt the greatest Enemy and stumbling block I have to fear—I may even say that it is likely to be the cause of my disappointment.³

In descriptions we may find all too familiar by now, Keats characterizes his “mood” and “temperament” as at odds with his intent to write, and a deficiency of unified attention with which to accomplish his stated purpose. In a letter a few days later to his publishers John Taylor and James Augustus Hessey he continues these descriptions:

I went day by day at my Poem for a Month at the end of which time the other day I found my Brain so overwrought that I had neither Rhyme nor reason in it... instead of Poetry I have a swimming in my head—And feel all the effects of a Mental Debauch—lowness of Spirits—anxiety to go on without the Power to do so which does not at all tend to my ultimate Progression...⁴

---

³ Keats, Letters: Volume One, no. 26, 142.
⁴ Ibid., no. 27, 146.
Keats’s formulations here may strike us as particularly familiar within the context of the Romantics. Keats’s “anxiety to go on without the Power to do us” recalls Coleridge’s “I may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within” or his later reflections in the *Biographia Literaria* that he suffered from “constitutional indolence, aggravated into languor by ill-health; the accumulating embarrassments of procrastination; the mental cowardice, which is the inseparable companion of procrastination…” Likewise, we recall how Wordsworth “seek[s] repose / In indolence from vain perplexity,” continuing, “Far better never to have heard the name / Of zeal and just ambition than to live / Thus baffled by a mind that every hour / Turns recreant to her task…” Similarly, Keats construes his constitution as divided and ultimately weak, recalling the formulation of weakness of will prominently featured in *Hamlet* whose “native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o’er” until he “lose[s] the name of action.”

Yet while Wordsworth and Coleridge’s formulations of weakness of will recall *Hamlet*, Keats’s formulation stand out as particularly “borrowed.” This becomes rather more explicit in a later letter about indolence sometime between February and May 1819 addressed to his brother George Keats and sister-in-law Georgiana, which prepares

---

some of the thoughts that would be included in his “Ode on Indolence” composed later that year:

This morning I am in a sort of temper indolent and supremely careless: I long after a stanza or two of Thompson’s [sic] Castle of indolence—My passions are all alseep [sic] from my having slumbered till nearly eleven and weakened the animal fibre all over me to a delightful sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness—if I had teeth of pearl and the breath of lillies I should call it langour—but as I am … I must call it Laziness—In this state of effeminacy the fibres of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body, and to such a happy degree that pleasure has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown. Neither Poetry, nor Ambition, nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me; they seem rather like three figures on a greek vase—a Man and two women—whom no one but myself could distinguish in their disguise.\footnote{John Keats, The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821: Volume Two, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958), no. 159, 78-79.}

This passage reflects a distinct self-consciousness about the way his articulations on indolence borrow from earlier works of literature. Instead of writing, he “long[s] after” reading an already completed work that depicts indolence—namely, James Thomson’s “Castle of Indolence.” Further, as he considers the poetic subjects he wishes to engage—poetry, ambition, love—they appear to him not as immanent to his own experience or from his own inward reflection of himself, but rather as “figures on a greek vase” – forms that have already been sketched and have already be given representational form.

In this sense, Keats’s indolence can be distinguished from Wordsworth’s or Coleridge’s, for it appears especially—to borrow Byron’s pejorative description of Keats’s poetry—“second-hand.” From John Bayley to Christopher Ricks to Marjorie
Levinson, a notable tradition of Keats scholarship has understood his poetry through its appropriative style. Levinson observes how Keats’s “Homer was Chapman, his Dante was Cary, his Provençal ballads translations in an edition of Chaucer, his Boccaccio Englished”; indeed, a dominant picture we have of Keats today is that of a poet at a “mediated” distance from the poetic themes that absorbed his Romantic predecessors and contemporaries. Indeed, we tend to see him as a more “modern” if not “postmodern” figure who relates to his poetic subjects through already-commodified genres and forms. In this sense, Keats’s formulations of indolence carry particular significance for us, for they reflect not merely a “weak will” in its older sense that owes to figures including St. Augustine, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth; they also reflect and are produced by a certain discomfort in the authority of inner experience.

Thus in the letter to George and Georgiana Keats, we not only see indolence as a state of feeling disembodied—will detached from purpose—but that the poet is disembodied from the trope of indolence itself. Poetry, Ambition, Love pass by as flat, two-dimensional images: even “Ambition” here is not something that Keats experiences as his, but something he recognizes as from afar. They are given names, as if they are

---


characters from another poem; he goes on to give his condition a name: “I should call it langour … I must call it Laziness.” As these poetic subjects appear for him as from a distance—flat and already articulated by literary tradition—they fail to have the kind of direct efficacy on Keats’s inspiration. He does not even know how to feel his indolence as his own.

