

“History, Memory, and Moral Knowledge: William Godwin’s *Essay on Sepulchres* (1809)”¹

“Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour.

England hath need of thee...”

- Wordsworth, “London, 1802” (1807)

It is a scholarly commonplace that Postmodernity’s disquiet with historical (and other) metanarratives can be attributed to, among other things, the twentieth century failure of the so-called ‘Enlightenment Project’. In this view, the world wars, genocides and Holocaust of the last century contributed profoundly to a general loss of faith in descriptions of historical ‘progress’ which privileged human rationality and benevolence or descriptions which posited necessary, scientific laws of historical change. Yet eighteenth century modernity had its equivalent cataclysm. At its outset, the French Revolution was seen by both liberal advocates and conservative opponents as the inevitable outcome of Enlightenment rationalism and reformism. And the subsequent bloody course of the Revolution and the European wars which issued from it provided cause for a fundamental revisioning of eighteenth century notions of history as a teleological process leading to ever-increasing knowledge, liberty and happiness. Scholars in the burgeoning field of memory studies remark how a memorializing urge usually accompanies just such a crisis of tradition or historical self-understanding.² In his *Essay on Sepulchres*³ (1809) the radical English philosopher, novelist and historian William Godwin sought a new perceptual

and historiographical mode with which to legitimate and nurture his own moral sense and hopes for the future. Godwin's essay proposed a scheme to mark the burial spots of the morally great – with a simple wooden plaque – in order to enable the public to most effectively “commune” with their “ghost[s]” (24). Yet the figures he wished to memorialise do not represent stages in a typical eighteenth century historical narrative expressing the gradual emancipation of the individual, the democratization of institutional life and the progress of science, that is, of the relentless, onward march of freedom and enlightenment. Godwin's heroes – “reformers, instructors and improvers” (6) all – were ultimately selected for their ongoing capacity to morally animate, energise, and modify posterity with their *personal* qualities. He argued that we are to experience them not as ossified specimens of History's libertarian dynamic, but as exemplary fellow citizens of, and companions in, an atemporal *community* of the living and the dead. This paper explores Godwin's activity in *Essay on Sepulchres* in terms of his evolution as a moral philosopher and historian.

Reason and Progress

It is well known that Godwin's *magnum opus*, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) is stocked with the characteristic concerns and orientations of Rational Dissent.⁴ In *Political Justice*, Godwin proposed the human essence as immaterial and ratiocinative and the untrammelled exercise of private judgement as the basis and guarantor of personal integrity and social felicity. Progress is inevitable:

Sound reasoning and truth, when adequately communicated, must always be victorious over error: Sound reasoning and truth are capable of being so communicated: Truth is omnipotent: The vices and moral weakness of man are not invincible: Man is perfectible, or in other words susceptible of perpetual improvement.⁵

For Godwin, the natural, unfettered operation of reason led to the adoption of true or rational ideas. He insisted that an individual's response to true ideas was as universal and necessary as human responses to other stimuli: "...no man ever imagined, that we were free to feel or not to feel an impression made upon our organs, and to believe or not to believe a proposition demonstrated to our understanding."⁶ Godwin, then, like many in the tradition of Protestant Dissent, was an adherent of rational intuitionism: moral truths are self-evident and propositional, like the truths of mathematics and geometry.⁷ Like Locke, he assumed two senses of 'reason'. First, it was the inherent and recognisable character of the universe which humans naturally attempt to emulate or participate in. Second, it was an instrumental faculty granting the individual the capacity for efficacious – and especially socially efficacious – calculation and consideration.⁸ Given such an ideally rational cosmos, Godwin's faith in the omnipotence of truth and human perfectibility is unsurprising.

