Quite Interesting
Godwin as a Writer of Fables

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> A tale which is compressed, dry, and told in as few words as a problem in Euclid, will never prove interesting to the mind of a child.
> —Edward Baldwin [William Godwin], 'Preface' to *Fables, Ancient and Modern* (1805)

In her study of contemporary aesthetics, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), Sianne Ngai traces the emergence of the zany, the cute and the interesting as concepts underpinning contemporary reactions to works of art (broadly understood, from poetry to photography).[1] Those categories, she argues, are central to our reactions to and conceptions of art in the context of late capitalism, because the relative affective weakness that they imply, what she calls their 'triviality', is fundamentally related to the development of capitalism, from the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries. Specifically, it is linked to the combination of aesthetic saturation and the demand for constant innovation that coincides with the growth of the capitalist literary and artistic marketplace.[2] Ngai locates the origin of one of those categories, the interesting, in the Romantic period, and in one historical process, modernisation.[3] For her, the concept emerges 'in the last decades of the eighteenth century', particularly in Germany, as 'an aesthetic of eclectic difference' that is particularly suited to the formation of a 'modern subject' who is understood to be 'a reflective, radically detached or "ironic" ego'.[4]

Although Ngai associates the interesting more specifically with Friedrich Schlegel, Diderot and the development of the novel in the long nineteenth century,[5] I argue that the interesting appears in a slightly different light as an aesthetic category particularly linked to children's literature by William Godwin in England. The Romantic genealogy of this concept thus appears to be richer than what appears in Ngai's argument. I will thus consider Ngai's discussion of the interesting with reference to William Godwin's *Fables, Ancient and Modern* (1805), the first book he wrote for his own bookselling venture, the Juvenile Library.[6] I will show that Godwin's attempt to make his fables 'interesting to the mind of a child',[7] can be fruitfully considered in light of Ngai's analysis of the concept, despite her locating the emergence of the term in a specifically German context with which Godwin was most likely not familiar.[8] However, Godwin's version of the interesting is not identical to either Ngai's or Schlegel's. It is

both more capacious than Schlegel's and more politically charged with radical potential, and I suggest, reformist intent than Ngai's. In my reading, Godwin's aesthetic of the interesting is fundamentally related to its inherent educational possibilities and linked not to the formation of a reflexive, detached, modern subject but rather to that of what might be called a 'Godwinian' modern child, who learns to become reflexive, engaged and therefore likely to be involved in the future reform of social and political institutions.

In order to show how Godwin operationalizes his aesthetic of the interesting in the *Fables, Ancient and Modern*, I begin by examining his criticism of late eighteenth-century fables, as it appears first in *The Enquirer* (1797), a collection of essays on 'education, manners, and literature', and later in the preface to the *Fables*. Taken together, these two texts show how Godwin considered fables to be potentially useful for the education of children, if only they were stripped of their faulty intent (to circulate moral commonplaces) and if their style was altered such that they could become interesting. Following these initial considerations, I examine a selection of Godwin's fables, showing that he subverted the conventions of the genres in order to make fables interesting by inserting moral ambiguity and displacing the temporality of the fable.

Scholars interested in *Fables, Ancient and Modern* such as Malini Roy, Robert Anderson and Richard Gough Thomas have all commented on the moral ambiguity of Godwin's stories.[9] According to Roy, the multi-layered morality of a story like that of 'The Poor Farmer and the Justice' anticipated the complex storytelling of children's authors like Lewis Carroll.[10] It is, in part, this narrative complexity that makes Godwin stand out as a children's author in the early nineteenth century. Anderson shares Roy's view that moral complexity and ambiguity are unusual features of children's books of the time. However, he linked this more directly to the continuation of a broader intellectual and political project that Godwin developed in the early nineteenth century: to develop the ability of individuals to use their faculty of private judgment.[11] For Anderson, the moral complexity implied by the different characterisations of the wolf between 'The Wolf and the Mastiff' and 'The Wolf and the Lamb' was designed to launch the child 'upon the sea of moral and political enquiry'.[12] Combining the study of Godwin's philosophy and pedagogy, Thomas related Godwin's educational theory with what he identifies as his profound scepticism. As Thomas shows, Godwin believed that any form of knowledge not derived from 'direct sense experience' is suspect and must therefore be examined critically. In educational terms, this implies that 'we cannot ethically indoctrinate young people into any existing practice without allowing them to examine its moral rectitude and utility for their own lives'.[13] In practice, this led Godwin to write children's books where received common knowledge would be made suspect. Introducing moral complexity and ambiguity to the fables was then part of this philosophical and educational programme.[14]