By centering on Keats’s poetry that engages indolence—most notably, *Endymion* (1817), “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” (1817) and the “Ode on Indolence” (1819)—we can discern a historically new depiction of an akratic state in “second-hand indolence.” Keats’s distinct self-consciousness regarding the conflicted nature of indolence indeed liberates him as a poet, so that weakness of will no longer becomes the originary dramatic tension or personal struggle, but the chief symbol of aesthetics itself. Indeed, by centering on Keats’s mediated relation to agency, we are able to discern Keats’s central role in the defense of aesthetic production as “disinterested” – undergone without “any individuality, any determined Character….“10 For akrasia in this new model is an exemplification of the limits of “individuality,” “character,” and the very prospect of autonomous authorship. In this sense, Keats’s poetry—unlike the narratives of Sterne, Rousseau, Godwin, and Wordsworth—is in no way an “account” of a self. Rather, poetry may symbolize or index the irreducible conflicts of the self without even a preliminary attempt at explaining or “accounting for” it: in its production of a

10 Keats, *Letters: Volume One*, no. 43, 184-85
“manifest image of man,” it thoroughly and self-consciously distinguishes itself from any “scientific image of man.”

The rich relations between “disinterested agency” and “disinterested aesthetics” come through particularly powerfully in Keats when we consider the profound influence on Keats of the writing by William Hazlitt. Inflecting the thought of Immanuel Kant, Hazlitt’s philosophical critiques of Enlightenment models of action in his Essay on the Principles of Action (1805) informed his writing on aesthetics as reflecting a occupying the state of indeterminacy and contradiction. We can see in Keats’s portrayals of his indolence elements of Hazlitt’s contemplations on human actions, and we can see then in both how encountering the limitations of systematic models for explaining human agency helps illuminate the representational value of “aesthetic” writing. Thus Hazlitt’s celebration of “disinterested aesthetics” and Keats’s notion of “negative capability” come directly out of their recognitions of the limits of causal explanation when it comes to human agency.

4.1 Endymion

With Keats’s first years as a poet, we find in his writing a relation to indolence that reflects a certain optimism about his ability to rise to the occasion, in this sense responding to indolence in a way that rings familiar from Wordsworth. Like in Wordsworth’s Prelude, in poems like “To My Brother George” (composed in August 1816) and “Sleep and Poetry” (composed around November or December 1816), the
problem of languor or listlessness seems curable by writing itself. “To My Brother George” begins, “Full many a dreary hour have I past, / My brain bewilder’d, and my mind o’ercast / With heaviness…” (1-3), then continues to demonstrate the reinvigorative power of poetry itself: “But there are times, when those that love the bay, / Fly from all sorrowing far, far away; / A sudden glow comes on them, nought they see / In water, earth, or air, but poesy” (19-22).¹¹ In “Sleep and Poetry,” likely composed in December of 1816, Keats dwells on the various qualities of deadening sleep, and sets his agenda to embark on the project of writing: “O for ten years, that I may overwhelm / Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed / That my own soul has to itself decreed” (96-98). This line from “Sleep and Poetry” reflects a confidence that “decreeing” leads to “doing.” Reminiscent of Wordsworth, who wrote that he was determined to “brace [him]self to some determined aim” by writing The Prelude,¹² Keats repeatedly construes poetry as a kind of savior or remedy for slackened spirits and a method for strengthening one’s sense of self.

Keats encounters the limits of this rehabilitative notion of poetry in his long poem Endymion, which he wrote over the course of 1817. He describes in his letters how he conceives of Endymion as a solution to his indolent state: it will be, he writes, “a test, a trial of my Powers of Imagination and chiefly of my invention which is a rare thing

¹¹ All quotes from Keats’s poetry are drawn from John Keats, The Poems of John Keats, ed. Miriam Allott (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1970), and line numbers will be provided parenthetically in the body of the text.
¹² Wordsworth, The Prelude, (1, 124).
indeed—by which I must make 4000 Lines of one bare circumstance and fill them with Poetry.”13 This self-assignment again recalls Wordsworth’s aim to embark on his “philosophic song” that would be The Recluse, and does so by forcing himself to sit down and write The Prelude.14

Like in the case of Wordsworth, Keats seeks a way to spur himself into poetic productivity by compelling himself to write Endymion. Yet Keats’s goal is similar to Wordsworth’s in that it is an attempt to overcome his own indolence. As Walter Jackson Bate has written, Keats’s feat of composition marks an expression of sheer force of will. “In this act of will sustained for seven months,” as Walter Jackson Bate has written in his biography of Keats, “we have something almost unique in modern poetry.”15 The task of making “4000 Lines of one bare circumstance and fill[ing] them with Poetry” indeed determines from the outset that the poem will be mostly “filler.”

Yet while Wordsworth attempted to overcome his creative lassitude by “shap[ing] out / Some tale from [his] own heart, more near akin / To [his] own passions and habitual thoughts,”16 Keats does not find that he possesses the authority or personal experiences to write “from his own heart.” The poem begins “where old Chaucer used to sing” (134), indicating from the outset (as in his first known poem “Imitation of

---

14 Walter Jackson Bate describes the “weeks of difficulty in getting started in Endymion, the nervous trips from the Isle of Wight back to Margate, then Canterbury, then home to Hampstead.” Walter Jackson Bate, John Keats (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1963), 180.
15 Bate, 193.
16 Wordsworth, The Prelude (1, 220-22).
Spenser”) that he is residing in the worlds of other poets. Indeed, Endymion is not a particular; he is always analogized to familiar tropes. His indolence is described at first not through his own experience but through the eyes of others: “A smile was on his countenance; he seem’d / To common lookers on, like one who dream’d / Of idleness in groves Elysian” (175-77), and he is recurrently described by citing recognizable “types” or “kinds”: “in the selfsame fixed trance he kept, / Like one who on the earth had never stept— / Aye, even as dead-still as a marble man, / Frozen in that old tale Arabian” (403-6). As John Bayley wrote, “Even at its most unpropitious, Endymion is packed with borrowed life.”

