

## ENDING CALEB WILLIAMS: ON STORYTELLING INFLUENCING WILLIAM GODWIN'S POLITICS

O DESFECHO DE *CALEB WILLIAMS*: A INFLUÊNCIA DA NARRATIVA SOBRE A POLÍTICA DE WILLIAM GODWIN

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**RESUMO:** William Godwin escreveu o romance gótico *Things as They Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams* ("As Coisas como Elas São; ou, as Aventuras de Caleb Williams", em tradução livre) em 1794 para disseminar suas ideias filosóficas e políticas. Início o artigo revisando a literatura para demonstrar como sua teoria influenciou tanto sua decisão de escrever ficções quanto o tipo de ficção que ele escreveu, mostrando como o autor usou e inovou convenções do gênero gótico para transmitir suas ideias para um público mais amplo. Então comparo duas perspectivas divergentes na literatura quanto à maneira como suas narrativas influenciaram suas ideias políticas e filosóficas, em particular a partir de comentários acerca do significado e do impacto de mudanças de última hora ao desfecho de *Caleb Williams*. Argumento que essa relação ambígua entre narrativa e política na obra de Godwin é relevante para reflexões políticas contemporâneas sobre a relação entre representação e ação política, ou como narrativas sobre a condição humana e realidades políticas podem afetar as ideias, atitudes e relações sociais de seus narradores.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Narrativa; William Godwin; Caleb Williams.

**ABSTRACT:** William Godwin wrote the Gothic novel *Things as They Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams* in 1794 as a way to spread political and philosophical ideas. I begin this article by reviewing the literature to demonstrate how his theoretical ideas influenced both his decision to write fiction and the kind of fiction he wrote, showing how the author used and innovated tropes of the Gothic genre in order to convey his ideas to a larger

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audience. Then, I compare two divergent perspectives in the scholarship regarding the way his fictional storytelling influenced his political and philosophical ideas, in particular through commentary on the meaning and impact of last-minute changes to the ending of *Caleb Williams*. I argue this ambiguous relationship between storytelling and politics in Godwin's work is relevant to contemporary political reflections on the relationship between representation and political action, or how the stories people tell about the human condition and their political realities might affect their ideas, actions and social relations.

**KEY-WORDS:** Storytelling. William Godwin. Caleb Williams.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The utilitarian philosopher William Godwin (1756-1836) gained notoriety for his radical politics. He was regarded by many (such as Woodcock (1981) and Costa (2004), to cite just a few) as an early anarchist, if not the first, for declaring structures of hierarchy and authority (such as the State) inherently unjust and envisioning an egalitarian society based on reason. He is also known as a fiction writer; the first novel under his own name (instead of pseudonyms) was *Things as They Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams*, published in 1794 and generally understood as a fictional materialisation of the political thought in his preceding work, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, published roughly a year before<sup>2</sup>. This evaluation comes not only from literary critics at the time, but also from the author himself:

What is now presented to the public is no refined and abstract speculation; it is a study and delineation of things passing in the moral world. [...] the spirit and character of the government intrudes itself into every rank of society. But this is a truth highly worthy to be communicated to persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach. Accordingly it was proposed in the invention of the following work, to comprehend [...] a general review of the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism, by which man becomes the destroyer of man. (GODWIN, 2009, p. 312)

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of convenience, I shall for the rest of this article refer to the first work as *Caleb Williams*, or simply *Caleb*, and to the second as *Enquiry* or *Political Justice*.

Even if the first edition of *Enquiry* was so expensive that it was deemed “unnecessary to ban because hardly anyone could actually afford to purchase a copy”, it did become a success via “pirated” editions, being quickly read by “intellectuals and the working class alike on both sides of the Atlantic” (LEUWEEN, 2006, p. 23). *Caleb Williams* also became a sensation, “the first entirely successful political novel in the European narrative tradition” (CLEMIT, 2009, p. vii). In an 1815 review of the book, James Mackintosh noted that it had been “translated into most languages”, with “scarcely a continental circulating library in which it is not one of the books which most quickly require to be replaced” (LEUWEEN, 2006, p. 23). Literary reviews recognised not only the quality of the book but also its political background: many critics denounced the novel as a “dangerous piece of fiction” (LEUWEEN, 2006, p. 23; CLEMIT, 1993, p. 68).

