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*Günter Ahrends
Hans-Jürgen Diller
(eds.)*

English Romantic Prose

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Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and the Fiction of 'Things as They Are'

I

In 1794, only a year after the voluminous philosophical treatise *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, William Godwin brought out his novel *Things as They Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams*, which proved to be an immediate success. Yet some 50 years later, Thomas de Quincey, in his "Notes on Gilfillan's Literary Portraits", published in *Tait's Magazine* in 1845/46, admits that he is quite at a loss to understand why many, even "men of talent", "have raised [Godwin's] *Caleb Williams* to a station in the first rank of novels": "[I] can see in it no merit of any kind." (328/329). And, as if to reassure himself of his verdict, he repeats several times that his is by no means a minority position, "They who vote against it are in a large majority", and, as he deals the final blow, "The Germans, whose literature offers a free port to all eccentricities of the earth, have never welcomed *Caleb Williams*." (332).

William Hazlitt, of course, was one of those who, in contrast to de Quincey, thought very highly of Godwin's novel. In his well-known essay on Godwin in *The Spirit of the Age*, Hazlitt holds that "*Caleb Williams* and [its follow-up] *St. Leon* are two of the most splendid and impressive works of the imagination that have appeared in our times." (31). "Perhaps the art", says Hazlitt, "in which [the two protagonists, *Caleb Williams* and his master, Falkland,] are contrived to relieve and set off each other, has never been surpassed in any work of fiction, with the exception of the immortal satire of Cervantes." (31/32). High praise indeed, but more was yet to come, because Hazlitt, enthusiastically ignoring the possibility of a de Quincey, continued: "We conceive no one ever began *Caleb Williams* that

did not read it through; no one that ever read it 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." (32).

Today, it seems, opinion on *Caleb Williams* is not so divided. Apparently, almost everybody shares Marilyn Butler's assessment that "for all its crudities, *Caleb Williams* remains easily the most impressive English novel of the 1790s"¹ - a double-edged compliment, no doubt, if one considers the notorious barrenness of the genre in that decade. However, the most remarkable thing about the critical discussion of *Caleb Williams*, now that the controversy about its literary merits has subsided, is, I think, that the novel is seldom looked at for its own sake; i.e., there is a steady, if not overwhelming outpour of articles on *Caleb Williams* and of monographs on William Godwin and the novel of the time in general, but often it only looks as if the critics had focussed their interest on *Caleb Williams* as such, whereas in reality they have turned their squinting eyes to far other objects. In other words, as *Caleb Williams* is seen as the first English detective novel, or as a typical Gothic tale of flight and pursuit, or as one of the first fictional studies of abnormal psychology, or as a representative example of the English Jacobin novel - approaches for which, in each case, there are very good reasons - , the book is, as it were, treated tangentially as a point of reference for the critical reconstruction of lines of development, a point of reference which, however, does not command much interest *for itself*. Just as to many William Godwin is now, as someone caustically observed, primarily the husband to *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, father to *Frankenstein* and father-in-law to *Prometheus Unbound* , so *Caleb Williams* is often not read or critically examined in its own right, but only as a curious instance of something else a literary oddity that has to be recorded, for reasons of comprehensiveness, in quite a number of different contexts.

As I said, there are very good reasons for reading *Caleb Williams* "in context" - and a particularly promising context is, evidently, its relation to *Political Justice*. But what I propose to do here - instead of treating the novel derivationally as a mere fictional illustration of the foregoing philosophical work - is to reverse the order of investigation, take a closer look at the *novel* - especially at its two

¹ Butler, 1975, p. 75.

endings - and ask in how far its striking reversals and its final bifurcation can illuminate Godwin's political philosophy.

It was, of course, William Godwin himself who presented *Caleb Williams* as the fictional analogue to *Political Justice*. In his preface to the novel - written on the 12th of May, 1794, the day of Thomas Hardy's arrest on charges of High Treason - Godwin pointed out explicitly the close interrelatedness of treatise and novel, making the latter almost a derivative of the former, designed to reach new quarters of the reading public:

The following narrative is intended to answer a purpose more general and important than immediately appears upon the face of it. The question now afloat in the world respecting THINGS AS THEY ARE, is the most interesting that can be presented to the human mind. While one party pleads for reformation and change, the other extols in the warmest terms the existing constitution in society. (...) What is now presented to the public is no refined and abstract speculation; it is a study and delineation of things passing in the moral world. It is but of late that the inestimable importance of political principles has been adequately apprehended. 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.²

Although this preface was, for the booksellers' fear of political persecution, withdrawn from the first edition of 1794 and only published in the second one of the following year, there can be little doubt that *Caleb Williams* was, even without these guidelines, chiefly received as the novel of the author of *Political Justice*, was indeed accepted as what Godwin believed it to be, namely "a general review of the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism by which man becomes the destroyer of man." (*CW*, 1).

