

THE ROMANCE OF THE IMPOSSIBLE: WILLIAM GODWIN IN THE EMPTY PLACE OF REASON

BY DAVID COLLINGS

In the treatise outlining his version of philosophical anarchism, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, first published in 1793 and revised twice thereafter, William Godwin attacks every possible interference with the individual's private judgment of what best serves the universal good. Every positive law attempts to substitute a contingent and fallible version of justice for its absolute form: "Legislation . . . is not an affair of human competence. Immutable reason is the true legislator, and her decrees it behoves us to investigate. The functions of society extend, not to the making, but the interpreting of law."¹ Because reason is prior to its historical articulation, the latter is illegitimate. To substitute mere laws for immutable reason is to be confined by potentially false interpretations; it is, in short, to create an imposture, a fiction of justice rather than the real thing. Accordingly, Godwin carries out a systematic critique of every kind of institution, arguing that people should live under the immediate authority of reason itself, carrying out an almost total violence against the complex fabric of social life. Because people would justify their behavior according to reason alone, and because property and sexual relations would be reconfigured to allow for such separate judgment, every form of collective enterprise or identity would disappear. No institution would mediate between people and reason, or between people and each other. This philosophy challenges far more than the rule of law or of government, for it also repudiates rhetorical power, prejudice, custom, contracts, promises, cooperative action, gratitude, codes of manners, marriage, the subordination of child to parent, employment of one person by another, and internalized forms of external constraint, as well as the coercion involved in any revolutionary or collective attempt to overturn institutions. Philosophical anarchy is in fact a kind of ratiocracy, a mode of governance even more severe than theocracy, for in this case the immutable principle would never mediate itself in any familiar social form. The same activity—coming to know and enact the

judgments of reason—would define every life and every interpersonal relation.

Godwin's philosophy amounts to a uniquely violent conceptual experiment, an attempt to hurl humanity into a space beyond any historical determination. Where Enlightenment thought typically appeals to ahistorical norms such as reason or nature, Godwin tries to make society identical with such a norm. But as a result, his work uniquely reveals the necessary impasses of such an enterprise. The aggression implicit in absolute reason dominates in the relatively unself-conscious *Enquiry*, but the novels *Things As They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794) and *St Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1799) expose the costs of such conceptual violence in acute, implicitly self-critical, and progressively more sweeping terms. Total conceptual revolution modulates into a searching critique of the irrational component of rational absolutism. While Godwin's anarchist positions made him vulnerable to anti-Jacobin satire in the late 1790s, in fact he became his own most searching and perceptive critic. As the ending of *Caleb Williams* first demonstrates, when immutable reason is opposed to established society, it eventually regards the latter as a closed system impermeable to change; only when the total criticism of society recognizes its resemblance to what it opposes, accepting the possibility that it is also shaped by selfish and partial motives, can it break out of the impasse of total accusation. *St Leon* dramatizes this critique even more explicitly, showing that the gift of absolute abundance leads not to universal happiness but to disaster and that, as a result, genuine social transformation must arise incrementally from within society, rather than being imposed upon it from the outside. Society would no longer realize itself by transforming into its negation, disappearing into the light of immutable reason, but rather, as G. W. F. Hegel might say, through the negation of the negation, through its perpetual invocation of a perfect justice it will never realize. From the original premise of a purely asocial truth, Godwin evolves a theory of modern society which makes its structural logic unusually explicit, carrying out an internal or sympathetic, rather than counterrevolutionary, reassessment of pure reason, sketching in his own way the lineaments of a progressive modernity.

But in a crucial turn, Godwin does not accept the necessary loss of immutable reason and throw his support behind the formation of a progressive public consensus. While his novels allow him to survey the failures of absolutist projects, they also permit him to experience

the fictively constructed subjectivity of protagonists embarked on such projects. Here critique and vicarious experience collapse into the same form, self-critical first-person romance, through which Godwin and his readers can project themselves into an enterprise eventually revealed to be illegitimate. If conceptual revolution is to be foreclosed in history, it may still take place in fiction. Through the ironies of literary form, self-critique can serve the purposes of what it negates, giving access to a fantasy unrealizable elsewhere. While *Caleb Williams* is in part written to carry out the social critique whose logic it undercuts in its final scenes, *St Leon* far more radically and consistently undercuts the fantasy of inhuman knowledge—the secret of the philosopher’s stone—even as it enables readers to share the experience of possessing such knowledge. A single gesture, the foreclosure of the absolute, gives rise at once to a postutopian society and negative romance, which represents no alternative historical future but rather marks the site of a rational bliss whose traumatic loss would otherwise be forgotten. Although Godwin’s novels are among the first to indicate the direction for a progressive modernity, they are also among the first to refuse that direction and adhere to what they acknowledge is impossible.

By arguing in the *Enquiry* that society’s true basis was to be found in none of its actual forms, but only in immutable reason, Godwin posed the crucial question of how to put such a principle into action. One could, for example, interpret those principles exhaustively in an intricately defended deductive system, attempting to give the immutable a final form. Such was the project of Jeremy Bentham, who sought to craft a social order based not in coercion but utility, not in the punishment of crime but the design of incentives and modes of surveillance that would bring about the greatest good. To make this design as flawless as possible, he sought to put the general good on a basis more stable and predictable than individual virtue, proposing ways of aligning duty and desire, utility and self-interest, according to which people would serve general utility simply by doing their own will.² But in the process of eradicating institutional violence against the subject, he disposed of the ethical subject as such, transforming it into the predictable, malleable creature of utility. Godwin shared much of this project; he also adopted utility as his guiding justification for ethical norms and argued that punishment could be replaced with surveillance and “general discountenance” (*E*, 659). But he relied directly on individual virtue and would have considered the predictable subject of Bentham’s system abhorrent. He also attacked

any attempt to reduce reason to a legal code, arguing that no code could ever anticipate the contingencies of any specific case, that rather than resolving legal disputes it would only give rise to the need for more codification *ad infinitum*. The only possible standard of justice was uncoded justice itself, whose dictates must be determined case by case in the light of reason alone (*E*, 686).

Does Godwin therefore rely on the opposite notion that ultimately reason must speak to us directly, ineffably, without articulating itself at all? Consider the ethical theory of Immanuel Kant, another of his contemporaries. While Bentham hoped to provide ethical theory with ways of arbitrating between competing demands for justice using a utilitarian calculus, Kant argued that one could never determine the contents of the moral law according to the empirical, practical good it might bring about. In *Critique of Practical Reason*, he argues that the moral law “is that which first defines the concept of the good—so far as it absolutely deserves this name—and makes it possible.”³ The moral Law (henceforth capitalized to indicate its absolute status) does not serve the good; on the contrary, it is the basis for any understanding of the good. One obeys the Law because it is already the good itself; it needs no justification. Accordingly, Kant also holds that the Law “commands the most unhesitating obedience from everyone,” is “plain to everyone,” and is itself “pure practical reason.”⁴ We know what is just immediately through the voice of conscience. Furthermore, since the Law commands a universal good, it demands that one comply with it not out of what Kant calls a “pathological motive,” not out of personal desire or interest. But by safeguarding the Law from becoming a means to practical ends, Kant places it beyond the reach of rational investigation; it is as if the Law could command what it would, and people would have to obey. As recent analyses of Kant suggest, his theory cannot distinguish between moral virtue and radical evil, for both can arise from the attempt to act upon an ethical principle for its own sake, without reference to social utility, even at the cost of life.⁵ Godwin would object to Kant on similar grounds, arguing that if we judge only by the intention to adhere to duty, then we would have to give “the palm to some of the greatest pests of mankind,” including political assassins, who, like good ethical heroes, “sacrificed their ease, and cheerfully exposed themselves to tortures and death” out of their deep “anxiety for the eternal welfare of mankind.” Virtuous intention alone is not a reliable guide, for “self-deception is of all things the most easy” (*E*, 188–89).⁶ Elsewhere Godwin writes, “Pure

malevolence is the counterpart of disinterested virtue; and almost all the considerations that prove the existence of the one are of equal avail to prove the existence of the other" (*E*, 384). As he states quite clearly in the second and third editions of his treatise, "intention is of no further value than as it leads to utility: it is the means, and not the end." In other words, "Duty is the application of capacity to the real, not imaginary, benefit of mankind" (*E*, 190).

