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OF CALEB'S GUILT AND GODWIN'S TRUTH: IDEOLOGY AND ETHICS IN *CALEB WILLIAMS*

BY GARY HANDWERK

For a moralizing solution, like any essentializing gesture, serves the ideological function of masking the more difficult cultural and ethicopolitical issues.

—Dominick LaCapra, *History, Politics, and the Novel*

I

Despite a recent resurgence of interest in his life and in certain of his works, William Godwin remains an elusive and little-noticed figure of English literary and intellectual history. Known as much for his personal links to other figures—to Wollstonecraft, Wordsworth, or Shelley—as for his own writing, Godwin remains largely unread except by specialists in the Jacobin period. At best, other critics may identify Godwin with the eccentric anarchism of his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* or the Gothic histrionics of *Caleb Williams*. Even if one gives full credit to work by more recent critics, literary criticism is still very far from doing justice to his work as a whole or overcoming long-nurtured suspicions about the quality and significance of much of his writing.

It may in fact be true that Godwin's novels show flashes of dramatic intensity rather than any sustained technical brilliance; his imaginative gifts may indeed be somewhat narrow in scope. Yet because literary history has often relied upon evaluative criteria that fit Godwin's fictional practice poorly, it has tended to reinforce the marginalizing of his work accomplished by the anti-Jacobin reaction in England. That tendency seems all the more regrettable in that Godwin's work has tremendous bearing on issues central to contemporary criticism, such as the relation of ideology to ethics in literature, or the relationship of subjectivity to interpretation and to history. Its narrative anomalies are themselves instructive about the complexity of the problems with which Godwin struggled in trying to shape an aesthetic form adequate to his political and ethical concerns.

To be sure, the past few years have seen a renaissance of Godwin studies that has produced some outstanding analytical work—a renaissance traceable to the seminal work of Burton Pollin on the intellectual

coherence of Godwin's ideas, to David McCracken's work on Godwin's literary theories and reedition of *Caleb Williams*, as well as to the discovery in 1966 of the original, previously unknown ending to *Caleb Williams*.¹ Since then, however, critical attention has focused almost exclusively on *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*, virtually neglecting Godwin's other fiction and essays.² That focus, though regrettable for the narrow image it gives us of Godwin's lifetime work, does rest on plausible premises, since much of the fascination of Godwin's writing lies in his attempt to reconcile his vision of justice with highly realistic portraits of political psychology, a struggle most evident in the proximity of these two works to each other. Any reestimation of Godwin as a novelist, then, needs to begin by turning our attention back to *Caleb Williams*. Of particular interest is the way in which Godwin's narrative choices, especially the revised ending, provide a developing commentary on his political values that takes him beyond the assumptions of *Political Justice*.

My primary argument here is that the tendency of *Caleb Williams*, and indeed of all of Godwin's fiction, runs fundamentally contrary to the explicit political assumptions and expectations of *Political Justice*—but, for that very reason, they need to be read in a complementary fashion as parts of a comprehensive perspective. Though Godwin may well have begun this novel hoping to exemplify his political ideals in dramatic form, his own narrative and psychological realism transformed the fiction into a much more sceptical mediation on the possibilities for political amelioration through reason. His careful attention to the working of ideology in an individual mind, Caleb's, led him to complicate his rationalist model of political justice and political change, anticipating the internal critique of his own political theory that comes more and more into evidence in his subsequent writing. To perceive this, however, we need to bear in mind the diverse tendencies present in the novel, and in fact, to read past the moral overtly proffered by Caleb himself.³ If we attend to its multiple resonances, Godwin's reformulated conclusion has the unexpected effect of abruptly reopening the gulf between politics and ethics, between power and justice, that Godwin's political writings had sought to bridge. It reveals *Political Justice* as Godwin's most perfect fiction, one whose credibility continues to seduce Caleb even at the moment that he tells us he has ceased to delude himself. *Caleb Williams* does not so much repudiate that fiction, however, as measure its limits within an existing political and social order.

Recent literary criticism, more so than philosophical and biographical treatments of Godwin, has shown an increasing awareness of the tensions between his novels and his political doctrines.⁴ Yet there is still consider-

able critical work to be done in exploring the complex patterns of this novel if we wish to see exactly how Caleb goes astray, or why the novel, even as revised, fails to carry through Godwin's project of explicating and demonstrating the accessibility of political justice. We can best begin by examining the direct relation of *Political Justice* to Godwin's reworked ending, the point where he tried hardest to fuse his theoretical and fictional practice. How we choose to interpret Caleb's status there—whether we see Caleb freeing himself from or still deeply entangled in the meshes of political ideology—may well be the single most important feature in shaping our understanding of the text. Though rather less than a hero, Caleb serves as our best measure for how Godwin was transforming his own vision of the possibilities for political change.

II

Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness* suggests already in its title that the author's interest in political matters had a fundamentally ethical basis. As the chapter entitled "Of Justice" states, "morality is the source from which its fundamental axioms must be drawn, and they will be made somewhat clearer in the present instance, if we assume the term justice as a general appellation for all moral duty."⁵ Indeed, the central claim of *Political Justice* is that politics—questions of power and government, of ideology and interests, which are rooted in historical circumstances—can be subordinated to ethical considerations—those questions of justice and fairness that ought to be determined objectively by abstract reason. Arguing vigorously against the absurdities of social contract theory, Godwin distinguishes politics from ethics by pointing out that politics inevitably involves the use of force to override countless reservations of particular individuals about specific communal decisions. "Government in reality, as has abundantly appeared, is a question of force, and not of consent. . . . the best constituted government that can be formed, particularly for a large community, will contain many provisions that, far from having obtained the consent of all its members, encounter even in their outset a strenuous, though ineffectual, opposition" (*PJ*, 1:225–26). We may go along with such decisions, says Godwin, but this adherence demonstrates only indifference, not assent, and we should not allow our private judgment to be silenced. "Obey; this may be right; but beware of reverence. . . . Government is nothing but regulated force; force is its appropriate claim upon your attention. It is the business of individuals to persuade; the tendency of concentrated strength, is only to give consistency and permanence to an influence more compendious than persuasion" (*PJ*, 1:230).

