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On Anarchism and the Real World: William Godwin and Radical England

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The rhetoric of anarchism is very much with us today, be it from Robert Paul Wolff in the academy or Jerry Rubin in the streets.¹ In its radical defense of freedom, this anarchism repudiates politics and the use of political means to achieve that freedom. This is the very essence of anarchist thought, and, indeed, its most salient distinction from other revolutionary doctrines. Freedom, the anarchist holds, cannot be realized through political methods and certainly not through popular or mass action. What replaces politics for the anarchist is either education or theater. If the former, then the path to utopia is conceived of as slow and laborious, successful only in the distant future. If the latter, then the new order of freedom is forever around the corner, instantly achieved through repetitive defiant deeds and romantic acts of self-assertion even unto death and annihilation. The one form of anarchist thought is passive, resigned, and critical of premature and precipitous action; the other is activist and precipitous in the extreme. Despite their differences, however, both forms of anarchist thought share a most important belief, a common conviction of superiority. Above the mediocre, the petty, the base, the dull, and the deceived, stands the anarchist of either stripe, convinced of his superiority of intellect or feeling. No surprise, then, that as political thought anarchism has traditionally been the expression of an intellectual or artistic elite.² Like Abbie Hoffmann, the anarchist has always stood apart from the "Pig Nation," which he sees so mindlessly unaware of its misery and mediocrity.³

¹ Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) and Jerry Rubin, *Do It!* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970).

² The history of anarchism both as movement and set of ideas has been ably presented by James Joll, *The Anarchists* (New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1964) and George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (New York: Meriden, World Publishers, 1962). Particularly useful as a contemporary indictment of anarchism as both elitist and counterproductive to the potential for change and reform in the real world is Benjamin R. Barber's excellent *Superman and Common Men: Freedom, Anarchy and the Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1971), a position which this paper shares and hopefully corroborates.

³ Abbie Hoffmann, *Woodstock Nation* (New York: Random House, 1969) and *Revolution for the Hell of it*. (New York: Dial Press, 1968).

There is, one must insist, nothing new in this. For Emma Goldman, an earlier American anarchist, this elitism was itself the very essence of anarchism. Writing of Nietzsche, she insists, "(he) was not a social theorist, but a poet and innovator. His aristocracy was neither of birth nor of purse; it was of the spirit. In that respect Nietzsche was an anarchist, and all true anarchists were aristocrats."⁴

The masses, more often than not, have seen the anarchist for what he is, an arrogant, albeit sensitive, snob; and they have rewarded him accordingly. Herbert Read, England's most distinguished anarchist of this century, sadly laments this fate of the artist-anarchist at the hands of public opinion. He must "accept this thankless task: to stand apart yet to mediate." Society will never understand or love him, he must "drink with Socrates, the deadly cup."⁵ But there may well be another dimension to the popular repudiation of the anarchist beyond mere distaste for those who stand apart. It could be informed by an astute realization that the purity and/or insanity of the anarchist often serves the conservative interests of the powers that be.

All of this rings true for the founder of modern anarchist political thought. Indeed, William Godwin (1756–1836) gives to anarchist thought its peculiar ambience and its enduring characteristics. A radical theorist, Godwin despised politics and the pursuit of change through political activity. Less interested in the-atics than in rational education and enlightenment, he still speaks for a literary and intellectual elite. As such he was repudiated by the leaders of the popular movements in his day. Enshrined in the sacred texts of anarchist tradition is Godwin's plea of 1793 in his *Political Justice* for "the dissolution of political government, of that brute engine, which has been the only perennial cause of the vices of mankind."⁶ Libertarian though this may sound, Godwin,

⁴ Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, 2 vols. (New York, A. A. Knopf, 1931) I, 194.

⁵ Herbert Read, *To Hell with Culture* (New York: Schocken, 1964) p. 9.

⁶ William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (Toronto, Univ. of Toronto Press, 1946) 11, 212. All future references to this work will appear with volume and page numbers in the text of this paper.

despite his philosophical commitment to freedom, was by no means a friend of reform. This divergence between the radical theorist and the conservative practitioner is evident in his views on political action and revolution found in *Political Justice* and in his public performance two years later when he sided with Pitt in the repression of the English Jacobins.

To facilitate an understanding of Godwin's anarchism and the extent to which it will mold the later tradition, the discussion here will be organized around five philosophical and political sections: (1) Godwin's destructive attack on government and institutions; (2) his positive vision of the anarchist society to replace "the brute engine government;" (3) his discussion of how to achieve this anarchist utopia, or, more importantly, how not to achieve it; (4) doctrine meeting practice, the clash between Godwin and the English Jacobins in 1795–1796; (5) speculations on the reasons for Godwin's break with the radicals and the significance of this for the future development of radical and anarchist thought. One final comment by way of introduction: Behind much of this paper are events and a scenario that will seem familiar to many readers; the 1790s were in England a time not unlike our own day. The response described here has continued to recur, so that even today we see the wasteful confrontation of elitist radicals, disdainful of politics, and popular radicals seeking political change.

The "Euthanasia of Government": Godwin's Attack on Law, Power, and the State

It is worthwhile at the outset to schematize the development of Godwin's argument. Two stages of destruction are followed by one of visionary reconstruction. The first negative stage involves an assault on the liberal tradition, carried out primarily by invoking Rousseau. Then follows the attack on law and political authority in the name of the liberal values of private judgment and individuality. There is, to be sure, some tension, incompatibility, and even contradiction, between these two destructive aspects of the argument, some of which remains and cannot be reasoned away. But much of this tension is resolved in the positive vision of anarchist society. The synthesizing agent is the principle of sincerity. In bare outline, then, these are the stages in Godwin's philosophy of anarchism. One can turn now in greater detail to each stage in the argument.

Godwin begins *Political Justice* with a root and branch attack on the Lockean natural rights tradition. His main charge is that it is too egotistical, too concerned with the individu-

al's right to do as he wills. Sacrificed in this world view, according to Godwin, are duty, justice, and concern for the common good. Writers like Locke, he contends, in their "unprofitable disquisitions . . . respecting the probable origin of government," and in investigating rights, have failed to ask what form of government was the most conducive to public welfare (I, 123). Godwin repudiates any notion of contract based on some original promise. He does this by simply repeating the arguments of Hume (I, 188; 194–95; 219). What irritates him even more is the basic liberal notion of rights, for as far as Godwin is concerned rights "are all of them superceded and rendered null by the superior claims of justice." Man has no permissive grant to do as he wishes based on some supposed ethic of self-justification. He is bound by justice to do his duty, to employ his talents, his understanding, his strength, and his time, in the production of the greatest quantity of general good. One's duty is to see that his every act is "bound to . . . the general weal, that is, for the benefit of the individuals of whom the whole is composed" (I, 166; 135; 13).