This difference between their ethical teachings comes through in the contrast between the little moral tales each ponders. Such tales inevitably focus on the confrontation of a tyrant with a powerless man. Kant proposes asking a man what he would do "if his sovereign threatened him with . . . sudden death unless he made a false deposition against an honorable man whom the ruler wished to destroy under a plausible pretext." That man might not be able to say for sure what he would do, but "he would certainly admit without hesitation" that it might be possible for him to give his life. "He judges, therefore, that he can do something because he knows that he ought, and he recognizes that he is free."⁷ In a slightly different context, a discussion of the necessity of sincerity, Godwin asks whether a man should, at the cost of death, reveal his own identity to powerful political foes, replying that he should do so not only to comply with his duty but also to help free the human race; through his act, he would avoid "contributing his part to the cutting off the intercourse between men's tongues and their sentiments, infusing general distrust," and set an example of "spirited defiance of consequences" that may inspire others (*E*, 328–39).⁸ For Kant, the possibility of complying with the Law reveals that people are morally free; for Godwin, adhering to the truth demonstrates not only one's freedom but the possibility of creating the conditions which would liberate others as well. Pure freedom, the virtuous intention, is not enough; it must also serve the actual interests of others.

Thus Godwin takes up a fairly unusual ethical stance. Like Bentham, he insists that ethical action must lead to real good for humanity; like Kant, he holds that one must act with a fully virtuous intention. Because he holds to both, he avoids the most coercive aspects of the ethical theories of these contemporaries. Bentham, in effect, substitutes his own ethical judgment for everyone else's, liberating them from the need to be virtuous through his own ethically heroic enterprise, but reducing them to mere instruments of his intention in the process. Kant's theory, while apparently the opposite of Bentham's, replicates its problems on another scale. How,

for example, is the Law to be imposed without any pathological motive and still find purchase in the mind of an actual human being, riven as he or she must be by countless partial motives of this kind? According to Jacques Lacan, it would do so by relying on that aspect of the subject that finds satisfaction in taking action against its own interest, that finds pleasure in something beyond its pleasure: in what he calls *jouissance*. Lacan places Kant in the company of the Marquis de Sade to reveal the sadistic dimension of the categorical imperative: by putting oneself under the spell of the Kantian Law, one in fact is “reconstituted from alienation at the price of being no more than the instrument of *jouissance*,” thereby taking up the position confessedly occupied by Sade himself. The Law is an alienated will; Kant’s inability to specify the object of the Law disables his theory, because through that fault he renounces happiness “at the price of the truth of man,” the truth of desire.⁹ In Bentham’s world, we would all become the means of bringing about the greater good, while in Kant, we would become instruments of the Law itself.

In contrast to his contemporaries, Godwin argues that people should accept the force only of those immutable principles of which they are truly persuaded. But it does not follow that they are free to do whatever they please; they would be subject to a somewhat different form of constraint. To ensure that people adhere to the demands of reason, Godwin proposes that people justify their actions before humanity as a whole, which would judge how well they have carried out the obligation to serve the universal good. People faced with ethical choices, he writes, should consider how their decision would appear if they were “to be their own historians, the future narrators of the scene in which they were acting a part. . . . How much better would it be if . . . every man were to make the world his confessional, and the human species the keeper of his conscience?” (*E*, 311–12). On the same principle, he writes, “How great would be the benefit if every man were sure of meeting in his neighbour the ingenuous censor, who would tell him in person, and publish to the world, his virtues, his good deeds, his meannesses and his follies?” (*E*, 313). By making humanity the best judge of how well one safeguarded its happiness, Godwin avoids the impasses of purely external or purely internal modes of punishment. Rather than submitting to the Law through the voice of conscience or the sentence of a judge, people would listen to the responses of others to their own accounts of what justice would require (*E*, 636–42), entering into a chastening debate not only over their actions but also over what right action

should be. Just as the Law is not the same as its enactment, so also it is not the same as any particular judgment; it would become best known if conscience were mediated through the judgments of others, and those judgments through inner assent, in either case being forced to account for its commands.

While Godwin's system of conversational enforcement undoes other forms of coercion, it creates one of its own. The theory of internal assent requires a form of moral aggression, the willingness of people to serve as self-appointed embodiments of justice. In reference to the recalcitrant, erring man, he writes, "I must teach him to feel himself, to bow to no authority, to examine the principles he entertains, and render to his mind the reason of his conduct" (E, 692). But in doing so, he will intrude upon his possible preference to remain as he is, a man content with unfreedom. Godwin might argue that people, once taught to be free, would recognize this wish as their own, experiencing it not as coercion but as liberation, but in so doing he would presume that he knows what is best, that without reason such a man "will never rise to the dignity of a rational being" (E, 692). Underlying his philosophy is the coercive demand that people eradicate all coercion: "the dictates of reason," Godwin writes, will bind people "more strongly than with fetters of iron" (E, 660). Although he eliminates every other mode of coercion, he never questions the demand that humanity eventually liberate itself from them, or that every virtuous person must be the agent of this demand. In the concluding remarks of the *Enquiry*, he writes, "No maxim can be more suspicious than that which teaches us to consult the temper of the times, and tell only as much as we imagine our contemporaries will be able to bear" (E, 784). But then one must constantly say what is unbearable. In this passage one hears a specifically Godwinian violence, the *jouissance* of the imperative of liberation: it is as if he wishes to become a hero of a traumatic truth, one who exposes the nullity of the social consensus and reveals that his auditors are as yet only "shadows of men" (E, 601; compare with 205). In the first edition of his treatise, Godwin even contemplates the possibility that such ethical heroism would win the day all by itself: "Nor is it possible to say how much good one man sufficiently rigid in his adherence to truth would effect. One such man, with genius, information and energy, might redeem a nation from vice."¹⁰ These lines reveal the contradiction at the heart of his ethical theory. A single good man who propagates a transforming wisdom is using sincerity to impose his vision on others, rather than allowing a

conversation about justice to take place. The coercion Godwin will not countenance elsewhere reappears in his determination to liberate his society from unreason, whether people want him to or not. Thus it is not surprising that before long he will have revealed too much about the life of Mary Wollstonecraft in his *Memoirs*, damaging her reputation and the public sympathy for feminism, or later, in his *Reply to Parr*, discussed infanticide too openly for his readers.¹¹

Godwin goes astray in these passages because he forgets that people should live not by their own immediate judgment, but by what they discover in conversation with others. If it is so easy to confuse virtue with radical evil, if even assassins think they carry out the dictates of reason, then people should not pretend they have immediate access to truth; they should act as if they must eventually confess everything to others. In short, he forgets the crucial place of interpretation in the adjudication of duty. Yet if he acknowledges the necessity of such mediation, his system would also contradict itself, for then he would accept the idea that immutable reason is not knowable in its own right prior to its articulation. He is caught between two demands: because he wants to insist on the illegitimacy of all institutions, he argues that reason exists objectively prior to them, but because he also wants to ensure that it does not impose itself without justification, he argues that people must explain their interpretation of it to others. He thus wants a truth prior to articulation that is known by being articulated. In his attempt to sustain an objective virtue without making it an irrational, immediate principle, he wants a mediated immediacy.

