

George Woodcock,

THINGS AS THEY MIGHT BE: THINGS AS THEY ARE

Notes on the novels of William Godwin.

Where William Godwin retains any celebrity today, it is as the author of *Political Justice*, first of the great anarchist treatises, and as the maligned father-in-law of Shelley. Except for *Caleb Williams*, only students of Romantic literature know even the titles of his novels, and few have read them. Yet in his day the liberal critics seriously represented Godwin as equal to Scott; the poets—Shelley and Keats, Coleridge and Byron—thought him a man of exuberant fancy, and Hazlitt and Lytton venerated him.

With the possible exception of *Caleb Williams*, Godwin's novels have certainly grown less readable over the generations; this is largely a matter of the texture of his prose, which is somewhat too Roman and marmoreal for the later twentieth century. Yet Godwin was a great fictional innovator, and as soon as we grasp this aspect of his work, it immediately becomes more significant. He was the first British writer of any consequence to use fiction as a vehicle of socio-political criticism, conceiving his earliest novel, *Caleb Williams*, as a popularization of some of the central ideas of *Political Justice*. Yet far from being a mere fictional propagandist, Godwin also anticipated in *Caleb Williams* not only the metaphysical thriller of our own age, but also the detective story in its strictest definition. Finally, in *St. Leon* especially, he wrote in the Gothic manner with considerable originality and influence.

Godwin's career as a fiction writer anticipated his meteoric rise and decline as a political prophet, for in a resumé of his early life he tells of a brief early period when he produced hack romances: 'In the latter end of 1783 I wrote in ten days a novel entitled *Damon and Delia*, for which Hookham gave me five guineas, and a novel in three weeks called *Italian Letters*, purchased by Robinson for twenty guineas, and in the

first four months of 1784 a novel called *Imogen, a Pastoral Romance*, for which Lane gave me ten pounds.'

Damon and Delia has vanished so completely that no copy has been found during the present century; when I wrote my biography of Godwin nearly 30 years ago this was the case with the other two early novels as well, but since then copies of both *Imogen, a Pastoral Romance: from the Ancient British and Italian Letters: Or, the History of the Count de St. Julian* have come to light. The remark with which the critic in *The Monthly Review* greeted *Damon and Delia* in 1784 might be applied to the two rediscovered novels as well: "The author attempts to be witty and pathetic, but his wit is insipid and his pathos is dull." They are didactic moral tales written to a pattern for the sake of a fee, and their sole importance to us now is the evidence they provide that Godwin had not only an interest in fiction, but also a certain practice in the craft before he embarked in 1793, almost a decade later, on the first novel he published under his own name—*Caleb Williams*.

Caleb Williams was no less didactic in intent than its anonymous predecessors. Having written and published *Political Justice*, Godwin was haunted by the problem of bringing its lofty teachings down to the actuality of contemporary life, of making them real to the ordinary man so that he could see how they might apply to his own condition: "The wise and virtuous man ought to see things as they are, and judge of the actual constitution of his country with the same impartiality as if he had simply read of it in the remotest page of history."

It was out of this intent that, the artist having to a great extent usurped the province claimed by the teacher, Godwin produced *Caleb Williams*, this commonly used title being the abbreviated sub-title of the original: *Things as They are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams*. But what had been intended as a calm and detached object lesson emerged as a curiously passionate tale of pursuit and persecution, in which the sense of tension is actually heightened by the contrast between the Augustan dignity of the prose and the violent actions and tortured thoughts it presents.

The source of the tension can undoubtedly be found in the historical circumstances in which *Caleb Williams* was written. Godwin had published *Political Justice* the previous year with the knowledge that

Tom Paine was a fugitive, having been sentenced to death in 1792 for writing *The Rights of Man*. A well-known anecdote related how Godwin was saved the possibility of a similar trial only through Pitt's remarking at a Cabinet meeting that a work which—like *Political Justice*—cost three guineas would hardly have a wide circulation among the working classes. While Godwin was actually writing *Caleb Williams*, the leaders of the London Corresponding Society, including his close friend Thomas Holcroft, were on trial for treason, and their acquittal in 1794 is generally thought to have been due largely to the timely publication in the *Morning Chronicle* of Godwin's devastating analysis of the prosecution's case, entitled *Cursory Strictures on Lord Justice Eyre's Charge to the Grand Jury*. The restless spirit of these times entered into *Caleb Williams* and elevated it from a cautionary tale into a genuine and almost a great novel.