Building on these arguments and revisiting some of the abovementioned fables from the perspective of Ngai's conception of the interesting, I show that the strategies Godwin employs to question the communication of conventional

morality through fables constitute a first way in which Godwin could tap what Ngai calls the 'deeply pedagogical dimension of the interesting'.[15] This first set of strategies is then complemented by Godwin's use of fables to introduce elements that are not necessarily particularly closely linked to the story and that can only be properly grasped with additional work. This upsets the conventionally fixed temporality of the fable further by opening avenues for new enquiries. These stylistic choices thus elicit interest because they are the source of a number of more complex questions that encourage the reader to enter into an internal dialogue (in the case of moral ambiguity) or a dialogue with further works or people (in the case of additional material unrelated to the story itself). In turn, this fulfils what Godwin identifies as 'the true object of juvenile education': 'to provide, against the age of five and twenty, a mind well regulated, active, and prepared to learn'.[16]

I. 'Boring and Interesting': Godwin on Late Eighteenth-Century Fables

Godwin prefaces his *Fables, Ancient and Modern* with a scathing indictment of fable-writing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Despite having 'long though that fables were the happiest vehicle which could be devised for the instruction of children', because of the familiarity of both their 'turn of incidents' and the human and non-human characters they employ, he argues that 'these advantages are too often defeated by the manner in which fables are written, and in which they are read' (*Fables,* 1, §2). In the rest of the preface, Godwin clarifies why the practice of fabulists, like that of parents and teachers using fables has been found wanting. The fabulists, he claims, have 'written [fables] in too simple a form' and 'told [them] in as few words as a problem in Euclid', making them not 'interesting to the mind of a child' (1, §3). The parents and 'governesses', for their part, simply fail in their practice as purveyors of knowledge and because they fail to 'interrupt their lessons with dialogue and enter into explanations' (1, §6). They do not give flesh to the subjects and settings of the fables and thus cannot make them educational in a broader sense. The result is that the child hears stories that they cannot find interesting, that is, with which they cannot engage quasi-dialogically, while being 'taught to receive and repeat words which convey no specific idea to his mind' (1, §6).[17]

No doubt, there is a sense in which this is a set of rhetorical moves designed to entice potential customers in an early nineteenth-century literary marketplace that already boasted a significant number of collections of fables. Returning to the connection Ngai makes between the development of the interesting and the growth of a professionalised literary marketplace in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Godwin had to make his book interesting not only to children but also to parents, who, as Godwin was well aware, chose which books to buy for their children.[18] The year Godwin published his *Fables, Ancient and Modern*, for instance, the seventeenth edition of Samuel Croxall's hugely popular *Fables of Æsop and Others* (first published in 1722) was found in booksellers' shops.[19] However, Godwin's criticism is not unfounded: Croxall, in his prose fables, for

example, straightforwardly and quickly relates the fables' stories before moving on to the typographically separate commonplace moral lessons that each fable is thought to illustrate.

Both Godwin and Croxall thus relate the fable of 'The Fox and the Grapes' in vastly different ways. Croxall succinctly introduces the story in the following way: 'A fox, very hungry, chanced to come into a vineyard, where there hung branches of charming ripe grapes'.[20] By contrast, Godwin's introduction is much lengthier: after dealing with the problem of verisimilitude (since foxes are not known to eat grapes), he pre-emptively answers one of his readers' potential questions: 'why did the fox come into this garden?' 'I suppose', says the first-person narrator, that the fox 'had missed his road, for the favourite walk of the fox is into the poultry-yard, that he may pick up a chicken or two for his dinner' (*Fables*, I, §100). Similarly, Croxall's 'charming ripe grapes' become Godwin's 'finest grapes you ever saw. They were full of juice almost ready to burst; the purple ones were turned black, and the green were so ripe, that they looked as if you could see through them' (I, §101). This stylistic difference provides a first point of entry into Godwin's aesthetic of the interesting as it can be applied to works for children. Child readers are to be drawn into a dialogue with the text, asking and answering questions that go beyond the story in its simplest form. These are sometimes answered in the text itself (as in the example here), but they are also often only raised by the text and properly understood only by reading different stories across the collection or by referring readers to the world outside the fable (as in the examples used in the final section of this article).

The 'customary dryness' of late eighteenth-century fables and its consequences were not Godwin's only problems with the genre. Another was what was considered to be its fundamental purpose. In a 1792 edition of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, a fable is defined as 'a feigned story intended to enforce some moral precept'.[21] Popular fabulists like Samuel Croxall and Sarah Trimmer thus affixed typographically separated moral explanations or short moral precepts at the end of their fables.[22] Trimmer, in her entirely hostile review of Godwin's *Fables, Ancient and Modern* even erected the adjunction of a moral statement at the end of a fable as the first of three 'Laws of Fable', which, she claims, 'Mr B. disapproves of [...], and deviates from [...] systematically'.[23] Not only did Godwin disapprove of these laws—and perhaps particularly the first—in practice, but he also considered the matter more theoretically. In one of the most famous essays in *The Enquirer*, entitled 'Of Choice in Reading', Godwin declares:

> Nothing is more futile, than the formal and regular moral frequently annexed to Esop's fables of animals. Examine the fable impartially and you will find that the lesson set down at foot of it, is one of the last inferences that would have occurred to you (p. 137).