Godwin is perfectly willing to dispense with the most fundamental of liberal rights. Man, he states, has no right even to his life, "when his duty calls him to resign it." Neighbors are duty bound to deprive one another of liberty and even life, he suggests, if to do so is absolutely necessary to the prevention of greater evil. Godwin sees such calculations of duty by and large as easy. It is, after all, blatantly clear that should one's mother and Archbishop Fenelon be trapped together in a burning house the latter should be saved. Not only has Godwin thus dealt with Locke and Hobbes, he also repudiates what will be one of Mill's major liberal contentions. Men have a duty to amend the errors of anyone they may see or know, suggests Godwin. "It is absurd to suppose that certain points are especially within my province, and therefore [that] he may not afford me, invited or uninvited, his assistance in arriving at a right decision" (I, 167; 162). In his assault on the liberal obsession with private rights Godwin reads very much like contemporary Straussian critics:

According to the usual sentiment, every club assembling for any civil purpose, every congregation of religionists assembling for the worship of God, has a right to establish any provisions or ceremonies, no matter how ridiculous or detestable, provided they do not interfere with the freedom of others. Reason lies prostrate at their feet; they have a right to trample upon and insult her as they please . . . but as it has been before shown that it

cannot be their duty to do anything detrimental to the general happiness so it appears with equal evidence that they cannot have a right to do so. There cannot be a more absurd proposition, than that which affirms the right of doing wrong (I, 165–66).⁷

Like Rousseau, his exemplar in much of this criticism, Godwin is basically a *philosophe*; and the Enlightenment thought he espouses in essence revives Platonic and Stoic conceptions of right reason, truth, and justice. Indeed, at this point there is every good reason to expect Godwin to continue his Rousseauian assault on liberal government by repudiating its negativism, its failure positively to promote virtue, the good life, or at least the general good. All he has written to this point in the argument tends in that direction. If not an enlightened despot then at least a democratic sovereign finding duty and right reason via the law of the general will seems in order. But Godwin follows neither of the two alternatives taken by the French *philosophes*; he sets out on his own path to anarchism. Is it the duty of governments to watch over the manners of the people, he asks? Ought it to superintend the sentiments of the people and “encourage such as are favorable to virtue, and to check in the bud such as may lead to disorder and corruption?” “Surely,” he states ironically, “government can do some positive good” (II, 214–15). But no, alas it cannot, he proclaims. Helvetius and Rousseau are both rejected, and in an abrupt about face there is the Godwin one expected.

Government is, in all cases, an evil; it ought to be introduced as sparingly as possible. Man is a species of being, whose excellence depends on his individuality; and who can be neither great nor wise, but in proportion as he is independent (II, 214–15).

This turn in the argument introduces Godwin’s second destructive stage, his assault on law and political authority in the name of private judgment and individuality. The mood shifts decisively and one finds the traditional liberal preoccupation with individual freedom pushed to extremes—to anarchist extremes. But the antiliberal Godwin, the critic of rights and the defender of duty and a higher public good, will eventually return. He will eventually proclaim a vision of an ideal society, where not governments but friends and neighbors will lead men to truth and virtue. But in this early stage of the argument he is concerned with the

defense of private judgment and the need to replace the brute engine, government.

Godwin argues, then, that self-determination and independence are basic to the nature of man. Free man consults his own reason and draws his own conclusions. He then will conscientiously conform to whatever are his own ideas of propriety. The free man is one who exercises his own judgment and, “stands by himself, and rests upon his own understanding.” The fundamental principle of politics, writes Godwin, is the universal exercise of private judgment, a doctrine “unspeakably beautiful.” Each man seeks truth and right through his own rational faculties. The only principle which legitimately imposes upon him any specific conduct is the conviction of his individual understanding (I, 168; 182; 181). We are unmistakably in the camp of individualistic liberalism. It is only necessary for Godwin now to push this liberalism to the finality of anarchism. This he does by criticizing first governmental authority, then law, and finally punishment.

Anything that moves man to action other than his own private judgment, Godwin contends, is by definition force or coercion. Government, which sets up other men as permanent arbiters over the actions of individuals, is the ultimate determinant of most men’s destinies. As such “government is nothing but regulated force; force is its appropriate claim upon your attention” (I, 230). But Godwin’s rejection of government is much more complex than this often quoted passage. Government is only the third of three possible forms of authority. In the first, the authority of reason, the individual obeys simply himself. Reason, indeed, represents the absence of government. The second form of authority is confidence in and deference to some esteemed figure and his decisions. As Godwin rightly points out, this is the original meaning of the word authority; it represents “compliance which is the offspring of respect” (I, 231). Godwin regards only the third form of authority as genuinely political; this is governmental authority, to which compliance is based not upon esteem and respect but upon force and power. Self-government, the first form of authority, is obviously the ideal. Of the two forms of external authority, the second is clearly preferable to the third, according to Godwin, especially when the individual has reason to believe that another person knows better than he what is proper to do. If this is the case, then one ought to conform to such direction. The door is opened here, we must note now and return to later, for an elitist appreciation of enlightened tutelage, an idea not at all unconge-

⁷ Compare, for example the sentiments expressed in this passage with those of Walter Berns in his *Freedom, Virtue and the First Amendment* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1957.)

nial to the eighteenth century *philosophe*. But, nothing, Godwin writes, can justify the third form of authority. It is totally contrary to reason and justice to surrender one's private judgment, i.e., to obey another man because he is superior in station "or because of concurrence of circumstances has produced him a share in the legislative and executive government of our country." Men need not, however, take arms to overthrow this brute engine, that Godwin calls government. Such forms of government are doomed anyway, writes Godwin, for all government will ultimately wither away. People obey government only because they are ignorant. When knowledge and virtue increase, men will discover that there is "no mystery in government which uninitiated mortals must not presume to penetrate." At some point they no longer will need nor will they tolerate authority of governments, the third form of authority. Formal governments will be abandoned and only the authority of the truly esteemed and wise will operate. But as knowledge and virtue further increase men will be themselves wise and defer to the authority of no one but themselves. With the inexorable passage of time, then, and with the progressive dissemination of knowledge and wisdom all forms of government, formal and informal, will slowly be put to rest.

In other words, government cannot proceed but upon confidence, as confidence on the other hand cannot exist without ignorance. The true supporters of government are the weak and uninformed, and not the wise. In proportion as weakness and ignorance shall diminish, the basis of government will also decay. This, however, is an event which ought not to be contemplated with alarm. A catastrophe of this description would be the true euthanasia of government (II, 214-215).

Having disposed of governmental authority, Godwin turns next on law. None of Rousseau's rhapsodic appreciation of law is found here.⁸ Godwin's central point is that the diversity of human experience defies generalization, one important form of which is abstract law. No action of any one man is the same as another's. Law is either stretched on a procrustean bed to fit new cases, or else a new general law is made. In either case, Godwin argues, instead of being certain and eliminating ambiguity, law is cloaked in uncertainty. Few can thus know what to expect at the hands of the law. Moreover, it "fixes the human mind in a stagnant condition," and substitutes permanence for pro-

gress (II, 400; 403). Because of these shortcomings law must be abolished and replaced by what Godwin calls situational wisdom. Reason, he holds, must be applied anew to each incident, and all the many and unique factors of each case must be heard and understood. Only this conduct befits a rational people.

The final step in the destructive phase of Godwin's anarchism is his attack on the doctrine of punishment. It is essential for his anarchism that he question the legitimacy and the utility of punishment, since, as he himself concedes, the most important justification for government is that in order to prevent the hostile actions of one member of society upon another there must be the sanction of criminal punishment. Punishment is unjust, however, Godwin contends, because it assumes free will when in fact necessity and circumstance propel the criminal to his action. In a famous passage Godwin suggests that the assassin can no more prevent the murder he commits than can his dagger (II, 324). Moreover, he adds, punishment is a useless method of dealing with a wrongdoer. Like all forms of political coercion it is a mere recourse to force that has no intrinsic capacity to convince. "It is no argument . . . it begins with violently alienating the mind from the truth with which we wish it to be impressed." One ought to reason with a criminal and convince him of his errors, for as Godwin firmly believes, no man can reject truth and choose falsehood when the evidence is clearly and fairly presented (II, 237; 225).

