
WILLIAM GODWIN

1756-1836

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WILLIAM GODWIN enjoys in our day a parasitic immortality. Two women keep his name alive, for he was the husband of Mary Wollstonecraft and the father of Mary Shelley. Everyone has read of Godwin's money debts to Shelley, while only the few realise Shelley's intellectual debt to Godwin. The oblivion that has fallen on him as a thinker does injustice to a powerful and daring intellect ; worse still, it renders unintelligible one of the most stirring chapters in the history of English literature and thought. Tom Paine was the knight-errant of the democratic revolution that had made the United States and re-made France. He was also the pamphleteer who brought to the masses of the people the practical conclusions of its "philosophy"—its republicanism, its humane programme of social change, its militant Deism. But Paine was fighter rather than systematic thinker, and it was chiefly the studious weaver and the reflective cobbler who cherished his vivacious books on their meagre shelves. Godwin, on the other hand, was the prophet of the revolutionary "intelligentsia." To him they turned, when the fury of Burke or the gloom of Malthus oppressed their minds. Two generations of poets drew from him their first views of life and society. He sent Wordsworth as a revolutionary pilgrim to France. Southey and Coleridge planned the foundation in America of a "pantisocratic" community based on his prescriptions. Shelley, reading him first at Eton, re-read him every year of his life, and some of his earlier poems contain passages that are merely Godwin versified. It was from this sage—for youth looked up to him with veneration—that the progressive fraction of English society, in the last years of the eighteenth century and the first years of the nineteenth, derived its knowledge of the French "philosophy" of the Encyclopaedists. This industrious student had digested it all, from Voltaire to Condorcet. But he was

much more than a skilled interpreter. He englished it by giving to it a characteristically ethical turn. He built it, moreover, into a system more solid and comprehensive than any of his French predecessors had attempted or achieved. He lacked, what some of them possessed to excess, a sense of humour, and thanks to this precious deficiency he carried their premises remorselessly to their logical conclusion, and by so doing blew up the erection he had raised with such ambitious care. He made explicit the anarchism that lies latent in individualistic liberalism. His writing was always lucid and often eloquent, at first in an elaborate periodic style that recalls Gibbon, later in an easy and graceful prose that reminds us that we have entered the generation of Hazlitt and Lamb. Much as Voltaire's prestige rested in his own day on plays that are now forgotten, so Godwin's popularity reposed on novels that seem to modern taste, with the exception of *Caleb Williams*, intolerably tedious. Yet a critic of Hazlitt's distinction could struggle to persuade himself that they were better than those of the Tory Walter Scott. His chief work, *Political Justice*, was issued at the monstrous price of three guineas, yet it ran through three editions and sold four thousand copies. It was a book that men not only read but remembered, and the progressives throughout the early years of the nineteenth century—Robert Owen is a notable instance—had a way of reproducing in their own writing not only its substance but its phraseology and illustrations.

For this generation philosophy meant Godwin, as for the mid-Victorians it meant John Stuart Mill. The difference lay in this; that Godwin's fame was buried under a mountain of obloquy in the reaction that froze all generous thinking during the Napoleonic wars; whereas it was Mill's good fortune, in an epoch of peace, to inspire a triumphant Liberal Party.

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The man who was to mature into this thinker who impressed himself so deeply on his generation, was born in 1756 at Wisbech in the Fens. His father and grand-

father were Independent ministers, and he was reared in the Calvinist tradition. The child was brought up on the *Account of the Pious Deaths of Many Godly Children*, and he would move his school-fellows to tears by his sermons on the Last Judgment. At seventeen he went to the Theological College at Hoxton and emerged from it still an ultra-Calvinist in his religious beliefs and a Tory in politics. These early influences shaped his mind. Calvinism is not an English mode of thought : it is a French creed, Latin in its systematic completeness, its logical courage and its disdain for sentiment. This habit of mind Godwin retained long after he had shed every one of Calvin's dogmas. No Methodist and no Churchman could have written *Political Justice*. The terrors of his pious nursery explain the peculiarities of Godwin's reaction against Christianity. He was not content to discard a personal God as an unnecessary hypothesis. He revolted against Him as a tyrant whom he would depose.

Godwin, however, matured slowly. He filled several positions as a dissenting minister, and published a volume of sermons before he drifted into Unitarianism and the Whig view of politics. It was as much lack of success as a pastor as his growing unbelief that set him to earning his living as a pamphleteer and novelist. His life at this period differed from that of other young men who live by journalism and aspire to literature, chiefly by his methodical industry.