Affixing a moral to a fable, in Godwin's view, is a futile attempt to restrict the multiplicity of readings available to readers solely based on authorial intention.[24] Correspondingly, Godwin does not usually single out an authorial moral, though he often makes comments regarding the possible moral messages

of certain fables. Nevertheless, it is partly because late eighteenth-century fables sought to enforce a particular message that could often easily be learned by rote (in the case of Trimmer's morals in *The Ladder to Learning*, for example), that they failed to cause the 'affective uncertainty' and 'ambivalence' that often accompanies the interesting, as Ngai defines it, and which, as we will now see, defines one of Godwin's more original contribution to the genre.[25]

II. Making Fables Interesting (1): Creating Ambiguity

Godwin employs different strategies to create a sense of moral ambiguity, of ambivalence, which therefore makes the *Fables* interesting. One of those is to present the reader with moral positions that stand in tension with one another in a single story. In 'The Poor Farmer and the Justice', Godwin tells the story of a farmer who has had his crop destroyed by the justice's 'famous red bull, that frightens all the children, and that neither locks nor bars can confine' (*Fables,* I, §169).[26] In order to obtain reparations from the justice, however, the farmer reverses the story and claims that his bull destroyed the justice's crops. When he hears this, the justice replies 'I shall merely send my bailiff to look at the waste, and what he says it comes to, thou must pay' (I, §168), at which point the farmer reveals the true story. At this point, the story shifts away from dialogue and the narrator adds:

> If the farmer had said at first that it was the justice's bull that had done all the mischief, I am afraid he would have set a very different face on it. But he thought he could not sit there as a justice, and say that there was one rule for a rich man, and another for a poor one. (I, §170)

The farmer receives money as compensation and goes home. Up to this point, this is a story of justice obtained and a condemnation of the class bias of early nineteenth-century justice. However, Godwin introduces a twist: the farmer, though he obtained the reparations he was due on legal grounds considers the money ill-gained. He therefore brings it to the church to 'have it laid out in bread for the poor in the work-house' while musing that he would 'rather stand by the loss of half a field of corn, than not tell the honest truth at once' (I, §171).

The complexity of and tension between the two moral situations outlined here echoes that of the ending of Godwin's most famous work of fiction, *Things as They Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794). The novel ends with the trial of Caleb's employer Falkland, who had unjustly pursued the book's protagonist and first-person narrator. Caleb wins the trial, which leads to Falkland's death and Caleb's feeling an unsurmountable guilt.[27] In both cases, we are shown two characters who considered that their way of obtaining justice was flawed. In both works, readers have different possible affective resolutions and they have to work out that which makes sense to them. To quote Pamela Clemit on *Caleb Williams*, readers are left with a choice: 'do we collude with Caleb's version of events'—or the farmer's—'or learn from his tale'?[28] The lack of resolution, the ambiguity at the end of both *Caleb Williams* and 'The Poor

Farmer and the Justice' make these two stories interesting because we as readers are left 'not knowing exactly what we are feeling'; we have to return to the story's various elements in order to make better of it.[29]

Ambiguity can also be created on the basis of character development over the course of several fables. In 'The Wolf and the Mastiff', Godwin presents a well-known dilemma: is it better to be free or safe from want but subjected to an absolute master? The wolf is free to roam as it wishes, but sometimes it 'must endure to be very hungry and half-starved' (*Fables*, I, §191). By contrast, the domesticated mastiff is 'plump' and 'well-fed' (I, §192), yet he must submit to being to a master who 'chains [him] up in the day time' and sometimes 'gives [him] a sound beating' if he so happens to 'be tired of [his] chain' and 'how most dismally' as a consequence (I, §211). The fable ends with a horrified wolf who bids the mastiff farewell by saying 'hunger shall never make me so slavish, as to prefer chains and blows with a belly-full, to my liberty' (I, §212). At no point in the story does the narrator intervene to suggest whether it is actually better to be free as the wolf or live in the material comfort but political subjection of the mastiff. However, the dynamics of the fable, ending with the wolf's farewell and the characterisation of the mastiff, who feels shame at being in chains, may lead readers to generally sympathise with the wolf.[30]

Rather than leaving it at that, which would not make the story particularly interesting, Godwin follows up on 'The Wolf and the Mastiff' with 'The Wolf and the Lamb'. In this fable, the first-person narrator contrasts the two stories and specifically the character of the wolf.[31] He begins by spelling out the affective response implied in the former fable, finding himself sympathetic to the wolf—as indeed readers are led to feel, since 'the wolf appears to advantage' (*Fables*, I, §213). However, he immediately challenges that initial position. 'A wolf', Godwin writes, 'is a very terrible animal, and eats lambs and sheep and even little children. Thank God, there are no wolves in England!' (I, §213). Here again, there is no real resolution. Child readers are shown different dimensions of the same character and must therefore work out what they think and in what context. In that way, the sequence, and specifically the way that it is introduced, contribute to making both these stories and the work as a whole interesting in Ngai's sense.

