

SIR ISRAEL GOLLANCZ MEMORIAL LECTURE

Bonjour Paresse: Literary Waste and Recycling in Book 4 of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*

JAMES SIMPSON
Harvard University

WASTE DEFINITION IS AN INEVITABLE function of cultural history. We routinely underline the value of studying the past, but if we think about it, we know that we are going to have to jettison a good part of any past. Reading takes time and requires energy, which are irreducible elements in the economy of scholarship. C. S. Lewis wrote this in the *Allegory of Love*: 'Humanity does not pass through phases as a train passes through stations: being alive, it has the privilege of always moving yet never leaving anything behind.'¹ The paucity of footnotes in that book offers some clue as to how Lewis had the confidence to make this erroneous statement. Not leaving anything behind might be a potential privilege, but none of us can enjoy it, since none of us has world enough and time. The entire system of book preservation and retrieval, including anthologies, indices, encyclopaedias, and libraries might be designed to stay the inevitable tendency to leave books behind, but that system equally satisfies our secret desire for dereliction: the anthology selects; the index allows us to pick; the encyclopaedia gives us the facts neatly wrapped and summarised; and the library is a tomb of books, a place for relieving a bad conscience as much as giving readerly access: we know the book is there, even as we also know that we will never read it.

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¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Traditions* (London, 1972; first published 1936), p. 1.

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Indeed, each hugely successful pedagogic movement knows that it must legitimate short cuts and must actively define waste material that a student need not, or, better, should not read. Built secretly into the programme of such pedagogies is a shrewd appreciation of human limitations. To look no further than the relatively recent English past, one of the secrets of Leavisite success was the permission it gave *not* to read whole libraries of books. Donald Davie recorded the pleasure of a Leavisite education thus:

Every issue of the magazine [i.e. *Scrutiny*] made me a present of perhaps a dozen authors or books or whole periods and genres of literature which I not only *need* not read, but *should not*. To be spared so much of literature, and at the same time earn moral credit by the exemption—no wonder that I loved *Scrutiny*, and Leavis's *Revaluation* and his *New Bearings in English Poetry*.²

The public face of Leavisism may have been stringently rigorous, but one secret of its success was permission to skip.

These pedagogic movements are, predictably, very alluring in revolutionary periods, precisely because what drives the entire revolutionary moment is a desire to jettison the burdens of history, which requires new definitions of waste. Moments of cultural revolution take a certain pleasure in trashing what has been newly defined as cultural waste, as in Augustine's *City of God*, where Augustine gleefully reduces pagan cultic practice to a kind of rubble. Moments of cultural revolution can even go so far as to destroy books, as in Mao's China, for example. In sixteenth-century England libraries were also destroyed, and that destruction was in part underwritten by alluring and brilliantly successful new pedagogies. Those were either Humanism, which (in its early phases) mocked scholasticism as cultural rubbish, or evangelical religion, which insisted that only one book was necessary. All others, and in particular 'poetry', were dismissed as idle distraction, or, worse, as muddy pools or even vomit, a kind of literary sewage. John Bale reports on the treatment of monastic books as waste matter after the dissolution of the monasteries: the new owners of the books 'reserved of those lybrarye bokes, some to serve theyr iakes, some to scoure theyr candel styckes, and some to rubbe their bootes'. At the service of both these pedagogies was the new philology, whose sophisticated techniques were in part designed to define what books need *not* be read. The philological project is driven by an economy of sorts: one

² Cited in Muriel Bradbrook, "'Nor Shall My Sword": The Leavises' Mythology', in Denys Thompson (ed.), *The Leavises: Recollections and Impressions* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 29–43 (at p. 36).

recovers literary value by scraping away the accreted, accidental waste of history. Cultural history is in part driven by the need to minimise exhaustion, and so needs actively to *define* waste.

Anxiety about waste in the sixteenth century was also accentuated by new theological pressures on the very notion of productive works. The importation of Lutheran theology into England in the 1520s brought with it a radical devaluation of human works, since, by the terms of this theology, only God's unmerited grace could save (and work). Irredeemable human sinfulness, and God's predestination of souls, introduced a short circuit into the economy of works, since human works became genuine, unrecyclable waste before God. Suddenly evangelicals found themselves surrounded and swamped by waste, by a once-numinous world that was now mere matter. Bunyan's list of what is on sale at Vanity Fair unsettlingly lumps evident waste with just about everything else: all that is civil and social is included in the list of vanities: 'as houses, lands, trades, places, honours, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures; and delights of all sorts, such as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not'.³ The abject uselessness of works reduces everything to vanity, in which case one can only rely on predestination. And predestination changes the function of works: works no longer operate in an economy of salvation, but serve instead as *signs* of divine approbation, or otherwise. Works, despite their uselessness as currency, become valuable as signs of a gift already bestowed. It is perhaps no accident that the most haunting images of despair derive from a post-Lutheran Northern Europe, as in Dürer's *Melancholia* (1514) or Bruegel's *Desidia* (c.1557). If Protestants did indeed work harder and idealise work, it was because works had become a semiotic field one must scrutinise for signs of divine approval. The uncertainty and necessity of the search produced the neurotic commitment to keep working until such a sign demonstrably appeared.⁴

Many of us are the living heirs of Protestant anxiety regarding work and waste. We find it difficult to recover the charisma of idleness of any kind, be it religious or aristocratic. Even if most of the seven deadly sins

³ John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners and Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Roger Sharrock (London, 1966), p. 211.

⁴ For the paradox of Protestant dismissal of and commitment to works, see Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons (New York, 1958; first published 1904), p. 112.

are often treated in secular society as virtues of a kind, or at worst as forgivable foibles, sloth is the one sin whose status as sin remains non-negotiable. Professional university literary readers are in particular vulnerable to charges of idleness. The carapace of protocols governing our productivity, and our own eagerness to demonstrate the intensity of our labour, disguise but cannot conceal that literary reading is non-utilitarian; it can very easily be described as wasting time, as conspicuous and unproductive consumption. We have a long and embarrassing tradition behind us, after all, of our own kind dismissing reading as a waste of time. Coleridge, for example, refused to dignify ‘the *pass-time*, or rather *kill-time*’ of reading ‘novels and tales of chivalry in prose or rhyme’ with the name of reading:

Call it rather a sort of beggarly day-dreaming, during which the mind of the dreamer furnishes for itself nothing but laziness and a little mawkish sensibility; while the whole *materiel* and imagery of the doze is supplied *ab extra* by a sort of mental *camera obscura* manufactured at the printing office, which *pro tempore* fixes, reflects and transmits the moving phantasms of one man’s delirium, so as to people the barrenness of an hundred other brains afflicted with the same trance or suspension of all common sense and all definite purpose.

Reading of this kind satisfies the simultaneous ‘indulgence of sloth, and hatred of vacancy’; it should be classed along with ‘gaming, swinging, or swaying on a chair or gate; spitting over a bridge; smoking; snuff-taking; tête-à-tête quarrels after dinner between husband and wife’.⁵

In this essay I want to get behind that durable hostility to idleness, and in particular to apparently wasted, idle reading. My larger claim is that late medieval, pre-Reformation textual practice is not driven by a need to define and expel cultural waste; on the contrary, idle reading is an essential part of a cultural economy. More specifically, *otium* and idle reading are an essential part of a psychic economy. That is an important argument for all literary study, since if it is not true then the study of literature per se looks otiose in the negative sense (literary reading takes time, and has no utilitarian purpose).⁶

⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate 2 vols. (Princeton, 1983), vol. 1, chap. 3, n. 2, pp. 48–9. I am grateful to my colleague Leah Price for alerting me to this delightful citation. One might add Pope’s comment, in the Preface to 1717 *Works*: ‘Poetry and Criticism being by no means the universal concern of the world, but only the affair of idle men who write in their closets, and idle men who read there’. See *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London, 1963), p. xxv.

