

Introduction

William Godwin: The novel, philosophy, and history

In 1825, Hazlitt described some of the fluctuations which the reputation of William Godwin had already experienced: ‘during his lifetime,’ he had ‘secured to himself the triumphs and the mortifications of an extreme notoriety and of a sort of posthumous fame.’ Godwin’s inspirational role to younger writers and radicals, combined with the vilification of many, after the emergence of *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* in 1793, had placed him in the peculiar category of being regarded in the past tense, even whilst he carried on the seemingly endless production of writings of all sorts that would continue to appear until his death in 1836. ‘He is thought of now’, says Hazlitt, ‘like any eminent writer of a hundred-and-fifty years ago, or just as he will be a hundred-and-fifty years hence.’¹ It would seem unlikely that Godwin has maintained the level of eminence that Hazlitt accords him, but it is undoubtedly the case that the sheer range of Godwin’s work has guaranteed sustained modern critical attention, even if such attention shows a focus on his more familiar productions. Parts of his huge *oeuvre* (particularly the works of history and biography) are little read, yet the works that Hazlitt so admired, *Political Justice* and the novels *Caleb Williams* and (to a lesser extent) *St. Leon*, continue to play their part in discussions of the literary history and politics of the Romantic period. Along with the presence of *Political Justice* in the formations of modern anarchist thought, critical work on Godwin’s different types of fiction has continued, rather than dwindled, in recent decades. Godwin was born a few weeks after Mozart in 1756, and although he will not receive anything like the same attention, it seems fitting to mark the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his birth with a collection of articles. These seek, in different ways, to illustrate the variety of Godwin’s work, the many different intellectual currents that can be found in it, and the manner in which it sustains interest for readers long after its apparent topicality has passed (unlike so many works of philosophy, history or literature which have a palpable design upon us). It is my present purpose to introduce the essays, via a brief account of the characteristic concerns of Godwin’s work which they will take up.

Not the least of the reasons for Godwin’s enormous impact in the tremendously politically-charged atmosphere of the 1790s was his accessibility as a writer and thinker; few philosophers have ever expressed their tenets through the form of the novel, but Godwin is the sort of stylist who could bring the clarity and openness of his fictional work to philosophy—indeed, unkind readers maintained that his whole philosophy was rooted

¹William Hazlitt. ‘William Godwin.’ *The Spirit of the Age. The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*. Ed. P. P. Howe. 21 vols. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930–1934) 11, 16–17.

in a fiction. It is this ingenuousness that is a part of his initial appeal to the reader, as exemplified in the well-known train of thought added to the second edition of *Political Justice*:

Sound reasoning and truth, when adequately communicated, must always be victorious over error: Sound reasoning and truth are capable of being so communicated: Truth is omnipotent: The vices and moral weakness of man are not invincible: Man is perfectible, or in other words susceptible of perpetual improvement.²

With such grand statements, Godwin epitomised a belief in (and a desire for) optimism and rational improvement, tapping into and shaping radical opinion by offering a comprehensible argument for social change; there is something irresistible about the manner in which Godwin effortlessly dismantles yet another civil structure as an impediment to happiness, and proclaims his all-encompassing faith in the powers of human reason to overcome the evils that have accreted around tradition and custom. Just as Godwin's striking thesis had found its appeal in the aftermath of the French Revolution, his popularity would dwindle accordingly as reaction and nationalism increased. By the end of the decade, his morals and motives would be repeatedly assailed, and his arguments accused of at best utopian speciousness and at worst, sedition.

What is interesting is that, even at the height of his fame, Godwin's fiction both complemented *Political Justice*, and showed the inevitable limits of its over-reliance on the powers of reason. *Caleb Williams* was originally published in 1794 under the title *Things as They Are*, a choice which proclaims its role as a practical accompaniment to the philosophy of *Political Justice*. In its obsessions with crime and the injustice of punishment, it has obvious analogies with the recent trials for treason of Godwin's friend Joseph Gerrald and other members of the London Corresponding Society and their allies. The story of the persecution of Caleb Williams after his discovery of the secret of his master Falkland is a novel written with a purpose and a message: Falkland has been forced to betray his own better nature because of the corrupting idea of public reputation (with the quixotism of his preoccupation with chivalry a stab at Burke) and the general rottenness of social institutions. As Caleb's final apostrophe puts it, 'Falkland! thou settedst out in thy career with the purest and most laudable intentions. But thou imbibedst the poison of chivalry with thy earliest youth; and the base and low-minded envy that met thee on thy return to thy native seats, operated with this poison to hurry thee into madness.'³ From such a fate there is little escape: 'But of what use are talents and sentiments in the corrupt wilderness of human society? It is a rank and rotten soil from which every finer shrub draws poison as it grows' (p. 276). Such strident statements are of a piece with the technique of *Caleb Williams*. In his essay in this volume, David O'Shaughnessy argues that this technique is to a large extent dramatic, by looking at the ways in which Godwin's interest in the drama developed after the perceived failure of his play *St Dunstan* in 1790. As well as the construction of scenes which mark the staginess of *Caleb Williams*, O'Shaughnessy also finds evidence of Godwin's knowledge and reading

