

Introduction: William Godwin and Political Justice

Rowland Weston

No work in our time gave such a blow to the philosophical mind of the country as the celebrated *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*. Tom Paine was considered for the time as a Tom Fool to him, Paley an old woman, Edmund Burke a flashy sophist. Truth, moral truth, it was supposed, had here taken up its abode; and these were the oracles of thought. (William Hazlitt, 1825)¹

Could I not, in *Political Justice*, take away all paradox, & leave only deep & sublime truth? (Godwin, manuscript fragment (circa 1831))²

*T*he philosopher, novelist and historian William Godwin (1756-1836) continues to exercise scholars of the long eighteenth and long nineteenth centuries. A polymathic, prodigious, long-lived, and perennially reflexive writer, Godwin is an ideal figure with which to interrogate the profound intellectual and cultural shift from an Enlightenment to a Romantic mode of consciousness.³ The present issue of *Nineteenth-Century Prose* comprises essays analyzing texts published between 1783 and (posthumously) 1873. Our first essay, “Godwin’s Citations, 1783-2005: Highest Renown at the Pinnacle of Disfavor” by

Pamela Clemit and Avner Offer provides some surprising and solid data concerning Godwin's reception over this period. Significantly, it reveals Godwin's massive and complex *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* as easily his most cited work.

First published in 1793, *Political Justice* is central to Godwin's reputation and subsequent reception. Scholars addressing any of Godwin's writings find *Political Justice* difficult to avoid: though few of the contributions to this volume deal predominantly with that text, all variously engage it. Moreover, Godwin's extensive later writings reveal an ongoing and conscious engagement with his *magnum opus*. Not only did *Political Justice* undergo substantial revision during the 1790s but, immediately after the publication of the third edition in 1798, Godwin planned a new work entitled "First Principles of Morals" that would correct the errors of the most recent edition, those "absurd and precipitate judgements, of which subsequent consideration has made me profoundly ashamed."⁴ Indeed, as late as 1832 he penned a "Prospectus of a New Edition of the Enquiry concerning Political Justice" which evidences both an unrepentant commitment to its broad principles and a desire to modify and revise the text.⁵ From about 1800, unfortunately, ongoing financial difficulties turned Godwin's literary activity in other directions. A manuscript note laments: "How I should like to commence afresh a treatise of the Elements of Moral Science! But a poor man can write only the books which will obtain a present sale."⁶ This note is undated, but could apply at almost any point in Godwin's life from about 1800. *Political Justice* was, and is, prominent in public perceptions and scholarly interpretations of Godwin's significance; and Godwin maintained an ongoing intellectual commitment to, and affection for, the text. In surveying *Political Justice*'s essential arguments and assumptions, this introductory essay aims to give a sense of why the work so startled Godwin's contemporaries and why it continues increasingly to provoke scholarly engagement.

From the first appearance of *Political Justice* and into the present day there has persisted a perception of Godwin as fundamentally

disengaged from mundane reality, perennially indulging a utopian "fantasy of reason."⁷ Yet his career in total – and even his writings of the 1790s considered as a whole⁸ – evidence anything but an ivory-towered eschewal of quotidian complexity and issues of practical and public moment. As much as *Political Justice* was originally intended as a scientific treatise comprising the final word in political and moral philosophy,⁹ Godwin also stressed the book's more diffuse pedagogic value. He wished, he said, to produce "a work from the perusal of which no man should rise, without being strengthened in habits of sincerity, fortitude and justice."¹⁰ It is now clear that Godwin increasingly believed in the capacity of literature to facilitate moral change, less by the dissemination of truthful or useful propositions than by stimulation of the imagination.¹¹ And moral education – conceived both as the reform of society and the instruction of the young – was always fundamental to Godwin's literary activities and intentions.¹² Interestingly, it was as much as pedagogue as political philosopher that Godwin was taken up in Spain, as Begoña Lasa Álvarez demonstrates in "William Godwin and the Spanish Enlightenment." The fact that Godwin's writings made any way at all in a polity circumscribed, as Álvarez says, by "the weight of tradition, religious inflexibility, and censorship" only underlines Godwin's faith in social reform by literary means.

Godwin's own education and upbringing is worthy of note, as a number of scholars have rightly insisted.¹³ The son of a Congregationalist minister, Godwin's early life was suffused with Calvinism; and from a very young age he determined to follow his father into the ministry. As a schoolboy he was attracted to Sandemanianism, a Calvinist sect characterized, among other things, by its insistence that the passions perennially be subjected to the dictates of reason, as well as by the conviction that reason alone could provide the motive for human behavior or action.¹⁴ He attended Hoxton Dissenting Academy where he was renowned, he tells us, for "calm and unpassionate discussion[,] ... the intrepidity of my opinions, and the tranquil fearlessness of my temper": "During my academical life, and from that time forward, I was

indefatigable in my search after truth.”¹⁵ Though these admirable proclivities were to undermine his pastoral career and terminate in a personal rejection of the Christian revelation,¹⁶ Godwin’s Calvinist education, broadly conceived, was to influence much of his later writing.¹⁷

Godwin commenced his career as an author in 1782 with his *History of the Life of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham* (1783).¹⁸ He had always been interested in the writing of history: his first literary love was Charles Rollin’s *Ancient History* (1730-38).¹⁹ He also published a study of the Dutch United Provinces in 1787,²⁰ as well as pseudonymous school histories of England (1806), Rome (1809) and Greece (1821), not to mention his monumental analyses of the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1803) and *History of the Commonwealth of England* (1824-28).²¹ In his pamphlet “An Account of the Seminary” (1783) – a proposal for a small school he planned to open – Godwin insisted that the most important element of education is an understanding of morality and that this is best obtained through the study of history. For “it leads directly to the most important of all attainments, the knowledge of the heart. It introduces us, without expense, and without danger, to an acquaintance with manners and society.”²² In this view, he maintained, history is fundamentally a “science of character and biography.”²³ Recent scholarship is enabling us better to appreciate Godwin’s historiographical attitudes and outputs;²⁴ this trend is extended in our third and fourth essays.

