THE CONCEPT OF FRIENDSHIP IN WILLIAM GODWIN’S EARLY NOVELS

by

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Abstract

With the publication of the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* in 1793, William Godwin arrested the attention of the English reading public. His call for an anarchist politics rooted in individual reason and divorced from all forms of political institution, cooperation, and tradition reoriented the terms of political debate and had a powerful (if short lived) influence on contemporary radicals, poets, and artists. But Godwin’s strict intellectual commitment to individualism and private judgment has often obscured the importance of the concept of friendship in his writing. As opposed to marriage or other conventional forms of social relation, friendship figures in *Political Justice* as a bond of rational sincerity, which provides the social basis for the dissemination of truth and for the spread of progressive justice. The fundamental role of this concept in his ethical and political thought is pronounced in his first three published novels, *Caleb Williams: or, Things as they Are; St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century;* and *Fleetwood: The New Man of Feeling.* This thesis explores the ways in which the narrative dimension of friendship in these novels brings to light certain tensions and paradoxes implicit in the conceptual structure of *Political Justice.* Against those critics who have read Godwin’s fiction as representing a turn away from his earlier political commitments, I argue that friendship continues to function in these texts as a crucial site of political communication and action. Godwin’s attention to the relationship between friendship and narrative furnishes his political thought with increasing temporal, economic, and anthropological complexity.
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1. Introduction: Examples of Dissent

This thesis is concerned with a crisis in the ethical and political meaning of friendship, and with the mediation of this crisis in William Godwin’s novels and philosophy. The end of the eighteenth century is remembered as a time of colossal political and historical upheaval, but the revolutions of the 1790s were not restrictively mass in scale; they took place in and through the domestic sphere, as well. Scholarship of the last few decades has identified important changes in the meaning of familial and amicable relations in eighteenth-century England. Historians and critics have shown how the intellectual, political, economical, and juridical evolution of British society led to pervasive shifts in kinship structures and marital practices; in the words of Felicity James, “it was a time when concepts of intimacy, domesticity, and kinship were being formulated and tested” (24). By the 1790s, terms of family and friendship accrued a wide range of overlapping and even contradictory significations, as kinship and civic paradigms were forced to contend with large-scale political, economic, and cultural changes. The rise of the middle class and the general increase in population mobility posed new questions for kinship patterns premised on a relatively stable relationship to land; in parallel, marriage itself, as Lawrence Stone has influentially argued, came to be viewed less as a relation of patriarchal dominance and more as one of companionship, based on “the ideal of conjugal affection” (101). Naomi Tadmor has shown how many eighteenth-century authors used friendship to define the ideal relationship between husband and wife (192-8). At the same time, however, the enlightenment terms through
which the Jacobin/Anti-Jacobin debates of the 1790s were staged often set friendship and marriage antagonistically against one another, as the disinterested and intellectual love of friends came to represent a democratic leveling of social relations, in contrast to the sexualized power dynamics of wedlock.

Within the 1790s public sphere, Godwin may be taken as a representative figure of many of the tensions and contradictions implicit in the context I have just outlined. Godwin not only made important literary and philosophical contributions to the ethico-politics of affinity, but his public persona became a focal point for desires and anxieties regarding traditional social relations. In the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Godwin proposed a radical dismissal of marriage as an outmoded and politically suspect contractual obligation. The scandal among conservative readers would only be matched five years later when Godwin married feminist author Mary Wollstonecraft, already a mother out-of-wedlock, whose *Vindications of the Rights of Men* and *of the Rights of Woman* had proposed her own forceful critiques of conventional marriage practices. In their theoretical and fictional writings, both Wollstonecraft and Godwin present distinct but related cases for the priority of friendship as an organizing principle of an equal and just society. This thesis will examine the literary, philosophical, and political contours friendship acquires in Godwin’s first three published novels, *Caleb Williams* (1794), *St. Leon* (1799), and *Fleetwood* (1805).

As I note in Chapter 2, Godwin is not conventionally considered a theorist of friendship: for both his contemporary and later readers, Godwin’s stern commitment to independence and private judgment has often been understood as precluding the intimacy and sympathy friendship would seem to demand. However, I argue that *Political Justice’s* projection of gradual political and social perfection is unthinkable without the peculiar notion of sociality Godwin associates
with friendship, understood as a bond of sincere communication oriented toward the eradication of moral error and the cultivation of justice. Chapter 2 will examine how Godwin’s politics of total sincerity pushes the concept of friendship to its theoretical extreme, even at a point where the relationship between friends becomes indistinguishable from a kind of hostility. In Godwin’s famous fictionalization of Political Justice in his novel Caleb Williams, friendship’s narrative use presents an important critique of Godwin’s own political presuppositions: for where Political Justice posits the instant of sincere communication as the chronological unit of politics, the dynamics of narrative movement and desire that take place through Caleb’s attempts at befriending the noble Falkland add a problematic temporal dimension to sincerity itself.

The shifting conceptual interplay between friendship and sincerity in Godwin’s texts is not simply a theoretical curiosity within a closed literary-philosophical framework; rather, Godwin’s use of these concepts is linked in important ways to wider intellectual movements related to literature and community. Thus, I examine analogues between Godwin’s thought and the theorization of friendship that takes place between Friedrich Nietzsche and Jacques Derrida, both of whom regard a certain hostile element in friendship as a crucial aspect of political and literary experience. Indeed, Derrida’s reading of the philosophical canon identifies a homicidal dimension in the love of friendship, in the sense that this love always defers self-presentation to some point beyond the death of friends—within the “post mortem discourse” (5) of trans-historical philosophical communication. The morbidity of friendship is suggested, for example, in the peculiar form of Aristotle’s apostrophe, “O my friends, there is no friend”; the very mode of address seems to take for granted a context of loving friendship, even as it announces and mourns the absence of any particular loving subject. As the post-mortem discourse of philosophical communication, friendship conjoins hostility and mourning, specifically through
the operation of criticism; the ruthless task of analysis and judgment also establishes an uncanny writerly intimacy, in what Paul De Man describes as the “ungracious relationship between the criticized text and the indebted critic” (x). This complex entwining of friendship and critique has much to do with the narrative dynamics of Caleb Williams: Caleb’s love for the Burkean nobleman Falkland is expressed from the start through a process of interrogation and critique, and is only finally consummated in the event of Falkland’s death.

But if friendship may be defined through an openness to death, this very openness has the capacity to disrupt the anthropological foundations supporting Godwinian friendship. Godwin and other 1790s radicals founded friendship in the same principles of intellect, judgment, and reason that enlightenment philosophy had used to ground the concept of the human: against the conventionalized sexuality of marriage, many radicals posited friendship as a mode of social relationality set free from the taint of the animal needs and passions. In the first edition of Political Justice, Godwin goes so far as to imagine a process of human perfection that would eradicate both sexual excess (381-2) and bodily decay, liberating man from his animal nature: “Why, in a word, may not man be one day immortal?” (862). But the power of reason to overcome bodily passion and social convention is increasingly problematized in Godwin’s second and third novels, St. Leon and Fleetwood; in these texts, man’s animality haunts the operation of reason, preventing the immanent unfolding of political or individual improvement.

The political stakes of the anthropological categories of man and family may be read in the following quotations from Dr. Richard Price and Edmund Burke, in what would become one of England’s most important polemical exchanges concerning the French revolution:

Those who dislike that mode of worship which is prescribed by public authority ought, if they can find no worship out of the church which they approve, to set up a separate worship for themselves; and by doing this, and giving an example of a rational and manly
worship, men of weight from their rank and literature may do the greatest service to society and the world. (Price, “Discourse on the Love of One’s Country”)

If the noble Seekers should find nothing to satisfy their pious fancies in the old staple of the national church, or in all the rich variety to be found in the well-assorted warehouses of the dissenting congregations, Dr. Price advises them to improve upon non-conformity; and to set up, each of them, a separate meeting-house upon his own particular principles. It is somewhat remarkable that this reverend divine should be so earnest for setting up new churches, and so perfectly indifferent concerning the doctrine which may be taught in them. His zeal is of a curious character. It is not for the propagation of his own opinions, but of any opinions. It is not for the diffusion of truth, but for the spreading of contradiction. (Burke 95)

I would like to focus on these quotations at some length, as they set into motion a constellation of themes I regard as a crucial background to Godwin’s writing. The second passage quoted above, from Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, perceives a dangerous paradox at the core of Price’s Sermon. What could it mean for a preacher to propose a consolidation of religious worship and political life based on the “example” of dissent? How could such an example be followed? Let us consider Burke’s response to Price, forgetting for a moment that his words are hardly a just appraisal—for Price nowhere advocates the spreading of dissension as such, or the propagation of just any opinions, but only of those marked by the vigour of a “rational and manly” independence. Could we not regard the reactive force of Burke’s response as the extreme case of a fidelity to the very political example Price proposes? Isn’t even this opposition already enclosed and exemplified within the theologico-political sphere of dissent?

For in calling for an exemplarity defined by staunch intellectual competition, what this passage from Price’s sermon unleashes is the possibility of polemics as the medium of community; that is to say, the possibility of a political commitment, not to any given principle of social or religious organization, but to political contestation itself, independent of all particular objectives and precedents, and wary of all terms of agreement.
I use the term *possibility* here because Price, along with the wider movement of British religious dissent he belongs to, does not in fact formulate community in precisely this way. Daniel White has demonstrated how eighteenth-century dissenters were required to temper their zeal for independent judgment by organizing themselves through a self-consciously provisional discourse, oriented toward the goal of social agreement: “Faced with the enduring Pauline ideal of a unified Church as well as the persistent early-eighteenth-century disdain for ‘sects’ and ‘sectaries,’ Dissenters were forced to articulate the virtues of religious division precisely as a means toward political and social unity” (7). Thus Samuel Palmer would propose “the right of private judgment and liberty of conscience, in opposition to all human authority in matters of religion” as the “grand principles” of dissent, which if given proper reign would permit the eventual instauration of a unified church; and Price invokes a “principle of universal benevolence” (White 6) that permits the limited love of one’s own country to coincide with a more global, generically human fellowship.

However, by failing to respect the dissenters’ frequent theme of a differed unification, Burke identifies and emphasizes an element of their thought which remains merely implicit within the limits of their writing. For, by neglecting to place any “bounds in the democratic and leveling principles which are expected from their titled pulpits” (96), Burke insists, the dissenters enforce a new Absolutism, a law of “compulsory freedom” (96). Far from merely designating a religious and political “pluralism” (White 8), dissent risks subsuming the field of cultural discourse beneath a violently universal set of existential commitments, cut from any contingent grounding in tradition or government. Burke rightly apprehends the revolutionary resonances of this violent universality, this Terror, and retreats to a conservative apologetics for the theatrical efficiency of Church and Crown; but not without first exposing the abyss beneath the stage.
Against the call of these “polemic divines” (Burke 96) for a community of reason and virtue, Burke argues that the example of dissent leads to a community of perpetual interruption: “No one generation could link with another. Men would become little better than the flies of a summer” (193). Could such a thing be called a community at all?

I have already suggested that the exemplar structuring Price’s vision of a new moral community is a basically formal exemplar, one that is in no way bound to any particular exemplary content. Rather than privileging some quality, value, or law as the basis of the social fabric, Price seems to suggest that it is fabrication itself, the process of extending connections, that defines the role of the church; it is just connectivity, and not the substance of such connections, that makes a community what it is. Thus, as Burke points out, Price can remain “perfectly indifferent” concerning the content preached by a given church, in a way that would seem to make the act of allegiance self-sufficient. The basic problem of Price’s Discourse is to uphold such an unrestricted concept of social affection while still remaining faithful to one’s local and restricted networks of sociality, be they familial, communal, or national. Price argues that one’s discreet structures of “family, friends, and country” need to be maintained while keeping in mind the arbitrary and contingent factors of their make-up, and relating their composition to the wider totality of human relations. The obligation to love those who are close is a meaningful obligation, only insofar as this love is perceived at a distance, thereby made commensurate with diverse structures of social relations. To be a “friend of mankind,” in this sense, is to affirm the particular values characteristic of one’s local relations only while at the same time subordinating such features to the fact of friendship as such, freed from the contingency of interpersonal, cultural, or national parameters.
This does not mean that friendship is unqualified. Price insists that the “love of one’s country” that binds both national and individual attachments must be “accompanied, as far as possible, with right opinions.” What matters here is that certain criteria of correct judgment take priority over any pre-given basis for community. Such a conception takes aim at the foundations of aristocratic society, its legitimating structure of familial genealogy—a fact that is not lost on Burke, some of whose most vitriolic passages in the Reflections concern revolutionary discourse’s disregard for the institution of nobility. “[D]estroying all other genealogies and family distinctions” (208), the revolution harkens chaos. We may see the debate between Burke and Price as an important instance of the 1790s polarity between family and friendship: on the one hand, the Burkean concept of family (and, closely related, “nobility”) designates a principle of historical continuity necessary for the political order of the present; friendship, on the other hand, designates a more fundamental structure of political relatedness that undermines the conceptual privileges of the family, however difficult it may be to provide an alternative principle of social and historical cohesion.

Burke’s assessment of Price’s community of dissent, that it constitutes the metamorphosis of mankind into “flies of a summer,” suggests one way in which this radical distinction between human and animal folds in on itself; friendship’s lack of genealogical connectivity subjects human reason to the contingency of animal existence. For some radicals, however, this assessment did not offer so much a critique of radical politics, but rather an enabling condition. Wollstonecraft, for example, wrote the following in answer to Burke: “Man has been termed, with strict propriety, a microcosm, a little world in himself. – He is so;– yet must, however, be reckoned an ephemera, or, to adopt your figure of rhetoric, a summer’s fly” (52). Wollstonecraft not only accepts Burke’s characterization of Price’s projected insect
humanity, but sees this figure as synecdochically related to the contingent and chaotic totality of politics; in contrast to the ordered genealogical legacy envisioned by Burke, Wollstonecraft asserts that “coherence, without some pervading principle of order, is a solecism” (40). William Blake similarly subverts Burke’s critique in his poem “The Fly”:

Little Fly  
Whose summer’s play  
My thoughtless hand  
has brushed away

Am not I  
A fly like thee?  
Or art not thou  
A man like me? (“The Fly” 1-8)

The speaker’s parallel identification of man and fly hinges upon both species’ experience of the contingencies of pleasure and death, or what Walter Benjamin would call the creaturely dimension of human existence. This is made clear in the poem’s final lines:

If thought is life  
And strength and breath  
And the want  
Of thought is death;

Then am I  
A happy fly,  
If I live,  
Or if I die. (13-20)

Like Wollstonecraft’s characterization of the chaotic totality of history and politics, the context of Blake’s human-fly’s existence lacks a “pervading principle of order.” The definitions in the second to last quatrain of Blake’s poem, which may at first seem to support a Cartesian definition of “thought” as the animating principle of human life distinct from the death-like, mechanistic existence of flies and other animals, turn out to de-differentiate man and animal by designating thought as synonyemic with biological functioning in general. For both
Wollstonecraft and Blake, a certain insect humanism, divested of any sovereign transcendence over animality, becomes the site of emancipatory political consciousness.