So much, then, for the destructive phase of Godwin's anarchism. Government, law, and coercion are pushed aside by self-determined, wise men who use their own private judgment and their own reason. These men are independent and autonomous. "Each man should be wise enough to govern himself, without the intervention of any compulsory restraint." So keen is Godwin on protecting this individual autonomy that he pushes his anarchic-individualist ideal to the elimination of all forms of cooperation. "Everything that is usually understood by the term cooperation," he writes, "is in some degree, an evil" (II, 246; 501). And that degree is the extent to which cooperation inhibits a man's individuality and prevents his thinking for himself. Meals in common and communal labor are suspect. Men may now have to work together in factories, but technology, will soon, he predicts, make the most extensive operations within the reach of one man. Theatrical and musical performances will go, too. Autonomous men may very well cease to "repeat words and ideas that are not

⁸ See for example Rousseau's praise of law "the celestial voice," in his *Discourse on Political Economy* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1955), p. 294.

their own," or music composed by others. Though they may find pleasure in one another's company, solitude will be the greatest delight of autonomous men: they "ought to be able to do without one another." And so one comes to Godwin's famous views on marriage, which he sees as both unjust and monopolistic. Even more harmful is its unnecessary emphasis on cooperation and its infringement on personal independence (II, 503; 504; 505; 508ff.).

In these prophetic passages of *Political Justice* one finds the quintessential statement of Godwin's anarchic individualism—the ideal of independent, self-determined, non-cooperative man. This is the often parodied Godwin that has amused his detractors ranging from the staff of the *Anti-Jacobin Review* of his day to the Victorian Leslie Stephen. But Godwin's anarchism, and anarchist thought after him, does not end with this longing for individual privacy and autonomy. It moves on to a second stage, more positive and less liberal—the vision of an ideal order, in which emphasis shifts dramatically to values of community, cooperation, and solidarity, all achieved through the coercion of virtuous and duty-seeking neighbors.

"Political Simplicity": The Politics of Utopian Anarchism

Godwin's vision of anarchist society is structured around three basic principles: "political simplicity," "public inspection," and "positive sincerity." One must begin with "political simplicity," for the two other principles presume its prior existence. The practice of sincerity and the performance of public inspection require the geopolitical reorganization of society. The masses of mankind have been duped, claims Godwin, "by the mysterious complicated nature of the social system" (II, 208); the social order must therefore be simplified. Simplicity of political arrangement would liberate men and could be achieved through localism and federalism. If nations were broken down into smaller autonomous units, parishes that regulated their own affairs, they would cease their tyranny:

The ideas of a great empire and legislative unity, are plainly the barbarous remains of the days of military heroism. In proportion as political power is brought home to the citizens and simplified into something of the nature of parish regulation; the danger of misunderstanding and rivalry will be nearly annihilated. In proportion as the science of government is divested of its present mysterious appearances, social truth will become obvious, and the districts pliant and flexible to the dictates of reason (II, 293).

A general assembly of these parishes would be a rare and extraordinary event. Normally, representatives of the parishes would assemble but once a year to adjust their few differences. This assembly would pass no laws, take no votes. To do so would be an affront to reason and justice, "the deciding upon truth by the casting out of numbers" (Rousseau is not totally forgotten). As part of the generally nostalgic flavor of Godwin's ideal order, this yearly assembly would merely perform the medieval task of hearing complaints and representations from constituents (II, 205; 207).

Within the parish no political institutions would be necessary. Occasional disputes would be settled by calling a jury, but these juries would have no coercive power. They would only invite and reason. They would persuade, not dictate. Political authority in the parish would be replaced by public persuasion. The entire system is made to work by the power "of public inspection." In a simple and small unit the "observant eye of public judgment" would prompt each individual to seek the common good. Godwin was not the first, nor the last, to suggest that men are less moral under the cover of a large society and more virtuous in the face-to-face contacts of simpler and more local surroundings. Extensive governments require coercion and force; smaller units allow the sway of opinion. "The inspection of every man over the conduct of his neighbors, when unstained with caprice, would constitute a censorship of the most irresistible nature." Law and government are replaced, then, in Godwin's anarchist utopia, by the watchful and censoring eye of public opinion. The disapprobation of one's neighbors is enough, he holds, to make everyone shy away from vice. (II, 211; 231; 274).

Public inspection and censorship would work, however, only if neighbors tell the truth to one another; i.e., only if they are sincere. Godwin's preoccupation with sincerity, his quaint insistence that one must not have his butler lie when one is in but not eager to see company, is more than simply the eccentricity of a bookish crank. It is, in fact, a principle basic to his vision of a new order, for public persuasion can only work if each citizen is his neighbor's "ingenious censor" and if they proclaim one another's "virtues, good deeds, meanness and follies." Only through such just and impartial evaluation can vice presumably be discouraged and virtue encouraged. In the telling of these truths, neighbors should not be restrained by private protections like libel laws. The occasional false charge or mistaken censor,

Godwin insists, is a small price to pay for the advantages of unlimited and sincere criticism (I, 329; II, 270ff.). It is in light of this important political purpose, then, that one is to understand Godwin's claim that sincerity is "the most powerful engine of human improvement." But sincerity does more: it helps bring together the antiliberal and the liberal aspects of his anarchism. Liberated from governmental coercion, men in Godwin's parishes will freely exercise their private judgments, but they will not leave each other alone. They will not till their gardens in passive liberal enjoyment of private rights. They will recognize their fundamentally nonliberal duty, "the most indispensable business of man, to study and promote his neighbors welfare" (I, 340; 339). Their exercise of private judgment will be in the service of others. It will pursue a higher will, a higher realm of truth. This pursuit will take the form not of legislative enactment of a general will but rather of positive, constructive, and sincere neighborly advice and criticism. There is, according to Godwin, no plurality of ideals. The nature of man and the nature of his good life are not relative. "There is but one perfection to man; one thing most honorable . . . all else is deviation and error; a disease to be cured, not to be encouraged." That single and overriding ideal is "benevolence," or as he calls it elsewhere, "disinterested transport." The goal of man's social existence is "to make others free, virtuous and wise." Godwin is convinced that "there is but one best mode of social existence," which can be deduced from the principles of human nature for there must be one code of truth on the subject of our reciprocal duties (I, 240; 314). It is as if Rousseau's legislator and general will were replaced by what Godwin calls:

Putting ourselves in the place of an impartial spectator, of an angelic nature,—beholding us from an elevated station, and uninfluenced by our prejudices, conceiving what would be his estimate of the intrinsic circumstances of our neighbor and acting accordingly (I, 133).

Each individual is obliged to see that his neighbor lives up to the uniform code of truths which teach benevolence and public spirit. To do this, he must, however, break the cold reserve that keeps men at a distance from one another. Men must end the charade in which they talk to one another without disclosing their feelings or opinions. They must sincerely and openly speak to each other about their moral character, "how they ought to be employed, and how to be improved" (I, 294).

Sincerity is the key, then, to understanding

the relationship of the diverse parts of Godwin's argument, as well as being the essential value in his simple, face-to-face, nonpolitical society.⁹ Laws would be unnecessary, for example, in this vision of political simplicity. The inhabitants of a small parish seeing that laws were irrational would judge each case not by written axioms but by the circumstances and demands of the particular case, what Godwin calls the "spontaneous justice" of the parish. But even this would become unnecessary at some point, for eventually crime would be totally eliminated. Public disapproval would turn all knaves honest. Who would commit a crime when faced by "the sober condemnation of every spectator?" Even the "legal" crime and murder of governments would come to an end in the new order, for they were indelibly associated with the false notions of extensive territory and dreams of glory, empire, and national greatness (II, 294; 410; 275; 361).