²William Godwin. *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*. 2nd edn. 2 vols. (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1796) I, 86–7.

³*Collected Novels and Memoirs*. Vol. 3. *Caleb Williams*. Ed. Pamela Clemit. (London: William Pickering, 1992) 277.

of the recent Treason trials, and the influence of their most dramatic moments and motifs of pursuit and punishment. Moreover, he suggests that the theatre (and specifically the theatrical novel), is an ideal form for the promotion of Godwinian values, given its delicate balancing act that allows for both audience consensus and private judgment. It also has the ability to harness a wider crowd than more rarefied forms of print culture, like philosophy. The overt theatricality of parts of *Caleb Williams* emerges not as an artistic weakness, but as a deliberate element in Godwin's endeavour.

The didacticism of Godwin's most popular novel is tempered by its psychological interest, a major attraction of his fiction beyond its ostensible purposes. In *Caleb Williams*, the thinly veiled message of reform that lies behind the relationship of Caleb and Falkland is accompanied by the uncanny sense with which the bond between the two is represented. Consider Caleb's feeling on being thwarted by Falkland's minions on his attempt to leave England by boat:

I now took it for granted that I was once more in the power of Mr. Falkland, and the idea was inexpressibly mortifying and afflictive to my imagination. Escape from his pursuit, freedom from his tyranny, were objects upon which my whole soul was bent; could no human ingenuity and exertion effect them? Did his power reach through all space, and his eye penetrate every concealment? Was he like that mysterious being, to protect us from whose fierce revenge mountains and hills we are told might fall on us in vain? No idea is more heart-sickening and tremendous than this. But in my case it was not a subject of reasoning or of faith; I could derive no comfort either openly from unbelief, or secretly from the remoteness and incomprehensibility of the conception; it was an affair of sense; I felt the fangs of the tyger striking deep into my heart. (pp. 214–215)

On one level this is gothic melodrama, heightening the momentum with which Caleb relates his ineffectual attempts to escape a powerful foe; moreover, the serious point is made that Falkland's power extends to an arbitrary control of the law, and its representatives. This is part of the novel's discussion of the real evils of unchecked power, and its ability to terrify its victims. But underneath this, is a suggestion of a peculiar intimacy: even in his persecution, Falkland is bound to Caleb in a way that suggests the instinctive ties between them that have been eroded by the evils of civilisation. Such a bond is perverted by Falkland's obsessive attempts to save his reputation at Caleb's expense, yet even the vestiges of such a feeling show how a different scenario could lead to the potential unification of their sentiments in a Godwinian scheme of perfectibility, if only the modern world did not get in the way. In Godwin's most important subsequent fiction, the move is from the social to the personal, and the state of obsession is used less as a radical statement, and more as a psychological malaise, a kind of inverted idealism, yet it retains its ability to unsettle: Gary Kelly's claim that 'Godwin's novels are strong in characterisation but weak in plot and structure' has not been widely disputed, but the strength of the depiction of character (particularly in extreme states) is the chief reason why they have always had some sort of readership.⁴

Such an extreme of character dominates his next fiction, *St. Leon* (1799), an historical novel that tries to encompass almost all of 16th-century Europe, from the Field of the Cloth of Gold to the Inquisition. St. Leon gains the secret of the philosopher's stone and

⁴Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel, 1780–1805* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 200.