Bayley’s word “packed” aptly characterizes the poem’s character as a grab-bag repository for poetic imagery. Indeed, Keats’s self-stated task to make “4000 Lines of one bare circumstance and fill them with Poetry” clarifies the peculiar conception of poetry assumed by Endymion – namely, poetry as “filler.” Despite the common appraisal of Keats’s poetry in terms of its “economy... of phrase,” “Endymion,” as Walter Jackson Bate writes, “is easily one of the most diluted poems Keats wrote. In fact, it is one of the most diluted poems in a century often given to poetic dilution.” Indeed, as we read, we find continually the attempt to prolong the imagery, to add descriptions onto “one bare

---

17 Bayley, 102. It is in the “badness” of “Endymion” that Bayley finds Keats’s unique strength: “when he tries to express reality he becomes abstract; when he turns towards the discipline of art he becomes Parnassian,” adding that “with Keats the processes of ‘maturity’ are those of real impoverishment and sacrifice, of muting and muffling.” Ibid., 105 and 112.
18 Bate, 171.
circumstance” – qualities that characterize Byron’s descriptions of Keats as “vulgar” and what a contemporary critic like Thomas McFarland calls (more positively) the “too much-ness” of Keats.¹⁹ To read any stanza is indeed to experience poetic filler: at each line, the aim is to produce satisfactory imagery and rhythm as well as to produce more reasons to produce yet more lines. To take one out of countless examples, the following is part of the 170-line introduction describing a procession that precedes the entrance of Endymion:

Leading the way, young damsels danced along,
Bearing the burden of a shepherd song;
Each having a white wicker over brimm’d
With April’s tender younglings: next, well trimm’d,
A crowd of shepherds with as sunburnt looks
As may be read of in Arcadian books;
Such as sat listening round Apollo’s pipe,
When the great deity, for earth too ripe,
Let his divinity o’er-flowing die
In music, through the vales of Thessaly:
Some idly trailed their sheep-hooks on the ground,
And some kept up a shrilly mellow sound
With ebon-tipped flutes: close after these,
Now coming from beneath the forest trees,
A venerable priest full soberly,
Begirt with ministring looks: alway his eyes
Stedfast upon the matted turf he kept,
And after him his sacred vestments swept.
From his right hand there swung a vase, milk-white,
Of mingled wine, out-sparkling generous light… (135-54)

Each line offers new opportunities for “poetry,” whether Chaucerian, Spenserian, or Thomsonian. The “crowd of shepherds” not only have “sunburnt looks,” but are

compared to representations in “Arcadian books,” representations further described in four more lines. The character of the “venerable priest” is depicted through his “eyes,” “vestments,” and “hand” for no discernible purpose except to fill yet six more lines. Passages like this reflect the style that Byron would disparagingly describe as “vulgar,” and which twentieth-century critics have called (more positively) the “too much-ness” of Keats.

Within *Endymion*, Keats’s excess thus reads as a form of overcompensation for his indolence, and reflects an assumption that over-stimulation corrects for a dearth of inspiration.\(^\text{20}\) This assumption is indeed mirrored in the character of indolent Endymion himself. Much like the descriptions of himself we see in Keats’s letters above, Endymion has lost “the power” (or as Hamlet says, “the name”) “of action.” Formerly a war hero, Endymion has become addicted to seeking after the visage of Cynthia with whom he has fallen in love. He tells his sister Peona:

\[
\begin{align*}
I, \text{ who, for very sport of heart, would race} \\
\text{With my own steed from Araby; pluck down} \\
\text{A vulture from his towery perching; frown} \\
\text{A lion into growling, loth retire—} \\
\text{To lose, at once, all my toil breeding fire,} \\
\text{And skin thus low! but I will ease my breast} \\
\text{Of secret grief, here in this bowery nest. (533-539)}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{20}\) Bate, 193.
Endymion enlists his sister’s assistance to “help to stem the ebbing sea / Of weary life” (709-10). As Endymion says to Peona regarding Cynthia:

...yet she had,
Indeed, locks bright enough to make me mad;
And they were simply gordian’d up and braided,
Leaving, in naked comeliness, unshaded,
Her pearl round ears, white neck, and orbed brow;
The which were blended in, I know not how,
With such a paradise of lips and eyes,
Blush-tinted cheeks, half smiles, and faintest sighs,
That, when I think thereon, my spirit clings
And plays about its fancy, till the stings
Of human neighbourhood envenom all. (612-22)

Endymion’s proliferation of sensual language—“bright locks,” “white neck,” “blush-tinted cheeks”—reflects his exhausted interior. In this sense, Endymion functions as a metonymy for Keats himself.

While the determination to “brace [one]self to some determined aim” helped Wordsworth approach The Prelude as a restorative writing enterprise, for Keats, who approached poetry as a borrower, the forced endeavor resulted in further exhaustion and embarrassment. In the Preface to the poem that he would later write in 1818, he admits, “the reader… must soon perceive great inexperience, immaturity, and every

---

21 Spiegelman puts Endymion in the context of Keats’s medical training and knowledge of modern physiology: exhibiting “the classic symptoms of nervous fever, Endymion is a melancholic whose physical condition results from, as well as symbolizing, his diseased mind.” Spiegelman, 101.

