Introduction
From Perswasion to Persuasion, Belief without Absolutes

Toward the end of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (published 1817, dated 1818), Anne Elliot finds herself wondering about the "right and wrong" of the title theme.[1] While she ultimately stands by her past persuasion to end an engagement, her deliberation about it, and the novel's attention by that point to the shifting combinations of judgment and influence, reason and feeling, case and rule, urge us to ask: What *is* persuasion? The question inflects a wide range of Romantic writing, from Thomas De Quincey's "Elements of Rhetoric" essay, which poses it explicitly, to Percy Shelley's political prose and poetry, which announce "reasoning and persuasion" and "music and persuasion" as their respective aims.[2] This book examines how these and other writers – namely, William Hazlitt, William Godwin, and William Wordsworth – reimagined the meaning, rights, and wrongs of persuasion in response to the epistemic and socio-political upheavals of their time, redefining it in relation to the adjacent concept of conviction and the overarching category of belief. W. B. Yeats would later lament that "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."[3] From this long-prevailing cultural vantage, unwavering beliefs would seem to be not just a goad to evils like the wars and rising fascism of Yeats's era but a necessary bulwark against them. Yet at the turn of the nineteenth century, in the wake of Enlightenment skepticism and amid polarized public debates about rights and revolution, the writers addressed here recognized that strong convictions (from the Latin *convincĕre*: to overcome, to conquer) could just as readily instigate injustice as oppose it. Their response, I argue, was to carve out serious intellectual and social space for the kind of belief that could accommodate doubt, dissent, and changes of mind, which they contradistinguished by the term "persuasion." This book makes a case for such persuasion as an unacknowledged impetus for Romantic literature, a bridge between literature and rhetorical theory, and a resource for literary criticism and civic life today.

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To venture further into terminological distinctions is to get at the heart of the problems addressed by Romantic writers and by this book. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, persuasion is largely equivalent to conviction, or else aspires rightly or wrongly to be. In contemporary parlance, "persuasion" generally denotes three things: the act of "addressing . . . arguments or appeals . . . to induce cooperation, submission, or agreement"; the resulting state of mind – "[s]omething which one believes; a belief, conviction, or opinion" – which might produce "action"; and the intermediary strategy: the argument or appeal itself.[4] "Conviction," meanwhile, is defined as the act of bringing a person to recognize the truth of something previously denied, or else as the mental state thus achieved: "opinion or belief held as well proved or established; . . . firm or settled persuasion."[5] The *OED* thus registers the tendency to either conflate persuasion with conviction (persuasion is "a belief, conviction, or opinion"; conviction is "firm or settled persuasion") or else treat conviction as the more reliable mindset ("well proved or established," "firm or settled") compared with the dubiously rational "arguments or appeals" of its other, which the *OED* also calls "inducements," "plea[s]," and "entreaties."[6] The suggestion of illegitimate influence is baked into the etymology of persuasion from *suādēre* (to advise) and *suāvis* (sweet), suggesting the act or result of making something sweet or pleasant to another: the appeal of seduction rather than argument.[7] Plato famously dismissed persuasion as the verbal equivalent of cosmetics or cookery, while countless subsequent rhetoricians associated it with feminine guile as opposed to manly reason.[8] The *OED* suggests, however, that this lesser, potentially specious form of appeal can rise to equivalence with conviction when the beliefs involved become "firm or settled," ideally because of their strong evidentiary or rational grounds, although the writers addressed here cast those foundations into doubt.

Further disambiguations are, for the *OED*, matters of strictly historical interest and usage, even as the relevant definitions point toward important epistemological fault lines. The date charts foreground the period from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries when the verb "to persuade" could mean not just to "urge as credible or true" but also to "make probable," evoking consequential debates about belief and evidence to which I will return.[9] "To convince," meanwhile, is recorded as having acquired in the eighteenth century a unique association with force – according to Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, it means "to force any one to acknowledge a contested position" – but the *OED* flags that definition as lacking "the fully developed current sense."[10] From the vantage of our fully

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developed current senses of both persuasion and conviction, historical inflections can look like so many semantic byways – mere lexicographical hairsplitting. In fact, they indexed major epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic concerns, the ramifications of which we are still addressing.

Stanley Cavell noted that one "theoretical benefit" of interchanging the terms "persuasion" and "conviction" was that "you lend to the idea of persuading someone the respectability of the idea of convincing someone, and you make convincing someone seem directly a matter of getting them to do something, and thereby remove it from a direct connection with the validity of the support you offer." Interchangeable usage in either direction, in other words, short-circuits the deliberation that ought to be involved in assent and action. Recognizing this, Cavell called for a more rigorous distinction in philosophy between "persuad[ing] someone to take a course of action" and "convinc[ing] them of the truth or soundness of a judgment."[11] Consciously or not, he was evoking a usage that became common in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and that prompted the more radical reimaginings examined in this book. The key figure, as we will shortly see, was the Scottish rhetorician George Campbell, who defined conviction as an appeal to the understanding by way of reason and persuasion as an appeal to the will by way of the passions. Aware, like Cavell, that a moving persuasion could stand in for a rational conviction, Campbell insisted on their tethering, treating persuasion as ideally a supplement to conviction.[12] He was responding in particular to David Hume's skeptical argument for the conjectural nature of all our beliefs, which unmoored them from both rational and transcendental anchors. A comparable persuasion/conviction distinction was popularized by Hugh Blair, who remarked that "no persuasion is likely to be stable, which is not founded on conviction."[13] But while the stance became mainstream, it was only one expression of the profound rethinking of persuasion in the wake of Enlightenment skepticism.

This book considers how a group of Romantic writers wrestled creatively and intellectually with the possibility of decoupling persuasion from the ideal of firm or settled conviction, allowing for flexibility in one's beliefs without giving up the possibility of belief altogether or reducing it to private enthusiasm. While many of the writers addressed here used the term "persuasion" for this malleable assent and reserved "conviction" for its self-certain alternative, the terms remained mobile, as an inherited lexicon was adapted to new sociopolitical circumstances and aspirations. What unites the resulting body of writing is the commitment to beliefs without absolutes that are not merely personally or culturally relative.

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As Shelley put it, one needed to be able to "love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure" without transcendental guarantees.[14] This ambition raised a set of corollary questions to do with the grounds and authority of persuasion, its potential deceptiveness or error, its influence on individual cognition and action, its connections with rank and gender, its relation to social and political institutions (law, marriage, government, religion), its circumstances of success and failure, and its verbal artifactuality, including its affinity with imaginative literature and reading.

In their responses to those questions, the writers and works examined here represent a different ending to our master narratives about the transformation of belief from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, when a concept associated in Protestantism with a divine gift, and in Catholicism with acceptance of authority, came instead to mean assent based on private judgments rooted in reason, experience, or evidence.[15] Historian Ethan Shagan charts this transformation up to the late eighteenth century, arguing that it culminated in the bifurcating paths of Kantian rationalism, which sought to raise judgment above the fray of mere opinion, and Blakean enthusiasm, which held that a "firm perswasion that a thing is so" should "make it so."[16] Shagan cites Harold Bloom's view of this "faithless faith" as the core of Romantic belief, but he might likewise have invoked M. H. Abrams's argument for Romanticism's secularized assimilation of Judeo-Christian ideas or T. E. Hulme's view of Romanticism as "spilt religion."[17] Yet the self-authorizing enthusiasm of poetic genius was hardly exhaustive of the possibilities for Romantic credence. And neither, for that matter, was the resistance to belief denoted by "Negative Capability," or the capacity of resting in "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."[18] While the writers addressed here represent a different ending to the story of the modern transformation of belief, it was also a significant new beginning, albeit one that our lexical conflations, epistemological biases, and literary-historical master narratives have long obscured.