For her, the interesting is 'a style explicitly about difference and comparison', and the 'perception' of the interesting relies on comparison.[32] She argues that 'an object can never be interesting in and of itself, but only when checked against another: the thing against its description, the individual object against its generic type'.[33] In this example, Godwin creates the conditions for comparison. The wolf in 'The Wolf and the Mastiff' is an interesting character because it is an individual variation from the generic type of the wolf described in 'The Lamb and the Wolf'. At the same time, reaching this conclusion requires confronting what appears to be a contradiction and working out exactly how to solve it, if it can be solved. As Robert Anderson notes, this is consistent with Godwin's pedagogical commitments in the early nineteenth century, and with the broader perspective

from which he wrote *The Enquirer*.[34] It also corresponds to another dimension of the interesting as a response to texts: its connection with the suspension of judgement. Saying that the wolf is interesting is thus not only saying that it is different from the typical wolf: it is also a way of foregrounding ambiguity and facilitating the reader's 'return to the object for judging at a later moment'.[35]

Such patterns of comparison appear at other moments in Godwin's *Fables*. The sequence of stories that bridges the two volumes of the collection ('The Lion and Other Beasts Hunting' followed by 'The Lion and the Man') has a very similar structure. However, it encourages more diachronic comparison because 'The Lion and the Man' refers back to a third story that appears earlier in the collection: 'The Lion and the Mouse'.[36] In that fable, we are shown 'the king of animals' to be merciful when he decides not to kill a mouse who had 'awaked him' (*Fables*, I, §105). His mercy is rewarded when the mouse returns to save the lion who came to be caught 'in a large net that some sailors had spread' (I, §106). In 'The Lion and Other Beasts Hunting', on the other hand, the lion is described as an imperious, tyrannical, 'terrible creature' (I, §301). After having made an 'agreement' to divide the bounty of their hunt with 'the wolf, the bulldog and the mountain cat' (I, §301), the lion keeps the entire prey to himself, scaring the other animals away (I, §305–06).

This tyrannical lion is to be contrasted not only with that of 'The Lion and the Mouse' but also with the typical lion the narrator introduces in the 'The Lion and the Man'. In the latter story, the reader is told that 'a lion is a generous creature. He is a fierce fellow; but as he is strong, so I have heard he is kind and merciful' (*Fables*, II, §15). In this case, readers have indeed been shown previously that the lion could be 'merciful' (in 'The Lion and the Mouse'), but they may have just read that he could be anything but 'generous' (in 'The Lion and Other Beasts Hunting'). The lion, like the wolf, is made into an interesting character, to whom readers' reactions must be complex and the result of their own judgment on the basis of the evidence the stories provide over times. This points to a further feature of the aesthetic of the interesting according to Ngai: its 'capacity to produce new knowledge' on the basis of its 'diachronic and informational, forensic dialogic' character. [37] As readers enter a dialogue with informational text, they obtain evidence which is then called back into question as they move forward from story to story.

The temporary suspension of judgment that makes these characters and the sequences of fables interesting can also be related to another aspect of the concept: its lack of a fixed temporality.[38] The lack of moral resolution, or rather, the upsetting of an initial moral resolution with the presentation of contrary evidence, leads the reader outside the fixed temporality of the work into an enquiry which can only end when readers are either satisfied with the conclusion they eventually reach or when they simply give up and accept the aporia. This reflexive form of the fable is fundamentally at odds with the more conventional contributions to the genre like Croxall's or Trimmer's. It is also where Godwin's and Ngai's versions of the interesting diverge.

As I mentioned, for Ngai, the historical emergence of the interesting is associated with the birth 'of the modern subject as a reflective, radically detached or 'ironic' ego' in the Romantic period. In that sense, as Ngai notes, the interesting appears to be 'apolitical'. Against this background, she seeks to identify and recover in the interesting the possibility contemporary political relevance in 'its conceptual indeterminacy', in the need to provide justification for why something is interesting.[39] For Ngai, detachment in the process of reading is followed by engagement in the justification of the reader's response. Godwin, by contrast, writes fables that are interesting precisely because they foster immediate engagement with the text and thereby with the broader issues raised in and by the text, at which point the temporality of the experience of the interesting changes. In this sense, Godwin seeks to encourage both immediate and temporally displaced reflections on the basis of ambiguity or open-endedness. This, he thinks is crucial for the development of reason in child readers, which Godwin thought would contribute to their 'intellectual and literary refinement', and, in turn, because they 'are inseparably connected', to 'political reform' (*Enquirer*, p. 79).