And yet, doubts remain as to whether *Caleb Williams* actually does what Godwin claims it does, i.e. depict realistically and in concrete terms, even if in fiction, 'things as they are', just as they had been analyzed philosophically and in a much more abstract way in *Political Justice*. The question in short is, whether Godwin in his preface did not overstate his case and make too much of the political

² W. Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, ed. with an introduction by D. McCracken, Oxford/New York, 1982, repr. 1986. Further page references preceded by *CW* are to this edition, which contains, in addition to the two prefaces of 1794 and 1795 respectively, the two endings and Godwin's account of the composition of *Caleb Williams* from the preface to the 1832 edition of *Fleetwood*.

dimension of an adventure story. Leslie Stephen, for instance, thought he did. In his *Studies of a Biographer*, he remarks that a reader, “unassisted by the preface would scarcely perceive [the doctrine propounded in it] between the lines” of the following novel. (140). After having given a somewhat biased account of *Caleb Williams*, Sir Leslie concludes, “How about the wickedness of government? The answer must be that it has passed out of sight” (145), and he adds sarcasm to stricture by writing, “The moral, it is true, eludes him. It reminds one of Lowell’s description of an orator who tries in vain to get his subject properly laid down. He makes desperate attempts, wanders off in many directions, and in his last contortion ‘sees his subjick a-nosin’ round arter him agin.’” (149/150). Could it be that *Caleb Williams* is, to borrow a simile from Robert Kiely (3), the literary counterpart of Frankenstein’s monster, a phenomenon not without interest, but particularly grotesque when measured against the intention of its creator? Surprisingly, the main witness against Godwin in this case is - Godwin. For it is he who in his later remarks on *Caleb Williams* in the oft-quoted 1832 preface to *Fleetwood* and in his advertisement to *St. Leon* of 1831, virtually ignores the political and philosophical dimension of the novel - whose title and subtitle he had just reversed³ - by describing it simply as “a book of fictitious adventure” (*CW*, 336).⁴ Its supposed political design is never even mentioned. Instead, Godwin gives a detailed account of how he planned the novel in reverse order - another reversal - , starting with part three as “a series of adventures of flight and pursuit”, then inventing, in part two, a motive for this - “a secret murder, to the investigation of which the innocent victim [Caleb] should be impelled by an unconquerable spirit of curiosity” (*CW*, 33) - , whereas the psychological outfit of the pursuer [Falkland] was to be given in part one, in which he should be invested with a number of excellent virtues which would initially endear the later villain to the reader.

The exclusive emphasis on the flight and pursuit theme here totally eclipses the socio-political criticism of “things as they are”. Given this slanted account - which so much impressed Edgar Allan Poe with its concentration on *effect* and retro-

³ According to Kelly, 1976, p. 180, the change of title did not occur before 1831, but Butler, 1975, p. 59, footnote 1, notes that the novel was from the beginning known as *Caleb Williams*.

⁴ An excerpt from the advertisement to *St. Leon* is quoted in Kegan Paul, 1:116/117.

grade construction that he began his famous essay on *The Philosophy of Composition* with a reference to *Caleb Williams* - , it is hard to conceive how the resultant adventure story could at the same time comply with the author's constant self-exhortation, while composing the novel, "I will write a tale, that shall constitute an epoch in the mind of the reader" (*CW*, 338).

Considering that the novel evidently admits of such divergent readings, is it helpful to explain this fact, as Kenneth W. Graham has done, by maintaining that "in *Caleb Williams* a conflict between Godwin the novelist and Godwin the philosopher seems to have resulted in a work that is woefully bifurcated"? (47).⁵ Or can we attribute the novel's ambiguities and bifurcations to causes other and more cogent than this supposed dichotomy of fiction and philosophy? I believe, as I indicated earlier, that an analysis of the novel's most obvious bifurcation - its two endings - does indeed provide an altogether different answer.