The same tension permeates *Caleb Williams*, the novel Godwin began to write almost immediately after finishing the first edition of his treatise. In the *Enquiry*, he recommends that people act as if they are to become their own “historians, the future narrators” (*E*, 311) of their lives, that they are to be accountable to “the world” and “the human species” (*E*, 312), and that their neighbors will “publish” (*E*, 313) their follies to all. In effect, he asks people to imagine that they will write confessional autobiographies that the world might read. Sincerity implicitly operates best on the analogy of mutual textual interpretation; it is an expanded or radicalized form of literacy. In this novel, he tries out what such a book might look like, writing it in the eponymous hero’s first-person voice. The problem of articulation posed by the treatise thus bears directly upon the genre of this book. Does the novel simply tell the truth about *Things As They Are*, the book’s original leading title, as if to instruct the reader about the

modes of “domestic and unrecorded despotism” referred to in the preface, or is it a confession that will be complete only after the reader has responded with his or her own judgment of Caleb’s views?¹² Does it belong to the mode of heroic truth-telling or of conversation and mutual judgment?

The novel does not immediately make clear how it is to be read. The preface suggests that it will merely convey the teachings of the treatise: “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” (C, 1). The phrase “things as they are” appears several times in the *Enquiry* and is meant to convey, as do many details in the novel itself, a sense of the overwhelming weight of injustice that the citizens of England must endure (E, 401, 485, 597). The tale of various miscarriages of law and Caleb’s imprisonment also bears out points made in the *Enquiry*. Falkland’s secretiveness and Caleb’s curiosity are instances of the “domestic tactics” of a society in which people do not reveal themselves fully to each other (C, 288). At times, the philosophical import of the tale breaks through the surface of the text, as when Caleb, confronted with the choice of whether to keep money given him by his persecutor, calculates the utility of returning it or spending it himself; his reflections in this passage resemble the sort one might find in the treatise (C, 287–88). Similarly, on at least two occasions, Caleb closely resembles the ethical hero of both Kant and Godwin, one who will risk future suffering to adhere to the truth. In one instance, he decides to tell the truth about his name although he is being sought by bounty hunters; in another, he refuses to sign a statement exonerating Falkland although he knows he will be subject to indefinite future persecution as a result. Even the stunning paranoia of the third volume, in which Caleb believes that an entire society is bent on persecuting him, echoes the passage in which Godwin denounces the machinations of the tyrant whose eye “is never closed”; here again “no man can go out or come into the country, but he is watched,” nor publish without attracting the attention of spies, nor frequent “places of public resort” without becoming “objects of attention”; it is as if Caleb stands in for the English nation, for he too could be “held in obedience by the mere operation of fear” (E, 438). It seems that almost every feature of the novel extends or confirms Godwin’s previous work.

But at the same time, Godwin signals a certain nervousness about his medium. "If the author shall have taught a valuable lesson, without subtracting from the interest and passion by which a performance of this sort ought to be characterised, he will have reason to congratulate himself upon the vehicle he has chosen" (C, 1). What lesson, exactly, is he teaching? Caleb joins in a single persona two genres of ethical reflection: he is at once the ethical hero telling the truth at all costs about an unjust society and someone confessing his ways to another. Insofar as it solicits readerly interpretation, the novel puts in question the value of that ethical heroism, asking whether in fact such hyperbolic virtue serves its purpose. These competing perspectives finally break the novel open in the two versions of the final chapter. The first ending, in which Caleb encounters Falkland one last time, fails to alter his antagonist in any way, and ends up imprisoned and mad, gives Caleb the chance to act out the fantasy that he is the solitary truth-teller in the face of a closed and total system of oppression. But it also exposes the failure of this fantasy, its impotence in the face of what it opposes. The novel is caught between two closed orders, tyranny and resistance, without indicating any way beyond them. In the second, published ending, Caleb encounters Falkland, is moved by his weakness and suffering, repents of his accusation, and accuses himself, while Falkland, moved by this performance, exonerates Caleb and denounces himself in turn. Here the personifications of the closed orders of tyranny and resistance suddenly admit their mutual implication and accept the violence implicit in their own self-righteous claims. In these pages, Caleb indicates that his book does not manifest some prior truth but rather seeks an as yet unsuspected truth in the response of the reader. As Tilottama Rajan argues, "Through Caleb as reader, Godwin inscribes a model of reading as the unearthing of truth and the correction of past misrepresentations. In finally becoming to Caleb what Caleb has been to Hawkins, we recover a truth of a different kind: the truth of what should rather than of what really did happen" (C, 185). In the end, he admits that he did not know what his life actually meant; master of things as they are, it never occurred to him how they might be. Godwin "thus passes on to us the task of applying in our own lives an insight that comes too late to help the characters" (C, 187).¹³

This second ending breaks open Godwin's ethical theory. Godwin might say that his critique of legislation extends to narrative as well: someone who believes that Caleb's narrative tells the whole truth about his life, and therefore actually represents things as they are,

forgets that, just as reason cannot be captured in legislation, the meaning of the life cannot be told in any single mode of articulation. If this were not so, Caleb would be frozen in the role he created for himself and would be nothing more than a character in his tale. But the novel gives this argument a new form. Caleb escapes the first ending not by recovering a truth prior to articulation but by discovering that narrative cannot fully capture who he is, that truth is found in the failures of articulation.¹⁴ According to this ending, immutable reason does not exist objectively prior to institutions, but negatively, in what they can never fully establish. Because this is so, Caleb exceeds the character he framed for himself and can become other than who he has been. He expresses this insight by stating that his novel vindicates Falkland rather than himself, reversing what he set out to write. Moreover, by admitting to the vast gap between intention and meaning, he implicitly accepts the possibility that the effects of action are never knowable in advance, that one cannot finally tell the difference between imaginary and real utility, and thus that no action can be entirely free from self-deception.