The new anarchist order would see the decline of crime for reasons much more basic than simply the public disapproval of knaves. The very motivation to crime would dry up. For, according to Godwin, its most important source was economic inequality. If this were changed, crime would cease. Godwin is dramatically outspoken in his condemnation of inequality. Few English Jacobins of the 1790s would outdo his indignation at social injustice; perhaps only his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Tom Paine could match him on this score. The rich, Godwin claims, were "in all countries directly or indirectly the legislators of the state." Their laws invariably favored their interests over those of the poor and "reduced oppression into a system" (I, 18; 19). While the rich, for example, could associate for monopoly and gain, the law of Parliament prevented workmen from combining in unions. The effect of this inequality on the poor was disastrous. To be born poor, Godwin writes, "may be said under another name to be born a slave." Any potential for distinction and intellectual achievement in the lower orders was dashed by "the present ordering of society . . . the great slaughterhouse of genius and of mind."¹⁰

The great ally of the rich in this oppression

⁹ Godwin's concern with sincerity is also important in understanding his link to Romanticism. Here and in his discussion of openness, spontaneity, and values of the heart (II, 280; I, 335-340) one sees a Godwin far different from the stern rationalist he has usually been depicted as, and much closer to the romantic so evident in his novels.

¹⁰ William Godwin, *The Enquirer* (London, 1797), pp. 62, 17.

and brutalization of the poor was, according to Godwin, modern technology; thus he sets the pattern for subsequent generations of anarchists in the condemnation of the machine age. Like many of them, however, he also relished the progressive potential of technology. Would not, for example, the drudgery and oppression of communal factory work be ended with the invention of one great machine operated by a solitary individual? But his response in this, his antitechnological, mood was in fact a rather acute anticipation of later notions of alienation, for the end product of the factory system, he argued, was the estrangement of man from himself, his transformation from worker to machine.

A mechanic becomes a sort of machine; his limbs and articulations are converted, as it were, into wood and wires. Tamed, lowered, torpidified into this character, he may be said perhaps to be content.¹¹

The most grievous political result of this constant and unmerciful exercise of superiority by the rich was, according to Godwin, that it produced crime, which in turn could be used as justification for punishment and, therefore, as rationale for government. The exploitation by the rich led the poor to seek reprisals. The poor see "the state of society as a state of war." In his novel *Caleb Williams*, Godwin has his pathetic hero, driven to crime, exclaim in his defense:

Oh poverty! Thou art indeed omnipotent! Thou grindest us into desperation; thou confoundest all our boasted and most deep rooted principles; thou fillest us to the very brim with malice and revenge, and render us capable of acts of unknown horror.¹²

The inequality and injustice of this economic system would disappear in Godwin's simple anarchist society. The factory, taxation of the poor, legislation by the rich, oppression and misery leading to class crime—all these would be replaced simply and magically in the transition to a frugal agrarian economy. Once again Godwin anticipated generations of future anarchists. Taxation would be unnecessary in the parish, he holds, since there would be no foreign wars, no domestic office holders. The usual army of government functionaries, clerks, collectors, etc. would not be needed. But Godwin felt that the right to private property, on the other hand, was still legitimate, and was in fact, essential for the exercise of private judgment

and independence. Too great and too unequal an accumulation of property was, to be sure, unjust, but the small and simple parish society would restrain this accumulation by "the good sense of the community, and the inspection of all exercised upon all." Eventually the parish would see an equality of holdings with no man having for his personal use more than his necessities required. Man in his parish society would work only in simple manual industry and agriculture. No one would accumulate unearned property produced by the labor of others; "the mathematician, the poet, and the philosopher, will derive a new stock of cheerfulness and energy from the recurring labor that makes them feel they are man" (II, 315, 433; 412; 480; 482). No one in Godwin's utopia would manufacture luxuries, however, an unnecessary chore that occupied many men in modern nations. Whereas the object of modern society was to multiply labor, Godwin's parish economy would simplify it, would produce "a state of the most rigid simplicity." In the England of the 1790s, one in twenty worked on agriculture, he conjectured; but in his utopia all men would work in the fields at some time. All other jobs would be eliminated. The job of supplying the community with the absolute necessities of life would be parceled out to all men and thus occupy one-twentieth of every man's time. Each member of the community would perform manual labor about half an hour a day; the rest of the day he would enjoy life, learning, and nature in his idyllic rural paradise (II, 480). More probably, I suspect, he would spend much of his free time inspecting and giving sincere advice to his neighbors.

Much of the imagery of Godwin's visionary parish society was familiar to Englishmen of his day. The rural nostalgia and the longing for the simplicity of a frugal economy and a face-to-face society were themes often found in earlier opposition writings under Walpole, both from Tories, like Bolingbroke and Gay, and radicals like Trenchard and Gordon. These themes are also writ large in the Toryism of Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* and the radicalism of Southey's *Wat Tyler*.¹³ Godwin, in his novel *Imogen*, written some nine years earlier, had himself depicted an idyllic community of Druids with no government, and no ranks of distinction. His sincere and simple protagonists, Imogen and Edwin, roundly overcame the villain Roderick. But the vision of *Political Justice*

¹¹ See Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle, the Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968) and Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of The American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968).

¹¹ William Godwin, *Fleetwood* (London, 1805), I, 277.

¹² William Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, (London, 1794), II, 30.

differs from other nostalgic pastorals and from the spate of English imitations of Rousseau in its transcendence of mere social and economic nostalgia and its thoroughgoing political radicalism—in short, in its complete dismissal of the political.¹⁴

Even here, however, one wonders if perhaps Godwin didn't have a model for his vision. Where else, for example, might he find a vision of a community free of law, free of coercion, free of institutions, free of power, indeed free of politics? Where else might he find a community of spontaneous solidarity and zealous regard for one another's moral well being? The answer may well be that Godwin, the former dissenting minister, could never quite free himself from the anarchic vision of the primitive Christian community—but that is another story. Suffice it to point out here that Godwin held no illusion that if the government of Britain were dissolved in 1793 his simple parish society would immediately flourish. The citizenry were still unregenerate, and not fit for this dispensation; it would come only in due time. Before one speculates on this eventuality, one must make clear how Godwin felt this dispensation would *not* come about. The radical ideal of anarchic political simplicity, he was certain, could never be brought about by radical political agitation or reform.

"Tumult and Violence": Godwin's Critique of Radical Politics

In the preface to the first edition of *Political Justice* Godwin credits many of his insights to the recent experiments in America and France. He was persuaded "of the desirableness of a government in the utmost degree simple" by the ideas suggested in the French Revolution (I, x). That event, he confesses, more than anything else, prompted his writing the *Enquiry*. Like Price's Sermon at Old Jewry, Paine's *Rights of Man*, Mackintosh's *Vindiciae Gallicae*, and Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Godwin's *Political Justice* was part of the literary outburst produced among English Jacobins by the French Revolution. But Godwin's response has very much the flavor of another written in those years, Burke's *Reflections*. Godwin, the philosophical radical, would have no truck with any political

action designed to encourage or hasten the achievement of anarchism. The Revolution in France, to be sure, had awakened Godwin's love for freedom, but it had also irredeemably frightened the calm philosophical skeptic in him. Thus in *Political Justice* Godwin specifically repudiates reform politics.