immortality, but loses all emotional ties, as endless wealth and life lead him only to isolation and a qualified misanthropy. Character overrides the historical action, as successive events and personages become a backdrop to St. Leon's obsessive failure to find happiness. Less unified than *Caleb Williams*, it nonetheless won much approval in Godwin's lifetime. It has become a matter of debate whether its historical subject represents a critique of the contemporary, or a less overt radicalism that is so muted as to be ineffectual or even defeatist, given the inevitable isolation of its main character and his unutterable secret.⁵ The relationship of Godwin's politics to *St. Leon* is approached from another angle in Louise Joy's essay, which examines the particular way in which, for all its praise of the domestic affections and the love of the family (including the heartfelt portrait of the sincerity and integrity of Mary Wollstonecraft, in the form of St. Leon's wife), the novel not only shows these affections to be squandered by its protagonist's quest and fate of isolation, it also confirms this rejection in its very language, with the static and restrictive domestic scenes contrasted with the energy of St. Leon's adventures. Joy argues that this reflects Godwin's wider distrust of the efficacy of the affections as a means of social change in his more utilitarian and rational scheme. The revisions to *Political Justice* of 1796 and 1798 (the latter of which show how the influence of Wollstonecraft had made Godwin modify his thought) which tried to temper the influence of rationality by paying greater service to the inherent influence of personal attachments, are thus followed by *St. Leon's* apparent attempt to place emotional ties at the centre of its narrative. That such an attempt fails is, for Joy, an indication of Godwin's complicated but nevertheless ultimate separation of private affections from his public philosophy of radical action.

The tracing of this philosophy in Godwin's fiction is aided by intertextuality. Godwin's allusions are usually very telling: Caleb Williams, for instance, introduces the example of Alexander the Great in order to test Falkland's reactions to a case (like his own) where the need for fame and reputation overcomes wider social responsibility. In the revised ending of the novel, Falkland is, like Alexander, laid low (albeit not so randomly). Conversely, St. Leon compares his gambling losses to Philoctetes' incurable wound, and the imparting of the vital secret of immortality to him is compared by its giver, the mysterious stranger, to Hercules injunction to Philoctetes. In this myth, Philoctetes is both hero and anti-hero: the enormous redeeming power that he represents (with his bow and arrows the only way to defeat the Trojans) is combined with the poisonous and nauseating wound of his foot, which repels those who he could otherwise save. As Graham Allen notes in his essay, allusions to Philoctetes in *St. Leon* are suggestive of the degree to which St. Leon's secret is a potential blessing but a practical curse to humanity. Like St. Leon, Godwin thought he possessed knowledge that would dramatically improve his world; like him, he was vilified by those who (in his own terms) ignored, or were insensible of the real bonds between them. Gary Kelly suggests (perhaps rather fervidly) that this is also the relationship between the author and the alchemist: 'Like the natural philosopher, Godwin finds himself to be in possession of great and terrible secrets—the philosophy of *Political Justice*—which he could not use for the benefit of mankind, but which, on the contrary, made him an object of fear and loathing'.⁶ Graham Allen's argument uses these intertextual

⁵For a summary of the purpose of the novel, and its problems, see Pamela Clemit. *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 88–94.

⁶*The English Jacobin Novel*, 209.

relationships—in particular, that between Godwin’s fiction and Fénelon’s influential *Telemachus* (1699)—to show how the topic of education (embodied in Fénelon’s character Mentor) is a central, but paradoxical aspect of the Godwinian novel: the enlightenment ideal of educating is something that is intrinsic to the ideas of his fiction, yet at the same time, Godwin’s stress on the progression of rational thought should eventually remove the need for anything beyond the teaching of the self. Allen suggests that the problem is that fiction ought, for Godwin, to be a way of informing and educating that is outside of the social systems he wants to replace, yet to what degree is education (even within the novel) free from the ideological transmission that constrains all practical pedagogy? Moreover, in the examples from the novels of ‘Mentor’ figures, the results are either ambiguous or disastrous: the disguised St. Leon rejoices in the happiness of his son, but cannot reveal himself to him; in *Fleetwood: or the New Man of Feeling* (1805), the eponymous character is given two mentors, shows himself unable to learn their lessons, and is only saved from madness and death by a *deus ex machina*.