Eliza O’Brien’s “‘The most inconsistent of men’: William Godwin and the ‘Apology’ of Sir Thomas More” is the first extended scholarly treatment of Godwin’s fascinating unpublished essay, “On the Composition of History, An Occasional Reflection,” written sometime after 1807.²⁵ O’Brien draws attention to Godwin’s privileging of history as a “science of character and biography” while exploring a range of Godwin’s other courageous, innovative, and often radical historiographical impulses. In “Between Individual and General History: Godwin’s Seventeenth-Century Texts,” Tilottama Rajan interrogates

Godwin's strangely understudied explorations of modern Britain's most historiographically contentious and politically formative period. Godwin's excursions into Britain's turbulent seventeenth century are shown to exhibit his preoccupation with the unresolved traumas at the heart of modern Britain, aporia elided by the triumphalist historiographical visions of British writers from William Robertson to Walter Scott and beyond.

These writings lay far in Godwin's future, however. From 1785-86 he was editor of the *Political Herald and Review* and from 1784-91 the "historical" (or current affairs) writer for *New Annual Register*.²⁶ He gave up this work in the hope – forlorn as it ultimately transpired – of writing only on subjects of his own choosing.²⁷ His literary career exploded into life with the intense intellectual ferment occasioned by the outbreak of the French Revolution. With justice, Albert Cobban termed the ensuing debate "perhaps the last real discussion of the fundamentals of politics" in Britain.²⁸ In a few short years there appeared literally dozens of moral and political studies, many of which retain the status of classics, such as Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791-92), and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Less-regarded today, but at the time considered chief of all the liberal and reformist tracts, was Godwin's *Political Justice*.

Political Justice is a complex and confusing work, not least as a consequence of the revisions Godwin made to the editions of 1796 and 1798. Despite his insistence that the changes made were merely matters of detail that left the "spirit and great outlines of the work ... untouched,"²⁹ the third edition comprises a bewildering and occasionally contradictory amalgam of philosophical ideas and terminology. Indeed, one scholar claims that in the "Summary of Principles" appended to the third edition "Godwin begins to develop a theory that stands in flat contradiction to the text that follows."³⁰ The most plausible and sophisticated account of how such a book came to be written, and to achieve its final form in the third edition, is Mark Philp's *Godwin's*

Political Justice. Philp demonstrates how the central doctrines of the first edition expressed commonly-held assumptions of the tight-knit intellectual community of Rational Dissenters, a fact underpinning the work's initial popularity. Furthermore, Philp argues that the changes Godwin made to subsequent editions – especially his replacement of opinion by feeling as the basis of human action – reflected the author's growing familiarity with, and appreciation of, British moral sense philosophy and the literature of sensibility. This occurred as Godwin's initial celebrity gained him entry to a wider, more mainstream intellectual community in which such ideas were prevalent.³¹ Philp insists, however, that throughout the process of revision, Godwin retained an unshakeable commitment to the Dissenting idea of the inviolability of private judgment.³² Unsurprisingly, then, Godwin's most forthright expression of this inalienable and definitive human right occurs in a discussion of religious proscription.

The sublimest worship becomes transformed into a source of depravity, when it is not consecrated by the testimony of a pure conscience. Truth is the second object in this respect, integrity of heart is the first: or rather, a proposition that, in its abstract nature, is truth itself, converts into rank falsehood and mortal poison, if it be professed with the lips only, and abjured by the understanding.³³

More than a right, private judgment is the defining element of a human being: "Man is the ornament of the universe, only in proportion as he consults his judgment [... moreover,] where I make the voluntary surrender of my understanding, and commit my conscience to another man's keeping [...] I annihilate my individuality as a man [...]"³⁴ This Dissenting presupposition runs throughout *Political Justice*; it is the basis of Godwin's thought; it gives his moral theory its distinctively ideal quality, and it is this moral theory which determines the radical elements of his political and social philosophy. It is in this sense that the third edition can be

considered a coherent statement of Godwin's philosophy, though not one with which he was ever entirely satisfied.

Although Godwin's fundamental commitment to private judgment ensures that some of his conclusions in *Political Justice* are novel, his moral theory proceeds from some fairly commonplace epistemological assumptions. He denies the existence of innate ideas or instincts while maintaining that all human behavior is ultimately the product of some prior idea or "opinion" which is ultimately derived from experience.³⁵ Even though the final edition of *Political Justice* evidences Godwin's commitment to the notion that all human action is motivated or enabled by feeling, he insists that all feeling, sensation or perception become translated into ideas which are then evaluated and judged in the mind.³⁶ Thus, if feeling enables action, reason permits or directs it. Against the obvious counter that immediate impressions of sense – pleasure and pain – may counteract this capacity of the mind to direct action, Godwin insists that where the senses compete with ideas, they do so in the realm of ideas, as ideas.³⁷ Thus, "the character of any man, is the result of a long series of impressions, communicated to his mind and modifying it in a certain manner...."³⁸ The only things that can be said to constitute human nature, then, are our "external" physical form, "the appetites and impressions growing out of that structure," and, crucially, "the capacity of combining ideas and inferring conclusions," or reason.³⁹ Yet there is no inherent tendency for such "reasoning" to be productive of truth or virtue. Reasoning may, Godwin admitted, be "bad or good"; but it will be better in proportion as we improve our knowledge.⁴⁰ That such reasoning can be designated "good" is a consequence both of its technical, operational efficacy and its moral dimension. "Good" reasoning is synonymous with virtue.