Godwin might never have risen above this respectable level, had not friends and the ferment of the French Revolution stimulated him to a brief exercise of his latent powers. Through the greater part of his long life he was merely an industrious literary craftsman, who wrote saleable novels for a living, conscientious school books and several historical works of some pretension. His was a ponderous, slow-moving mind, that could excel itself only under the influence of some unusual intellectual excitement. This came to him first through his friendship with Thomas Holcroft, his senior by twenty years. Starting life as stable boy and cobbler, Holcroft was by turns actor, schoolmaster, translator, journalist and for a time a most successful playwright. He had more experience of life

than the sedentary, introverted Godwin would ever have acquired, even if he had realised his own dream of overcoming death and sleep by the exercise of the "powers of the mind." He had indomitable courage, the zest of a never-aging youth for adventure among ideas, a hot temper and a passion for argument. He had lived in Paris and absorbed the new "philosophy," and he set himself to pummel Godwin out of his compromising moderation. It was Holcroft who drove him from whiggery to anarchism, and turned the Unitarian pastor into an atheist. But above all, Holcroft was a leading member of the London Corresponding Society, which aimed, after the first dazzling successes of the French Revolution, at the introduction of its democratic principles into our island.

We who lived through the excitement of the Russian Revolution can dimly understand the effect of the French upheaval on contemporary England. Its influence, however, both as a stimulant and a begetter of terror was vastly greater. This revolution occurred among our immediate neighbours. It befell a land that was at that period unquestionably the leader and pattern of European civilisation. It had been preceded by a flowering of imaginative and reflective literature, in a language which most educated Englishmen understood, that dazzled men's minds even before the fall of the Bastille presented its ideas in action. This revolution, moreover, made itself instantly respected or feared by its startling military victories. By comparison, Russia was distant and unfamiliar: it ranked as a backward and almost barbarous land: its language was little known, and its great literature seemed exotic. Its revolution was dwarfed, when it happened, by the events of the Great War, and finally, the visible demonstration of Russia's new power and success came, not in the early years of struggle, but very much later, after the adoption of the Five Years Plan. For all these reasons our ancestors were moved, some to sympathy and others to abhorrence, very much more powerfully by the French than were we by the Russian Revolution. The effects, none the less, were in varying degrees the same—for a big but rapidly dwindling minority an imaginative exaltation, a sense that a new era of hope had dawned, for the immense majority a horror of its

violence and a dread of its innovations that drove them into a furious defensive reaction.

Godwin attended the dinners of the Society for commemorating the Revolution that was long since over—that of 1688. It heard that celebrated sermon of Dr. Price, which drove Burke to rhetorical fury. This was an eminently respectable society, which counted several non-conformist doctors of divinity and at least one Whig earl among its patrons, but even in its sermons it welcomed the contemporary Revolution. The London Corresponding Society was bolder, and even after the Terror, in 1794, the band at its dinner played *Ça ira* and the *Marseillaise*, and its guests drank the toast of “the Armies contending for Liberty”—by which it did not mean those of King George. In its more sober moments it worked for a reformed franchise and annual parliaments, and counted in the little London of that day its 30,000 members, backed by numerous provincial branches and a strong Scottish society. It started among shopkeepers and mechanics, with the godly Thomas Hardy for its leader, but it soon attracted a rash crew of intellectuals who talked “hanging matters” at its meetings—Horne Tooke, Tom Paine, William Blake, Ritson the vegetarian, Thomas Holcroft, and finally Sinclair, Thomas Muir, and Joseph Gerrald who were soon to make the journey to Botany Bay. On the fringes of this group, cautious, critical, yet in his cold way stirred in every fibre of his tightly-knit intellect, moved William Godwin.

In this atmosphere Godwin wrote his one great book, the *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, of which the first edition appeared early in 1793. It is usually classed as an answer to Burke, but Godwin's real purpose was, by correcting Montesquieu, to “place the principles of politics on an immovable basis.” To do this he had to traverse rapidly the whole field of psychology and with lingering steps to journey to and fro and back again across the whole territory of ethics. In reality the book is a preface to all future progress, an elaborate study of the conditions under which mankind may gird up its loins for the “generous race to perfection.” A second edition betrayed a growing caution and commonsense, while a third (dated 1798) was

so heavily revised that it lost much of the vivacity with the extravagance of the first draft. It is a book of astonishing daring, not merely in its enthusiastic prescriptions for an anarchist-communist millennium, but still more in its unsparing onslaughts on every pillar of the Constitution—king, church, landed aristocracy and courts of justice. It teemed with “hanging matters,” but Pitt refrained from prosecuting the author because “a three guinea book could never do much harm among those who had not three shillings to spare.”