Even on the thematic level, Godwin broadened in *Caleb Williams* the view he had taken in *Political Justice*, which dealt with the effect of what he called 'positive institutions'—or governmental structures and their like—on the life of the individual. He became concerned in the novel with the penetrative psychological effect of authoritarian attitudes as distinct from institutions, and how in unsuspected ways they warped men's lives. This he made clear in the preface to the novel:

It is now known to philosophers that the spirit and character of the government intrudes itself into every rank of society. But this is a truth highly worthy to be communicated to persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach. Accordingly, it was proposed in the invention of the following work to comprehend, as far as the progressive nature of a single story would allow, a general review of the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism, by which man becomes the destroyer.

How man—organized in societies—becomes the destroyer is indeed a recurrent theme of Godwin's novels; they deal always in some way with the crushing of the individual by social and moral forces, which is a recognizable variant of the general Gothic theme of the struggle of a bewildered victim against powers which are supremely elusive and hard to combat because of their unamenability to reason. In Godwin's novels, the hero is always victim, often of physical coercion and invariably of social convention. He is man frustrated by force and prejudice; his fate personifies that of humanity while it persists in living without the full use of reason.

The primacy of this theme in *Caleb Williams* is shown clearly in Godwin's own account of the making of the book. He maintains that it was the general idea of a pursuit maintained with violent action that first occurred to him, and he describes this idea in terms which clearly relate *Caleb Williams* to the modern thriller novel: "The fugitive in perpetual apprehension of being overwhelmed with the worst calamities, and the pursuer, by his ingenuity and resources, keeping his victim in a state of the most fearful alarm." Having established this theme, he worked out his plot, inventing a reason for the pursuit, and drawing the characters of hunter and hunted to fit. The scheme that emerged is simply formed, and the power of the book, the sense of unrelenting peril, is built up mainly in the detail with which Godwin depicts the injustices he sees as inherent in human societies.

Falkland, a landowner of great power and wealth, murders his neighbour, and allows two innocent men to go to the gallows because he cannot bear the shame of death by hanging. The murderer is a dual personality, a forerunner of Dr. Jekyll-and-Mr. Hyde, for he is not lacking in qualities of gentleness and generosity that endear him to most of those with whom he associates, and it is with consternation that his devoted secretary, Caleb Williams, discovers in an old iron chest the evidence of his master's guilt. He is indiscreet enough to reveal his knowledge to Falkland, who immediately threatens to accuse him of capital crimes if he reveals what he has discovered. Williams escapes, and, after many adventures, in which he is pursued by the law and by an even more insidious moral and psychological persecution, he is driven to expose his master, who finally confesses and praises the rectitude of his accuser. But here there is an interesting, Kafka-like inversion, for by confession, Falkland sheds the burden of guilt he has borne so long, and Caleb assumes it, overwhelmed with remorse at having encompassed the downfall of a man who—culpable of a single great crime—is also capable of great nobility: a man, moreover, whose crimes were due to his having himself been the victim of a false code of honour.

In writing a novel that combined moral complexity with a great deal of suspenseful excitement, Godwin did not neglect his polemical intent. All the principal ideas of *Political Justice* reappear; in addition Godwin denounces such topical injustices as the destruction of the English

peasantry through enclosure, and the evil prison system from which his radical friends had—in that year of 1794—been suffering. It is from this persistent sense of the need to be didactic that the main faults of the novel emerge: Its improbabilities of action, its crudities of characterization, its often heavily rhetorical style and manner. Yet though the first volume limps slowly through an excessively elaborate setting created to house the main action, which occurs later, the crescendo of interest does rise during the second and third volumes, and one is left in the end impressed by Godwin's gloomy vision of the injustice of man to man. Comparing the conclusion of the novel with that of *Political Justice*, one realizes that Godwin's imagination led him—as H. G. Wells' imagination later did—to conclusions far less optimistic than those fabricated by his reason.