⁵ Bifurcated the novel - "one of the most profoundly ambiguous"; Tysdahl, p. 3 - undoubtedly is, full of binary oppositions which tend to result in striking reversals, two of which I have already mentioned: the reversal of the two titles and the reversal of the process of planning the novel in the process of writing it. To these we can add
(3) the flip-flop story of the preface that was written, then withdrawn, printed a year later, and finally, to all intents, disclaimed in a preface to an altogether different novel;
(4) the reversal of narrative perspective, because Godwin set out to write *Caleb Williams* in the third person, then made it Caleb's first person narrative, only to find after some 7 pages he had to introduce a retrospective account of Falkland's past by another person [Mr. Collins], which takes up the remaining 11 chapters of book one, is rendered by Caleb as if he were Collins and is - a mini-reversal yet again - unspecifically "interspersed with such other information as I [Caleb] was able to collect." (*CW*, p. 106);
(5) the double reversal of pursuer and pursued, for it is Falkland, surprisingly, who after Caleb has found out he is the murderer of Tyrrel , fiendishly chooses to hunt down, torment and provoke - but not destroy! - his still admiring secretary Caleb, whom, one should assume, he had every reason to humour and leave in peace (cf. Storch, p. 191); after all, it is only in the end that Caleb decides to do what he originally strove to avoid - in spite of the incessant persecution - , namely to give up his purely defensive behaviour and reveal his master's crimes - the pursued becomes the pursuer, the framed Caleb the accuser of a real crime: evidently Falkland's malice has worked like a self-fulfilling prophecy; and finally - although a number of additional bifurcations and reversals could be pointed out -
(6) the obvious bifurcation and reversal manifested in the novel's two endings, which the now standard edition of *Caleb Williams* prints in reversed order, i.e. with the "later" ending as the "natural" conclusion of the novel and the "earlier" one in an appendix.

The novel's two endings - the published one and the earlier, unpublished one which was discovered and made known to the public by D. Gilbert Dumas in his excellent article of 1966 - are radically different in content, form and message. I shall first discuss the draft that Godwin did not send to the printer's.

In this manuscript ending of the novel, the originally well-meaning and devoted Caleb Williams is finally compelled by the incessant persecution of his master and tormentor Falkland to give up his purely defensive behaviour and accuse Falkland, in court, of the murder of the brutal and tyrannous Squire Tyrrel, and, we may only conject, because the text puts it in fairly general terms, also of the long line of consecutive crimes and misdeeds such as his acquiescence in the hanging of the innocent Hawkinses, of his repeated lies in two previous legal hearings, and of the innumerable injustices and cruelties Falkland worked on him, Caleb, for having discovered his crime. Falkland, the nobleman, in turn, laments Caleb's ingratitude and defends himself simply by drawing attention to his own unblemished reputation and the fact that Caleb, on the contrary, is a known criminal. The magistrate, as was to be expected after the long record of legal injustice that the novel presents, does not believe Caleb and, as before, refuses to investigate the case any further. We next find Caleb in prison on the verge of madness, still unable to understand why the court preferred Falkland's tale of lies to his own true account. Caleb has to learn that, given this society, "the power of truth is no power at all",⁶ and that therefore injustice and inequality are bound to prevail: "Alas! alas! it too plainly appears in my history that persecution and tyranny can never die!" (*CW*, 332). The final two pages present

⁶ Dumas, p. 586. See also Godwin, *Pol. Justice*, p. 656: "A man properly confident in the force of truth would consider a public libel upon his character as a trivial misfortune. But a criminal trial in a court of justice is inexpressly different. Few men, thus circumstanced, can retain the necessary presence of mind, and freedom from embarrassment. But if they do, it is with a cold and unwilling ear that their tale is heard." etc. (Contained in 1st edition).

us with an even more confused, drugged and possibly deranged Caleb Williams, an idea that Godwin got from his reading of *Clarissa* at the time of composition.⁷ This pessimistic original ending is absolutely in accordance with all that precedes it. After the haunting descriptions of prison life, the demasking of the *systematic* injustice of British jurisprudence, which, as the novel amply illustrates, is "better adapted for a weapon of tyranny in the hands of the rich, than for a shield to protect the humbler part of the community against their usurpations" (*CW*, 73), after the countless instances of misused privilege, aristocratic bullying and wanton despotism - after all this, anything else would have come as a surprise. The very fact that the innocent Caleb has to disguise himself and is perpetually chased by Falkland, his helper Gines and public opinion, whereas the murderer lives unperturbed - except for his pricks of conscience - , is a devastating indictment of "things as they are", just as the disguise of the virtuous Edgar in *King Lear* is a silent reproach to times that are disastrously out of joint. It is not true that social criticism in *Caleb Williams* - for example the famous "Thank God, exclaims the Englishman, we have no Bastille!" passage (*CW*, 181) - is only peripheral to the story. As the prison is presented as the epitome of society -

This is society. This is the object, the distribution of justice, which is the end of human reason. For this sages have toiled, and the midnight oil has been wasted. This! (*CW*, 182) -

so Falkland's power over Caleb is exposed as but one instance of the general oppression that pervades all unequal societies. Falkland's superior social position is not an irrelevancy, it is rather - can anything be more obvious? - the basic prerequisite for the relentless humiliation of Caleb. It is beside the point to argue that Falkland's very idiosyncratic mental and psychological make-up proves Caleb's story to be a highly individual one. The decisive point is that only a hierarchical society can invest Falkland with the power to actually follow his whims and victimize his inferiors :

⁷ Cf. Dumas, p. 578, Kelly, 1976, p. 192.

