

## St. Leon and the culture of the heart

Louise Joy

*Newnham College, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge CB3 9DF, UK*

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### Abstract

This essay reads Godwin's second novel, *St. Leon* (1799), as an attempt to counter the asperity he expresses towards the domestic affections in his political philosophy of the 1790s. In *St. Leon*, Godwin seeks to square his newfound interest in the affections as a topic for fiction with his commitment to an anti-establishment political agenda. Though it is presented as a 'eulogium' to 'the affections and charities of private life', the narrative persistently undercuts the potential for the affections to stimulate readerly curiosity. The focus of the novel constantly shies away from the domestic scene, and instead propels the momentum forwards to the alchemical adventures that precipitate the disintegration of the very affections the novel purports to eulogise. The novel thus plays out Godwin's complicated desire to embrace, and yet simultaneously to deny, the importance of private emotions in the pursuit of political justice.

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William Godwin's works of the 1790s vacillate over the question of the proper role for the affections. In the first edition of *The Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Political Justice* (1793), he famously decrees that private attachments compromise the 'general good of the species.'<sup>1</sup> The interests to which they give rise, he baldly asserts, should be subordinated to the interests of the public at large. If, for the sake of argument, it were only possible to rescue one victim from a fire in which the lives of the influential educationalist, the Archbishop of Fénelon, and a chambermaid were endangered, then it

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*E-mail address:* lj214@cam.ac.uk.

<sup>1</sup>*An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*. 1st edn. 2 vols. (Dublin: Luke White, 1793) I, vii.

follows that Fénelon must be saved, since his contribution is of greater benefit than that of the chambermaid. Mounting a series of claims that incensed critics, he proceeds:

Supposing the chambermaid had been my wife, my mother or my benefactor. This would not alter the truth of the proposition. The life of Fénelon would still be more valuable than that of the chambermaid; and justice, pure unadulterated justice, would still have preferred that which was most valuable. What magic is there in the pronoun ‘my,’ to overturn the decisions of everlasting truth? (*Political Justice*, I, 77–78)

By divesting the most cherished familial units—marriage and parenthood—of the emotional pull (‘magic’) they customarily exert, Godwin reduces domestic bonds to mere descriptors of the fact of kinship. He refuses to credit the significance of possession, denying any difference between the notions ‘wife’ and ‘my wife’. In effect, by disentangling concepts of familial relationships from the affections they tend to engender, he confutes the possibility for personal attachments to hold subjective value. The value of a human being is an objective absolute, he insists, which must be calculated through impartial assessment of a person’s merits, irrespective of the impact that this person’s life may have on one’s own by accident of circumstances.

When Godwin revised *Political Justice* for the second and third editions (1796 and 1798)—completed during and after his liaison with Mary Wollstonecraft—he tried to temper the asperity of his position by changing the sex of the servant. His rhetorical question is thus rephrased: ‘Suppose the valet had been my brother, my father or my benefactor.’<sup>2</sup> By altering the wording so that his example no longer contains a direct assault on the sanctity of marriage and motherhood, his emendation covertly acknowledges that there are certain personal attachments rooted in the domestic sphere whose subjective value to an individual (to a man) it is unfeasible, and perhaps undesirable, to deem readily expendable. Although the principle remains unchanged, Godwin’s modification concedes that the domestic affections might play a more complicated role in dictating human behaviour than his earlier statement had suggested.

During his relationship with Wollstonecraft and, in particular, in the months immediately after her death in 1797, Godwin immersed himself in the writing of his wife, whose thinking on this issue encouraged him to reconsider his position. The rehabilitation of the domestic affections is a central concern of Wollstonecraft’s work. ‘[W]hat can equal the sensations produced by mutual affection, supported by mutual respect’, she asks in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). ‘True happiness—I mean all the contentment and virtuous satisfaction that can be snatched in this imperfect state—must arise from well-regulated affections.’<sup>3</sup> While Godwin’s early work conceives the public and the private affections as mutually exclusive, in Wollstonecraft’s philosophy, the two are viewed as

<sup>2</sup>*Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*. 2nd edn. 2 vols. (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1796) I, 129. See *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. 3rd edn. 2 vols. (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1798) I, 180–181. For an analysis of the politics of Godwin’s famous Fénelon example, see Chris Jones. *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) especially 91–103.

<sup>3</sup>Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. (London: J. Johnson, 1792) 446, 323–324.

different manifestations of the same original propensity:

... public affections, as well as public virtues, must ever grow out of the private character, or they are merely meteors that shoot athwart a dark sky, and disappear as they are gazed at and admired.