With this book Godwin leapt into instant popularity and fame. For a brief moment Englishmen did not resent his flattering suggestion that they were demi-gods who might rapidly achieve perfection, if they would but shed a few such outworn rags as their monarchy and their Constitution. This cold, methodical man enjoyed sunshine, lived for a few years or two at high pressure in this state, and wrote (1794) his one novel that deserves to live. *Caleb Williams* illustrates, with a stirring plot in the romantic manner, the criticism of society and government that is the basis of *Political Justice*. As a melodrama (the *Iron Chest*) it survived in humble theatres within my memory.

The reaction, however, was now breaking in a pitiless panic on reformers and philosophers alike. It did, indeed, receive a check when a London jury acquitted the twelve leaders of the Corresponding Society, Holcroft among them, on a charge of high treason. It is probable that a formidably reasoned and powerfully written plea in their defence from Godwin's hand contributed not a little to this defeat of the Government. It may have saved their lives, but henceforward the movement was broken; the timeservers turned against it, and those of the philosophers who lived by their pens, at first Holcroft and later Godwin himself, were compelled to write under pseudonyms. Some were assailed by Church and King mobs; some fled to America or the Continent; reform was delayed for nearly forty years.

Godwin's was a placid and unaggressive courage. He would defend a friend at no small risk to himself, but he was not by temperament a fighter. He repeated the main

argument of *Political Justice* once again in a series of essays entitled *The Enquirer*, written in a lighter style with some approach to ease and charm of manner (1797); but thereafter, save for a pamphlet or two, through the remaining forty years of his life he was virtually silent.

The career of Godwin, the leader of thought, ends here. The rest is the private life of an unfortunate man on whom the world weighed too heavily. His happy union with Mary Wollstonecraft ended in sudden tragedy. His second wife, the widow Clairmont, was a vain and worldly woman, who persuaded him into publishing—and bankruptcy. He went on writing good school books, bad novels and worse plays. He met no enemies more worthy of his pugnacity than duns and bailiffs, and the struggle broke and degraded him. His last years were spent serenely, as a pensioner of the Government, in defiance of all his anarchist principles. His posthumous work on religion which might have done good service had he dared to publish it in his own lifetime, for it ranks with his more effective writings, was wasted, first by his own timidity, and then by that of Lady Shelley. He died in 1836. When at length these last *Essays* appeared in 1873, a new generation found them but moderately interesting and no longer shocking. Agnosticism had become respectable.

Godwin's service was that he started in England a fruitful debate on the conditions of progress, or as he phrased it "perfectibility." It is not finished: it never will be finished, for it shifts with every advance in physiology, psychology and the social sciences. Godwin did much to clear the ground and state the problem. Progress was a new idea: classical antiquity had not grasped it: it began to appear only as the thinkers of the eighteenth century made their first attempts to reach a scientific view of universal history. What, broadly, are the conditions that determine the character and destiny of mankind? Scholastic philosophy supposed that innate ideas are implanted in our minds, sovereign and immutable. Montesquieu had laid especial stress on climate as the external condition that

chiefly moulds us. On neither of these foundations could one base a doctrine of perfectibility : one cannot by taking thought alter either innate ideas or the climate. Godwin therefore followed the Encyclopaedists in their psychology. Man is under the empire of his impressions : through every hour from birth, experience is moulding him ; his whole environment shapes him ; he is the creature in this broad sense of "education". These philosophers came, in their headlong argument, to think of human nature as an infinitely malleable raw material, which may indeed be bent and distorted, but may equally be trained in any desired direction. This was a comforting conviction, and Godwin went on to confirm it and apply it.