[Falkland] exhibited, upon a contracted scale indeed, but in which the truth of delineation was faithfully sustained, a copy of what monarchs are, who reckon among the instruments of their power prisons of state (*CW*, 177).⁸

When Caleb refuses to accept the repressive logic that you have to be either tyrant or slave, oppressor or sufferer (*CW*, 156) - "there is no alternative"? - , it becomes apparent that the novel is indeed, in this respect, an illustration of one of *Political Justice's* basic theses (735, unchanged from 1793 edition) that unequal societies prevent human happiness:

Whatever may be the value of the life of man, or rather whatever would be his capability of happiness in a free and equal state of society, the system we are opposing may be considered as arresting, upon the threshold of existence, four fifths of that value and that happiness.

Caleb's offers to leave his master and not betray him can be understood as desperate and doomed attempts to privately break the circle of dominion and subjection which defines society as a whole. It is in this broader sense that Godwin speaks of "the spirit and character of the government [intruding] itself into every rank of society"⁹. When, in the end, Caleb is driven to such desperation that he appeals to a court from which, given his experience, he has little to expect, he enters the ring of established social relations again - and is consequently crushed. The manuscript ending of *Caleb Williams* is therefore, to sum up, the perfect and cogent finale to a novel of social protest which by the melodramatic destiny of one individual evokes a picture of "the corrupt wilderness of human society" as a whole (*CW*, 325). The published ending tells a different tale. As before, Caleb publicly accuses, in powerful oratory, his former master, who is already heavily marked by his guilty conscience and moral depravity - a Dorian Gray with no relieving picture. But this time, the power of truth and discourse is victorious: Falkland breaks down, throws himself into Caleb's arms and confesses his crimes: "I have spent a life of the basest cruelty to cover one act of momentary vice and to protect myself against the prejudices of my species. I stand now completely detected." (*CW*, 324) He dies but three days after this, which, in turn, is the cause

⁸ See Butler, 1982, pp.251, 252: "The relationship between Falkland and Caleb is, then, a political relationship. (...) In general terms, then, *Caleb Williams* is about hierarchy." But see further down for her assessment of *Caleb Williams'* two endings. For a good historical interpretation of the conflicts Tyrrel-Falkland and Falkland-Caleb see Janik, pp. 213-228.

⁹ Cf. Monro, pp. 68/69.

of the severest self-reproaches in Caleb - "I have been his murderer." (*CW*, 325) - while at the same time he elevates Falkland almost to the status of a saint: "A nobler spirit lived not among the sons of men." (*CW*, 325). Caleb, who began "these memoirs with the idea of vindicating my character" (*CW*, 326) now acknowledges that he, too, is not innocent. As his opponent has ceased to exist, his own identity crumbles - "I have now no character I wish to vindicate" (*CW*, 326) - and the former victim is left to ponder the sad fate of his tormentor, whose best intentions and indubitable virtues were thwarted in a corrupt society. Strange reversal!

It is not hard to see that this ending is, on at least three accounts, inconsistent with the bulk of the novel: It is inconsistent with respect to character delineation, because the hardened and monomaniacal Falkland we have come to know is all of a sudden - by mere rhetoric - transformed into a repenting sinner. It is inconsistent with respect to action, because Falkland had repeatedly rejected Caleb's pleas for a truce before and it was definitely not, as is implied in Caleb's self-reproaches which intersperse his accusation, Caleb who hunted Falkland after his detection but, of course, Falkland who would not let go of Caleb. And it is, most significantly, inconsistent with the political philosophy transported by the preceding action, which states that given an unequal and hierarchical society, justice and truth cannot be triumphant, because oppression and the ignorance upon which all government is founded permeate through society in its entirety.

These major inconsistencies are accompanied by a number of minor ones, such as, for instance, Caleb's self-accusation of the death of Falkland three days after the trial, when before, on seeing Falkland for the first time after quite a period, he had remarked that his master looked so bad "he seemed not to have three hours to live." (*CW*, 319). Another example is Caleb's absurd self-incrimination: "I am sure that, if I had opened my heart to Mr. Falkland, if I had told to him privately that tale that I have now been telling, he could not have resisted my reasonable demand." (*CW*, 323). Well, as the attentive reader will recall, Caleb *did*¹⁰ and Falkland responded with unrelenting cruelty.