Tumult and violence, the phrase he habitually used to describe the hurly-burly of radical politics, could never bring about an ideal order, he argued. Only when the great majority of society were persuaded, would "the chains fall off of themselves." Any effort to introduce political change—no matter how excellent theoretically—that did not consider the state of the public mind would be both absurd and injurious. Men ought to speculate on the ideal form of political society, Godwin felt, but they should be on guard against precipitate measures. Ideals could be securely established only when there was a general preference in their favor. Philosophers might well know that one form of government is most desirable, but inferior forms of government must still be tolerated since immediate efforts to remove them would introduce something far worse, chaos and turbulence. All the wheels, he writes, must move together lest the fragile structure of society break down:

The interest of the human species requires a gradual, but uninterrupted change. He who should make these principles the regulators of his conduct, would not rashly insist upon instant abolition of all existing abuses . . . Truth, however unreversed be the mode of its enunciation, will be sufficiently gradual in its progress. It will be fully comprehended, only by slow degrees, by its most assiduous votaries; and the degrees will be still more temperate, by which it will pervade so considerable a portion of the community, as to render them mature for a change of their common institutions . . . we shall have many reforms, but no revolutions . . . Revolutions are the produce of passion, not of sober and tranquil reason (I, 99; 242ff.).

Political change will come not through political action but through knowledge. New or reformed laws or policies would change nothing if opinion and understanding remained the same. The proper task for the friends of humanity was not to introduce new practices in politics, but "enquiry, communication, and discussion." Godwin assailed Rousseau on this very point. He felt that Rousseau's recourse to a civic religion in the effort to reorient the public mentality enlisted a new authority over a people not yet capable of perceiving the wisdom of the new order. Duping men to receive a system whose reasonableness is not a part of their understanding is, Godwin suggests, "a

¹⁴ William Godwin, *Imogen, A Pastoral Romance* (London, 1784, reprinted 1963, New York Public Library, edited by J. W. Marken). For the English Rousseauans see J. A. Warner, "The Reaction in Eighteenth Century England to Rousseau's Two Discourses" in *P.M.L.A.* 38 (1933) and Michael Sadler, *Thomas Day, An English Disciple of Rousseau* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1928).

questionable method for rendering them sober, judicious, reasonable, and happy." Burke, too, is criticized on this score for his suggestion that men cherish their prejudices. Lulling men not to use their own understanding is wrong when used to uphold the established order as well as when used to change it (II, 128; 130; 140).

The major thrust of Godwin's caution, however, is directed against the "domestic spoilers" who preach immediate dissolution of all governments. Godwin contends that if this should occur in 1793, in a period when political truth had not yet permeated the understandings of all, an anarchy of barbarism and violence would follow, not the reasoned anarchy of political simplicity, positive sincerity, and public censorship. The resultant insecurity and disorder would be far worse than the preceding despotism. Particularly vulnerable were not the poor and the exploited, but men the very likes of Godwin, "the wisest, the brightest, the most generous and bold." In a state of barbaric and violent anarchy one "must bid farewell, to the patient lubrications of the philosopher, and the labor of the midnight oil." True anarchy would not result from headlong and impatient action:

In order to anarchy being rendered a seed of future justice, reflection and enquiry must have gone before; the regions of philosophy must have been penetrated, and political truth have opened her school to mankind (II, 366; 368; 371).

Godwin is so outspoken in his opposition to any form of resistance or revolution that he even rejects the argument from Locke so often cited by English radicals. Nations have no right, Godwin answers, to shake off governments simply because of an alleged break with a social contract or usurpation of traditional rights. Since government is founded on opinion, he argues, even bad governments must have come to be accepted by whatever be the current level of popular understanding. If the people are unenlightened and unprepared for a state of freedom, then resistance is inappropriate, and if political knowledge has spread among them, then their resistance is unnecessary, for subjection of the people even by foreign forces will be futile and short-lived. The theme is constantly reiterated: "if the nation be not right for a state of freedom" no resistance is justified (I, 252ff; 302).

Godwin is careful in *Political Justice* to remind his readers that "the great cause of humanity" has two enemies, the Burkean friends of prejudice and antiquity, on the one hand, and the "friends of innovation" on the other. Having warned of two enemies he concentrates,

however, on only one, those "impatient of suspense, inclined violently to interrupt the calm, incessant, rapid, and auspicious progress which thought and reflection appear to be making in the world." He even uses the misgivings of the one enemy to combat the other. Like Burke, Godwin keenly saw the paradoxes inherent in the Jacobin-Revolutionary mentality. Resisting tyranny, the revolutionaries became tyrants themselves, scrutinizing men's thoughts and punishing their opinions. "To dragoon men into adoption of what we think right," Godwin writes, "is an intolerable tyranny" (I, 256; 257).

Much like an orthodox Marxist, Godwin, in the next stage of his attack on radical reform, cautions against rushing the inevitable developments of progressive change. "There is a condition of political society best adapted to every different stage of individual improvement." Everything is in order, and succeeds at its appointed time. History must unfold in its predetermined stages, one cannot impatiently hurry it to its conclusion. The historical passage is long and arduous; and if we aspire to the final result, we must submit to the portion of misery and vice, which necessarily fills the span in between," he writes. One such evil is the unfair distribution of wealth. This, too, cannot be changed by premature violence or even legislative action; it can only come from a "revolution of opinions." Men should be careful lest they rip down too hastily the institutions of property and its inequalities which are so woven into the social fabric. If private property were suddenly abolished, or if even the principles of feudal rights and privileges of rank were instantly dissolved, thousands of men, indeed whole classes, would be reduced to immediate wretchedness, Godwin contends, and all manner of calamity, convulsion, and upheaval would ensue more dreadful than the evil remedied. It is Godwin the proto-Marxist historicist again who writes, "the inequalities of property perhaps constitute a state, through which it would be necessary for us to pass" (II, 372; 441; 418; I, 273, 259). It is more than simply anachronistic, however, to label Godwin thus. His historical caution on this score is, after all, informed by fundamental bourgeois convictions.

Without permitting to every man, to a considerable degree, the exercise of his own discretion, there can be no independence, no improvement, no virtue and no happiness. This is a privilege in the highest degree sacred; for its maintenance no exertions and sacrifices can be too great. Thus deep is the foundation of the doctrine of property. It is, in the last resort, the palladium of all that ought

to be dear to us, and must ever be approached but with awe and veneration (II, 450).

Burke might well agree with Godwin's criticism of the politics of resistance, revolution, and redistribution, but Burke would never agree with Godwin's more basic and unique assault on political associations, parties, and political life in general. Political parties, associations—any form of cooperative political endeavor—all fall before Godwin's ruthless philosophical bias. Sounding much like a contemporary student of group politics, Godwin insists that in any such collective gathering the intemperate and artful push aside the "prudent, the sober, the skeptical, and the contemplative." Truth could never emerge from the superficial convictions of committed partisans; it would come only from rigorous and laborious enquiry. Party, Godwin argues, puts a premium not on thinking for one's self but on identifying one's creed with that of one's associates. There is no encouragement to enquiry when all the diversity of opinion has been reduced to the position of one common mass. Political meetings encourage harangue and declamation, he contends, which lead only to passion and not argument. Orators and party leaders work on the passions of their followers, playing on hopes and fears. "Truth can scarcely be acquired in crowded halls and amidst noisy debates" (I, 290).

Burke need not have feared, different as their opinions on party were, for in these passages Godwin was not criticizing the Rockingham Party nor the Whigs, old or new. His clearly intended victims were the radicals, those who thought that politics and not philosophy would usher in the new political age.

The Philosopher and the Agitator: Godwin's Attack on John Thelwall

This theoretical repudiation of activism found in the bible of anarchism, Godwin's *Political Justice*, was soon tested in the arena of Jacobin politics. In 1795 and 1796 Godwin's philosophical anarchism and the politics of radical agitation met head on. The second party to the confrontation was the London Corresponding Society and its leader John Thelwall.