For these reasons, Godwin argues that we need to reformulate our perception of justice, not so much what it is, but how we can best go about defining and realizing it. This means discovering how human reason might be able to circumvent politics as it has traditionally been understood. Although *Political Justice* shares the Enlightenment confidence in an eternal, immutable law of reason, it remains sceptical of any invocation of coercive reason in political affairs; its essential political principle asserts the absolute priority of private judgment as that which government needs most urgently to foster. "It may be granted, that an infallible standard, if it could be discovered, would be considerably beneficial." Yet since this cannot be guaranteed, "the conviction of a man's individual understanding, is the only legitimate principle, imposing on him the duty of adopting any species of conduct" (*PJ*, 1:181).

Why should we assume, however, that rational behavior will actually lead toward social justice without governmental efforts to enforce it? Here lies the crucial assumption of Godwin's argument: that two features intrinsic to rational human motivation, benevolence and impartiality, will ultimately prove able to override considerations of power. Justice requires both capacities, not only a readiness to act in ways that enhance the general welfare, but also the ability to judge in an unbiased way which actions best achieve that aim. Godwin's ethical bias is perhaps most evident in his assumption that these capacities exist and naturally conform to the laws of reason—the sort of analytical move that has driven political theorists to distraction in dealing with him and to frustrated accusations that his philosophy is absurdly utopian and inattentive to practical mechanisms for reform, relying upon the simple "euthanasia of government" for entry into an anarchist paradise. From Godwin's perspective, however, government can never be an appropriate mechanism for social change, for not only can it not foster political virtues, but it actively works against their development by constricting the progressive movement of reason within fixed, traditionally sanctified, institutional ways of determining justice.

In his political writing, Godwin goes so far as to insist that the very idea of political rights as things distinct from moral duty is unreasonable. "Morality is nothing else but that system, which teaches us to contribute upon all occasions, to the extent of our power, to the well-being and happiness of every intellectual and sensitive existence. . . . If then every one of our actions fall within the province of morals, it follows that we have no rights in relation to the selecting them" (*PJ*, 1:159).⁶ Our duty to behave in a benevolent fashion is absolutely overriding, although this remains a personal and internal compulsion, not one that government

ought to enforce. Private judgment does remain practically and politically preeminent for Godwin, yet it exists essentially to help us understand how we should serve the general good.

Political Justice argues that our reason is sufficient to determine what will foster the general welfare, that is, we can attain a position of intellectual impartiality that lets us see beyond self-interest and prejudice. Justice rests upon impartiality for Godwin (*PJ*, 1:126), so that, “the soundest criterion of virtue is, to put ourselves in the place of an impartial spectator, of an angelic nature, suppose, beholding us from an elevated station, and uninfluenced by our prejudices, conceiving what would be his estimate of the intrinsic circumstances of our neighbour, and acting accordingly” (*PJ*, 1:133).⁷ Impartiality thus complements benevolence; the former involves an intellectual capacity to attain the objectivity necessary for determining the general good, while the latter embodies an affective impulse to benefit others, to put the judgments of impartiality into effect. *Political Justice*, with its rationalist bias, does tend to conflate the two; in the 1796 version, Godwin explicitly justifies benevolence as the highest of pleasures, desirable in an impersonal way in any utilitarian calculation (*PJ*, 1: 421–38). Hence making an impartial, rational calculation is for him the same as putting it into effect.⁸ His celebrated example of whether one should save Fénelon or his maid (who happens to be one’s mother) from a fire, for instance, really focuses on the choice between two sorts of benevolence, as if the thought of simply saving neither person were not an option.

As Godwin moves into fiction and as he comes to be influenced by discussions with Mary Wollstonecraft, he takes increasing account of affective elements in his equation; benevolence becomes more and more a distinct problem of its own.⁹ Still, his commitment to a sentimental rationalism persist programmatically throughout his works, which take as their first aim the arousing of emotional indignation against the irrationality of things as they are and have been in political society. At the same time, Godwin’s fiction shows him to be a more canny analyst of political psychology than any literal-minded perusal of *Political Justice* might suggest, someone quite aware, as William Hazlitt astutely noted, of the limits of reason. It is through Godwin’s fiction, in fact, that we may best be able to weigh the practical application of his political ideals, what this fantasy of reason (as Don Locke aptly terms it) entails. To gauge Godwin’s position, I want to turn to what seem to me three distinct alternatives sketched by *Caleb Williams*—in its original, manuscript version, and in two contradictory movements within the actually published text.

In beginning, we would do well to recall the judgment of Mitzi Myers about this novel:

CW is neither a simple exemplification nor an unacknowledged repudiation of his philosophical tenets. The moral concerns at the heart of Godwin's treatise inform his novel as well, not as a positive program of set doctrines, but as the exploration of a moral problem. The numerous political reflections and the brilliant psychological analyses cannot be considered in isolation from the basic moral pattern that forms the core of the novel.¹⁰

Caleb Williams's narrative structure is obviously allegorical; it translates the larger terms and conditions of political justice into the personal relationship of power between Caleb and his master and mentor, Falkland.¹¹ Recognizing this, however, does not provide a precise answer for just how the allegory works, especially for how Godwin's choice to foreground psychology and to put issues in moral terms affects the political message (if any) of the text.

The original ending of *Caleb Williams* had provided a conclusion to the novel that underscored in a very predictable way the political critique behind the narrative, wringing the maximum emotional anguish from the potentially oppressive use of political power. Caleb's ethical integrity proves unable to alter the structure of "things as they are." Although he does get the chance to accuse his former master, Falkland, of having committed a murder and of having shifted the blame and punishment onto an innocent tenant farmer, the legal system continues to operate as it has throughout the novel. Despite the eloquence of Caleb's appeal, society refuses to give his case a serious hearing; Falkland successfully defends himself by pointing out that, in the absence of real evidence, the judges' determination of who is speaking the truth must rest on their judgment of the respective characters of himself, a respected local landlord, and Caleb, an accused thief and escapee from prison—that is, on the very differences of status that Caleb has tried to make subordinate to the ethical claims of rational justice.

Falkland goes further, having Caleb imprisoned and ultimately poisoned, thus revealing himself as an absolute villain, consciously using his access to political power for his private benefit. Impervious to any appeal to benevolence or impartiality, he exploits what Caleb had earlier astutely described as "the power which the institutions of society give to *one* man over others" (225; emphasis added). Godwin clearly meant for the reader to condemn a political-social system that enhances the power of individu-

als to manipulate truth for personal advantage. Caleb struggles as a righteous individual against the system whose representative or agent is Falkland, but he finds no opportunity for justice within politicized institutions. Any moral here, to borrow Rajan's apt categories, would have to lie beyond the text itself, in the supplementary production by the reader of an alternative ending that political reform might have made possible.¹² Yet two problems remain that may well have led Godwin to rewrite the ending. First, this conclusion makes it all too easy to take Falkland's villainy as personal in nature, a consequence of his character rather than endemic to the political system. Second, this original version puts into question the efficacy of any appeal to benevolence or impartiality in bringing about change in an arena conditioned by considerations of power. Caleb's death, though dramatically plausible and effective, might well lead the reader, like Caleb, to fatalistic despair.