⁶ For the Roman ideal of *otium*, see Jean-Marie André, *L’Otium dans la vie morale et intellectuelle romaine, des origines à l’époque augustéenne* (Paris, 1966). For the ambivalence towards

The case is generated from consideration of Book 4 of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (1390–2). There it is a kind of hardest case, since Amans' literary education in that book looks like nothing so much as a plain waste of time idly frittered. The text as a whole, further, seems unworried about idling away in archives of old texts.

I

It would, of course, be possible if paradoxical to generate a whole branch of Idleness Studies in Middle English. We cannot do that in one essay, but we can make a start at the most delightful point of entry, into erotic and literary idleness. I suggest we enter the Garden of Love, whose portress is the gloriously insouciant Oiseuse, who 'porter of the gate is of delices', and who, by her own account, worries about nothing 'but to my joye and my pleyng'.⁷ The *Confessio* is a dialogue between Amans, the lover, and his confessor, Genius, whose role it is to offer Amans therapy for his hopeless love longing. Each book of the poem works within one of the seven deadly sins of which the lover may be guilty. Book 4 of the *Confessio* broaches the sin of Sloth in its various branches: unpunctuality (*lachesse*), pusillanimity, forgetfulness, negligence, idleness, somnolence, and despair (*tristesse*).

The enterprise of Amans' encounter with Genius is of course a therapeutic one, the apparent aim of which is to move Amans on from debilitating psychic stasis as a lover. That psychic stasis is most fully on show in the discussion of Sloth. Strikingly, nothing much moves at all in Book 4. Both Amans and Genius occupy roughly the same position for a good deal of the book, and both positions can plausibly be described as wholly unproductive. I deal in this section with Amans the idle lover and in the next with Genius the idle literary teacher.

Amans denies that he is slothful under some of the pertinent heads. He has never missed a lover's appointment, not least because he has never been given one. Neither has he been idle: 'toward love, as be mi wit, | Al ydel

otium in the Renaissance, see Brian Vickers, 'Leisure and Idleness in the Renaissance: the Ambivalence of *otium*', *Renaissance Studies*, 4 (1990), 1–37, 107–54.

⁷ Chaucer, *The Romaunt of the Rose*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford, 1987), line 598.

was I nevere yit' (4. 1115–16).⁸ Certainly he has procrastinated, and he has also been a coward; yes, he has forgotten his lines, and he is subject to the 'sin' of what he calls 'tristesce'. Often as not, though, he is 'innocent' of sloth. The more he insists on just how busy he is as a lover, however, the more he fills out the very image of an entirely inactive, idle and profitless life. The amusing Ovidian conceit of accounting for sloth as busyness runs as a comic leitmotif throughout the book.⁹ Thus in Amans' denial of idleness, he insists that he is busy as a bee: whatever his lady bids him do, it is done; should she call him, he is there; if she sits, then he is on his knees nearby, but if she stands, then so does he; he intently examines her graceful fingers as she does embroidery; he arranges his countenance to look just right; sometimes he plays with the puppies on the bed, sometimes on the ground. Sometimes, for a change, he plays with the caged birdies, or with servants, and so on, 'to dreche forth the long dai' (4. 1185). This catalogue of entirely idle pursuits is itemised so as to demonstrate just how busy a man can be: 'Thus mowe ye sen mi besi whiel, | That goth nocht ydeliche aboute' (4. 1196–7).

Amans' predicament throughout the book conforms to a formula along the lines of 'the more I do, the less I do'. He articulates that formula in a variety of ways: 'The more besinesse I leie . . . The more I am refused ofte' (4. 1747–50); 'thogh my besinesse laste, | Al is bot ydel ate laste' (4. 1757–8); in his dreams, the somnolent man 'clymbeth up the banckes | And falleth into slades depe' (4. 2726–7). It is also found within narratives: concerning Araxarathen, Genius says that 'the more he preide, | The lesse love on him sche leide' (4. 3527–8). And it is found at the very beginning of the book, as a headline to Sloth: the person who keeps postponing duties will never conclude: '. . . whan he weneth have an ende, | Thanne is he ferthest to beginne' (4. 12–13). Given his commitment to idleness, in short, everything Amans says about activity is unwittingly ironic: 'Al ydel was I nevere yit' means 'I have always (in this affair at any rate) been entirely idle.'¹⁰ Even Amans becomes revealingly confused

⁸ All citations of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* are taken from *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 2 vols., EETS, es 81, 82 (1900–1901; rpt. Oxford, 1979). Further references will be made in the body of the text, and will cite the poem by book and line number.

⁹ For the Ovidian tactic of describing the otiose life of the lover in the terms of public service, see Joseph B. Solodow, 'Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*: the Lover as Cultural Ideal', *Wiener Studien*, ns 11 (1977), 106–27. Ovid's *Ars* is presented as a treatise on the 'labour' of gaining a lover: see especially *Ars Amatoria*, I. 35–40.

¹⁰ For a well informed account of Amans' sloth within an Ovidian tradition, see Gregory M. Sadlek, *Idleness Working: The Discourse of Love's Labour from Ovid through Chaucer and Gower*

about the definition of idleness: ‘For when the effect is ydelnes, | I not what thing is busyness’ (4. 1759–60).

II

That Amans should consistently deny that he is idle as a lover, only to insist on his total oisivity, is perhaps unsurprising. He is in denial, and that is part of his problem. The disparity between the negligible, often pathetic quality of Amans’ situation and that of the frequently tragic figures in the tales narrated by Genius is a consistent source of comedy in Book 4, as it is throughout the entire *Confessio*. To compare Amans to Aeneas (4. 77–137), Ulysses (4. 147–233), Achilles (4. 1693–1701), and, not least, Hercules (2045–134) has to provoke a quiet mirth.

Comic it might be, but if the *Confessio* were designed to produce only gentle Ovidian mockery, then we might dismiss the poem as otiose, offering no more than subtly amusing satire of an ineffectual lover. Before we took that route, we should of course consider the work’s further reach through the action of Amans’ therapist Genius. In my view Genius is a faculty of the psyche of which Amans is himself a part: Amans is the will, or desire, while Genius represents his imaginative faculty or *ingenium*.¹¹ The reach of this exceptionally rich faculty is wide in the psyche: situated between the common sense on the one side and abstract reason on the

(Washington, DC, 2004), pp. 167–207. Sadlek does not register Genius’ participation in Amans’ sloth at all.

¹¹ For the larger history of the concept of Genius and its later medieval reflexes, see Jane Chance Nitzsche, *The Genius Figure in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (New York, 1975). For the late medieval poetic reflexes specifically, see Winthrop Wetherbee, ‘The Theme of Imagination in Medieval Poetry and the Allegorical Figure Genius’, *Medievalia et Humanistica*, NS 7 (1976–7), 45–64. For the overlapping medieval concepts of the imagination, see Alastair Minnis, ‘Medieval Imagination and Memory’, in Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 2, *The Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 239–74. For the figure of Genius in the *Confessio Amantis*, see James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille’s ‘Anticlaudianus’ and John Gower’s ‘Confessio Amantis’* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 167–97, and Kurt Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion: a Reading of the Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 52–62. For the larger tradition of late medieval philosophical *involucra*, see the indispensable studies of Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: the Literary Influence of the School of Chartres* (Princeton, 1972), and Kathryn L. Lynch, *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form* (Stanford, CA, 1988).

other,¹² *ingenium* is capable both of genial sympathy with sensual desire and of a kind of practical, psychic engineering, in which reason is informed by imaginative apprehension. Genius is the perfect therapist, precisely because he is in touch with both psychic parties at war with each other, sensual desire and abstract reason.

If Genius serves these psychological functions, then he is also by the same token a literary instructor. Just as the *ingenium* mediates between sensual desire and abstract reason, so too does Genius draw on literary texts to mediate between the sensual body of literary narrative and the abstract, rational understanding of those texts. Genius as reader has access to all literature, classical, Biblical and medieval. As a natural faculty, Genius' understanding of texts is primarily ethical; he draws, accordingly, primarily on classical sources.¹³ *Poetria* as a science is valuable precisely because it has the power to inform the reason through imaginative apprehension.¹⁴ The most persuasive ethical defence of poetry as a discipline derives from its power to apprehend the particularities of sensual pain and pleasure in narrative.¹⁵ The tyrannical severities of abstract reason are humanised by commerce with the body of the text, via the imagination.