However, Godwin is not as highly regarded now as he once was. “To many”, Bode (1990, p. 96) remarked, Godwin is “the husband to *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, father to *Frankenstein* and father-in-law to *Prometheus Unbound*”. Even while he was still alive, his philosophy “became increasingly unpopular in a British society dominated by the reactionary politics that followed the Reign of Terror in France”, and his fiction “lost its popular appeal” (LEUWEEN, 2006, p. 24). There does not seem to be (for all the international circulation of its original release) a Brazilian Portuguese translation of *Caleb*. Even if Godwin’s theoretical connexion to anarchism is sometimes recalled (which is not a given among scholars not directly investigating anarchism; see Schwalm (2017)), some contemporary anarchists now distance themselves from the author, explicitly disavowing Godwin’s status as part of the anarchist canon of thinkers<sup>3</sup> - Ferreira Neto (2002, p. iv) goes even further, as he categorizes Godwin as a “bourgeois ideologist” who re-elaborates and spreads “values more suitable to the consolidation of the British capitalist order”<sup>4</sup>. Not being identified as an anarchist is not necessarily a sign of dishonour, but not being seen any longer as a precursor to an impactful political movement could certainly indicate waning relevance. Academic interest in him plummeted; in spite of a spike in commentary decades ago following the discovery of an alternative, manuscript

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3 This is the perspective of thinkers who study anarchism as a specific social and political workers’ movement originated in the middle of the nineteenth century. See Corrêa (2015).

4 Ferreira Neto (2002, p. 15) states that an anarchist “appropriation” of Godwin is recent (from the mid-eighties), and that his “political heritage” is more directly linked to the English labour movement. He points out that 19th-century radicals do not make a reference out of Godwin’s works, and Godwin never used the word anarchism to describe his politics (WEIR, 1997, p. 19).

ending of *Caleb Williams* (Godwin rewrote it days before publishing the story), research on the author, in the field of political theory in particular, has been decidedly timid.

Still, the relationship between storytelling and politics in Godwin's work remains fascinating – and ambiguous. This goes beyond the fact, pointed out by authors such as Iris Marion Young, that “the choice of [a] particular genre or mode of communication [...] is itself a political act grounded in problems of inclusion and exclusion from the public sphere” (HANSSON, 2017, p. 2; YOUNG, 2002, cap. 2), although that is also relevant; Godwin's process of writing fiction, *Caleb* in particular, had an effect on his philosophical views. In order to explore this effect, I shall mainly engage with the established discussions on the subject from the field of literary theory, a corpus of research sitting at the crossroads of politics and literature, and thus better positioned than contemporary discussions on his philosophical work (few and far between) or on political utilitarianism in general to aid the efforts to answer or comment on the questions I pose in this article: how storytelling, in terms of writing *Caleb Williams* in particular, impacted Godwin's political thought? How reflecting upon this influence might help us reflect upon contemporary political issues?

I shall begin by reviewing the literature to demonstrate that Godwin's ideas were related to his decision to write fiction, as he made use of Gothic tropes in order to convey them. Then I shall compare the perspectives of Bode and Weir on the controversy regarding the ending of *Caleb*. Despite being relatively old takes on the matter (Bode's in particular), this contrast has, to the best of my knowledge, not been explored yet, leaving unspoken, within the scholarship, an unresolved conflict about how his fictional body of work influenced his philosophy and political thought. Though I do not claim one side has a better point (and in pointing to the disagreement, I offer two competing answers to the first of my questions mentioned above), his work, and these literary-political interpretations of it, could be fruitful for research in a whole field of political and social theory.

## 2 WHY GODWIN WROTE FICTION

*Caleb Williams* is a first-person perspective story about the title character, a

poor, self-educated orphan boy who becomes an employee at the estate of Ferdinando Falkland, who murdered his neighbour Barnabas Tyrrel, a tyrannical master, arranging for two of Tyrrel's tenants to be found guilty of the crime and then hanged. Caleb gains knowledge of the crime, and Falkland threatens him with death should he tell anyone about it. Caleb flees, and Falkland orders his pursuit, using every means to hinder his efforts to hide. Caleb eventually makes public accusations against his former master, but in the end the two forgive each other. Caleb accuses himself of having become as vicious as Falkland and recognizes humanity in his former master, voicing admiration for many of his qualities. Falkland dies soon thereafter, and Caleb feels responsible for his death, ending the book by explaining that its purpose was to straighten out Falkland's story instead of condemning the master.

Based mainly on the author's recollection of writing the story in his 1832 preface to *Fleetwood*, for a period scholars saw *Caleb* as a psychological thriller, with little or no relation to politics (BODE, 1990, p. 95; BUTLER, 1982, p. 239; CLEMIT, 1993, p. 35). Later scholarship rescued the political undertones in *Caleb Williams* from oblivion; I shall demonstrate how they were related to Godwin's decision to write it.

Godwin thought fiction was a valuable vehicle for his ideas. There were three main reasons for that. First, it reached more people. As he himself noted, books of "philosophy and science" were not likely to be read by most of the growing reading public available. The Gothic genre rose to popularity, spearheaded by authors such as Ann Radcliffe, and it took advantage of a booming market as much as it helped it "boom" even further. This was of paramount relevance to Godwin, as "the wide dispersal of Gothic fiction among many social strands of society ensures it a large and varied reading audience receptive to what it presents and eager to discuss" it (LEUWEEN, 2006, p. 21)<sup>5</sup>.

To appreciate the second and third reasons, one should bear in mind Godwin's relevance in the public and intellectual English debate on the French Revolution. His main rivals were Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke, the latter being a conservative writer who disapproved of the events south of the Channel – which the first supported. Burke consistently appeals to tradition as he defends "things as they are", and although

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<sup>5</sup> See Hansson (2017) for a discussion on Godwin's egalitarianism in relation to his choice of format, especially when compared to John Thelwall's differing strategy to reach a broader audience.