Many readers would object to this account, arguing that the second ending is far too caught up in modes of performance exposed as fraudulent elsewhere in the novel. The rhetoric of sincerity in Caleb's final speech, not to mention in Falkland's response, resembles that used by Falkland to exonerate himself of the charge of murder. Caleb's sympathetic response to Falkland might be no less fictive than Falkland's call upon his audience's sympathy on that occasion.¹⁵ As Randa Helfield argues, early in the novel Caleb tries to construct a legal case against his master and fails to do so, in part because his hearers only listen for the confirmation of their expectations. The truth alone cannot win the day. Only after he learns that the telling of the truth, not the truth itself, "establishes its credibility and power" can he become convincing in the final scene.¹⁶ But this is exactly how the novel relieves Caleb of his solipsistic grandeur. When he relinquishes the self-evidence of the truth and accepts the fact that it must be represented through fiction, he can encounter the world of fictions as other than a closed system of lies. This insight is mirrored in Godwin's own practice in writing the second ending. In the 1832 preface to the Standard Novels' edition of *Fleetwood*, Godwin recounts the stages he went through in composing *Caleb Williams*, writing that he conceived of the breathless anxiety of the third volume first and then worked backward from there.¹⁷ On this account, the entire novel germinated from the idea of a person trying

to survive unendurable pressure from a more powerful antagonist. The logical culmination of this sensationalist plot, this fantasy of absolute resistance to absolute oppression, is in fact the madness of the first ending. In writing the second ending, Godwin dramatically changes the import of his text, doing so only at the last moment, in effect discovering the significance of his novel not at its inception but in the process of composition. The same process took place as he composed the *Enquiry*. As Godwin declares in *The Enquirer*, "When a man writes a book of methodical investigation, he does not write because he understands the subject, but he understands the subject because he has written."¹⁸ Godwin's own experience of writing thus contradicts his claims about immutable reason: just as Caleb must submit to rhetoric before he can break out of his narrow identity, Godwin must also write to discover what he has to say.

In accepting representation in this way, the second ending challenges the central premise of the *Enquiry*, that actual legislation falsifies the decrees of immutable reason. Not long after completing *Caleb Williams*, Godwin wrote a pamphlet attacking the way the Lord Chief Justice conceived of "constructive treason" in a case against several members of the London Corresponding Society.¹⁹ As Helfield shows in the pamphlet, Godwin argues that the law "is and must remain constant" and have the same meaning in all circumstances, in effect that "it is an objective and self-contained entity that can be apprehended independently of judicial constructions." But this novel's ending demonstrates that the law can be known only through construction.²⁰ The second ending implicitly transforms Godwin's entire theory of justice, whether or not he appropriates that ending's insights in his future work. Reason, too, needs to enter into a conversation in order to discover its truth; it must speak through positive law or institutions, not because they coincide with it but because they make it possible for it to discover itself.

Because this ending brings about such a pronounced change in Godwin's basic ethical theory, it makes possible a retrospective reinterpretation of the entire novel. Consider Caleb's state for much of the third volume. In the aforementioned preface of 1832, Godwin writes that he conceived the novel when he imagined "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."²¹ But since Caleb remains in this state because he refuses to comply with his pursuer's demands, this third volume vastly expands the little tale of ethical heroism

familiar in Kant's *Critique* or Godwin's *Enquiry*. In those texts, ethical defiance presumably leads to a quick death, but here Falkland, having already deprived his victim of his livelihood, reputation, and place in civil society, wishes to keep him alive and torment him indefinitely, as if he could perpetually undergo a kind of emotional or spiritual death. Furthermore, Falkland's accusation does not remain his alone: sealed by a legal verdict, enforced by prisons and agents of the law, rendered into a popular narrative sold on the London streets, passed by word of mouth among the lower ranks, it permeates the social order from top to bottom, pressing against Caleb from every conceivable part of his world and through every form of discursive and textual articulation. Caleb's insistence on the truth thus reveals an even more hyperbolic investment in doing the right thing, this time in defiance of an entire society and potentially over the course of an entire life. What was a short and brutal confrontation with unjust power in the *Enquiry* here becomes an extensive negotiation with various kinds of intimidation; the novel thus translates the battle with an unjust force into an almost Foucauldian reflection on the manifold layers of social power.

It might seem that in this volume Caleb is entirely subject to Falkland's power. Yet Caleb can master Falkland's charge at least on one count: he knows that it is untrue. Having once imagined that he could know Falkland's secret, he now believes he knows the secret of the entire social order, that its power is illegitimate through and through. Although he lives in misery, his perpetual defiance of Falkland's demand allows him to experience that misery as a feature of the *jouissance* of his absolute ethical heroism, his determination to hold up against the entire creation if need be. Caleb needs Falkland to reach this state of heroism; only if the world is a system of total oppression can he become the singular pillar of truth. Of course, since nearly the entire nation is against him, he has no audience for his tale nor even for his true identity, and must adopt a series of disguises as an Irishman, a beggar, or a Jew to elude his pursuers. It might seem that by using such disguises, Caleb becomes guilty of not telling the truth, but by regarding those identities as not revealing his true self, he keeps himself pure, safeguarding a self entirely outside of the language of social life. Caleb's dilemma is the logical extension of Godwin's ethics: if all legislation necessarily falsifies reason, then all social identities are illegitimate as well. The novel's sensationalist plot originates directly from the premises of the *Enquiry*, for an ethics this hostile to articulation must eventually dramatize its pretensions through a

revelation of the world's nullity. The heroic truth-teller of Godwin's fantasy is Caleb himself: he is the singular just man whose truths could transform the world, except that there is no one listening.

The novel thus makes quite clear that the fantasy of possessing a world-transforming truth implies a similar fantasy that the world could be under the sway of a total falsehood, of what Falkland describes as "so well digested a lie, as that all mankind should believe it true" (C, 135). If one man could be the hero of truth, another could be equally committed to radical evil. Such is the case with Caleb and Falkland. But then it is not entirely clear whether Caleb himself escapes becoming a hero of evil as well: in the novel's penultimate chapter, just before the second ending, he becomes so incensed at his impossible situation that he explodes in a furious denunciation of his antagonist: "What should make thee inaccessible to my fury!—No, I will use no daggers! I will unfold a tale—! I will show thee for what thou art, and all the men that live shall confess my truth!" Beneath this fantasy of murder through truth lies the wish for a power to destroy the world: "The elements of nature in universal uproar shall not interrupt me! I will speak with a voice more fearful than thunder!" (C, 315). Here Caleb is not so different from Falkland, who on occasion expresses the wish to "crush the whole system into nothing!" (C, 117). Caleb is willing to destroy the creation in order to save the truth, just as Falkland would annihilate the "system" to safeguard his reputation. What could better represent the sacrifice of actual future good? The absolute ethical demand leads each of them to express the wish for what Sade calls the "second death," for an annihilation without hope of regeneration.²²