In short Genius is, among other things, a literary teacher or *grammaticus*.¹⁶ The imagination is a treasure house of remembered images,

¹² For a visual image of the imagination placed between the common sense and the reason, see James Simpson, 'The Rule of Medieval Imagination', in Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson and Nicolette Zeeman (eds.), *Images, Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 4–24, fig. 1.

¹³ For the medieval reception of the classical poetic tradition within which Genius works, see the fine chapters by Winthrop Wetherbee, 'The Study of Classical Authors: From Late Antiquity to the Twelfth Century', and Vincent Gillespie, 'The Study of Classical Authors: from the Twelfth Century to c.1450', both in Minnis and Johnson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 2, 99–144, and 145–236 respectively.

¹⁴ For the classification of poetry in medieval pedagogy under Ethics, see Gillespie, 'The Study of Classical Authors: from the Twelfth Century to c.1450', in Minnis and Johnson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 2, 160–78, and further references.

¹⁵ For theorisations of this tradition, see especially Kathy Eden, *Poetic and Legal Fiction in the Aristotelian Tradition* (Princeton, 1986); Wesley Trimpi, *Muses of One Mind: The Literary Analysis of Experience and its Continuity* (Princeton, 1983), chap. 10; and Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford, 1990). For the applications of this tradition to Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, see Charles Runacres, 'Art and Ethics in the 'Exempla' of *Confessio Amantis*', in A. J. Minnis (ed.), *Gower's 'Confessio Amantis': Responses and Reassessments* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 106–34; Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, pp. 167–97, and 252–71; and Wetherbee, 'The Theme of Imagination in Medieval Poetry'.

¹⁶ For the broad tradition of grammatical education, see Martin Irvine and David Thompson, 'Grammatica and Literary Theory', in Minnis and Johnson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, 2, *The Middle Ages*, 15–41. For practical application, see Wetherbee, 'The

drawn from ever-fresh literary narrative. Genius himself defends this kind of literary remembrance from within the current of Book 4, which is what we would expect, precisely given that this book is in part about forgetting. The forgetful person is such that he ‘lost hath his memorial, | So that he can no wit withholde’ (4. 532–4). That rememorative failure is specifically linked to verbal, and perhaps literary remembrance, since the forgetful person

... in the tellinge of his tale
 Nomore his herte thane his male
 Hath remembrance of thilke forme,
 Whereof he scholde his wit enforme
 As thanne, and yit ne wot he why.
 (4. 545–9)

Later in the book, in the explicit discussion of human labour and sciences, Genius elevates the writing, understanding and transmission of books to the highest form of human work:

Of every wisdom the parfit
 The hyhe god of his spirit
 Yaf to the men in erthe hiere
 Upon the forme and the matiere
 Of that he wolde make hem wise:
 And thus cam in the ferste apprise
 Of bokes and of alle goode
 Thurgh hem that whilom understode
 The lore which to hem was yive,
 Wherof these other, that now live,
 Ben every day to lerne newe.
 (4. 2363–73)

Genius, then, offers ample theorisation from within Book 4 of his own customary practice in that book and in the *Confessio* more generally: profound value derives from philosophical meditation on books, intuiting form in matter. Just as Genius defends the information of ‘wit’ through imaginative remembrance of tales in theory, so too does he draw on literary remembrance in practice: he routinely sees, or so it would appear, the ‘form’, or animating idea within the ‘matiere’ of texts he draws from ‘Poesie’ (4. 2668), texts he even goes so far to call ‘my wrytinges’ (4. 2924).

Study of Classical Authors: From Late Antiquity to the Twelfth Century’, and Gillespie, ‘The Study of Classical Authors: from the Twelfth Century to c.1450’, pp. 150–60.

Genius is nothing if not a literary exegete, working within a long tradition that prescribes reading as an antidote to idleness.¹⁷

In Book 4, though, is he a successful interpreter of texts? The theory might sound impressively subtle as an account of how poetic impressions inform the soul, but Book 4 offers ample evidence that it does not happen in practice this way at all. In the very defence of the writing, understanding and transmission of literary understanding to which I have just alluded, Genius ends with praise of Grammar and Rhetoric. He underlines the achievements of the Latins in the making of books and ‘Poesie’, and makes especial reference to Ovid as the writer to whom the passionate lover should turn for understanding of how love might be cooled (4. 2668–71). Amans’ response does not inspire confidence in the power either of Genius or the educative power of literary books:

My fader, if thei mihte spede
 Mi love, I wolde his bokes rede;
 And if thei techen to restreigne
 Mi love, it were an ydel peine
 To lerne a thing which mai nocht be.
 (4. 2675–9)

Books are a waste of time unless they advance Amans’ love: ‘There is’, he concludes, ‘bot only to poursuie | Mi love, and ydelschipe eschueie’ (4. 2685–6). There is, in short, nothing for it in the matter of books but to eschew idleness, which, coming from Amans, means precisely the opposite: that there is nothing for it in the matter of books but to waste time.

This, needless to say, does not of itself mean that Genius will be a poor transmitter of literary knowledge. There is no shortage of evidence from within Book 4, however, to suggest exactly that. Neither is there shortage of evidence to suggest that literary education can very easily run into the sands of waste. I deal first with the suggestions from within Book 4 to suggest that literary education can be a waste of time, before turning to Genius’ own, spectacularly poor interpretations in this book.

Amans wants to learn, but he is only interested in learning the successful art of love. He is ‘curious | Of hem that conne best enforme | To knowe and witen al the forme, | What falleth unto unto loves craft’ (4. 922–5), but somehow has not yet heard anyone give the surefire recipe for

¹⁷ The *Rule of St Benedict* requires scriptural reading as an antidote to idleness: ‘ociositas inimica est animae; et ideo certis temporibus occupari debent fratres . . . in lectione divina’. See *The Rule of St Benedict*, ed. and trans. Justin McCann (London, 1952), pp. 110–11.

success.¹⁸ While he waits for the right moment, he idly listens to tales: in admitting to procrastination, for example, Amans says that whenever he thinks to speak to his lover, Lachesce bids him wait: ‘Thus with his tales to and fro | Mi time in tariinge he drowh’ (4. 34–5). Tales, perhaps even the tales narrated by Genius, can very easily serve not to inform but rather to neutralise action, by feeding pathological desire. The soporific dangers of poetry are underlined, too, in the narrative of Argus, in which Mercury sends the hundred-eyed Argus to sleep, having first ‘affaited | His lusty tales’, and ‘in his piping evere among | He told him such a lusty song, | That he the fol hath broght aslepe’ (4. 3337–47). All this, of course, before Mercury decapitates the sleeping Argus; by this account, poetry can kill you if you are not careful. Given Amans’ habitual listening practice, all the books adduced by Genius can serve no purpose whatsoever, and might be positively dangerous. Book 4 potentially presents the spectacle of books being remembered only to be forgotten, being read only to be unwritten. This literary nightmare finds explicit utterance in Amans’ account of forgetfulness. Like Troilus at the beginning of Book 3 of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Amans ‘records’ all his lines to his lover before he meets her. Once in her presence, however, they all vanish: he acts as if he had seen a ghost, and entirely forgets his text:

Lich to the bok in which is rased
 The letter, and mai nothing be rad,
 So ben my wittes overlad,
 That what as evere I thoughte have spoken,
 It is out fro my herte stoken.

(4. 580–4)

There are, then, plenty of meta-narrative suggestions in Book 4 that the literary education offered Amans in this very book is less an antidote to the sin of Sloth than an example of that very sin. Book 4 might be offering the spectacle of literary erasure, of texts being adduced only to be idly unwritten before our eyes. One of the ways that Amans says he idly fills in time with his lady, as an alternative to dice, or dancing, or discussing *demandes d’amour*, is none other than literary, ‘to rede and here of Troilus’ (4. 2795). Literature might be on a level with dicing, or ‘swinging on a gate’.