In bringing the Romantic reimagining of persuasion back into view, this book builds on a growing interdisciplinary body of scholarship on the fortunes of rhetoric and persuasion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries while addressing a significant blind spot within it. By contrast with rhetorical studies – which, as we will see in Chapter 1, either skips entirely over the supposedly antirhetorical Romantic period or treats select writers as outliers – Romantic scholarship has been closely attentive to the period's diverse sites and cultures of rhetoric, from poetry and pamphlets to public assemblies and Parliament.[19] Seeking, we might say, to reverse

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the process that classicist George Kennedy called *letteraturizzazione*, the historical "slippage of rhetoric into literary composition," scholars highlight the persistence and adaptation of key rhetorical traditions (e.g., Sophistic, classical, Biblical, and Enlightenment) amid a "new scene of writing" characterized by changing market forces, expanding reading publics, and lively oral cultures.[20] One especially fruitful area of investigation has been the adaptation of rhetorical tools and techniques in the period's debates about political reform, revolution, and human rights. Marilyn Butler and Olivia Smith, for instance, have argued that the goal of many writers was to forge a "common language" or "intellectual vernacular" that could communicate political ideas to a wide audience, including as a basis for political action.[21] Jon Klancher, meanwhile, has shown how writers employed a range of rhetorical techniques to shape audiences' "interpretative and ideological frameworks," including their sense of themselves as audiences and members of emergent social classes.[22] Focusing on the verbal techne of rhetoric, however, this body of scholarship overlooks concurrent changes in the very meaning of persuasion, often treating it as the self-evident objective of rhetoric, in keeping with textbook definitions from Aristotle to the present.[23] The distinct trajectories of persuasion in the period are also bypassed by a second important body of "rhetorical" criticism: the deconstructive criticism that decouples rhetoric from persuasion when the latter is "conceived exclusively as persuasion, as actual action upon others," and uses "rhetoric" to denote instead the "figural potentiality of language," thus making it newly compatible with literature by purging it of the instrumentalism now ascribed to "grammar."[24] That vexed instrumentalism returns as the focus of a third line of scholarship that calls attention to rhetoric's negative development in the period into an art of imposture, and to the deep-seated suspicion of persuasion as mere influence peddling or audience manipulation, especially in Continental sources.[25]

Shifting attention to the new understanding of persuasion that emerged in the period, this book makes common cause with the collection *Persuasion after Rhetoric in the Eighteenth Century and Romanticism* (2024), which shows how values and practices of persuasion once bound up with rhetoric were rearticulated after its cultural decline.[26] That collection's broad range, spanning diverse national contexts and then-emerging disciplines, attests to the need for further attention to how persuasion was reconceptualized in specific intellectual and historical circumstances. Focusing on the British tradition, this book traces the collective (though not necessarily concerted) reimagining of persuasion as a self-consciously

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partial and malleable mode of belief that was not merely relative. *Reimagining Persuasion* is concerned, in other words, with how Romantic writers fundamentally transformed a core concept of the rhetorical tradition they inherited, with important consequences for ideas about the persuasiveness of literature itself: its capacity and resources for affecting individual mindsets and the wider polity. In works by De Quincey, Hazlitt, Godwin, Wordsworth, Austen, and Shelley, I argue, "persuasion" comes to name an alternative to strong, dogged beliefs that does not require the apolitical or disenchanted loss of all belief whatsoever, but achieves its characteristic flexibility in open-minded debates and controversies. Among the changes that enabled this new understanding of persuasion were the extreme polarization of public political discourse, shifting legal protocols of truth and evidence, and a new sense of historical situatedness, all addressed later in this Introduction and in the chapters that follow. But in their bid to formulate notions of belief adequate to these developments, Romantic writers also had to reckon with rhetorical and philosophical precedents, and especially with the newly problematic idea of persuasion's appeal to the will through the passions. We can therefore start to frame their reimagining of persuasion by attending more closely to the overlapping but ultimately divergent attempts by Hume and Campbell to redefine it in response to the rise of probabilistic thinking and of empirical psychology – attempts that provide crucial touchstones for the constellation of terms and texts discussed hereafter.

Hume, Campbell, and the Problem of Persuasion

Even before Hume ventured his controversial arguments about belief in the 1730s and 1740s, the currents of thought had shifted momentously. Across the domains of natural science, history, theology, law, and literature, thinkers grappling with problems of evidence set aside the ideal of certain knowledge inherited from Hellenistic sources to make a new allowance for degrees of certainty – or, in modern terms, degrees of probability – from the most tenuous ("mere opinion," "conjecture") to the pinnacles of "moral certainty" and, in legal contexts, certainty "beyond reasonable doubt."[27] As Barbara Shapiro remarks, this new probabilism represented nothing short of a "breach[ing of] the epistemological barrier between logic and rhetoric, or knowledge and opinion"[28] – the ancient *episteme* and *doxa*. Across fields of inquiry, the great spokesman and systematizer of this thinking was John Locke. In *An Essay Concerning*

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Human Understanding (1689), Locke formidably refutes the prevailing doctrine of innate ideas, arguing that ideas are in fact the products of experience, or sensation and reflection. On this basis he seeks to articulate the grounds for our pretensions to knowledge and opinion free from the impositions of authority or superstition. True knowledge, for Locke, consists in the apprehension of agreement or disagreement among ideas, and it is wholly certain only when immediately apparent and thus "intuitive," as with the knowledge that "*White* is not *Black*, That a *Circle* is not a *Triangle*, That *Three* are more than *Two*, and equal to *Two* and *One*" (*Essay*, 531). Knowledge can also be reliably certain when it proceeds from demonstration, or sequential reasoning from proofs that establishes intuitive certainty at each step, as with knowledge of the existence of God (530–38).[29] These higher orders of assurance being, however, "very short and scanty" in human experience, we must for the most part dwell instead in "the twilight . . . of *Probability*" and rely on our "judgment" of "*presumed*" relations of ideas (652–53).