I see a similar rethinking of the anthropological dimension of politics in Godwin’s two novels following *Caleb Williams*: *St. Leon* and *Fleetwood*. These narratives mobilize a concept of friendship that involves resolutely modern form of suffering, associated with historical paradigm Michel Foucault has examined under the title “biopolitics,” or the co-option of life-functions in the service of power and capital accumulation. In Chapter 3, I situate these novels in relation to an important contemporary of Godwin’s, Thomas Robert Malthus, in many ways the pre-eminent economist of biopolitics. Malthus’ *Essay on the Principle of Population* achieved lasting notoriety from its argument that a certain degree of suffering among poor peoples is necessary in order to maintain a relatively balanced ratio between population size and food production. To some extent, the *Essay* also sealed the fate of *Political Justice* by convincingly demonstrating that Godwin’s rationalist utopia of perpetual political improvement must at some point come up against the limit of the principle of population. My reading of Godwin’s evolving notion of friendship, however, will argue that this notion’s openness to death already exposes friends to the confrontation with suffering that Malthus’ principle implies, in ways that do not necessarily foreclose the project of emancipatory politics. Whereas *Political Justice* regarded human reason as the vessel of political progress, *St. Leon* and *Fleetwood* describe a possible mode of political subjectivity as arising from the incommensurability between human reason and animal passion.

Although I will not often have occasion in the following pages to contextualize my interpretation of Godwin’s works within his contemporary literary scene, I nevertheless believe that these readings have much to say in dialogue with scholarly accounts of the history of
romanticism. At least since the writing of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Literary Absolute* and Raymond Williams’ *Marxism and Literature*, this history has been recognizable in terms of a peculiar confrontation between philosophy and literature, through which each becomes discursively reliant upon the other, while at the same time their distinct disciplinary boundaries are (for the first time) rigidly established. Such scholars of British romanticism as Alan Bewell, David Bromwich, and Maureen McLane have shown how the modern concept of the human emerged through the poetic intervention into philosophical anthropology. Bewell’s argument, for example, focuses on how Wordsworth in particular undertook the task of producing an encyclopedic poetry, or what Bewell calls a “domestic anthropology”; by displacing the subjects typically grouped under the heading “moral philosophy” from a systematic to a poetic exposition, Wordsworth strove to provide a human language that would give adequate expression to the developing human sciences. But romanticism consecrates enlightenment anthropology only by exposing it to its theoretical limits, as McLane wonderfully shows in her reading of *Frankenstein*: “the monster – as a literate but indeterminate species being – forces a critique of the anthropological foundations of the [romantic] literary ideal” (13). Which is to say that even as romanticism enshrines the taxonomy of Man—whose most prominent features are language, reason, freedom, and sympathy—within the concept of literature, these very features are revealed as discursive constructs rather than natural and inherent values. Romantic Man achieves cultural sovereignty only by acceding his autonomy to the technological reproducibility of literature.

Would the critique offered by Shelley’s novel have been possible in 1789, the year Price delivered his sermon, or four years later, when her father published *Political Justice*? It should be kept in mind that the concept of humanity singled out in Shelley’s 1818 critique is one already
... decayed, whose animation demands an untimely unearthing. The gothic topos of *Frankenstein* mourns Europe’s apparent inability to posit a novel post-revolutionary political subject; the modern Prometheus will be a revitalized corpse. But it is likely that the disinterred parts of the Creature’s frame still flexed in the open air twenty-five years prior, in an age when the political possibilities of enlightenment humanity seemed poised on the brink of historical realization. For this reason, when McLane presents Shelley’s novel as a critique of the specifically literary concept of humanity proposed by her father (84), we should be careful not to think of this “critique” as something like a solution to a problem or didactic correction. For the position of critical wisdom that Shelley comes to occupy in relation to Godwin is a product of the same conceptual history of the human that *Frankenstein* seems to witness. What Shelley teaches us is that any correction of this history must simultaneously acknowledge its conditioning within this history—or, expressed in the terms Richard Price makes available to us, the dissenting stance of the critic must see itself exampled in the object of critique.

It is in this sense that I see the polemics of literary criticism as engaging a kind of community, one that does not organize itself around any lines of theoretical, political, or aesthetic allegiance, but rather extends itself precisely through the distances that literary interlocutors set between themselves—following, in doing so, the examples of those they stand apart from. Godwin would never have described his vision of community this way; but his writings have more to do with this process than as simply representing a starting point for his daughter’s critique of literary humanism. Thus, in his fictional writing, Godwin’s continued commitment to *Political Justice* is almost always expressed through narrative situations that challenge his political ideas: in *Caleb Williams*, Caleb fails to triumph over injustice and oppression; in *St. Leon*, man’s overcoming of bodily constraints is debilitating, rather than
liberating; in *Fleetwood*, marriage is no longer simply an illegitimate institution, but rather affords a painful but irreplaceable kind of intimacy. These texts update the commitments of Godwin circa 1793, but not in the sense (too often assumed by critics) that he simply changes his mind about the issues at stake. Rather, in each case, the problems originally opened in *Political Justice* are examined more deeply; presuppositions are tested, new contingencies are accounted for, different perspectives are set in dialogue. For Godwin, fiction becomes the medium of dissenting exemplarity within the conceptual field of his own oeuvre—always taking the radical positioning of *Political Justice* as a crucial exemplar, to be simultaneously followed and surpassed. This difficult straddling, which one might also describe as a coinciding intimacy and hostility in the relationship between reader and text, defines an important aspect of the task of criticism; I have tried for a faithful performance in the readings that follow.

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1 Godwin’s affinity to religious dissent was a matter of personality as well as association. As William Hazlitt described him in *The Spirit of the Age*, “In private, the author of *Political Justice* at one time reminded those who knew him of the Metaphysician engrailed on the Dissenting Minister” (37). This portrait is evidently not intended to flatter: Hazlitt continues, “There was a dictatorial, cautious, quibbling pettiness of manner.” Mark Philp has illuminatingly described the influence of dissenting culture on Godwin’s thought (15-37).

2 The category of correct judgment here is identical with the emergent rationality (or *raisonement*, as Habermas prefers) so central to the development of bourgeois public space in the eighteenth-century. As Habermas notes, one of the conditions of the public sphere is the increasing accessibility of philosophical and political topics to the scrutiny of a generalized readership (36-7).
2. Godwin’s Politics of Friendship

*Caleb Williams: or Things as They Are* is a touchstone political novel. Written in the context of English radicalism, in hearing of the tumult of the French revolution, it rightly continues to be read as a paradigmatic attempt to generate political impact through literary production. Critics interested in this aspect of the novel face certain difficulties. First of all, *Caleb Williams* not only predates many of the familiar categories critics use to examine the political dimensions of literature, but also participates in the production of such categories; thus, for example, one cannot makes claims about the ideology of *Caleb Williams* without attending to the way the notion of ideology itself is represented and mediated in its pages. Secondly, there is the question of the relationship between *Caleb Williams* and Godwin’s earlier opus, the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Modern Morals and Manners*. While it is well known that Godwin, in some sense, intended *Caleb Williams* as a narrative illustration of his political philosophy, the novel also seems to make critical adjustments to *Political Justice*; readers continue to disagree about the extent of continuity and discontinuity between these texts.¹

This chapter will explore the role of friendship in mediating this political and conceptual exchange. In *Political Justice*, friendship is understood as a relationship of total sincerity between rational individuals, oriented toward the gradual perfection of society. In *Caleb Williams* friendship functions both as a figure of sincere and rational politics, and as a principle of narrative development; this dual aspect of friendship complicates the rational politics of
Political Justice by emphasizing the role of curiosity as a psychological feature inhabiting an uneasy complementarity with sincerity. Godwin’s coupling of sincere expression and political commitment within his thinking of friendship offers an important theoretical construct for understanding the relationship between politics and literature. Caleb Williams presents a politics of friendship that emphasizes an interrogative and even hostile element of both friendship and communication, troubling Political Justice’ earlier projections of human perfectibility through the dangerous curiosity implied in the act of reading.

Political Justice and the End of Ideology

The driving presupposition of Political Justice is the existence of an insoluble unity between the sciences of government and morals. This implies, first, that both fields are to be considered open to scientific inquiry and to the possibility of improvement by a scientific proceeding, and second, that politics and morality share a common goal or end: “The true object of moral and political disquisition, is pleasure or happiness” (I.xxiii [3rd ed.]). Godwin claims that these two sciences have been kept separate by the tendency of “political writers of our own country” (I.122[3rd ed]) to become wrapped up in questions about the origin and entitlement of different modes of rule, without paying sufficient attention to moral consequences. It is possible to hear an indictment of Burke when Godwin complains of how “different forms [of government] have been estimated, not by the consequences with which they were pregnant, but the source from which they sprung” (I.123). The political consequentialism in this statement marks the author’s often noted role within the history of modern utilitarian ethics: for Godwin, as for Jeremy Bentham, estimating moral worth involves weighing the positive and negative effects of a given action, judged with reference to the widest social distribution of happiness.
Accordingly, “Justice … is coincident with utility” (I.121). But Godwin’s call to evaluate governmental structures according to the “consequences with which they are pregnant” also hints at a certain theory of expression which tempers his moral theory in distinction from the contemporary utilitarians. Like them, Godwin considers the legitimacy of a given political institution (or any moral entity) to rest on its capacity to protect or augment the sum of all individuals’ happiness. But for Godwin, the measurement of this capacity is inseparably linked with the degree to which the operations and forms of such institutions correspond to the demands of the individuals they propose to represent.

In this sense Godwin’s political thought reacts against a dominant current of eighteenth-century moral theory, which de-emphasized the moral propriety of the desires or opinions motivating moral actors. According to moral sense philosophers such as Francis Hutcheson and Joseph Butler, the affective responses of a community of moral spectators could serve as an adequate index for the ethical utility of a given action, without inquiring into the motivations of an actor. This early moral psychology involved a split between the private motivation and public reception of moral practices, favoring the latter as a more pragmatic terrain for the calculation of moral behaviour.

Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments is exemplary in this regard; in its pages, moral spectatorship is pushed to its philosophical limits. The Smithean “impartial spectator” or “man within” (III.3.4) is not the personification of an individual psychological faculty, but rather a symbolic and ultimately fictive object of social identification. Smith argues that the propriety of a person’s carriage is a question of the sympathetic demands placed on other persons around her or him: “To approve of the passions of another, therefore, as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathize with them; and not to approve of them as
such, is the same thing as to observe that we do not entirely sympathize with them” (I.i.3.1).
However, the subjective calculation of sympathy implied here is not a purely personal,
psychological event, but rather takes place at a certain distance from the subject: “we can never
survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them;
unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view
them as at a certain distance from us” (III.1.3). With this move, the “impartial spectator” is
unleashed from the perspective of the unique individual and comes to act as a kind of shared
ego-ideal. The result is that private subjectivity is cut off from the public domain of moral life;
social utility becomes a matter of abstract social entities whose behaviors are made
commensurable and measurable with reference to the universal equivalent of the impartial
spectator.

Godwin, in contrast, refuses to admit this theatrical model of political utility, demanding
instead a total “connexion between personal judgment and outward behavior” (495). On this
account, the only proper conduct in the pursuit of political progress is rational exchange between
political agents, aimed at identifying and eliminating those errors of judgment which prevent
their attaining happiness. Smith’s dialectical assertion that the social appearance of virtue
constitutes the essence of moral governance proposes a vision of society as a structure of
deception: the “moral looking-glass is not always a very good one … There is not in the world
such a smoother of wrinkles as men’s imagination, with regard to the blemishes of his own
character” (112). Thus, for all its language of mirrors and reflections, what matters to the
operations of sociality in Smith’s Theory is not the mimetic accuracy of representation, but only
its ability to generate sympathetic resonance: Smith anticipates Althusser, for whom “The
duplicate mirror-structure of ideology ensures simultaneously … [t]he mutual recognition of
subjects as the Subject, the subjects’ recognition of each other, and finally the subject’s recognition of himself” (180-1). What this picture of reflective ideological surfaces is missing, from Godwin’s perspective, is an ideational source, which he locates in the rational thinking individual. For Godwin, political action is the sincere expression of thought: “the voluntary actions of men originate in their opinions” (52). From the point of view of the Godwinian individual, Smith’s theory of moral reflexivity has the effect of a darkened hall of mirrors: untouched by the scientific light of the rational subject, the moral looking-glass remains an empty figure.

Sincerity, then, as the expressive mode of reason, is the foremost category of Political Justice. For this reason, all political institutions are deemed inimical to the fostering of justice: since political institutions are “calculated to give perpetuity to [some] particular mode of thinking, or condition of existence” (xxvi [3rd ed]) not for the purpose of fulfilling rational individuals’ desires but rather for the preservation of the institutions themselves, they fail to meet the conditions of sincere expression that structure Godwin’s politics. These “modes of thinking” and “conditions of existence” are not the expressions of a rational immanence, but are rather ideological scaffoldings surrounding an institutional base without claim to social utility. To be sure, the principle of sincerity remains dependant for its relevance and value upon the fundamental political demand of utility: “Sincerity itself is a duty, only for reasons of utility” (349). And yet, this ancillary demand for sincere expression also transforms the concept of utility, by placing it in a more direct relation to a notion of philosophical truth.