This is, in fact, exactly what happens in Genius’ interpretations in Book 4, which are spectacularly ill-judged. As I suggested above, Genius

¹⁸ For Gower’s conscious and philosophical use of the terms ‘form’ and ‘information’, see Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, pp. 168–79.

has a wide range of psychic potential, capable as he is of sympathy with sensual desire on the one hand and with abstract reason on the other. This psychic range explains his instability, or at least his flexibility, as an interpreter. An earlier view had it that Genius as priest of Venus serves rather the same functions as a Christian priest, and that lovers' sins are Christian sins.¹⁹ Once we recognise Genius' psychic mobility, however, we can account for his interpretative moves that seem wholly consistent with Amans' erotic passion. In Book 4, however, he makes more such moves than in any other book; in Book 4 literary interpretation and education threaten, that is, to exemplify rather than resist the psycho-pathology of sloth.

Gower headlines the sheer wrong-headedness of Genius' interpretations from the very start of Book 4, beginning with Aeneas and Dido. For later medieval readers the *Aeneid* was the secular literary narrative *par excellence*. A long and living tradition of exegesis interpreted Virgil's poem as a *Bildungsroman*, according to which the first six books at any rate were an allegory of (male) ethical development.²⁰ In that powerful tradition Dido personifies lust, whose powerful attractions Aeneas must overcome before he can descend to the underworld and achieve full philosophical understanding.²¹ An alternative tradition, derived from Ovid's *Heroides* 7, aligns itself wholly with Dido.²² Ovid's Dido works into the

¹⁹ For this critical tradition, see, in order, C. S. Lewis, 'Gower', in Peter Nicholson (ed.), *Gower's 'Confessio Amantis': A Critical Anthology* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1991), pp. 15–39 (first published 1936); J. A. W. Bennett, 'Gower's 'Honeste Love'', in *ibid.*, pp. 49–61 (first published 1966); and A. J. Minnis, 'John Gower, Sapiens in Ethics and Politics', in *ibid.*, pp. 158–80 (first published 1980). For revisions to that position, which first stressed the incongruences in the *Confessio*, see James Simpson, 'Ironic Incongruence in the Prologue and Book I of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*', *Neophilologus*, 72 (1988), 617–32; and A. J. Minnis, 'De *Vulgari Auctoritate*: Chaucer, Gower and the Men of Great Authority', in R. F. Yeager (ed.), *Chaucer and Gower: Difference, Mutuality, Exchange* (Victoria, BC, 1991), pp. 36–74.

²⁰ For the three principal classical traditions of Dido (i.e., the Virgilian Dido, the 'historical Dido', and the Ovidian Dido), each alive in the later medieval and early modern periods, see Marilyn Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality and the Medieval 'Aeneid'* (Minneapolis, 1994), pp. 23–73. For the tradition of allegorical interpretation of the *Aeneid*, see Christopher Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the 'Aeneid' from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 84–135.

²¹ For an example of such a reading, see the commentary attributed to Bernard Sylvesteris, *The Commentary on the First Six Books of the 'Aeneid' Commonly Attributed to Bernard Sylvesteris*, eds. Julian Ward Jones and Elizabeth Frances Jones (Lincoln, NB, 1977), pp. 23–5.

²² For this tradition, see especially Desmond, *Reading Dido*; Peter Dronke, 'Dido's Lament: From Medieval Latin Lyric to Chaucer', in Ulrich Justus Stache, Wolfgang Maaz, and Fritz Wagner (eds.), *Kontinuität und Wandel: Lateinische Poesie von Naerius bis Baudelaire* (Hildesheim, 1986), pp. 364–90; and James Simpson, 'Subjects of Triumph and Literary History:

chink in Aeneas's reputation as a faithless lover in the *Aeneid*, and exposes a large area for reinterpretation. The voice of a single, suffering woman of labile memory pits itself, not unsuccessfully, against the voice of Virgil's divine Muses. She watches Aeneas sail away from Carthage, pleading with him to return as she knows he will not. The reader is encouraged to identify with the voice of female, lyric suffering against the epic of male proto-imperialism.

How does Genius interpret Aeneas and Dido? Aeneas arrives in Carthage; Dido falls in love with him; Aeneas leaves, and Dido writes her letter saying that she will commit suicide should he delay his return. When he delays, she criticises his slothful tardiness ('. . . who fond evere such a lak | Of slowthe in eny worthi knight?' (4. 128–9)), before committing suicide. Genius concludes by commenting that 'tariinge upon the need | In loves cause is forto drede' (4. 139–40).

This is an extraordinary under-reading, which, while obviously ignoring the moral reading of the *Aeneid*, also fails to capture the pathos of Dido in the *Heroides*: this Dido expects Aeneas to return, and this Aeneas is criticised for not doing so. Either way, Genius' reading is strikingly superficial. The imperial narrative of the *Aeneid* is implicitly dismissed: all Aeneas needed to have done was to keep his appointment (which appointment?); and the Ovidian story is also derailed, by focusing less on Dido's pathos and more on Aeneas' 'tarrying'. Not keeping an appointment was never an imaginable charge against him in either the Virgilian or Ovidian tradition. The narrative of the *Aeneid* need not have happened, and Dido's suicide could have been avoided, if only Aeneas had been better at keeping time. This interpretation is driven less by imaginative remembrance and more by the fantasy that Aeneas and Dido could have shared erotic happiness were it not for an unfortunate delay. The superficiality of this reading is underlined later in the book, when Genius praises none other than Aeneas as an active lover in gaining the hand of Lavinia; here the slothful Aeneas becomes the energetic Aeneas, who is 'bold | And dar travaile and undertake | The cause of love' (4. 2183–219). Medieval exemplary readings are more opportunistic, and less beholden to interpretative consistency than post-Renaissance reading protocols, but inconsistency at this level beggars both interpretations of Aeneas advanced in Book 4. After such spectacular inconsistency, one wants simply to begin again.

Dido and Petrarch in Petrarch's *Africa* and *Trionfi*, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 35 (2005), 489–508.

The narratives of Dido and Aeneas, in both principal classical traditions, along with their attendant interpretative traditions, are the highest profile literary sources available to Gower. Genius' under-reading of these traditions at the very beginning of Book 4 can only be described as remarkable. Many interpretations that follow run equally counter to plausible and meditated readings of well-known narratives. Some narratives run counter to well-known versions of a story. The very next story Genius tells, again about delay, is a positive exemplum of not delaying: once Ulysses reads Penelope's letter, he thinks of his wife, and rushes home as soon as Troy is destroyed:

He made non delaiement,
Bot goth him home in alle hihe,
Wher that he fond tofore his yhe
His worthy wif in good astat.

(4. 226–9)

The near-infinite delay of Ulysses' homeward journey may not have been as well known in all its details as Virgil's poem was to Gower, although Gower certainly did know of its difficulty and length.²³ Genius' reading of the Homeric story is a massive collapsing of the long-drawn narrative of desire-deferred into a single, four-line narrative of rapid erotic fulfilment.²⁴

Genius narrates a number of stories concerning female virgins in Book 4, in each one of which his interpretation is weighted, sometimes very strangely indeed, more towards grief for the loss of a virgin body than towards grief for a life lost. He passes quickly over the five foolish Biblical virgins whose lamps were unfilled (4. 250–60). That Genius should interpret a Biblical story (Matthew 25: 1–13) from a strictly tropological perspective is wholly in keeping with his standard practice, since he nowhere engages in other levels of Biblical allegory.²⁵ That his single other large Biblical narrative should also concern a virgin girl is, however, significant.

²³ See, for example, Book 6, lines 1391–1788, the opening of which makes reference to the 'see divers', the 'many a wyndi storm revers', and 'many a gret peril' from which Ulysses escaped on his way home from Troy (6. 1415–21).