III. Making Fables Interesting (2): Opening New Gates of Learning

Creating ambiguity and thereby conditions for a deeper, rational engagement with the text are not the only strategies Godwin employs to make his stories interesting, or indeed to upset the fixed temporality of the self-contained fable. Another strategy is to include what Sarah Trimmer called 'extraneous matter', which she considered to be bad practice for a fabulist.[40] This kind of additional material could serve two purposes. Firstly, it was another way to challenge the moral dimension of fables by making the moral less relevant or, in the case of 'The Mountain in Labour', almost entirely irrelevant. In this sense, Godwin broke different aspects of Trimmer's 'Laws of Fable' in a single story and challenged common assumptions about fables, making them innovative and—therefore—interesting in Ngai's sense. Secondly, it was a way to create the conditions for the production of new knowledge and interests, thanks to the interaction of the child reader with the fable and then with the world outside the fable, as it becomes visible through the story.

To illustrate these points, let us begin by comparing Godwin's and Croxall's versions of 'The Mountain in Labour'. In Croxall's *Fables of Æsop and Others*, this is one of the shortest fables. In just five lines, Croxall relates the story of 'mountains [that] were said to be in labour, and uttered the most dreadful groans' such that people gathered around the mountain until eventually 'out crept a mouse'. After this short narrative, he adds a page-long, political 'application' where he emphasises that one should be wary of 'rumours' used by 'projectors of all kind' who promise too much and deliver too little.[41] Godwin's fable mentions a similar moral, but introduces a certain amount of narrative distance between the text and the moral precept it is supposed to illustrate by beginning with a question that appears to be irrelevant to the story in its conventional rendering,

but which leads him to deeply contextualise the story and introduce different kinds of geographical and geological knowledge.

Rather than simply stating that there was a mountain 'said to be in labour' because it produced loud noises, Godwin asks his readers: 'Did you ever see a mountain?' Whether the reader has or not does not matter if the story is to illustrate the idea that one should be suspicious of large promises, but the question demands an immediate answer. This use of direct questions to the reader that detract from the story's conventional purpose is not unique to 'The Mountain in Labour'. In 'The Miser and his Treasure', Godwin asks what the story's protagonist might 'do with his fifty guineas when he had got it?' before enumerating a number of possibilities and ending with a more open question: 'Did he mean to buy a horse? Or a pleasure-boat? Or a fine gold watch with a gold seal to it? What could he do with fifty guineas?' (*Fables*, I, §82). In 'The Stag Drinking', Godwin asks a more leading, rhetorical question: 'Do not you think it very cruel, to call the frightening of a poor creature, and at last perhaps killing him, fine sport?' (I, §37). In all these cases, questions generate engagement: the reader is encouraged at that point to stop, think, and then return to the story with an answer. The reader is effectively led to enquire outside of the text and discover new knowledge which then informs their return to the text.

Godwin pursues this possibility much further in 'The Mountain in Labour'. What follows the initial question is a detailed, almost naturalistic description of the kinds of landscapes one could see in mountainous regions. This then serves as a way to introduce geography and geology, as the narrator specifies that 'the Alps' are 'the mountains which divide France from Italy' and presents some more special 'mountains, which are called volcanic' (*Fables*, II, §40). He then singles out the Etna and Vesuvius:

> Which have a fire for ever burning within them, that sometimes blazes out at the top, and throws up a red-hot substance, almost like a metal, which, wherever it falls, destroys every thing it finds in its passage. Previously to the eruptions of this metal, you may hear a terrible noise in the inside of the mountain; it rumbles and roars, with a noise grander and more deafening than thunder. (II, §40)

By contextualising his narrative, Godwin provides a scientific, rational explanation for the rumbling of the mountain while bringing to the fore different areas of knowledge and points of entry into further reading and learning. From a pedagogical point of view, this is related to Godwin's view that there is probably 'no one thing that it is of eminent importance for a child to learn' (*Enquirer,* p. 115). What matters, rather, is to be able to 'inspire habits of industry and observation', to mould 'a mind prepared to learn', in other words, to make child readers engage with what they read. Godwin's *Fables* could thus allow for the present and future acquisition of new knowledge for the child.