He asked from his readers, before he swept them along with him, only one further admission, which looked, at a hasty glance, innocent enough. He asked us to concede, in the old Socratic sense, that man is a reasonable being. He acts on a reasoned view of his own advantage : show him by cold argument that he is mistaken, that he has miscalculated as to his own interests, and he will alter his ways. Even vice is merely error. In brief, men's voluntary actions originate in opinion. Of course they do, one answers, but when, if ever, are they wholly "voluntary" and self-conscious ? But one need not bring to bear on this proposition the formidable batteries of modern psychology. It is enough to point out that Godwin has quietly taken his stand on a position of the extremest individualism and intellectualism. He has made action an affair of the lonely individual, tightly enclosed in his own skin ; and further he has assumed that the process that leads up to action can be, and should be, wholly rational.

Grant him this, and in a few pages he will rush you, bound hand and foot, into philosophic anarchism. All action ought to be voluntary. By effort, education and persuasion it can be made so. It follows, then, that sound reasoning, when adequately presented, is invincible. Truth is omnipotent (as from the dock the heroes of the London Corresponding Society would tell the judge who sent them to Botany Bay), and the vices and weaknesses of men, which are but our names for their faulty reasoning,

can certainly be overcome. It follows that man is perfectible.

Is this a pulpit platitude? On the contrary, it is a charge of dynamite warranted to blow up any and every government. For if truth is omnipotent, why trust to laws? If men will obey argument, why use constraint? The difficulty is that in our society truth goes trammelled. Sincerity, therefore, is the first virtue that the new philosophy inculcates. We should perpetually argue with one another, criticise and correct one another, with a Roman boldness. Polite lies must be scorned. The law of libel should be swept away. If we all were to tell every knave at his first transgression what we thought of him, we might dispense with prisons and gallows. Censorships, established religions and even state systems of education are all abolished in the name of this first indispensable condition of progress—unfettered opinion.

Authority, constraint and any form of terror must be brushed aside without hesitation. Godwin scorns any morality that rests on the pains and punishments of the after-world. To terrify men is a strange way of rendering them judicious and fearless: it is to leave them indolent and unbraced by truth. Authority in any form makes dwarfs of men. What is punishment? You and I differ in opinion, and you tell me that you must be right, since you have a more brawny arm. The case is no better, if without waiting to be coerced, I bow to authority. If one must obey, at least one should do it without reverence. To surrender my conscience to another man's keeping, even if he masquerades as my lawful ruler, is to annihilate my individuality as a man.

Government, then, has lost all justification. It is harmful, it is unnecessary, and it has no rational basis—for Godwin disposes very neatly of the myth of a social contract. His elaborate criticism of "positive institution" (his odd term for government) is interesting, because of the characteristic ethical turn that he gives to the familiar case against monarchy, aristocracy and even a republican constitution of the American type. They make for moral corruption; they subvert our standards of value; they promote ostentation and luxury by which we wrong the

"labouring millions." They are linked, moreover, with the delusion of patriotism and the institution of war. Defensive war he reluctantly tolerates, but he will have no standing armies: and sincerity forbids stratagems and secrecy. Nor will he hear of colonies.

Government, then, is an evil, and he will not even call it a necessary evil, save in some brief transitional phase. His idea of a constitution is shadowy. He hates the overgrown national State, and turns to the parish, as Tolstoy and Gandhi turned to the village, as the true unit of society. At most he would allow a Parliament that met for one day only each year. Within the parish public opinion is sovereign and would express itself through juries, deciding each case on its merits without laws. They would never punish, but they would censure the wrongdoer. Godwin's argument against the folly and immorality of punishment is perhaps the most impressive thing he wrote. He was here a century ahead of his contemporaries. Coercion annihilates the understanding, alike of him who suffers it and of him who exercises it. At the most Godwin would tolerate imprisonment to restrain a violent criminal, but against solitary confinement he argues fiercely. How can a man learn to exercise virtue, if he be shut out from the society of his fellows? How shall he exercise benevolence or justice in a cell?