²⁴ Gower enjoys radically abbreviating long narratives. He also does it with Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* at *Confessio Amantis*, 5. 7597–602.

²⁵ For Gower's familiarity with the tradition of the moralised Ovid, but his consistent resistance to any but tropological, or ethical readings, see C. Mainzer, 'John Gower's Use of the "Mediaeval Ovid" in the *Confessio Amantis*', *Medium Aevum*, 41 (1972), 215–29.

Genius insists to Amans that a girl should not delay her marriage, since by doing so she might lose up to three crucial years ‘Whil sche the charge myghte bere | Of children’, without which the world cannot survive (4. 1488–1501). By way of exemplifying this notion, Genius tells the story of Jephtha’s daughter (4. 1505–95; cf. Judges, 11: 33–5). This child is sacrificed in the name of an appallingly dangerous and finally savage oath by her father, to the effect that he will sacrifice the first creature he sees on return if he is victorious in battle. In Gower’s narrative it is the child’s very anxiety to see her father again that ensures that she is ‘tofore | Al othre’ at the gate to meet her victorious father and her dreadful death. So far from recoiling in horror from the fulfilment of this oath, as other late medieval writers did,²⁶ Genius lays the weight differently, on the daughter’s ‘failure’ to have married earlier and produced children. The child accepts her dreadful fate, but regrets that ‘sche hir time hath lore so’ (4. 1573); the most she begs is a respite, that she might have time with her friends to lament the loss ‘That sche no children hadde bore’ (4. 1587). The powerful narrative of Jephtha’s daughter is, in short, seen wholly from the drives of a Genius like that in Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose*, interested only in procreation.²⁷ All other concerns are ruthlessly suppressed, even the ‘kynde’ love between father and daughter.

The other large scale narrative of virginity ‘slothfully’ prolonged is that of Rosiphelee (4. 1245–1446), who, slow to love, is granted a vision of beautiful women riding on splendid horses, followed at a distance by a woman on a poor horse, carrying about her dozens of halters. Asked why she is behind and in the position of servant, the woman replies that, a princess in life, she was ‘slow in loves lore, | When I was able forto lere, | And wolde noght the tales hierre | Of them that couthen love teche’ (4. 1402–5). The one splendid bridle she has, worn by her horse, marks a love unconsummated before her own sudden death, which failure she must now regret in the afterlife. The dead princess concludes to the living Rosiphelee that she must be ‘noght ydel’ in love (4. 1433).

The dead princess’ failure to listen to ‘tales’ by those who ‘couthen love teche’ refracts back onto the position of Amans himself: is Amans the positive type of the princess’ negative, since he is only too keen to

²⁶ See, for example, Dante’s response to the dreadful execution of Jephtha’s stupid vow: *Paradiso*, 5. 64–8.

²⁷ For Jean de Meun’s Genius, see especially George D. Economou, ‘The Character Genius in Alan de Lille, Jean de Meun, and John Gower’, in Nicholson (ed.), *Gower’s ‘Confessio Amantis’: A Critical Anthology*, pp. 109–16 (first published 1970), and Denise N. Baker, ‘The Priesthood of Genius: A Study of the Medieval Tradition’, in *ibid.*, pp. 143–57 (first published 1976).

listen to those who tell tales regarding love's lore? Or is it rather the case that this tale of idleness reveals that Genius' own pedagogic programme is itself idle, since all it does is to provide a story that satisfies Amans' own wish fulfilment? The tale itself reveals that Rosiphelee sees an image of herself in her vision, since the woman whose sad story she learns is, like Rosiphelee herself, a 'slow' princess, not wishing 'to love obeie' (4. 1388–9). That dreamers and readers see only themselves might be pertinent to Genius' story as told to Amans too, since this story encourages women not to be slow in returning love to petitioning men. As a narrative it has nothing to offer Amans but encouragement, and a certain *Schadenfreude* with regard to Amans' own, unfailingly cold lover: the woman who resists love will be punished in the afterlife.

Genius gives odd inflexions to other stories concerning virgins: he tells the story of Penthesilea, which becomes instead the story of Philemenis, the king of Patagonia, who takes the dead body of Penthesilea and gives it proper burial, for which respect he is offered three Amazonian virgins each year as a tribute payment. Genius praises this 'success' as exemplary of energetically seeking fortune through military success. Nothing is made of Penthesilea's commitment to feminine isolationism; nor is anything made of the horrible resonances of her death at the hands of Phyrus, son of Achilles (4. 2161–4), who also murdered the innocent virgin Polyxena. Genius ignores Amazonian feminist ethos, just as he ignores the exploitation of young women in war. Instead, he focuses on male military success, and blithely defines the annual tribute of three virgins as success.

Genius, then, seems focused on tales that promote sexual activity at all costs, even when those tales run counter to both natural claims (in the case of Jephtha's daughter), and to personal claims (in the case of Rosiphelee). Those stories would tend to suggest that Genius serves, rather than redirects or re-educates, Amans' desire. They therefore also suggest that Genius' literary education is devoted to nothing so much as idle fantasy. Perhaps the most striking narrative of art serving erotic desire is that of Pygmalion and his statue (4. 371–450). The narrative is well known and simply told: Pygmalion the sculptor fashions the statue of a woman; falls in love with it; and prays to Venus, until finally 'The colde ymage he fieleth warm' (4. 422). They have a son, Paphos. Even if simply told, such emphases as the tale is given are rich in meta-narrative implications, pertinent both to Amans and to Genius. The object of Amans' hopeless love is nothing if not stony: never throughout the *Confessio* is there the remotest suggestion that she encourages Amans in any way. Despite that, Amans idolises and fetishises her, subjecting

himself to a grinding discipline of self-deception and humiliation, ‘drecch[ing] forth the longe dai’ (4. 1185). So too Pygmaleon:

His love upon this faire ymage
 He sette, and hire of love preide;
 Bot sche no worde ayeinward seide.
 The longe day, what thing he dede,
 This ymage in the same stede
 Was evere bi.

(4. 392–7)

He feeds her, lays her in his bed, kisses her, whispers in her ear, lays his arm across her ‘as he hir wolde embrace’ (4. 409). And, as with Amans, Venus hears Pygmaleon’s prayer (4. 415–19). In short, like Amans, Pygmaleon is obsessed with a hopeless and self-destructive love.

The hypothetical status of Pygmaleon’s actions, serving his stony image as if she were alive, evokes Amans’ subjection to the seductive stories of Genius. For Pygmaleon, like Amans, is subject to his imagination. From the imagination’s capacity to manufacture images derives art’s power to create hypothetical realities, whether those realities save or damn. Pygmaleon ‘himself beguileth’, as he looks on the erotic statue, ‘So that thurgh pure impression | Of his ymaginacion | With al the herte of his corage | His love upon this faire ymage | He sette’ (4. 389–93). This evokes Amans’ own subjection to his imagination, which he articulates later in Book 4: he says that he sometimes spots the chance of leading his lover to mass, though it grieves him when her arm is clothed:

. . . afterward it doth me harm
 Of pure ymaginacioun;
 For thane this collacioun
 I make unto miselven ofte,
 And seie, ‘Ha, lord, hou sche is softe,
 How sche is round, hou sche is small!
 Now wolde god I hadde hire al
 Withoute danger at my wille!’