¹⁰ Cf. Dumas, p. 591. It is strange that McCracken (*CW*, XVIII-XIX) does not remember Caleb's letter to Falkland and his master's reaction (Vol. II, chapters 8ff.).

Keeping in mind these conspicuous inconsistencies, it is difficult to agree with the numerous critics who prefer this second ending, in particular with those who do so, of all reasons, for its narrative cogency! This, for example, is Donald Roemer:

I suggest that whatever might have been Godwin's conscious intention for drastically altering his ending, he was in effect responding imaginatively to the psychological and moral complexity of a proto-Byronic character at first coerced into a schematic resolution for a doctrinal plot (56).

Similarly, Kenneth W. Graham argues that "the peripety that leaves Caleb not vindicated and triumphant but guilty and depressed is not to be explained by the politics of time, but by narrative demands exerted by the change in point of view [from third to first person narrative, which took place very early on in the process of composition]. That change reflects the true emphasis of the narrative which is on character and not on theme or plot." (49). When Graham welcomes this fundamental reversal as "a victory of art over politics and adventure" (49) and is pleased to state, "Opening with vehement appeals to Truth and Justice, the narrative closes on fundamental doubts about the nature of guilt and innocence." (56), we begin to doubt whether the issue at hand is really narrative excellence and not ideological reconciliation. Again, Gary Kelly (1976) holds that Godwin's "new ending was a new conclusion about 'things as they are'" (190), which "raises the novel above the doctrinaire, above questions of the triumph of persecutor or persecuted, to a level which is humane and perhaps even heroic." (197). Cynically one might comment that for him art begins where questions of guilt and suffering are obfuscated. This new message "that there is no such thing as innocence when individuals or societies are at war" (188), seems to greatly appeal to critics, for Don Locke, to cite another example, finds that, although this ending "seems less plausible, more contrived, all too obviously a case of *veritas ex machina*" (75), it is nevertheless "in many ways more satisfying than the first" (74), not the least of which seems to be that *both* Falkland and Caleb are more or less guilty, because "in his own way Williams torments and destroys Falkland as surely as Falkland torments and destroys him." (69) - which again seems to imply that ideological content is more important than plausibility. David McCracken's argument parallels this when he first writes that

The original ending not only shows the disastrous end of the hero through a fascinating inside portrayal of a demented mind; it is also more obviously consistent with the preceding action. (in CW, XIX),

only to conclude, surprisingly, “to my mind the second ending (...) is better Godwin and better prose fiction.” (CW, XX): “The tragic force comes not from the inexorable course of events” - since when is this a *fault* in our cultural hemisphere?! - “but from Caleb’s new understanding of what Falkland’s genius might have been had it not been ‘poisoned’ by society, and of what he himself might have done had he not made his ‘hateful mistake’.” (CW, XX) A similar position, to round this off, is held by Marilyn Butler, who also prefers the second ending, which she sees as

quite as tragic as the first, but for different and profounder reasons. Caleb breaks Falkland, with intense regret sees him carried off to die, and knows that at last he has done what all along he has sworn not to do - played the role of tyrant. The first version is the more tragic at the level of external action, but it hands over responsibility for the denouement to an external agent - the law - and so suffers from the rational but excessively neat and flat determinism of so many novels of the period. (1975, 68).

Unmistakably and contrary to their occasional protestations, what these critics love is exactly this shift from the social and political to what is individual and psychological; for the sake of this shift, they are evidently willing to condone the noted inconsistencies. Practically they are following Kiely’s suggestion “that the greatest fault in Godwin’s fiction is his philosophy” (81) - for the apparent abandonment of which he has to be applauded.

If it is true that, as Gilbert Dumas, one of the very few who set the manuscript ending above the revised version, says, “the second ending adversely affects both the logical dramatic development and the propagandistic intention of the narrative” (582) and thereby “betray[s] Godwin’s proclaimed purpose” (594), it remains a mystery - does it not? - why, within a week’s time in May 1794, Godwin the rationalist and careful planner should have botched what he had been building up systematically in some 15 months - a catastrophe now commonly known as the victory of the novelist over the political philosopher. I proffer a different reading.

There is no reason not to take Godwin's proclaimed purpose at face value: He meant to write a political novel about Britain in the 1790s, he meant it to be a work of propaganda,¹¹ propagating and illustrating in fictional form the main insights of his philosophical enquiry.