The result of that judgment is what Locke calls "*Belief*, *Assent*, or *Opinion*," or more generally "perswasion," and which he argues is probable in varying degrees, since it involves the intervention of "something extraneous to the thing I believe" – something that cannot be made intuitively or demonstratively certain (*Essay*, 655). Such "perswasion" therefore involves a constant risk of error about the relevant ideas. A latitudinarian Anglican writing just decades after the English Civil War, Locke sees religious enthusiasm as a particularly egregious form of persuasion. He defines it as "perswasion of an immediate intercourse with the Deity, and frequent communications from the divine Spirit," arising "from the Conceits of a warmed or over-weening Brain" (699). For Locke, the key difference between this fanatical persuasion and rational religious belief is the inability of the former to call on satisfactory evidence beyond its own "internal light" and "feeling" of certainty (700). For those gripped by an enthusiastic persuasion, a given proposition "*is a Revelation, because they firmly believe it*, and *they believe it, because it is a Revelation*" (702). To break this circular reasoning, Locke insists on testing any supposed divine communication against external corroboration. One should ask, "How do I know that GOD is the Revealer of this to me; that this Impression is made upon my Mind by his holy Spirit, and that therefore I ought to obey it?" (701). But he then expands the claim to insist that the validity of any proposition concerning external objects depends likewise on corroboration:

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> Every Conceit that thoroughly warms our Fancies must pass for an Inspiration, if there be nothing but the Strength of our Perswasions, whereby to judge of our Perswasions: If *Reason* must not examine their Truth by something extrinsical to the Perswasions themselves; Inspirations and Delusions, Truth and Falshood will have the same Measure, and will not be possible to be distinguished. (704)

To avoid such conflations, Locke sets forth a careful methodology for weighing probabilities with reference to knowledge, observation, experience, and the testimony of others, and also disavows "the Art of Rhetorick" and "all . . . figurative applications of Words" as "perfect cheat" for their potential to "insinuate wrong *Ideas*, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment" (508). For while he considers it a mark of divine design that humanity can become aware of its "short-sightedness and liableness to Error" and aspire to a more perfect knowledge (652), he also seeks to ward off skepticism about the prospects for human knowledge and encourages readers to "improve" their judgments to the utmost extent possible, and thus independently "govern" their "Opinions, and Actions depending thereon" (46).

Locke, then, not only induces "a kind of epistemological Fall" by pointing out the gulf separating our ideas and the realities they purport to represent,[30] but also aims to mitigate its consequences by insisting on the need for stable, rational beliefs and their clear communication. By contrast, Hume's still more revolutionary argument is that probable "perswasion" is all we have to go on, and that it is hardly rational. His recommendation of a mitigated skepticism toward our beliefs provided a powerful impetus for the reimagining of persuasion undertaken by the writers addressed in this book. In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), Hume uses "perswasion" interchangeably with "belief" but also, tellingly, with "conviction." This is not because he wants to measure persuasion and belief against a gold standard of conviction. Rather, Hume argues that all three mental states are at best conjectural and far more prevalent in our understanding of the world than we care to admit.[31] Hume thus turns Locke's probabilism in an emphatically skeptical direction. He first contends, largely in concurrence with Locke, that whereas direct sensory perceptions ("impressions") always elicit belief, the copies of those perceptions in the mind ("ideas") do so only when they possess a high degree of "force" or "vivacity," qualities he compares to the "liveliness or brightness" of particular colors.[32] Belief, in other words, is the communication or transmission of this force and vivacity, not just of the ideas themselves. "[W]hen any impression becomes present to us," he writes, "it not only

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transports the mind to such ideas as are related to it, but likewise communicates to them a share of its force and vivacity" (*T*, 98). Such belief, he then explains, has two main channels. One is mental habit, as in our tendency to perceive cause and effect whenever two impressions are repeatedly conjoined, like fire and heat. Hume observes that while there may be real causal connections in the world, we never experience them as anything other than ideas derived from impressions. It follows that

> all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation. 'Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy. When I am convinc'd of any principle, 'tis only an idea, which strikes more strongly upon me. When I give the preference to one set of arguments above another, I do nothing but decide from my feeling concerning the superiority of their influence. (103)

Necessary as this main vector of belief may be, it poses the constant threat of allowing habitual associations to pass for epistemic rather than psychological certainties, and one of Hume's ambitions is therefore to reveal the role of mental habits in making beliefs seem absolute and thus undermine the resulting dogmas.[33]

But Hume is also concerned about the consequences of the second main channel of belief, eloquence. Defining it as the verbal skill "by which objects are represented in their strongest and most lively colours," Hume contends that its force, like that of custom, is superior to reasoned argument: "We may of ourselves acknowledge, that such an object is valuable, and such another odious; but 'till an orator excites the imagination, and gives force to these ideas, they may have but a feeble influence either on the will or the affections" (426–27). Locke had similarly remarked that the will could be moved to action only by means of "uneasiness" – a feeling of bodily pain or mental "disquiet" and a desire to relieve it (*Essay*, 250–51) – but he remained committed to reflective thinking as a necessary guide to action. Hume, conversely, insists in the *Treatise* that the prime mover of the will is in every case the passions. Hence his famous assertion that "[r]eason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (*T*, 415). Eloquence capitalizes on this supremacy of the passions to effect "perswasion" by conjuring ideas so vivid that they approximate the force of impressions and thus elicit belief, often with greater force than even "custom and experience." It is difficult, Hume remarks, to "withold [*sic*] our assent" from eloquent language. "We are hurried away by the lively imagination of our author or companion; and even he himself is often a victim to his own fire and genius" (123).

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Hume's subsequent essay "Of Eloquence" (1742), which ambivalently treats such "fire and genius" as at once unavailable and unsuited to contemporary oratory, is often understood as contributing to a wider eighteenth-century shift from an ideal of rousing ancient eloquence to one of modern polite style that could "placate and stabilize" an emergent class society "rather than . . . make things happen."[34] Yet as Catherine Packham emphasizes, the sublime oratory of the ancients is of serious interest to Hume because it raises the wider "moral problem" of the place of human passions in commercial modernity.[35] Hume's concern with the effects of eloquence is not only moral, political, or historical, however, but also epistemological. His response to the problem of persuasion by eloquence and vivid imagination includes a significant narrowing of the definition of legitimate beliefs. In his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), which sought to correct "some negligences" of reasoning and expression in the *Treatise*, he insists that belief is "a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain," and he explains that what makes for this especially forcible "*manner* of conception" is "the customary conjunction of the object with something present to the memory or senses."[36] As Hsueh Qu remarks, for Hume, "[w]ithout such an impression or memory, our inductive belief would be 'entirely without foundation.'"[37] Inductive belief is truthful to the extent that it accords with, and systematizes from, experience.

Hume's bid to thus stabilize belief did not quell anxieties about its associations with imagination and eloquence. Among the better-known rebuttals were Thomas Reid's treatise on common sense and James Beattie's on the immutability of truth. Yet for Reid's and Beattie's colleague in the Philosophical Society of Aberdeen, the Church of Scotland minister George Campbell, Hume's ideas were also profoundly (though no less vexedly) inspiring. The author of a *Dissertation on Miracles* (1762) that refuted Hume's attack on the evidentiary basis of such expressions of divine will, Campbell was also a rhetorician whose *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) became "common stock" in the period's teaching and scholarship.[38] Together with works including Thomas Sheridan's *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* (1762), Adam Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1748–64), and Hugh Blair's *Lectures* by the same title (1783), Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric* participated in an eighteenth-century rhetoric revival that John Guillory has lately described as "the nova-like efflorescence of a dying system."[39] One major "belletristic" strand focused on tasteful criticism and elegance of expression in polite society, as well as

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on proper elocution, pronunciation, and delivery, finding impetus in the contexts of national linguistic diversity (especially after the 1707 Act of Union), the rise of the periodical press, and a new sociable and commercial culture in which "civic discourse took place not at the Forum but in the coffeehouse."[40] A second major strand, the period's "psychological-epistemological" rhetoric or "New Rhetoric," was centrally concerned with the rhetorical ramifications of empirical psychology.[41] It was to this innovative branch of study that Campbell made his most important contributions. Exploring the psychology of persuasion and the roles of passion and vivid ideation therein, even as he attempted to accommodate them within a strongly rationalist and religious framework, Campbell's treatise, in tandem with Hume's, set the terms for subsequent inquiries, rebuttals, and reimaginings.