In revising the ending of *Caleb Williams*, Godwin created one of his most brilliant and memorable narrative passages, its psychological complexity intensified by the way that it startlingly reverses the previous momentum of the novel not just once, but twice—first by Caleb's triumph in court, then again by his sense of the emptiness of that victory. The rewritten conclusion exploits the narrative subtleties of his fictional text much more fully, above all in its treatment of the complicated interaction between ideological and ethical concerns. In revising the ending, Godwin dramatically raised the stakes involved in his portrayal of Caleb. For once Caleb is not simply a victim, his own capacity to understand and articulate political justice becomes a central concern of the text. Reading his own past, he becomes much more obviously a surrogate for the reader, a model for our own struggles to realize the conditions of political justice. So it matters a great deal that the very success of Caleb's appeal to ethical norms and virtues, his triumphant enactment of the principles of political justice, somehow generates a paradoxical and paralyzing sense of culpability about his own character and behavior. At the exact moment when Caleb seems to circumvent historically conditioned differences of status and power, they rewrite themselves within the personalized ethical narrative that he is constructing, leaving behind as narrative surplus an excessive feeling of guilt.

Still, the initial movement of this conclusion is optimistic. The surface logic of the trial scene had originally placed Caleb between the alternatives of a raw, brutal justice and an uncomfortable sense of sympathy for Falkland. As if quoting from *Political Justice*, Caleb first says: "It appeared therefore to my mind to be a mere piece of equity and justice, such as an impartial spectator would desire, that one person should be miserable in

preference to two [that is, Falkland alone, once his guilt was revealed], that one person rather than two be incapacitated from acting his part, and contributing his share to the general welfare" (319). Caleb has all along pictured himself as that ideal spectator, yet the physical decline of Falkland irresistibly arouses his sympathy and makes him doubt his utilitarian calculation. "Shall I trample upon a man thus dreadfully reduced? . . . There must have been a better and more magnanimous remedy to the evils under which I groaned" (319–20). Caleb's moving speech manages to chart a third course, one that allows him to maintain his benevolence and impartiality towards Falkland. Even as he accuses Falkland, he vindicates his master's character and intentions, rebuking his own "folly and cruelty" in choosing to confront Falkland in court and publicize his guilt. Not truth alone, but Caleb's magnanimity towards his tormentor, persuades the listeners of his veracity and transforms Falkland. In confessing and asking for Caleb's forgiveness, Falkland vindicates the claim of *Political Justice*, at least in modified form; sentimental rationalism, manifested in a personal ethical appeal, triumphs over institutions, interests and ideology.

Yet there is more than sentiment involved here. Although his trial speech remains factual and focused on the personal dimensions of his relationship with Falkland, Caleb's restored admiration of Falkland is really made possible by a shift in his perspective that becomes clear only at the end of the postscript. Caleb can absolve Falkland of personal enmity towards him because he suddenly comes to understand him as the product of a corrupt political system—more precisely, as a victim of socially conditioned chivalric ideals. Caleb's final words translate the personal contest between himself and Falkland back into allegorical terms, relocating Falkland's behavior within a socio-historical context that largely erases his personal guilt. "Thou imbibedst the poison of chivalry with thy earliest youth; and the base and low-minded envy that met thee on thy return to thy native seats, operated with this poison to hurry thee into madness" (326).

Numerous critics have argued that Caleb here reaches a form of political and historical self-consciousness by indicting those chivalric ideals, resurrected by Burke and others, that were major impediments to social progress.¹³ Such historical understanding does indeed seem to motivate and explain Caleb's newly felt sympathy and magnanimity at the trial. His benevolence and impartiality flow directly from a hermeneutic revisioning of his situation, from his capacity to adopt a wider view of the historical circumstances that transcend and condition personal relation-

ships. For the first time, he makes a direct link between Falkland's ideological biography and his personal behavior towards Caleb himself.

Paradoxically, this reading suggests that Caleb's error is his failure to step outside those circumstances and outside the legal system in order to seek a personal reconciliation with Falkland: "The direct and private confrontation of truth with error, testing the power of truth, is what Caleb should have attempted, but did not."¹⁴ Indeed, Caleb interprets his own behavior in these terms, as a failure to believe in the power of personal ethical relationships to transcend or circumvent historically determined differences of power and status. He endorses a mode of relationship that he claims would let us evade the ongoing repetitions of power, appealing to an ideal of frankness and mutual understanding that he contends would have been accessible to him at any time, had he been able to recognize it: "I now see that mistake in all its enormity. I am sure that, if I had opened my heart to Mr. Falkland, if I had told to him privately the tale that I have now been telling, he could not have resisted my reasonable demand" (323). This fault is Falkland's as well; Caleb's one remaining accusation is that Falkland likewise failed to trust him: "You began in confidence; why did you not continue in confidence?" (321).

In this appeal, *Caleb Williams* reiterates the political prescription of *Political Justice*; personal dialogue can transcend social differences and restore a genuinely impartial justice. The text seems to claim that knowledge of history allows us to erase its effects, to step outside relations of power, in part because all are equally victimized by circumstance. The dramatic irony of the ending discloses our universal entanglement in political injustice, a state we as readers implicitly share with Caleb. In Uphaus's concise terms, the revised ending moves Caleb from self-vindication to "an acknowledgment of complicity."¹⁵ Failing to recognize the allegorical resonance of his own life, Caleb allowed his impartiality to be corrupted by his sense of self and by his emotional reactions to Falkland. Despite his belief in his own purity of purpose, he fell short of an adequate faith in the efficacy of his own appeal to reverse the predominance of power over ethics.