Godwin certainly rejected this political view, he also maintained a relationship of great admiration to Burke (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 40). Godwin's "central ethic of respect for individuals created", on the other hand, "a profound distaste for violent revolutionary activity", for he distinguished "between revolution based on uncontrolled passion, and the tranquil operation of reason leading to gradual improvement" (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 41). If "socio-political reform needed to start at the level of [the] individual", then popular fiction, "privately consumed and dwelt upon", became the "perfect didactic tool" (LEUWEEN, 2006, p. 23). Godwin's goal for writing *Caleb* was to

expose the evils which arise out of the present system of civilized society; and, having exposed them, to lead the enquiring reader to examine whether they are, or are not, as has commonly been supposed, irremediable; in a word, to disengage the minds of men from prepossession, and launch them upon the sea of moral and political enquiry. (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 42)

Godwin thought fiction could provide an "unfettered imaginative space" - an element of popular fiction (beyond its popularity) that made it particularly better at disengaging "the minds of men from prepossession" than the non-fiction he had already been writing. He wrote in *Political Justice* that the special function of imaginative literature is to liberate "from the constraints of 'things as they are'", since when the reader "boldly takes a flight into the world unknown [the reader] may expect to be presented with the materials and rude sketches of intellectual improvement"<sup>6</sup>. This is the second reason for his choice of storytelling as a vehicle for his philosophical and political ideas. *Caleb*, the book, and Caleb, the character, were not about stirring up the destruction of private property and overthrowing the government; Godwin wanted "not by violence to change [society's] institutions, but by discussion to change its ideas" (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 42-43).

If Godwin's quarrel with Paine helps to understand the second reason for his choice, his opposition to Burke sheds light on the third: the role emotions play in cognition. Godwin took note of Wollstonecraft's and Paine's criticism of Burke as an intellectual who strived to influence the public's views through "a range of emotive techniques"; Burke "draws on images of nature, antiquity, and the patriarchal family, as well as biblical and Miltonic allusions, to promote unquestioning obedience to institutions" (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 43). And while he denounced Burke for manipulating emotions, he also understood how powerful

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<sup>6</sup> For more on Godwin's reasoning for considering fiction a powerful tool, see Ferreira Neto (2002, p. 83)

they were. The problems with his conservative foe lied in his deception (manipulating emotions in non-fictional texts) and in his goals (the defence of aristocratic institutions), but not necessarily in the “tool” itself. By focusing on individual experience “to dramatize the inner workings of hierarchical society, the psychological and linguistic strategies by which inequality is maintained”, (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 44) Godwin counter-attacked Burke's imagery: if the latter “casts the reader in the role of a small child, dwarfed by the scale of the greater world”, exploiting the language of early instruction to “persuade [...] with the child's implicit obedience” (BUTLER, 1982, p. 243), the first wanted to break the spell, encouraging people to grow out of infancy and judge matters for themselves (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 44). The third reason for writing fiction is that Godwin could use it to portray the State as an unfair structure which promotes inequality, persecution and betrayal, linking it to the insecurity of not being able to settle anywhere, instead of as benevolent institutions akin to a family, evoking warm feelings of protection and belonging. Finally, as Hansson (2017, p. 12) points out, appealing to passions and emotions could be necessary to reach lower class readers, since for Godwin an uneducated public could not “be expected to reason adequately”.

Godwin saw in literature a way to reach a broader audience and to take advantage of the state of mind of its readers – one which could leave them more prone to the abandonment of prejudices; one with which it would be acceptable to tamper using the kind of emotional topiary that guides people in the appreciation of facts. He chose one of the most popular fictional genres of its time to attempt such an engagement with the public – the Gothic.

### 3 GOTHIC TROPES IN *CALEB WILLIAMS*

The first thing to take note of when interpreting *Caleb* in light of Godwin's ideas is the fact that it is a first-person narration<sup>7</sup>. This offered a “counter-proposition to Burke's limited view of human potential”, as it allowed (all) readers to judge for themselves, precisely that which Burke did not theoretically conceive of as positive (CLEMIT, 1993,

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<sup>7</sup> He had begun writing the story in third person, but switched in order to employ his “metaphysical dissecting knife in tracing and laying bare the involutions of motive” (GODWIN, 2009, p. 350).

p. 45). Godwin structures *Caleb Williams* by means of subjective accounts (Caleb's being the main one), and thus "appeals directly to the reader as [the] true arbiter of political justice", but even if Caleb's "confessional" attitude is linked to Godwin's belief "in the power of total frankness to erode the false opinion upon which government was established", his memories are indicated at times to be unreliable. This results in a stronger cognitive pressure for the reader, who must more actively judge and interpret, and opens up the kind of displacement that leads to Gothic upsetting: the world not steadily comprehended, but felt as a "subjective nightmare of flight and pursuit" (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 56-57). Additionally, first-person narration reminded readers of the difficulties of seeing 'things as they are' (as narrators are unreliable) and laid bare the mechanisms through which they, "unreliable" as they were, strived to do that.