Virtue, in its purest and most liberal sense, supposes an extensive survey of causes and their consequences that, having struck a just balance between the benefits and injuries that adhere to human affairs, we may adopt the proceeding which leads to the greatest practicable advantage.⁴¹

Virtue, then, consists in a rationalistic, utilitarian calculation of consequences, devoid of the promptings of feeling. Godwin's example became notorious. He proposed that if a building containing a member of one's family and the celebrated social critic and author Archbishop Fénelon were on fire and only one person could be saved, then we should save the Archbishop, as his survival would logically contribute more to the public good than that of one's wife or mother. For the latter may very well be "a fool or a prostitute, malicious, lying or dishonest [and] if they be, of what consequence is it that they are mine?"⁴² Godwin's example was intentionally chosen, though ill-advised. *Political Justice* was conceived directly as an answer to Burke's condemnation of the principles of French revolutionaries and the British Jacobins, their putative acolytes.⁴³ Burke believed not only that reason was not competent to achieve moral and political insight and progress, but also that the basis of any broad sociability and public welfare was a commitment to the discrete group of people with whom we are immediately connected.⁴⁴ British society rapidly polarized into those for whom moral duty was local, British, familial, and instinctive, and those for whom it was rational, cosmopolitan, and (putatively and pejoratively) "French."⁴⁵ Godwin quickly became caricatured as an enemy of domestic affection and natural feeling. A whole sub-genre of anti-Jacobin literature arose, in which Godwin was often the chief target.⁴⁶

Yet despite the clinical and dispassionate diction he often employs in *Political Justice*, Godwin's intention was not to deny the existence or validity of instinctive feeling in preference to the determinations of a cold, rational deliberation, but to ensure that our capacity for benevolence is exercised in situations where it is most appropriate or where it will do the most good.⁴⁷ This inevitably occurs when we truly exercise our private judgment and act according to its dictates. Personal moral and intellectual autonomy are the *sine qua non* of human nature, the essence of personal fulfilment and the guarantee of moral and sociable behavior.

Man is a being who can never be an object of just approbation, any further than he is independent. He must consult his own reason, draw his own conclusions, and conscientiously conform himself to his ideas of propriety. Without this, he will be neither active, nor considerate, nor resolute, nor generous.⁴⁸

Immorality and error are normative because people do not think independently. That is, independently of habit, tradition, prescription, feeling, or the promptings of instinct. Nor do they treat individual moral situations – and all situations have a moral dimension⁴⁹ – as independent or unique.⁵⁰ And we do not, Godwin averred, because people seldom attain a “perfectly voluntary” state of consciousness. Most human action is “imperfectly voluntary.” Such actions are not based on “judgments extant to [... our] understanding,” or, as he alternatively put it, “attended with consciousness.”⁵¹ Almost invariably, individuals “begin to theorize” forgetting that “no two things in the universe were ever perfectly alike.”

Thus the understanding fixes for itself resting places, is no longer a novice, and is not at the trouble continually to go back and revise the original reasons which determined it to a course of action. Thus the man acquires habits, from which it is very difficult to wean him, and which he obeys without being able to assign either to himself or others, any explicit reason for his proceeding. This is the history of prepossession and prejudice.⁵²

Now Godwin admitted that such “general rules and theories” were unavoidable and beneficial, in science and in morals. But we should never, he says, “become the slave of theory,” because “no theory, accurately speaking, can possibly be practical”; that is, as a generalization it need not take account of actually existing particulars.

General rules and theories are not infallible [...]. I ought, as far as lies in my power, to examine every thing upon its own grounds, and decide concerning it upon its own

merits. To rest in general rules, is sometimes a necessity which our imperfection imposes upon us, and sometimes the refuge of our indolence; but the true dignity of human reason is, as much as we are able, to go beyond them, to have our faculties in act upon every occasion that occurs, and to conduct ourselves accordingly.⁵³

The legal system is an apt example. No two actions are alike in motivation or in consequences, and in distinguishing between actions not on the basis of their intent or utility but in terms of their conformity to generalized “catechisms and codes,” the law as it stands can only frustrate the purpose of true justice.⁵⁴ Godwin maintained that it is only as the individual exercises his faculties independently upon every occasion that the invariably moral outcomes necessitated by perfect voluntariness become possible.