Those who lived through the age which Godwin obliquely portrayed in *Caleb Williams* found the book moving and memorable; writing of it thirty years after its first appearance, Hazlitt doubted whether anyone who read it through "could possibly forget it, or speak of it after any length of time but with an impression as if the events and feelings had been personal to himself." In a later generation, H. N. Brailsford noted that *Caleb Williams* played the same conscience-stirring role in its own day as Hugo's *Les Misérables* and Tolstoy's *Resurrection* did in their own times and places; it is certainly impossible to find any work in prose fiction—though there are a number in verse—that so faithfully projects the mood of revolutionary romanticism in England for a whole generation after the French Revolution. But there was something more to *Caleb Williams* than the expression of one facet of the thought of an age; in a lesser way Godwin has won Stendhal's lottery—to be read in a hundred years—and modern critic-novelists like Walter Allen and Angus Wilson and Roy Fuller have found in his most important novel an underlying symbolic structure relating to man's confrontation of the universe that makes it timely in the context of the metaphysical preoccupations which have dominated so many novelists since Proust and Conrad.

By the time he published his second novel *St. Leon* in 1799, Godwin had gone through experiences that profoundly changed his outlook without involving him in the political apostasy with which so many of his contemporaries and even of his former admirers, responded to the

rising tide of political reaction. That reaction made him, indeed, one of its victims, for he was subjected to such a cumulation of calumnies in the popular press that his fame declined drastically and his income with it. More important to him in a personal way had been his liaison and subsequent marriage with Mary Wollstonecraft, for which, as Coleridge said, he was 'in heart and manner...all the better.' That relationship, and the grief he felt over Mary's death in childbirth, led him to conclude that in *Political Justice* he had laid too much stress on the reason and too little on the feelings. "The voluntary actions of men", he said in the plan of a work on *First Principles of Morals* which he proposed to write, "are under the direction of their feelings: nothing could have a tendency to produce this species of action, except so far as it is connected with ideas of mature pleasure or pain to ourselves or others."

In the political climate of 1799 Godwin found no encouragement to write a book that would be so obviously a pendant to *Political Justice*, his *First Principles of Morals* remains no more than a title and a synopsis, and for many years he had—like the great Russian writers of the Tsarist era—to communicate his moral and political ideas semi-esoterically through the novels that succeeded *Caleb Williams*; any more direct way of expressing them would have failed to find publication and might well have brought personal misfortune. Still, he strove 'to do my part to free the human mind from slavery', as he once put it, and the least of his works—even when exhaustion and anxiety sapped his energy and self-confidence—was redeemed by a steadfast attempt to reveal the truth as he saw it.

St. Leon bears all the traces of Godwin's experiences during the years of praise and blame since the publication of *Political Justice*. Yet it also sustains the fundamental Godwinian tenets, and plays its own variation on the theme of the pursued victim. It is the most Gothic in outward semblance of the novels, narrating the sufferings of an alchemist who attains the means to boundless wealth and eternal youth. These gifts confer an almost unlimited power of good and evil, but they also incur the universal enmity of the normal world and the destruction of domestic peace, until *St. Leon* is left alone and hunted in his golden immortality. In developing this fantastic plot, Godwin remarked that he "mixed human feelings and passions with incredible situations" with the intent of rendering them "impressive and interesting".

The essential framework is again the pursuit, and, like *Caleb Williams*, the novel builds to a crescendo, with its principal action occurring in its latter part. The first volume starts slowly in a description of the circumstances preceding St. Leon's disaster, and here the theme of domestic happiness, of which Godwin makes much in his preface, is developed with an enthusiasm whose origin becomes clear when we realize that Marguerite, St. Leon's wife, is the first of a series of fictional portraits of Mary Wollstonecraft. Yet after the early chapters, domestic happiness becomes a minor theme, overshadowed by the drama of pursuit and persecution that is unfolded with an intensity approaching that of a Greek tragedy of guilt.