A Gothic atmosphere provided Godwin with the tools necessary to achieve his aforementioned goal of portraying political institutions not as something to love and respect, but to fear and oppose. The innovation here lies in the creative appropriation of a central Gothic motif: the *sublime*, that which awes and astonishes, suspending one's rational abilities; that which "the human subject cannot comprehend", feeling "diminished as a result" (WEIR, 1997, p. 100) – a Burkean concept essential to eighteenth-century literary conventions. The overwhelming antagonist in *Caleb*, structurally speaking, is not a supernatural power (real or apparent): it is the social structure as a whole; political institutions, judges, lords, even people outside the machinery of government, enlisted by powerful actors in order to reach Caleb everywhere he goes; to prevent him from having a moment, so to speak, of peace.

Burke's sublime may be evoked through natural or supernatural means: certain forces in nature, such as hurricanes and floods, appear limitless in their power and inspire wonder and awe as a result; similarly, the imagination is capable of overwhelming itself through the evocation of supernatural terrors, such as those manufactured by the authors of Gothic novels. Elements of conventional Gothic fiction are present in *Caleb Williams*, but Godwin has also contributed something new by suggesting that political forces may have as much sublime power as natural or supernatural forces. The political sublime appears in the novel in the form of Falkland's power over Williams, which Falkland himself likens to omnipotence. (WEIR, 1997, p. 100)

Another aspect of the Gothic novel Godwin might have been interested in was the fact that, as Walter Scott remarked of Radcliffe's novels, "the characters 'bear the



features, not of individuals, but of the class to which they belong" (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 54). Caleb Williams and Ferdinando Falkland have a marked relationship of "master" and "servant" – and, as Butler (1982, p. 245) remarks, at least initially "the two characters are not individuals but stereotypes". Taking advantage of this might have ensured readers would see the characters for representations, standing in for something broader than themselves (even if made complex by the intimacy the first-person narrative provides at least for Caleb), and thus would be able to follow the story from a politically charged vantage-point. However, Godwin "resists the conventional pressures of the eighteenth-century romance plot, which typically leads to the affirmation of social identity through the discovery of parents and husbands"; his manipulation of class relations creates a dramatic tension which cannot be "resolved by familial reconciliation" – becoming, then, a study on "what happens when individuals break out of their prescribed social roles" (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 54).

Thus not only institutions are reworked through tropes and devices, but also social relations between individuals. It is no accident, Clemit (1993, p. 59) argues, that Caleb experiences these relations as ties of dependency or persecution: "Burke depicts the individual as fallible and childlike [... encouraging] dependency on the state as on a vast family", but Godwin twists this pattern as "Caleb experiences repeated betrayals of trust".

Some scholars (such as Gary Kelly) have seen more resemblance between Godwin and authors like Thomas Holcroft (his close friend, even), categorizing him as a writer of "Jacobin fiction", a genre defined as "the imaginative enactments of a philosophical argument" in which "character and plot are unified through the sociological thesis that individual character is formed entirely by social circumstance" (LEUWEEN, 2006, p. 23). However, Jacobin novels lack the Gothic's "morbidity, its tendency to fuse the rational and emotional, the scientific and magic, the academic and folkloric, and its penchant for representing psychologically disturbed protagonists" (LEUWEEN, 2006, p. 23). Even though characters do tend to represent social classes, as mentioned above, Godwin avoids, differently from Holcroft, "creating characters who can be used as the author's mouthpiece" (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 46).

Some scholars also debate<sup>8</sup> whether Gothic fiction has any subversive or dissident potential, which is relevant since the lack thereof could undercut Godwin's entire project – and considering the apparent bitterness in the way he refers to *Caleb* in his preface to *Fleetwood*, we might suspect *he* suspected as much later in life. Perhaps “the Gothic” is (intrinsically), or was (contingently), unfit to function as catalyst for action, means for political education, or inspiration for moral conversion.

It can be said that Godwin achieved his goals. The critical edge in *Caleb Williams* slit the reality of its time, taking aim at very real, existing institutions, and as such it “spoke too loudly” - it was the kind of book that caused “a stir, private and public debate, and sometimes legal repression” (LEUWEEN, 2006, p. 21). Godwin encouraged readers to “live up” to their rational potentials, says Clemit, and rearranged elements of the Gothic fiction in such a way that, even though it was seen as a Gothic tale (of the same kind as a somewhat politically harmless Radcliffe pageturner), it was also considered *dangerous* by authorities. But did Godwin achieve his goals *despite* inherent shortcomings of Gothic fiction, or standing on its large, winged shoulders?

If understanding the influence of Gothic fiction in general on radical political projects at large is not the purpose of this article, analysing the influence of Godwin's *Caleb* on his own ideas is. In order to do that, I shall begin by examining the controversy regarding *Caleb Williams*' endings.