This is made clear by the way in which Godwin connects the entire field of politics through the operation of rational opinion. Godwin maintains the enlightenment duality of passion versus reason, characterizing the former as passive response to sense data, and the latter as active
thought immanent to the individual and expressed in their voluntary actions: “the great stream of
out voluntary actions essentially depends, not upon the direct and immediate impulses of sense,
but upon the decisions of the understanding” (26). It is because “the voluntary actions of men
originate in their opinions” (52) that Godwin is able to pronounce what is one of the strangest
formulations in the *Political Justice*, made no less strange by the fact that it arguably constitutes
one of the founding presuppositions of the emergent human sciences: “Politics [is] a science”
(218). This is something quite different than the related claim that there exists a “science of
politics” (4), or even than that such a science might have more than intellectual effects and prove
itself politically valuable. In this statement, politics itself is rendered a scientific practice; since
the actions that characterize the political field are the sincere expressions of the opinions held by
political actors, the resultant exchanges and events will be analogous to the development of a
discursive body of knowledge. Equivalently, all scientific activity—not only that which takes
politics as its object—takes on a political aspect, insofar as scientific data is bound to become the
source of “voluntary actions.” Hence the correction of error in all fields of knowledge and
practice acquires a vital political exigency, as Godwin reminds his readers constantly: “vice
depends for its existence on the existence of error” (I.4[1st]); “Nothing can be of more
importance, than to separate prejudice and mistake on the one hand, from reason and
demonstration on the other” (I.131[1st]); “If politics be a science, the investigation of truth must
be a means of unfolding it” (I.218 [1st]). Once again, these reflections justify the imperative to
sincerity; for, in withholding one’s true opinion one obstructs the parallel development of reason
and justice, in much the same way this obstruction works with political institutions.

For Smith, true moral governance functions through fictive identification: for Godwin,
true moral governance functions through and as the eradication of fiction. The Godwinian
treatment of the distinction between reason and passion is thus mediated through a second dichotomy, which we can recognize as that of politics and ideology: authentic politics operates according to the principles of science, whereas ideology (or “error”) hinders the operation of politics. What’s more, Godwin’s position is that with the instantiation of scientific politics, the age of ideology is at its end—not in the sense that its influence will immediately dissolve, but in that the cultivation of rational virtue is all that is needed to bring about its eventual demise.²

But the question must immediately be raised: isn’t Godwin’s confidence that ideology will cease to be a problem once reason and sincerity are adopted precisely an ideological confidence? Doesn’t a theory that contrasts itself to politically or historically tainted thought, by figuring itself as a product of pure intellection, perform the originary gesture of ideology as such? In Godwin’s case, the answer is both yes and no. For although Godwin’s commitment to sincerity presupposes the possibility of a totalizing rationality that escapes the grip of error in a moment of pure truth-communication, sincerity also involves a countermovement that casts presuppositions into doubt and renders judgment provisional. Politically, this countermovement has its most explicit formulation in Godwin’s writings on friendship.

Friendship as a Politics of Sincerity

To portray Godwin as a philosopher of friendship is to read against the grain of critical tradition. In his essay on Godwin in The Spirit of the Age, William Hazlitt condemns what he regards as his friend’s militant opposition to “the supplementary aids of an imperfect virtue,” including friendship: “Gratitude, promises, friendship, family affection give way, not that they may be merged in the opposite vices or in want of principle, but that the void may be filled up by the disinterested love of good and the dictates of inflexible justice” (23). More contemporary
critics have followed suit, contrasting Godwin’s stark individualism to the contemporary
romantic theorizations of friendship undertaken by the likes of Samuel Coleridge and Charles
Lamb (James 15-17; Taussig 279-83). What these authors miss is that Godwin’s attack on
conventional structures of friendship was not a wholesale attack on social affection, but rather an
attempt to rethink its basis, to theorize a mode of communal love consistent with individual
reason. The dichotomy criticism has invoked between friendship and individualism is thus the
very thing Godwin strives to dissolve.

Consider, for example, Political Justice’s chapter on “Political Associations”; the
opening pages’ attack on the insincerity involved in various forms of affiliation have been read
as evidence for Godwin’s antipathy to social affection. As the argument develops, however,
Godwin redraws his familiar vision of linear rational progress so that it has its precise origin in a
context of friendly intimacy. After outlining the dangers of political association “in the received
sense of that term,” Godwin suggest that “unreserved communication in a smaller circle, and
especially among persons who are already awakened to the pursuit of truth, is of unquestionable
advantage” (I.212). In the following pages, this vision of a “small and friendly societ[y]” (214)
composed of self-assertive individuals, is refigured as the wellspring of scientific politics:

Let us imagine to ourselves a number of individuals, who, having first stored their minds
with reading and reflection, proceed afterwards in candid and unreserved conversation to
compare their ideas, to suggest their doubts, to remove their difficulties, and to cultivate a
collected and striking manner of delivering their sentiments. Let us suppose these men,
prepared by mutual intercourse, to go forth to the world, to explain with succinctness and
simplicity, and in a manner well calculated to arrest attention, the true principles of
society. Let us suppose their hearers instigated in their turn to repeat these truths to their
companions. We shall then have an idea of knowledge as perpetually gaining ground,
unaccompanied with peril in the means of its diffusion … Shew to mankind by a few
examples the advantages of political discussion undebauched by political enmity and
vehemence, and the beauty of the spectacle will soon render the example contagious.
(214)
We have here, in outline, the social mechanism for the transmission of Godwin’s philosophy of sincerity: friendship as the contagion of reason, as the microcosmic origin of the public sphere. The sincere exchange of opinions between friends cannot result otherwise than in the correction of error and the dissemination of truth, and consequently, in the gradual perfection of society.

But friendship derives both stability and fragility from a foundation of complete sincerity. The Enquirer explains,

I cannot ardently love a person who is continually warning me not to enter into his premises, who plants a hedge in my path, and thwarts me in the impulses of my heart. I cannot understand the reason that dictates his judgments; it is well if he understands them himself. I cannot therefore regard him as a friend. Friendship requires that the man in whose bosom it reigns, should act, and appear to act, for the interest of his friendship.

The pact of friendship conjoins the appearance and essence of intention within an immanent bond of reason and understanding. Friends not only share a mutual interest, but are brought together through a communion of truth: “Friendship requires that the hearts of the persons should, as it were, be amalgamated into one substance, that their thoughts should be transparent to one another, and their communication entire” (130). Godwin admits that such a complete transparency “perhaps can never be effected in its utmost extent” (131), but this practical limitation does has no effect on the rational conditions that support this theory; friendship functions as a kind of regulative ideal of social practice, betrayed by every instance of reserve and dishonesty.

Gurion Taussig points out that Godwin’s thoughts on friendship developed in contest with a number of eighteenth-century etiquette theorists, who demanded observance of conventions to protect the ordered exchange of social affect (281). Taussig points to Eliza Hayley’s The Triumph of Acquaintance over Friendship, published posthumously in 1796, as representative of polite society’s increasingly self-conscious elevation of mannered reserve over
honest exchange (280). Godwin’s contrasting stance is that systems of manners are illegitimate insofar as they restrict an individual’s capacity to reason effectively; sincerity must be elevated before all concerns of custom and tact, even at the cost of hurt feelings. The withholding of opinion, by limiting the operation of sincerity, harms the “commerce of life”; “a strict adherence to truth will have the best effect upon our minds in the ordinary commerce of life…whatever certain accommodating moralists may teach us, the value of sincerity will be in the highest degree obscured when it is not complete” (238). These are not mere philosophical speculations. Within his circle of acquaintances, Godwin was known (and often disliked) for his active application of the principle of sincerity; he considered it, in his own words, “my duty, & … pleasure, to tell every man what I think of him, more especially when I find cause for approbation” (Taussig 282). Nor did those around him always credit the “sincerity” of the benevolence Godwin claimed to be guiding this policy. In a letter to John Thelwall, Coleridge recalls being brought to tears by the violent manner in which Godwin had insulted the poet Edward Williams “under the pretense of Reproof,” concluding that the aggressor only “pleads for absolute Sincerity, because such a system gives him a frequent opportunity of indulging his misanthropy” (Taussig 283). The effects of sincerity upon the commerce of life were more turbulent than Political Justice anticipated.

But what Coleridge’s condemnation of Godwin’s latent misanthropy reveals is precisely the radical nature of Godwin’s reformulation of social communication. Godwin’s demand for sincerity effectively asserts that when it comes to constructing a just and rational community, the messages, opinions, sympathies or attributes shared between participants are of secondary importance—what really counts is that they are shared sincerely. Rather than proposing some substantive basis or essence of community (race, species, nation, language), Godwin’s insistence
upon sincerity suggests that it is simply openness itself, or a certain posture of openness, which enables the progress of justice. We must be careful here, since the rhetorical apparatus of *Political Justice* and other of Godwin’s texts often does make reference to substantive categories of social cohesion. Intellect, especially, is frequently cited as an essential attribute of community members, a claim occasioning many offensive judgments about the capacity for friendship among women, savage races, or the very poor. However, Godwin does not go so far as to restrict intellect as the exclusive property of a middle-class, masculine Britishness. Not only does *Political Justice* lament “[t]he incapacity of human intellect at present” (87), but this very incapacity (among Brit and savage alike) may be meliorated by the development of sincere communication. The priority of sincerity to the progress of political justice threatens all social and economic distinctions between persons. This is the philosophical source of Coleridge’s accusation of misanthropy: for to demand sincerity of one’s friends involves a hostile gesture, in which the qualities composing the character of friend are valued less (in terms of the constitution of the friend-ship) than her or his attitude of total openness.

What *Political Justice* ultimately demands is the severing of truth (taken as simply the actual, real, or referential content of a given message) and sincerity (the psychological attitude of truth-telling). The sincere speaker aims, no doubt, to communicate truth; but since the intellect remains, “at present,” under the disorienting sway of the passions, there is no way to guarantee the truth of speech—indeed, the offer of such a guarantee is an insidious kind of insincerity. This is the substance of Godwin’s argument against promises and contracts: such speech acts make claim to a degree of veracity superceding the conditions of sincere speech. Godwin disparages all oaths of duty and office, claiming that “that there is no cause of insincerity, prevarication and falsehood more powerful” (634): “Can the oath that is imposed upon me make
any alteration in my duty? If not, does not the very act of imposing it, by implication assert a falsehood?” (634). Pledges of political allegiance are likewise castigated as insincere: “Let us examine … the oath of the French… ‘to be faithful to the nation, the law and the king.’ Fidelity to three several interests, which may in various cases, be placed in opposition to each other, will appear at first sight to be no very reasonable engagement” (627). But it is not simply the possibility of conflicting allegiances that troubles Godwin, but the sense that such pledges oblige a fidelity that exceeds the rational and scientific constraints of justice:

I have a paramount engagement, to the cause of justice, and the benefit of the human race. If the nation undertake what is unjust, fidelity in that undertaking is a crime. If it undertake what is just, it is my duty to promote its success, not because I was born one of its citizens, but because such is the command of justice. (627)

In the introduction, I pointed out that Richard Price’s emphasis on the contingency of personal, communal, and national affiliations established individual judgment as the fundament of social relations. We can see the same principle work in Godwin’s critique of oaths: since oaths demand a degree of commitment that goes beyond the limits of personal judgment, they are contrary to justice.

This thinking of sincerity structures the opposition between marriage and friendship in Godwin’s philosophy. Friendship is a relation of total sincerity, in which the love between friends is coextensive with each one’s rational appraisal of the other’s virtue and character. Political Justice’s rigid insistence on the preservation of individuality is somewhat downplayed in Godwin’ later reflections on friendship in the Enquirer, which frequently slip into an erotic discourse of “one substance”: “Friendship requires that the hearts of the persons should, as it were, be amalgamated into one substance” (130). This passage is nonetheless enlightening, insofar as it demonstrates how reason supplants sexual passion as the medium of love. In this light, Godwin’s critique of marriage in the first appendix to Political Justice cannot be regarded
merely as one more instance of his distaste for institutions; rather, as “the most odious of all monopolies” (II.381[3rd ed]) and “a system of fraud” (849), marriage produces social evils that are precisely and negatively correlative to the virtues of rational affection.

But if the intimacy of friendship takes place within a moment of sincere communication which cannot guarantee its future perseverance, to what extent can this intimacy precondition the progressive process of human perfection that Political Justice announces? The polarity between friendship and marriage seems to raise the problem of a possible incommensurability between an imagined historical trajectory of politics, and the many instants of sincerity that would cumulatively form such a history. The implications of this temporal problematic the political structure of friendship have been examined by Jacques Derrida.

Reading Aristotle and Cicero, Derrida observes the way in which the possibility of friendship depends on the possibility of death. This is because the love of friends is said to partake of an intimate truth more fundamental than the uncertain duration of the friend’s life: “Friendship provides numerous advantages …, but none is comparable to this unequalled hope, to this ecstasy towards a future which will go beyond death” (3-4). It is not simply the case that friendship inscribes the possibility of death as an event to be superceded; rather, it is death itself that makes love between friends possible. As Derrida discovers in Aristotle, philía is characterized by an intimacy and transparency between friends in which their hearts are made wholly present to one another, as well as by a faith and confidence between friends which defers their mutual self-presentation to a projected future: “There is no friendship without confidence (pístis), and no confidence which does not measure up to some chronology, to the trial of a sensible duration of time” (14). The paradox of confidence introduces what Derrida calls the “contretemps” of friendship, deferring the moment of self-presentation beyond the death of the
friend; split between present and future, now and then, the time of friendship binds love and
death together by opening itself toward a futurity beyond the “living present” (15). For Derrida,
this contretemps is the time of the political itself, a Hamletian time “out of joint” with the given
administrative determinants of the political present, and opened toward the possibility of a
“democracy-to-come.”

A few observations are warranted regarding Godwin’s relation to the concept of
friendship Derrida raises here. Derrida’s identification of the role of confidence in the
constitution of friendship obviously goes beyond the Godwinian demands for friendly sincerity.
In Godwin, the requirement that friends be sincere with one another extends even so far as to
deny the possibility of promising future friendship; to do so would be to make a claim to truth
which is unjustifiable on the basis of the contingent facts at hand for present knowledge.
Godwin’s attack on any theoretical or political demand for consistency is based on the fact that
friendship can only be asserting in the present-tense: the sincere communication of friends
establishes the conditions for political futurity, but only by sacrificing confidence, and restricting
the operation of friendly communication to immediate exchanges of sincerity. But for Derrida,
that confidence is never rationally justified in the present instance is precisely the point. Without
overstepping the bounds of present knowledge and communication, there is no friendship;
friendship, precisely, demands the overstepping of the parameters under which friends agree to
love one another. However, although this thinking of friendship remains beyond the
enlightenment limitations of Godwin’s text, the contretemps of friendship is nevertheless one of
the crucial stakes of Political Justice. Godwin’s very reticence toward all promises or oaths
reveals his attunement to the limitations of a wholly positive and immanent friendship premised
on agreement; his willingness to risk hostility in the activation of friendship demonstrates a
fidelity to a dissenting exemplarity in the manner of Price. We may say, then, that by Godwin’s
critique of oaths reveals the aporetic aspect of friendly confidence, while refraining from
accepting or theorizing this aporia as a possible condition of politics.