The alchemical symbolism outlines the true major theme of *St. Leon*. Like many devotees of reason, Godwin felt strongly the attraction of the irrational; it was this attraction that led him into Gothic fiction and also into an abiding interest in occultism which he later demonstrated by writing a history of the magic arts entitled *The Lives of the Necromancers* (1834). It is therefore unlikely that he was ignorant of the true significance of gold in the hermetic philosophy. Gold is wisdom and the power it confers; the philosopher's stone is the discipline by which wisdom is attained. In this light *St. Leon* conveys the teaching that a man who gains power through wisdom and seeks to use it for the general good must expect to forego the comforts of ordinary life, the benefits of domestic affection, even the support of friendship. Every hand will be against him, and men will misunderstand and hate the good he seeks to bestow on them.

Here there is a clear parallel with *Caleb Williams*, for as St. Leon discovers to his detriment the secret of alchemical gold, so Caleb discovers to his detriment the secret contained in the mysterious iron chest. The alchemical secret and the iron chest are both variants of Pandora's box, but in *St. Leon* the situation is transformed by the emphasis on the ingratitude of men for the benefits they receive. St. Leon's guilt lies not in doing evil but in doing good. This shift of emphasis is linked undoubtedly to Godwin's own experience as a result of telling men how they can become happy and free.

St. Leon is less swift in action than *Caleb Williams*, less relentless in its cumulation of emotion, less concrete and tangible in its portrayal of ambiguous evil, and, though at times there is an exuberance to the

writing unparalleled elsewhere in Godwin's books, the style is uneven and often heavy. Nevertheless, it was regarded in its time as a fine novel; Byron and Keats admired it, and Shelley paid it the compliment of imitation when he wrote his own vastly inferior novel, *St. Irvyne*; the elaborate scenes in the dungeons of the Inquisition were imitated in later Gothic novels—in particular by Maturin in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, and perhaps, remotely and indirectly, by Dostoevsky when he dipped into the Gothic tradition to create the legend of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is these echoes and correspondences that reward those who are patient enough to master the tedious beginning of *St. Leon* and to enter the nihilistic world of rationality dislocated that is released by St. Leon's supernatural powers.

In *Fleetwood, or the New Man of Feeling*, which appeared in 1805, Godwin's imaginative powers show a marked weakening. In the interval since the publication of *St. Leon* he had committed the folly of his second marriage to Mary Jane Clairmont, the lady with the green spectacles whom Charles Lamb detested. A lapse in arithmetical calculation had led Godwin to suppose that marriage might redeem his economic instability, caused by the failing market for his books, but union with Mary Jane, who brought two children and soon bore a third, merely meant seven mouths to feed (including Fanny Imlay, Mary Wollstonecraft's first child) rather than three. In spite of his great industry and the establishment of a publishing house—the Juvenile Library—for which he wrote pseudonymous children's books, Godwin found it impossible to make a living, and so he began—sustained by his arguments in *Political Justice* that the means of life belong justly to those who most need them—that disastrous career of borrowing which was to last for three decades and to foster great condemnation on the part of respectable Victorian critics.

Fleetwood, written in haste to replenish his empty purse and save the Juvenile Library from bankruptcy, bears the traces of anxiety and fatigue, yet the old themes reappear with no sign that Godwin's passion for social justice has diminished; it still shares with Mary's memory the dominion over his imagination. Godwin claimed that, in contrast to *St. Leon*, *Fleetwood* was made out of "common and ordinary adventures". In fact, the combination of a Calvinist denunciation of libertinage and a libertarian condemnation of jealousy creates an artificial tension which is heightened by the rather rhetorical prose. And, far from his life being

“common and ordinary”, Fleetwood is one of the tiny minority of eighteenth-century Englishmen who could attend a university and enter parliament (both of which institutions Godwin treats with expected asperity); he even plays a part in the literary world of London, and here Godwin settles some old scores with the agile wits of contemporary salons who had defeated him in wordy battle—the Porsons and the Home Tookes—by portraying them with a touch of satirical venom unusual in his writings.