One distinctive feature of Campbell's treatise is its identification of four main aims of discourse, each involving a distinct mental faculty. Discourse can variously "enlighten the understanding, . . . please the imagination, . . . move the passions, or . . . influence the will" (*PR*, 1). Enlightening the understanding means either "instructing" an audience about some unknown or misunderstood element of knowledge or "convincing" it of a position it disbelieves (2). By contrast, influencing the will means "persuading" an audience to a particular conduct (4). Conviction, then, is a matter of rational assent; persuasion, a matter of acting on what we have assented to. At first, Campbell asserts that persuasion is the culmination of a "regular progression" of appeals to the understanding, imagination, passions, and will, in that order (2). Within a few paragraphs, however, he describes persuasion as an "artful mixture" of appeals to the understanding and the passions: "the argumentative and the pathetic incorporated together" in a "*vehemence* of contention" (4). Ideally, he explains, the affecting parts of a discourse will be "so interwoven with our argument" that these elements will be mutually reinforcing, with passion "commanding attention" for reason, and reason consolidating passion (5–6). Campbell later sums this up as the "analysis of persuasion": a rhetor must both "excite some desire or passion in the hearers" and also "satisfy their judgment that there is a connexion between the action to which he would persuade them, and the gratification of the desire or passion which he excites" (77–78).[42]

Admittedly, Campbell was not the first to distinguish between persuasion and conviction with reference to the mental faculties. Allan Ramsay, in *An Essay on Ridicule* (1753), and Johnson, in his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), both associated conviction with argumentative appeals to

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reason and persuasion with moving appeals to the passions, though, as Johnson noted, the distinction was "not always observed."[43] Campbell nevertheless stands out for the degree of attention he bestows on persuasion and especially on its relationship to the "vivacity" or "vividness" of language, the "lively and glowing ideas of the subject" that excite a desire for particular outcomes (78). He identifies the chief source of such liveliness as "striking resemblances in the imagery" (73) – that is, between the imagery and its objects – and specifically ones that escape general notice. There is little or no vivacity in comparisons of "man to man, eagle to eagle, sea to sea," but plenty in comparisons across "species" or "genus" (74). Hence one point of departure from the Lockean distrust of rhetorical tropes and figures: for Campbell, the striking and unusual comparisons that give rise to vivacity can not just elicit passion but also carry implicit arguments about some fundamental point of resemblance between the objects compared, and thus make that quality of style no less legitimate or effective an instrument of "conviction" than comparison itself (75). Campbell therefore emphatically questions the banishment of vivacity from rhetoric to poetry: "Where then lies the difference between addressing the judgment and addressing the fancy? what hath given rise to the distinction between ratiocination and imagery?" (74). Refusing this distinction, Campbell devotes Book 3 of his treatise to showing how vivacity can arise (or fail to arise) from the choice, number, and arrangement of words. Poetry, for him, is not separate from rhetoric but "properly no other than a particular mode or form of certain branches of oratory" (lxxiii) – as Kenneth Burke would similarly assert two centuries later.[44]

Scholars of rhetoric have noted broad affinities between Campbell's concept of vivacity and the traditional rhetorical and poetic concept of *enargeia*, or language capable of painting a picture in the audience's mind, which was revived to some extent in the Addisonian ideal of descriptive writing that recreates ideas of absent or fictitious objects.[45] Yet as Arthur Walzer contends, Campbell moves beyond such precedents, and firmly in the direction of Hume, when he suggests that while resemblance can create vivacity, vivacity can also create resemblance.[46] As he puts it at the opening of Book 3, "[b]y vivacity of expression, resemblance is attained, as far as language can contribute to the attainment" (285).[47] Campbell thus takes seriously the notion that vivacity "commonly enlivens our ideas" and can thus help "induce belief." He nevertheless adamantly refuses to conflate them: "I will not say with a late subtle metaphysician, that 'Belief consisteth in the liveliness of our ideas'" (73). As a clergyman and rationalist, that is, Campbell balks at what, as a rhetorician, he had almost accepted.

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At issue were not just the "radical ontological and epistemological implications" of Hume's ideas,[48] but also their implications for persuasion. For if vivacity could not merely embellish argument but to some extent carry it – by suggesting unforeseen resemblances, for example – and if, moreover, appeals to the various mental faculties were "incorporated together" in persuasion (4), what was to prevent mere vivacity (or indeed other qualities of style) from standing in for legitimate argument? This question surely hovers in Campbell's mind when he insists that the passions, imagination, and memory are not the "supplanters" or "rivals" of reason but only her "handmaids, by whose ministry she is enabled to usher truth into the heart, and procure it there a favourable reception." Campbell acknowledges that "[a]s handmaids," these faculties "are liable to be seduced by sophistry in the garb of reason, and sometimes are made ignorantly to lend their aid in the introduction of falsehood" (72).[49] The Crusades, he argues, are just one testament to the fact that "there is no pitch of brutality and rapacity to which the passions of avarice and ambition, consecrated and inflamed by religious enthusiasm, will not drive mankind" (109). Campbell nevertheless remains optimistic about the countervailing powers of rhetoric and reason, rooting this optimism in his sense of humanity's God-given disposition to be moved by the good and the true. As he puts it categorically, "[g]ood is the object of the will, truth is the object of the understanding" (78). As Lloyd Bitzer notes, Campbell's theology thus rises to fill a gap in his empirical psychology, explaining the truth and authority of certain ideas, as well as our ability to perceive them, as divinely ordained, and treating error and irrationality as matters of corrupted feeling, potentially reversible through tactful rhetorical address.[50]

On balance, then, notwithstanding his forays into the view that language does not merely represent reality but actively shapes our picture of it, Campbell's overall perspective is strongly rationalist and foundationalist. While he regards passion, imagination, and memory as intrinsic to persuasion, he also regards persuasion as strictly a supplement to rational conviction. He also circumscribes the kinds of belief attainable by rhetoric within the limits of what God allows us to know and enjoy as truth. Persuasion can be truthful only under these conditions; otherwise, as Locke warned, it degenerates rapidly into mere enthusiasm.

Blair's influential *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* would soon articulate a comparable persuasion/conviction distinction. Although more focused than Campbell on the standards of discriminating taste and criticism, Blair shares his contemporary's sense that persuasion and

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conviction can be distinguished along faculty-psychology lines, asserting that "[c]onviction affects the understanding only; persuasion, the will and practice. It is the business of the philosopher to convince me of truth; it is the business of the orator to persuade me to act agreeably to it, by engaging my affections on its side." Recognizing the potential waywardness of persuasion thus defined, Blair cautions further:

> Conviction, and persuasion, do not always go together. They *ought*, indeed, to go together; and *would* do so, if our inclination regularly followed the dictates of our understanding. But as our nature is constituted, I may be convinced, that virtue, justice, or public spirit, are laudable, while, at the same time, I am not persuaded to act according to them.

For Blair as for Campbell, the proper solution was for a rhetor to apply first and foremost to conviction: "for no persuasion is likely to be stable, which is not founded on conviction."[51] The position soon became mainstream, but it did not go uncontested.