#### 4 THE ENDINGS

The unpublished, “manuscript” ending of *Caleb Williams* was only made known in 1966. Caleb and Falkland are not exactly forgiving in this version: when the former servant arranges a way to publicly denounce Falkland's crimes, he is immediately seen as an insolent liar and thrown into prison. He dies there, alone, after a few extra disappointments, and ends the story by writing a letter in which he says “true happiness lies in being like a stone”. This marks a reference to *Political Justice*, in which Godwin “had classified humanity according to a scale of happiness”: the best to be said of the worker,

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8 For a review of this debate, see Leuween (2006).

on the bottom of the scale, is that he is "happier than a stone", and therefore Falkland's power reduced "the powerless Williams to the lowest level of human happiness" (WEIR, 1997, p. 96).

The critical reception to Godwin's rewriting, once acknowledged, was mostly positive, with critics seeing the change as "a victory of art over politics [...] of the novelist over the political philosopher" (BODE, 1990, p. 104). Bode argues that these appreciations are themselves politically biased; what critics who approved of the change "love is exactly this shift from the social and political to what is individual and psychological" (BODE, 1990, p. 103). Most critics framed the issue as a dichotomy in which politics and philosophical ideas cannot coexist with a sense of narrative or character development. In fact, Bode (1990, p. 103) convincingly defends that the new ending is not at all a literary improvement, with inconsistencies with respect to "character delineation", "action" and "the political philosophy transported by the preceding action".

Hence it was probably not a concern for literature that motivated Godwin to change the ending. This should come as no surprise; we have seen above how his philosophical and political views influenced his fiction. Writing *Caleb* only gave him an opportunity to clash the novelist in him with the activist he also was. "So convincingly does he portray the overall corruption of the society of his day", says Bode about the original ending, "that a sympathetic reader is discouraged rather than encouraged to do anything about the pitiful state of things" (BODE, 1990, p. 106). Godwin's visions of "things as they are", once transmitted to readers, were "counterproductive to his political purpose" (BODE, 1990, p. 107); "as the work aimed to spread the author's political idea to the public", the first ending "would not fit for the planned purpose" (LEE, 2016, p. 1). Godwin chooses, then, to withdraw the "novel's *realistic* ending", replacing it with a "*utopian* one" – not things as they are, but as they *should* be. His "progressive concept of character", even if it does highlight "man's potential for self-reform rather than inevitable tragic decline" (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 51), is rushed, narratively speaking; seemingly out of place and pace. If the new ending's "ethical and psychological complexity" (in which Caleb voluntarily considers himself as guilty in relation to Falkland as Falkland is in relation to him, as unethical or typical of abusive relationships as that sounds) at least holds out to the audience "the possibility of improvement" (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 64), it also completely undermines

Godwin's project of presenting "things as they are", for his fictional account is distorted by his interest in overcoming his present reality: it means "anything but a victory of the novelist over the philosopher", being rather "the victory of the propagandist over the faithful recorder of things passing in the moral world" (BODE, 1990, p. 107).

If this new ending was supposed to weaponise this work of art, making it more likely to influence people, how did it satisfy critics who apparently craved a narrative free of the shackles of philosophical coherence or the dangers of explicit political affiliation? The answer is eerily simple: if we follow the logic from the second ending, truth *can* and *does* prevail, through discourse, against unjust institutions. Well, why would a revolution be needed at all?

One could add, echoing Clemit (1993, p. 67), that "this optimistic revelation of the power of sincerity should not blind us to its extreme tenuousness", since truth might have prevailed, but "only at a frightening personal cost" for Caleb as he "sees himself as morally culpable". But this is an odd argument; Godwin might have shown "how the mind may be forced to breaking-point under the constraints of the existing system or the pressures of sudden change", but this could only have been effective if we, as readers, could *believe* this sudden change; that it made sense for Caleb to feel guilty for Falkland's death. As private rational dialogue had been tried before (and it failed), the only alternative for Caleb was to let himself be captured and killed so that Falkland would not consume himself over knowing someone else knew he was a murderer<sup>9</sup>. The diagnosis remains: reforming social structures is unnecessary, for they cannot lead to injustice as long as individuals can communicate.

Godwin firmly believed in the power of truth, but in developing a fictional story in which the main character *has* the leverage of truth, he became aware of the depressing truth that truth was, in the context of his story, no leverage at all. One could wonder whether Caleb *really* has truth on his side, but even though he is slightly unreliable as a narrator, it does not follow that he is not truthful or morally right. Godwin uses unreliable

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<sup>9</sup> Mohammad (2017) points out that tyranny can produce ill effects on both dominant and dominated, which can be seen on both characters' arcs in the published ending (Falkland's and Caleb's). But this still does not help us believe Caleb's remorse. If anything, as Mohammad also discusses, we could see it as a manifestation of some sort of mental disorder developed during his struggling with Falkland's persecution, which stands in for structures of hierarchy and authority in general.

first-person narration for, presumably, aesthetic and philosophical reasons; he wanted to build a Gothic sense of insecurity and uneasiness *straight into* the chassis of the story, and also make it *necessary* for readers to judge for themselves what the truth is regarding the events of the book (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 68). But we can still reasonably suppose, by the way the story unfolds (regardless of the ending), that when readers *do* judge they are supposed to consider Caleb a wronged hero. By changing the course of events towards a conclusion incoherent with the fact that Caleb is truthful, yet this is not enough, Godwin lost radicals (whose suspension of disbelief bled to death) and was unable to convince general readers that any *systemic* change was needed at all.