IV

And yet—appealing though this reading is in some ways, especially since Caleb himself seems to embrace it (323), it resolves the narrative in essentially sentimental terms, ones that fit neatly with *Political Justice's* faith in the power of sincerity, but elide certain problematic features of the novel. For Godwin's revised ending produces a counter-movement

against its own ethical prescriptions, a contrary interpretive force marked by Caleb's excessive feeling of guilt. The end of *Caleb Williams* remains bizarre, as unsettling in its own way as the original nightmarish version. Its uncanny logic and emotionally overwrought tone are far removed from utilitarian rationalism; Caleb's acknowledgement of complicity is strangely detached from any political context such as that provided for Falkland's behavior.

The conclusion seems awry first in its utilitarian logic. The purely rational question here is whether it would have been better for Falkland's crime not to be revealed, an issue raised both in an early dialogue about the crimes committed by Alexander the Great (110) and in the one face-to-face interview of Caleb with his persecutor (282). The response implied by the text, shocking to the moral neatness of Godwin's theory, is that revelation is not the best solution, that utility does not coincide in this case with speaking the truth publicly. Yet if Caleb was indeed as wrong in making his accusation as he now seems to think, if Falkland did not deserve to be publicly accused, then utilitarian calculations would apparently justify concealing a murder (as Caleb himself reflected earlier, 130). And if they justify concealing murder, then why not committing one as well? Not only might the murder of Tyrrel seem rationally justified, but likewise the deaths of the falsely accused Hawkinses, since Falkland's potential ability to contribute to society clearly exceeds that of a tenant farmer and his son.

But the narrative is even more profoundly awry in its tone. Caleb's postscript exposes much more than a reasoned catalogue of his errors and implied solutions for them. It becomes an increasingly frenzied defense of Falkland's virtues and an almost frantic exercise in self-abasement. Caleb implausibly elevates Falkland to heroic stature, as if his actual guilt had somehow ceased to matter. "Mr. Falkland is of a noble nature. Yes; in spite [of all he did], I affirm that he has qualities of the most admirable kind" (323). In fact, "a nobler spirit lived not among the sons of men" (325). As Falkland rises in Caleb's esteem, his own self-image suffers a proportionate degradation. "I proclaim to all the world that Mr. Falkland is a man worthy of affection and kindness, and that I am myself the basest and most odious of mankind!" (323). Having absolved Falkland of any personal guilt, Caleb projects an incredible degree of benevolence onto his earlier behavior, and takes upon himself the guilt that must evidently lie somewhere. Caleb blames himself alone for their communicative failure. "I despaired [of my ability to persuade Falkland] . . . my despair was criminal, was treason against the sovereignty of truth" (323).

Its emotional tone makes Caleb's sympathy for Falkland extremely suspect, for it derives less from a detached, historical understanding of their relation than from a problematic identification with Falkland and even with his power to oppress. As the postscript continues, Caleb virtually *becomes* Falkland; he inherits his role as ruthless oppressor, passing on to him the role of innocent victim.¹⁶ Caleb sees himself as all that he has accused Falkland of being, a murderer (323) and an execrable criminal (325), even claiming that he should more mercifully have "planted a dagger in his heart" (as Falkland did to Tyrrel) than humiliated Falkland in court (325). By making Falkland and Caleb interchangeable in this way, the novel undercuts its own effort at an historical explanation of events. If Caleb is somehow guiltier than Falkland, then the ideological explanation he provided for Falkland's behavior seems irrelevant in accounting for his own guilt. Caleb's guilt is extraordinary, excessive, far disproportionate to any reasonable moral calculus. How can he be guilty if Falkland is not? How can his treatment of Falkland be worse than Falkland's behavior toward Tyrrel and Hawkins? Why should Caleb take up Falkland's burden of guilt, his sense of self-abasement, his melancholic egoism, his misery?

Clearly, even at the moment when his integrity has been vindicated by the legal system, his truth with respect to Falkland established, Caleb is in important respects more deluded than ever—because he applies to himself in a naive and uncompromising way the standard of impartiality from which he has absolved Falkland. He remains a victim of the system at the moment when he thinks he has seen fully into it, for he now takes himself as its intentional, culpable accomplice. The resulting sense of guilt blocks any application to himself of the sort of ideological analysis he has used to liberate Falkland. He continues to read his own actions strictly within a code of personal ethics that blinds him to their wider ideological implications. He *repersonalizes* the guilt for the tragedies of the text, turning back on himself the wrath that he had gradually come to feel for Falkland. Caleb understands his error as an ethical flaw in his personal identity, as egoism, a wholly personal aspiration for power: "Why should my reflections perpetually centre upon myself? self, an overweening regard to which has been the source of my errors! Falkland, I will think only of thee, and from that thought will draw ever fresh nourishment for my sorrows!" (325). This sort of reasoning implies that social violence stems from human nature, not from circumstances or inequities of political power; it empties out the historical awareness that let Caleb absolve Falkland. Rather than being an uplifting manifestation of political justice, Caleb's response replicates Falkland's reaction to his own "crime," generating a

degree of self-hatred that can only prove debilitating and ethically corrosive, a self-hatred that seems just as likely as in Falkland's case to eventually find an outlet, a new victim.

Caleb does recognize his complicity, but in exactly the wrong way, in a way that permits ideology to continue to function invisibly behind a facade of personal psychological agency. Caleb remains locked in an obsessive identification with Falkland because he can find no place for himself within the historical narrative he has constructed to vindicate Falkland. Rather than becoming an impartial spectator or a reliable narrator, Caleb simply exchanges roles with Falkland in an ongoing ideological spectacle. Earlier in the novel, he seemed to recognize this dangerous social dialectic: "I thought with unspeakable loathing of those errors, in consequence of which every man is fated to be more or less the tyrant or the slave" (156). Now, however, his language exhibits fundamentally similar distinctions, even using a Biblical "thee" and "thy" to address Falkland. He reverts to the role of servant, abased before a divine Falkland whose "intellectual powers were truly sublime" and whose "bosom burned with a godlike ambition" (325). The formal structure of this relationship of unequals overrides any attempt to step outside of it into ethical impartiality, to deconstruct it into its circumstantial origins.¹⁷ Caleb's praise of Falkland and his own self-abasement are the sole new elements at the trial; Caleb's reassertion of status differences doubtless contributes to producing the conviction in his hearers that his earlier attempts to defend himself had failed to achieve.¹⁸