The London Corresponding Society, founded in 1792 by a shoemaker, Thomas Hardy, hardly seems to merit Burke's assessment as "the mother of all mischief."¹⁵ Its membership, according to France Place, an early official of the Society, was about two thousand; more generous estimates place it around twenty thou-

sand. The social types attracted by the Society were artisans; mainly hatters, bakers, grocers, booksellers, and shoemakers—"the thinking part of the working people"—as Place characterized them.¹⁶ The division meetings of the Society were devoted to political discussion and communication with other radical societies, often with the two very large ones in Sheffield and Norwich. Pamphlets and broadsides were periodically published proclaiming the Society's positions on issues of the day. The ideology of the group was simple and straightforward and was shared by most of the Jacobin groups of the 1790s. It stood for three principles: annual parliaments, universal suffrage, and parliamentary reform. Despite a liberal dose of Paine's ahistorical and nonconstitutional argument from nature and natural rights, most of the Society's rhetoric was still couched in terms of recapturing ancient lost English rights. Communications and pamphlets were as often signed "Anglo-Saxon" as "citizen." The ancient constitution, freed from its "Norman Yoke" was authority enough on which to base true English liberty in the three areas of reform. There were in the Society a very few who, according to Place, "were desirers of confusion, and for all sorts of absurd and violent measures." Some members, for example, accepted Paine's Republicanism, but even they assumed that it would be achieved after the House of Commons was reformed and the King and Lords set aside peacefully.¹⁷ The L.C.S. (as it was known in its day) was, in short, an association of sober shopkeepers, craftsmen, and journeymen. Some indication of the extent of its threat to the social order can be gathered from Place's evaluation years later of his association with the Society. It had a profound moral impact on its artisan membership, he wrote. Instead of wasting time in the public house, they were encouraged to read books, to think for and respect themselves. In addition, Place wrote, it encouraged them to educate their children. Lest this general assessment be doubted Place related how in 1822 at an anniversary dinner for Hardy he saw twenty-four men whom he knew

¹⁶ Add. Mss. 35, 143 f/9. All references to Additional Mss. refer to the manuscript collection of the British Museum. For further details on the Society see C. B. Cone, *The English Jacobins* (New York: Scribner's, 1968); Philip Anthony Brown, *The French Revolution in English History* (London: G. Lockwood and Son, 1918); W. P. Hall, *British Radicalism 1791-1797* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1912); G. S. Veitch, *The Genesis of Parliamentary Reform* (London: Constable & Co., 1913); and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Random House, 1963).

¹⁷ Add. Mss. 35, 143 f/90. (Place Papers)

¹⁵ Thomas Hardy, *Memoirs* (London, 1832), p. 109.

at the Society in the middle of the 1790s. "Of the twenty-four, twenty were then journeymen or shopmen; they were now all in business and all flourishing men."¹⁸

How surprising then that in May, 1794, Pitt's government should try the leaders of the L.C.S. for treason! The great treason trial of that year brought to an end the first stage of Pitt's repression of the radical Jacobin community. It had begun over a year earlier with his decision to ban Paine's *Rights of Man*, and with Paine's subsequent flight and trial *in absentia*. Anti-Jacobin societies quickly spread across England and Scotland, as did John Reeves's Church and King Associations,¹⁹ groups heavily assisted by Pitt's Government. Moreover, in 1793, the French King was killed, and England went to war. The blissful dawn that had so moved Wordsworth had turned to dusk. The campaign of repression was so widespread that few were surprised in May of 1794 when Pitt accused the Corresponding Society and other leading radicals of plotting:

To assemble a pretended convention of the people, for the purpose of assuming the character of a general representation of the nation, superseding the representative capacity of the House and arrogating the legislative power of the country at large.²⁰

The Tory newspapers echoed Pitt's charge. "The whole system of insurrection lay in the monstrous doctrine of the Rights of Man, and the Corresponding Society composed of the meanest and most despicable of people."²¹ Godwin knew most of the accused. Three of them—Jerrald, Thelwall, and Horne Tooke—were good friends, One defendant, Thomas Holcroft, the writer, was Godwin's close friend. Nevertheless, Godwin had little love for the Society. It stood condemned of all he had written about political associations. Moreover, in *Political Justice* he had even criticized those who argued for change in the name of antiquity, having heaped ridicule on "those governed by the dicta of their remotest ancestors." In his book he had criticized the narrowness of groups like the L.C.S., groups that opposed "a specific tax perhaps, or some temporary grievance" (I, 245; 255). He had, after all, pro-

posed a truly radical restructuring of society, albeit not readily attained. Friendship and the conviction that Pitt's charges were based not on actions but on publications and speeches won out, however, and Godwin anonymously published an attack on the court. Shortly thereafter, the defendants were found innocent by the jury, and at least one of them, Horne Tooke, credited this to Godwin's *Cursory Strictures on the Charge Delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury*. Soon, however, the basic differences between Godwin and the L.C.S. would surface, and true to his own creed of outspoken and sincere censorship no amount of friendship would quiet Godwin and prevent the confrontation within the Jacobin family.

The essential ingredient for the evolution of the controversy was the emergence after the trial of one of its defendants, John Thelwall, as the leading figure in the L.C.S. He gave to the Society a new and decidedly more radical face. Poet, playwright, pamphleteer, and politician, Thelwall cut a fascinating figure in the 1790s. Friend and confidant of Coleridge, author of Rousseauian pastorals, publisher of a weekly radical newspaper, and ever present agitator at public meetings and lecture halls, Thelwall may well deserve a place in history as the first great leader of the English working class.²² His ideas are not our central concern here; in this story they are less important than his actions. Suffice it to say, however, that he was an intellectual disciple of Godwin's. In his *Tribune* articles and in his very popular *Rights of Man* (1796) he, too, was a perfectionist, who wrote on necessity, the fraud of punishment, and hypocrisy of patriotism, marriage, and gratitude, and one who recognized the obligations of sincerity and truth over friendship. He refused, however, to follow Godwin into the utopia of "political simplicity." Much more concerned with economic and social questions, he wrote primarily of specific reforms required to improve the lot of the working man. As one historian puts it he took "Jacobinism to the borders of Socialism." He also took it "to the borders of revolutionism," which is much more our concern.²³ Thelwall roused the L.C.S. from the depths of its despair and responded to Pitt and the legions of Church and King. His tactic was twofold: first, he gave rousing lectures with great rhe-

¹⁸ Add. Mss. f/93. E. P. Thompson suggests, it should be noted, that Place may be glossing over its real radical thrust to fit his own later, more moderate position (p. 153).

¹⁹ The full name of Reeves's group was "The Association for the Protection of Property Against Republicans and Levellers."

²⁰ Brown, *French Revolution*, p. 112.

²¹ *New Annual Register*, 1794, pp. 190-1.

²² For Thelwall, see C. Cestre, *John Thelwall, A Pioneer of Democracy in England* (London, 1906); B. S. Allen, "William Godwin's Influence upon John Thelwall" in *P.M.L.A.* 37 (1932); and Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, esp. pp. 157-161.

²³ Thompson, p. 160.

torical flourish, lectures which soon became the source of inspiration for scores of militant Jacobins. Much more courageous was his second tactic, the mass meeting; he organized and spoke to meetings at least three of which, in 1795 alone, drew more than 100,000 people to London.²⁴ Whatever his cause—universal suffrage, annual parliaments, shorter working hours, or redistribution of wealth—he brought to it an intensity and activism that pushed the L.C.S. from moderation to agitation and active intervention in the street politics of London. As an activist he was disdainful of philosophical and literary fellow-travelers like Godwin who refused to participate in Jacobin agitation.