Few, I believe, have had much affection for mankind, who did not first love their parents, their brothers, sisters, and even the domestic brutes, whom they first played with. The exercise of youthful sympathies forms the moral temperature; and it is the recollection of these first affections and pursuits that gives life to those that are afterwards more under the direction of reason. (p. 373)

Wollstonecraft's belief that personal relationships create the 'moral temperature' directly challenges Godwin's argument that private attachments threaten morality. To divorce the desire to be of public service from the desire to tend to the needs of those immediately around us—as Godwin advocates—is inconceivable to Wollstonecraft, since it is only *through* our experience of individual attachments that we comprehend the interests of wider society. For the author of the *Vindications*, it is thus impossible to experience public affections without first investing in the private affections. Moreover, she contends, for women in particular (but, ideally, also for men) to execute the duties of domestic life *is* to make a substantial contribution to public welfare.

In addition to the intellectual challenge that Wollstonecraft's philosophical legacy posed to Godwin in the mid 1790s, the fact of her premature death compelled him to confront the practical problem of how best to provide for her two young children (Fanny, Wollstonecraft's child by Gilbert Imlay, and Godwin's own daughter, Mary). In 1797, the urgency and seriousness of responsibilities within the domestic sphere thus looms large. Unsurprisingly, then, in his writing of this period, the role of the domestic affections surfaces as a more pressing and complicated concern than he had earlier allowed. In *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798), his elegiac biography of Wollstonecraft, Godwin's admiration for his deceased wife chiefly congregates around her investment in human relationships. He presents her as a woman who 'felt herself formed for domestic affection, and all those tender charities, which men of sensibility have constantly treated as the dearest band of human society.'<sup>4</sup> His account of their union proudly recounts how he was patiently and fondly introduced to the domestic affections by his more experienced wife: 'She was a worshipper of domestic life. She loved to observe the growth of affection between me and her daughter, then 3 years of age, as well as my anxiety respecting the child not yet born' (pp. 166–167). The affections are figured as the enduring gift that Wollstonecraft bequeaths to her husband. Her exceptional capacity for affection is invoked throughout the *Memoirs*, deployed as a symbol that testifies to her objective moral worth. Through this pivotal work, the affections are transformed from a dubious repository of superstitious 'magic' to an emblem of the human capacity to fulfil the demands of justice so extolled in his political philosophy.

When he embarks on *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1799), Godwin aspires publicly to redress the imbalance of his former position by placing the affections at the heart of his novelistic venture. He announces that the project is envisaged as a 'eulogium' to 'the affections and charities of private life.'<sup>5</sup> Highly conscious of the awkwardness of

<sup>4</sup>Godwin. *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. (London: J. Johnson, 1798) 98.

<sup>5</sup>*Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*. Vol. 4. *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century*. Ed. Pamela Clemit. (London: William Pickering, 1992) 11. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as SL, with page number.

this gesture, given his infamous rejection of private attachments in *Political Justice*, he uses the Preface of the novel to account for the transition that has occurred in his thought:

Some readers of my graver productions will perhaps, in perusing these little volumes, accuse me of inconsistency; the affections and charities of private life being every where in this publication a topic of the warmest eulogium, while in the Enquiry concerning Political Justice they seemed to be treated with no great degree of indulgence and favour. In answer to this objection, all I think it necessary to say on the present occasion is, that, for more than 4 years, I have been anxious for opportunity and leisure to modify some of the earlier chapters of that work in conformity to the sentiments inculcated in this. Not that I see cause to make any change respecting the principle of justice, or any thing else fundamental to the system there delivered; but that I apprehend domestic and private affections inseparable from the nature of man, and from what may be styled the culture of the heart, and am fully persuaded that they are not incompatible with a profound and active sense of justice in the mind of him that cherishes them. (SL, 10–11)

By presenting *St. Leon* as the fulfilment of his longstanding desire to alter certain views expressed in *Political Justice*, he sets up the novel as in dialogue with—or as a recasting of—the discussion that takes place in the earlier treatise. Disregarding the generic differences between the two works, his characterization of *St. Leon* as a direct response to questions left unanswered by *Political Justice* indicates that the novel's appeal primarily resides in the ideas it encodes: in the access it grants to Godwin's philosophy. But despite the fact that he states as the occasion for the novel the reappraisal of his earlier position, he nonetheless stresses that his central thesis (which he visualizes as a continuous thread running through all of his works, individually and collectively) is not compromised by the effusive endorsement of affectionate relationships in *St. Leon*. Although the affections are now embraced as a prominent theme, this does not constitute 'any change respecting the principle of justice, or any thing else fundamental to the system there delivered'. As his forceful use of the word 'any' accentuates, he is anxious to portray his new veneration of the domestic affections as an amplification of, and not as a retreat from, his former position.