To see in the revised ending a case where "a flawed Caleb achieves moral self-recognition and acceptance of his guilt," is to ignore the intense emotional ambivalence of Godwin's revised conclusion.¹⁹ It places Caleb and us in the position of accepting Falkland's own earlier reading of events, where he presents his intentions towards Caleb only in positive terms: "I meditated to do you good. . . . I would yet have found a way to reward you" (281). But Falkland's words reveal an aberrant ethical perspective on the events of the text as we have seen them, and can hardly begin to justify his vindictive pursuit of Caleb. As Tysdahl more persuasively notes: "Caleb has seen through one set of false assumptions, but this new version of his own history is at best only a curious mixture of newly acquired insight, misunderstandings and uncertainties."²⁰

The curiousness of that mix, I would argue, stems from Caleb's excessive confidence in the power of rational ethics to circumvent deeply embedded relationships of power. He attains only a partial impartiality, for while his sympathetic rationality elevates him above self-interest, it does so only by substituting another self in which to be interested. As

guardian of Falkland's reputation, Caleb reinscribes differences of power along traditional lines and allows ideology to reassert itself in and through the very ethical categories on which he relies to extricate himself. As readers, we have to weigh his justice towards Falkland against his injustice towards himself.

v

The reservations that *Caleb Williams* forces us to raise about impartiality and confidence are characteristic of Godwin's developing thought. Both political and personal events in the 1790s led Godwin to doubt his easy faith in ethical absolutes—not their existence, but how operative they might become in human affairs.²¹ The *Enquirer* essays of 1797 share with most of Godwin's novels considerable scepticism about the sort of ideal ethical standards so confidently anticipated in *Political Justice*. "Of Difference of Opinion" specifically questions our ability to maintain the impartiality that could lead us, through dialogue, towards consensus: "Alas! impartiality is a virtue hung too high, to be almost ever within the reach of man!" (*E*, 305–6). It requires, in fact, a seemingly superhuman effort: "The causes of this pertinacity [in adhering to first impressions] are closely interwoven with the nature of man . . . We ought . . . to regard those who conquer it as having lifted themselves above the level of almost the whole mass of their species" (*E*, 308). Godwin ultimately concludes, as he urges us not to blame others for their partiality, "that there is not a man that lives, of whom it can be affirmed that any one of his opinions was formed with impartiality" (*E*, 311).

Still, it is Godwin's novels, rather than his philosophical writings, that undertake the most probing analysis of this political and ethical problem. They explore his concern that there may be no moral economy of the psyche from which vanity and self-gratification can be excluded, that there is no ethics of benevolence apart from and therefore able to monitor and regulate our interests, passions, or will. As they explore the conditions of possibility—or impossibility—for rationalist virtues, their Romantic psychological realism reveals a will to power behind even the most altruistic of motives, thus implying an irreducibly political dimension in social interaction. Over and over, Godwin's characters show us how the desire for truth—to be right, at any cost—itself derives from and intensifies the desire for power. Hence the radical anarchism of *Political Justice* gives way to the pragmatism of *The Enquirer*: "All men love independence. . . . All men love power. . . . From these passions taken together, united with the actual imperfections of the human mind, arises the necessity of political restraint" (*E*, 320).

Caleb himself recognizes this truth by the end of the novel, though he still tends, as throughout the text, to consider his current position to be impartial. Yet his ethical categories fall short of an explanatory power that would be genuinely liberating for him, because he fails to connect his ethical terms to any context beyond himself. In fact, the materials necessary for an adequate reinterpretation of his own past are simply not available to him—a curious structural anomaly in one sense, probably not even intended by Godwin, yet brilliantly right in another sense for illuminating the complex interlocking of ethics and politics. *Caleb Williams* never provides the same sort of explanatory context for Caleb as it does for Falkland. So Caleb's inability to reread himself is, oddly but accurately put, a function of Godwin's inability to rewrite the whole text (the earlier chapters of which were already being printed as he completed the novel) and to give Caleb a past comparable in contextual depth to Falkland's. Caleb remains a remarkably isolated individual, literally an orphan, inhabiting a world free of conscious ideological resonances.

Partly for these reasons, Caleb had portrayed himself from the start as someone who could provide a reliable, impartial version of events: "I am incited to the penning of these memoirs, only by a desire to divert my mind from the deplorableness of my situation, and a faint idea that posterity may by their means be induced to render me a justice which my contemporaries refuse" (3). He retains that ambition to the end, even as his purpose shifts from self-vindication to vindication of Falkland. Yet his interpretive project demonstrates its weakness in its failure to provide a compelling rereading of earlier events in the text; it constantly overlooks factors that it lacks any ideological framework to explain.

Instead, Caleb writes over the past in ways that make its errors seem curiously inexplicable. Caleb's fundamental accusation against Falkland in the final trial focuses on an ethical error—that his master failed to have sufficient faith in him: "You began in confidence; why did you not continue in confidence?" (321). Yet his behavior gives us little reason to think that Falkland could have relied on Caleb's disinterested justice in pursuing his secret. Even Caleb had been aware of how his observation and conversation were quite obviously aimed at forcefully penetrating Falkland's confidence: "There was still an apparent want of design in the manner [of my remarks], even after I was excited accurately to compare my observations and study the inferences to which they led . . . Mr. Falkland's situation was like that of a fish that plays with the bait employed to entrap him" (108–9). For anyone with secrets—that is, virtually everyone in Godwin's fiction—fully divulging oneself to such an interlocutor must seem like folly.²²

Caleb retrospectively sees his curiosity as a “mistaken thirst” (133), driven as much by passion as by an impartial love of truth and something in which he takes a “strange sort of pleasure” (107). Still, his reiterated insistence to himself of his disinterestedness (proved for him by his refusal to accuse Falkland until the end) allows him to conceal from himself any awareness of his own will to power or to his own need to know. As Uphaus perceptively notes, the desire to learn Falkland’s secret has clear, revolutionary political implications, ones that Caleb never understands: “Caleb wishes to reenact Falkland’s torment, not merely to discover and experience Falkland’s feelings, but to raise himself—at least psychologically, if not socially and politically—to the level of Falkland’s coequal.”²³ Yet it seems less true that “affective tendency supplants political moral” than that Caleb’s affective obsession with truth itself provides the mechanism through which political ideology surreptitiously works, an “insanity” whose ideological logic escapes his awareness, and perhaps the reader’s as well.²⁴ For despite Caleb’s self-recriminations at the end, he never examines the mysterious madness of his wish to know the truth about Falkland. His acceptance of guilt, in fact, seems to absolve him from further self-examination and from applying to himself the historicizing analysis he has applied to Falkland.