On the Discrimination of Romantic Persuasions

A faculty-based, foundationalist treatment of persuasion gained prominence in the late eighteenth century, as manifest in two of the period's main topics of debate: abolition and revolution.[52] Anna Letitia Barbauld, for one, in her "Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq." (1791), follows Blair and Campbell in treating rational conviction as the precondition of effective persuasion, even as she registers a signal instance of its failure. Responding to the recent defeat in Parliament of Wilberforce's motion to abolish the slave trade, Barbauld sardonically urges him to give up the cause, reminding him that although the "Preacher, Poet, Senator" have all exposed the horrors of slavery and "flash'd conviction on . . . [Britain's] shrinking soul," the country nonetheless persists in the crime.[53] Rational conviction and its attendant evidence, however horrific, need supplementation to outweigh powerful financial and political interests, and Barbauld's decision to write a poem about this argues implicitly for poetry's value as an alternative mode of influence. The political radical and satirist Charles Pigott, meanwhile, treats the shortcomings of rational conviction more sardonically, noting in his *Political Dictionary* (1795) that "the only argument of conviction to despots" is a cannon.[54] Conversely, Mary Wollstonecraft, who was familiar with Blair's *Lectures* if not also with Campbell's *Philosophy*, warns against the dangers of an unmoored revolutionary persuasion when she attributes the violent events in France to

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demagogic forms of eloquence that, "persuading instead of convincing," spread enthusiasm rather than understanding through the National Assembly.[55] She thereby reverses Jean-Jacques Rousseau's recommendation of "persuading without convincing," even as she praises the "interesting eloquence" by which he "induc[ed] the men who were charmed with his language to consider his opinions."[56] William Godwin, meanwhile, famously denounces the "sort of magic persuasion" that enables political institutions to elicit unthinking obedience and argues instead that "if conviction of the understanding be the compass which is to direct our proceedings in the general affairs, we shall have many reforms, but no revolutions."[57] Godwin, however, is also notable for reorienting his compass in the direction of persuasion, and for recommending such reorientation in others. As we will see in Chapter 2, in 1794 he urged a fellow reformer charged with sedition to make every syllable of his defense "fraught with persuasion," and the same year he explored the compatibility of persuasion with political justice in *Things as They Are* (a novel of false conviction in multiple senses), eventually defending the tendency to be "persuaded . . . [and] repersuaded" in contrary directions as an inevitable feature of the human mind and a necessary mechanism of progress.[58]

Godwin's openness to persuasion (including about persuasion) makes him representative of the writers addressed in this study, and it is worth disambiguating that attitude from those discerned by critics in some further contemporaries. The need to give opposing viewpoints a fair hearing comes to the fore in Matthew Bevis's *The Art of Eloquence* (2007), a study of the influence of parliamentary oratory on Lord Byron and several later nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers. Bevis argues that at a moment when, amid the rise of debating societies and the fourth estate of the press, the British people became (in the words of *The Times*) "a debating, that is, a Parliamentary people," writers were uniquely receptive to the force of eloquence and opinion, and felt a responsibility to entertain multiple perspectives rather than peremptorily favor just one.[59] Bevis's chapter on Byron shows how a Whig understanding of the ideal constitution as a balance of powers inspired a polyvocal poetry in which homophony and other forms of ambiguity serve to give hearing, literally and figuratively, to diverse voices (and voicings) in disputed questions.[60] Byron thus typifies, for Bevis, the disinterestedness that Matthew Arnold praised as the ability to "return . . . upon" oneself and be "irresistibly carried . . . to the opposite side of the question" despite one's prior commitments, which Bevis glosses as the achievement of a neutral "balance between affirmation and concession that is at once politically responsive

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and responsible."[61] One holds a "literary 'persuasion,'" or what Bevis also calls a "poised conviction," when one entertains various positions simultaneously and suspends judgment among them.[62]

While Arnold, in the remarks on disinterestedness just quoted, is elaborating on Edmund Burke's ability to "return ... upon himself" in *Thoughts on French Affairs* (1791), Burke was hardly an advocate for the kind of neutrality Arnold recommended.[63] In David Bromwich's *How Words Make Things Happen* (2019), Burke figures instead as a representative of "persuasion" now understood as a synonym for powerful, chiefly affective "conviction."[64] Bromwich elaborates with reference to the "emotion of conviction" described by Walter Bagehot:

> A hot flash seems to burn across the brain. Men in these intense states of mind have altered all history, changed for better or worse the creed of myriads, and desolated or redeemed provinces and ages. Nor is this intensity a sign of truth, for it is precisely strongest in these points in which men differ most from each other.

This emotion of conviction, Bagehot continues, is akin to the "strong glow of faith" in that it needs no external reinforcement from argument. Whereas "[d]ry minds" achieve "intellectual 'assent'" only by a painstaking review of arguments, "intense convictions make a memory for themselves, and if they can be kept to the truths of which there is good evidence, they give a readiness of intellect, a confidence in action, a consistency in character, which are not to be had without them."[65] Bromwich's prime examples of this emotion of conviction come from Burke's speeches on the trial of Warren Hastings, which sought to awaken in audiences a sense of the national responsibility to defend law and liberty even overseas. By demonstrating his own intense conviction of this responsibility, Bromwich argues, Burke stood a fighting chance of "spur[ring] in listeners a corresponding intensity of feeling."[66] Bromwich, in short, finds in Burke and Bagehot a "persuasion" that is exactly the opposite of the impartiality described by Bevis: a passionate, even quasi-enthusiastic prepossession that seeks its own propagation as physical force, notwithstanding the vagaries of such reception.[67]

For a significant swathe of Romantic writers, however, the experience of intense, unwavering, automatic assent – assent that might *not*, as Bagehot intimated, "be kept to the truths of which there is good evidence" – was a cause of serious concern, as was the egalitarian balancing of discordant opinions. Hazlitt captures the sentiment in his essay "The Spirit of Philosophy" (1836), where he defines the true philosopher as one who

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steers a course beyond "universal and cheap pretensions to infallibility" and "an entire suspension of opinion" (the latter, he notes, "would be nearly impossible, and might be dangerous").[68] For Hazlitt and the contemporaries addressed here, this means holding opinions with a willingness to review their "grounds and principles . . . again and again" and, if necessary "to retreat from an untenable position" and adopt a new one (*CWWH*, 20: 371–72). It is a matter of mobility and malleability, prompted not just by a desire for even-handedness or rhetorical efficacy but by epistemology, and specifically by a sense of the shifting nature of truth. In "The Spirit of Controversy" (1830) Hazlitt asserts that

> Truth is not one thing, but has many aspects and many shades of difference; it is neither all black nor all white; sees something wrong on its own side, something right in others; makes concessions to an adversary, allowances for human frailty, and is nearer akin to charity than the dealers in controversy or the declaimers against it are apt to imagine.[69]

For Hazlitt, this sense of the multiplicity of truth had roots in the culture of rational Dissent in which he had been educated, which stressed the values of open, candid debate and the questioning of authority, as discussed in Chapter 1.[70] The Dissenting tradition was also influential for Godwin, who studied to become a minister before moving toward deism and philosophy instead. Yet allowances for the fallibility of human judgment and the need for a measure of "charity" or "concession" to others' views, even when they contradicted one's own, also flourished outside that tradition, as we will see with Wordsworth, Austen, Shelley, and to some extent De Quincey.