It is impossible that we should choose any thing as evil. It is impossible that a man should perpetrate a crime, in the moment that he sees it in all its enormity. In every example of this sort, there is a struggle between knowledge on one side, and error or habit on the other. While knowledge continues in all its vigour, the ill action cannot be perpetrated. In proportion as the knowledge escapes from the mind, and is no longer recollected, the error or habit may prevail. But it is reasonable to suppose that the permanence, as well as the vigour, of our perceptions, is capable of being increased to a definite extent. Knowledge in this sense, understanding by it a clear and undoubting apprehension, such as no delusion can resist, is a thing totally different from what is ordinarily called by that name, from a sentiment seldom recollected, and, when it is recollected, scarcely felt or understood.⁵⁵

Godwin’s political theory was very largely determined by his devotion to this ideal version of human character and the fact of its absence in

contemporary human society. As noted above, human behavior is a necessary consequence of ideas or opinions which are ultimately derived entirely from external sources, or "education" to employ Godwin's all-encompassing term. Apart from formal education or the "education of design," there exists "the education of accident" – or chance conditioning – and, most powerful and pervasive of all, "political education, or the modification our ideas receive from the form of government under which we live."⁵⁶ Godwin argued that monarchy and aristocracy were especially pernicious forms of government as they tended to "undermine the virtues and the understandings of their subjects" by requiring of them "implicit faith, [and] blind submission to authority." Democracy, by contrast, in encouraging rational independence, enabled individuals to behave benevolently and sociably.

Democracy restores to man a consciousness of his value, teaches him, by the removal of authority and oppression, to listen only to the suggestions of reason, gives him confidence to treat all other men with frankness and simplicity, and induces him to regard them no longer, as enemies against whom to be on his guard, but as brethren whom it becomes him to assist.⁵⁷

Significantly, it is the creation of these personal virtues that Godwin saw as the primary function and justification of democracy. Consequently, he attacked "superficial" advocates of the democratic cause who focused more on the "external situation" than on the "internal sentiments" of individuals. He maintained that "external" civil and political freedom was of little value if the individual concerned did not possess the characteristic republican virtues of "magnanimity, energy and firmness," and the rational independence from which they derived. He insisted, moreover, that if a person does possess these qualities, his external circumstances are of little moment. For such a person "cannot be degraded; he cannot readily become either useless or unhappy. He smiles at the impotence of despotism; he fills up his existence with serene enjoyment and industrious benevolence."⁵⁸

Yet although democracy might exercise a restorative or remedial function on a populace inured to, and conditioned by, aristocratic and monarchical systems of government, Godwin insisted that “above all we should not forget, that government is, abstractedly taken, an evil, an usurpation upon the private judgment and individual conscience of mankind.”⁵⁹ All authority overrides independence by influencing the actions of individuals through force or fear of force or sanction. For where we submit to authority not only do we compromise our capacity to act in truly moral, that is, voluntary ways, but we also detract from our essence as human beings. As Godwin put it, under such coercion “[...] our] action becomes modified, and [our] *character* also.”⁶⁰

Fortunately, this trust in, or willingness to submit to, government is only the “offspring of ignorance.” Godwin conjectured that as people became more enlightened, their perceived need for such authority would wither away, and humanity would experience the “true euthanasia of government.”⁶¹ A state of society would then occur in which each person governed herself according to the dictates of reason.⁶² Moreover, rather than encouraging intellectual license, antinomianism and social upheaval as conservatives typically feared, Godwin argued that such widespread independence guaranteed consensus and sociability.

[...] so far as mind is in a state of progressive improvement, we are perpetually coming nearer to each other [...] the proper method for hastening the decline of error, and producing uniformity of judgment, is not, by brute force, by laws, or by imitation; but, on the contrary, by exciting every man to think for himself.⁶³

The logical and inevitable outcome of a society entirely comprised of such people is an anarchist one, or as Godwin preferred to put it, “a well conceived form of society without government.” For “anarchy” described the “terrors” of social existence that would ensue should government be summarily abolished. The Godwinian utopia, by contrast, occurs as the inevitable “result of consistent and digested views of political truth previously disseminated among the inhabitants.”⁶⁴ Given a

population comprised of rationally autonomous beings, anarchism is a *fait accompli*: it is less a political program than a prediction.

Thus, although deeply critical of the monarchical and aristocratic nature of the existing English polity, and ultimately of the limitations of the democratic or republican models to which the majority of his radical fellow-travelers aspired, Godwin never advocated revolution. For while he insisted that governments create and maintain the majority of our ideas and attitudes, he also maintained that their continued existence depended upon the population retaining that governmentally-derived mentality. He iterates with wearying consistency the dictum that "all government is founded in opinion," and that it relies upon that opinion being preserved among at least a majority of the population.⁶⁵ Fortunately, however, society is not trapped in a static equilibrium of opinion and government, as there will always exist, Godwin believed, people who "will be less confirmed in error than others [... and that] this number, from the very nature of just sentiments, must in the ordinary course of things perpetually increase."⁶⁶ Thus, Godwin proposed something very like quietism, while at the same time advocating that reform-minded persons work toward, and trust to, the inexorable progress of truth. He claimed that "if the system of independence and equality be the truth, it may be expected hourly to gain converts. The more it is discussed, the more will it be understood, and its value cherished and felt."⁶⁷

We have already noted that in revising *Political Justice* Godwin came to place an increased emphasis on feeling – as opposed to reason or opinion – as the fundamental motive force in human behavior. This set up some uncomfortable tensions in the *Political Justice* and elsewhere in Godwin's *oeuvre*, as he sought to square a long-standing mistrust of sympathy as detrimental to the maintenance of personal independence with his new-found commitment to moral sense philosophy. And it was his fear of sympathy's erosive effects on independence that led to some of his stranger pronouncements on social behavior.⁶⁸ Godwin's objection to marriage – that "worst of monopolies" – is well known. But while

concerned with the commercial and dynastic priorities underpinning the institution of his day, more fundamental to his objection is the way somatic proximity and mutual dependence dilutes (by way of the operation of sympathy) personal independence. For the same reason, Godwin proscribed concert music and theatre (“an absurd and vicious cooperation”); these involve the “formal repetition of other men’s ideas” and thus the “imprisoning [... of] the operations of our own mind.”⁶⁹

Godwin’s commitment to personal independence and suspicion of sympathy also created tension between Godwin and his fellow radicals over the issue of mass politics. In “Godwin’s Anti-Mass Politics Revisited: Sympathy, Retirement, and Epistemic Diversity,” Michael Edson suggests a mode whereby Godwin extricated himself from his apparent rejection of group discussion. Edson outlines Godwin’s proposal of an alternative “social-spatial practice” that obviated sympathy’s corrosive effects on intellectual diversity.