The seeming inconsistency of Godwin's presentation of *St. Leon* as both embodying a newfound appreciation of the affections and upholding a system of philosophy founded on their negation, is partially surmounted by crucial shifts that occur within his deployment of the category of the affections. Initially, the affections are referred to as a 'topic', which depicts them as an extant corpus of subject matter that inspires a particular literary mode. In describing the act of their representation as an act of the 'warmest eulogium', Godwin suggests that this topic is bound up with the impulse to celebrate, to memorialize, and even to mourn. His turn towards the affections is thus launched as the inauguration of a particular literary form.<sup>6</sup> Like Wordsworth, who harnesses the category of the affections in order to redraw the parameters of poetry, Godwin identifies this category of the emotions as a site on which to build a new branch of fiction whose 'boldness and irregularity of ... design' will push the frontiers of the rapidly evolving genre of the novel. And, building on

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<sup>6</sup>For an exploration of Godwin's fusion of genres in *St. Leon*, see Gregory Maertz. 'Generic Diversity and the Romantic Travel Novel: Godwin's *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century*.' *Narrative Ironies*. Eds. A. Prier and Gerald Gillespie. (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997) 267–282.

the success of his highly innovative *Things as They Are, or the Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), it is his explicit aim in *St. Leon* to charter new territory for prose fiction.

Domesticity is hardly an uncommon focal-point for eighteenth-century novels, and in particular, is a stock motif in so-called sentimental literature. Celebration of familial love goes hand in hand with the rise of the novel, as seminal studies by Nancy Armstrong and others have shown.<sup>7</sup> The innovativeness of Godwin's manoeuvre lies not in his identification of the novelistic potential of the theme per se, but in his insistence that the cultivation of private affections is consistent with an anti-establishment political agenda. By importing into the main frame of a politically—and theologically—radical novel a field of interest usually saturated in conservative ideology, he aspires to 'gain footing in one neglected track of the ... province' (SL, 10). Through this gesture, he pays tribute to, and perhaps seeks to bring to fruition, the project that Mary Wollstonecraft never lived to complete. Like *St. Leon*, Wollstonecraft's unfinished fiction, *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1797), is premised on the supposition that no situation is more distressing than one in which one is 'obliged to renounce all the humanizing affections.'<sup>8</sup> By appropriating this same theme as the animus for *St. Leon*, and by placing Wollstonecraft at the heart of his novel in the barely disguised form of the protagonist's wife, Marguerite, Godwin aligns his second novel with Wollstonecraft's fragment. The two works stand together to propose a new type of novel founded on the thematic possibilities afforded by the category of the affections for the furtherance of a radical political agenda through fiction.<sup>9</sup>

On the one hand, then, Godwin deploys the category of the affections to signify an exciting new field of interest for anti-establishment novelists. On the other, he is keen to stress that he regards the affections as 'inseparable from the nature of man, and from what may be styled the culture of the heart.' This comment deploys the category of the affections not as a discrete object of study, but on the contrary as a label for a set of principles that cannot be extricated from the behaviour to which they give rise. Far from rendering them worthy of celebration, then, Godwin's second definition of the affections asserts them as commonplace and banal. Indeed, when he further clarifies his new position in a prose pamphlet of the following year, he maintains that the recognition that we 'all of us have, twisted with our very natures, the principles of parental and filial affection, of love, attachment and friendship' does not give rise to particularly fruitful avenues for moral philosophical enquiry. '[T]he cultivation of these sentiments ... does not appear to me the

<sup>7</sup>See Armstrong. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Caroline Gonda. *Reading Daughters' Fictions, 1709–1834: Novels and Society from Manley to Edgeworth*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Michael Ragussis. *Acts of Naming: The Family Plot in Fiction*. (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Naomi Tadmor. *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship and Patronage*. (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup>Wollstonecraft. *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria. Posthumous Works of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. 4 vols. (London: J. Johnson and G.G. and J. Robinson, 1798) I, B5<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>9</sup>Godwin and Wollstonecraft were not alone in this enterprise. Writers including Charlotte Smith, Robert Bage, Elizabeth Inchbald, Eliza Fenwick and Thomas Holcroft also participated in this movement to redraw the emotional structures of the domestic sphere from a radical standpoint, and placed them at the heart of the novel form. This movement has been conceptualized by some as the development of the novel of radical sensibility, although the term 'sensibility' is not, in fact, privileged in Godwin's work. See Markman Ellis. *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Gary Kelly provides an alternative interpretation, suggesting that '[a]utobiography is the central form of the Godwin–Wollstonecraft fictions'. See *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789–1830*. (London: Longman, 1989) 41.

principal office of moral discipline.’<sup>10</sup> Despite his newfound conviction of their importance, and despite his enthusiasm for the opportunities they present for the novel form, the affections fail to arouse Godwin’s curiosity as a legitimate subject for serious philosophical debate. At the same time as carving out a new position for private attachments in his account of human psychology, Godwin’s ‘eulogium’ to the affections in *St. Leon* simultaneously holds them at arm’s length. By celebrating the culture of the heart from a position of remove from, rather than involvement in, the practices he reveres, he is able both to proclaim their significance and resist their assimilation into his political philosophy.