Moderation! Moderation! A compromise between right and wrong! I detest it . . . for what is moderation of principle, but a compromise between right and wrong; an attempt to find out some path of expediency, without going to the first principles of justice. Such attempts must always be delusive to the individual and fatal to mankind. If there is anything sacred, it is principle! Let every man investigate seriously and solemnly the truth and propriety of the principles he adopts, but having adopted, let him pursue them into practice: let him tread on the path which they dictate.²⁵

The change in direction Thelwall brought to the once sober L.C.S. did not go unchallenged within the organization, and within its own meetings, quietly and beneath the surface there occurred the first skirmish between his tactics and Godwin's principles. A serious split developed in the society over the issue of large mass meetings, a split between Thelwall's activist followers and the disciples of Godwin who saw the group as merely engaged in educational work disseminating political wisdom and truth through publication and discussion. The Godwinians lost, as evidenced by the resignation of twenty-one members, "who deplored the increase of factious spirit, the preference given to measures the most inconsiderate and violent." The General Committee of the society answered with an attack on "those many weak minded persons who have attempted to propagate an opinion, that all endeavors to promote the cause of liberty in Britain by means of popular associations must necessarily prove fruitless." Under Thelwall's leadership, Place informs us, many in the society came to believe that repeated mass meetings and agitation would provoke a crisis that would "force the House of Commons to consent to radical re-

form in the state of representation."²⁶ Place, a good Godwinian, resigned, however, rather than agree to such coercive tactics.

This disagreement took place solely within the radical family, but the next and more devastating confrontation took place out of doors for all to see. It came to a head in late 1795 and early 1796 with the introduction into Parliament of Pitt's notorious Anti-Sedition Acts. Pitt's response to L.C.S. agitation was not the reform of Parliament but instead the introduction of two laws abrogating freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press. Fearful for its survival, Pitt's Government was lashing back. Food riots had spread through England in the summer and autumn of 1795, inflammatory tracts appeared at the same time with titles like *King Killing, the Reign of the English Robespierre, or the Happy Reign of George the Last*. En route to Parliament, the King was hissed and booed by some two hundred thousand Londoners thronging the streets. His carriage window was broken by a stone, and he is alleged to have gasped, "My Lord, I, I, I've been shot at." For many, the nightmare world of Versailles seemed to have arrived at St. James.²⁷ The Anti-Sedition Acts were Pitt's response to all of this. The Foxite opposition fought the bills unsuccessfully, and upon their passage *habeas corpus* was suspended for eight years. The two acts having been passed, Pitt's repression succeeded. The L.C.S. and the English Jacobins were stilled, only to revive in the short-lived naval mutinies of 1797.

Where did Godwin, the anarchist and philosopher of freedom and truth, stand in all of this? As a careful reading of *Political Justice* might have predicted, he was defending Pitt and attacking the L.C.S. and most specifically his one time friend, John Thelwall. His position is found in his pamphlet, *Considerations on Lord Grenville's and Mr. Pitt's Bills Concerning Treasonable and Seditious Practices and Unlawful Assemblies*, published anonymously by "a lover of order." (Did he find it so hard to betray a friend that he violated his own canon of candor?) The pamphlet begins with a general lecture on the principle of philosophical anarchy, as differentiated from false anarchy, offered by one "untainted with the headlong rage of faction." Governing men in a "petty

²⁴ Add. Mss. 27, 815 f/165-6; f/184. (Letters of L.C.S. 1795-6). Add. Mss. 35, 143 f/15.

²⁷ (Anon.) *Truth and Treason! or a Narrative of the Royal Procession* (London, 1795); See also J. H. Rose, *William Pitt and the Great War* (London, G. Bell and Sons, 1911) pp. 282-88; and Thompson, pp. 141-143.

²⁴ Thompson, p. 141ff.

²⁵ *The Tribune*, No IX, Saturday, 9 May 1795. Thelwall's weekly newspaper was reprinted in collected volumes in 1796. (Vol. I, 214).

and limited circle," he contends, is easy and can be done not by institutions but by reason alone. All men will "exercise an inspection over all," and no deeds can be concealed from the general censure or applause. But in nations with millions of men, "there is no eye penetrating enough to detect every mischief in its commencement." Governments are needed in such states to keep order and provide security. Shifting to the language of Burke, Godwin describes the fragility and complexity of society and government.

He that deliberately views the machine of human society, will even in his speculations approach it with awe. He will recollect with alarm, that in this scene "fools rush in, where angels fear to tread." The fabric that we contemplate is sort of a fairy edifice, and though it consist of innumerable parts, and hide its head among the clouds, the hand of a child almost, if suffered with neglect, may shake it into ruins.²⁸

There are, to be sure, abuses in societies; there are, for example, large numbers of poor and very few rich. But these abuses, Godwin quickly adds, are woven into the fabric of society and must be painstakingly corrected with careful judgment and deliberation lest one destroy faster than one creates, and rear up only false anarchy and barbarism. "These universal principles of political science," Godwin writes, "are necessary as premises" to the examination of Pitt's legislation. They convince one that government has as its major responsibility the protection of order and security, "the blessings we already possess, from the rashness of presumptuous experiment." The major threat to this security, Godwin insists, is the L.C.S. Like the Jacobin party in France, it is filled with impetuous and ardent zealots. It threatens civil order by "the immense multitudes it collects" who wreak disorder in the city streets. Its speeches and resolutions lack all temperance. Having done with the L.C.S., Godwin turns next on its leader Thelwall, whose lectures and public addresses violate all reasonable tenets of political life. The public mind ought to be enlightened, Godwin insists, and a uniformity of understanding reached such that no minister or monopolist would ever be powerful enough to withstand it. Could such a transformation occur in Thelwall's crowded, noisy meetings? No, he answers, and he condemns Thelwall:

Oh reform! Genial and benignant power! How often has thy name been polluted by profane and unhallowed lips! How often has thy standard been

unfurled by demagogues, and by assassins been drenched and disfigured with human gore!²⁹

Thelwall, Godwin continues, is a dangerous demagogue. "An impatient and headlong reformer," he is in no position to weigh his words with proper deliberation and purvey the truth while prompted by the demoralizing stimulus of the clamorous applause of large, excited audiences. He appeals to their passions and not reason, and if as "saving clauses," he urges the practice of universal benevolence and utters warnings against violence, he is like "Lord George Gordon preaching peace to the rioters in Westminster Hall," or "Iago adjuring Othello not to dishonor himself by giving harbour to a thought of jealousy."³⁰

A shocked Thelwall lamented in his biweekly issues of the *Tribune* that even Godwin, his friend for so long, should have turned on him when all the forces of Pitt's repression sought to shut him up.³¹ But Thelwall should have known that candor and sincerity were more important values for Godwin than friendship and that true to his own teaching, Godwin was obliged to censor his neighbor, to show his shortcomings, and thus to contribute to the formation of a more virtuous character.

The Elite and the Masses: Godwin the Anarchist—Some Concluding Comments

What most alarmed Godwin about the L.C.S. was the absence at its meetings of "persons of eminence, distinction, and importance in the country," who could temper the enthusiasm of those "not much in the habits of regular thinking." In addition, Godwin charged that Thelwall, the popular leader, was "not calmed and consecrated by the mild spirit of philosophy."³² As in his attack on reformers in general, the intellectual and elitist disdain shown here was by no means a novel departure in Godwin's public writings. *Political Justice* had been just as outspoken on this score. There, for example, Godwin described the greater part of people as "mere parrots" who mouthed arguments of which they understood little or nothing. Burke's depiction of the democratic masses constantly setting their minds on every "floating fashion and fancy," was no more arrogant than Godwin's castigating a constantly

²⁸ *Considerations . . .* the reader will have noted in this paper the incredible number of parallels found in these events with those in contemporary America, including, as we shall see, the tension between radical intellectuals and radical street (movement) politicians.