This book, then, is about the Romantic redefinition and reimagination of forms of belief adequate to the multiplicity of truth: its correlation with contingent, variable, and often conflicting human perceptions and judgments. To continue in Hazlitt's terms, it is about the possibility of striking a "balance" between the extremes of "folly and violence" – of persisting in error or forcibly imposing our views on others (*CWWH*, 20: 310). For the writers addressed here, I argue, that possibility does not depend on absolute, predetermined standards but must be achieved in controversy itself: in the unfolding of self-consciously reversible positions in De Quincey and Hazlitt, the clash of plausible tales in Godwin and Wordsworth, the intimate quarrels in Austen, and the disruptive ambiguities of the poetic line in Shelley. These writers' shared belief in controversy as a necessary testing-ground for persuasion represents an important facet of the Romantic commitment to robust debate as it encompassed but also

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exceeded the 1790s' "War of Ideas" and the tradition of religious Dissent. Mark Canuel argues that the Romantic pursuit of progress, or "increasing freedom, equality, and relief from injury," depended on the solicitation of "contending vantage points," even when they contended about the very meaning of progress.[71] Focusing on literary as well as political and scientific explorations of progressive topoi, Canuel delineates a Romantic progressivism that pursued collective improvement or the common good without suppressing dissent in favor of consensus. Jon Mee locates a comparable spirit of contention in the period's literature and cultures of conversation, where, he argues, established values and practices of politeness jostled with a new premium on intellectual controversy. Conversation, Mee argues, came to be understood as a model for community, as part of an uneven shift from traditional to more democratic forms of authority, while communal culture came in turn to be understood as a "form of conversation," "a place of contention as much as . . . of dialogue," triggering ideals of broad participation but also bids at regulation.[72]

While sharing these critics' interest in Romanticism's cultures of controversy as they extended across the literary and public spheres, *Reimagining Persuasion* also departs from them in its focus on the kind of beliefs most suited to progressive disputes and the dilemmas involved in forming and transforming them without absolutes. The particular dynamism of such beliefs can be illuminated with reference to the contemporaneous emergence in Britain of a mobile and relative sense of historical situatedness. Influentially described by James Chandler in *England in 1819*, this Romantic historicism pivots on a particular understanding of its main object of deliberation, the case. Long the focus of the Roman Catholic casuistry of conscience, then dwindling in Europe, the case developed in Britain along secular lines as it came to bear on historical and legal questions. To describe the result, Chandler turns to the Dutch-German literary critic André Jolles, who in *Simple Forms* (*Einfache Formen*, 1930) offers a rare theoretical account of the case as a cognitive form.[73] According to Jolles, a case is not just a problematic deviation from a general scheme or set of norms (as in traditional casuistry, and as suggested by the Latin *casus*, or fall), but a disturbance of the scheme itself such that it, too, is called into question. An action is measured against a norm (e.g., a theft against the law), but the norm is also measured against other norms (e.g., the law against morality) "in an ascending series."[74] Jolles describes the resulting "swaying and swinging" of the mental scales as now the instance, now the norm undergoes judgment.[75] This dynamic explains a second hallmark of the cognitive form of the case: it is never settled. The

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question "By what norm should we judge?" forestalls a conclusive answer: "it imposes the duty of judgment upon us, but does not itself contain the judgment."[76] In Chandler's words, "its mode is always to be calling for deliberation," making a perpetual appeal to judgment.[77]

As Jolles and Chandler suggest, "judgment" names both a process of deliberation and its outcome, the formation of a belief or opinion.[78] Both senses are operative in the period, and their respective weighting goes to heart of the problem of persuasion for Romantic writers. As Austen puts it in *Northanger Abbey*: "To be always firm must be to be often obstinate. When properly to relax is the trial of judgment."[79] Judgment, that is, must decide whether we hold a belief firmly or more loosely, as what the writers in this book call a "conviction" or a "persuasion" – a distinction glossed over by the single term "judgment" when applied to any outcome of deliberation or with an implication of total authority. A persuasion, in other words, is a judgment open to renewed judgment, as befits the dynamism of the case. It involves a willingness to review the "grounds and principles" of assent "again and again" and, if necessary, "to retreat from an untenable position" and adopt a new one (*CWWH*, 20: 371–72). A brief return to the case of (and in) Austen's *Persuasion* can help clarify the point. From the outset, the novel pits Sir Walter's static values against Anne's sense of the relativity of values and persuasions – their variability and perpetual appeals to judgment. That Anne refuses an engagement once does not mean she should refuse it twice, and not because the first persuasion was wrong. She can be right in both cases, as she concludes in conversation with Wentworth, because they are distinct cases, and Wentworth's error is to judge them by a single rule. When he admits to having assumed that Lady Russell would prevail on Anne to marry Mr. Elliot, just as earlier she prevailed on her to reject Wentworth, Anne admonishes him: "You should have distinguished, . . . the case [being] so different" (*P*, 265). No single rule can take the correct measure in all circumstances, and the challenge – cast into further relief by the naval context of the novel – is to navigate uncertainty without renouncing the hope of finding community and cognitive resting places, or ports of call.

The possibility of achieving some justified measure of stability in one's beliefs, a resting place of some duration, bears emphasis in tandem with the need to "relax" our firmest judgments. This is one feature of the distinct brand of irony exhibited by the texts I address. They are sometimes strategically, structurally ironic (as when dogmatic characters undermine their own assertions, or a third-person narrator does so for them), but they are also constitutionally ironic in their attention to the contingency of

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belief. They bear selective comparison in this regard with the literature of eighteenth-century British skepticism, in which Fred Parker discerns a characteristic "doubleness": the advancement of a position with a playful "consciousness of . . . [its] necessary provisionality or contingency: as if opening a dialogue."[80] Often, Parker notes, this takes the form of an invocation of nature or natural instinct at a moment of impasse, when skepticism confronts the question of how to get on with our lives. Hume, for instance, at the conclusion of Book I of the *Treatise*, famously seeks respite from "melancholy" skepticism in social distractions like dining and backgammon (269), but the sudden shift from mental abstraction to physical immediacy only suggests how "incongruously slender a basis . . . for a philosophy of life" our sociable amusements afford.[81] The seventeenth-century recourse to fideism being unavailable to the English skeptic, irony offers a way of living in a world whose conventions one must finally adopt, but with necessary incredulity. The simultaneous assertion and undercutting of assertion is also characteristic of the Romantic literature of persuasion examined here, with the important proviso that the undercutting does not wholly undermine the believing. Persuasion can still be a positive, assertive state. What distinguishes even the firmest persuasion from dogmatism is its permeability to others' opinions, as well as its nondogmatic modes of expression. Persuasion does not, in other words, forbid the taking of stances, only their ossification – their refusal to stand back critically from themselves.[82]

Parker's account of Hume enables a few more important distinctions. For one, whereas Hume combined a "corrosive scepticism" about the foundations of beliefs with an endorsement of "life lived according to custom, sentiment, and inclination," the writers addressed here were by no means wedded to custom or precedent.[83] Their skepticism most often accompanies a social and political outlook that is at least critical, and in many cases outrightly reformist or revolutionary. Common sense and consensus are less important to these writers than an allowance for seeing things another way.[84] Nor does the Romantic reimagining of persuasion retain much if any of the "sense of passivity" to larger forces (of nature or natural instinct) or of the illusoriness of free choice that Parker highlights in his eighteenth-century sources – Hume but also Pope, Sterne, and Johnson.[85] In several key instances, notably those of Godwin and Shelley, Romantic treatments of persuasion tackle head-on the role and limits of necessity in ways that build on and rework eighteenth-century precedents. There is admittedly a deep commonality with Hume in his successors' recognition that living with skepticism does not mean simply

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ignoring it or blithely accepting all habit-driven inferences, but calls instead for testing belief against one's own and others' experiences.[86] But the writers examined here are also uniquely disposed to reckon further with the nature and stakes of the particular kind of belief they call "persuasion." In their works, persuasion is not just a synonym for probable belief or a name for affective appeals that might supplement or speciously stand in for rational, stable convictions. Rather, it denotes a uniquely reflective, flexible mindset worth the often considerable effort involved in achieving and sustaining it.