As many critics have remarked, Caleb’s curiosity expresses and reveals an attraction to the power that knowledge can provide. “Every man,” Caleb says, without noticing his own inclusion in the category, “is in some degree influenced by the love of power” (245). His own language accuses him of this long before he comes to accuse himself at the trial. As he contemplates his state of mind when first imprisoned, for instance, his desire for truth slides syntactically into a frank, if unacknowledged, expression of more questionable motives: “Every sentiment of *vanity, or rather of independence and justice* within me, instigated me to say to my persecutor, You may cut off my existence, but you cannot disturb my serenity” (187; emphasis added). Even as he asserts his inviolability and moral superiority, Caleb tellingly reveals his personal stake in “impartial” truth. Later, as his rage against Falkland mounts, he says: “I will show thee for what thou art, and all the men that live shall confess *my* truth” (314; emphasis added). The language of Falkland’s confession reveals a similar tendency to see in their struggle a personal struggle for power. “You have conquered” (324), he says—not persuaded or been vindicated, but *conquered*. It is neither truth nor impartiality, but Caleb’s person and reputation that triumph over Falkland, an opposition that Caleb can try to reverse in writing his text, but cannot hope to dissolve. In a text where every important relationship offers only two psychological alternatives—

egoism or absorption by the other person—knowledge of anyone else becomes just one more counter in a struggle for control. To the end, Caleb continues to see that struggle—at least from his side—in essentially personal terms, failing to acknowledge the ideological factors that condition it. Caleb lacks any of the terms that Godwin might have provided for reinterpreting his own past as he does Falkland's, a lack that is profoundly telling about how ethical categories, for all the power of their internal coherence, may still go astray.

VI

By transforming the end from a series of events that lead inexorably to Falkland's guilt, as in the first version, into Caleb's still partial interpretation of the trial itself, Godwin underscored the difficulty of subordinating issues of power and historical circumstance even to his own ethical ideals. Caleb accepts the role of villain in this revised tragedy, re-enacting Falkland's melancholy mourning for the other as victim and for himself as the unwilling agent of political injustice. He does revise Falkland's script in one respect by publicly announcing his responsibility, which might suggest that a more positive balance results. Yet the residual imbalance in the text argues against this. As the first murder left an interpretive surplus exceeding utilitarian ethical calculations—the Hawkinses's unmerited deaths for Falkland's crime (which Caleb's eulogy of Falkland cannot explain and must therefore erase)—so does the "murder" of Falkland by Caleb leave us with the remainder of Caleb's guilt, its excess the sign of the limits of his self-recognition.

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, Caleb remains convinced by his myth of impartiality, both about his own essential rightness in uncovering Falkland's secret and about the accuracy of his final accounting. He embodies the aspirations of *Political Justice*, sharing its conviction that he, like any rational being, ought to have been able to trust the power of ethical concerns to sweep aside political ones. Yet his interpretive struggles and his residual guilt in Godwin's revised ending convey a more complex message about the intersection of ethics and politics. First, his ethical capacity to estimate Falkland impartially and to pardon him derives from his comprehension of historical circumstances, his recognition of the degree to which character may be shaped by ideological factors that need to be understood in their full specificity. His own self-estimation, however, reveals a second sort of connection. His guilt and his skewed effort to reread his own past demonstrate the tendency of ethical categories to drift away from their historical grounding, a shift that contributes to the

re-emergence of ideological forces within them. His ideological relation to Falkland can thus reassert itself within his ethical language, aided in crucial ways by the universalizing, essentializing nature of its terminology. Too confidently adhering to ethical absolutes, Caleb cuts short his interpretation of events and blinds himself to his own place in the narrative he constructs around Falkland. Ironically, Caleb's recourse to an ethics "purified" of ideology has the effect of erasing his own identity. "I have now no character that I wish to vindicate" (326), he concludes, echoing Falkland's despair. Though he can clearly see the ideological factors that corrupted Falkland, he perceives his own case in terms of ethical universals. Here again he mimics his master, for Falkland, too, may well have understood Tyrrel's motives and justifications better than his own (what else should those years of solitary brooding have led him to?).

Having failed to enact political justice, Caleb imagines that his own narrative will provide a clear and consistent truth, so that the world will "at least not hear and repeat a half-told and mangled tale" (326). That very telling, however, tempts us to repeat the mangling we have seen, for Caleb's dilemma is very much the reader's as well. Recalling that Godwin's own aesthetic theory stressed tendency as the crucial component of narrative, we must finally turn our attention to his text's effect on the reader. "Of Choice in Reading" emphasizes the power of literature to "increase the powers of the understanding," suggesting our intellectual distance from and potential superiority to the partial visions that entrap fictional characters (*E*, 138). But Godwin's own comments on *Caleb Williams* and other novels emphasize the affective dimensions of reading, how its power derives from an appeal to our feelings.

His 1832 Preface to *Fleetwood* speaks of his efforts to create a tale of "powerful interest" whose unity of plot would give it a "powerful hold" over the reader.²⁵ Godwin's critique of Wollstonecraft's draft for *Maria* similarly argues that an author needs to depict not only incidents, but the feelings they arouse in the characters themselves. "An incident, to produce its effect in a work of fiction, must be accompanied with an exhibition of the successive feelings it inevitably creates in the person that is the subject of it."²⁶ Nor can we, *Caleb Williams* implies, easily imagine ourselves exempt from the ethical partialities that go along with such affective involvement, as if we were embodiments of the fairness that these characters never quite manage to maintain.

The extent of this aesthetic identification, its approximation of Caleb's own position, becomes clearest when Godwin describes his creation of the figure of Falkland:

Nor could my purpose of giving an overpowering interest to my tale be answered, without his appearing to have been originally endowed with a mighty store of amiable dispositions and virtues, so that his being driven to the first act of murder should be judged worthy of the deepest regret, and should be seen in some measure to have arisen out of his virtues themselves. It was necessary to make him, so to speak, the tenant of an atmosphere of romance, so that every reader should feel prompted almost to worship him for his high qualities.²⁷

The reader, as much as Caleb, seems called here to an affective identification where the ethical imbalance of Falkland's indirect murder of Hawkins and his son, done to cover up his first, simply vanishes. Curiously, Godwin's comments on the novel focus exclusively on Falkland rather than Caleb, replicating Caleb's identification with him, but not helping us locate ourselves in relation to Caleb.