Caleb is saved from his destructive fantasy when he fails to adhere to his duty. When he at last meets Falkland and, in that man's ravaged and dying body, sees the unmistakable signs of his moral sadism, he realizes that his virtue has no human justification. Falkland is only human, not the source of the world's evil; the enormous power he exercised was the product of Caleb's wish to prove his infinite capacity to resist it. The second ending thus rewrites the ethical fables of Kant and Godwin, suggesting that the sovereign and the ethical hero relied on each other to sustain a useless and apocalyptic *jouissance* without ever regarding each other as human beings, that the fantasy of heroic defiance serves the purposes of glory rather than the general good. But then evil is found not in Falkland but in Caleb's insistence on a truth and an identity prior to social articulation. The encounter demystifies the fantasy that there could ever be a secret

order of the world that Falkland could control or that Caleb could know. Caleb works through this fantasy when he discovers that the world exceeds any singular truth, any virtuous intention, that there is no Law one can use to defy it, nor any principle antagonistic to the Law which holds it in thrall.²³ In the excessive self-denunciation that follows, Caleb almost sustains his ethical fantasy by making himself into the prince of evil, as if he wishes to protect himself against his realizations through a different kind of moral aggression. But the novel's final paragraph, in which Caleb writes about completing the tale so that the world might fully understand Falkland's errors, not his own, shows that he rapidly moves to another understanding in which both Falkland and himself are to be found not in the tale of their errors but in its interpretation. Moreover, in the penultimate paragraph, Caleb muses on how Falkland was infected in youth by the poison of chivalry and thus finally admits that ethical agency might take shape through forces other than one's own will, that he and Falkland are both implicated in the history of social fantasy, and that the interpretation of their errors must reach beyond their own stories into a more comprehensive critique. In that case, they are also participants in a story whose ultimate import is unknown: much as they exceed their narratives, society exceeds the tale of its errors as well. No longer in thrall to an immutable reason, Caleb finds his place in the world of a mutable and progressive reason, one whose ultimate form must also be retrospective, knowable only in the future perfect tense, beyond reach from within history as it is actually lived.

The second ending thus makes possible the emergence of a negative definition both of identity and of justice, making its own version of the defining gesture of a philosophy of progressive modernity. In the essay, "What Is Enlightenment?," Kant argues that society can enlighten itself only if the public is free to discuss political and religious affairs without fear of punishment. Reason would create a perpetual check to state power in the realm of public opinion, protecting society from the impositions of a state that might otherwise identify itself immediately with ultimate power and thus dispose of the need to justify its actions. State power would renounce its claim to embody transcendental justice, which would now appear only negatively in the ideal form to which it would aspire, and which reason would invoke in its public criticisms. The society as a whole would thus take shape around what Claude Lefort has called power's "*empty place*," the form of ultimate legitimacy that would never receive permanent content in any person, doctrine, or law but that

nevertheless would shape the social order as a whole.²⁴ This schema accepts institutional authority only within the context of its perpetual interrogation, retaining external power alongside modes of investigation that would force such power to win general consent. Kant's notion of Enlightenment thus corresponds to the ethic found at the end of the novel, which proposes that the reader interpret the novel to discern in its representations of things as they are signs of things as they might be, to find in the gap between representation and being the place for possible enlightenment.

The retrospective approach to justice refigures the novel's first two volumes. If no narrative or institution can directly capture being, reducing the world to its known and frozen terms, then no one could ever capture the essential truth about another person. But then the fantasy at the basis of Caleb's detection is fraudulent. When he listens to Collins's account, he assumes that something is missing in his narrative and that this thing must be the essential truth. In this way, Caleb enacts the premise of the *Enquiry*: whatever is prior to articulation must be its truth. No doubt Godwin would argue that secrecy and voyeuristic investigation both follow from the lack of sincerity, but the novel suggests that insincerity itself follows from the premise of a presocial essence of consciousness. In the retrospective reading, the secret is not the truth of Falkland but only an effect of discourse, something projected by an interpreter. Both Falkland and Caleb assume that to possess the secret would be to possess Falkland himself. The trunk thus symbolizes a secret and essential knowledge.²⁵ Through his insatiable curiosity, Caleb enacts a version of his later fantasy, hoping to penetrate Falkland's lies, unmask social power at its source, and thus reveal a truth beyond its coercive distortion. The novel builds outwards from this fantasy, reversing and complicating it in several stages: Falkland frames Caleb by placing jewels in Caleb's own secret boxes, publicly symbolizing his mastery of Caleb's mastery; Caleb responds with his own secret knowledge of Falkland's illegitimate power, as I argued above, but does so in a narrative which, like the contents of the trunk, is known only to himself (and to the reader), as if his tale is outside social discourse in exactly the same way as Falkland's secret remained untold in Collins's tale. The parallel between the contents of the trunk and Caleb's narrative suggests that positing a prior truth inevitably makes it wholly alien to the social order, even if it also renders the entire social order into a symptom of this absent intention, a discourse permeated with its possible inadvertent revelation. Falkland's paranoia in Caleb's pres-

ence exactly matches Caleb's paranoia in the third volume; both are under the sway of the illusion that their essential selfhood might become visible to the eyes of another. The second ending thus cuts through the novel's entire plot by suggesting that it is no more possible to know the essence of Falkland than to maintain a total social power over Caleb; there are no successful detectives, any more than there are tyrants who know all and see all.

Although the novel culminates in a thorough critique of its early premises and makes possible a fairly rigorous understanding of postutopian society, it does not conclude by affirming this alternative possibility. Caleb completes the manuscript to provide a full history of Falkland's life, not to speak of himself at all. It is as if, in renouncing his illusions, he also wishes to renounce himself, to disappear from public view entirely. The novel concludes with a strange tone whose exact import is elusive, divided between a chastened ethic of interpretation and Caleb's wish to disappear. Much as the tension that permeated through the treatise leads to the breakthrough in the novel's final chapter, the elusive tone of that chapter indicates that it has not entirely settled the key questions, which Godwin addresses in a much more sweeping and comprehensive manner in his next novel, *St Leon*. Once again, he writes a first-person romance concerning a protagonist who made a fatal error in coming into the possession of secret knowledge. In contrast to Caleb, who merely knows the truth about one man's crime, *St Leon* gains possession of the secret of the philosopher's stone from a disreputable stranger, learning how to coin gold out of simple materials and to renew his youth indefinitely. He has apparently effortless wealth and something like immortality. But he can possess such magical knowledge only if he does not share it with anyone, not even his wife or family, much less agents of the church or state. As a result, he becomes socially unaccountable, a figure of permanent suspicion; like Caleb, he is hounded out of a rural village, is imprisoned on specious charges, and becomes alone in a world that does not understand him. Because he cannot renew his youth without giving up his name, his property, and all his social ties, he is more fundamentally alienated from a social identity than Caleb. Ironically, his immortality forces him to experience social death: as *St Leon* laments, "I became prematurely dead to my country and my race, because I was destined never to die!"²⁶ In a logic familiar from the previous novel, it seems that only those who are mortal can experience the delights of social life.

Although this novel seems to go even farther afield from Godwin's philosophical concerns, the counterfactual premise is right to the point. St Leon's impossible knowledge perfectly represents the access to immutable reason Godwin posited in the *Enquiry*. Just as Godwin's ethical agent gains access to reason by cutting through all social and political mediations, St Leon can draw upon a potentially infinite fortune without participating in economic activity; just as Godwin founds his philosophy on an immutable reason not subject to historical contingency, St Leon acquires the ability to live potentially forever, to become equally immutable. If this reading seems implausible, ponder the appendix entitled "Of Health, and the Prolongation of Human Life" that appeared in the *Enquiry*, in which Godwin speculated that eventually medical science would enable people to live for indefinite periods, freeing them from the need for sexual reproduction and enabling them truly to become exemplars of private judgment. In his celebration of this possible future, Godwin implies that it would bring about the anarchical society he has envisioned throughout the book—one of universal, passionate benevolence (*E*, 776–77). Like Kant's version of the afterlife, it would free people from the contingencies of mortal existence and thus give them access to enormous knowledge and self-discipline, to an impartiality almost impossible in ordinary existence.