²⁹ *Considerations . . .* p. 22.

³¹ *The Tribune*, Vol. II, vii-xiv; Vol. III, 101-103.

³² *Considerations . . .* pp. 17, 19, 20.

²⁸ Godwin *Considerations . . .* (London, 1796) p. 4; 2-3.

changing public opinion by writing ". . . what is it they desire? They know not. It would probably be easy to show that what they professed to desire is little better than what they hate" (I, 255). One obvious answer, then, is given to the question raised at the end of Part II in this paper. "Political simplicity" cannot be realized by popular agitation led by radical reformers. Nor, for that matter, would widespread popular education suffice. Unlike Tom Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft, both of whom advocated a government-run school system, Godwin saw schemes of national education as only further examples of coercive interference with the individual's unfettered exercise of private judgment (II, 297-304).³³

If the age of felicity could not be entered through the schoolhouse, nor through street pressure on a weak Parliament, how would it be accomplished? How would the simple and sincere social order come about? Enlightened despotism, according to Godwin, was clearly not the answer. Power and force could never be the allies of truth and reason; nor for that matter could monarchs ever be capable of encouraging progress. The same could be said for the clergy and aristocracy. As for the middle class of newly enriched commoners, they too were ruled out as too selfish to be champions of reform. The lawyers who favored the rich over the poor and discouraged candor were also incapable of this task (II, 50-90, I, 41; 18-19; II, 457ff.; II, 390; 423; 407). The only social group capable of the noble mission of moving society to its blissful future was for Godwin, as for legions of future anarchists, the literary and intellectual elite. At bottom, Godwin harbors the one basic prejudice shared by all the enlightenment philosophers, save Rousseau—the unreflecting faith in the power of reflective man. "*Political Justice*," he informs the reader in his preface, is "an appeal to men of study and reflection." If only a small number of "liberally educated and reflecting members" would serve as the "people's guides and instructors," then, Godwin holds, "the business would be done." The "elevated system of the preceptor" would push aside "the groveling views of the great mass of mankind." These few preceptors "having stored their minds with reading and reflection" would communicate their wisdom to all, and through *them*, not through na-

tional schooling, enlightenment would filter down to all mankind (I, xi; 104; 50; 295-6). The social and political mission of the intellectual elite is most succinctly described by Godwin in his *Enquirer* of 1797.

Men of genius must rise up . . . to analyze the machine of society, to demonstrate how the parts are connected together, . . . and point out the defects and the remedy. It is thus only that important reforms can be produced. . . . He who is a friend to general happiness, will neglect no chance of producing in his pupil or his child, one of the long-looked for saviours of the human race.³⁴

There is no doubt who these men of genius were. They could be found in the literary and philosophical circle that always had Godwin at its center, the circle of Holcroft and Godwin's wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, and that of Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Godwin's son-in-law, Shelley. Writing to a friend, Godwin unabashedly described himself and his correspondent as "of course among the few enlightened." His close friend Hazlitt wrote that Godwin "has the happiness to think an author the greatest character in the world."³⁵ His friend Coleridge, however, soon to leave the fold of eighteenth-century rationalism, did not even in 1795 share its and Godwin's high hopes for the intellectual elite. In two sentences he repudiates the intellectualism of Godwin in particular and the *philosophes* in general.

The annals of the French Revolution prove that the knowledge of the few cannot counteract the ignorance of the many . . . the light of philosophy, when it is confined to a small minority, points out the possessors as the victims rather than the illuminators of the multitude.³⁶

In his writings and in his actions Godwin exemplifies the characteristic intellectualism of the Enlightenment. How fitting, then, that in 1795 he should have locked horns with the democrat Thelwall, for in this obscure confrontation an important turning point is marked in the evolution of modern political attitudes. The philosophical and theoretical radicalism of the eighteenth century, the work largely of speculative intellectuals colored by elitist assumptions, meets head on the practical radicalism of the Nineteenth century, the work mostly of political agitators and reformers with democratic popular sympathies. The days would soon be

³³ For Paine's views see *Rights of Man*, Part II. (London, Penguin Books, 1970). For Wollstonecraft's views see *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London, 1792), p. 185. See also the useful book *Education and Enlightenment in the Works of William Godwin* by B. R. Polin (New York, 1962), especially Ch. IV.

³⁴ *The Enquirer*, pp. 10-11.

³⁵ William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age* (London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1964), p. 202; C. Kegan-Paul, *William Godwin: His Friends & Contemporaries* (London, 1876), II, 195.

³⁶ S. T. Coleridge, *Essays on His Times* (London, 1850), I, 7-8.

gone when radicals would write, as Godwin did, that men of character would emerge in times of crises and the "soil in which such men are to be matured, is less that of action, than of enquiry and instruction" (I, 298). Interestingly enough, the symbolic aspects of this transition were captured best by Thelwall, the victim of Godwin's intellectual snobbery. To Godwin's charge that in the politics of agitation and reform, one "bids farewell to the patient lubrications of the philosopher, and the labor of the midnight oil" (II, 368), Thelwall responded through his *Tribune* that, on the contrary:

It is in the mixed and crowded audiences in theaters and halls of assembly that the real lover of his species must principally expect to inspire that generous sympathy, that social ardor without which a nation is but a populous wilderness and the philosopher himself only a walking index of obsolete laws and dead-letter institutes.³⁷

This division within the Jacobin camp in 1795 sets the pattern for the evolution of nineteenth-century radicalism and has its counterpart even to this very day. Most friends of humanity react to the ills of society with a political response and like Thelwall seek political goals through political action. A smaller number, however, still cling to Godwin's philosophical response and flee from politics to the vision of a nonpolitical society achieved through the nonpolitical means of education and enlightenment.

One should also note the significance of this split for the general development of anarchist thought, which is where this discussion of Godwin began. Many anarchists would leave Godwin the *philosophe* behind. Much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century anarchism is, of course, an outright repudiation of the Enlightenment rationalism that the founder of anarchism so typified. Ineed, for many more recent anarchists, politics is in fact equated with reason and because of this to be superseded

³⁷ *The Tribune*, II, xiv.

with and by apolitical action. In the same vein, it could be argued that Thelwall's street politics was in fact a more accurate anticipation of the future anarchist style. But, these points notwithstanding, Godwin stands as the father of modern anarchist thought in a sense more profound than simply being the first to write of society without government.

He gives to anarchism qualities that endure despite the philosophical, methodological, and cultural gap that may separate him and the doctrine's later proponents. As it was in his presentation, the doctrine after him is forever torn between the liberal values of individuality, independence, autonomy, privacy, and self-determination, on the one hand, and the nonliberal values of community, solidarity, and the encouragement of virtue through social pressure, on the other. So, too, later anarchists waver, like Godwin, between a progressive, futuristic orientation with assumptions of perfectibility and endless innovation and improvement, and a nostalgic yearning for a simple, agrarian, and preindustrial existence. Most decisively, however, he has stamped anarchism with its elitism, its abiding convictions that if only all men were as wise or as sensitive as the anarchist then governments would be superfluous, and that until this was the case government represented pure coercion. The artist-anarchist's role meanwhile is to emancipate the ignorant "great mass of mankind," the misguided "Pig Nation," whether slowly and imperceptibly through reason and enlightenment or hastily with the dramatic flourish of an exquisite act. Finally, Godwin in these years may well have marked anarchism with another indelible stamp, its ultimate service to the status quo (although latter-day anarchists may have been and are less willing in this service than he). To the extent that change in political systems—either incremental or revolutionary—has and must come from political activity, there is little to fear from those who seek change but who eschew politics, be it for philosophic enlightenment or for theater.