How, then, should we respond to this text? Perhaps better than identifying with Caleb, and ultimately with his own identification with Falkland, we might respond with some measure of aversion to the vehemence of Caleb's own self-abasement and self-contempt. The affective excess at the end of *Caleb Williams* ought to remind us of the ways that ideology can be reinscribed within ethical categories. Yet we should not therefore conclude that Godwin is undoing, consciously or not, his own rationalist ideals simply because his fictional text confronts more directly the difficulty of the path leading to them. His rationalist ethics both require and are threatened by the identificatory processes that Caleb enacts; they depend upon a sympathetic identification with other persons that constantly risks becoming an ideological identification with reactionary values that those persons may represent.

In the way that it positions Caleb both within and outside of history, *Caleb Williams* looks forward to Godwin's subsequent examination of the conditions for political justice. The question of why historical understanding proves hardest to turn back upon one's own life supplies a dominant theme in many of Godwin's later texts, from his *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft and his historical novels to numerous essays in *The Enquirer* and elsewhere. *Caleb Williams* asks, then, to be taken not alone and in isolation as definitive Godwinian philosophy, but as the first step in Godwin's analysis of the complex interdependence of affective apprehension and a rational, yet historically conditioned, sense of justice.

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NOTES

¹ Burton Ralph Pollin, *Education and Enlightenment in the Works of William Godwin* (New York: Las Americas, 1962); William Godwin, *Uncollected Writings: 1785–1822*, ed. Jack Marken and Burton Pollin (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1968). David McCracken's "Godwin's Literary Theory: The Alliance between Fiction and Political Philosophy," *Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (1970): 113–33, remains one of the best pieces available dealing with Godwin's little noted but highly interesting remarks on the purposes and functioning of literature. On the discovery of the original ending, see D. Gilbert Dumas, "Things as They Were: The Original Ending of *Caleb Williams*," *Studies in English Literature* 6 (1966): 575–97. The original conclusion is published as an appendix in David McCracken's edition of the novel: William Godwin, *Caleb Williams* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970). All *Caleb Williams* quotations are taken from the McCracken edition; page numbers cited parenthetically within the text.

² Godwin's three recent biographers have unfortunately been sometimes the readiest to write off Godwin's later fiction as mere repetition of *Caleb Williams* or as aesthetically inept. Yet each biography has distinctive merit and together they have contributed to shaping a much fuller and more nuanced view of Godwin. Don Locke, *A Fantasy of Reason: The Life and Thought of William Godwin* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), is a probing intellectual biography, one of the best treatments of the evolution of Godwin's philosophical thinking. William St. Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys: The Biography of a Family* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), provides a wealth of anecdotal information about Godwin's life, drawing heavily on his detailed diary and extensive correspondence. Peter Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984), stresses the importance of Godwin's Dissenting background and provides by the far best analyses of the novels. Most successful treatments of Godwin's fiction attend carefully to its allegorical features, restoring to his psychological portraits a depth that critics with a realist bias can simply overlook. B. J. Tysdahl, *William Godwin as Novelist* (London: Athlone, 1981), highlights religious dimensions of the novels; Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel: 1780–1805* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), carefully draws out their historical and political dimensions; Marilyn Butler, "Godwin, Burke, and *Caleb Williams*," *Essays in Criticism* 32 (1982): 237–57, focuses specifically on Godwin's reaction to Burke.

³ The terms "tendency" and "moral" are Godwin's own, set out in an essay in *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature* (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1797); hereafter abbreviated *E*. In "Of Choice in Reading," Godwin defines "moral" as "that ethical sentence to the illustration of which the work may most aptly be applied," in other words, some clear and explicit message. Such morals are interpretively subordinate to "tendency," defined as "the actual effect it is calculated to produced upon the reader, and [which] cannot be completely ascertained but by experiment" (136–38). As used by Godwin, tendency refers not to something an author can consciously control, but instead to the influence a work has over time in altering its readers' powers of understanding or dispositions of heart. McCracken's essay (note 1) provides a good overview of the terms, which are brilliantly deployed in Tilottama Rajan's "Wollstonecraft and Godwin: Reading the Secrets of the Political Novel," *Studies in Romanticism* 27 (1988): 221–51. Rajan's essay is particularly valuable because of the rigorous way that it locates Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's novels generally against the intellectual shift from Enlightenment to Romantic modes of interpretation and more particularly in terms of emergent hermeneutic theories.

⁴ Most commentators in the last fifteen years have, in fact, focused in one way or another on the interpretive ambiguity of the text, although their readings diverge widely according to where they locate the source and significance of this ambiguity. The indeterminacy of motivation and the complexities of Caleb's identification with Falkland are central to

Michael DePorte's "The Consolations of Fiction: Mystery in *Caleb Williams*," *Papers in Language and Literature* 20 (1984): 154–64, and Robert Uphaus's fine close reading, "Caleb Williams: Godwin's Epoch of Mind," *Studies in the Novel* 9 (1977): 279–96. The epistemological ambiguities of Caleb's avowed aim of knowing the truth predominate in Andrew Scheiber's "Falkland's Story: *Caleb Williams*'s Other Voice," *Studies in the Novel* 17 (1985): 255–65, and Donald Wehrs's "Rhetoric, History, Rebellion: *Caleb Williams* and the Subversion of Eighteenth-Century Fiction," *Studies in English Literature* 28 (1988): 497–511. The role of writing in undermining Godwin's conversational model of truth is highlighted by Karl Simm's deconstructive reading, "Caleb Williams' Godwin: Things as They Are Written," *Studies in Romanticism* 26 (1987): 343–63, and Leland Warren's "Caleb Williams and the Fall into Writing," *Mosaic* 20 (1987): 57–69. These readings all reflect a common reaction against the tendency of earlier interpretations—such as those by McCracken, Mitzi Myers and Eric Rothstein—to see Godwin advocating a sentimental humanism in this novel and to take Caleb's own interpretation of his life in the closing pages as indicative of Godwin's narrative aims. See Mitzi Myers, "Godwin's Changing Conception of *Caleb Williams*," *Studies in English Literature* 12 (1972): 591–628, especially 624–28; McCracken's introduction to his edition ([note 1], xv–xx); Eric Rothstein, *Systems of Order and Enquiry in Later Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975), especially 238–39.