The critical figure in the history of the thinking of friendship, according to Derrida, is
Friedrich Nietzsche; “for the first time” (27), he writes, Nietzsche locates and affirms the
hostility belied within the canonical thinking of friendship. Nietzsche’s originality lies in
locating the undecidable relationship between friendship and enmity; the openness to death
which characterizes the love of friends also, in an important sense, makes each friend a potential
murderer. The important thing to note is the way in which Nietzsche raises this indeterminacy
through a critique of friendship’s conceptual reliance upon sincerity. Nietzsche sees friendship as
a relationship of violent dissimulation:

such human relationships almost always depend upon a few things never being said,
indeed, upon their never being touched upon … By getting to know ourselves and seeing
our own nature as a changing sphere of opinions and moods and thus learning a little self-
deprecation, we bring ourselves once again into equilibrium with other people. It is true
that we have good reasons to pay very little respect to each of our acquaintances, even the
greatest among them, but we have equally good reasons to turn this feeling against
ourselves.— And so let us put up with one another since we put up with ourselves. (§376)

The lack of sincerity involved in the relationship of friends at once disguises and enacts a certain
hostility. Friends can only avoid the effrontery of intimate communication via the effrontery of a
lie. But for Nietzsche, this does not amount to a nihilistic dismissal of love; rather, to recognize
the current of hostility between friends, and to identify with the other’s loving hostility toward
oneself, is the condition of the “joyful hour” of future community in which friendship is brought
into “proper equilibrium.” In Derrida’s reading, Nietzsche introduces the possibility of affirming
a notion of friendship at its conceptual limits, which takes the paradoxical enfolding of
friendship and solitude as the condition of love.
We have seen how Godwin’s foundation of friendship in a rigorous principle of sincerity establishes a similar undecidability between amity and enmity, to the extent that the very cultivation of such friendship may be viewed as misanthropic. Nietzsche offers a more disruptive model, by displacing the imperative for sincerity between friends beneath an anterior demand for a paradoxically shared dissimulation. But again, we may say that this development is already anticipated in Godwin’s thinking of sincerity, insofar as this concept is taken to designate an attitude at a marked distance from truth; as a result the sincere friend cannot sincerely guarantee the prolongation of his/her love. Nietzsche’s thought inverts the valences of Godwin’s concept of friendship, but remains romantic in its bearings.

Although Godwin is a foreign figure within the philosophical traditions Derrida examines (or perhaps, because of this foreignness), specifying his thematic linkages within this problematic may open valuable lines of thought. But Godwin’s importance in this regard stems not so much from his philosophy, as from his fiction—or, perhaps more accurately, from the intersections between the two. *Caleb Williams*, a novel conceived as a narrative exemplification of *Political Justice*’s politics of sincerity, has long been regarded to inhabit an influential place in the evolution of the novel, although it’s exact role remains a topic of debate. To briefly enumerate some key readings: Robert Miles sees *Caleb Williams* as an exemplary “philosophical romance” that stages a theatrical confrontation between the ideologies of romance and novel writing in the wake of the eighteenth-century fragmentation of the epic (192-4); C. R. Kropf sees the novel’s particular pedagogical ambitions as involving a critique of romance models for narrative instruction; for Tillotama Rajan, its failure to transcribe enlightenment politics into narrative form instates a version of romantic hermeneutics; Andrew Franta regards the novel’s three unsuccessful handshakes as emblematizing *Political Justice*’s anti-contractualism, in a way
that prefigures the moral void of commercial society; and Clifford Siskin reads it as a novel/system hybrid that renders the notion of systematicity itself morally culpable for future fiction writing. But there is relative consensus that the novel-ty of Caleb Williams, it’s distinctive place and influence in narrative history, arises from the challenges Godwin faced in translating his philosophical ideas into narrative form; the role of the concept of friendship in mediating this translation has yet to be accounted for. Friendship functions in Caleb Williams as a principle of narrative movement: Caleb’s desire to inhabit a relationship of total sincerity with Falkland, conjoining personal affection with an inquisitorial demand to know and appraise the latter’s faults and crimes, drives the story forward by positing a future of rational friendship. But as is well known, this future never arrives. In the manuscript ending, Falkland’s overwhelming tyranny leaves Caleb a friendless and insane prisoner. In the published version, the concluding court scene features dizzying dialectics of friendship and enmity: Caleb’s violent accusation of Falkland succeeds in bringing the two into “confidence” only through the death of one and the misery of the other. As I hope to show in what follows, the contretemps of friendship has much to do with this disruptive resolution.

Sincerity and Curiosity in Caleb Williams

Godwin’s narrative theory is closely aligned with his philosophy of friendship. In “History and Romance,” novel writing is pronounced “a nobler species of composition than history” (464) because the logic of narrative plausibility requires complete intimacy with his subject, with “the muscles, the articulations, everything in which the life emphatically resides” (462), whereas history merely demonstrates “Superficial acquaintance” (458) with facts. If the shared task of history and romance (but which the latter does better) is to reveal “the machine of
society, and to direct it to its best purposes” (456), then Godwin’s novels—Caleb Williams in particular—may be said to set the problematic of friendship within its widest political contours, toward the cultivation of “genuine praxis” (461). But, if romance’s function as a model for correct politics relies on the same precepts of transparent intimacy that govern the operation of friendship, then the leap from the author’s sincere intentions to the wider context of political life must be accompanied by the same dilemmas that reside in the concept of friendship itself.

In the 1830 edition’s introduction to Fleetwood, Godwin recounts his ambitious conception of his first published novel: “I will write a tale, that will constitute an epoch in the mind of the reader, that no one, after he has read it, shall ever be exactly the same man that he was before” (CW 447). At stake in this transformation of the reader is the desire that the operation of “romance” will make the philosophical insights of Political Justice transparent and intuitive, rather than abstract and philosophical—Caleb Williams will communicate social critique, that is, in the spirit of friendly sincerity. But in retrospect, Godwin finds that his political motivations have somehow lost their desired transparency: “when I had done all, what had I done? Written a book to amuse boys and girls in their vacant hours, a story to be hastily gobbled up by them, swallowed in a pusillanimous and unanimated mood, without chewing and digestion” (450). Godwin’s sincere intensions in the act of writing Caleb Williams are thwarted, not in accordance with Political Justice’s warnings about the provisional status of sincere communication (what seems rational and true now, may turn out to be false in retrospect), but rather because the book’s readership is inattentive to its lessons. The problem has not so much to do with sincerity, then, as with receptivity.

In fact, the text of Caleb Williams already anticipates these later concerns about readerly receptivity. One of the ways that Caleb Williams complicates Godwin’s early theoretical
presuppositions is by focusing on a concept that is complementary to sincerity, yet foreign to the vocabulary of Political Justice: curiosity. Sincerity is a propensity for truth-telling; curiosity is a desire for truth-receiving. Although this passive definition subordinates curiosity to the active principle of sincerity for the cultivation of political justice, there is also a sense in which curiosity is anterior to sincerity as a condition of friendship: recall the passage from Godwin’s chapter on “Political Associations,” in which “unreserved communication” is found most readily “among persons who are already awakened to the pursuit of truth” (I.212).\(^5\) See also The Enquirer, which praises curiosity as “one of the strongest impulses of the human heart” (116) in a passage immediately following a paragraph extolling sincerity as a prerequisite of friendship. In this light, Caleb, “the whole train of [whose] life” is “characterized” by curiosity (60), would seem to be suitably predisposed to the contagion of rational virtue. But although Godwin will always insist upon the unfailing political exigency of truth-communication, Caleb’s curiosity for truth is cast as a highly volatile motivation.\(^6\)

This seems to have to do with curiosity’s insatiable aspect, never quite satisfied with the materials available for inquiry. Caleb fashions himself as a “sort of natural philosopher,” “desirous of tracing the variety of effects which might be produced from given causes,” obsessed with discovering “the solutions that had been invented for the problems of the universe” (60). But this desire for truth takes him beyond the limited contexts of the natural sciences, and into the domain of romance: “this produced in me an invincible attachment to books of narrative and romance. I panted for the unravelling of an adventure … I read, I devoured compositions of this sort.” Like the boys and girls reading his own romance, Caleb eats narrative. The digestive metaphor is suggestive: Political Justice uses the good table manners of “reasonable men” as a model for a future society liberated from sexual excess:
Reasonable men now eat and drink, not from the love of pleasure, but because eating and drinking are essential to our healthful existence. Reasonable men [in the future] will propagate their species, not because a certain sensual pleasure is annexed to this action, but because it is right that the species should be propagated (II. 383).

Caleb and his readers’ curiosity opens them to the sincerity of the texts they read, but at the same time distinguishes them from the polite stoicism of reasonable men; as a result, they are potentially excluded from the progress of political justice. For the political novelist, the affinity of curiosity and appetite poses a serious problem: the very characteristic that would make readers receptive to political insight also threatens to swallow it whole.

While curiosity and sincerity are both implied in the structure of Godwinian friendship, they are not exactly commensurate to one another. From Godwin’s reflections on readerly receptivity, it is clear that curiosity, although necessary to receiving truth, does not necessarily do so in the rational spirit friendship demands. However, as the plot of Godwin’s novel bears out, it also may happen that curiosity ascertains even more truth than is meant to be sincerely conveyed—curiosity may involve either less or more truthfulness than sincerity.

*Caleb Williams* is told through multiple narrative frames in uneasy relation to one another. Caleb first hears about Falkland’s past from Mr. Collins, beginning with an imbedded narrative of Falkland’s early youth in Italy, and winding up at the cusp of Caleb’s own history, with Falkland as an aging, dejected nobleman whose honour has been shaken but restored. Mr. Collins’ narrative is itself conveyed in the voice of Caleb, who (with admirable sincerity) qualifies his retelling by admitting he has “interweave[d] with Mr. Collins’s story various information which [he] afterwards received from other quarters” (66), thereby enacting the friendly editorial duty of correcting errors and promoting a more “perspicu[ous]” narrative (of course, in the same gesture, Caleb opens the question of what information “from other quarters”
may be missing from his own version). Before beginning, Caleb feels obliged to justify his retelling of Mr. Collins’ narrative:

To the reader it may appear at first sight as if this detail of the preceding life of Mr. Falkland were foreign to my history. Alas! I know from bitter experience that it is otherwise. My heart bleeds at the recollection of his misfortunes, as if they were my own. How can it fail to do so? To his story the whole fortune of my life was linked; because he was miserable, my happiness, my name, and my existence have been irretrievably blasted. (66)

This passage recounts a perfect transmission: the affective kernel of Falkland’s history arrives wholly and completely, touching Caleb’s heart as if it were—to quote once again from the *Enquirer*—“amalgamated into one substance” (130) with Falkland’s. But where this passage departs from Godwin’s account of friendly communication is in the fact that the truth Caleb finds in Mr. Collins’ narration is not sincerely expressed, but rather withheld—not by Mr. Collins himself, but by Falkland’s previous orchestration of the events influencing his posterity. Here, Caleb’s curiosity reaches beneath the surface of the story presented to him, discerning aspects of Falkland’s history that are explicitly denied in its oral transcription; thus, Godwin presents us with an illustration of the dangerous incommensurability between Caleb’s curiosity and his text’s (lack of) sincerity.

Caleb’s lament over Falkland’s misfortunes and their ramifications on his own story can be read along two different axes. The first is the same axis that the narrative proper will unfold along, in which there is a causal continuity between the two mens’ histories: Falkland’s tragic past explains his aggressive behavior toward the meddling Caleb. The second axis is that of interpretation, which cuts across the imaginary scene in which Caleb listens to Mr. Collins. This mode of reading complicates Caleb’s account of his own readerly sympathy: for in this case, it is his acute sense of the story’s incompleteness, its critical opacity, that will promote Caleb’s voyeuristic inquisitiveness and influence the causal chain of events leading to his fall. The
narrative form of Caleb Williams is thus “out of joint” in the sense of the Derridean time of politics: every instance of Caleb’s interpretation not only exceeds the material sincerely communicated to him, but also, by casting such material into doubt, revises the very conditions of his own interpretation. His own narrative of investigation involves a series of incisions into the otherwise consistent tale told to him by Collins; and as Falkland’s suspicions of Caleb increase, visions of future reconciliation recede.

That Caleb Williams undertakes a form of ideological critique has often been noted. Mr. Collins’ story seems to involve a nearly clichéd dialectical-materialist narrative of ideological transformation, according to which Falkland passes through successive stages of European development, each involving concomitant moral framework: Falkland’s Italian episode represents the moral code of nobility set in its chivalric Golden Age; leaving Italy for England, we witness the gothic decay of chivalry and the rise of bourgeois vulgarity; and finally, in Caleb’s utopian desire for reconciliation with Falkland, we have the projected but never realized future of democratic justice. Superficially, the novel presents a straightforward counter-argument to the optimism of Political Justice: instead of reason progressively curing society of its ideological ills, ideology overpowers rational politics. But things are more complicated than this simple reversal suggests: and the complications arise precisely through the relationship between friendship and narrative form.

Each of the ideological stages outlined above traverses a different paradigm of friendship-in-crisis. During his stay in Rome, Falkland’s sympathetic virtue allows him to repair a rift between the Count Malvesi and himself over the love of the Lady Lucretia. Having mistaken the motives of Falkland’s kindness to his beloved, Malvesi challenges him to a duel; regretting his role in the misunderstanding, Falkland manages to orchestrate the reunion of the
couple before the outbreak of violence. This restabilization of homosocial fraternity is not an act of friendship in *Political Justice*'s sense: rather, Falkland’s chivalric virtue consists in his efficient management of the structure of social appearances, a structure which, “under the present weakness of our nature and forms of society” (73), has the power to override the sincere bonds of friendship. As Falkland advises Malvesi, “the laws of honour are in the utmost degree rigid; and there was reason to fear that, however anxious I were to be your friend, I might be obliged to be your murderer” (73); only Falkland’s sympathetic magnetism prevents the split between private friendship and public honour from erupting into violence.