My case for this sense of persuasion is broadly complementary to that of Daniel Stout, who examines how, around 1800, natural science and the law came to see persuasion as predicated not strictly on facts but on their arrangement. As Stout observes, persuasiveness was newly regarded (by some) as a matter of "how facts fit, comport, or interact with each other" in a given explanatory framework.[87] It was a matter, in other words, of what Romantic-era legal sources called the "assemblage of facts" in circumstantial evidence and the resulting "preponderance" of this or that fact therein.[88] Circumstantial evidence, with its often narrative stand-ins for manifest signs of guilt and innocence, was newly permissible in British trials of the period, as we will see in Chapter 2. Stout argues that this entailed a drifting of legal judgment (insofar as it concerned arrangements chiefly of words) toward forms of aesthetic judgment that relied on "intuition or instinct."[89] My argument, however, is that Romantic writers in fact grappled with the question of whether and how, without recourse to certainties or mere gut-feel, we can have better or worse grounds for finding certain evidentiary arrangements more compelling than others. I focus, moreover, not primarily on natural science or law (though the latter is important to Chapter 2) but on developments in literature in the period's broad sense of the term: works of argumentative prose as well as imaginative fictions in diverse genres. These, too, involved and examined the persuasive power of arrangement, extending it beyond facts and ideas to include formal resources that earlier rhetorical theorists and philosophers had deemed merely ornamental. De Quincey's heterodox redefinition of persuasion as arrangement, discussed in Chapter 1, turns on precisely such resources: persuasion, he argues, is an art of "aggrandizing and bringing out into strong relief . . . some aspect of truth which . . . rests upon artificial aids," notably those of style and figuration (*WTDQ*, 6: 160). The resources that come to the fore hereafter also include divergent narrative and argumentative perspectives, lexical hedges, suggestive polysemy, and rhetorical and rhythmical pauses. In poetry especially, the

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graphic qualities of texts prove as important as the semantic. Shelley's ellipses and enjambments, for instance, show how craft could go where speech and overt expostulation could not, especially at moments when public contestation was minimized.[90]

While sound and speech are vitally important to the texts I address, I am concerned above all with the (re)arrangements of belief enabled by print and reading. Writers' faith in the capacity of literature to batter down "so many strongholds of prejudice and power" and achieve "revolutions in opinion" was predicated to no small degree on the unique affordances of print to engage and slow down our processes of judgment, an effect typically denied by the celerity and impermanence of speech.[91] As Matthew Bevis puts it, writing "wards off the decisiveness of the tongue," even as it "asks us to try out its words on our tongues so that we might develop our sense of what is at stake in the process of our decision-making."[92] Or as Hazlitt remarked, writing "give[s] the mind pause."[93] This could be only an ideal: Godwin was aware that *Things as They Are* might be "hastily gobbled up" rather than "chew[ed] and digest[ed]."[94] Yet the hope that readers might take time to deliberate – that they might practice the kind of active, recursive hermeneutic attention that Stefan Uhlig notes was prohibited by the ambition of the Scottish rhetoric to "guarantee conviction"[95] – seems to motivate Romantic writers' own prominent emphases on scenes of deliberation. If print in general brings other people's thoughts into our perceptual fields in a way that would not otherwise be possible, the works addressed here foreground in significant detail the processes by which we judge for ourselves and others, as well as the circumstances in which we do so. Frances Ferguson calls attention to the highly deliberative character of the epistolary novels of Samuel Richardson, in which moral debates are rendered at length and without authorial interventions that would direct characters' or readers' judgments. Epistolarity, she argues, presented Richardson with an analogue to the new technique of shorthand that, in the law courts and Parliament, was preserving oral testimony more or less complete.[96] Yet deliberation could be showcased by means of other literary techniques, as we will see with the recursiveness of De Quincey's and Hazlitt's essays, the first-person narration of Godwin's *Things as They Are*, the soliloquies of Wordsworth's *Borderers*, the ironically split perspectives of Austen's fiction, and the suspensive syntax of Shelley's verse. Moreover, by their innovative marshaling of the resources of print not just to represent deliberative persuasion but to spur it in readers, these works and writers show how textuality and reading are themselves significant circumstances for belief-formation,

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involving differently consequential experiential textures and temporalities than speech and hearing.

A word is in order about why Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is not a focus hereafter, even though it mounts a powerful critique of cognitive rigidity. A decidedly intractable sort of persuasion is prominent from the first paragraphs of the novel, as Walton records his "vain attempts to be persuaded" that the North Pole is a region of "frost and desolation," not "beauty and delight."[97] Fixity and force of belief become leitmotifs of the ensuing narrative, as when Victor's mother dies because she resists the "many arguments . . . urged to persuade" her not to visit Elizabeth's sick room (26), and Victor thereafter cannot soon "persuade" himself that she is gone (27). He becomes instead as dead set in his ambition to create life as in his subsequent sense of the unmitigated viciousness of the Creature. Catching a glimpse of the "filthy daemon" just after the death of William, Victor is instantaneously "convinced" of the Creature's guilt: "The mere presence of the idea was an irresistible proof of the fact" (56). Victor has no need for evidence, and he likewise feels no onus to provide any in defense of Justine Moritz when she is falsely accused and convicted of the murder on circumstantial grounds.[98] (He tells Elizabeth instead that Justine's innocence "shall be proved" [60], apparently vesting faith in the sheer convictive force of truth, but also covering his tracks.) The Creature in turn becomes rigid in his sense of an entitlement to revenge. What he describes as a reasonable attempt to prevail on Victor at Montanvert for a companion and mate turns conspicuously on a threat of physical violence ("Remember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself" [77]). Victor's subsequent revocation of his promise also defies deliberation: he destroys the half-created female while "banish[ing]" from his mind "every thought that could lead to a different conclusion" (143). He subsequently tries to give the same convictive force to the narrative of his experiences, as Walton suggests when he notes that Victor has taken the liberty of "correct[ing] and augment[ing]" the transcript "in many places; but principally in giving the life and spirit to the conversations he held with his enemy" (179). That seemingly extraneous "the" – in "giving *the* life and spirit" – subtly signals Victor's desire to give the narrative only the life he thinks it ought to have, much as he has attempted with the Creature.[99] This is just one instance of how the novel invites criticism of the irrational and intractable convictions-cum-persuasions of its main characters (a more conspicuous technique being the three-level narrative that prevents the consolidation of a single perspective). Mary Shelley does not, however, theorize or represent an alternative of self-reflexive, malleable persuasion to

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the extent pursued by the contemporaries addressed here. Rather, any countervailing models of belief – Clerval with his love of narrative and argumentative invention, Elizabeth with her curiosity about other ways of life, and even the Creature with his eventual self-reproach – are tragically engulfed by the conflicts born of their own or others' rigidities. And while Victor at one point questions the rightness of his beliefs (37), he remains insistent in the end on the blamelessness of his conduct and urges Walton's crew, faced with certain death at sea, to be likewise "firm as a rock" in their purpose – "heroes who have fought and conquered" (183).[100] Percy Shelley, by contrast, would show that heroes should in fact be more malleable than the rocks to which they are fettered, while Austen would have the unsung heroine Anne Elliot justify her own past persuasions as matters of circumstantial judgment rather than absolute rule.