Given these overtones, St Leon's decision to accept the stranger's knowledge is partly honorable; he imagines that, with great wealth and long life, he can do much good in the world. But here again the seemingly utilitarian justification conceals a powerful pathological motive, the wish never to experience poverty again, to regain noble status, and to pursue a glorious destiny. Godwin makes it quite clear that to possess this secret knowledge is somehow akin to committing a great crime.²⁷ Early in the novel, immediately after agreeing to his wife's earnest request that he never gamble again, St Leon submits to the impulse to gamble precisely because his love for his wife prohibits it and, in a single night, loses his entire fortune in a frenzy of transgression; in almost exactly the same way, he agrees to accept the stranger's offer of secret knowledge knowing that, in doing so, he risks losing everyone he loves. While it may seem that in acquiring the secret he gambles away everything to gain the world, it turns out that the latter is in fact a curse, for his unique condition actually cuts him off from the world and condemns him to a horrific life. At first, he thinks his knowledge sets him apart, and he briefly regards even princes and kings as his inferiors (163–64). But because he cannot

discuss his new condition with anyone, the absolute good, to which he has access, is indistinguishable from radical evil, and his greatness equivalent to a curse. Even worse, the fact that he will never lack gold or life exposes him to the experience that Lacan calls “the lack of the lack”: where there should be something missing, some goal or object that he could search for, there is something present instead, blocking off his access to desire.²⁸ Restless, triumphant, ecstatic, he lives in a continual fever of the soul, a state of solitary *jouissance*; having gained immortality, as Lacan would say, “at the price of the truth of man,” he later repents of his deed, confessing, “I felt that I was not formed for the happiness of a God” (S, 377).

Perhaps St Leon is cursed simply because he violates the ethic of sincerity in keeping his knowledge a secret, when something this powerful should be given to all. But consider what would result if he told his secrets: “Exhaustless wealth, if communicated to all men, would be but an exhaustless heap of pebbles and dust; and nature will not admit her everlasting laws to be so abrogated, as they would be by rendering the whole race of sublunary man immortal” (S, 161). Infinitely abundant, gold would lose all value, as would all paper currency based on its standard; at least for a time, monetary exchange itself would collapse. The promise of total abundance leads to wholesale destruction. Similarly, universal immortality would destroy the institutions of sexual and cultural reproduction, including the family, which Godwin regards with especial reverence throughout *St Leon*, bringing about not the ideal society of the appendix to the *Enquiry* but an atomized dystopia. To realize pure reason would lead to the disaster that Caleb and Falkland only wish for when intoxicated by the *jouissance* of self-vindication.

This novel thus departs somewhat from the terms familiar in Godwin’s previous works: in the counterfactual scenario, Godwin transforms what was merely fantasized into an actual disaster. Here the disclosure of the secret would threaten not merely social authority, as is the case with Caleb, but social relations themselves. The novel’s focus shifts from ethics to an objective social logic: rather than adhering to the absolute as an ideal, St Leon possesses it in the form of a technology. This novel describes society as a system ordered by formal structures distinct from intention or affect. Social structure is no longer a form of constraint in its own right, but rather a framework for action which depends on the constraint already given in the “everlasting laws” of nature. The implicitly hierarchical confrontation between Falkland and Caleb, which sustains the entire mode of

inversion, complete with the ambivalent genres of criminal autobiography and of forest outlawry, gives way to a very different dynamic: the attempt to commit a crime against the laws of nature, one that would, like Sadean crime, attempt “to liberate nature from its own laws.”²⁹ St Leon’s magical knowledge constitutes precisely this kind of crime, one that would liberate by bringing about a version of the “second death,” either through the annihilation of exchange or the cancellation of the need to reproduce. While St Leon does not destroy himself with his secret, the fact that he receives it from a stranger, who asks that he never “betray to mortal man the place in which [he] shall have deposited [the stranger’s] ashes” (S, 157), just as Sade commanded that his coffin be covered in acorns so that the “traces of [his] grave [would] disappear from the surface of the earth,” suggests that his indefinitely long life is already a version of such a second death, that he already embodies a principle alien to nature.³⁰ The shift from the defiance of power to that of nature suggests that Godwin extends the critique of immutable justice carried out in the earlier novel; here he implicitly identifies the attempt to realize perfect reason with a crime against the most fundamental elements of things as they are. To attempt cancelling all legislation in the name of reason is to become another Sade.

This shift in focus leads also to a change in form. While Caleb learns that his ethical heroism was socially useless only at the end of his tale, St Leon recognizes the solitude and misery of the stranger even before he gains his forbidden knowledge. The novel never needs to arrive at a moment of self-critique, for it demonstrates that St Leon is pursuing a doomed project all along. Consider the effects of St Leon’s attempt to improve life in Hungary. In his account of his sojourn in Hungary, where he attempted to revive the nation with his benevolent public expenditures, St Leon writes, “I was aware that, in the strictness of the term, money was not wealth; that it could be neither eaten nor drunk; that it would not of itself either clothe the naked or shelter the houseless”; it could do these things only if he spent the money to employ the most people in the most productive form of labor (S, 372–73). In itself, money has no value. St Leon does not in fact have infinite wealth, only the capacity to command it by exchanging gold for the products of labor. But in that case, he is caught in a familiar dilemma. On the one hand, when he is abandoned in the dungeons of Bethlem Gabor, he is tormented by hunger (S, 413), since he cannot buy any food. Bereft of its social context, gold is nothing but dust. The pure disinterestedness of immutable

reason is represented here as the uselessness of the abstract medium of exchange. On the other, when he puts his money into circulation to bring about the greater good, launching a major public works project in Hungary, the massive increase of specie in circulation leads to inflation and disrupts the conditions for employment for everyone (S, 379). To spend money on this scale brings about a small-scale version of the economic disaster that would follow upon telling his secret. If coining gold in solitude is useless, making the gold useful threatens to undo the actual relations of labor.

A similar logic informs the novel's treatment of St Leon's political position. The more he spends, the more he raises the suspicions of the bashaw, the region's Turkish administrator, who regards his officious interference with the "superintendence of the public welfare" as "blasphemy against the spirit of our religion" (S, 388) and a challenge to the authority of his sovereign, primarily because the person from whom people "have the most to fear and the most to hope, will always be their master" (S, 389). Through his public works, St Leon implicitly challenges the monarch's unique prerogative to be the public benefactor. Furthermore, his attempt to act on purely benevolent motives makes him suspect, since, as the bashaw states, he comes "hither with no apparent motive" (S, 390). Whatever his intentions, his actions will have the same effect as if he wished to become the patron and thus the master of Hungary's citizens. The attempt to act upon pure benevolence is indistinguishable from the attempt to seize power. Bringing abstract reason to bear on social problems exposes the fantasy that one might be able to reshape society all on one's own, that one might find a place outside of the world from which one could dictate its transformation.