Falkland’s character thus represents an ideal harmonization between social appearance and personal affection: however, this principle fails to transfer from this narrative frame to the next, from Italy to England. Although Falkland’s English narrative is more complicated than the Italian episode, involving multiple storylines and numerous characters, the general outline is similar: Falkland unwittingly spurs the jealousy of a nobleman, and attempts to resolve the situation through sympathy and reason. But Malvesi’s English counterpart, Tyrrel, refuses to be assuaged by Falkland’s charms. Disaffected with the noble virtues and pursuits of chivalry, Tyrrel regards Falkland simply as a hindrance to his own prestige in the local coterie; his unrelenting hatred in the face of Falkland’s philanthropic love posits a possible criticism to *Political Justice*’s claims for the power of goodwill. When Falkland approaches Tyrrel with a proposal to “preserve mutual peace” (88), he is certain that once Tyrell “perceives [his] view,” he will “willingly co-operate with it”; but Tyrell counters, “Mayhap, Mr. Falkland, we may not agree” (86). This “mayhap” poses the ever present possibility of dissent, not just from the irrational state of “things as they are,” but from the very means of rational progress; Tyrell’s tenacious irrationality does not so much refute the rationalist politics of *Political Justice*, as force
it to confront its unwritten supplement. Tyrrel embodies the dangerous potential Derrida witnesses in the logic of the Nietzschean “perhaps” (Vielleicht), designating that uncertainty which must be accepted in the thinking future politics. “[T]here is no more just category for the future than the “perhaps,” (29), Derrida tells us: perhaps, the sincere truth will not be listened to; perhaps, the one you love is really your enemy; or, perhaps, vice versa. By figuring this category in the person of Tyrrel, Caleb Williams opens an alternative temporality of friendship than that advocated in Political Justice: rather than an immanent and linear progression of rational, political improvement, friendship’s passage through the violence of the “perhaps” involves an untimely process of recursion and interruption.

The conflict between the two men culminates when Falkland is pummeled by his opponent in court; publicly disgraced by Tyrrel, Falkland is (as he had earlier put it to Malvesi) “obliged to be [his] murderer” (73). But Tyrrel’s death does not take place through the chivalric spectacle of the duel, but rather through a clandestine act of passion. Falkland’s crime illustrates a point about chivalry made earlier in Mr. Collins description of Rome’s moral climate:

In Italy, the young men of rank divide themselves into two classes,—those who adhere to the pure principles of ancient gallantry, and those who, being actuated by the same acute sense of injury and insult, accustom themselves to the employment of hired braves as their instruments of vengeance. (68)

Malvesi and Tyrrel neatly fall into these two respective “classes.” but when Collins goes on to deconstruct this opposition—“The whole difference, indeed, consists in the precarious application of a generally received distinction”—he opens an ethical position that will eventually be occupied by Falkland himself. For Falkland maintains his role as the representative of “ancient gallantry” through an act of cowardly subterfuge; his crime returns fraternal order to the domain of social appearance only by accepting the necessity of violent dissimulation.
Accordingly, the event of the crime is repressed, consigned to the pages Caleb speculates Falkland keeps locked in his trunk.

Within the narrative structure of *Caleb Williams*, Falkland’s crime resembles what Derrida calls the “seismic event … signed Nietzsche” (47), not only in the sense that it interrupts the benign framework of chivalric fraternity operative in the Italian episode, but also in that it restructures the terms of friendship for the plot that follows. From the beginning of the second volume onward, Falkland plays the role of Caleb’s Tyrrel, perpetually and selfishly bent on his destruction. But for Caleb, Falkland’s secret violence is precisely the truth that would ground their projected friendship; it is his capacity “to love a murderer” (208) that orients his fraternal desire, which in turn orients the narrative as a whole. In other words, for Caleb to befriend Falkland is to demand the truth which Falkland’s own concept of friendship cannot accept, and thus to seek his friendship is to assume the role of his enemy. In the manner endorsed by *Political Justice*, he extends critique as an act of love. But where *Political Justice*, through its emphasis on the power of sincerity, sees such communication as resulting in a progressive history of enlightenment, the element of readerly curiosity in the novel’s formal composition introduces a cycle of violent interruptions and interrogations.

For this reason, the political lesson of *Caleb Williams* cannot simply reside in an ideological critique which shows the lingering persistence of the old regime in the substratum of the new. Not because the roots of ideology are too deep for rational politics, but because the very desire to overcome the ideological obstacles to love and reason turns out to produce its own obstacles: just as the doctrine of sincere communication produces the instability of readerly curiosity, the rational necessity of friendly agreement involves the violent contingency of the Tyrrelian/Nietzschean “mayhap.” If *Caleb Williams* offers a lesson in political justice, it is that
the critique of injustice must confront its own unjust potential: Caleb’s curiosity shows how the
desire of the reader threatens to exceed the legislation of the text, surpassing “just”
interpretations, delving deeper than the text authorizes. But just as Falkland’s suspicion toward
Caleb belies the secret he withholds, the critical eye that attempts to police curious readership
partakes in the same curiosity, and could be said to be conditioned by the same event—the event
of literature, the sincerity of which always demands a curiosity it is unable to control.

1 In the following chapters, Political Justice refers to the first edition of 1793 (unless otherwise noted). The revisions that Godwin made to this work in its various publications mark incisive variations in political and ethical emphasis; Mark Philp has examined these changes in detail. Penny Fielding’s reading of Caleb Williams reveals the ways in which the differences in Godwin’s notions of necessity and action between the 1793 and 1796 editions of Political Justice can be traced through the dynamics of Godwin’s fiction writing. Since I am specifically interested in the relationship between the original positions of Political Justice and Godwin’s subsequent fiction, and because I follow Fielding in regarding the fictions as documents of intellectual and political revision, I have mostly avoided dealing with Political Justice’s publication history.
The distinction I raise between politics and ideology requires some qualification, as these terms are neither necessarily nor intrinsically opposed. Of course, with regard to their historical development, the various theoretical and popular usages of the word “ideology” have their origin in a recognition of the political subcurrents that ideas both express and withhold. From Napoleon’s derogations of the French idéologues, to *The German Ideology* and onward, “ideology” implies that the ideas so named are far from innocent, but rather carry precise political motivations. At the same time, in the intellectual history of the various theories of ideology, a firm opposition has often been stressed between, on the one hand, ideology as a superstructural, epiphenomenal or symptomatic artifact, and on the other, real, non-ideological political-economic antagonism; the most notable manifestation being the Stalinist insistence that since political change “always begin with changes and developments in the productive forces” (“Dialectical and Historical Materialism”), ideological critique has no role to play in revolutionary practice. Judith Butler has noted a similar and recurrent tendency to divide the political from the ideological dimensions in American academia, right up to the widespread attacks on cultural studies, from left and right, in the 1990s (39-44). It seems fair to say that the political role of ideological critique has remained a questionable topic for the left since its inception.

The recent movement of “new historicism” in literary studies has attempted to extract itself from these polemics by discarding the notion of ideology altogether. In Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt’s words, “we have found ourselves … slowly forced to transform the notion of ideology critique into discourse analysis” (9). New historicism’s qualm about ideology is a topographical one: distrustful of the hierarchy of levels between base and superstructure which the concept of ideology seems inevitably to invoke, new historicism suggests an alternative texture of democratically arranged discursive surfaces, each one a contingent historical product and all demanding equal critical attention. In a related move, Sharon Marcus, also a careful reader of textual mediations of friendship, has recently suggested that today’s criticism should disentangle itself from the concept of “symptom” (rooted in psycho-analysis and the Marxism of Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*) and adopt an attention to the surface of texts which she conceives under the title “just reading”: “just reading … strives to be adequate to a text conceived as complex and ample rather than as diminished by, or reduced to, what it has had to repress” (75). The just reader respects the literality of textual communication: rather than deferring the site of meaning to some always-already obscured deep referent, textual surface is regarded as exhibiting a certain sincere expressivity. It is not that just reading ignores the possibility of equivocality, but equivocality is regarded as including the correct (or “just”) expression of desires and intentions. Such expressions may, of course, be appropriated or distorted for political purposes; but the task of analysis should be to demarcate between just literary expressions and their hegemonic co-options—not to reduce one to the other.

Marcus’ hermeneutics of justice and sincerity suggests one way in which Godwin’s projection of a scientific, anti-ideological politics anticipates the positions set in play in the polemics of new historicism. What Marcus and Godwin share is a sense of responsibility what is intentional in texts: in *Political Justice*, it is only through the explicitly formulated propositions of a scientific politics that a politics free from the tyranny of passion and dogma may come to be.

That the “time is out of joint” is a problem Derrida examines at much more length in *Specters of Marx*, more specifically in relation to the post-1980s era of the “end of history” where we still find ourselves.

Obviously, the eighteenth-century word “praxis” does not have the same Marxist overtones as now, but Godwin’s usage is still firmly political. The above quotation comes from a discussion of Rousseau’s theory of history as a “tissue of fables.” Godwin writes, “I ask not…whether [a historical event or narrative] be true or false? My first enquiry is, can I derive instruction from it? Is it a genuine praxis upon the nature of man?” (461). In this context, the word’s strongest intertextual resonance is with Aristotle’s suggestion that actions are the ultimate reference of poetry (*Poetics* 7).
See Derrida’s discussion of the priority of active over passive loving in Aristotle: “The friend is the person who loves before being the person who is loved: he who loves before being beloved” (11). The legacy of this distinction turns out to be implicated in many of the structural exclusions of canonical friendship, including the exclusion of the feminine via the figure of fraternity.

Barbara M. Benedict has contextualized the fraught relationship between curiosity and rational individuality in the late-enlightenment scene of 1790s Britain. Benedict reads the trope of curiosity in Caleb Williams and The Mystery of Udolpho as unravelling the ethical and epistemological commitments of English radicalism: curiosity makes the protagonists of both novels “flawed by their very virtue. Their curiosity, the same impulse that drives them to seek the truth and see justice done, marks them as discontented, possessed by irrational, antisocial urges, even as superstitious: motivated by impulses antagonistic to neoclassical ideals of control and self-possession” (231).

Tilottama Rajan’s chapter on Godwin in The Supplement of Reading includes an incisive account of the hermeneutic complexities introduced in this part of Caleb Williams, and suggests that Godwin’s writing of it prompted his much debated reworking of the novels ending (184-5). My reading is aligned with Rajan’s, only where she sees Political Justice as operating according to a “simple and utopian desire for liberation” (185) overturned by the novel’s retrospective critique, I regard the complexities of Caleb Williams as elaborations of certain paradoxes already contained in Political Justice.

Kenneth Wayne Graham’s The Politics of Narrative is perhaps the most exhaustive reading of the novel-as-demystification in the familiar Marxist sense; but his argument falls short of addressing how the novel also interrogates such a model of ideological critique. Rajan and Miles perform more nuanced readings of the novel’s reflexive attitude toward ideology, as does Klancher in his reading of “History and Romance.”
In the previous chapter, I argued that in writing *Caleb Williams* Godwin mobilized a certain construct of friendship that expanded, and in so doing critically revealed, the aporetic dimensions of *Political Justice*’s commitment to reason. Thus, the treatise’ prospective vision of a gradually unfolding scientific politics— premised, as I have indicated, in the absolute sincerity of friendship— is shown to devolve into a kind of eternal recurrence via the instability of sincerity’s ancillary concept, curiosity. This narrative process reveals the paradoxical structure of communication and temporality implicit in Godwin’s version of rational friendship. However, the question arises whether the critical force of this gesture remains internal to the concept of reason, without exactly touching on the opposition this term relies upon: reason vs. passion. It is this second term which I now would like to examine in Godwin’s next two novels, *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* and *Fleetwood: the New Man of Feeling*.

There is already a fair amount of writing on this topic. Historical and biographical scholarship has made it possible for contemporary critics to take for granted the fact that, sometime in the 1790s, Godwin underwent a transformation from the stoic rationalist who wrote *Political Justice* into a “man of feeling,” a phrase featured in the subtitle to *Fleetwood*. This metamorphosis was more or less coincident with shifting evaluations of Godwin’s philosophy in the eyes of England’s reading public, as the phenomenal cultural stir of its initial publication mellowed into a growing critical consensus on its idiosyncratic abstraction and naïveté.
Scholarly accounts of these parallel shifts have principally been staged in two biographical contexts. The first is Godwin’s marriage to Mary Wollstonecraft, viewed by many to indicate a revision of the philosopher’s earlier attack on marriage and on domestic affections more generally; criticism has long recognized observable changes in the theme and tone of Godwin’s works after his marriage, and especially after Wollstonecraft’s death. The second is the well-known controversy between Godwin and Thomas Robert Malthus, whose 1798 *An Essay on the Principle of Population* took the perfectibilism of Godwin and the Marquis de Condorcet as a convenient counterpoint to his account of the demographic limitations on social progress.

Malthus’ measured emphasis on the sovereignty of the passions over intellectual politics came to be viewed by many as a welcome antidote to the irresponsible rationalism associated with Godwin and other radicals.

Shared by these two perspectives (one personal and amatory, the other theoretical and public) is a sense of the inadequacy of Godwin’s opinions of 1793, and more specifically his failure to make room for passions in his theorization of the polity. But what has happened to the category of reason under this retrospective gaze? Is it simply set aside, *replaced* by the force of passion Godwin had earlier disavowed, or can we witness here something like a dialectical synthesis? More important to current discussions of romanticism, perhaps, is the question of the extent to which we can continue to trust the opposition between reason and passion as conceptual categories of intellectual and literary history—or, the extent to which we *do* continue to trust it, in spite of ourselves.
Godwin, Malthus, Romanticism

Recent critical recuperations of Malthus, tracing his importance to early nineteenth century culture, have done much to disrupt the received wisdom regarding romanticism’s self-definition across the axes of reason and passion, wisdom all-too-easily gleaned, for example, from hasty readings of Wordsworth’s distinction between the “poet and the man of science” (Preface ¶20). Donald Winch, Phillip Connell, Francis Ferguson, Maureen McLane, Catherine Gallagher, and others have read Malthus in ways that have helped to break down persistent understandings of the antagonisms between political economy and romanticism, or more specifically, between a calculating, inhuman Malthus and the humanist Lake Poets. Connell provides the most elaborate account of the connections and disjunctions between Malthusian economics and romantic poetry, noting the parallels between both Malthus’ *Essay* and Wordsworth’s early experimental poetics, both of which share an animosity toward Godwinian rationalism and an attitude toward the poor favoring personal charity over institutional relief (16-25). Moreover, Connell explains how the Lake Poets’ famous anti-economism developed only after the second publication of the *Essay* in 1803, in a context of renewed military encounter between Britain and France. Eager to distance themselves from their earlier radicalism by aligning themselves with their country’s martial cause, Coleridge and Southey condemned Malthus as a thinker whose cautions against great populations and military expenditure appeared more than ever in an unpatriotic light (34-41); in actual fact, however, their adopted political positions came quite close to Malthus’ own Christian-Whig leanings. Connell thus revises the separation between romanticism and Malthusianism through a double-movement: on the one hand, Malthus is seen to share some of romantic poetry’s most noted traits (renewed emphasis on the passions, humanistic sympathy);
on the other hand, the politics of romanticism moves ever further from its initial moment of revolutionary fervor, toward a kind of Malthusian conventionalism.