(4. 1141–8)

Just as Pygmaleon is subject to his imagination, so too is Amans subject to his, in the figure of Genius (and vice-versa). This narrative is especially attractive to Genius, since, like Pygmaleon, his role is also to fashion images. Both are artist figures, and both become potential idolaters.²⁸ For this narrative obviously evokes the possibility of artistic idolatry, for it

²⁸ For Genius as artistic maker in the *Confessio*, see Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, pp. 252–71. For Genius and Pygmaleon as potentially idolatrous makers in the *Romance of the Rose*, see

invests the shaped artistic object with the emotional fullness of humanity; as Genius himself says in his discussion of idolatry in Book 5, the ‘worchiþe of ydolatrie | Drowh forth upon the fantasie | Of hem that weren thane blinde’ (5. 1587–89). Oblivious to that danger, both artists Pygmaleon and Genius praise the astonishing, miraculous power of the image to come to life. Pygmaleon’s erotic fantasy of fashioning a wholly subservient woman comes to fruition: ‘Lo, thus he wan a lusti wif, | Which obeisant was at his wille’ (4. 424–5). If Pygmaleon shapes a statue, Genius shapes a tale: he shapes the image of a desirable woman in Amans’ imagination, and nourishes the idea that she, too, will come to life. He encourages Amans to be like Pygmaleon:

Bi this ensauple thou miht finde
That word mai worche above kinde.
Forthi, my sone, if that thou spare
To speke, lost is al thi fare,
For slowthe bringeth in alle wo.
(4. 437–41)

Genius encourages the idea that more talk will bring the lady to life, and that such talk (Genius’ talk, of the kind exemplified by this very tale), is a way of avoiding sloth. Once again, though most powerfully, the story told has bearings on the story telling in the *Confessio* more generally. And both suggest that this particular combination of psychic desire and literary education leads backwards into a finally self-destructive idleness, even as they pretend to lead out of it. Like Ovid’s *Remedia amoris*, the story telling exemplifies the ‘sin’ rather than offering a remedy for it.²⁹ It is a book that goes backwards even as it pretends to proceed. Book 4 of the *Confessio* would seem also to be following the traces of the *Roman de la Rose*, whose lover enters the Garden of Pleasure only via the gate whose portress is Idleness.

Further narratives give extra colouring to the idea of Genius as an *ingenium* wholly subject to the sensual will. The very next story concerns the girl Iphis who, disguised as a boy of necessity, is betrothed to the girl Ianthe (4. 451–515). Placed in bed together, ‘sche and sche’, their intense

Nicolette Zeeman, ‘The Idol of the Text’, in Dimmick, Simpson and Zeeman (eds.), *Images, Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England*, pp. 43–62. For images of both artists at work and idolatrous prayer, see figs. 3–5.

²⁹ For Gower’s subtle relations with Ovid’s *Remedia amoris*, see Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, pp. 198–203.

sexual desire is answered by Cupid, who transforms Iphis into a male.³⁰ This story of miraculous transformations answering to sexual desire caps and confirms the preceding story of Pygmalion in obvious ways. Here, though, transformation goes one step further, since the very concept of nature is transformed. Cupid is said, out of pity for the two feminine lovers, to ‘let do set kinde above, | So that his lawe mai ben used, | And thei upon here lust excused’ (4. 489–92). Gender as an expression of ‘kinde’ is here subjected to a novel and higher definition of what constitutes nature, in this case sexual desire itself. Erotic desire by this argument is alone the measure of the natural; both gender (in Iphis and Ianthe) and materiality itself (in Pygmalion) concede the force of this newly devised natural law, since both are transformed so as to serve it.

In sum, Genius serves Amans’ erotic passion in Book 4. It is true that he does this in various ways across the first six books of the *Confessio*, and, given his place and function in the psyche, we would expect him to do precisely this. This genial sympathy with desire is the very quality that could make him a subtle, homoepathic therapist, offering more of the disease in order to cure its pathological effects. And, as the imagination, literary texts are his medicine. He is simultaneously *grammaticus* and therapist. We would, as I say, expect him to act like this in part, but in Book 4, the book of Sloth, much more so than in any other book, Genius offers the sympathy but not the therapy. While apparently leading the way out of idleness, Genius fosters that very pathology, encouraging Amans in an ‘ydel thoght’ of erotic fantasy that clearly has nowhere to go but into destructive psychological sands.³¹ Genius might cite the paired exempla of Phaeton and Icarus as classic stories of negligence (4. 979–1034, and 4. 1035–71 respectively): neither listens to paternal counsel, and both are destroyed as a result. But whereas Phaeton, for example, allows the horses of his chariot to go ‘as hem liketh wantounly’ (4. 1017) against his father’s advice, Amans seems headed for catastrophe precisely *on* the advice of ‘fader Genius’ (4. 2771). Not only is Amans in danger in Book 4, but literary education itself looks to be failing on its pedagogic promise.

³⁰ For discussion of the Iphis and Ianthe narrative, see Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics* (Minneapolis, 2003), pp. 73–6.

³¹ The citation is from Chaucer, *Book of the Duchess*, line 4, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn., general ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford, 1987).

III

What, then, is going on in Book 4? Both Amans and Genius seem to occupy rather the same position for a good part of the book, and those positions are self-supporting constructions of idle fantasy: Amans draws Genius forth to tell exactly the kind of story that he wants to hear, and Genius complies. The penitential frame of the dialogue offers a camouflage of therapy, but the actual content of that therapy serves only to aggravate the pathology to which it is ostensibly directed. Talk ostensibly designed to cure idleness, that is, turns out to promote idleness. The strategy of Book 4 seems to be modelled on Ovid's *Remedia amoris*, a book to which Genius explicitly directs Amans for sound advice on how to fool oneself out of love (4. 2668–71). Just as the *Remedia* turns out playfully to offer a good deal more erotic fantasy even as it pretends to wean the lover from desire, so too, it seems, does Book 4 feed the fantasy it pretends to retrain.

As Thorstein Veblen argued so suggestively in 1899, doing nothing is hard work.³² Humans are inescapably economic creatures, and everything they do, even doing nothing, contributes productively to one economy or another. In this final section I offer three ways of accounting for what is going on productively in Book 4. I begin with the reader; I then turn to ways in which the interaction of Genius and Amans turns out to be productive; finally I address the grave and moving account of suicidal despair at the end of the book. My argument across each of these brief *essais* is that Book 4 does offer a regeneration of sorts, and that that regeneration can only derive from the apparently idle, static play of fantasy. The psyche has its own economy, by this poem's account. Idleness is part of that economy, but the psyche cannot rest idle; idleness generates its own antidote.

The reader: the very fact that I have generated the reading of Book 4 so far advanced implies that the poem's own stasis *can* provoke movement of a kind in its readers. Medieval poems are less well-wrought urns than interactive games; even if literature unwrites its force in the represented action of the poem, that does not mean that the poem itself is without force. The reader, that is, can be provoked *by* the text to reinstate a literary education that is being undone *in* the text.³³ The text's illocutionary

³² Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (London, 1994; first pub. 1899), pp. 68–101. Veblen anticipates Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital.

³³ For the reader as the point to which the *Confessio* is directed, see Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, pp. 263–71.

force is different from its perlocutionary force.³⁴ Not only that: if the reader is doing hermeneutic work left undone in the poem's represented action, then the reader is also rethinking the nature of hermeneutics itself. The literary pedagogue Genius within the text acts as if literary texts had an extractable, exemplary meaning, whereas Gower's reader witnesses in Amans as reader the undoing of that simplistic hermeneutic. Amans only sees himself in narrative, and he only wants narrative to confirm and encourage his own position: this is exactly what he says when he avers that he will read books 'if thei mihte spede | Mi love;' but if 'thei techen to restreigne | Mi love, it were an ydel peine' (4. 2675–7). The poem's reader, then, is provoked to recognise that reading depends not only on books but also on their readers: a readerly disposition to read books profoundly, and to be changed by them, is the precondition of literary education.³⁵ The real target of the *Confessio* is less the decoy Amans and more the poem's own reader.

Reading *of* the poem, then, turns out to be potentially different from reading *in* the poem. Book 4's representation of readerly sloth turns out to provoke unslothful readings. But before we entirely dismiss the represented action of Book 4 as one of idle reading, we should also consider the interaction of Genius and Amans. Even if both separately maintain idle positions pretty steadily, what about their interaction?