When one asks how mankind is to rid itself of kings and governments, Godwin's answer is explicable only when one reviews the circumstances of the time. He wrote amid the Terror, which was to prepare the reaction in England. Violent revolutions he condemns, though the folly of rulers may render them inevitable. Nor will he advise "constitutional" agitation. He loathed public meetings, poured his scorn on elections and even condemned the process of deciding issues by a majority vote. He will sanction only the unorganised pursuit of truth in intimate gatherings of friends. The moral beauty of the spectacle, as they meet for candid enquiry and persuasion, will render it contagious. Organised political associations—he had watched the Corresponding Society—will mean only tumult, intrigue, cabal, declamation, and the ascendancy of artful and intemperate men. This

argument of Godwin's was perhaps his most fateful contribution to history, for it helped in a time of stress and danger to keep the young and generous generation that hung on his words from any active participation in politics. Godwin, it may be, did as much as Pitt to delay reform. It is true that in this way he saved many poets and idealists from Botany Bay. Incidentally he saved his own skin. He stood firm, admiring the irresistible march of Truth, and Pitt was content to leave him standing. The doctrine was, however, a perfectly consistent deduction from his individualist position. Not only did he object to political association, he regarded any form of co-operation as an offence to human dignity. He marvelled that men would demean themselves to play concerted music, or to act another man's play.

The positive expression of Godwin's ethical teaching was his doctrine of "universal benevolence." Reason forbids that I should make any distinction among my fellows because some are my countrymen, my kindred or my friends. I owe to each the same perfectly impartial benevolence, and a stranger may have a clearer call to it than my own mother. My mother may be a fool, a liar or a thief. Of what consequence is it, then, that she is "mine"? Gratitude has no place in morals, and reason refuses to recognise the private affections. Justice deals with beings all capable of pleasure and pain: all have a common nature and a like capacity for enjoyment. Justice requires of us that we shall exercise our capacities, our talents, and resources so as to produce the greatest sum of benefit for sentient creatures. Property, Godwin holds, should be sacred—that a good man may give it away. For justice assigns a destination to all I possess. It must go where it will produce the greatest good.

The family under this analysis melts away, as the State has already done. Marriage is a curse, not merely because it is an extreme form of co-operation, but also because it involves a promise, and all promises are unreasonable; for they are undertakings to suspend the free exercise of one's judgment. Property, however, will flow in a steady stream, actuated by universal benevolence, from him who hath to him who needs. In a rational society wealth would

lose its distinction, and a man who amassed wealth would hide his treasures as carefully as to-day he displays them. So we approach the vision of a society in which equality is automatically achieved. Food and clothing will spontaneously flow from the quarter in which they abound to the quarter that is deficient. So, even without the family, will the needs of the children be met. Something will always turn up for nobody's child. Finally, in this easy-going Utopia, half-an-hour's toil should suffice to provide every man with necessities. We may hope too for great physical changes. We must get rid of sleep. Life too can be prolonged by intellect. We are sick and we die because we consent to suffer these infirmities. The vision of perfectibility ends with the overthrow of death itself.

One does not criticise so strange an amalgam of caution with extravagance. Its merit lay in its unflinching logical courage. Godwin set out from his individualist and intellectualist assumptions, and plunged forward with the sincerity of a reasonable machine, caring nothing what he overthrew in his course. Down went every ninepin that stood in his way, State and family, Church and King, motherland and law. One regrets that he ever compromised, as on occasion he did—for in later life, after some experience as husband and father, he condescended to reinstate the "private affections." The merit of it all was that his honesty provided the perfect refutation of his premises. The reasoning was sound, but the conclusions were impossible. Clearly then, the premises were at fault. *Political Justice* is the *reductio ad absurdum* of individualism.

The argument is worth following, if only because it discovers to us the advances we have made in social analysis and the interpretation of history, since the eighteenth century philosophised. Godwin leaps, with a motion habitual among reformers, though it is rarely so athletic or so prompt, from an absolute condemnation of the past to the serenest confidence in the future. History is nothing but a chronicle of oppression and wrong, priestcraft and superstition. It has not dawned on him that priests and kings are zoological facts, and that man is precisely the sort of being who breeds these creatures. Because his

reading of history is so naïve, he fails to find the dynamic factor in it, the spring of change, the causative element in progress. To the whole chapter of economic causation in history he remained totally blind. Writing in London, while the North was rushing into the industrial age, he never guesses the significance of capital or machinery, nor perceives that it must regiment "the labouring millions" in enforced "co-operation." The limitations of any purely ethical view of history and society proclaim themselves from every page. He was the last of the ancients. But when this is said, much that is stimulating remains. We are obsessed to-day by a physiological and economic determinism. It is bracing to read these pæans to the powers of the human mind. It is salutary to be reminded that we can control our environment, and set our wills to perfect ourselves. Because self-conscious beings can criticise themselves, they can react against history. Nor is there in our language a writer who has analysed with equal humanity and power the degradation that overtakes every society that props inequality by coercive violence.