It will be noted that the figure excluded from this suture of poetry and political economy is Godwin himself, representative of both the rationalism and radicalism from which the romantic movement is said to take its leave. That is, this revised narrative of romanticism’s joint emergence with nineteenth-century political economy takes a critique of Godwin as an important point of departure, thereby consigning Godwin-as-radical-rationalist to a pre-romantic moment; the opposition between romantic passion and enlightenment reason is hereby reintroduced. Whether or not we take this appraisal of Godwin to be correct, we can perceive certain tensions exerting their force here. Malthus’ most insistent difference from Godwin lies in his assertion that sexuality is a constant in all communities; all societies tend to a similar birth rate as a result of the necessity of sexual passion. To this claim, Political Justice provides an obvious counter-example: there, Godwin speculates a possible future in which man’s increasing sincerity and rationality surpasses the limits of bodily need, desire, and decay. In the same way that mind exercises its sovereignty over the body in the act of communication, expressing thought through the manipulation of its flesh, Godwin conjectures that the social evolution of individual reason may lead to a total control of bodily matter: “Why, in a word, may not man be one day immortal?” (862). Of course, this thought defies the Malthusian principle; however, far from betraying Godwin’s ignorance or indifference to the problematic of population, it should be kept in mind that these speculations are actually framed as a response to the principle of population as it had already been outlined by Robert Wallace and others. In the chapter “Objections to this System from the Principle of Population,” Godwin’s suggestion that a historical shift in man’s intellectual powers may lead to a rationalization of sexuality is proposed as a solution to the
problem of population outstripping food production. From this angle, Malthus, in refining Wallace’s theory of population, does not so much offer a critique of *Political Justice* as retract one of its premises, and in so doing reaffirm a position that Godwin (however inadequately) had already attempted to move beyond.

It is no secret that the principle of population has a long history preceding Malthus; Marx goes as far as to dismiss him as a plagiarist (117). For his part, Malthus only claims a limited degree of originality, which can with fair accuracy be reduced to two claims: first, the problem of over-population is not something that can be left for future generations to contend with, it is a problem with wide-ranging effects in the present; second, the mechanism which prevents radical overpopulation is human suffering. Foucault has shown how the second of these claims is anticipated by the French physiocrats of the eighteenth century, in their accounts of the role of peasant suffering in mediating the effects of agricultural scarcity on national finance (75).

Whereas the pre-enlightenment disciplinary governments of Europe strove to prevent the upheaval of the population-as-political-subject by enforcing strict and pervasive trade restrictions, the physiocrats viewed population as a statistical mass that would, if local suffering was permitted to take place without interference, fall in line with natural market forces in such a way that political economic scarcity would balance itself out. The guiding principle of the physiocratic notion of population is that the effects of scarcity on a population’s well-being are basically imaginary; Foucault quotes Louis-Paul Abeille to the effect that “scarcity is … ‘a chimera’” (38), in the sense that market forces, driven by fear of the prospect of scarcity, almost always compensate for agricultural deficits before the actual advent of famine. But Foucault also cites Abeille as warning the possibility that the population might not, in fact, obey the natural processes of market behavior he has just laid out: against the prospect of their local, communal
suffering, individuals may act contrary to physiocratic wisdom and subvert the order of security. This possibility, according to Foucault, defines the concept of “the people”:

The people comprise those who conduct themselves in relation to the management of the population, at the level of the population, as if they were not part of the population as a collective subject-object, as if they put themselves outside of it, and consequently the people are those who, refusing to be the population, disrupt the system. (44)

Where do the people stand, in terms of the exchange between Malthus and Godwin? The question of who between them was right or wrong is less interesting than the dynamics of their rhetorical play. We may wonder whether the volley of intellectual and political oppositions might conceal a deeper affinity—whether the famous antagonism between Godwin and Malthus might be read within the boundaries of friendship. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, a text that inherits Godwin’s preoccupation with the politics of friendship, suggests a point of departure. In her own assessment of the relationship between political economy and romanticism, McLane has read Shelley’s “hideous progeny” as an extended contribution to the population debate I have just outlined. In her analysis of the decisive scene where Victor dismembers his female creation, McLane suggests that Victor assumes the role of a “humanist Malthusian” (104), attacking the means of human procreation in the name of preserving human species-being. Pushing McLane’s reading somewhat further, we might suggest that the creature’s desire that Victor here thwarts—the utopian desire to found a new society free of injustice and arbitrary hatred—designates, with some precision, the Godwinian project. And, of course, Victor’s violent repulsion in this scene originates in his creature’s uncanny refugation of his own earlier desire for a new form of social relation, founded in rational innovation, unhindered by bodily constraints. Perhaps, then, there is more than one sense in which we can understand Godwin’s radical rationalism as the issue of Malthusian humanism: as its topic of debate, as well as its uncanny creation. *Rationalist politics as the creaturely manifestation of human passion*: this is
the formula this chapter undertakes to elaborate in the context of Godwin’s works, and which will provide the key to the concept of political subjectivity I see emerging there.

The point of contact I want to explore between Malthus and Godwin is human suffering. For Malthus, suffering keeps the disparate ratios of population and food growth in balance; this is why Poor Laws and other reform measures are no good, because by alleviating the local suffering of peasants, they exacerbate and institutionalize suffering on a mass scale. Suffering thus appears under two aspects for Malthus, the local and the mass: on the side of the local, suffering can be cognized and recuperated through the religion or other sympathetic rituals of human communities; on mass, suffering is irredeemably profane. In contrast, as I will argue in what follows, Godwin’s novels test the boundaries between human and profane suffering; perhaps more accurately, suffering itself is shown to collapse any distinction between the human and the profane.

What is unique about Godwin’s rethinking of suffering vis-à-vis Malthus is that it plays itself out through a rethinking of domesticity. As I mentioned above, many critics have understood this rethinking to originate in Godwin’s marriage to Wollstonecraft. Indeed, in his Memoirs of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Women, Godwin credits her for prompting a significant shift in his philosophical habits, and in particular for his discovery of the importance of intuition as a support to reason (121). But too often, critics have understood this shift merely as a renunciation of Godwin’s political commitments of 1793; worse, some have understood his growing interest in the home as a retreat from politics altogether. To situate Wollstonecraft as a cipher for such a retreat is to ignore the Vindications’ devastating critique of the separation between the political and the domestic. Wollstonecraft invests the home with the highest political exigency, as can be seen in her rally for “revolution in female manners.”
it would be spurious to see Godwin’s domestic turn as determined, in any straightforward way, by his encounter with Wollstonecraft (he was not a careful reader of the \textit{Vindications}\textsuperscript{4}), we may at least comment that this encounter does not give evidence for an apolitical transition in Godwin’s thought. In the preface to \textit{St. Leon}, for example, Godwin not only candidly admits to a rethinking of \textit{Political Justice}, but also ties this rethinking to Wollstonecraft by following it up with a quotation from his \textit{Memoirs}:

\begin{quote}
I have been anxious for opportunity and leisure to modify some of the earlier chapters of the work in conformity to the sentiments inculcated in this. Not that I see cause to make any change respecting the principle of justice … but that I apprehend domestic and private affections inseparable from the nature of man … and am fully persuaded that they are not incompatible with an active sense of justice. (52)
\end{quote}

The important thing to note here is that Godwin continues to situate domesticity in relation to the political; Godwin’s domestic turn is thus a revision of his earlier philosophy only in the precise sense that he comes to view domesticity as playing an essential political function. It is an important but insufficiently understood fact that Godwin’s rethinking of domesticity occurs alongside his growing concern with the problems of political economy, problems which had played only a marginal role in \textit{Political Justice}. How these two domains come to interact in Godwin’s thought may be seen from the narratives of \textit{St. Leon} and \textit{Fleetwood}; in both, passionate suffering functions as the fulcrum of political and domestic economy.

\textbf{Species of Love and Suffering in \textit{Fleetwood}}

Let us work backward from Godwin’s third published novel, \textit{Fleetwood} to his second, \textit{St. Leon}: the former represents the author’s most elaborate revisitation of his earlier ideas concerning the nature of the domestic affections; the latter traces this revision through the problematic of Malthusian anthropology. Toward the middle of \textit{Fleetwood}, Casimir Fleetwood,
who like the protagonists of both *Caleb Williams* and *St. Leon* finds himself ejected from human society and wanting a friend, indulges in a characteristically Godwinian digression on the nature of friendship. Whereas *Political Justice* seemed to define friendship as a rational mode of communication that precipitates human perfectibility, here friendship is defined as initiating an extremely localized and unique “species” that defies anthropological or zoological categorization:

Friendship, in the sense in which I felt the want of it, has been truly said to be a sentiment that can grasp but one individual in its embrace. The person who entertains this sentiment must see in his friend a creature of a species by itself, must respect and be attached to him above all the world, and be deeply convinced that the loss of him would be a calamity which nothing earthly could repair. (230)

It is not simply that friends together enter into a new taxonomical order that transcends the animal or the human: rather, Fleetwood describes friendship as a cross-species affection, a deviant erotics that would seem to violate nature itself. It is perhaps for this reason that the participants of this union is so strictly limited: resisting both Burkean natural affection and *Political Justice*’ projected public sphere of reason, Fleetwood’s vision of friendship demands affective orientation outside recognized habits of social relation. Fleetwood goes on to comment on the conditioning of such amity in the prospect of mourning:

I require that my friend should be poignantly affected by my death, as I require that he should be affected if I am calumniated, shipwrecked, imprisoned, robbed of my competence or my peace. Not that I have any pleasure in his distress, simply considered; but that I know that this is the very heart and essence of an ardent friendship. (231)

The themes set in play here are the same as those I have just traced between Burke, Blake, and Wollstonecraft in the introduction: openness to death as a disruption of human species-being and as a condition of political relationality.

*Fleetwood*’s most memorable plotline concerns the protagonist’s difficult marriage to Mary Macneil, a relationship which he regards as a “substitute” (285) for the kind of friendship
he desires in the passages quoted above. But Fleetwood’s desire for friendship has its narrative bearings in the story told to him early on in the novel by his father’s close friend, Ruffigny. As a child, Ruffigny is orphaned and left in the care of a deceitful uncle, who plunders the boy’s inheritance and sends him to a life of factory labour in Lyons (139). While this episode depicts the horrors of emergent industrial capitalism, it gives rise to a feudal political desire, in which the King is imagined as the benefactor of freedom and identity: “You will smile when I tell you that my favourite scheme was to go to Versailles, and throw myself at the feet of the King of France… I was persuaded that I could interest his Majesty in my case,—that I could induce him to judge me deserving his attention” (159). Ruffigny travels to Versailles, arrives robbed and hungry, and cannot gain admittance to address the King. At this point, he attracts the generosity of Ambrose Fleetwood (Casimir’s grandfather), who adopts him, takes him to England, and—along with Casimir’s unnamed father of Ruffigny’s age—forge a fraternal bond that accords perfectly with Godwin’s theorization of friendship and sincerity. The structure of this fraternity permits Ruffigny to finally renounce his fantasy:

> [Ambrose’s] accents were those of friendly solicitude; the looks I cast upon him were those of affection. My spirit was softened within me: my new situation took away from me the heart of stone, and gave me a heart of flesh.

> It was this heart of stone … that led me to the King of France … Kindness, the perpetual attention and interest of a real friend, in no long time brought me back to myself. It is impossible to express what comfort, what a delicious relaxation and repose of spirit, was produced by this revolution. Mr. Fleetwood gradually led me to consider the scheme I had formed, as wild, senseless, and impracticable. His expostulations were so gentle, benignant, and humane, that, while they confuted, they had not the effect of mortifying me. (190)

The political allegory of this episode—rational sentiment leads Ruffigny beyond the imaginary structures of monarchy and toward a “revolution” of reason, sincerity and love—successfully depicts the political desire mobilized by Political Justice, as friendship triumphs over the tyrannical bonds of custom and obligation.
The Fleetwoods’ fraternal economy of feeling and truth is also one of finance. Ambrose, “an opulent London merchant” (193), establishes Ruffigny in the control of a Lisbon bank. When Ruffigny objects that he has no desire to be rich and that to accept Ambrose’ advance would be a theft of his son’s inheritance, the old man “expiate[s] upon the uses of wealth,” and chastizes him for his “narrow notions” of patrilinearity: “Are all the kindnesses of the human heart to be shut up within the paltry limits of consanguinity? My son will have enough; and I am sure he will not repine, that you should be make a partaker of the opulence with which Providence has blessed me” (194). From the convergence of reason and kindness is borne a system of exchange that moves beyond the customary limits of bloodline descent; the narrative of friendship, in contrast to so much fiction before and after Godwin, refuses to respect primogeniture. But while money provides one medium for the interplay of friendship, friendship is not bound to it. After Ambrose dies and his son falls into unforeseeable financial difficulties, Ruffigny takes what is necessary to his retirement out of his property and gives the rest to his friend. Narrative closure is thus achieved in accordance to Ambrose’ liberal lesson (which Fleetwood, in turn, will later teach Mary [273]), that wealth is naturally subordinate to a deeper affective economy of sympathetic good will (194).

This closure is, of course, not free of elisions—not the least of which is suggested by the story’s movement from a scene of labour to a scene of trade, in such a way that the harmony of the fraternal economy belies and obscures the antagonisms raised in Ruffigny’s earlier wage slavery. But like the long embedded narrative of Caleb Williams, this episode provides the allegorical terms orienting the political desire of the larger narrative. Ruffigny’s story is told at a crucial moment in Fleetwood’s history, following his sexual humiliations in Paris and the subsequent death of his father. Just as Ambrose did for him, Ruffigny acts as a fraternal
substitute for Fleetwood, reorienting the passionate errancies of his youth toward reason and morality.

