William Godwin (1756-1836), Edward Bulwer Lytton (1803-1873) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) were all three intellectual elitists, authors of popular fiction and, each in their own way, radicals with a utopian vision. Their strong belief in the superiority of their own intellects over that of their fellow authors marginalized them from any identifiable cultural community. At the same time, their individualism and sense of intellectual superiority endowed them also with a strong feeling that it was their duty to write in order to educate. They believed that their fictions would not only entertain but also improve the minds of the readers and consequently society as a whole. Even if all expressed a fear of the mob, the nature of their literary productions shows that it was in fact the less-educated masses to which they wanted to reach out. All three found literary fame by writing sensational stories of crime, mystery, detection, and the supernatural that reached a much wider audience than the work of contemporary intellectuals such as Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Amos Bronson Alcott or Ralph Waldo Emerson (to name just a few). This essay shows that as intellectual elitists who turned to popular fiction in order to improve the minds of many, which would raise the standards of the society in which they lived, Godwin, Bulwer, Poe in fact form a loose-knit transatlantic community of literary utopians.

William Godwin: visionary anarchist
Godwin’s utopian vision was of a state of ultimate happiness wherein every individual would use his rational faculty, as well as his innate sensibility and sympathy, to work towards the good of the whole community. Godwin wrote enthusiastically about “the right each man
possesses to the assistance of his neighbour”,¹ and the fact that “the rich man therefore has no right to withhold his assistance from his brother-man in distress”.² In Political Justice (1793) Godwin expressed his belief that it was the duty of the wise to instruct the uneducated masses by means of persuasion, not coercion. He wanted each individual to cultivate a reason-controlled sensibility that would lead him or her to further curiosity for knowledge and would instil an innate sympathy that would allow him or her in turn to instruct the next generation. Godwin’s utopian vision was based on a concept of gradual intellectual improvement over generations, leading to increasingly utopian socio-political conditions, never to explosive revolution by force.

In Godwin’s utopian scheme, the key factor in achieving social progress was the independence of the individual mind. Political Justice is at its most radical in its premise of doing away with traditional governing bodies such as monarchy, parliament, law, the church and state education. To Godwin, these institutions had played an important part over the centuries in keeping the individual mind enslaved within an ideology of inequality on the level of class, gender, race and intellect. What was needed was a revolution of the mind, in which each individual with a sound moral sense would be allowed to think and judge entirely for him or her self. Through the cultivation of a Hutchesonian moral sensibility and an insatiable curiosity to acquire new knowledge of self and society, the individual would learn to act on disinterested motives for the benefit of the community. Unfortunately, after the publication of Political Justice, an expensive, dry and dense work of philosophy, Godwin slowly became an object of satire rather than admiration amongst his intellectual peers.³

Probably because of the limited readership of Political Justice, Godwin started work on a novel in which he set out to translate his anarchist philosophy into a form more easily palatable for less well-educated readers. The original title of the novel, Things as They Are

³ After denouncing marriage in Political Justice as “a system of fraud … the worst of monopolies” (762), Godwin was satirized for failing to practice what he preached when he married Mary Wollstonecraft. Having called for the euthanasia of government, ironically at the end of his career Godwin accepted a government job.