The first ending to *Things as They Are*, is, as I said, highly successful as a finale to a novel of social analysis and protest. It informs a vitriolic indictment of "things as they are" and convincingly unmasks the predominant ideology of "whatever is, is right". But in a way, the manuscript ending is self-defeating, or, more precisely: What Godwin wins as a social analyst and unwavering accuser of social grievances, he loses as a political propagator and advocate of social change. For so convincingly does he portray the overall corruption of the society of his day, so thrillingly does he present its stifling totality, that a sympathetic reader is discouraged rather than encouraged to do anything about the pitiful state of things. In other words, Godwin is so successful in depicting "things as they are" as a monolithic oppressive "social machine" (Lewis Mumford) that the very idea of change seems absolutely absurd and illusory. This downbeat ending certainly shows "things as they are", but it just as certainly does *not* show how they can be overcome, and what is even more, it suggests they *cannot* be overcome and thereby it suffocates all hope. Godwin's fiction is a fixation of "things as they are"; their merely static depiction informs, notwithstanding Godwin's intention, a reinvigorating reification of the *status quo* and is therefore counterproductive to his political purpose.

What we are confronted with is an interesting paradox: Godwin set out to show "things as they are" in a fiction in order to underline the need for change and to further the cause of reform. And he completed his task so successfully that nobody in his mind could believe any more that reform was even possible. Godwin was too bright not to notice this. So he withdrew the novel's *realistic* ending and wrote a *utopian* one. For the second ending incontestably is not "things as they

¹¹ Cf. Dumas, p. 583.

are" but "things as they should be".¹² The first ending shows unequivocally where, in an unequal society, the power of truth and discourse find their limitations *in social and political power*. Caleb may tell the truth - and his tale is his only weapon (*CW*, 314) - but to no avail; this society, built as it is on interest and opinion, is necessarily adverse to the flowering of truth and justice. The second ending, however, is utopian in that it shows how in a discourse free of dominion and interest, truth would necessarily prevail ("truth is irresistible"),¹³ how, when there is only discourse pitted against discourse, tale against tale, truth must be victorious because language, as the prime instrument of reason and truth, cannot help but convince us when it is in accordance with facts, with "things as they are" which is, after all, the oldest definition of "truth". When social and political power, when opinion and interest no longer exist, so Godwin, there will be nothing left to impair the power of discourse; in collective, unhampered conversation, man will find out how things really are.

But there is a second paradox in Godwin's revision: He set out to show how things *really* are in contrast to the ideologically established version which is distorted by vested interests; and he ends up by showing us a *fictitious* reality, definitely *not* "things as they are", because it is in his interest that things as they *really* are should be overcome. So what we are "really" confronted with is *two distorted* views of "things as they are", both distorted by *interest* - the interest to stabilize "things as they are" on the one hand, and the interest to overcome "things as they are" on the other hand. The point bears repetition: What we are confronted with is discursive *fictions* of "things as they are", *fictions* invariably based on *interest*.

For this interest, for this rhetorical opening up of a utopian perspective, Godwin is quite willing to sacrifice the credibility of the novel's ending and to put up with the conspicuous inconsistencies already mentioned. This reversal is, therefore, anything but a victory of the novelist over the philosopher; it is rather the victory of the propagandist over the faithful recorder of "things passing in the moral world" (*CW*, 1). This ending is an emphatic, if narratively unmotivated rhetorical appeal to the reader, rooted in Godwin's political convictions.

¹² Cf. Dumas, pp. 584, 587.

¹³ Godwin, *Political Justice*, p. 789 (contained in 1st edition), cf. pp. 116ff., (= Book I, ch. V, added in 1796), pp. 140, 144 especially.

But does not Godwin sacrifice quite as willingly the cogency of his political argument? After all, in a society in which truth *can* prevail through discourse, as the second ending implies, there would be absolutely no need for reform or revolution - it had already taken place. On this level, it could be argued, the second ending is even more devastatingly self-defeating than the first.

This fundamental objection is valid, I believe, and, what is more, in its reversed form it even pertains to Godwin's anarchistic philosophy in general. For, given a society built on ignorance, with all its institutions designed to systematically preserve, perpetuate and reproduce that ignorance, how can the spreading of truth through the discourses of individuals be recommended as the only means for political change? How can free discussion and conversation be the cure for a society whose disease, according to Godwin, is exactly that it does not allow this? If power prevents truth, how can truth ever topple power?¹⁴

The central flaw in Godwin's political philosophy is indeed that it lacks a convincing theory of social change.¹⁵ His description of society's repressive mechanism is unable to show us convincingly how the new world is supposed to evolve out of the old, where exactly we can find antithetical forces which, now subdued, will gather strength in time and will eventually overturn the balance of power some day. Godwin is not - to let the dirty word out - a dialectical thinker. He is an amiable anarchist saying that our society is very unfair and very unjust and that it would be better if it were not.