Although it is perhaps the most striking, the case of 'The Mountain in Labour' is not isolated: a similar strategy is at play in 'The Wolf and the Mastiff'. In that story, the wolf opens his conversation with the dog by claiming that the

two animals should be friends, grounding his argument in scientific discourse. For the wolf, dogs and wolves 'are originally animals of the same class, only with a little difference in [their] education' (*Fables*, I, §193). This scientific point is driven across more forcefully by the mastiff's response: he agrees, based on the scientific authority of a 'Dr Mavor', the author of a 'Natural History'.[42] This reference serves as a way to achieve three results: (1) it opens areas of scientific enquiry into 'natural history', which would not necessarily be open to all readers of fables, with a specific point of entry; (2) it presents a model of evidence-based rational discussion; (3) it advertises a text written by an acquaintance of Godwin's, and published by someone who was both a collaborator and a friend.[43]

The first two of these results contribute most to the sense that it is a story designed to be interesting in both a Ngai-an and a perhaps broader Godwinian sense. On the one hand, the potentially questionable or arresting claim that wolves and dogs are 'originally animals of the same species' becomes verifiable (by opening another book and examining its arguments), thus contributing to the production of new knowledge (of scientific rather than aesthetic nature) and to the opening up of new spaces of judgment and analysis. This helps children have 'the springs of their minds [...] exercised in various direction and with unabating perseverance' (*Enquirer*, p. 85) On the other, the style of rational discussion represented here is both unusual for the genre—and therefore aesthetically interesting in Ngai's sense—and a model of Godwinian communication of knowledge. Through this interesting story, and in accordance with the pedagogical commitments Godwin develops in *The Enquirer*, children are encouraged to pursue 'miscellaneous enquiries' (p. 79), discover what they may want to study, and construct their own course of education in a way that is as autonomous as possible.[44]

Making fables interesting, as both 'The Mountain in Labour' and 'The Wolf and the Mastiff' show, implies removing the moral content of the fable—or at the very least downplaying it—while bringing out details that are not germane to the story that is being told. Doing so enabled Godwin to generate interest, in the form of both aesthetic and non-aesthetic responses to these innovative fables. More precisely, he could create 'a feeling—inquisitiveness, curiosity, wonder—falling somewhere between an affect and a desire', which is to say what Ngai describes as the beginning of 'the experience of the interesting'.[45] The aesthetic response is linked to the elicitation of a desire to acquire new kinds of knowledge, which was central to Godwin's pedagogy. Making fables interesting was therefore not only a way to tap what Ngai calls the 'deeply pedagogical dimension' of the interesting, it is central to fostering 'habits of intellectual activity', which, for Godwin, was the fundamental goal of early education (*Enquirer*, p. 85), and which, as we saw above, he believed is deeply political.

Conclusion

Godwin is both an interesting fabulist and a fabulist of the interesting. He is an interesting fabulist because he elicits this affective response throughout his col-

lection by subverting some of the expectations of the genre regarding both the moral content of the stories and their narrative structure. This makes Godwin's *Fables, Ancient and Modern* original and new in a relatively crowded market, illustrating the connection between the interesting, novelty and the market that Ngai identifies. In addition, Godwin's attempt to be interesting to both parents and children, singling out these specific, relatively narrow audiences through both the preface and the style of his work reinforce the link between the interesting and an 'expanded literary marketplace' with increasingly specialised target publics.[46] In that sense, Godwin developed his considerations on the interesting while responding to and participating in the development of a book market specifically dedicated to children, who, over the course of the eighteenth century, acquired a new role: that of consumers.[47]

The interesting as an aesthetic category thus appears to be bound up with the development of children's literature as well as the novel, which is perhaps to be expected not only given the development of the literary marketplace but also because of its pedagogical characteristics. For Godwin, the interesting seems to be a particularly fitting affective response to elicit in children because of 'its eclecticism, its recursiveness, and its future-oriented temporality'.[48] These features of the interesting are what empower its pedagogical character, given the indeterminacy of Godwin's approach to learning. Making something interesting thus allows children to develop their cognitive capacities without committing them *a priori* to 'this or that species of knowledge' (*Enquirer*, p. 85). In the more specific case of the genre of the fable, eliciting this response was therefore a way to oppose educational designs—such as Sarah Trimmer's—that sought to recreate moral commonplaces and reinforce existing social structures.

Lastly, the connection between the interesting, education and children's literature suggests that this aesthetic category is not necessarily linked to the reflexive, detached, ironic, modern reader which Ngai identifies. Although is possible that the conception of the interesting which Ngai identifies with the Romantic period came to be dominant, there were alternative versions of the concept which relied on the reader's warm engagement. For Godwin, the readers that are to be produced are indeed reflexive but engaged rather than detached. They are engaged morally as they 'learn to think, to discriminate, to remember and to enquire' through complex stories that refer back and forth to one another (*Enquirer*, p. 85). They are also engaged in understanding the world around them as stories seek to excite their curiosity and lead them, from the moment in which they find something interesting, to become interested in pursuing it further. Such readers would, Godwin hoped, become the ideal agents of human progress, including social and political reform, for, as they cultivate 'intellectual and literary refinement' and undertake 'miscellaneous enquiries', they should also become engaged in 'preserving kindness and universal philanthropy, in the midst of the operations of our justice' (*Enquirer*, p. 79).