Whether because of its patent inferiority, or because of the offense it gave to the mandarins of letters, *Fleetwood* earned little praise even from Godwin’s friends, and it was twelve years before, in 1817, he gathered the courage to write and publish his fourth novel, *Mandeville*. His life had not in the meantime improved. He had precariously avoided the debtor’s prison, but it was nine years since he had published anything under his own name, his insolvency had become unredeemable, and Shelley had entered his domestic life like a destroying imp. An attitude of half-desperate resignation characterized the preface with which he brought his first work for almost a decade before his contemporaries: “I am not aware that, in my capacity as an author, I owe any considerable thanks to the kindness of my contemporaries; yet I part from them without the slightest tinge of ill-humour.”

Mandeville is a novel of extraordinary pessimism, permeated from beginning to end with a misanthropic gloom whose consistency of texture is alone impressive. Its aim, as Godwin stated it, was “to show how the concurrence of a variety of causes operate to form a character,” but this psychological intent is somewhat marred in the performance by the fact that however varied the causes may be in other respects, they are unvaried in their negativeness. Misfortunes shower on the hero of this “Tale of the Seventeenth Century in England”, as the sub-title describes it. A witness to his parents’ slaughter at the age of three, he is brought up joylessly by a recluse uncle, and later, when he takes up the Cavalier cause during the Civil War, he is unjustly accused of being a spy for the opposing side and becomes a moral outcast because he cannot prove his innocence. These experiences make him an enemy of mankind in general and of all the individual human beings he encounters, except for his beautiful and virtuous sister, Henrietta. In particular he detests Clifford, a young man whose capabilities give him the advantage over Mandeville in all the circumstances that draw them

together, and the bitterest blow of all comes when Clifford gains Henrietta's love and deprives the misanthrope of his last consolation, leaving him with only his hatred to protect him from the world he fears.

One of the curious features of *Mandeville* is its divided projection of the author's attitudes, for while Mandeville shows a deepened form of Godwin's personal pessimism at this time, it is Henrietta, yet another recognizable personification of Mary Wollstonecraft, who, in trying to convert her brother from his misanthropy, advances the ideas of Godwin's more confident days by reviving the doctrines of necessity and universal benevolence, of the supremacy of reason and the foundation of tyranny in opinion, that infused *Political Justice*. It is as if Godwin were anxious to distinguish his ideals and his apprehensions, his hopes for mankind and his sense of hopelessness regarding his own condition. Of the two, it is the pessimism that is the more convincing and that gives *Mandeville* a unity and a power none other of Godwin's novels after *St. Leon* shares.

One of the more interesting questions regarding *Mandeville* is a biographical one: the speculation on the extent to which it was shaped by Godwin's relations with Shelley. It has often been suggested that Mandeville is a fictionalized Shelley; many of his contemporaries regarded the poet as a misanthropic and rather sardonic figure. But Godwin, despite their disagreement, must have known better, and if Shelley appears at all in *Mandeville* it is surely in the guise of Clifford, the brilliant young man who elopes with Mandeville's sister as Shelley did with Godwin's daughter.

Shelley liked *Mandeville*, and as he also liked Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*, in which he undoubtedly figured, one may assume that he recognized himself in Clifford and his vanity was touched. Hazlitt, a more impartial judge, treated *Mandeville*, as a poor novel by a good writer, and Peacock blandly mocked it as *Devilman* in his fictional rendering of the Shelley circle. It marked the beginning of Godwin's return to the literary world, the end of his long ostracism (it is significant that it appeared in 1817, two years after Waterloo had temporarily laid the spectre of revolutionism), and the onset of a period of intense literary activity that ended only with his death in 1836. In the final years of his life, and largely under the stimulus of association with his last disciple, Bulwer Lytton, he wrote his final novels,

Cloudesley (1830) and *Deloraine* (1833).

There was little evident diminution in Godwin's rational powers in his last decade. The long four-volume *History of the Commonwealth*, which he completed when he was over seventy, remained for a generation the best work on its subject, and in *Thoughts on Man*, the volume of essays published in his seventy-fifth year, Godwin made some interesting modifications of the theories advanced in *Political Justice*. But his inventive powers did decline, and *Cloudesley* and *Deloraine* are interesting mainly because they demonstrate the consistency of his basic themes, and especially that of man as fugitive. In both novels a crime is central to the action, but it is the psychological element—the pursuit within the mind—that is most important. Remorse, which figures dramatically at the end of *Caleb Williams*, is a powerful element from the start in these final novels, and yet in each of them—in contrast to *Mandeville*—there is a somewhat unconvincing progression out of the darkness of guilt into the light of reconciliation.