Godwin's new emphasis on the laws of currency or of social power is less a development of earlier positions than an attempt to refashion them within the context of debate that prevailed after the 1798 publication of T. R. Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*. Malthus wrote his essay in response to Godwin, who had in the *Enquiry* and the *Enquirer* devoted significant attention to population, property, poverty, avarice, and other economic questions, and who in 1820 would publish a book-length refutation of Malthus.³¹ Insofar as this novel shifts its focus from justice to the social constraints on just action, it accepts Malthus's attempt to change the terms of debate. Yet this novel does not adopt a Malthusian argument against utopia. While Malthus argues that the achievement of an ideal social condition would lead to a rapid increase of population and

a return to misery, Godwin demystifies utopia even more directly, showing how its very achievement would destroy society. In effect, Godwin identifies utopia with disaster and dispenses with the need for a demographic argument. The counterfactual premise of his novel allows him to demonstrate that it is forbidden to realize immutable reason in history because it is itself the immediate threat: when forms of justice rooted only in disinterested, abstract reason are realized, they wreak havoc in a world shaped by ordinary human motives. The novel ultimately argues that immutable reason is already the disaster that Malthus fears.

This scenario of abundant disaster transposes the problem of the lack of the lack onto a social stage, suggesting that a monetary system of exchange, like the desiring subject, also relies on absence. Without death and scarcity, the social order would collapse. The empty place of power reappears here as the empty place of life and wealth: only the gap between what people have and what they might wish to have sustains them. In this novel, the Lacanian subject of desire, the Lefortian empty place of power, and the economic theory of scarcity, all of which emerge at roughly the same historical moment, are strictly homologous.³² At one point in the *Enquiry*, Godwin argues against the “political superintendence of opinion” by invoking the theories of “speculative enquirers that commerce never flourishes so much as when it is delivered from the guardianship of legislators and ministers” (*E*, 562), linking philosophical anarchism with laissez-faire economics. While his theory of property does not otherwise conform to liberal economic doctrine, such a passage reveals the basic homology between the development of the individual subject, the general transformation in public opinion, and economic growth. All three rely on a progressive model that draws upon the notion of lack, of something which, while remaining absent, will inspire an endless effort to achieve it.

The possibility of such a productive lack is foreclosed from this novel, precisely because St Leon himself embodies what should be missing. In effect, it sketches a negative image of Enlightenment society as it traces St Leon’s path through the world. What prevents St Leon from becoming a benevolent sovereign and dispensing his gold for the public good? Would it not work for him to become the equivalent of the Benthamite legislator who, from a position grounded in ahistorical reason, would manipulate the world of self-interest to improve the common lot? This prospect opens up when St Leon learns he can bribe the bashaw to allow him to continue his scheme

of public works. But the bashaw will of course need more and more bribes, just as people, once they learn of his endless wealth, will regard him as evil if he does not immediately relieve their distress. As the bearer of an impossible abundance, he rapidly becomes the target of greed or opprobrium. Even worse, the misanthropic Bethlem Gabor captures him and imprisons him, demanding to be told the secret or to be supplied henceforth with gold. These events demonstrate that a society rapidly seizes control of a source of wealth generated outside of it, that St Leon does not in fact master Hungary with his benevolence but is mastered by it. It replicates on another scale the plot of *Caleb Williams*, in which Caleb, having detected Falkland's secret, cannot use his knowledge in any way before Falkland, realizing what has happened, subjects Caleb in turn. The result in each case is not the unilateral imposition of knowledge, but rather its capture by those who wish to use it for their own ends. Much as Falkland demands that Caleb exonerate him and thus legitimate the authority of a murderer, Bethlem Gabor demands that St Leon supply him with money to fund his activities as the leader of a marauding band. The public authority of the English magistrate or Hungarian nobleman is founded in lies and violence, in the attempt to master, rather than serve, true knowledge.

Yet the very episodes which show that knowledge is inevitably mastered by social power also show that the latter is irrational. Here reason and power expose each other's limits, leading not to the progressive interplay of Kant's theory of Enlightenment, in which power accepts the perpetual criticisms of reason, but to a contest that discredits power and enslaves reason. If St Leon's benevolence makes him a despot, as the bashaw implies, those who would use his power to their ends are also despots. As a result, the novel points to the failures of both disinterested benevolence and of selfish rulership: it carries out a double negation, emphasizing that the impartial and the partial fail in similar ways. But such failures are inevitable simply because immutable reason has become actual in the form of St Leon's secret knowledge. The novel thus everywhere suggests that enlightenment is possible only if society finds itself on the prohibition of what St Leon represents. Insofar as society demands that absolute knowledge never be realized, either in legitimate authority or its critique, it makes their fruitful interplay possible. Power would no longer claim to exercise transcendental authority, reason would no longer regard power as purely illegitimate, nor would reason pretend to have an ahistorical truth that power could either enslave or appropriate.

But why would Godwin write a romance centered in a project that is clearly identified at the start as destructive? If this romance already displays its impossibility, what social purpose does it serve? The fact that such a romance could be entertaining, even fascinating, suggests that it fulfills the wish to be able to carry out such an impossible enterprise. The novel's mode shares much with what Godwin outlines in the "Essay of History and Romance," written around 1797 but unpublished in his lifetime, in which he argues that a fictional representation is preferable to a factual account of a historical personage's life, for it makes available what is otherwise unknowable in the historical record. In this essay, he defends the attempt to represent an inaccessible subjectivity, replicating the enterprise of *Caleb Williams*. Jon Klancher argues that romance, defined in this way, could articulate defeated radical projects of the past, especially those of the seventeenth century, preserving such "possible, unrealized futures" from the realist reifications found in the universal history of the Edinburgh Enlightenment.³³ Yet by writing a romance not only about a historical personage but a nonexistent one, in *St Leon* Godwin makes the fictional representation of actual and of imaginary people indistinguishable, at once exposing the essay's potentially scandalous argument and reaffirming that scandal; in effect, he chooses what could never happen over what might happen and remains loyal not only to what has been, but will always be, unrealized. If, as Klancher argues, in this essay he shifts from the *Enquiry's* theory of necessity to one of contingency, in *St Leon* he goes further and writes a book of the impossible.³⁴ The utopian future may never come to pass, but he would rather enact its impossibility in fictional form than endorse a merely progressive history. If in the *Enquiry* Godwin theorized the conversational, experimental ethos of London radical circles to which he belonged, serving as one of the first organic intellectuals of revolutionary living, in *St Leon* he voices a hopeless, if absolute, protest and thus becomes one of the first artists of a resolute negation.³⁵

Thus the novel registers a profound difference between Godwin and Enlightenment culture. Like Caleb, *St Leon* disappears from his text: after restoring Charles to his true love, he completes the narrative without speaking of his further adventures. Renouncing his fantasy does not integrate him into society but makes him even less accountable than before. The genre of romance, having exposed its own futility, does not transform into realist fiction but lapses into silence. Unlike Maria Edgeworth or Jane Austen, who typically

expose the failures of romance to reinforce the norms of an interpretive society, Godwin prefers to sustain romance even if he explodes its premises from the start. But by folding the negation of fantasy into this novel's counterfactual scenario, he demonstrates that he pursues the negative here not in a naïve enthusiasm but rather because he prefers what he demonstrates to be impossible. In effect, then, he renounces the fantasy of immutable reason not to abandon it but to retain his loyalty to it, even after its loss. St Leon occupies the place of the lack not because Godwin wishes to have similar access to immutable truth but because, knowing that this place is empty, he prefers what is absent there to the world of progressive Enlightenment this absence brings into being. It is as if his sole remaining form of protest is to identify with what he reveals is a traumatic loss that culture must undergo as it enters modernity. But since the terms of his protest are consistent with modern culture's myth of its own progress, his novel demonstrates that negative romance is this culture's privileged way of marking out its limits. The romance of the impossible, far from being anomalous or irrelevant, discloses the annihilating wish that modern culture ceaselessly invokes and renounces as it renews its commitment to the ethos of history.