Notes

1. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Harvard University Press, 2012).
2. Ibid., pp. 19–21.
3. Ibid., ch. 2.
4. Ibid., pp. 112, 120.
5. Ibid., pp. 48, 125–26, 139–40.
6. For more information on the Juvenile Library, see the following: Pamela Clemit, 'William Godwin's Juvenile Library', *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, new ser., 147 (2009), 90–99; Suzanne L. Barnett and Katherine Bennett Gustafson, 'Introduction: The Radical Aesop: William Godwin and the Juvenile Library, 1805–1825', in 'Edward Baldwin' [William Godwin], *Fables Ancient and Modern*, ed. by Suzanne L. Barnett and Katherine Bennett Gustafson, Romantic Circles (2014) <https://romantic-circles.org/index.php/editions/fables> [accessed 5 March 2025]. See also their bibliography of the titles published by the Juvenile Library.
7. See the Preface in Godwin, *Fables Ancient and Modern*, 1, §3. I have chosen to refer to Barnett and Gustafson's online critical edition because it is by far the most accessible. I hereafter refer to this work in the body of the text as *Fables* followed by the volume (in small capitals) and paragraph number (§).
8. According to the diary in which Godwin recorded his reading, he never read Friedrich Schlegel (though he did read Friedrich's brother August's writings on Shakespeare in 1816–1817 and again in 1829 and 1832). See *The Diary of William Godwin*, ed. by Mark Philp, Victoria Myers and David O'Shaughnessy (Oxford Digital Library, 2010) <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>. It is possible that he would have had some passing knowledge of Schlegel's thought through acquaintances who were more familiar with German thought, such as Henry Richter or Samuel Taylor Coleridge, but it would likely not have been more than a passing familiarity.
9. Robert Anderson, 'Godwin Disguised: Politics in the Juvenile Library', in *Godwinian Moments from the Enlightenment to Romanticism*, ed. by Robert Maniquis and Victoria Myers (University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 125–46 (pp. 126–27); Malini Roy, 'Celebrating "Wild Tales": Lamb and Godwin's Groundwork for Children's Literature', *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, new ser., 147 (2009), pp. 122–30 (p. 128); Richard Gough Thomas, 'Scepticism and Experience in the Educational Writing of William Godwin' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2015), ch. 5.
10. Roy, 'Celebrating "Wild Tales"', pp. 128–29.
11. In so doing, he (critically) follows Pamela Clemit, 'Philosophical Anarchism in the Schoolroom: William Godwin's Juvenile Library, 1805–25', *Biblion: The Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 9.1/2 (2001), pp. 44–70.
12. The words are from a letter Godwin wrote to the editor of the *British Critic* after the publication reviewed *Caleb Williams*. See *The Letters of William Godwin, Volume 1: 1778–1797*, ed. by Pamela Clemit (Oxford University Press, 2011), letter 63. It is quoted in Anderson, 'Godwin Disguised', p. 142.
13. Thomas, 'Scepticism and Experience', pp. 165–66.
14. Ibid., ch. 5.
15. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 171.
16. William Godwin, *The Enquirer. Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature*, in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin: Educational and Liter-*

ary Writings, ed. by Pamela Clemit, 7 vols (Pickering & Chatto, 1993), v, 70–309 (p. 115). Hereafter, I refer to this work in the body of the text as *Enquirer* followed by the page number.