But if Godwin's fiction did not make him change his position on truth (only stubbornly reaffirm it), how did it influence his ideas? It did so by moving him on the issue of rationality. For Caleb to have a "sudden change of heart" in the new ending, the fugitive contrasts the "demonic monster" he had imagined his master as being with "the suffering individual" he is confronted with (Falkland is described as having very fragile health at that point). An emotionally moved Caleb then "offers a tale of errors which highlights his and Falkland's mutual failure of 'confidence' in each other's rational potential". Godwin offers us a "notional model for social interaction" based not only on frankness, but also sympathy: his conclusion did not involve solely "equity and justice", but also "an undisguised appeal to the emotions" (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 66). This development is actually *crucial* for the course of his political ideas, since in the second edition of *Political Justice*, published in 1796, "Godwin adds several passages which further question the rational self-sufficiency promoted in the first edition", pointing to "the development of a concept of virtue based on feeling and sympathy" (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 68). Butler (1982, p. 255) agrees that Godwin's fictional enterprise influenced his philosophical ideas, stating that the "revisions to the treatise, though more limited, are dictated both by the insights won from the novel and by further thoughtful study of real men suffering actual political oppression". Godwin possibly hoped that the emotions fictional narratives could elicit would serve him well in attacking Burke's perspectives; between the first and second editions of *Enquiry* (when he wrote *Caleb*) he apparently realized the full potential of these emotions.

## 5 ON TRUTH, POWER AND CHANGE

"For Godwin", Hansson (2017, p. 10) remarks, "the lack of effective communication [...] generates the potential for both revolutionary and reactionary violence, and this [...] fundamentally undermines the cause of reform and the progress of truth and equality". Communication can come from rational discourse or emotional engagement, but in any case it elicits truth – in whose power, as we have seen, Godwin believed. Godwin also thought that the State, representing the use of force, hindered truth and equality. But this matrix of conceptual relations of his leads to a philosophical entanglement in which he was trapped:

given a society built on ignorance, with all its institutions designed to systematically preserve, perpetuate and reproduce that ignorance, how can the spreading of truth through the discourses of individuals be recommended as the only means for political change? How can free discussion and conversation be the cure for a society whose disease, according to Godwin, is exactly that it does not allow this? If power prevents truth, how can truth ever topple power? (BODE, 1990, p. 108)

For Bode (1990, p. 108) Godwin lacks a theory of social change; he cannot conceive of "antithetical forces which, now subdued, will gather strength in time and will eventually overturn the balance of power". Weir (1997, p. 100) sees a strong tie between Falkland's pursuit of Caleb and Foucault's concept of panoptic power; Bentham's panopticon model of the prison is a model for the eighteenth-century state. Foucault is frequently criticized by anarchists for its picture of the world as an inescapable network of power, in which the idea of subject itself becomes nearly, if not completely, irrelevant – and social emancipation is given up, exchanged at best for some sort of individual liberation<sup>10</sup> (CUDENEC, 2015). It is possible that Godwin saw structures of power as inescapable, and as a consequence, individual growth (specially through private activities such as reading) was seen as the only feasible solution to impact or influence the structures of power.

But not all who could criticize Godwin for this point of view imply on the contrary that the *only* solution is the raw violence Godwin detested (as if complaining that "he

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<sup>10</sup> Bode (1990, p. 111) also offers a "post-structuralist" argument, considering *Caleb's* original ending, in which Falkland's trunk means that "the free play of signifiers is arrested and meaning determined where the powers of truth and discourse find their ultimate limitation: in *social force and political power* [...] where] it is decided which [...] fiction of "things as they are" will prevail as the "true" one".

should admit that *only* power topples power!"). The alternative could lie in an insight thinkers such as Foucault and Graeber were able to reach that the eighteenth-century philosopher was not: that "structures of hierarchy, by they [sic] own logic, necessarily create their own counter-image or negation" (GRAEBER, 2004, p. 74); in other words, whenever there is power, there is *resistance* (COHN, 2002). Graeber, for instance, mostly agrees with Godwin's analysis regarding the way structures such as the State poison communication within a society: "violence, particularly structural violence, where all the power is on one side, creates ignorance", in the sense that "if you have the power to hit people over the head whenever you want, you don't have to trouble yourself too much figuring out what they think is going on, and therefore, generally speaking, you don't" (GRAEBER, 2004, p. 72). Violence, which "is [...] the basis of the state" (GRAEBER, 2004, p. 73), has the "capacity to allow arbitrary decisions, and thus to avoid the kind of debate, clarification, and renegotiation typical of more egalitarian social relations". But insisting in talking and "telling the truth" in such an environment will not suffice; Graber offers instead a framework for analysis and action based on "institutions of counterpower" which does not exclusively (if at all) rely on the use of force to envision an overcoming of the current political *status quo*.

