

Reading and the Materiality of the Future

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This paper is about the way books have made the future seem graspable despite—or, perhaps, because of—suggesting that better times to come depend on the fraught project of finding more time away from work and reproductive labour. At the furthest horizon of my argument is a sense of modernity's having been imagined as one in which working hours would decrease. As recently as 1981, Ralf Dahrendorf, then the Director of the London School of Economics, wrote confidently of the “fundamental reduction of work in modern society” as an “irreversible” trend.¹ Predictions like this have reading in view as one of the activities most closely associated with a surplus of leisure time. In their capacity to help us anticipate that possibility, books have been as significant in orienting us towards a future as they have been in linking us to the past. Today (for many reasons) the association of reading with an ideal future is weakening. Along with the kinds of loss this might represent, this juncture of media history offers us a moment for thinking about why and how the presence of the book in its concrete form—as something that incubates, something that *assumes* time to come—has played a role in the history of progressive thinking.

My focus is on texts from the 1780s and 1790s, years in which attention was easily riveted to the present, but in which a different and more democratic future could also be felt close at hand. While the most obviously revolutionary kinds of reading from this period responded to a flowering of pamphlets, an accelerated speed of print transmission, and the multiplication of literary forms—that media ecology of urgency and quantity in which Cliff Siskin, William Warner, Mary Favret, Andrew Piper, Chad Wellmon and others have found the textures of the later eighteenth century—the old fashioned book surfaced also here, I will argue, with the glow of a futuristic object. Not only did it feature as the vehicle by which old and new Republican ideas were to be carried forward to an audience still in the making—it put in people's hands a future both fully unfolded *and* yet still in wait; a future both strangely graspable and yet ambitious in its vision.

With these claims, I want to keep in mind the physical shape of the late eighteenth-century book, both in terms of the particular heft it acquired in a sea of pamphlets and as a model that set book consumption apart from the reception of serialised publication. It is, Bernard Steigler argues, constitutive of all writing—though not of analogue or digital media—“that an event typically precedes its seizure, and that the latter precedes its reception or reading.”² This is the lag that the rapid relay of news works to overcome; the distance that technical media, to use the terms of Friedrich Kittler, are able to eliminate. But to books it is native: the time of their publication and their reading diverge much more radically than in most other forms of print. And the more surely a book is made to last, the more positively that distance between the time of it being produced and that of the reader's time is expanded and affirmed. As something distinguished in medial terms from the time of the event, the time of reading can be practically and imaginatively expanded, extracted, and deferred. As such, it can be grasped as a horizon of political promise with which the book as object becomes

¹ This is cited as the epigraph to André Gorz, *Paths to Paradise: On the Liberation from Work*. Trans. Malcolm Imrie, 1985.

² Bernard Steigler, “Memory,” in W. J. T. Mitchell & Mark B. N. Hansen (eds.), *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press (2010): 66–87.

proximate in interesting ways. This, at least, is the argument that I'll make here about *A Simple Story* and *Political Justice*. For those writing in the 1790s, the future was a time in which there would be time to read. This project, while difficult to articulate *in* a book, was easily grasped *as* a book.

The first part of my argument concerns the different roles of reading in Inchbald's *A Simple Story*. The logic of reading's time coming after narrative's space is explored here through the very different appearance of books in the two halves of the novel. While unread (and unreadable) volumes feature in the first part of the novel as sources of contention in Dorriforth's relationship with Miss Milner, in relation to his daughter, reading becomes a crucial medium of contact. I read the second part of *A Simple Story* in these terms as Inchbald's stirring time back into a project that has conspicuously emptied it from books. We can think of it as the staging of a relation between the space of the book and the time of reading that has begun with their uncoupling; with reading being delayed. When Bakhtin comments on the creative work having its own chronotope, he stresses the possibility of just such a conjunction, with the narrative contained in the work being overlaid by the very different kind of event that comes with its reception:

these events take place in different times (which are marked by different durations as well) and in different places, but at the same time these two events are indissolubly united in a single but complex event that we might call the work in the totality of all its events, including the external material givenness of the work, and its text, and the world represented in the text, and the author-creator and the listener or reader...³

This narratological proposition helps explain a chronology that Inchbald makes intrinsic to her bifurcated novel. Beginning with a form of happiness on display as a woman's fully realised set of desires, she later on inserts reading as a deferral of that fulfilment, reinstating time as prior to that version of events that the first draft of the novel has already put in place. As the heroine who reads, and whose story needs reading, Matilda's role is to make the time spent with books apparent in a way it was not in her mother's ill-fated theatre of fulfilment.