Book 4 produces interesting and productive conflicts between Amans and Genius, particularly concerning violence and love. Idleness is to be shunned, says Genius after his telling of the story of Rosiphelee, from which point he generalises to say that 'Among the gentil nacion | Love is an occupacion, | Which forto kepe hise lustes save | Scholde every gentil herte have' (4. 1451–4). This might seem uncontentious in a late medieval text, expressing as it does the fundamental premise of *fin amour*: that nobly born lovers should actively devote themselves to the pursuit of a single erotic passion. The restrictive definition of 'gentle' implied here might, however, surprise, coming as it does from Genius.³⁶ Genius is a

³⁴ These terms are drawn especially from Quentin Skinner, 'Motives, Intentions, and the Interpretation of Texts', *New Literary History*, 3 (1971–2), 393–408; the terms derive from J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, 1962).

³⁵ For medieval literary theory on readerly disposition, see Gillespie, 'The Study of Classical Authors: from the Twelfth Century to c.1450', pp. 160–78.

³⁶ Note this comment by Winthrop Wetherbee: 'Chivalry is in effect the villain of the *Confessio*, at odds with Genius's teaching in virtually every area', in his 'John Gower', in David Wallace (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 589–609 (at p. 602); see also Winthrop Wetherbee, 'Classical and Boethian Tradition in the *Confessio Amantis*', in Siân Echarad (ed.), *A Companion to Gower* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 181–96 (at 192–4).

figure of the natural self and a literary maker; one might expect him to participate in the long tradition of humanist opposition to an aristocratic, restrictive definition of nobility.³⁷ The side note at this point also strikes a warning note: ‘Non quia sic se habet veritas, set opinio Amantum’, which is the only marginal note in the entire *Confessio* that explicitly disagrees with Genius.³⁸ The immediately following tale of Jephtha’s daughter, while not underwriting any doctrine of courtly love, does produce, as we have already seen, a frankly peculiar reading from Genius. And immediately after that story, Genius introduces an explicit defence of militarist pursuit of amatory success:

Forthi who secheth loves grace,
Wher that these worthi wommen are,
He mai noght thanne himselve spare
Upon his travail forto serve,
Wherof that he mai thonk deserve,
There as these men of armes be.

(4. 1620–5)

Asked if he has been militarily active on behalf of his lady, Amans replies both comically and seriously. Comically, he rapidly denies any military involvement whatsoever: every man must have been more aggressive militarily than he has been. He would rather win his love than Cairo and all its treasure (4. 1648–58). The comic, Ovidian defence of non-military action itself produces, however, a serious objection to Genius: Amans persuasively argues that he cannot see what good will derive from the shedding of non-Christian blood. And besides, he goes on forcefully, Christ forbad killing; and those who actively promote the crusades themselves remain at home comfortably enjoying an easy and sinful life. He concludes his attack on complacent ecclesiastical preachers:

Bot hierof have I gret mervaille,
Hou thei wol bidde me travaile:
A Sarazin if I sle schal,
I sle the soule forth withal,
And that was nevere Cristes lore.
Bot nou ho ther, I seie nomore.

(4. 1677–82)

³⁷ For the late medieval tradition of nobility of soul, see A. J. Minnis, ‘From Medieval to Renaissance?: Chaucer’s Position on Past Gentility’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 72 (1986), 205–46.

³⁸ ‘Not because the truth has it thus, but the opinion of lovers’.

Out of the apparently irresponsible and self-serving Ovidian excuse for lack of public service, Amans generates a sharply topical attack on the immorality of crusading, whose topical danger he underlines by his abrupt halt to further critique.³⁹ Activated in this way, Amans the slothful lover becomes Amans the active literary reader: he recalls a text in which a hero did all he could to avoid military involvement in the name of erotic passion: he remembers Achilles, who temporarily withdrew from the Trojan War out of love for Polyxena.

In defending militarist action in the name of love, Genius seems to me to dig himself in deeper with his counter examples. He begins with the story of Ulysses, who tried to avoid the Trojan War because he preferred to stay at home with his wife (4. 1815–1900). Genius argues that Ulysses finally recognised that it is better to win honour than love, which goes very close to contradicting the earlier narrative of Ulysses hurrying home from the war to his wife. We then hear the story of Protesilaus, who rejects his wife's pleas to avoid the Trojan War and stay at home, and goes instead to war, preferring to die 'as a knyht' than live in dishonour (4. 1901–34). The barely relevant story of Saul follows (4. 1935–62), in which Saul, ignoring the prophecy that he will die in battle, goes to battle and dies, preferring 'worschipe.' After that narrative, we hear that as a child Achilles was taught to kill or wound at least once a day, which 'proves' that knightly courage is superior to all other amatory endowments (4. 1963–2019); Genius does not pause once to consider the terrible effects of Achilles' violence in love or otherwise. Neither does he pause to consider the disasters consequent on the love aggressively pursued by Lancelot (4. 2029–39). Hercules, we are told, successfully gained the love of Deianira (4. 2045–2134), but we are not told of the disastrous finale to that story.⁴⁰ Finally, after telling the story of Philemenis, whose very questionable conclusion I considered above, Genius blithely concludes all these narratives by saying that they all demonstrate how women admire military courage, especially among the 'gentles' (4. 2190–2219).

Amans, then, activates an anti-war position that is more persuasive than Genius' own defence of an aristocratic erotic-militarism. True, it is Amans' self-serving defence of his own idleness that moves him to argue against the ethos of chivalric love, but the interaction produced leads in

³⁹ For Lollard opposition to the Dispenser Crusade of 1383, see Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 368–70.

⁴⁰ For the Ovidian-derived Gowerian tactic of referring to amatory stories without taking their disastrous consequences into account, see Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, pp. 134–66.

productive directions. That interaction produces further interest in the question Amans now poses: what is true nobility? In direct opposition to the idea of nobility as restrictive and aristocratic, Genius now adopts an opposed position: he defines nobility as nobility of soul, so that, he insists, ‘of generacion | To make a declaracion, | Ther mai no gentilesce be’ (4. 2227–9). Whoever pursues virtue out of a ‘resonable entencion’ is ‘a verrai gentil man’ (4. 2270–7).

It seems to me that Amans and Genius are interacting here so as to produce more profound and civilised accounts of action in each other.⁴¹ While Amans defends his own idleness, he attacks the unchristian bloodshed of the crusades, so unthinkingly defended by Genius. And if Genius provisionally approves a specifically aristocratic ethos of militarist eroticism, Amans produces in him a deeper commitment to an alternative, ethical definition of true nobility. And as Genius produces that more civilised definition, so too is he moved to articulate the origins and uses of practical and intellectual arts and sciences, which is the one large inset disquisition in Book 4 (4. 2363–2700). If true nobility is achieved through cultivation of the soul, then Genius provides a map of skills and sciences by which humans can practise that cultivation. Genius knows these sciences, from the art of writing to cookery and alchemy, since Genius is the psychological faculty that produced them in the first place. The women who invented linen ‘were of grete engyn’ (4. 2438); Carmente invented ‘of hire engin’ the first Latin alphabet (4. 2637); those who fail to practise the arts are ‘otios[i] . . . qui excellentis prudencie ingenium habentes absque fructu operum torpescunt’.⁴²

So Genius begins with praise of a restrictive, aristocratic version of nobility and its ethos of passionate love; he moves, however, through an unpredictable yet productive psychological interaction, to a ‘clerical’ account of nobility, an account of nobility of soul achieved through cultivation of arts and sciences. Some invented the practical sciences, while others began to ‘studie and muse’ (4. 2385) in the writing of books, among which literate sciences are included Grammar, Rhetoric and ‘Poesie’ (4. 2632–71). It seems to me that the very process by which Genius arrives at this account of nobility achieved through active pursuit

⁴¹ The situation is similar to that at the end of Book 6, when Amans is exhausted by discussing love, and wants to change the subject; he asks for political instruction, which in fact turns out to be exceptionally productive; see Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, pp. 205–7.