The tension between Godwin’s concomitant desires to embrace and to deflect the affections is played out in the psychological battles that plague the novel’s central protagonist and narrator, Count Reginald de St. Leon. Throughout the novel, St. Leon is torn between the calm, uniform appeals of domestic harmony and the more thrilling, unpredictable allures of independent life. Although the ambitions that consume him (wealth, prestige, the survival of his patrimony) are particular to the persona of the sixteenth-century character Godwin fashions and are ambitions that Godwin himself despises; nonetheless, the incompatibility of these goals with the demands of domesticity replicates the conflict that beleaguers his own philosophy. By using his narrator as a mouthpiece for the explication of the transitions in his own thinking on the affections, Godwin establishes an affinity between the voice of the novel’s narrator and his own voice in its Preface. This affinity invites us to read St. Leon’s vexed position in relation to the affections as a reflection of Godwin’s own struggle—and ultimate failure—to resolve the threat that personal attachments pose to political justice.

Like Godwin in his non-fictional prose, St. Leon recoils at every turn from probing the virtues of the topic he eulogizes. The affections are treated as a touchstone, their tranquilizing charms invoked in a refrain that persistently hauls the narrative back to its moral epicentre, but which is not in itself sufficiently absorbing to enthrall the narrator’s attention. Consequently, the potential for the topic of ‘the affections and charities of private life’ to seize the reader’s interest is undercut from the outset through the narrator’s tacit repudiation of its power to stimulate:

In my own times, and for upwards of a century before them, the subject which has chiefly occupied men of intrepid and persevering study, has been the great secret of nature, the *opus magnum*, in its two grand and inseparable branches, the art of multiplying gold, and of defying the inroads of infirmity and death .... It is not to my purpose to ascertain the number of those whose victory over the powers and inertness of matter has been complete. It is enough that I am a living instance of the existence of such men. To these two secrets, if they are to be considered as two, I have been for years in the habit of resorting for my gratification. I have in my possession the choice of being as wealthy as I please, and the gift of immortal life .... I sit down purely to relate a few of those extraordinary events that have been produced, in the period of my life which is already elapsed, by the circumstances and the peculiarity to which I have just alluded. (SL, 13)

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<sup>10</sup>*Thoughts Occasioned by the Perusal of Dr. Parr’s Spital Sermon, Preached at Christ Church, April 15, 1800: Being a Reply to the Attacks of Dr. Parr, Mr. Mackintosh, the Author of an Essay on Population, and others.* (London: Taylor and Wilks & G.G. and J. Robinson, 1801) 31–32.

The hook used to captivate the reader's imagination is not the novel's eulogium to the affections, but its engagement with the 'secrets' of alchemy. This strategy plays directly to the tastes of a readership hungry for Gothic intrigue following the recent popularity of novels such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). But, aligning himself with 'men of intrepid and persevering study', the narrator also asserts the weighty scholarliness of the novel's interest in the supernatural, staking a claim for its intervention in debates of philosophical significance—a claim that echoes Godwin's statement in the Preface that the novel will mix 'human feelings and passions with incredible situations' to 'rende[r] them impressive and interesting.'<sup>11</sup> Although he decides against calling the novel *The Adept, Opus Magnum* or *Natural Philosophy* (titles used for early drafts of the manuscript), settling instead for a title that promotes it primarily as the history of a life, Godwin's opening plays down the novel's interest in 'human feelings and passions' in favour of the 'incredible situations' it promises to address.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the topic of the affections, then, the theme of alchemy is deemed to hold the potential not only to whet the reader's appetite, but, in addition, to attest to the philosophical gravity of the issues the novel addresses.

As the use of the words 'extraordinary' and 'peculiarity' indicate, the novel's intrigue is judged by its narrator to be located in the idiosyncrasy of its central premise: that it presents a 'living instance' of an otherwise unverifiable scenario. The uncanniness of this premise is compounded by Godwin's application of the method of formal scholarly enquiry ('ascertain', 'instance', 'relate') to the subject matter of Gothic fantasy ('victory', 'secrets', 'gratification'). However, by disclosing the novel's 'secret' at the outset of volume one, Godwin denies the possibility for the first volume—the volume that centres on the pleasures of quiet domesticity—to participate in the generation of dramatic tension. Plunging the reader straight into the mysteries that will dominate volume two before he has even set the scene for volume one, he renders St. Leon's eulogium on the affections impotent. It is incapable of participating in the suspense and intrigue that the opening has identified as the novel's selling-point. The contents of volume one are pre-emptively dismissed as a lengthy preamble to the story proper. Therefore, in the very process of its construction, St. Leon's idyllic family life is tilted towards its extinction, narrated in full view of its imminent end. Volume one's prolonged celebration of domestic harmony is thus suffused with a sense of averted momentum. The edicts of the narrator constantly suggest that 'natural affection winds itself in so many folds about the heart ... that he who should attempt to divest himself of it, will find that he is divesting himself of all that is most to be coveted in existence' (SL, 351). But from the outset, the stasis of the affections is aligned not with peacefulness and fulfilment, but with lack. It brings with it a sense of edgy anticipation as the reader lies in wait for the alchemical adventures that are anticipated. Godwin therefore creates a dissonance between the response the affections elicit from the narrator and their effect on the reader. By using volume one as a structural device to cultivate an atmosphere of extended delay, Godwin nurtures a climate in which, as Tysdahl has noted, the 'moments of emotional intensity' cherished by the narrator, become 'moments of irritation for the reader.'<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup>'Preface.' *St. Leon*, 10. The seriousness of Godwin's fascination with the study of magic is evidenced by the fact that in 1834 he published a scholarly history entitled *Lives of the Necromancers*.