22 Bate writes, “[o]ne use of [Endymion] was confessional: it was used partly for self-expression in the hope of making a step in self-understanding. Hence Endymion was inevitably a victim of conflicting desires. This pallid pilgrim was merely reflecting uncertainties in Keats himself—uncertainties that were to remain with him until the end. No quick, doctrinaire solution to them could satisfy Keats’s honesty.” Bate, 191-192.
error denoting a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished.”

Keats’s “inexperience” and “immaturity” can be seen not merely in his “error[s],” but in the very idea of this “feverish attempt” – the very notion that indolence ought to be fought and that he must (as he put it in “Sleep and Poetry”) “overwhelm / Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed / That my own soul has to itself decreed.” Keats would not repeat this method of composition for the remainder of his life; as Thomas McFarland has written, the approach to Endymion from “a priori design was absolutely at variance with [the] understanding of the proper genesis of poetry” that Keats is most well known for.

Over the course of 1817 and over the next several years, Keats’s thinking on the “proper genesis of poetry” would indeed evolve alongside his changing conceptions of indolence and human agency.

### 3.2 The Influence of William Hazlitt and “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles”

Keats’s definition of negative capability is often traced to the conceptual architecture of William Hazlitt. The ability for a poet to be “in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” reflects what Hazlitt calls the ability for a great poet to be “nothing in himself.” This Hazlittian conception is most famously displayed in his essay on “the great poets,” with its particular emphasis on

---

23 Keats, *The Poems of John Keats*, 102. Ricks writes memorably about the embarrassment staged here, his embarrassment by *Endymion* and “by his self-inflicted obligation to dissociate himself from the poem even while publishing it (such conflicting impulses are endemic in embarrassment).” Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 11.

24 McFarland, 126-127.
Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s primary characteristic is not “intensity” (as for Chaucer),
“remoteness” (as for Spenser), or “elevation” (as for Milton), but rather “every thing”; he
is able to be multiple things at one and the same time:

The striking peculiarity of Shakspeare’s [sic] mind was its generic quality, its power of
communication with all other minds – so that it contained a universe of thought and
feeling within itself, and had no one peculiar bias, or exclusive excellence more than
another… He was the least of an egotist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in
himself; but he was all that others were, or that they could become. He had not only in
himself the germs of every faculty and feeling, but he could follow them by
anticipation… He had ‘a mind reflecting ages past,’ and present:—all the people that ever
lived are there. There was no respect of persons with him. His genius shone equally on
the evil and on the good, on the wise and the foolish, the monarch and the beggar… He
turned the globe round for his amusement, and surveyed the generations of men, and the
individuals as they passed… He had only to think of any thing in order to become that
thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it.25

As David Bromwich has observed, it is not merely Hazlitt’s ideas that influenced Keats,
but his idioms: “Keats understood Hazlitt’s ideas till they became second nature to him;
but the ideas were always inseparable from the tact of expression; Hazlitt’s power, in
every way, was communicated.”26 Thus Keats would very similarly write about “Men of
Genius” that they “are great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of
neutral intellect—by they have not any individuality, any determined Character.…”27

Surrey Institution. London: Taylor and Hessey, 1818. 91-93.
bold enough to call on him by December 1818. … No other encounter between poet and critic has been so
fortunate for literature.” Ibid., 367-69. For an extensive discussion of what Keats’s “negative capability”
owes to Hazlitt, see Bromwich, 374-79. Duncan Wu stages Keats’s and Hazlitt’s first encounter in November
27 Keats, Letters: Volume One, no. 43, 184-85
However, while a great deal of scholarship has interrogated the connections between Hazlitt and Keats in aesthetic and poetic theory, there is less work on what Keats learned from Hazlitt’s extensive philosophical writing on human agency, action, and the will. One exception is the work of Jacques Khalip, who has investigated how Hazlitt’s notion of “disinterest” informs a broader “ethics of lyric anonymity” that we find expressed in Keats’s “negative capability.” Khalip, however, does not consider the Essay in relation to Keats’s conceptions of indolence. Willard Spiegelman, on the other hand, discusses Keats’s indolence, though not by considering his indebtedness to Hazlitt, but rather through Keats’s experience studying physiology as a medical student: Keats, Spiegelman writes, “would have heard his lecturers at Guy’s Hospital discuss the mental form of hypochondriasis in melancholy, among the causes of which are ‘indolent inactive life’ as well as ‘intense study.’”