This is something Godwin actually *depicts* in *Caleb*, but does not ponder enough to charge with purpose, conscience or a definition of "power" that does not demand equation to violence and domination ("capacity", for instance): Caleb "is concerned more with avoiding the law than with changing the system that makes the law possible" (WEIR, 1997, p. 96); out of the character's resistance, alone or (more importantly) in his relationship with others, no arrangement comes that is strong enough to avoid being poisoned by the corrosive influence of the Gothic / panopticon-esque social and political forces. Caleb is a passive character insofar as "Godwin's critique of the current social structure does not depend so much on what [he] says and does as on the dramatic treatment of authority", and even more interestingly, "what ultimately destroys the power [Falkland and Tyrrel] possess is the corrupting influence of the power itself" (WEIR, 1997, p. 96), not individual or collective action against it. As in the early Marxists'<sup>11</sup> prophecy

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11 Godwin's rejection of revolutionary violence distances his view on social change from a Marxist's, even if his readers could be led to believe undesirable powerful institutions would necessarily crumble by themselves in time. Of course, there is significant dispute among Marxists regarding revolutionary violence and the demise of capitalism; I do not imply a uniformity of positions exists within this paradigm.

of capitalist self-destruction, Godwin's readers might as well just wait for institutions of domination to destroy themselves spontaneously<sup>12</sup>.

We can see how Godwin sturdily came to believe, according to Mark Philp (1986 apud Hansson, 2017, p. 13), that "when the people are ready for change, then change will occur". His methods, as we have seen, were always individualistic – but this only grows stronger with time. By 1797 he is saying "that political reform is ultimately linked with the 'humbler walks of private life,' as well as with 'intellectual and literary refinement'", and suggesting that "social, moral and political reform emerge [...] as *the reader* pursues an enquiry [...] on relatively familiar and relatable subjects" (HANSSON, 2017, p. 12, emphasis added). But it is hard to understand how people will become individually enlightened if structures of domination impede such enlightenment. As Godwin might have realized after rewriting the ending of *Caleb*, emotionally connecting with one another might help, even though this is yet *another* individualistic method for change. One could ask whether political injustice does not also handicap our emotional experiences as well, and then wonder how can emotions ever topple power if power violates sympathy.

## 6 TWO PERSPECTIVES ON THE INFLUENCE OF HIS FICTION

Through fiction, Godwin might have become more aware of the problems involving truth, power, some of his philosophical axioms and his political aims; he also shifted his views on rationality, rethinking the place of emotions in his system of ideas. However, Weir argues that fiction was not simply one step in Godwin's development, all in all consistent with most of his principles and goals; it was, rather, a hindrance; an attachment to other purposes that altered his relationship with radical politics irreversibly – and for worse.

Weir echoes Bode's impression that the published ending cannot be reconciled with the "politics of the novel up to that point" (WEIR, 1997, p. 98), and sees as "evident that the retreat from reason" (discussed above) "occurred sometime during the writing of *Caleb Williams*, since the novel form itself in the late eighteenth century required Godwin

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<sup>12</sup> Even if it is reasonable not to categorize Godwin as an anarchist, he shares some ideas with many of them, and as such I thought it convenient to briefly include an anarchist perspective on truth and power (Graeber's).



to complement his rational faculties with imaginative invention" (WEIR, 1997, p. 98). These two were not complementary in his case; "the poetics of the literary form ran counter to Godwin's politics [...] the rationalistic approach that forms the basis for self-governing human conduct in [*Enquiry*] gives way to romantic sentiment in [*Caleb*]" (WEIR, 1997, p. 34). This relationship is necessarily hostile because "the conventions of the Gothic romance at the end of the eighteenth century interfere with" Godwin's ideology; *Caleb* is "an aesthetically retrograde" work because it is "merely expressive of radical politics". Godwin held political positions and also happened to write fiction; his "failure to integrate" these two activities is reflected in his "reliance on extremely conventional novelistic forms" (WEIR, 1997, p. 88).

The point is that if he had let his radicalism intrude the realm of cultural production *more*, he might have stumbled upon different ideas and innovated the format. As he did not do so, he depended upon a specific template when writing fiction, and obeyed its rules. The only thing this approach offered him was conventional solutions for both his literary *and theoretical* problems. Caleb was almost as passive as the classic Radcliffe heroine who "both flees from and is fascinated by a tyrannical father-figure" (CLEMIT, 1993, p. 54) – his literary form, then, was to blame for the main character's passivity, which might have hindered Godwin's ability to visualize a dialectic power dynamic between the wronged hero and his cruel enemies. Reconciliation was seen as a need, as it was a very common pattern of the genre (SÁ, 2013, p. 10; SÁ, 2010, p. 127), and hence Godwin gave us a new ending to replace the more tragic one (puzzled by the way critics praised the change, Bode (1990, p. 105) asks: "since when is [the tragic plot] a *fault* in our cultural hemisphere?!"). It is worth noting that what Bode sees as an inevitable conclusion to the original ending (discouragement from acting against the *status quo*) is but one of two possibilities, the other being that exposure to an utterly wrecked Caleb might incline readers to act towards changing a system that *clearly* cannot promote justice. But simply retaining the original ending would not necessarily suffice: Godwin could have chosen to represent a *victory* instead of a reconciliation, for example (or a reconciliation which *felt more like* a victory instead of an admission of guilt). This could have led him to all sorts of new paths.