<sup>12</sup>See *St. Leon*. 'Introduction', v.

<sup>13</sup>B. J. Tysdahl. *William Godwin as Novelist*. (London: Athlone, 1981) 93–94.

The discrepancy between these two concurrently unfurling attitudes towards the affections is exacerbated by the irony produced through Godwin's selection of the confessional form as his vehicle for delivering a homage to the domestic affections. This form, which inescapably draws attention to the haunting omnipresence of the first-person narrator, posits an equation between the uniqueness of St. Leon's story and his solitariness.<sup>14</sup> St. Leon's authority and unnerving appeal as a narrator derive from the very fact of his detachment from other people. By appointing his central protagonist as the narrator, Godwin uses St. Leon's alienation from human affections as a contraption to arrest our attention. Eerily dislocated in time and place, his disembodied voice acquires the transfixing force of a note sounded in the void. In a novel that ostensibly seeks to affirm the value of human connections, the beguiling solitariness of the narratorial voice rebelliously tantalizes the reader's morbid curiosity to fathom utter disconnection. Crucially, this irony operates to undermine the force of the novel's didacticism, since, if we were to accept St. Leon's judgment that the domestic affections offer 'all that is most to be coveted in existence,' we would not be susceptible to enthusiasm for the projected disclosure of his experimentation with black magic.

By the same token, if we accept the challenge issued in the first pages, and embark on reading the novel as a means of attaining entry into the secret world of the paranormal—a world against which the pleasures of the domestic sphere appear cloyingly familiar—then we are precluded from investing in the very affections that the narrator demands we commemorate en route. Indeed, the narrator defies us to stake any interest in the fortunes of his family by persistently and aggressively reminding us of the end it will meet. Before he has even introduced its members, he painstakingly recounts the entire history of the sufferings they will incur:

Poverty, I have drained thy cup to the dregs! I have seen my wife and my children looking to me in vain for bread! Which is the most intolerable distress?—that of the period, in which all the comforts of life gradually left me; in which I caught at every fragment of promise, and every fragment failed; in which I rose every morning to pamper myself with empty delusions; in which I ate the apples of purgatory, fair without, but within bitterness and ashes in which I tossed, through endless, sightless nights, upon the couch of disappointment and despair?—or the period, when at length all my hopes were at an end; when I fled with horror to a foreign climate; when my family, that should have been my comfort, gave me my most poignant agony; when I looked upon them, naked, destitute, and exiles, with the tremendous thought, what and who it was that had caused their ruin? (SL, 35–36)

The effect of such passages is violently to wrench the reader's attention away from the family chronicles of the past towards the present moment in which the contents of these scenes is now destroyed. St. Leon's children are presented to us as 'destitute', 'exile[d]', and ultimately dead, before he has even announced their births. Strings of hyperbolic apostrophes ('Poverty, I have drained thy cup to the dregs!') and agonized rhetorical

<sup>14</sup>Pamela Clemit suggests that his inventive deployment of the first-person narrator is one of Godwin's 'boldest innovations' for the novel form. *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 6. Tysdahl also discusses the significance of the device of lone first-person narration in Godwin's fiction, observing that his novels explore the possibilities of seeing the world through the eyes of a 'frightened and bewildered narrator.' (7).

questions (‘Which is the most intolerable distress?’) compel us to take as the object of focus not the (now disintegrated) family, but St. Leon’s grief for its loss. By denying the reader any opportunity to dally with the inhabitants of the scene, Godwin debars us from attaching emotionally to the characters he conjures. Thus, while St. Leon’s anguish is vividly alive, the characters he mourns are already dead to us; their collective significance resides only in the role they play as a stimulus for the narrator’s pained remembrances. St. Leon’s accounts of family life are deprived of any capacity to engage our emotions since the scenes he presents are fixed as static, inaccessible tableaux that we are given no power or incentive to probe further. Their function in the narrative is to puncture, not to be punctured by, the narrator’s attention.