⁵ William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, ed. F. E. L. Priestley, 3 vols. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1946), 1:125. Except where indicated, quotations from this text refer to the third edition of 1798, cited parenthetically and abbreviated *PJ*. Priestley himself is clear about the "fundamentally ethical nature of Godwin's purpose" (*PJ*, 3:5). Both St. Clair ([note 2], 75) and Marshall ([note 2], 103) provide useful discussions of the meaning given by Godwin to "justice." Don Locke (note 2) gives an exceptionally clear and thorough analysis of Godwin's revisions of *Political Justice*, noting how the second edition emphasizes the moral dimension of Godwin's argument on perfectibility (93). Mark Philp's fine study, *Godwin's Political Justice* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986), stresses the priority of perfectionist ideas over utilitarian ones in Godwin's thinking, a perspective that would align Godwin in interesting ways with contemporary German reflections about *Bildung*.

⁶ Passages like this one strongly echo the arguments of Kant's *Foundation to a Metaphysics of Morals*, although it does not seem that Godwin had any extensive acquaintance with Kant's work.

⁷ Godwin's image anticipates certain features of contemporary liberal theory, performing a role similar to John Rawls's "veil of ignorance," for instance, in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971).

⁸ Godwin's argument for how our actions cannot but be done according to our reason are actually quite compelling. See book 1, chaps. 4 and 5.

⁹ The profound effects of their relationship can be traced in Godwin's own *Memoirs of the Author of The Rights of Woman* and is especially evident in Godwin's portrayal of Marguerite and ongoing debate with Rousseau (whose works Wollstonecraft persuaded him to read more sympathetically) in Godwin's second novel, *St. Leon*. The discussions by Marshall (note 2), Locke (note 2) and St. Clair (note 2), as well as their analyses of the Wollstonecraft-Godwin correspondence, underscore the intellectual impact of Wollstonecraft on Godwin's thinking.

¹⁰ Myers (note 4), 594. For Myers, the basic moral pattern here is redemptive. Though I disagree with Myers's interpretation of how politics and ethics intersect in the novel, in particular with her emphasis on personal agency and her reading of the ending as a triumph of moral self-recognition, her article provides a coherent and compelling statement of that position.

¹¹ Critics have often complained, however, that the political allegory becomes obscure because the political and historical backdrop lacks real specificity. See A. D. Harvey, "The Nightmare of *Caleb Williams*," *Essays in Criticism* 26 (1976): 236–49.

¹² In her readings of *Caleb Williams* and Wollstonecraft's *Maria*, Rajan (note 3) describes with great precision how different hermeneutic models create different roles for a reader to play in creating narrative truths. Novels like *Maria* (or *Caleb Williams*, with its original ending) rely on a rhetorical hermeneutic that expects the reader to simply reverse the terms of the text and to see that revolutionizing the social and political conditions described would allow one to rewrite the tragic ending. "We are invited to practice a negative reading that unfolds a meaning shadowed in the text but not yet contained in it as either manifest or latent content" (230). "But the revolution effected is entirely abstract by virtue of being wholly dependent on a future reader" (242). In contrast, *Caleb Williams* as revised moves towards a divinatory hermeneutics, setting out "a 'romantic' ideology of truth and love in which opposites are reconciled through the dialectic of experience, and in which evil is simply error" (245). In its self-consciousness about the act of interpretation, however, Rajan sees *Caleb Williams* already moving towards a historical hermeneutics that seeks to change political conditions as well as personal values, a reading that seems to me to underplay the limitations and internal contradictions of Caleb's role as surrogate for the reader.

¹³ McCracken, "Godwin's *Caleb Williams*: A Fictional Rebuttal of Burke," *Studies in Burke and His Time* 11 (1970): 1442–1452. Rajan (note 3) sees this novel as still locked in the myth of a personalized, "divinatory" hermeneutic, with *St. Leon* first realizing Godwin's move towards a historical hermeneutic (245–51).

¹⁴ McCracken, *Caleb Williams* (note 1), xviii.

¹⁵ Uphaus (note 4), 291.

¹⁶ Rothstein (note 4) discusses the pervasive repetitions in *Caleb Williams*, as does George Sherburn in "Godwin's Later Novels," *Studies in Romanticism* 1 (1962): 80–82. In his careful reading of *Caleb Williams*, Uphaus provides an extensive catalogue of these repetitions, as well as insightful comments on how they shape the overall meaning of the text.

¹⁷ The text's most telling symbol may be Falkland's agent, Gines, who passes easily between his roles as violator and enforcer of the laws (259), another fact that Caleb notes without really comprehending.

¹⁸ DePorte (note 4), though he does not pursue the point, aptly notes that Falkland is changed not by the revelation of truth, but by seeing that Caleb has continued to admire him, a curious intrusion of personal vanity into political justice (162).

¹⁹ Myers (note 4), 602–3.

²⁰ Tysdahl (note 2), 40.

²¹ With his usual sensitivity for historical context, Kelly (note 2) relates Godwin's concern with questions of truth to political conditions in England in 1793 (189–90). Simms (note 4) gives a poststructural twist to the absence of referents that might ground truth in the text (358–63). Kenneth Graham's *The Politics of Narrative: Ideology and Social Change in William Godwin's Caleb Williams* (New York: AMS Press, 1990) provides an interesting discussion of how Gines's broadsheet description of Caleb creates an anti-narrative within the text itself (70). One effect of Caleb's loss of confidence is to distance him more effectively from Collins, who insists on our need for moral absolutes regardless of their ultimate truth (310), and from Laura, a figure added in the third edition of the novel who substitutes in a certain sense for the Caleb of the first ending (297).

²² Godwin's comments on confidence in *Political Justice* give the term a strongly negative flavor. "Confidence is in all cases the offspring of ignorance" (*PJ*, 2:237) he asserts, finding it a poor substitute in most cases for personal judgment. "Man is the ornament of the

universe, only in proportion as he consults his judgment. . . . But, where I make the voluntary surrender of my understanding and commit my conscience to another man's keeping, the consequence is clear. I then become the most mischievous and pernicious of animals. I annihilate my individuality as a man" (*PJ*, 1:232). Hence reverence even to our superiors in wisdom is strictly qualified (*PJ*, 1:234). Caleb's reverence for Falkland seems all the more excessive by this account, since he has little ethical basis for his reestimation of his master.

²³ Uphaus (note 4), 284.

²⁴ Uphaus, 285.

²⁵ William Godwin, *Fleetwood: or, the New Man of Feeling* (London: Richard Bentley, 1832), vii–viii.

²⁶ McCracken, "Godwin's Literary Theory" (note 1), 128.

²⁷ Godwin, *Fleetwood* (note 25), viii.