So how storytelling impacted Godwin's political thought? We are now able to

picture a thinker who, by trying to save the critical bite of a work which would hopefully reach a large audience, may have instead reinforced a sense that the current institutions of society did not need reform or radical change, since communication could balance out, even supersede, the effects of a system defective by design. For both Bode and Weir, Godwin “failed” at some point; however, for the former, his philosophical ideas were to blame, flawed from the onset; fiction led him to consider even more strongly the importance of emotions, and in that sense it definitely influenced (and might have improved) them. For the latter, the problem was his choice of literary format, which prevented him from transcending an individualistic framework based on emotions and directed toward reconciliation (which reinforced the *status quo* Godwin wanted to reform).

At the end of the last section, I commented that the relationship between emotions and authority could be seen as structurally similar, in a Godwinian sense, to the one between truth and authority. If they are qualitatively different, non-violent political actions aimed at engaging sympathy in individuals could improve a society without requiring deep systemic change. For Weir, however, by finishing *Caleb* one might be motivated to try to be a better person without ever questioning the social processes that could significantly slow down, halt or even revert and subvert one’s trajectory of personal growth, rendering all the effort futile.

## 7 FINAL THOUGHTS

It seems that the notion that the “Godwin who wrote fiction” influenced the “Godwin who did not” acquired the status of scientific consensus. The question that remains open is *how* - and it might for evermore stay that way. Did Gothic storytelling help him coherently develop his original ideas, or was it a set of literary conventions that stealthily prevented him from fleshing out his most radical ones? The reach of the corrupt system he was a part of might have, as surreptitiously as the villainous social forces in *Caleb*, directed him into an absorption of Gothic and romantic sensibilities that silently derailed his train of thought, with every new theoretical development by him widening the gap between what he *could* have conceived and what he actually *did*.

In any case, I would still like to briefly discuss how reflecting upon this influence might be useful to us today. Centuries after *Caleb* was published, contemporary societies still deal with issues of social organization and political change – particularly those in these societies which, like Godwin in his time, dream with a radical transformation of structures and institutions. Storytelling does not concern only words printed on the pages of books as they give shape to fictions individually imagined; as we (re)present things we do and experience, as individuals and together with others, we also tell and share “stories”. Surely some are explicitly fictional and some try to represent memories and events as best as possible, but all employ narrative techniques to some extent in order to convey ideas, and some connexion to or grounding on reality is expected even of fictions. Some understand this kind of representation as essential to political action (GRAEBER, 2007)<sup>13</sup> or even reality itself (COHN, 2006). If the way Godwin told his stories (how he chose a particular way of representing the human condition and the political reality of his day) says a lot about his ideas, and may in fact have *changed* his own ideas, not to mention the way it influenced others’, then it matters how we at all times represent the human condition and our own political reality – and the subject of this last sentence may refer to individuals, activist groups, political parties, journalists in media organizations, so on and so forth.

Does representing our political reality as bendable to the power of truth, communication and dialogue diminishes our own disposition toward thinking critically of institutions and broad social relations? What about our interlocutors’ dispositions? Is not doing the opposite dangerous, irrespective of the way one might want to focus on social and political structures? And if focusing on them means denouncing the way they corrupt and poison communication and dialogue, could it not also lead us to devalue communication and dialogue as a tool for political change at all? If one represents political reality as bleak in order to motivate others to act toward changing it, could one not end up leaving people with the counterproductive feeling that no change is possible? If one represents it in a lighter shade of grey, implying change is possible, could one not be deflating the sense of urgency some political actions require? What about the role of

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13 Of course, I suppose the majority of political theorists study political action in the context of representative governments, which makes representation an essential feature of their analyses; I single out Graeber (2007, p. 130) because he defines political action *itself* as “action that is meant to be recounted, narrated, or in some other way represented to other people afterward”.

emotions and sympathy in all of this?

Godwin's practical predicaments as an activist, as well as the way fiction influenced his philosophy and political thought, can be an excellent source of reflections for political theorists and other researchers examining the (strategic) choices individuals (such as other radical fiction writers, even) and groups make when representing reality, their significance, and how these choices might impact their political activities and thought in turn (even if unconsciously). I am not suggesting this is a novel field of research, of course, but arguing that Godwin's trajectory in literature and politics might make for a good case study, and theoretical reference, in such a field.

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