Bowdoin College

NOTES

¹ William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1985), 236. This text is based on the third and final edition published in 1798. Hereafter abbreviated *E* and cited parenthetically by page number. When a citation differs significantly from the first edition, I will refer to the relevant passage in the text ed. J. B. Priestley (Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness*, ed. Priestley, 3 vols. [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1946]), which provides an exhaustive guide to the differences between the versions of 1793, 1796, and 1798. In this case, the 1793 version of the second sentence reads: "Reason is the only legislator, and her decrees are irrevocable and uniform" (*Enquiry*, ed. Priestley, 3:156).

² Useful guides to these dimensions of Jeremy Bentham's work may be found in Ross Harrison, *Bentham* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), chap. 5; and Eldon J. Eisenach, "The Dimension of History in Bentham's Theory of Law," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 16 (1983): 290–316.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 66.

⁴ Kant, 38, 43, 44.

⁵ On this point see, for example, Alenka Zupancic, *Ethics of the Real* (London: Verso, 2000), 79–105.

⁶ This last sentence does not appear in the 1793 version of the *Enquiry*.

⁷ Kant, 30.

⁸ Godwin entirely rewrote the chapter cited here for the 1796 edition; for the 1793 chapter see *Enquiry*, ed. Priestley, 3:294–96.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, “Kant with Sade,” trans. James B. Swenson, Jr., *October* 51 (1989): 63, 71.

¹⁰ *Enquiry*, ed. Priestley, 3:292.

¹¹ On the latter blunder, see Marilyn May, “Publish and Perish: William Godwin, Mary Shelley, and the Public Appetite for Scandal,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 26 (1990): 502–4.

¹² Godwin, *Caleb Williams* (New York: Norton, 1977), 1. Hereafter abbreviated *C* and cited parenthetically by page number.

¹³ Tilottama Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), 185–87.

¹⁴ In this way, the novel anticipates Lacan’s theory of the subject. As Joan Copjec argues, “[t]he fact that it is materially impossible to say the whole truth—that truth always backs away from language, that words always fall short of their goal—*found*s the subject.” *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 35.

¹⁵ John Bender argues that, by endorsing sympathy in this scene, the novel accepts a mode of external judgment attacked in the *Enquiry*, and thus contradicts Godwin’s project. “Impersonal Violence: The Penetrating Gaze and the Field of Narration in *Caleb Williams*,” in *Critical Reconstructions: The Relationship of Fiction and Life*, ed. Robert M. Polhemus and Roger B. Henkle (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1994), 115, 119, 125. But the idea that private judgment could escape external determination buys into the fantasy that the subject could precede social articulation—the fantasy, as I argue below, that generated the mode of violent spectatorship to begin with.

¹⁶ Randa Helfield, “Constructive Treason and Godwin’s Treasonous Constructions,” *Mosaic* 28 (1995): 54–55.

¹⁷ See appendix 2 of Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, 337.

¹⁸ Godwin, *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners and Literature* (1797; reprint, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1965), 26.

¹⁹ Godwin, *Cursory Strictures on the Charge Delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury*, in *Uncollected Writings (1785–1822): Articles in Periodicals and Six Pamphlets, One with Coleridge’s Marginalia*, ed. Harry R. Warfel (Gainesville, FL: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968), 145–75.

²⁰ Helfield, 45 (“constant”), 46–47 (“objective and self-contained”). For Helfield’s argument regarding the ending of the novel, see 58.

²¹ See appendix 2 of Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, 337.

²² For the relevant passage in the Marquis de Sade, see *Juliette*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove, 1968), 769–72. The notion of the second death is a central part of Lacan’s discussion of ethics. The passage in which he designates its significance for his theory most clearly appears in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 7 of *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 210–17.

²³ In Lacan, one works through the fantasy by recognizing that the *jouissance* absent from the subject is barred from the Other—from the field of signification—as well. On the lack in the Other, see Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: Norton,

1977), 316–17; and Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 121–24.

²⁴ Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” in *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 54–60. Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1988), 17.

²⁵ Several readers argue that the unspeakable truth of the self in this novel is to be read as the secret of same-sex desire: Alex Gold, Jr., “It’s Only Love: The Politics of Passion in Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 19 (1977): 135–60; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), 83–96, 116–17; and Robert J. Corber, “Representing the ‘Unspeakable’: William Godwin and the Politics of Homophobia,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1 (1990): 85–101. But the notion that a sexual secret can reveal the truth of the subject requires a prior notion that there is a singular, hidden truth of the subject, a site for unspeakable *jouissance*. The novel’s depiction of a same-sex erotics of knowledge thus depends upon a particularly modern conception of the subject that may be used in other contexts as well.

²⁶ Godwin, *St Leon* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 302. Hereafter abbreviated S and cited parenthetically by page number.

²⁷ See, for example, the narrator’s suspicions of the stranger in S, 143.

²⁸ On the “lack of the lack,” see Mladen Dolar, “I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night”: Lacan and the Uncanny,” *October* 58 (1991): 13.

²⁹ Lacan, *Ethics*, 260.

³⁰ This passage from Sade’s last testament appears in Maurice Lever, *Sade: A Biography*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 563.

³¹ See Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Geoffrey Gilbert (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 3–4, 74–87; Kenneth Smith, *The Malthusian Controversy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), 122–31; and Godwin, *Of Population: An Enquiry Concerning the Power of Increase in the Numbers of Mankind, Being an Answer to Mr. Malthus’s Essay on That Subject* (1820; reprint, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1964).

³² On the shift from the idea of natural desire to scarcity as the premise of socially constituted needs, see Nicholas Xenos, *Scarcity and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1989); on an account of the emergence of a mode of consumer desire very like desire as understood in Lacanian theory, see Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987). Godwin’s novels evoke the emergent sphere of serialized literary consumption, as several readers have noted: see Kristin Leaver, “Pursuing Conversations: *Caleb Williams* and the Romantic Construction of the Reader,” *Studies in Romanticism* 33 (1994): 589–610; and Andrew McCann, “William Godwin and the Pathological Public Sphere: Theorizing Communicative Action in the 1790s,” *Prose Studies* 18 (1995): 199–222. *St Leon* displays the close alignment of this serialized community with new conceptions in several domains, including the subject, desire, power, knowledge, scarcity, and consumption.

³³ Godwin, “Essay of History and Romance,” in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, ed. Mark Philp, vol. 5 of *Educational and Literary Writings*, ed. Pamela Clemit (London: William Pickering, 1993), 290–301; Jon Klancher, “Godwin and the Republican Romance: Genre, Politics, and Contingency in Cultural History,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 56 (1995): 156, 159.

³⁴ See Klancher, 164.

³⁵ According to Philp, the three versions of the *Enquiry* emerged out of Godwin's evolving participation in the radical circles of London in the late 1780s and 1790s. These circles narrowed considerably in the final years of the latter decade as the possibility of radical social change dissipated. See Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986), 122–29, 162–64, 169–74, 219–21.