The novel’s homilies to the affections therefore interrupt the flow of the narrative, marking points where St. Leon steps out of his role as narrator and into an adjacent psychological realm occupied by memories of the past—a realm that exists contemporaneously to, but which is irreconcilable with, his dominant mind set:

When I indulge this vein of reflection, I seem again to see my family, as they surrounded me in the year fifteen hundred and forty-four .... How richly furnished, how cheerful, how heart-reviving, appeared to me the apartment in which they were assembled! I dwell upon the image with fond affection and lingering delight. Where are they now? How has all this happiness been maliciously undermined, and irrevocably destroyed! To look back on it, seems like the idle fabric of a dream. I awake, and find myself alone! Were there really such persons? Where are they dispersed? Whither are they gone? Oh, miserable solitude and desertion, to which I have so long been condemned! I see nothing around me but speechless walls, or human faces that say as little to my heart as the walls themselves! How palsied is my soul! How withered my affections!—But I will not anticipate. (SL, 115–116)

He characterizes the moments when he slips into this parallel realm as an ‘indulg[ence]’, indicating that the morbid pleasure of reflecting upon his deceased family carries with it sensations of guilt, since it takes him away from the more practical ends he should be serving. The ‘lingering delight’ produced by the process of ‘look[ing] back’ is depicted as a vain, solipsistic pleasure, which he berates himself for not resisting. Indeed, St. Leon’s immersion in his memories of the past directly impedes his capacity to fulfil the functions of narration. As the words ‘dwell upon’ suggest, during these moments of detainment, he hovers over the objects on which he fixates, refusing to inspect or uncover their contents, satisfied merely to exist in their proximity. He thus halts the progress of the narrative, temporarily releasing his command of its course, a withdrawal that is registered in his use of the parenthetical dash. His expressions of loss, which merely reiterate again and again the same numb fact of his culpability—‘[s]uch was the amiable circle, one and all of whom have been involved by me in the most tremendous ruin and disgrace’—reveal nothing new to the reader, who is by now inured to this familiar refrain (SL, 48).

Yet, although the fact of his family’s ruin is uttered with unremitting frequency, St. Leon’s confused questions concerning their present whereabouts suggest that he does not in fact accept the finality of his loss. Indeed, he retreats into these reveries precisely in order to abandon the unpalatable narrative in which corporeal death certifies extinction. By slipping into this alternative realm, he is able, despite the material absence of his loved ones, nevertheless to find traces of their existence. Through the metaphor of sleep, Godwin conjures these two worlds as parallel (and hence incongruous) states of mind. In the realm

of his ‘dream’, the objects of St. Leon’s affections are alive and he is no longer alone, but the distraction of their company renders him apathetic and incapable of pursuing courses of action that benefit others. In the realm of his ‘awake’ mind, the objects of his affections are irretrievably gone, and St. Leon is eternally alone; but, by way of compensation, he is purposeful, energetic and capable of being useful to those around him. Godwin’s figuration of both mind sets as prisons emphasizes that both are forms of entrapment. When awake, St. Leon is ‘condemned’ within the ‘speechless walls’ of his solitude. But equally, being enveloped in a life of pure affection is likened to a ‘species of disability’, a state of weakness so acute that the human frame is unable to exert power over itself, let alone its environment:

A great portion of my time was passed in a deep and mournful silence ... It was a mild and passive situation of the mind; affectionate, as far as it was any thing, to the persons around me; but it was a species of disability; my soul had not force enough to give motion to the organs of speech, or scarcely to raise a finger. (SL, 75–76)

In both cases, the imagery of physical barriers highlights the insuperability of the confines that lock the mind in a particular state. St. Leon is necessarily detained in either one or the other psychological domain; the possibility of bridging a gap between the two is unimaginable. This means that the affections are incontrovertibly aligned with mortality and inactivity, while their loss is equated with immortality and insatiable restlessness. On this view, to extricate elements of the one (a commitment to private attachments) and combine them with elements of the other (energy for the pursuit of public good) is inconceivable.

The impossibility of reconciliation between these two attitudes towards the affections is replicated in the narrator’s inability to establish a settled pace in the first volume. The topic of the domestic affections prompts either deceleration to the brink of narrative breakdown—as above—or acceleration so rapid that the vista St. Leon presents is rendered blurred, remote, and hence inaccessible to the reader:

In the first ten years of our marriage my wife brought me five children, two sons and three daughters. The second son only died in his infancy. My predominant passion at this time was that of domestic pleasures and employments, and I devoted myself, jointly with the mother, to the cultivation of the minds of my children. They all in a considerable degree rewarded our care; they were all amiable. Taught by the example of their parents, they lived in uncommon harmony and affection. (SL, 47)

A span of 10 years of ‘uncommon harmony and affection’, the shattered memory of which eclipses St. Leon’s other miseries, is collapsed into the space of several lines. This entire tranche of his life—one of the longest and, retrospectively, most cherished eras that features in his memoirs—is recounted with such rapid speed and such minimal detail that the reader can absorb it only as a hazy impression. No distinctive details mark out these years: St. Leon’s children remain nameless and altogether undifferentiated, their personalities all identified by the same adjective, ‘amiable’. ‘Uncommon harmony’ yields no discordant events by which to distinguish the days. The pattern of life is defined by way of its lack of variety. Indeed, so uniform is St. Leon’s familial existence that it is completely interchangeable with that of the McNeils, the idealized family in *Fleetwood*, who inspire in the eponymous protagonist of Godwin’s novel of 1805 a similar cocktail of admiration, detached envy and disavowal: ‘here was a whole circle of persons, such as a man would

wish to spend his life with: so much concord of affection without any jarring passions; so much harmony of interests.<sup>15</sup> In *St. Leon*, as in *Fleetwood*, close proximity to the domestic affections stifles the narrator's critical faculties, causing him to resort to bland and derivative prose that shuts down, rather than opens up, readerly interest in the scene at hand.