Fleetwood, as its subtitle suggests, was a move towards the sort of emotional explorations that only flicker in *St. Leon*. The domestic world of enlightened sensibility is contrasted with the corrupted cynicisms of the sophisticated, whether drunken Oxford students leading the hero into dissipation, or French aristocrats encouraging his misanthropy. In the last, *Othello*-like volume, having married the young orphaned daughter of a friend, Fleetwood is deceived by a distant relation and driven to the edge of his sanity. When the day is saved by the true sensibility of his wife and his other heir, the villain is punished, with Fleetwood’s grim blessing:

I shed no tear upon the bier of Gifford. I reviewed the whole series of his life from the cradle to the scaffold. I have always regarded with horror those sanguinary laws which, under the name of justice, strike at the life of man. For his sake I was willing to admit of one exception. His whole existence had been a series of the most monstrous and unnatural crimes. For what society, or plantation of men, in the remotest corner of the globe, was he fitted? What discipline, or penitentiary confinement, could rationally be expected to inspire him with one touch of human nature? Die then, poor wretch, and let the earth, which labours with thy depravity, be relieved!⁷

While it is glib to expect Godwin to have solved the problem of evil where so many others have failed, this description of the innately bad Gifford takes us a long way from *Political Justice*, with its repeated admonitions that it is the organised structures of society and their penal systems that corrupt the individual, and that redemption is never impossible once we are freed from them.

The obsessive jealousy of Fleetwood is matched by the protagonist of Godwin’s next novel, *Mandeville* (1817), set in the Civil War and Interregnum, which indulges Godwin’s enthusiasm for the period (he wrote a history of it, and lives of John and Edward Philips), and has obvious parallels with Scott. *Mandeville* is an English orphan as a result of the Ulster rebellion of Sir Phelim O’Neill in 1641 (the novel is dedicated to Godwin’s friend John Philpot Curran, and shows Godwin’s long-standing interest in

⁷ *Collected Novels and Memoirs*. Vol. 5. *Fleetwood: or, The New Man of Feeling*. Ed. Pamela Clemit (London: William Pickering, 1992) 291.

Irish politics).⁸ The massacre of his parents in County Tyrone gives Mandeville a virulent anti-Catholicism. His upbringing in England is destroyed by that old Godwinian bugbear, reputation, when a fellow Wykehamist helps expose his erroneous possession of an anti-royalist satire, and goes on to supplant him in Colonel Penruddock's failed uprising of 1655. The morbid jealousy of Mandeville for this youth, the graceful Clifford, dominates the remainder of the book. Clifford (somewhat inevitably) turns out to be betrothed to Mandeville's beloved sister. The novel is a triumphant portrait of morbidly obsessive jealousy, but somewhat flat as a narrative: a rascally lawyer appears, and serves the Hobbesian function of showing that 'the whole world is a scene of warfare under the mask of civility', with 'Honesty a starving quality, set up by powerful villainy for its own ease and safety. It was in reality an imaginary existence, like truth, much talked of, never to be found.'⁹ Otherwise, the interest is partly in its being a recapitulation of former ideas of psychology, but in a far more pathological state. Thus, Mandeville's jealousy, the motives for which seem irrational even by outmoded standards of decorum, is described by him in a way that recalls the earlier novels:

In the same manner as, in the world of human creatures, there exist certain mysterious sympathies and analogies, drawing and attracting each to each, and fitting them to be respectively sources of mutual happiness, so, I was firmly persuaded, there are antipathies, and properties interchangably irreconcilable and destructive to each other, that fit one human being to be the source of another's misery. Beyond doubt I had found this true opposition and inter-destructiveness with Clifford. (p. 141)

It is the same disturbingly unconscious tie as that between Caleb and Falkland, yet it suggests not a buried instinctive sympathy, but its opposite. The result is an oppressive tragedy: things as they are, with little suggestion of alleviation. As Pamela Clemit argues, Mandeville's lack of personal control and the erosion of his judgment is related to the later Godwin's 'view of historical change as decided not by the individual abilities of great men, but by an accumulation of external circumstances and overwhelming impulse.'¹⁰ A curious 'continuation' of the novel appeared in 1818, pretending to be its fourth volume, taking Mandeville's monomania to the last extremity of melodrama: 'Her eye, wandering, doubtful, and undetermined, then rested on the anxious countenance of Clifford-her husband!—perhaps *the murderer of her brother!*—'¹¹ The choice of italics signify the parody, but the floridity is not that far from Godwin's original.