My second example concerns William Godwin's more politically worked out version of this chronology. I find this largely in the connection he weaves, in his own life and in his writing, between the time given to the reading of old books and the democratic future he envisions. While Inchbald senses the problem of the female protagonist who wants to act and to read, Godwin hones in on the same problem more directly by flagging that, for most people, temporal access to books is restricted. In the present, he states:

Literature, and particularly that literature by which prejudice is superseded, and the mind strung to a firmer tone, exists only as a portion of the few. The multitude, at least in the present state of human society, cannot partake of its illuminations. For that purpose it would be necessary, that the general system of policy should become favourable, that every individual should have leisure for reasoning and reflection... (22)

³ Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist, trans. Austin: University of Texas Press (1981): 255.

Of course, he's right. As E.P. Thompson and others tell us, working hours increased enormously in the last part of the eighteenth century.⁴ All arguments about reading spreading as an Enlightenment activity, and about readers struggling with the quantities of material being printed, need to be offset against this other social historical fact: that working people were losing the hours in which they might previously have had time to read.⁵ A future such as the one Inchbald made for herself and her characters' through social withdrawal is cast in this context by Godwin as a political ambition; his is a form of democracy that depends for its vision of progress as much on the spreading of "leisure for reasoning and reflection" as on improving material enfranchisement of the new members of the public sphere.

Godwin's own reading practice also supports this idea of reading as a dedication of time that comes after and that remains distinct from events as they happen. For most of his life, he was a diligent and regular reader of the classics. He had, giped Lamb, "read more books not worth reading than any man in history."⁶ Even when he was at his busiest and most socially active, Godwin read each morning before breakfast, ring-fencing these hours for that purpose. Throughout the first part of the 1790s, he read from a Greek or Latin author each day; later in the decade, from an unfashionable range of seventeenth-century English authors.⁷ In these hours, the point of his reading was not to keep up with or absorb current thought, but rather to find a tone and a distance that became the hallmark of his own writing. Advocating the kind of "unplugged" thinking that was to be won by spending time with old texts, Godwin wrote in his 1811 *Advice to a Young American* that young men "will soon enough be plunged into the more sordid realities... I could wish that those who can afford the leisure of education, should begin with acquiring something more generous and elevated."⁸ In "Of Choice of Reading," he argues the content of books matters very little compared to the frame of mind in which they are read—one that is understood as being ideally a step back from, a space of reflection on, life.⁹

Godwin's time of reading, then, comes after the time of action. It comes after the action of the event described in a text, and it comes after the event of the text as a media. He likes old books because they make this belatedness felt. This reiterates at a more practical level what I described in relation to *A Simple Story* as the time of reading being something that could be retroactively added to the dramatic situation. It's not that Godwin was not active in the contemporary setting as essayist, speaker, theatre-goer and dramatist: he was all of these things. But the best reading as he defines it

⁴ E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism" *Past and Present* Vol. 38, 1967, 56-97, 73 and Hans-Joachim Voth, "Time Use in Eighteenth-Century London: Some Evidence from the Old Bailey" *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 57; No 2, 1997, 497-499.

⁵ I am thinking here of different strands of history and media theory relating to the management of information in the period that emphasize indexing, abridgement, "systems," collections, catalogues, disciplines and canonicity being symptoms of a burgeoning world of print culture. Recent work by Chad Wellmon, Brad Pasanek and Cliff Siskin serves as an example. Media historical scholars who think in these terms often approach the problem of there being too much to read as a spatial problem that produced spatial solutions. An equivalent form of solution to the same problem, I'm suggesting, involved no change to the media landscape as such but only the ventilating of books to the future.

⁶ Lamb reference

⁷ I am drawing here on two sources: William St Clair's *The Godwins and the Shelleys*, New York: Norton (1989) and Mark Philp's digital edition of William Godwin's Diary: <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/index2.html>

⁸ William Godwin, *Letter of Advice to a Young American on The Course of Studies it Might be Most Advantageous for Him to Pursue*. London: Printed for M.J. Godwin (1818): 11

⁹ William Godwin, "Of Choice in Reading" *The Enquirer* (1797) 134-35.

is consciously sequestered from the time spent being present in contemporary political debate. This makes Godwin an active spokesperson for the kind of chronology that Inchbald senses: one by which the purpose of revolutionary action can be understood as having nothing as urgent as the making of time for the book. Reading, which comes with this making of time, involves an affirmation of the kinds of change that a text itself may advocate long before it is read.