Whereas at moments of heightened emotional significance in the novel, St. Leon intrusively draws attention to himself as the grieving narrator lurking in the background, here he wholly retreats, maintaining a cool, impartial, efficient mode of delivery. The short, factual sentences treat the members of his family as pieces of information to be catalogued, rather than as characters to be showcased. Uncluttered by direct speech, the scene is presented via a single, flat voice that asserts, but refuses to represent, the pleasures derived from the domestic affections in operation. Instead of demonstrating the contentment of embroilment in the domestic affections, his narrative stance indicates his psychological removal from the scene, implying not delight but indifference, not satisfaction but impatience. The phase of life that St. Leon is unable to forget is allotted a portion of the narrative so brief and so nondescript that the reader can barely remember its occurrence.

Faced with an inability to find a way of writing about the domestic affections that comfortably resolves his respect for their importance with his latent contempt for their perceived redundancy as a focus for intellectual debate, Godwin's solution, like St. Leon's, is ultimately to resign his commitment to the domestic sphere. Abandoning the attempt to settle the conflict from within the family home, St. Leon absconds, fleeing the claustrophobic affections in order to pursue the thrills that they forbid. And while ostensibly the narrator asserts the folly of this choice; nonetheless, it is precisely at this point in the novel that Godwin's writing for the first time acquires animation:

The wildness of an untamed and savage scene best accorded with the temper of my mind. I sprung from cliff to cliff among the points of the rock. I rushed down precipices that to my sobered sense appeared in a manner perpendicular, and only preserved my life, with a sort of inborn and unelective care, by catching at the roots and shrubs which occasionally broke the steepness of the descent. I hung over the tops of rocks still more fearful in their declivities, and courted the giddiness and whirl of spirit which such spectacles are accustomed to produce. I could not resolve to die: death had too many charms to suit the self-condemnation that pursued me. I found a horrible satisfaction in determining to live, and to avenge upon myself the guilt I had incurred. (SL, 76)

Overthrowing both the excessive heaviness of the mournful, moralistic voice deployed at moments of oblique grief and the excessive briskness of the impersonal voice used to transmit incidental material, here the narrator finds a light and energetic touch that vividly and compellingly enlivens the past. Verbs of movement ('rushed') alternated with verbs of suspension ('hung') signal an amplification in the range of the narrator's vocabulary that shadows the newfound extension in the range of St. Leon's mind. This expansiveness is further replicated in the scale of the physical scenery, which plunges from the tops of cliffs to depths of precipices. Precise and evocative adjectives succinctly disclose the narrator's present attitude towards his past actions without disrupting the internal dynamics of the

<sup>15</sup>Godwin. *Collected Novels and Memoirs*. Vol. 5. *Fleetwood: or, The New Man of Feeling*. Ed. Pamela Clemit. (London: William Pickering, 1992) 161.

scene. Thus, the gulf between St. Leon's two personae—the protagonist in the past and the narrator in the present—subsides into the background, and the narrative focus moves away from the friction between the two towards the activity at hand. For the first time in the novel, Godwin entrusts that the scene itself, and not merely his narrator's attitude towards it, will carry the reader's interest.

This new invigoration in Godwin's language—demonstrated through his experimental mixture of sentence formations, for example, his dramatic use of the colon—posits a structural alliance between the relinquishment of the domestic affections and zest for life. By comparison, the topic of the affections is aligned with deathliness, not just thematically (St. Leon forsakes mortality when he surrenders his private attachments), but stylistically, through the inhibited language it occasions. Anne Chandler has read the novel as an exploration of 'Godwin's evident concern with the internal processing of individual sexuality', demonstrating how 'St. Leon's 'travels' are in essence 'adventures of the body.'<sup>16</sup> Certainly, sexual desire is among the passions that are suppressed within the tightly regulated model of the affectionate family he idealizes. But St. Leon's liberation is not merely physical; it is also psychological. Throwing off the familial obligations he perceives as fetters, he unleashes a whole spectrum of extreme emotions ('giddiness and whirl of spirit') that must be modulated inside the home. And while the didactic force of the novel recommends the enduring satisfaction to be found in the harmonious compromises of family life, the outbreak of Godwin's literary fluency at precisely the point when St. Leon discards his domestic shackles silently gives support to the view articulated in *The Enquirer* (1797), that '[c]ohabitation [is] fundamentally an erroneous system.'<sup>17</sup> St. Leon's suspicion that, despite his admiration for private attachments, he himself is 'not a creature qualified for such dear and tender connections' echoes Godwin's own scepticism about whether (male) humans can in practice fulfil their potential when accountable to the demands of the domestic affections (SL, 74).