⁴² ‘Idle, who, while possessing an imagination of excellent wit, lie supine without the fruit of works’.

of the sciences, including the sciences of letters, itself prompts us to reflect on the process of literary knowledge in this very poem. The model of knowledge here is not authoritarian, deriving from one, stable figure or from one simple hermeneutic process. Instead it derives from the interaction of different faculties of the psyche, each unpredictably provoking the other to a deeper perception, and each working, I think, by an inherently productive and optimistic economy of soul. Of course, as we have seen, this schema of the sciences ends without much uptake: the very last reference in Genius' disquisition is to Ovid's *Remedia amoris*; and, as we have seen, Amans remains uninterested in remedies to love. Something, however, has happened here: the very operations of idle fantasy have, without outside or aggressive intervention, pointed a way out of idleness and into the ennobling labour, including the ennobling but unpredictable labour of reading.

Both the reader's engagement with the poem, and aspects of the poem's represented interaction do, then, generate antidotes to idleness. By way of ending, I propose one further argument that Book 4 works its own way out of the dead-end of static, obsessive, repetitive readerly sloth. I focus on the final two sequences of the book, devoted respectively to somnolence and despondency, which include grave and moving stories. These final stories have their own persuasive power to retrieve human sense and purposiveness from waste, forgetfulness and negligence.

Aspects of Book 4 are comic, particularly when Amans' 'sins' are the kind he wishes he had had the chance to commit, or when the contrast between Amans and the protagonists of Genius' stories is especially wide and improbable. Thus Amans denies ever having been late for an assignation with his lover, mainly because he has never had an assignation (4. 270–80). And the comparison between Achilles' training in blood savagery as an incitement to Amans to be more active as a lover (4. 1963–2022) can only strike the reader as comically implausible, not least because it is followed by a narrative concerning the bravery of Hercules. Amans is no Achilles or Hercules.

Discussion of the final 'sins' is, however, no joke. These final sequences are focused less on avoidable ethical failings than on troubling and disabling states of depression and listlessness; as with much of the ethical reflection in the *Confessio*, Gower liberates the 'sins' from their penitential limitations; he uses the sins as material to reflect in more complex ways about the needs of the psyche and the polis. He does this especially with states of melancholy, in ways that the standard scholarly treatments resolutely refuse to recognise, reserving as they do creative

melancholy for the Renaissance.⁴³ I briefly discuss these two sustained narratives, of Alceone and of Iphis and Araxarathen.

Amans' account of the grinding cycle of despair led, and repetitively betrayed, by faint hope, introduces the narrative of Alceone. Like the narrator of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, Amans cannot sleep; when he finally goes to bed, before sleep itself, he is wholly vulnerable to the image of his lover:

Into hire bedd min herte goth,
And softly takth hire in his arm
And fieleth hou that sche is warm,
And wissheth that his body were
To fiele that he fieleth there.
And thus miselven I tormente,
Til that the dede slep me hente.

(4. 2884–90)

This, though, is the prelude to further torment: in his dreams he keeps winning only to keep losing his love; the intense joy of meeting her, alone and in freedom from 'danger', leads directly to a waking despair that is itself victim to an insuppressible desire to continue the dream. This moving pathology recalls the 'sorrowful ymaginacion' of the *Book of the Duchess* narrator, who is also incapable of sleeping, obsessed as he is by 'ydel thought', until he reads the narrative of Ceys and Alceone. This same story follows the same psychic pathology in the *Confessio*. As in the Chaucerian text, so too in the *Confessio*: Juno sends Iris to engage Morpheus in order to reveal the truth to the anxious Alceone. Morpheus' cavern of sleepy forgetfulness, by which runs the river of Lethe, is the very image of sloth; interestingly, nonetheless, from this very place of total stasis and oblivion, Morpheus resuscitates images to tell the tragic truth, and so restore a transformed Alceone to a kind of happiness.⁴⁴

The images of oblivious, slothful sleep, in this powerful story at any rate, turn out to be productive and finally transformative. That may not

⁴³ Thus Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art* (New York, 1964). For a vigorous and persuasive rebuttal of this chronological restriction, see Giorgio Agamben, 'The Noonday Demon', in *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, translated by Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis, 1993), pp. 3–15.

⁴⁴ For late medieval and early modern imitations of Ovid's Morpheus, see Colin Burrow, "'Full of the Maker's Guile": Ovid on Imitating and on the Imitation of Ovid', in Philip Hardie, Alessandro Barchiesi, and Stephen Hinds (eds.), *Transformations: Essays on Ovid's Metamorphoses and Its Reception* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 271–87.

be irrelevant to the images produced by Genius for the sick and tired Amans. Psychic waste can, that is, generate profitable images. Certainly the last image produced in these stories, that of Iphis and Araxarathen, delivers a powerful and memorably imagistic shock to the despairing lover. Amans' state of mind, as expressed at the beginning of this tale, is no joke:

For be my trouthe I schal nocht lie,
 Of pure sorwe, which I drye
 For that sche seith sche wol me nocht,
 With drecching of myn oghne thought
 In such wanhope I am falle,
 That I ne can unethes calle,
 As forto speke of eny grace,
 Mi ladi merci to pourchace.

(4. 3473–80)

The story told by Genius answers directly and seriously to this state of mind. Iphis the prince falls in love with Araxarathen, who rebuffs his insistent approaches so forcefully that he succumbs to despair. After a long and articulate lament outside the house of Araxarathen, he hangs himself. Araxarathen, in turn, blames herself for the suicide, and is transformed into a stone statue, a petrified and perfect image of herself. The body of the male suicide and the stone image of the female are taken to the temple of Venus, where the statue is memorably set above the tomb of the dead prince.

It is true that the female suffers the vengeance of the gods in this story, as in earlier narratives of hard-hearted girls in Book 4. But this story offers no consolation or hope to the male lover who will not give up; on the contrary, Genius' final tale serves as a riposte to earlier, wish-fulfilment stories. Here the boy Iphis dies as a suicide, whereas the earlier Iphis story in Book 4 has the protagonist transform into a man so as to satisfy sexual desire. And this story also responds to the narrative paired with the earlier Iphis tale, that of Pygmalion. For the Pygmalion myth satisfies fantasist dreams of both sexual desire and idolatrous love of art, in having the beautiful statue come to warm and sexually pliant life. Here, by contrast, the metamorphosis is the other way around: through the unrelenting burden of suffering the human is petrified, and the verisimilar art object serves the function of visible and minatory remembrance, placed as it is in Venus' temple. And whereas Pygmalion's prayer to Venus is answered, Iphis' is not. Genius tells the story, indeed, precisely by way of underlining the fact that such a sore is incurable, and that the 'goddes

ben vengable' (4. 3509–10). Late medieval Christian penitential manuals were confident to warn against despair, by affirming God's ever-readiness to accept the penitent sinner,⁴⁵ but Genius knows that psychic forces are less forgiving.

In conclusion, we can concede that a literary education can easily feed the psyche's capacity for delusive satisfaction. That said, we have seen various ways in which Gower recognises the value of *otium*; there are some states of soul that cannot be broached directly, and that require homeopathic therapy that pretends to feed pathological desire even as it begins the cure. And that homeopathic psychic treatment involves a cultural commitment to idle, apparently wasted reading: like many other Middle English works that recycle prior texts, the *Confessio* demonstrates no desire to define books and libraries as waste. It offers instead a model of recreative relaxedness among many books; books will respond creatively to the big questions, but only if we allow them to do their own work on us. Even in the depths of despair, a new rewriting may be going on in the soul's deepest powers, as it is in Dürer's *Melancholia*.⁴⁶ The recycling of old texts in the *Confessio* is less a matter of humble obeisance to older, higher literary authority, and more a matter of understanding how texts and traditions are creatively recycled through the complex operations of idle reading.

Note. I thank the anonymous readers of this essay. I altered the essay in the light of their forceful comments wherever I agreed with them. At some points (particularly with regard to the *Confessio Amantis*) I hold by, and build on, ground work laid in my *Sciences and the Self: Alan of Lille's 'Anticlaudianus' and John Gower's 'Confessio Amantis'* (Cambridge, 1995).

⁴⁵ For penitential accounts of sloth, see Siegfried Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1960).

⁴⁶ Note the busily writing putto to the right of *Melancholia*.