For Hazlitt and Keats alike, “disinterested” describes not merely the chief quality of poetic genius, but the natural condition of human agency – the ability for a person to be oriented in several directions and hold contrary intentions and beliefs at one and the same time. As Bromwich has written, “A disinterested investigator, a disinterested judge, a disinterested historian, need not be detached. He may be immersed in a question and, having started on one side, conclude his engagement on the opposite

---

one—or even on the same. What is unimaginable is that he should remain strictly neutral…” Hazlitt uses this word earliest on the first page of his Essay on the Principles of Human Action, published in 1805; the aim of the essay, he writes, to demonstrate that “the human mind is naturally disinterested,” in which “disinterested” does not mean “not interested,” but rather a position of abeyance and ability to attend to several inclinations simultaneously.31

Hazlitt’s Essay is intensely schematic and diligent in argumentative style. Perhaps for this reason little literary scholarship has connected it to Keats’s poetry and thought, for Keats certainly did not read Hazlitt or listen to his lectures with argumentative aims in mind; he was not trained as a philosopher and did not intimately know the work of those whom Hazlitt was critiquing – primarily Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Helvetius, and Hartley. Yet Keats clearly found Hazlitt to be a source of rich ideas and powerful language. The Essay presents a prolonged argument against the mechanistic and necessitarian models of human action that dominated Enlightenment thought. It centers especially on the premises of Hobbes, which also became the premises of the French materialists and British associationists; these philosophers understand action to operate by physical causal laws, and which thus imply that all human action is necessary selfish. For Hobbes in particular, action is determined by desire, and desire is

30 Bromwich, “Genealogy,” 64.
grounded in self-preservation; action is thus always caused by selfishness. Countering
this framework, Hazlitt stresses (much like his British contemporary Coleridge and
German predecessor Immanuel Kant) that philosophy cannot at the outset presume that
the human frame is reducible to mechanistic laws; it will be impossible to “ever arriv[e]
at [truth],” he writes, “if at the outset we completely cover our own feelings with maps
of the brain, dry skulls, musical chords, pendulums, and compasses.” Hazlitt argues
that individuals do not merely instinctively re-act to stimuli; rather, in order to be
directed to a future action, they must have the capacity for imaginative abstraction. A
future good, he writes, “can only affect me as an imaginary idea, or an idea of truth.”
Because we imaginatively abstract about the future, we are capable not only of acting for
the good of ourselves, but also of acting for the good of others, in whose minds we can
take an interest: “I can only abstract myself from my present being and take an interest

---

32 Ibid., 176-77. For precise and thoughtful distinctions between Hazlitt’s philosophy of thought and action
and those of other philosophers—namely, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hartley,
Helvetius, Coleridge, and Kant—see W. P. Albrecht, Hazlitt and the Creative Imagination (Lawrence: The
University of Kansas Press, 1965), 1-28. The primary difference from Coleridge rests in Hazlitt’s dependence
upon empiricism; in this sense “he never thought of Coleridge’s transcendentalism as anything but
nonsense,” and though he looked into Kant he grew convinced that “Kant’s system ‘was a wilful and
monstrous absurdity.’” Albrecht, 5. On Hartley, Albrecht writes, “For Hartley, association coalesces the
pleasures of imagination with those of the moral sense; and moral action results when these pleasures
activate the ‘set of compound vibratiumcles’ that Hartley terms ‘the will.’ For Hazlitt, however, the
imagination has a more dominant role. It not only supplies vivid images that enter into the idea of a ‘good’
but charges them with habitual thought and feeling to ‘create’ the sympathetic object of voluntary action.”
Ibid., 24.
33 Hazlitt, Essay, 137.
in my future being in the same sense and manner, in which I can go out of myself entirely and enter into the minds and feelings of others."\(^{34}\)

For Hazlitt, this capacity for imaginative abstraction crucially allows the ability to compare and contrast – a capacity that would not be possible if the mind were sheer mechanism reacting to strictly linear motives and a solely efficient mode of causation.

“To perceive the relation of one thing to another it is not only necessary that the ideas of the things themselves should co-exist… but that they should be perceived to co-exist by the same conscious understanding, or that their different actions should be felt at the same instant by the same being in the strictest sense.”\(^{35}\) Hazlitt’s essential point here is that humans are inherently capable of holding different and indeed contrasting ideas at one and the same time. In formulations that strikingly anticipate his aesthetic theory and the reflections by Keats, Hazlitt declares: “I am not the same thing, but many different things.”\(^{36}\)

Hazlitt’s philosophical dispute with Enlightenment ontologies of action thus furnish him with a vocabulary for aesthetics that he would develop in his essays and lectures on Shakespeare’s genius, and which would arise in English-language

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 113-14. Bate writes, “In his Principles of Human Action, Hazlitt went much further than Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments. His hope was to show that imaginative sympathy was not a mere escape hatch from the prison of egocentricity, but something thoroughgoing, something indigenous and inseparable from all activities of the mind. Sympathetic identification takes place constantly—even if only with ourselves and our own desired future.” Bate, 256; see 256-59 for fuller discussion. Duncan Wu recounts Godwin’s centrality in the publication of the Essay. Wu, 101-106. As Wu and various other of Hazlitt’s biographers have recounted, the Essay was not well received upon publication. See also Stanley Jones, Hazlitt: A Life (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 18-21, and A. C. Grayling, The Quarrel of the Age: The Life and Times of William Hazlitt (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholas, 2000), 92-94.

\(^{35}\) Hazlitt, Essay, 201-2 (emphasis mine).

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 101-3.
translations of Kant’s aesthetics. Indeed, Hazlitt’s discussion alters how we think about Keats’s phrase “negative capability,” which indeed might just as well describe Hazlitt’s conception of human agency. The phrase indicates the human ability to be endowed with agency—“capability”—but also its irreducibility to concrete deterministic causation and the ability to hold back “negatively” in that position of capability.