Notably excluded from the Fleetwood’s fraternal economy is any female component. The end of the novel will complicate this picture, by introducing the pathetic female descendent of Ambrose’ sister, a character we never meet in Ruffigny’s recollections; this reintroduction of femininity will predictably disrupt the seemingly stable closure of Ruffigny’s story. Before addressing the end of the novel, however, I would like to note how the destabilizing power of women on the structure of friendship is suggested early in *Fleetwood*, in a passage that situates female sexuality close to animal love. The protagonist’s closest childhood companion is his dog, Chilo, whom Fleetwood loves for his unconditional affection and respect. Fleetwood concludes two tales of Chilo’s “distinguished … attachment” (69) with the following thesis on canine love:

> What is the nature of this attachment? A dog, I believe is not less attached to a fool than to a wise man, to a peasant than to a lord, to a beggar in habiting the poorest hut, than to a prince swaying the sceptre of nations and dwelling in a palace. At least, the most sparingly dealt kindness of the surliest groom affords a sufficient basis of attachment. (69)

The dog’s love manifests the plane of absolute equality requisite of friendship, transcending arbitrary distinctions of class and power. But as Fleetwood continues, this equalizing affection is trivialized as a mode of attachment proper only to a “[f]ond fool”:

> The case is considerably parallel to that of a nobleman I have somewhere read of, who insisted that his mistress should not love him for his wealth nor his rank, the graces of his person nor the accomplishments of his nature; but *for himself*. I am inclined to blame the man who should thus subtly refine, and wantonly endeavour at the separation between him and all that is most truly his; but, where the course of nature produces this separation, there is a principle in the human mind which compels us to find gratification in this unmerited and metaphysical love. (69)

The nobleman at the centre of Fleetwood’s anecdote is accused of an erroneous desire to be loved beyond the materiality of his wealth, reputation, or virtues; sexual love is thus situated
within an economic field of personal interests. The dog, on the other hand, separated from his companion by “the course of nature,” exhibits the pure affection that the nobleman finds frustratingly absent in his mistress; across species, canine love figures an ideal of disinterested, democratic affection. The mistress is scorned for failing to elicit the love of a hound; it is not that female sexuality is chastised as a form of animal lust, but that it is too human, unable to cross the taxonomic boundary that seems to act as a necessary interstice of friendly love.

The marriage between Fleetwood and Mary is initially defined well within the field of affective interest. Fleetwood proposes to Mary out of pity (not only is Mary bereaved of her sisters and father after their death at sea, but she is deprived of her inheritance by the wiles of a Genoan banker) as well as shame (he fears that he will be accused, as Macneil’s executor, of absconding with his estate and leaving his daughter destitute) (268-77). Yet, he soon appears to succumb to the same problematic desire he found so blamable in the aristocrat: “My tenants loved me, because I had power; my acquaintance, because I could contribute to their entertainment; the poor who dwelt near my mansion, for my wealth; but my wife would love me in sickness or in health, in poverty, in calamity, in total desolation!” (287). This tension between interested and disinterested affection can be approached through the way in which Fleetwood understands marriage to function as a “substitute” for friendship. We have already seen how the species metaphors involved in Fleetwood’s understanding of friendship introduce a necessary aspect of difference between friends. The substitution of marriage for friendship replaces species difference with sexual difference: “The difference of sex powerfully assists the intimacy; similarity of character can never unite two parties so closely, as the contrast of masculine enterprise in one, and a defenceless tenderness in the other” (286). But while sexual difference provides the distance necessary to intimacy, the interdependency between enterprise and
tenderness remains enclosed within the field of interest: “Their interests are in almost all cases united. If they have children, these children form a new bond, either party pursues the same end, and has its affections directed toward the same object.” Interest, it seems, defines the species barrier: only a love that crosses this divide can escape the egotism of human passion.

The complicated relationship between animality, love, and interest that emerges in these passages is important to the end of the novel because Fleetwood will develop an obsessive fear of cuckoldry and sexual inadequacy as symptoms of his inability to ascertain where Mary’s interests lie. Mary’s becomes a site of indeterminacy between sheer self-interest, the mutual interest of marriage, and canine disinterested affection. Fleetwood vacilates wildly between praising her perfect love and denouncing her deceit:

Artful hussy! … I wrong her. There was no art in what she did; it was all the most adorable ingenuousness and sincerity. Or, if I may venture, by a bold allowance of speech, to call it art, it was that art, with which nature adorns her lovely sex more richly than with all the mines of Galconda,—the art of persuasion, compelling us to feel the impossibility of resisting their honourable desires. (297)

The very transparency of Mary’s speech is here seen as a uniquely feminine artifice. In Political Justice, the persuasive power of sincere communication was the mechanism that made friendship the basis of political improvement; here, friendly intimacy and coquettish duplicity converge.

The indeterminacy of Mary’s affection is not only a problem for her marriage; it also becomes a site of homosocial contestation for Fleetwood and his two nephews, Kenrick and Gifford. Stepbrothers from different fathers, Gifford and Kenrick are the sons of Fleetwood’s estranged female cousin, the avaricious and deceptive descendent of Ambrose Fleetwood’s sister. In Novel Relations, Ruth Perry has described how eighteenth-century novels frequently cast heroines who were forced to confront disinheritance from their estates, reflecting changes in dowry and legacy laws that, more than any previous moment in English history, dispossessed
daughters and consolidated wealth along male family lines (18-20, 40, 46-55). From a different angle, *Fleetwood*’s oblique depiction of Ambrose’ sister’s descendent presents an ambivalent view of this cultural shift; for while the description of Kenrick and Gifford’s mother depends on a sexist cliché of female vanity which may seem to legitimate the disinheritance of daughters, it also adds a problematic layer to the concept of fraternal economy depicted in the Ruffigny subplot.

The illegitimate son from an affair with a West Indian officer during his mother’s first marriage, Gifford is disinherited from any family ties, leading him to a life of cunning and deceit. Kenrick, although equally poor as his stepbrother, lives as an honest soldier. Casimir invites his nephews to his house in Bath in order to make decisions about the inheritance of his estate, Gifford, bent on monopolizing his uncle’s inheritance, manipulates Casimir into suspecting Mary and Kenrick of a secret affair. Gifford manages to transform the total, naive sincerity of both Kenrick and Mary into an image of deceit, while his own manipulative insincerity appears to Casimir as the sole site of truth: thus, Gifford becomes ‘the only person on the face of the earth, with whom [Casimir] now discoursed familiarly.” We have here the same indeterminacy between friend and enemy explored in *Caleb Williams*, only here this indeterminacy may be said to have its roots in the destabilizing force of female sexuality, which exerts itself here through the polar opposites of Casimir’s wanton cousin and Mary’s innocent affection. The sexual dynamics occluded in the Ruffigny subplot thus reveal their potent violence in the novel’s final chapters, as Casimir’s dreams of fraternal legacy undergo a catastrophic confrontation with desire.

*Fleetwood* is ultimately a novel about the irredeemability of human passion; contrary to *Political Justice*’s prospect of mind’s progressive transcendence over matter, bodily suffering
and sexual desire retain their force in the face of sincerity and friendship. Not, however, in the sense that Godwin simply reverses his earlier pronouncements; the New Man of Feeling is not the opposite of the rational, solitary individual, but rather the same individual, having undergone the failed trials of fraternal intimacy and rational perfection. Casimir names this suffering of the incommensurability between rational and passionate faculties “love”: “Love is a passion in which soul and body hold divided empire. The meaner half of our nature is essential to its support. It is sex, it is ‘a set of features of complexion, the tincture of a skin,’ that constitutes its origin and principle” (327). Between reason and passion, spirit and body, “love” designates an irreducible tension and split at the core of human experience. The turn to domesticity Godwin reveals in Fleetwood should be read in this light, not as merely renouncing his earlier claims for rational independence through an increasing valuation of familial affection, but rather through an identification of the home as an important site of creaturely suffering. Neither a space of rational interest management or one of pure passionate communion, the Fleetwood home is finally staged within a relational mode that neither resolves or eschews suffering, but rather takes the affliction of love as the basis of domestic community.

_St. Leon: Slight of the Invisible Hand_

In moving from Fleetwood to St. Leon, it will be useful to note these texts’ generic distinction. In the preface to Fleetwood, Godwin proposes a shift toward a realist mimesis that self-consciously abandons his earlier novel’s flamboyant fictionality, and which attempts to find the conditions of literary novelty in the unspoken dynamics of the quotidian and familiar—in “Things often done, yet never yet described” (48). Thus, Casimir Fleetwood represents a New Man of Feeling not simply in the sense that he marks a radical break with older modes of
affective masculinity (of course, we cannot fail to see Burke’s shadow looming here), but rather in that a new affective register is exposed within common modalities of experience. Casimir’s suffering thus situates the problem of feeling and reason at the heart of the everyday; such a move may be read as a response to the widespread accusations against Godwin’s tendency to abstraction. But one should be careful not to read this gesture as signaling a removal from the terrain of politics as such; rather, we should understand Godwin’s realist depiction of domestic feeling as an attempt to show how the presuppositions of his political theory play themselves out in familiar situations. _St. Leon_ is important here because it works through an opposite generic process, bringing his fiction against the limits of suspended disbelief in order to dramatize the most abstract or far-fetched aspects of his political theory. Far from merely revealing the practical futility of these aspects, this narrative strategy shows links fantasy and suffering as a disjunctive interface between local and mass political process.

In _St. Leon_, creaturely suffering constantly haunts the possibility of friendship. This can be seen, first of all, in the way in which the novel allegorizes Godwin’s earlier forecasts for human reason’s flight from animal embodiment. Reginald’s possession of the philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life dramatizes the utopian element of Godwin’s _Political Justice_ by literally representing man’s triumph over matter. The parallel between these texts is deepened by the fact that Reginald’s possession of these strengths is initiated in a moment of sincere communication, which the unnamed stranger (the source of Reginald’s powers) describes as an act of friendship: “what I seek at present, is a friend who will take care that I shall be suffered to die in peace. Shall I trust you? Will you be that friend to me?” (156). And yet, that the stranger combines friendship with _trust_ suggests that the concept of friendship evoked is not exactly the same as that of _Political Justice_. Reginald’s reflections on friendship, shortly before he learns the
stranger’s secret, are in terms very similar to those of Godwin’s philosophy: “Friendship is an object of a peculiar sort; the smallest reserve is deadly to it” (180). The reserve between the stranger and Reginald at first forestalls their genuine friendship (“he had in me a protector, not a friend” [180]); but this obstacle is overcome when, in death, the stranger communicates his secret knowledge, making Reginald the friend he seeks. This transaction illustrates Derrida’s suggestion that friendship derives its meaning in relation to death: just as the “deadly” reserve between the stranger and Reginald is paradoxically overcome at the very moment of the stranger’s passing, Reginald’s commitment to uphold the secret makes friendship impossible, presumably until his own death when he in turn would pass the secret on.

*St. Leon* figures a funereal mode of friendship that complicates *Political Justice*’s account of friendship as sincerity, for here, the moment of candor that conjoins friendship and death is also a betrayal of trust. Of course, *Political Justice* had already attempted to excise trust (or “confidence”) from the structure of friendship; but *St. Leon* does not so much place trust in a non-relation to friendship, as define friendship as a trust-in-betrayal. The result is that, while both of these texts depict the human overcoming of matter as a process originating in friendly sincerity, *St. Leon* goes further by defining this very overcoming as involving the impossibility of friendship. Thus, even in his joy immediately after acquiring the stranger’s secret, Reginald laments: “Yet there was one thing I wanted. I wanted some friendly bosom into which to pour out my feelings, and thus by participation to render my transports balsamic and tolerable. But this was for ever denied me” (186).

Even in Reginald’s transformation into an immortal being, he continues to undergo a modality of creaturely suffering. His friendship-in-solitude to the ancient stranger is fundamentally conditioned by the prospect of death, even as it promises immunity to death; the
The secret nature of his friendship involves its enclosure within the creaturely domain of existence. Similarly, Reginald’s possession of the philosopher’s stone will fail to propel him out of the biopolitical problematic of scarcity and need. To explain this, it will be useful to examine the way political economy is set both before and after Reginald’s acquisition of his gift.

*St. Leon*’s first extended representation of the circulation of wealth is figured through Reginald’s extravagant gambling habits. A. A. Markley has described how the widespread practice of gambling among eighteenth-century aristocrats served as a psychological assurance against the growing strength of the bourgeois marketplace. Self-representing their divinely ordained political superiority by exposing their wealth to the play of chance, aristocratic gamblers inhabited a vexed relation to the developing logic of capital; for while gambling, on the one hand, represented the guarantee of an aristocratic position outside and free of the contingencies of trade, it did so precisely through participation in games which figured the exchanges of investments and risks, depicting in miniature the characteristics of an increasingly dominant industrialism. As Markley shows, many reformist novelists of the 1790s depicted scenes of gambling in order to condemn the prideful folly characteristic of the established aristocratic ideology; thus, Reginald’s catastrophic loss of his estate signifies the mad governance of his passions over reason, an insane inversion of priorities Godwin would diagnose in the entire intellectual and political culture of the *ancien régime*. But in reading this episode of *St. Leon* simply as a condemnation of the psychology of aristocratic passion, Markley fails to explore how the dilemmas raised by Reginald’s gambling extend forward into the novel, in ways that critically interrogate the liberal, reformist politics which might otherwise be seen as the clear alternative to aristocratic power.
In the final volume of *St. Leon*, the exposure to chance and ruin Reginald had found at the card tables of Paris reemerges in his venture to use his powers to bring peace and prosperity to war torn Hungary. Entering a landscape of almost undifferentiated abjection and terror, whose human and natural features have been equally laid to waste (“villages laid in ashes; cities reduced to the dimensions and insignificance of villages; fields fertilised or made rank with the manure of human blood; the roads broken up; the erections of human ingenuity almost obliterated; mills thrown down; rivers choked up …” [362]), Reginald undertakes a project “to pour the entire stream of [his] riches, like a mighty river, to fertilize these wasted plains, and revive their fainting inhabitants” (360). That this project miserably fails may, at first glance, seem to indicate a Malthusian rethinking of *Political Justice*’s championing of reasoned benevolence; Reginald’s charitable actions only slacken the fortitude of the poor in the face of unavoidable scarcity. But in fact, Reginald’s philanthropy takes a decidedly Malthusian aspect.

“[A]ware that, in the strictest sense of the term, money was not wealth; that it would not of itself either clothe the naked or shelter the houseless” (363), Reginald moves cautiously in his charitable ambitions, aiming to revive “a spirit of industry” (363) rather than “to supply those around me with luxuries, or to augment the stock of their cheerful relaxations and amusements” (367-8). This plan leads Reginald to inhabit a strange and uneasy political nexus. First of all, the unbounded nature of his purse distinguishes him from any human philanthropist not only in degree, but in kind; Reginald understands himself less as a beneficent, isolated party, than as an agent or force of nature: “I had put myself in a considerable degree, with whatever diffidence and caution, in the room of the course of nature, and had taken the administration of the common benefits of human society into my hands” (368). What takes place here is not so much that Reginald enters intervenes within an unfavorable economy to influence it toward a more
equitable distribution. Rather, Reginald himself *creates* the conditions of market circulation; “like a God” (367), he oversees the channels of supply and demand from a vantage higher than that of any other individual.