The novel *Caleb Williams* (1794), written between the first and second editions of *Political Justice*, unsurprisingly evidences Godwin’s aporetic incorporation of moral sense philosophy. It problematizes the impossibility and undesirability of the kind of aloof, disengaged individuality and cerebration sometimes assumed in *Political Justice* while emphasizing the potential for sympathy to dissolve personal identity.⁷⁰ Suzie Asha Park analyses additional difficulties Godwin experienced in accommodating the specific version of moral sense philosophy elaborated in Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). In “*Caleb Williams* and the Smithian Spectator: Reading the ‘Reasonable Demand,’” Park explores Smithian notions of sympathy and the ideal observer in the context of the new Romantic privileging of the subject.

If novels like *Caleb Williams* and *St Leon* (1799) underpin Godwin’s eschewal of disengaged ratiocination,⁷¹ the eponymous protagonist of Godwin’s 1805 novel *Fleetwood: or, The New Man of Feeling* instantiates an equally isolating and socially destructive emotionalism. Given the enduring perception of Godwin as an unfeeling

enemy of the domestic affections, *Fleetwood's* delineation of a marriage poisoned by an excess of sensibility has long awaited the kind of analysis undertaken in Colin Carman's "Godwin's *Fleetwood*: Shame and the Sexuality of Feeling." Unpacking the anfractuous "feeling of shame" in the novel, Carman explores intriguing dimensions of Fleetwood's manifest and manifold queerness.

In *Political Justice* Godwin proffered a critique of extant political society in terms of an ideal view of human nature and the ideal polity this moral theory entailed. In *Caleb Williams* (or *Things As They Are*, as the novel was originally and significantly entitled)⁷² his primary intention was to reveal and express the impact of "things as they are" on the level of the particular. As he remarked in the initially unpublished preface to the first edition, "what is now presented to the public is no refined and abstract speculation; it is a study and delineation of things passing in the moral world." Moreover, the novel is an attempt to convey in an appropriate "vehicle" Godwin's understanding of the evils of government "to persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach."⁷³ Godwin's prefaces to his novels are intriguing documents to which Eric Leuschner in "The Prefaces of William Godwin and the Literary Public Sphere" devotes welcome attention. Godwin was always of the mind that fiction and other literary genres had their part to play in effecting the change in opinion and sentiment which alone presage institutional change. Leuschner shows how Godwin's prefaces operated to engage a rapidly changing public sphere in debates about, for example, the nature of fiction and its capacity to represent psychological truth and to inculcate virtue.

Unsurprisingly, given the highly charged political atmosphere of the 1790s, *Caleb Williams*, more than any other Godwinian novel, engaged directly and consciously with issues of contemporary political and social moment.⁷⁴ This is most apparent in its broad and sustained critique of the legal and penal systems, as well as of the corruption and injustice inherent in the contemporary aristocratic polity. In "'Men whose glory it is to be known': Godwin, Bentham, and the London Corresponding

Society” Sophie Coulombe deftly unpacks the novel’s onomastic implications. Naming in *Caleb Williams* is shown to reveal deep cultural, societal and existential anxieties in the early Romantic period, anxieties played out in celebrated legal cases of the day.

Increasingly fearful that domestic radicals and political reformers might be encouraged to emulate the example of the French, and even support a French invasion of Britain, Pitt’s government introduced a series of draconian bills intent on quelling this potential menace. In May 1794, the Act of Habeas Corpus was suspended, the Seditious Meetings Act introduced, the laws of treason redefined to include any who openly questioned the Constitution, and by the end of the decade, a substantial number of publications were directly under state control.⁷⁵ Godwin’s experience of this repression became especially personal when friends and fellow-radicals were arrested and tried for treason in late 1794. Godwin played a large part in securing their release through his published attacks on the charges.⁷⁶ In “‘till all law is annihilated’: Godwin versus the Bar” Mark Crosby explores these and other of Godwin’s writings on the law and the legal profession. Crosby shows how Godwin’s success in these arguments derived in part from his deployment of the same rhetorical skills he insisted adversely characterized legal practice. Issues of rhetoric, broadly conceived, are further examined in Victoria Myers’ “William Godwin’s *Enquirer*: Between Oratory and Conversation.” Myers draws our attention to Godwin’s commendation of rhetoric in pedagogy as a means of inculcating the qualities of personal intellectual independence which he saw as the vital precondition for broader social reform. Both essays remind us emphatically that for all his reputation as an aloof, disengaged philosopher, Godwin felt and pursued a keen sense of public mission.