Hazlitt’s philosophical thinking then parallels agency and aesthetic in that in both cases, “disinterest” is, to quote Khalip, “the crucial term for divesting ourselves of the premise that we are fully self-possessed individuals.”37 This connection between the disinterested conceptions of agency and aesthetics manifests itself in Keats’s consistent parallels between agential weakness or indolence and the notion of aesthetic greatness. We find this parallel at a particularly early moment in “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” composed in February or March of 1817. This poem begins with a portrayal of the poet’s weak spirit reminiscent of Keats’s other poems on indolence to date, including “To My Brother George” and “Sleep and Poetry”; but unlike them, it shifts directions away from the self so and stages an analogy between indolence and the dizzying splendor of an aesthetic encounter. The poem’s first two lines (“My spirit is too weak—mortality /

37 Khalip, 27. We may also observe the economic conditions for both forms of disinterest – the middle-class possibility of guilty leisure and indolence, on the one hand, and the sense of social distinction implied by the “disinterested” conception of art, on the other. While, as Levinson has argued, Keats—unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge—“hadn’t the luxury for a ‘wise passiveness,’” he nonetheless—like Wordsworth and Coleridge—had the luxury of indolence. Likewise, following Pierre Bourdieu, we have come to associate the Kantian disinterested aesthetic as a mark of social distinction. See Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984), especially 11-96.
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep”) recall the opening to “To My Brother George” (“Full many a dreary hour have I past, / My brain bewilder’d, and my mind o’ercast / With heaviness…”). In both we have the “brain” or “spirit” that is “weigh[ed]” down “heavily” or “with heaviness,” made heavier by the awareness of the passage of time, indicated by the prospect of “mortality” or “many a dreary hour.” The weight in both cases is a result of the inherent paradox: the aspiration to work and the inability to work derive from the same source. As the poem continues through line 10, it reflects on the paradoxical qualities of agency that produce a sense of struggle and confusion with its unresolvable contraries:

My spirit is too weak—mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.
Yet ’tis a gentle luxury to weep
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep
Fresh for the opening of the morning’s eye.
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
Bring round the heart an undescribable feud; (1-10)

Multiple contradictions are contained in the poet’s weak-willed condition. He is capable of imagining his lofty imaginings of “pinnacle[s] and steep[s],” but they in turn tell him he “must die.” His heaviness is a burden, but it is simultaneously a “gentle luxury.” His “glories of the brain” are able to energize him, but they are “dim-conceived.” Together these contraries bring about “an undescribable feud,” a clash that he cannot articulate.
As he writes in a follow-up poem to Haydon, “Forgive me, Haydon, that I cannot speak / Definitively on these mighty things” (1-2).

Yet from lines 11 forward, the poem no longer centers on the poet; there is no more mention of “[m]y spirit” or “I.” The undescrivable feud is introduced not as a problem to be resolved, but as an analogy for the feud involved in contemplating the Elgin marbles:

So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old time—with a billowy main—
A sun—a shadow of a magnitude. (11-14)

This late introduction of the titular subject of the poem—the marbles (“these wonders”)—serves to displace the agony of the weak spirit and focus our attention outwards to objects in the world. They likewise “bring round the heart” a “most dizzy pain,” for they also contain contradictory qualities that place the viewer in a disoriented and unresolved stance. The marbles “mingl[e]” the “Grecian grandeur with the rude / Wasting of old time” – a sense of timeless greatness with the inexorable fact of passing time. The dichotomy between heaviness and time recalls the same dichotomy staged earlier in the poem, but now it carries different connotations, and turns our attention not to the self’s sense of crisis, but rather to the sublimity of the objects.

Thus not only does the poem turn from indolence to aesthetic experience, but it also turns from a poem that appears to be concerned with reinvigorating the will to a
poem that is content to leave unresolved contraries on the page. With the final lines, new contraries are placed side by side: “a billowy main” and a “sun,” on which a formless shadow is cast. Indolence has become a means for appreciating the stance of negative capability – the ability to be in “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”

4.3 The Modernity of the Disinterested Aesthetic: the “Ode on Indolence”

Keats’s 1819 “Ode on Indolence” is not only his most explicit poem on indolence, but it also offers one of his most self-conscious meditations on his status as a “second-hand” appropriative poet. Though never considered one of Keats’s “great odes” like “Ode to a Nightingale,” “Ode to a Grecian Urn,” and “To Autumn,” it is especially rich as an exploration of Keats’s belatedness. Indolence becomes Keats’s figure for capturing the poet’s exhausted condition as one who has seen too much poetry and is left feeling emptied of interior resources. The very beginning of the poem captures this belatedness through a scene we considered earlier in this essay, in which Love, Ambition, and Poesy appear as if on a Greek vase (adapted from Keats’s letter to his brother George and sister-in-law Georgiana):

1
One morn before me were three figures seen,
With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced;
And one behind the other stepp’d serene,
In placid sandals, and in white robes graced:
They pass’d, like figures on a marble urn,
When shifted round to see the other side;
They came again; as when the urn once more
Is shifted round, the first seen shades return;
And they were strange to me, as may betide
With vases, to one deep in Phidian lore. (1-10)

The three poetic subjects appear not as themes that are immanent to the poet’s own experience, derived from his own reflection, memory, and imagination, but rather as two-dimensional pictures. There is a silent slow-motion quality to the scene that evokes its familiarity: these are not new figures of his own creation, but have already been represented as on an “urn” and recognizable “to one deep in Phidian lore.” They evoke blankness through their “serene” steps, “placid” sandals,” and “white” robes. The encounter is distinctly inactive: the poet does not interact with the figures, but “sees” them. Indeed, the encounter is so inactive that the stanza does not contain “I” as an active subject, but instead constructs active verbs passively (“were three figures seen”). When the urn turns both times, it “is shifted round”: the sources of inspiration notably appear to him rather than from him.