Reginald assumes the responsibility for the entire field of biopolitics. For example, recounting his importation of grains from neighboring countries which he secretly (so as not to influence domestic prices) stocks in hidden magazines, Reginald explains, “It would have been contrary to the genius of my undertaking, either to make a gratuitous distribution of what I purchased, or to sell it at such low prices as to drive other speculators, whose spirit of enterprise might happily co-operate with mine, out of the market” (364). Reginald identifies precisely those errors of poor relief strategy which Malthus, like the physiocrats before him, had discovered and inveighed against: free or cheap distribution of grain would increase peasant suffering because it would obscure the “balance...between what was necessary for immediate subsistence, and what might be applied as the basis of future” (364), resulting in a false sense of financial security. In permitting this ratio to keep “to its spontaneous level” (364), Reginald takes the role of the Malthusian humanist. However, to do so requires an important trick; to disguise his philanthropic ambitions, he must appear to the public as a wholly self-interested capitalist: “However indifferent I might feel to the receipt of pecuniary compensation, it was necessary that, in the concerns of barter and trade, I should assume the exterior of a merchant” (365). The functionality of Reginald’s godlike “invisible hand” over the market requires this slight-of-hand so that the market will maintain its spontaneity and continue to prompt the population’s industrious spirit. The result, however, is that Reginald’s relation to the Hungarian poor becomes essentially undecidable: is he a friend or enemy of the people, an investor in local industry, or an exploiter of poverty? From the perspective of the people, Reginald’s philanthropic station is basically
indistinguishable from what Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism,” or the rapid primitive accumulation of catastrophe-stricken territories.

This indeterminacy is precariously balanced on the point of market scarcity. Reginald’s biopolitical governance depends on a careful management of the chimera of scarcity. But this chimera proves only too effective; “anticipating famine, [the poor] felt the mischiefs of it before it arrived … To people thus circumstanced, it would have been vain to recommend frugality and moderation” (369). The Hungarian people enter into the political subjectivity of the Foucauldian “people” precisely by naming this scarcity as a chimera, confronting it’s imaginary status as a ghost of biopolitical accumulation through a gesture that reveals collapses Reginald’s dual aspect as friend/enemy:

Under the hypocritical pretence, they cried, of being their benefactor and saviour, I was using them only for my private ends. I had become a purchaser and vender of corn, for the single purpose of increasing my fortune. The present scarcity, they were well assured, was artificial, of my own contriving. I had magazines in different stations on the borders, which, when the price was rise to the standard of my avarice, and when half of the people had fallen victims of my inhumanity, I purposed to dispose of to my profit. (370)

The point is not that the people misjudge Reginald’s good intentions, but that they realize that the biopolitical totality that Reginald represents involves a critical blindness to their local well-being; they refuse to suffer the sacrifice of their locality to the directives of mass politics. In Reginald’s refusal to open his grain to the poor, of course, he had the interests of population at heart; in Malthusian fashion, he permitted the outbreak of local suffering in order to prevent the massive scarcity of overpopulation. But the people’s suffering opens them to a political subjectivity indifferent to biopolitical calculation. The experience of biopolitical inhumanity conditions a plea for political humanness.

The political subjectivity of the Hungarian people will not open the way to a utopian politics that might replace that of Political Justice: rather, this episode resolves in accordance
with its links to the revolutionary referent, as the overwhelming poverty of the people exposes them to the seduction of the novel’s orientalized Napoleon, Bethlam Gabor. What is interesting here, however, is the way in which Godwin draws the emergence of a peculiar political subject from the conditions of a population-management project that is rooted in both *Political Justice* and the *Essay on Population*. In bringing these polarized philosophic visions together within the regulated *laissez-faire* of Reginald’s biopolitical benevolence, Godwin situates the true political problematic in the social affect that both visions attempt to exclude from politics: local suffering. That is, whereas Malthus’ *Essay* casts widespread but localized suffering as irrelevant compared to the real political threat of mass scarcity, and whereas Godwin’s *Political Justice* subordinates local instances of suffering to the sum total of social utility, St. Leon identifies the local suffering that arises *out of* such calculations as the cardinal political moment.

*St. Leon*’s politics of suffering is not restricted to the global political scale explored in the fourth volume; it arises first in Reginald’s fraught relationship to his family. Reginald assumes a responsibility for his family’s happiness that parallels his philanthropic adventure in Hungary, in that he finds himself similarly bound to exercise this responsibility by a subtle management of outward behavior. Anticipating the market logic that will later be his guide, Reginald’s desire to use his powers to his family’s benefit require him not to disclose his powers: “compelled to account for appearances” (194), he lies about the source of his wealth, and it is just this well-intentioned insincerity which will lead to his family’s dissolution and suffering. The effects of the sincerity-in-betrayal that characterized the friendship between Reginald and the stranger are dealt out within the space of the private home, in such a way that the distinction between family and friendship seems to collapse: Reginald’s suffering would seem to exclude him from both the rational and passionate domains of personal affection.
Godwin is often ridiculed, with some justice, for failing to respond to Malthus’ *Essay* until the 1820 publication of his own *Of Population*, the span of twenty-one years apparently indicating the philosopher’s speechlessness in the face of the irrefutable principle of population. There is something baffling, certainly, about this delay, especially considering Godwin’s normally argumentative temper; however, it should by now be clear that *St. Leon*’s detailed political economy of suffering offers, at the very least, a timely consideration of the problems at stake. Malthus’ critique of *Political Justice*’ utopian rationality is, of course, unimpeachable: the animal nature of humanity will forever prevent the unfolding of reason toward a pure political future of virtue, peace, and justice. There is no step beyond the closure of biopolitics; no matter how human society may wish to surpass it, it will always recoil at its horizon. For Malthus, the suffering of this approach and retreat defines the task of biopolitical administration: human populations must be trained to follow its ebb and flow, to accept their natural share of suffering. But it is precisely the necessity of this *training*, this *domestication* of humanity, which suggests the blindness of biopolitics in its regard for human nature; what is introduced here is humanity’s irreducible non-identity with its animal essence. There is always a chance (a nagging “perhaps” or “mayhap,” to return to the vocabulary of the last chapter) that the people will not follow their own biopolitical interests; perhaps, they will not be awed by the chimera of scarcity; perhaps, they will be insulted by the slight of the invisible hand. It is the suffering involved in this non-identity of the human, against the administrative suffering of Malthusian biopolitics, which opens the domain of the political: a creaturely domain torn between man and animal, between the escape of reason and the necessity of passion.
This transformation is especially apparent in Godwin’s *Memoirs of the Author of the Rights of Woman*: see Mary Jacobus “Intimate Connections: Scandalous Memoirs and Epistolary Indiscretion,” which insightfully traces this transformation, and Mitzi Myers’ “Godwin’s *Memoirs of Wollstonecraft*: The Shaping of Self and Subject,” which reads the *Memoir* as a Rousseau-inspired foray in confessional autobiography.

Writing in *The Spirit of the Age*, Hazlitt describes the trajectory of Godwin’s reputation as emblematizing the fickle perils of fame: “five and twenty years ago he was the very zenith of a sultry and unwholesome popularity; he blazed as a sun in the firmament of reputation … Now he has sunk below the horizon, and enjoys the serene twilight of a doubtful immortality. Mr. Godwin, during his lifetime, has secured to himself the triumphs and the mortifications of an extreme notoriety and of a sort of posthumous fame” (19).

This reading of suffering in Malthus is particularly informed by Francis Ferguson’s essay on Malthus, Godwin, and Wordsworth: “Yet, Malthus argues, the Poor Laws, in appearing to distance the laboring classes from unexpected sufferings, in fact institutionalize the sufferings of the poor by luring them into a false happiness that makes them think themselves free to procreate, to produce more persons like themselves with whom they will have to share their portions” (114).

In his *Memoirs*, Godwin sees the *Vindication of The Rights of Men* as both stylistically and polemically challenged: “Marked as it is with the vehemence and impetuosity of its eloquence, it is certainly chargeable with a too contemptuous and intemperate treatment of the great man [Burke] against whom its attack is directed” (73). His description of the second *Vindication* adopts the same aestheticized figuration of female sentimentality that Wollstonecraft attacks: “There are … occasional passages of a stern and rugged feature, incompatible with the true stamina of the writer’s character … Yet, along with this rigid and somewhat amazonian temper, which characterised some parts of the book, it is impossible not to remark … a trembling delicacy of sentiment, which would have done honour to a poet, bursting with all the visions of an Armida and a Dido” (75).

Godwin’s taste in dog names is antique: here, the reference is to the sixth century BCE Spartan philosopher; in *St. Leon*, the lead canine is named Charon, after the mythic ferryman of the underworld made famous by Virgil’s *Aeneid* and later in Dante’s *Inferno*. We can only speculate about the intention of such allusions, but a quotation from Diogenes Laertius’ “Life of Chilo” provides a starting point: “He also said once to his brother, who was indignant at not being an ephor, while he himself was one, ‘The reason is that I know how to bear injustice; but you do not’” (32). Fleetwood’s dog’s talent for friendship involves a similar ability to bear injustice, distinct from the talent for justice that defines friendship in Godwin’s earlier writing.

Wollstonecraft, of course, is a prime example of a daughter who experienced the suffering of disinheritance; see Janet Todd’s biography (4-19).

The most memorable passage in which Godwin subordinates the specificity of suffering to the calculation of utility is his thought experiment in which one is asked to choose between the death of Francois Fenelon and his chambermaid: The life of Fenelon was really preferable to the chambermaid … Supposing the chambermaid had been my wife, my mother or my benefactor. This would not alter the truth of the proposition” (82-3).
4. Conclusion: Politics and Apology

Literature does not come to an end at the very place where it comes to an end: on its border, right on the dividing line—a line sometimes straight (the edge, the border of the book), sometimes incredibly twisted and broken (the writing, reading). It does not come to an end at the place where the work passes from an author to a reader, and from this reader to another reader or to another author. It does not come to an end at the place where the work passes on to another work by the same author or at the place where it passes into other works of other authors. It does not come to an end where its narrative passes into other narratives, its poem into other poems, its thought into other thoughts, or into the inevitable suspension of the thought or the poem. It is unended and unending—in the active sense—in that it is literature. And it is literature … that puts into play nothing other than being in common. (Nancy IC 65)

Here then begins the moral of my tale:—I ‘repented,’ but I was not ‘made whole.’ (Fleetwood 216).

Is every ending a plea for forgiveness? For there is no perfect ending. As Caleb describes it, “information … from other quarters” (CW 66) has been left unsaid, or said imperfectly; things did not turn out exactly as planned; even to the extent that a work has succeeded, the ending marks the finitude of this success, its enclosure within its own determinant limits, shut between covers. To be satisfied with a work in its completion is to forgive these limitations, to give approval in spite of faults. Can this be justified? Why should we not demand perfection? What possible criteria of judgment could assign an objective margin of acceptable error or failure? From the perspective Political Justice, natural or moral imperfections receive no leniency before the demands of utility and justice. It may so happen, Godwin explains, that one loves Francois Fenelon’s chambermaid more than one loves the author of Telemachus himself (82), but “this compulsion … is founded in the present imperfection of human nature. It may serve as an
apology for my error, but can never turn error into truth. It will always remain contrary to the strict and inflexible decisions of justice” (85). Godwin thus sees the principle of apology as external to politics, which takes as its starting point the severe calculability of human actions and affections relative to the principle of utility; if, as Godwin believes, literature may serve a political purpose, then literary criticism must be totally strict and inflexible in it’s judgment. But this, in a circular logic, is exactly why every ending requires forgiveness; for if a work’s imperfections could be justified, it would not need to be forgiven. As Derrida reminds us, “Forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable” (Cosmopolitanism 32); strictly, then, if every ending asks for forgiveness, this can only mean that to end is unforgivable.

Both Caleb Williams and Fleetwood conclude with scenes of forgiveness. When Falkland finally admits his crime before the court and forgives Caleb for his disrespectful curiosity, Caleb understands the reprieve not as exonerating, but “aggravating the baseness of [his] cruelty” (433); at the end of this tale of imprisonment, pursuit, and torment, Caleb reflects: “it is only now that I am truly miserable.” In the final chapter of Fleetwood, both Kenrick and Mary, who Casimir has brutally wronged through his deranged pride and mistrust, extend their forgiveness. For Casimir, the effect is intolerable: “Remorse, while the party against whom we have offended still retains its resentment … scarcely rases the outermost cuticle of the heart. It is from the hour in which we are forgiven that true remorse commences” (423); “I thought that, if Mary and Kenrick were proved innocent, it would be all joy. It is the reverse. It is a feeling without name. It is worse than remorse; it is hell” (417). Redemption as hell: for both protagonists, forgiveness portends not the alleviation of guilt, but rather the most final and absolute penance.

And yet, in both novels, it is only within this inferno that the desire for friendship meets its object—briefly, in Caleb Williams, as the protagonist’s forgiveness is almost immediately
followed by Falkland’s death, but apparently more permanently in *Fleetwood*, which concludes with reunion, marriage, and childbirth. If *Political Justice* attempted to demarcate friendship within a political domain defined by the principle of utility, it seems that *Caleb Williams* and *Fleetwood* ultimately portray friendship as born out of an apolitical communicative act, one excluded from political participation by its address to that which is flawed and founded in error. Far from de-politicizing friendship, however, this gesture should be read as shifting the locus of politics. Rather than premising meaningful social wellbeing in the rational self-sufficiency of individuals, the end of these novels brings people together through their common limitedness, through what Nancy would call their “being in common.” The ends of these novels mark both their own finite closure and a certain political finitude that characterizes human experience—a finitude that haunts the category of the “human,” precisely through the way in which this category bends to distinguish itself from the animal in virtue of its own creative power or force.

The hell of redemption is the suffering of this failed self-sufficiency: repentant, but never made whole, the very closure of these novels paradoxically opens them to the finitude of the world they inhabit and represent.

The political complexities and frustrations of Godwin’s novels—their reluctance to end in stable achievements of equality, peace, or happiness—cannot be reduced as either narrative expositions or narrative refutations of *Political Justice*. It is more accurate to see *Political Justice* as establishing an epistemological and political horizon that orients Godwin’s fiction, toward which his characters project their desires for future happiness and affection. Friendship, I have argued, provides a recurrent sign of these political and libidinous projections. But Godwin’s thinking of friendship as a figure of radical political relatedness freed from the constraints of tradition and materiality, turns out to contain the intimations of a quite different conception of
politics. In falling short of the horizon of *Political Justice*, Godwin’s fictions retrace friendship and politics in their re-enfolding within the experience of tradition and materiality. In doing so, they re-conceptualize the relationship between literature and politics, history and romance.


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