The last is no better illustrated than in Godwin’s final, posthumously published work *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled* (1873), which he left in the hands of his daughter Mary Shelley. Godwin commended the book as a companion volume to *Political Justice*, and

together these works reveal and correct the most dangerous and insidious enemies of "the energies and independence of the intellectual part of our nature."⁷⁷ In "Unspeakable Truths, Unutterable Sincerity: Godwin's *The Genius of Christianity Unveiled*," Gary Handwerk tackles this most "rhetorically and generically elusive" of Godwin's texts. Handwerk reads *The Genius* in terms of a characteristic Godwinian concern – evident as early as *Caleb Williams* – that sincerity of intention might not always guarantee the discovery of truth, nor that any such truth be automatically acknowledged by the public. For all his putative dogmatism and utopianism, Godwin remained until the last a skeptical, tentative and conjectural *litterateur*.⁷⁸ And where he might legitimately be indicted on grounds of excessive idealism, that idealism had a practical purpose. As one of his most sympathetic and perspicacious readers has remarked, "Godwin was one who believed that the ideal was also a motive in the process of historical 'necessity,' and ultimately the most enduring motive of all."⁷⁹

Godwin had offered the essays in *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners and Literature* (1797) "to the contemplative reader, not as *dicta*, but as the materials of thinking."⁸⁰ The same might be said of all Godwin's writing for, as the essays in this volume demonstrate, his generically and topically wide-ranging output provide intellectual stimulation of the highest order. In *Essay on Sepulchres* (1809) Godwin proposed a different conception of the reader-writer relationship. He argued that it is an intimate engagement with the *person* of the author of great writing rather more than any *datum* or detachable proposition which, deriving from our reading, contributes most to stimulate our intellectual and moral growth.⁸¹ Readers are sure to find much that is intriguing, instructive, and provocative in this double number of *Nineteenth-Century Prose*. More than 200 years after *Political Justice* took the intellectual world by storm, Godwin remains fascinating company.

Rowland Weston
University of Waikato

Notes

¹ William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, ed. E.D. Mackerness (London & Glasgow: Collins, 1969), 36-37.

² Oxford, Bodleian Library, [Abinger] Dep. b. 229/2(a). This is written above what appears to be a journal entry for "1831, May 8." The vast majority of Godwin's unpublished writings are contained in the Abinger Collection held by the Bodleian Library. This archive has recently been recatalogued, though the new shelf marks are easily matched with the old, which I employ here.

³ Godwin's status as spokesperson for, and exemplar of, this process is a staple of Godwinian analysis commencing at least as early as A.E. Rodway's *Godwin and the Age of Transition* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1952). A more recent collection based on this premise is Robert M. Maniquis and Victoria Myers, eds., *Godwinian Moments: From the Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

⁴ He felt that these were its undue emphasis on reason over feeling, his insistence of the equality of intellect at birth, and his underestimation of the importance of domestic attachments. See note of September 1798. Oxford, Bodleian Library, [Abinger] Dep. b. 228/9.

⁵ In this work he again notes that *Political Justice*'s defects are minor, although he does single out his claim that death could be conquered as one that "marked the absence of a sobriety of reason & necessarily detracted from the character of the work." William Godwin, "Prospectus of a New Edition of the Enquiry concerning Political Justice," 9 October 1832. Oxford, Bodleian Library, [Abinger] Dep. b. 226/4. That Godwin's later writings constitute an ongoing commentary on, and modification of, the central doctrines of *Political Justice* is a fact occasionally mentioned, but never elaborated on, by scholars. See, for example, Joann P. Cobb, "Godwin's Novels and *Political Justice*," *Enlightenment Essays* 4 (1973), 15-28.

⁶ Oxford, Bodleian Library, [Abinger] Dep. b. 229/2 (a).

⁷ Don Locke, *A Fantasy of Reason: The Life and Thought of*

William Godwin (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980). Robert Southey's response to *Political Justice* was not untypical: "The frequent & careful study of Godwin was of essential service – I read & all but worshipped – I have since seen his fundamental error – that he theorizes for another state – not for the rule of conduct in the present." Southey, letter to Grosvenor Bedford, 1 October 1795. Quoted in Nicholas Roe, *The Politics of Nature: Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 52.

⁸ Marilyn Butler maintains that all Godwin's writings of the 1790s, published and unpublished, when considered together reveal anything other than the abstracted visionary of popular myth. Instead, he was "a powerful observer of the human psyche, who neither flattered nor simplified his own kind. [...] An abrasive, punishing attention to unpleasant realities, rather than utopianism, is the literary characteristic of 'the Philosopher.'" See M. Butler, "Godwin, Burke and *Caleb Williams*," *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (1982), 237-57 (255).

⁹ "In the first fervour of my enthusiasm I entertained the vain imagination of 'hewing a stone from the rock' which by its inherent energy and weight should overbear and annihilate all opposition, and placing [*sic*] the principles of politics on an unmoveable basis." William Godwin in Mark Philp, gen. ed., *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, 8 Vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1992), 1.49. This volume contains a collection of Godwin's autobiographical notes written over the period 1798-1822. I subsequently refer to this collection as "Autobiographical Notes."

¹⁰ William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, And Its Influence On Morals and Happiness*, 3 vols, 3rd edn., ed. F.E.L. Priestley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1946), 1.vii.

¹¹ William Godwin, *The Pantheon: or Ancient History of the Gods of Greece and Rome*, 4th edition (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1984), viii; Rowland Weston, "History, Memory, and Moral Knowledge: William Godwin's *Essay on Sepulchres* (1809)," *The European Legacy*, Vol. 14, No. 6 (2009), 651-65; Evan Radcliffe,

“Godwin from ‘Metaphysician’ to Novelist: *Political Justice*, Caleb Williams, and the Tension between Philosophical Argument and Narrative,” *Modern Philology*, Vol. 97, No. 4 (2000), 528-53.