Helen Vendler brings out how the poet here is an appropriating craftsman: “He feels irrepressibly his own vocation as artificer, worker in a medium, one whose destined creations have come from their matrix… to rebuke their creator for not yet having created them. They bear, for that reason, overtones of the haunting ghost of old Hamlet rebuking his son for not yet having entered upon action.”38 Not only does the

poet view his poetic materials as flat images as might appear on an ancient urn; but the scene itself is a kind of second-hand adaptation. To follow Vendler’s suggestion, this stanza is a strange new dream-like staging of Hamlet in which the poet is neither able to be roused by the ghostly presences nor is the very writing of a Hamlet adaptation able to wake him out of his stupor.

In its soporific vision of moving figures that seem to move at a great distance from the poet, this stanza recalls a scene described by Hazlitt in an essay called “On Londoners and Country People.” This essay was eventually published in 1823 but likely included sections and ideas that were part of the lectures that Keats attended. In it, Hazlitt describes modern city life as “an endless phantasmagoria”: a place where someone is able to see everything and yet feel removed and unmoved by it all. He focuses on the lower-class cockney (in this respect responding to Blackwood’s Magazine’s characterization of Keats and Hazlitt as of the “Cockney school” of writing). The cockney witnesses the hubbub around him and yet remains “nothing in himself”:

The true Cockney… sees everything near, superficial, little, in hasty succession. The world turns round, and his head with it, like a roundabout at a fair, till he becomes stunned and giddy with the motion. Figures glide by as in a camera obscura. There is a glare, a perpetual hubbub, a noise, a crowd about him; he sees and hears a vast number of things, and knows nothing. His senses keep him alive; and he knows, inquires and cares for nothing farther. … He notices the people going to court or to a city-feast, and is quite satisfied with the show. … A real Cockney is the poorest creature in the world, the most literal, the most mechanical, and yet he too lives in a world of romance – a fairy-land of his own. … He is a shopman, and nailed all day behind the counter: but he sees
hundreds and thousands of gay, well-dressed people pass – an endless phantasmagoria – and enjoys their liberty and gaudy fluttering pride.39

Hazlitt’s piece thus depicts what Thomas Pfau has called “the exhausted interiority of the modern metropolitan subject as a direct consequence of the commodification of styles, expressive conventions, and a ubiquitous print culture.”40 Precisely like in the “Ode on Indolence,” the cockney’s outside “world turns round, and his head with it, like a roundabout at a fair... [f]igures glide by...” London in this essay evokes a modernity in which there is too much to be seen. More significantly, it is a modernity in which there are too many people doing the seeing – so many that one’s own gaze cannot be authoritative. Hazlitt’s analogy to the camera obscura becomes a useful figure with which to think about Keats’s modern disinterested stance in the “Ode on Indolence.” The camera obscura—known at the time as a small box that produces an inverted but accurate image of the outer world—is an apt figure for Hazlitt insofar as it reflects the necessarily mediated nature in which an urban citizen perceives the rush around him. The perspective through the camera obscura is an especially relevant characterization of the view of the lower-class cockney who, to paraphrase Levinson, does not have the appropriate social code, but rather sees the world through a translation or pre-established medium.

The poet of the “Ode on Indolence” indeed has seen too much. Like Hazlitt’s cockney, he observes a visual prism rotating before him, encountering what are presumably active entities endowed with life as if they are passive two-dimensional images “shifted round.” But the poet of the ode also has seen too much and finds himself overwhelmed by the repetition. Indeed, the poem repeats the image of the three figures passing by as if on a broken loop: they appear to him twice in the first stanza, and then in the third stanza, “A third time pass’d they by.” Not stopping there, the fifth stanza begins by repeating, “A third time came they by…,” as if it has forgotten that we are now on the fourth time around. Just as the cockney sees new customers each day, they may as well be all the same to him – a linear time-frame begins to be experienced like a carousel.41

The ode’s excess of imagery then causes a deadened indolence—in a sense similar to Endymion except here more self-consciously. Indeed, the deadened indolence here fosters a sense of deadening but it also fosters regeneration:

2

...Ripe was the drowsy hour;
The blissful cloud of summer-indolence
Benumb’d my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;
Pain had no sting, and pleasure’s wreath no flower.
O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense
Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness? (11-20)

41 Spiegelman discusses how the poem “mentions indolence only twice; its crisis of representation is so powerful that it circles its main subject, in much the same way that the trio of tempters circles the speaker, making faint but strongly felt demands on his attention.” Spiegelman, 93.
There is one sense of indolence here, which closes the stanza, as “nothingness”; however, as Vendler has pointed out, while “the first exploration of indolence borrows the language of death, the second… borrows that of birth. The sleep, no longer one of oblivion, is instead one of rich dreams, growing flowers, a chiaroscuro of light and shade, all that ‘information,’ … taking place in a landscape of incipient emotion…” The figure of indolence thus carries the connotation of tired excess as well as of poetic fertility.