17. Godwin's use of pronouns suggests an imagined male child reader. However, his correspondence and practice as a writer of children's books suggest that he also sought a female readership. In an 1802 letter to William Cole, Godwin writes that for 'the early part' of 'the education of female children from the age of two to twelve', one 'should make no difference between children male and female'; Godwin, *Letters*, letter 324. The long titles of his books also suggest a mixed readership: the *Fables* are 'for the use of children', the histories of England, Greece and Rome are 'for the use of schools and young persons'. The *Pantheon* is explicitly addressed to 'young persons of both sexes', an emphasis that may have been necessary because classical mythology, like classical learning more generally, was rarely a part of a girl's education in the late eighteenth century. Because of all this, I have chosen to use a gender-neutral 'they' to refer to Godwin's child readers in this article.
18. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, pp. 120–21. On Godwin's awareness of his clientele, see for example the letter he wrote to Charles Lamb regarding the *Adventures of Ulysses*, which was eventually published by Godwin's Juvenile Library in 1808, reproduced in Charles Kegan Paul, *William Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries*, 2 vols (King & Co, 1876), II, 163–64. In it, he stressed that 'it is children that read children's books, when they are read, but it is parents that choose them', before arguing that the violence and gruesomeness of some of Lamb's descriptions would be met with parental disapproval as, he claimed, 'we live in squeamish days'. Showing again his desire to reach a female audience (at the very least for economic reasons), Godwin also suggested that the blood and gore would lead to the exclusion of 'the female sex from among your [Lamb's] readers'.
19. Samuel Croxall, *Fables of Æsop and Others: Translated into English, with Instructive Applications and a Cut before Each Fable*, 17th edn (Johnson and others, 1805).
20. Ibid., p. 41.
21. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 10th edn (Rivingtons and others, 1792).
22. See Sarah Trimmer, *The Ladder to Learning: A Select Collection of Fables; Consisting of Words of One, Two, and Three Syllables; with Original Morals*, 11th edn (Harris, 1824).
23. Sarah Trimmer, *The Guardian of Education. A Periodical Work*, ed. by Matthew O. Grenby, 5 vols (Thoemmes and Synapse, 2002), v, 282–83. For a more general historical overview of the defining characteristics of a fable, see Mary V. Jackson, *Engines of Instruction, Mischief, and Magic: Children's Literature in England from its Beginnings to 1839* (University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp. 43–50; Matthew O. Grenby, *Children's Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), ch. 1.
24. For a more sustained discussion of Godwin's views on the 'moral' and the 'tendency' of texts, see Tilottama Rajan, 'Wollstonecraft and Godwin: Reading the Secrets of the Political Novel', *Studies in Romanticism*, 27.2 (1988), pp. 221–51 <https://doi.org/10.2307/25600709> (pp. 223–24); Pamela Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley* (Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 76; David O'Shaughnessy, *William Godwin and the Theatre* (Pickering & Chatto, 2010), pp. 25–29; Thomas, 'Scepticism and Experience', pp. 84–90.
25. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 135.
26. For another version of this argument, see Roy, 'Celebrating "Wild Tales"', *passim*.

27. William Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, ed. by David McCracken (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 324–26.
28. Clemit, *Godwinian Novel*, p. 68; for a contrasting view, see: Gary J. Handwerk, 'Of Caleb's Guilt and Godwin's Truth: Ideology and Ethics in *Caleb Williams*', *ELH*, 60.4 (1993), pp. 939–60 <https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.1993.0003>.
29. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 135.
30. When asked about the marks left by the chain on his neck, 'the mastiff hung his head' and tried 'to change the conversation' (*Fables*, I, §207).
31. As noted above, this argument was first introduced by Anderson, 'Godwin Disguised', pp. 125–28.
32. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 38.
33. Ibid., p. 26.
34. Anderson, 'Godwin Disguised', p. 126. See also See also Gary Handwerk, '"Awakening the Mind": William Godwin's *Enquirer*', in *Godwinian Moments*, ed. by Maniquis and Myers, pp. 103–24.
35. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 134.
36. Thomas ('Scepticism and Experience', p. 151) makes a similar point by linking 'The Lion and the Man' and 'The Horse and the Stag'.
37. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 171.
38. Ibid., p. 121.
39. Ibid., p. 13; see also p. 171.
40. Trimmer, *Guardian of Education,* p. 283.
41. Croxall, *Fables*, p. 47.
42. The editors of the Romantic Circles edition of the *Fables* suggest two possible sources for this reference: William Fordyce Mavor, *A New Dictionary of Natural History; or, Compleat Universal Display of Animated Nature: With Accurate Representations of the Most Curious and Beautiful Animals, Elegantly Coloured* (Harrison, 1785); William Fordyce Mavor, *Natural History for the Use of Schools: Founded on the Linnaean Arrangement of Animals; with Popular Descriptions in the Manner of Goldsmith and Buffon* (Phillips, 1800). According to Godwin's diary, he met Mavor through a shared acquaintance: the bookseller Richard Phillips (who published both Godwin's first book for children, the *Bible Stories* in 1802 and his *Life of Chaucer* in 1803). They first met in late 1801 and again in 1807. For this reason and given that the *Fables* was a book for the use of children, the *Natural History for the Use of Schools* seems a likelier candidate as a source.
43. See the editorial notes in the entry on 'Phillips, Sir Richard' in Godwin's *Diary*.
44. On Godwin's commitment to autonomy and self-directed study in *The Enquirer*, see Pamela Clemit, 'Godwin's Educational Theory: *The Enquirer*', *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 12 (1993), pp. 3–11 (pp. 8–11). For a broader discussion of autonomy and the suspicion of authority in Godwin's educational works, see Thomas, 'Scepticism and Experience', esp. ch. 6.
45. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 116.
46. Ibid., p. 122.
47. J. H. Plumb, 'The New World of Children', in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England,* ed. by Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb (Europa Publications, 1982), pp. 286–315 (p. 286).
48. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 136.

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