¹² See, for example, Burton R. Pollin, *Education and Enlightenment in the Works of William Godwin* (New York: Las Americas Publishing Company, 1962); Pamela Clemit, “Philosophical Anarchism in the Schoolroom: William Godwin’s Juvenile Library, 1805-25,” *Bibliion: The Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, Vol. 9, Nos. 1/2 (2000/2001), 44-70; Pamela Clemit, “Godwin’s Educational Theory: *The Enquirer*,” *Enlightenment and Dissent* 12 (1993), 3-11; William St. Clair, “William Godwin as Children’s Bookseller,” in Gillian Avery and Julia Briggs, eds., *Children and their Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 165-79; Janet Bottoms “‘Awakening the mind’: the educational philosophy of William Godwin,” *History of Education*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2004), 267-82; M. Kinnell, “Childhood and Children’s Literature – The Case of Godwin, William and the Publications of his Company 1805-25,” *Publishing History* 24 (1988), 77-99; Margaret Fearn, “William Godwin and the ‘Wilds of Literature,’” *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1981), 247-57; K.E. Smith, “Autonomy and Perfectibility: The Educational Theory of Godwin’s *The Enquirer*,” *The British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1982), 217-24; Robert Anderson, “Godwin Disguised: Politics in the Juvenile Library” in Maniquis and Myers, eds., *Godwinian Moments*, 125-46.

¹³ For the religious element of Godwin’s early upbringing, education, and life as a minister, see Peter Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1984), 7-55. For the general influence of Rational Dissent on Godwin’s mature thought see the following: Mark Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1986); Martin Fitzpatrick, “William Godwin and the Rational Dissenters,” *The Price-Priestley Newsletter* 3 (1979), 4-28; William Stafford, “Dissenting religion translated into politics: Godwin’s *Political Justice*,” *History of Political Thought* I (1980), 279-99.

¹⁴ Godwin remained a Sandemanian until the age of 25. See Godwin, "Autobiographical Notes," 30-38, 44. See also Stafford, "Dissenting Religion," 298.

¹⁵ Godwin, "Autobiographical Notes," 42.

¹⁶ Godwin, "Autobiographical Notes," 44, 53.

¹⁷ Summed up in Robert M. Maniquis, "Godwin's Calvinist Ghosts: *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*," in Maniquis and Myers, eds., *Godwinian Moments*, 25-58.

¹⁸ Godwin, "Autobiographical Notes," 44, 58-59.

¹⁹ He later remarked of his early experience in reading Rollin's work that "few bosoms ever beat with greater ardour than mine did, while perusing the story of the grand struggle of the Greeks for independence against the assaults of the Persian despot: and this scene awakened a passion in my soul, which will never cease but with life." Godwin, "Autobiographical Notes," 37.

²⁰ William Godwin, *History of the Internal Affairs of the United Provinces, from the Year 1780 to the Commencement of Hostilities in June 1787* (G.G.J. and J. Robinson). See Jack W. Marken, "William Godwin's History of the United Provinces," *Philological Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 2, (1966), 379-86.

²¹ William Godwin, *History of the Commonwealth of England. From its Commencement, to the Restoration of Charles the Second*, 4 Vols. (New Burlington Street, 1824-28); *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, the early English poet: including memoirs of his friend and kinsman, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster: with sketches of the manners, opinions, arts and literature of England in the Fourteenth Century* (London, 1803); Edward Baldwin, *History of Greece: from the earliest records of that country, to the time in which it was reduced into a Roman province* (London: M.J. Godwin and Co., 1822); Edward Baldwin, *History of Rome: From the building of the city to the ruin of the Republic. Illustrated with maps and other plates. For the use of schools and young persons* (London: M.J. Godwin, 1809); Edward Baldwin, *The history of England: For the use of schools and young persons* (London: Thomas Hodgkins, 1807).

²² William Godwin, *An Account of the Seminary that will be opened on Monday the Fourth Day of August, At Epsom in Surrey, for the Instruction of Twelve Pupils in the Greek, Latin, French, and English Languages* (1783), in Burton R. Pollin, ed., *Four Early Pamphlets (1783-1784)* (Gainesville, FL: Scholars Facsimiles and Reprints, 1966), 147-202 (192-93).

²³ Godwin, "An Account of the Seminary," 193.

²⁴ John Morrow, "Republicanism and Public Virtue: William Godwin's *History of the Commonwealth of England*," *The Historical Journal* 34 (1991), 645-64; Tilottama Rajan, "Uncertain Futures: History and Genealogy in William Godwin's *The Lives of Edward and John Philips, Nephews and Pupils of Milton*," *Milton Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (1998), 75-86; Porscha Fermanis, "William Godwin's *History of the Commonwealth* and the Psychology of Individual History," *Review of English Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 252 (2010), 773-800. See also essays by Carlson, Rajan, O'Shaughnessy, and Myers in Maniquis and Myers, eds., *Godwinian Moments* and work by the present author.

²⁵ "On the composition of History; An occasional Reflection," Oxford, Bodleian Library, [Abinger] Dep. b. 226/6. The essay is written on paper watermarked 1808.

²⁶ See Burton R. Pollin, "Introduction" to Godwin, *Four Early Pamphlets*, ix.

²⁷ Godwin, "Autobiographical Notes," 49.

²⁸ Alfred Cobban, *The Debate on the French Revolution 1789-1800* 2nd ed. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1960), 31.

²⁹ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.xv-xviii.

³⁰ Locke, *A Fantasy of Reason*, 142.

³¹ Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, 80-81, 142-44, 159-67.

³² Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, 202-13.

³³ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 2.330.