If, therefore, the second ending to *Caleb Williams* is unconvincing because it does not follow from what has been said before, this striking *non sequitur* but mirrors the much larger one in *Political Justice*. *Caleb Williams* wonderfully illuminates Godwin's political philosophy by exhibiting much more glaringly the unbridgeable hiatus, in Godwin's system of ideas, between "things as they are" and "things as they ought to be."¹⁶ In both novel and treatise, conclusion and solution

¹⁴ This contradiction finds a parallel in Shelley's "Mask of Anarchy", where he - shocked by the news of the Peterloo Massacre - advocates non-violent demonstrations as the future political means for social change - exactly the same strategy the peaceful crowd had chosen before the bloodbath. See Bode, 1983, pp. 184-190.

¹⁵ Cf. Clark, pp. 274ff., especially 294, 295.

¹⁶ Don Locke (p. 107) seems to be the only one to have touched upon this parallel, in just one sentence, which, unfortunately, he does not elaborate.

do not result from the preceding “narrative” - they are but superimposed fictions. The relation between *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams* in its revised form is therefore, I’d like to argue, much closer than has hitherto been surmised - if not in a way which Godwin would have liked to concede. But then, he rarely conceded anything.

IV “What’s in the trunk?” - A post-structuralist postscript

A mystery right at the core of Godwin’s novel remains unsolved: In chapter 6 of volume II, Caleb, who already suspects his master of the murder of Tyrrel but has no positive evidence in hand, is driven by his ruling passion, curiosity, to break - while part of Falkland’s mansion is on fire - the mysterious trunk placed in a small private apartment at the end of Falkland’s library. To this trunk, Caleb witnessed, Falkland once withdrew in one of his fits of gloom and depression, emitting “a deep groan expressive of intolerable anguish” (*CW*, 7). Caleb is sure the trunk contains the long sought-for evidence, which, however, is dramatically withheld from him - and the reader:

(...) the fastenings gave way, the trunk opened, and all that I sought was at once within my reach. I was in the act of lifting up the lid, when Mr. Falkland entered, wild, breathless, distraction in his looks! He had been brought home from a considerable distance by the sight of the flames. At the moment of his appearance the lid dropt down from my hand. (*CW*, 132).

This is the peripeteia of the story. On the evening of the same day, Falkland confesses his crime to Caleb and begins the monstrous persecution of his secretary, who, up to that moment, had acted as a spy upon his master, “a continual thorn in his side” (*CW*, 113), tormenting him with questions and hints about his suspicion.

Given the centrality of this scene, it is all the more astounding - is it not? - that neither we nor Caleb ever get to know what was actually in the trunk. Of course, it is perfectly admissible to shrug off this central gap of indeterminacy, this void and vacancy in the eye of the novel, as a gigantic Hitchcockian “MacGuffin”, i.e.

a something that, in itself irrelevant, is vitally important only in so far as it is used to trigger off, or, as here, revert the action of the story.

But Caleb's later ruminations on what *might have been* in the trunk are worth a closer look: Before the final court room scene, only 3 ½ pages to go before the decisive bifurcation of the novel's double ending, Caleb writes, "The contents of the fatal trunk from which all my misfortunes originated, I have never been able to ascertain" (*CW*, 315), and he continues, "I once thought that it contained some murderous instrument or relique connected with the fate of the unhappy Tyrrel." This suggestion is absurd on two accounts: For one, the deadly weapon was already found with Hawkins, which, together with the parcel of his blood-stained clothes found in a ditch, led to his being sentenced to death (*CW*, 104). And, secondly, it is not easy to imagine a motive for Falkland's keeping evidence against himself shut up in a trunk when he might just as well have destroyed it.¹⁷

Caleb's second guess seems to be nearer the mark:

I am now persuaded that the secret it incloses is a faithful narrative of that and its concomitant transactions, written by Mr. Falkland, and reserved in case of the worst, that, if by any unforeseen event his guilt should come to be fully disclosed, it might contribute to redeem the wreck of his reputation. (*CW*, 315).

But this is a puzzle, too. If the trunk contains anything like "a faithful narrative", then it must amount to a confession of guilt, in which case it could hardly "contribute to redeem the wreck of [Falkland's] reputation". Besides, here, too, one would have to suspect Falkland of almost wanting to be found out for deliberately producing such an incriminating document.