Cloudesley, like *Caleb Williams*, is a confidential servant, persuaded by his dead master's brother to assist in robbing the infant heir of his earldom and his property; his amenability to this suggestion is increased by bitterness at having been imprisoned for a crime of which he was morally innocent. But, the action of the novel suggests, we are not shaped irrevocably even by our worst experiences; other influences can counteract them, and the goodness of the child he has wronged eventually works its magic on *Cloudesley*'s heart, so that he is filled with a sense of guilt which in the end he communicates to his fellow conspirator, and the rightful heir is reinstated—an odd conclusion to a novel by the great proto-anarchist who once attacked so forthrightly the evils of "accumulated property".

Cloudesley is unconvincing psychologically as well as in terms of plausible action, and probably the worst crafted of all Godwin's books. *Deloraine* is better constructed, but it invites a damaging comparison, since it returns to a situation in some ways resembling that of *Caleb Williams*. *Deloraine*, like *Falkland* in the earlier novel, is a gentleman of hitherto unblemished life who kills a man in passion. Now the story is told from the murderer's point of view; he is the victim hero, pursued by the dead man's closest friend, a misanthrope named *Travers*, who is eventually led to relent by the persuasions of *Deloraine*'s beautiful daughter. The story is told with little of the power that propels the

pursuit in *Caleb Williams*, and its final interest is probably biographical, for the most striking character is Emilia, who was Deloraine's first wife, dead long before the events that occur within the novel. She, again, assumes the qualities of Mary Wollstonecraft.

When Mary died, Godwin said, "This light was lent to me for a very short period, and is now extinguished forever," yet the reflections of that light seemed to shine about him to the very day of his death. And after reading his novels, one feels that it was only in this one person, whose benign shadow falls over so many of them, that he encountered a being really approximating to his inner vision of man as he might be.

But essentially, despite their artificialities of manner and their implausibilities of action, Godwin's novels are concerned with "things as they are", and with men as they are. There is a paragraph in the book of essays on organized religion—*The Genius of Christianity Unveiled*¹—which was unpublished at his death that expresses more concisely and clearly than any of his critics has done the difference between man as conceived in *Political Justice* and man as observed in the whole series of novels from *Caleb Williams* to *Deloraine*. After a long discussion of the authoritarian and repressive nature of all institutional religions, Godwin concludes:

We know what we are: we know not what we might have been. But surely we should have been greater than we are but for this disadvantage. It is as if we took some minute poison with everything that was intended to nourish us. It is, we will suppose, of so mitigated a quality as never to have had the power to kill. But it may nevertheless stunt our growth, infuse a palsy into every one of our articulations, and insensibly change us from the giants of the mind which we might have been into a people of dwarfs.

Political Justice postulates the possibility of giants existing; the novels note the existence of dwarfs as actual reality. And it is symptomatic of the difference between imaginative and rational modes of apprehension which we have already observed, that nowhere in his novels does Godwin in fact describe the utopian world to which his reasonings as a political philosopher would seem to lead. At best, and rarely, a character in one of his novels reaches an accommodation with things as they are, in what Godwin leaves us no doubt is far from being the best of all possible worlds. It is, after all, a world in which the pursuit of the individual either by actual political institutions or by inner impulses nurtured by false social codes is relentless, and the best

of his fiction is that in which—as in *Caleb Williams* and *St. Leon*,—the symbolism of the pursuit is developed in such a way that, overshadowing the relationship between a man and his society which is the overt theme, we can apprehend the greater theme of man's confrontation with a universe whose ultimate impulses baffle all reason, a universe in which the gentle reasonable anarchists imagined in *Political Justice* have no place.

FOOTNOTES

1. Godwin's criticism of organized religion disturbed Mary Shelley so much that she did not publish this book until 37 years after his death, and then under the innocuous title of *Essays Never Before Published!*