Godwin's fiction moved, to some extent, from mirroring his philosophy to providing negative examples of it: characters like Mandeville and Fleetwood have need of a liberating internal philosophy of rationality, but seem the least likely of people to adopt it. The final essay in this volume explores the most notorious example of what was perceived as a correction (and, in some ways, a capitulation) of the original position of *Political Justice*—the question of immortality. Originally, the perfectibility of the species was to be carried to

⁸For Godwin's relationship with Ireland, see Tim Webb. 'Missing Robert Emmet: William Godwin's Expedition to Ireland in Summer 1800.' *Re-interpreting Emmet: Essays on the Life and Legacy of Robert Emmet*. Ed. Anne Dolan, Patrick Geoghegan and Darryl Jones (Dublin: UCD Press, 2006).

⁹*Collected Novels and Memoirs*. Vol. 6. *Mandeville*. Ed. Pamela Clemit (London: William Pickering, 1992) 234.

¹⁰*The Godwinian Novel*, 102.

¹¹*Mandeville: or, the Last Words of a Maniac! a Tale of the Seventeenth Century in England, by Himself*. (London: Effingham Wilson, 1818) 10.

such a degree that those remaining ‘will cease to propagate, for they will no longer have any motive, either of error or duty, to induce them. In addition to this they will perhaps be immortal’.¹² Eventually, this would bring forth Malthus, of course, but in the second edition of 1796, we find the message apparently tempered: ‘The men therefore whom we are supposing to exist, when the earth shall refuse itself to a more extended population, will probably cease to propagate. They will no longer have any motive, either of error or reason, to induce them.’¹³ Quite apart from the question of population, it remained unclear why procreation should cease if immortality was taken out of the question, but this was a minor issue, in comparison with the claim for immortality, and its subsequent removal. In her essay here, Siobhan Ni Chonaill argues that Godwin’s claim for the possibility of immortality was neither as intrinsically eccentric or absurd as it is often taken to be, given the context of European thinkers working on the same lines. Furthermore, it is of a piece with Godwin’s philosophy, relating in a metaphorical way to the ideology of the perfectibility project, being not so much a tangible goal, as an inspiration in the ceaseless process toward perfection. Malthus’s pragmatic reaction is contained in a letter to Godwin of 1798: ‘In the view in which you now place the subject, do you not in some degree change the question from the perfectibility and happiness to the numbers of the human race; and it may be a matter of doubt whether, without looking to a future state, an increase of numbers without a perpetual increase of happiness be really desirable.’¹⁴ What, in other words, will you do when the overpopulated world cannot become immortal? Godwin’s response, as Ni Chonaill shows (apart from the unlikely suggestion of abstinence and the unsavoury one of infanticide), was that population would always possess the means to control itself, not least by its developing beyond the need for reproduction. Ridiculous as this sounds now, it is more important to realise that whilst Godwin would adjust his views, he would not alter the comprehensive belief that immortality, the summit of human progress, had to be aspired towards, even if it could not be comprehended; whilst Malthus and others worried over the subsistence of the population, Godwin maintained his conviction that the mind could advance to the stage where it transcended the needs of the body. As Ni Chonaill suggests, the secular antipathy towards the stasis of immortality as understood by organised religion (a rebuke to the Sandemanism of Godwin’s childhood) was also a part of his thinking in this matter, as he upheld the radically progressive view of his philosophy, in spite of the small revisions to its text.

Although any approaches to such a multifaceted and complicated career can only be partial, the essays collected here cover the range of Godwin’s major works and the most significant intellectual events of his long life. Hazlitt’s Godwin, it may be recalled, ‘blazed as a sun in the firmament of reputation’ but had then ‘sunk below the horizon’, and was left with ‘the serene twilight of a doubtful immortality.’¹⁵ Godwin’s status in modern academic criticism is not so doubtful, and given the future appearance of important critical materials, it seems likely that Godwin will remain one of the most influential of English Romantic authors.¹⁶ His works and thought are an often peculiar but never dull way of

¹²William Godwin. *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*. 1st edn. 2 vols. (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1793) II, 871.

¹³Godwin. *Political Justice*. 2nd edn. 2 vols. (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1796) II, 524.

¹⁴Quoted in C. Kegan Paul. *Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries*. 2 vols. (London: H. S. King, 1876) I, 322.

¹⁵*The Spirit of the Age. The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*. 11, 16.

¹⁶Pamela Clemit’s edition of *The Letters of William Godwin* (which will be published in six volumes by Oxford University Press) will obviously be of great significance to the future study of Godwin.

viewing some of the most important literary, philosophical and political questions of this significant period of English history.

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