¹⁷ Cf. Storch, p.197. - Walter Scott (see Brown, p.87, also Lang, p. 154, footnote 16 read *Caleb Williams* with interest, "commenting particularly on the skill with which Godwin kept up his story by nowhere revealing the contents of Falkland's chest" ("iron chest" was changed to "trunk" throughout in all the later editions), whereas de Quincey was especially unwilling to let Godwin off the hook in this case, "(...) of what nature could these memorials be? Surely Mr. Falkland would not keep in brandy the gory head of Tyrrel; and anything short of *that* could not proclaim any murder at all, much less the particular murder. Strictly speaking, nothing *could* be in the trunk of a nature to connect Falkland with the murder more closely than the circumstances had already connected him; and those circumstances had been insufficient." (330). - As Lang informs us (p. 154, footnote 16), a knife and a paper "Narrative of my murder of..." are found in the chest in Coleman's dramatrical version - one of three (Locke, p.185) - of *Caleb Williams, The Iron Chest*.

Be that as it may - the decisive point is that if the trunk does not contain just a written repetition of Falkland's lies - in which case it would be tale against tale, again - , it contains something which must be very close to Caleb's own story, which, after all, claims to be true and faithful and gives sufficient emphasis to the fact that Falkland, in the beginning, was an extremely virtuous man whose only fault was a mistaken sense of reputation. Caleb sees quite clearly that *it does not really matter what might have been in the trunk* - “ (...) the truth or the falsehood of this conjecture is of little moment” -, but he tends to believe that if there are two tales, one for each antagonist, the two will paradoxically converge into one, so that one could actually replace the other (“In that case this story of mine may amply, severely perhaps, supply its place.” *CW*, 316) [i.e. the place of Falkland's narrative]. In other words, if there is anything in the trunk at the centre of *Caleb Williams*, it is likely to be the equivalent of the novel itself, at least of its first volume.

But as this narrative universe bends back upon itself, so to speak, we become aware that, for all we know, the trunk is *narratively and effectively empty*: As we are unable to ascertain what it contains, let alone what its supposed contents mean, we yet clearly perceive that this object, which contains no meaning that we could possibly know (and which meaning is ever contained...?), has a meaning in that it redistributes the other elements of the tale, invests them with a new meaning, makes Caleb a pursued man, Falkland a pursuer. This poststructuralist trunk, all form, no specified content, functions as an empty ruling signifier, but Godwin, the radical thinker, in contrast to some later *maîtres*, leaves us in no doubt as to where the meaning of it all will be settled, in the end. As Caleb says, “where there is mystery, there is always something at bottom that will not bear the telling” (*CW*, 148), we begin to understand that the *semiotic* mystery of Falkland's trunk is disclosed in the suppressed ending of *Caleb Williams*: The free play of signifiers is arrested and meaning determined where the powers of truth and discourse find their ultimate limitation: in *social force and political power*. It is here that it is decided which discourse, which fiction of “things as they are” will prevail as the “true” one.¹⁸

¹⁸ It would be worthwhile, I think, to systematize Godwin's remarks on discourse, logic and power. Compare, for example, his retrospective estimate of his own diaries - “What a strange power is

It is Godwin's accomplishment as a systematic thinker that he, by curiosity, struck upon society's secret - namely that, just as there lurks crime behind Falkland's facade of respectability, civil society, for all its appeasing ideology, is ultimately a crime against humanity, based as it is on oppression and a discourse which is definitely *not* free, but limited, truncated, deformed and perverted by power.¹⁹ And it is his tragedy as a political thinker that he was, on the other hand, quite unable to point a feasible way out.

Like Caleb, he later reiterated that he never had the intention of betraying his "master" or actively overturning "things as they are" - all his later retractions could be summed up under Caleb's self-defence, "My offence had merely been a mistaken thirst for knowledge" (*CW*, 133), and it is, I think, in this light that his later disclaimers of the political dimension of *Caleb Williams* have to be seen. The novel itself, with both of its endings, tells an altogether different story, though what it may ultimately mean is, of course, determined elsewhere.

this! It sees through a long vista of time, and it sees nothing. All this at present is mere abstraction, symbols, not realities. Nothing is actually seen: the whole is ciphers, conventional marks, imaginary boundaries of unimagined things." (Kegan Paul, II : p. 331) - with the following assessment of linguistic and thinking from the *Enquirer* (quoted in Pollin, p. 7): "Almost all the ideas employed by us in matters of reasoning have been acquired by words. (...) the science of thinking therefore is little else than the science of words. [If a man] would successfully cultivate his understanding, he must apply himself to a minute and persevering study of words and language."

¹⁹ Ever since Furbank's remark (p. 215) that *Caleb Williams* is "a highly dramatized symbolical picture of Godwin himself in the act of writing *Political Justice*", this has become an established reading. For *Caleb Williams* and Falkland's relation to Edmund Burke see also Boulton (p. 227ff.), Butler, 1975, p. 69ff., and 1982, Graham (p. 53), Kelly, 1976, p. 189ff., Lang and McCracken, 1970a.

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