The dominant figure for excessive indolence in the ode—and indeed in Keats’s other odes—is Summer, which brings about “summer-indolence” (16), the domain of fullness, surfeit, ripeness, and laziness. “Ode to a Nightingale” focuses on this same sense of summer as excess, which begins (again reminiscent of “To My Brother George” and “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles”) with a phrase of quintessential indolence: “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense,” and then continues to wallow in the imagery of summer. “‘Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,” stanza 1 continues, “But being too happy in thine happiness,” addressing the nightingale who “Singest of

———

42 Vendler, 26. For Vendler, the first form of indolence pre-figures what we will see in “Ode to a Nightingale,” while the second will be explored in “Ode to Psyche.” Spiegelman continues this line of interpretation: “Keats steers his path between construing passivity as the sign of listless illness and making it the initial sign of ripeness; or between will as a frenzy of morbid, active phantasms and will as a man’s healthy determination to make himself and his work.” Spiegelman, 102.
summer in full-throated ease.” Here in his state of being “too happy”—overly happy—the poem shifts in stanza 2 to Keats’s most memorable articulations of summer excess:

2
O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool’d a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
   With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
   And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
   And with thee fade away into the forest dim: (11-20)

Each line of this stanza evokes the fullness of summer that is at once deadening and a new source for life. The vintage is a beverage designed to deaden, though it is a product of countless years “in the deep delved earth,” and tasting of too much sun—“sunburnt mirth.” Lines 15 and 16 reiterate the promise of a “beaker full,” “Full of the true,” “the blushful,” and the liquid is “at the brim” and causes stains on the mouth.

In this way, Summer is distinguished from the sister-season we also frequently find in Keats’s corpus—Autumn—which tends to be associated not with indolence, but with idleness. As “To Autumn” begins, we learn that autumn is the “Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun” (2)—it is merely a friend of the ripe state we know as summer, able to “conspir[e] with him” (3). While Autumn is “careless” (14) and “with patient look” (21), Summer is Keats’s primary figure of potential. Its over-fullness reflects the problem of how to produce at a phase of peak ripeness.
The tension of summer in the “Ode on Indolence” then is in one sense the frustration of a modern poet who has taken in too much to begin anew, as in stanza 3: “I burn’d / And ached for wings, because I knew the three” (23-24). The poet here aches because he knows the wings, and yet he does not have them. However, in another sense, the tension indicates the sense of potential and germination inherent in the over-full state. Stanza 5 continues, “The morn was clouded, but no shower fell, / Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May; / The open casement press’d a new-leaved vine, / Let in the budding warmth and throstle’s lay” (45-48). The frustration of the belated and “over-full” poet is here paralleled with the clouds that do not proceed with a rain shower, the morn keeping “in her lids” “the sweet tears of May.” This excess is the gift of indolence.

As the ode ends, the poet does not wish to be rid of indolence, but rather bids “adieu” to the “three ghosts,” acknowledging without regret that “Ye cannot raise / My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass” (51-53) and asking them to “be once more / In masque-like figures on the dreamy urn” (55-56). He does not wish to be roused by lifelike images but prefers to remain at a mediated distance from Poetry, Ambition, Love, or Indolence itself. The poet opts to write as if through a camera obscura, thus reflecting the belated and over-saturated condition in which he finds himself as a poet.

By thus writing an “Ode on Indolence” which, unlike Coleridge’s “Dejection” ode, invites a spirit of languor, Keats has embraced rather than sought to correct one’s
contradictory and paradoxical human agency. He has shifted from playing the role of an anxious and unhappy Hamlet to the role of Shakespeare himself who, according to Hazlitt, “turned the globe round for his amusement, and surveyed the generations of men, and the individuals as they passed…” Keats has embraced his belatedness by luxuriating in his second-hand status and his “life of allegory,” and in so doing, has transformed the figure of weakness of will from a personal struggle to a metonymy of poetry itself.
Bibliography


Plumb, J. H. “The Commercialization of Leisure.” In Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and


—. *Julie; or, the New Héloïse*. Translated by Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché. Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 1997.


Biography

Thomas Salem Manganaro was born in Honolulu, Hawaii in March 1987 and lived in Highland Park, New Jersey from 1989 to 2005. He went to college at the University of Chicago between 2005 and 2009, where he earned a bachelors degree in Philosophy (Intensive Track) and received honors for his thesis, “The Implications of Development in Evolutionary Psychology,” advised by Professor Robert J. Richards. He also was awarded the status of Student Marshal of the College (Class of 2009). In 2010, he enrolled in the doctorate program in English at Duke University and between the years 2013 and 2016 wrote his dissertation, “Akrasia and the Aesthetic: Human Agency and the Site of Literature, 1760-1820,” under the supervision of Professor Thomas Pfau. He concurrently earned a Masters degree in 2013 as well as certificates in the programs in Philosophy, Arts, and Literature and in College Teaching. In 2015 he received the Evan Frankel dissertation completion fellowship from the Duke Graduate School. An article-length portion of the dissertation, entitled “Akrasia and the Explanation of Action in Rousseau and Sterne,” is forthcoming from the journal The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation (vol. 58.1, Spring 2017).