I have chosen to focus on De Quincey, Hazlitt, Godwin, Wordsworth, Austen, and Percy Shelley, then, because of their explicit interest in reimagining persuasion as an alternative to strong conviction and their innovative means of enacting it. They are concerned, in overlapping ways, with the dynamics of persuasion in the domains of law, love, politics, and literature, and they all attend closely to how it runs up there against significant risks and challenges, including the potential for misjudgment, the temptation to mock others, a reckoning with the force of institutions, a giving in to despair, and a (re)turn to the seeming surety of conviction. These writers also allow me to pursue the book's central concept across conventional period divisions, including of first and second generation, female and male, radical and conservative, and poetry and prose, drawing out a throughline of commitment to deliberation over didacticism, and possibility over precedent.

Chapter 1 delineates the overlapping new paradigms of persuasion elaborated by De Quincey and Hazlitt in variously direct and indirect response to Campbell and Hume, and considers their implications for the genre of the periodical essay. Over against Campbell's mainstream definition of persuasion as an emotional supplement to rational conviction, De Quincey and Hazlitt, in their essays chiefly of the 1820s and 1830s, formulate the alternative notion of a self-consciously partial and flexible way of holding and forming beliefs. De Quincey, in his "Rhetoric" essay, breaks with established theories to define persuasion as a shifting of the mental scales under the weight chiefly of style and figuration, but his performance of such recalibration in "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" makes apparent the problem of anything-goes judgment that leads him to restrict persuasion to "subjective" domains like rhetoric

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and poetry. Hazlitt, meanwhile, in his essays on belief, opinion, and controversy, goes the further step of endorsing (and enacting) malleable persuasions in all domains of dispute, fending off the specter of boundless relativism by invoking principles of truth, liberty, and justice that can be defined and achieved only in the conflict among discordant persuasions. He also theorizes the unique affinity of persuasion with imaginative literature, articulating how it might be at once cognitively and politically transformative without being merely didactic.

Chapter 2 addresses the ethical and legal dimensions of malleable persuasions, focusing on Godwin's and Wordsworth's responses to the rise of probabilism, specifically the new allowance in English law courts for circumstantial evidence, or narratives that connected causes to effects in plausible ways. As such evidence in the 1790s became subject to abuse, notably in an unprecedented number of trials for treason and sedition, Godwin and Wordsworth came to share a concern with how plausibility might instead serve the cause of justice. In *Things as They Are*, I argue, Godwin draws on Cicero's newly relevant advice about the construction of plausible narratives, showing how the use of another's words as evidence can either intensify persuasion or call it into question, thus effecting a major break with his insistence on unvarnished truth and rationality in the first edition of *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. Wordsworth, meanwhile, in his verse drama *The Borderers*, explores the ambivalences of plausibility in a paralegal hinterland: the thirteenth-century border between England and Scotland, where individual judgment carried the weight of legal conviction. I show how Wordsworth's imagination of a miscarriage of justice shares with Godwin's novel a sense of the value of eschewing rigid convictions when adequate grounds are wanting, even as it attests to their powerful appeal, in ways that Wordsworth's later poetry would amplify.

The circumstantial character of our judgments was likewise of interest to Austen, who considered how, in a world without arranged marriages, courtship carried the philosophical weight that we assign more routinely to legal and political deliberations. Chapter 3 argues that across the gamut of Austen's works, we see a marked change in the representation of persuasion and the ideal marriage of minds. Preliminary discussion of Austen's teenage writings establishes her familiarity with the cultural valorization of unwavering conviction and her sharp sense of the often willful, self-interested motives that determine it. I then consider her ironic portrayals of the triumph of such conviction in *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*, and her depiction of its shortcomings and contradictions,

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especially for women, in *Mansfield Park*. By contrast, in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, I argue, Austen makes significant allowances for the value of disagreement among the open-minded, while in *Persuasion* she engages most directly with the contingent and relative qualities of judgment that make good quarrels a personal and communal imperative. The result, I show, is a wholly new valence for "persuasion" in *Persuasion*, where it denotes a form of belief that is open to change, and that thereby paradoxically gains the possibility of being enduring.

Austen's faith in love as our one potentially justified "conviction" in life finds a parallel in Shelley's belief that we might realize ideals of love, admiration, trust, hope, and endurance without transcendental guarantees. Chapter 4 shows how Shelley moves from taking negative positions on others' beliefs to exploring how to hold and encourage hopeful beliefs without absolutes. The first section examines Shelley's developing argument, in his philosophical prose, for the ethical and epistemic value of the flexible mindset he calls "persuasion" within the framework of necessity. The abiding appeal of rigid convictions, and of the literary genres that might impose them, comes to the fore in his fragmentary "Satire upon Satire" and *Julian and Maddalo*, which demonstrate the respective shortcomings of scourge-like satire and friendly conversation as rhetorical options for the would-be reformer. I then show how, in *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley reimagines persuasion as a matter chiefly of craft and configuration: of rearranging what we think we know or leaving it open-ended, in ways uniquely enabled by the semantic ambiguities and self-interruptions of verse. Shelley's main graphic, rhythmical, and rhetorical instrument for this, I argue, is the ellipsis, serial dots that perform the same disruptive function as the voids and vacancies that he describes in his prose as essential preconditions for reform.

Across these four chapters, then, *Reimagining Persuasion* tracks the emergence of a new concept of persuasion compatible with the partiality of human belief, in the double sense of bias and limitation, and highlights the unique resources of written language to represent and elicit it. But the book also considers the relevance of the Romantic reimagining of persuasion for modern debates about persuasion as a feature of our political and professional lives. In the Coda, I suggest how the concept of malleable persuasion might prove suggestive in our own moment of polarized convictions and partisan divides. Political theory, despite its resurgent interest in historical rhetorics, has by and large overlooked the Romantic rethinking of persuasion, as has rhetorical studies. Literary studies, meanwhile, expresses ambivalence about the persuasive status of its objects and

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critical practices – an ambivalence born of the very schism between literature and rhetoric long associated with Romanticism, and that this book calls newly into question. At a moment when some in the discipline are recommending generous or collaborative thinking as alternatives to rhetorical aggression, the Romantic concept of persuasion suggests that we need not reject controversy itself as the problem, only controversy conducted in a spirit of conviction, or intellectual conquest. Rather than assume synonymy between persuasion and conviction, that is, and dismiss them both together as either so much domineering or else so much boundless subjectivism, we might consider the deep compatibility between the experiences of judgment under uncertainty specific to literary criticism and to persuasion as it was reimagined in Romantic writing.

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