³⁴ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.232.

³⁵ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.38ff., 94, 363ff. Between the second and third editions of *Political Justice* Godwin again modified his

epistemological position slightly, admitting that certain behavioral and mental characteristics might be inherited. He insisted, however, that in the overall scheme of things, these were insignificant and that education, consequently, remained the crucial determinant of character. See *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners and Literature* (New York, Augustus M. Kelley, 1965 [1797]), 3-4.

³⁶ See Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, 145-47.

³⁷ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.73.

³⁸ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.370.

³⁹ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.84.

⁴⁰ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.84, xxvi.

⁴¹ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.309.

⁴² See Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.126-28. I have reinserted elements of the text of the first edition to give the full force of Godwin's example as it initially appeared to his readership. By the second edition Godwin attempted to moderate his example by exchanging "father or brother" and "profligate" for the more unchivalrous "wife or mother" and "prostitute." See *Political Justice*, 3.146 for the original phrasing.

⁴³ Marshall, *William Godwin*, 82.

⁴⁴ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), 135.

⁴⁵ Evan Radcliffe, "Revolutionary Writing, Moral Philosophy, and Universal Benevolence in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54 (1993), 221-40.

⁴⁶ See William St Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys: The Biography of a Family* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 179-209; B. Sprague Allen, "The Reaction Against William Godwin," *Modern Philology*, Vol. 16, No. 5 (1918), 225-43.

⁴⁷ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.323.

⁴⁸ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.168.

⁴⁹ "There is no sphere in which a human being can be supposed to act where one mode of proceeding will not, in every given instance, be more reasonable than any other mode. That mode the being is bound by

every principle of justice to pursue [...]. If then every one of our actions falls within the province of morals, it follows that we have no rights in relation to the selecting them. No one will maintain that we have a right to trespass upon the dictates of morality.” Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.158-59.

⁵⁰ Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, 145-47.

⁵¹ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.62-69.

⁵² Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.345.

⁵³ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.345.

⁵⁴ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 2.397-413.

⁵⁵ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.276.

⁵⁶ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.45-51.

⁵⁷ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 2.119.

⁵⁸ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.258-59. Gregory Claeys notes how this concern with the problems of *moral* independence determined Godwin's preference for the smaller political societies prevalent in antiquity, rather than the larger modern versions favored by thinkers such as Paine and Rousseau. Claeys argues that these *philosophes* were more concerned with the nature, rather than the form of government, that is, they insisted primarily upon issues of popular sovereignty and the rule of law. As a result, the republics thus constructed could not guarantee the production and maintenance of those personal moral qualities so crucial to, and characteristic of, Classical republicanism. It was this moral quality with which Godwin was most concerned. Gregory Claeys, “William Godwin's Critique of Democracy and Republicanism and its Sources,” *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1986), 253-69.

⁵⁹ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 2.2. On Godwin's critique of democracy, see Roland Garrett, “Anarchism or Political Democracy: the Case of William Godwin,” *Social Theory and Practice* I (1971), 111-20.

⁶⁰ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.178. My emphasis; see also, 1.230-33.

⁶¹ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.237-39.

⁶² Godwin, *Political Justice*, 2.211-12.

⁶³ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 2.501. See also, 1.178-79.

⁶⁴ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 2.366.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.145. As early as 1783, Godwin announced this conviction that government depends on the mentality of the populace, and that once people's minds are changed, political change will necessarily ensue. See Godwin, *An Account of the Seminary*, 150.

⁶⁶ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.106.

⁶⁷ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1.256.

⁶⁸ See Rowland Weston, "Radical Enlightenment and Antimodernism: The Apostasy of William Godwin (1756-1836)," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2013), 1-30 (6-8).

⁶⁹ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 2.499-514.

⁷⁰ Eric Daffron, "'Magnetical Sympathy': Strategies of Power and Resistance in Godwin's *Caleb Williams*," *Criticism* 37 (1995), 213-32.

⁷¹ Rowland Weston, "Politics, Passion and the 'Puritan Temper': Godwin's Critique of Enlightened Modernity," *Studies in Romanticism* 41 (2002), 456-63; Weston, "Radical Enlightenment and Antimodernism."

⁷² See David McCracken, "Introduction" to William Godwin, *Caleb Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), xxiv-xxvi.

⁷³ Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, 1.

⁷⁴ See Pamela Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 35-45.

⁷⁵ See H.T. Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 37-42.

⁷⁶ See William Godwin, *Cursory Strictures on the Charge delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury and A Reply to An Answer to Cursory Strictures* in Jack W. & Pollin, Burton, eds., *William Godwin: Uncollected Writings* (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1968), 145-75, 185-91.

⁷⁷ William Godwin, letter to Mary Shelley in Mark Philp, gen. ed., *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, 7 Vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1993), 7.79.

⁷⁸ Reflecting on the composition of *Political Justice* he insisted: “Every impartial person who knows me, or has attentively considered my writings, will acknowledge that it is the fault of my character, rather to be too sceptical, than to incline too much to play the dogmatist. I was by no means assured of the truth of my own system. I wrote indeed with ardour; but I published with diffidence [...]. I did not cease to revise, to reconsider, or to enquire.” William Godwin, *Thoughts Occasioned by the Perusal of Dr Parr’s Spital Sermon* (1801), in Marken & Pollin, eds., *William Godwin: Uncollected Writings*, 281-374 (299-301).

⁷⁹ John Middleton Murray, *Heaven – and Earth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1938), 268.

⁸⁰ Godwin, *The Enquirer*, viii.

⁸¹ See Weston, “History, Memory, and Moral Knowledge.”