The beginning of the second volume, which heralds the imminent disintegration of the affections, is purposefully announced as the start of the action we have been expecting: 'It was in the evening of a summer's day in the latter end of the year 1544, that a stranger arrived at my habitation':

His voice was the voice of thunder; and, rolling in a rich and sublime swell, it arrested and stilled, while it withered all the nerves of the soul. His eye-beam sat upon your countenance, and seemed to look through you. You wished to escape from its penetrating power, but you had not the strength to move. I began to feel as if it were some mysterious and superior being in human form, and not a mortal, with whom I was concerned. (SL, 108, 118)

Whereas St. Leon's sparse description of the members of his family shied away from precision, in presenting the figure of Zampieri, the stranger who confers on St. Leon the secret of the philosopher's stone, he conjures a meticulously exact and vibrant picture. Metaphors ('voice of thunder'), similes ('as if it were some mysterious and superior being') and tautologies ('arrested and stilled') are packed into tight sentences fleshed out with numerous subclauses. Neither lengthily dwelling on his own perspective, nor depriving us

<sup>16</sup>Anne Chandler. "Romanticizing Adolescence: Godwin's *St. Leon* and the Matter of Rousseau." *Studies in Romanticism* 41:3 (2002) 399–414, 413.

<sup>17</sup>'On Cohabitation.' *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners and Literature in a Series of Essays*. (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1797) 93.

of his insight altogether, the narrator cogently and engagingly intertwines his account of the protagonist's inner state with his narration of the external events. In addition, by issuing an appeal in the second-person ('You wished') and by presenting the conversation in direct speech, he invites the reader to participate in the construction of the scene—to gauge for himself the implications of the stranger's manner:

"Be silent, St. Leon! How often must I tell you that no single incident of my story shall ever be repeated! Have I no claim upon your forbearance? Can you be barbarous and inhuman enough to disturb my last scene with these bitter recollections?"—I was silent.

This is all that is material that passed at our interview.

The stranger died the next day, and was buried according to his instructions. (SL, 136)

Our exclusion from the pact that takes place at this momentous exchange where the alchemical secrets and other 'instructions' are imparted to St. Leon heightens the sense of mystery fostered by the scene. Until this point, St. Leon pre-empts the outcomes of all the significant episodes in the plot before they have occurred. But here, for the first time in the novel, Godwin capitalizes on the literary potential of suspense, which propels the thrust of the narrative forwards, rather than backwards, in time. Deprived of the didactic voice of the immortal St. Leon instructing us on how to interpret the encounter, we are compelled to fill in the gaps for ourselves. Therefore, the parallel between the withered, mournful, embittered voice of the stranger and the voice of the roaming narrator remain implicit, left to the reader to perceive independently.

The point at which Godwin renounces his commitment to the topic of the affections thus coincides with a new playfulness in his organization of the mechanics of the text. While the subject of domestic harmony elicits didactic commentary, its abandonment presents new possibilities for the asking, and not merely the answering, of questions. Godwin's conviction that, despite their inevitability and their inarguable importance, the domestic affections do not galvanize provocative philosophical questions encumbers his attempt to represent them in literary form. His eulogium to the affections thus stands apart, forming a discrete element that accompanies, but is not integrated with, the central concerns of the novel. Because Godwin's celebration of the culture of the heart in a sense neither infects nor is infected by his political philosophy, contemporary reviewers in the conservative press, hostile to the contempt for government expressed throughout the novel, were nonetheless quick to praise *St. Leon's* acclamation of the pleasures of domestic life. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* stated that 'we are delighted to find the social and domestic virtues placed in their proper rank', while the *Critical Review* wrote that: 'the domestic scenes are well sketched.' The *New Monthly Magazine* even declared that *St. Leon* contains 'some of the truest touches of homely and domestic nature that ever were conceived'.<sup>18</sup> Far from

<sup>18</sup>All references from *William Godwin Reviewed: A Reception History 1783–1834*. Ed. Kenneth W. Graham. (New York: AMS Press, 2001): *Anti-Jacobin Review* 5 (Feb. 1800) 158; *Critical Review* 28 (1800) 160; *Monthly Mirror* 9 (1800) 165. Tilotamma Rajan, for example, calls it an 'unsatisfyingly corrective turn to the domestic.' 'Between Romance and History: Possibility and Contingency in Godwin, Leibniz, and Mary Shelley's *Valperga*.' *Mary Shelley in Her Times*. Eds. Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 88–102: 96.

bringing the topic of the affections in line with a radical political and literary agenda, then, *St. Leon* accentuates the tension between the two, highlighting Godwin's indecision as to how to square heartfelt commitment to private attachments with his belief in the imperative for absolute independence.