Yet we do not generally observe the automatic adoption and expression of truth thus suggested. And we do not, Godwin averred, because people seldom attain a "perfectly voluntary" state of consciousness. Most human action, as Godwin admitted in the second edition of *Political Justice*, is "imperfectly voluntary."⁹ Such actions are indeed based on judgment and foresight, but not on "judgements extant to...[our]

understanding,” that is, “attended with consciousness.” For the most part, people do not consciously deliberate on each and every situation that occurs, but generalize from past experience and employ the decisions which seemed appropriate at that time.¹⁰ Adherence to generalizations, then – be these legal codes, moral dogma or common sense “rules of thumb” – cannot guarantee just or moral outcomes in specific cases. And all cases are specific.¹¹ Moreover, if individuals ought not to rely on habit, prejudice or tradition, nor should they rely on instinct and emotion. Godwin’s example became notorious. He proposed that if a building containing a member of one’s family and the celebrated social critic and author Archbishop Fénelon were on fire and only one person could be saved, then rational deliberation would lead us to the incontrovertible decision to save the Archbishop, as his survival would logically contribute more to the public good than that of one’s wife or mother.¹² Godwin’s apparent callousness with regard to ‘normal’ human impulses did much to cement his reputation as an unfeeling and eccentric rationalist, as did his related fear of the potential for human character to be modified in unconscious and unregulated ways through mere social intercourse.¹³

Furthermore, it is this insistence on the dispassionate, rational evaluation of information, or “moral arithmetic”¹⁴ which has led, understandably, to the tendency among scholars to classify Godwin as fundamentally a utilitarian.¹⁵ For it is only as individuals exercise their faculties independently upon every occasion that optimal moral outcomes are comprehended. Yet although he did suggest, on occasions, that rational independence was valuable primarily for its utilitarian outcomes, the overwhelming sense in *Political Justice* is the reverse: an individual’s disposition or

predisposition is essential to an act attaining truly moral status.¹⁶ And the quality of character most expressive or definitive of personal integrity is rational independence:

Man is a being who can never be an object of just approbation, any further than he is independent. He must consult his own reason, draw his own conclusions, and conscientiously conform himself to his ideas of propriety. Without this, he will be neither active, nor considerate, nor resolute, nor generous.¹⁷

Thus, as we approach this “perfectly voluntary state,” of perception, cognition, deliberation and action, we approach “the perfection of the human character.”¹⁸ Godwin was primarily interested in individual moral character; and one of his objectives in *Political Justice* was to marry social utility to a particular vision of rational and moral autonomy, one derived in large part from the Dissenting tradition. This was a complex task made more difficult by Godwin’s subsequent attempts to incorporate into his utopian vision the terminology, if not the underlying substance, of moral sense philosophy and the literature of sensibility.¹⁹ The second and third editions of *Political Justice* (1796, 1798), along with Godwin’s other writings of the 1790s and early 1800s, evidence an attempt to stress the extent to which humanity’s perceptual and moral faculties are, properly, emotional and physiological, rather than ratiocinative. Of particular importance is Godwin’s rehabilitation of sympathy as an essential and productive element in moral life. Godwin came to see that personal morality and social progress consisted not in our capacity to disengage our rational essence from emotional, social and sensory pressures, but precisely in our personality, character or identity being continually constructed and nurtured through,

and motivated by, such modificatory inputs. And of particular importance here were the close, physically proximate relationships individuals ordinarily enjoy with friends and family.²⁰

While Godwin's, so to speak, Dissenting moral theory thus became substantially revised and complicated, the 3rd edition of *Political Justice* remained underpinned by a typical Rationalist and Protestant historiography. As Gary Handwerk puts it: "*Political Justice* presumes that history is essentially and irreversibly progressive, its shape linear and evolutionary...Any genuine use of reason thus fosters humanity's inherent momentum toward a standard of perfection in personal and social conduct."²¹ Such a view was especially pronounced among Rational Dissenters and their intellectual fellow-travellers. It was, of course, the Dissenting minister Richard Price's published sermon, "Discourse on the love of our country" (1789) which prompted Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Burke objected vehemently to Price's equation of England's Glorious Revolution of 1688 with the revolution then underway in France. He maintained that the revolutionary principles expressed by Price were continuous not with those of 1688, but with those espoused by the Puritan regicides and radical sectaries of the 1640s from whom Price and his fellow Dissenters traced their religious descent.²² In so arguing, Burke appealed to, and reinvigorated, a long tradition of suspicion and enmity towards Dissenters.²³

For Godwin, modern progress depended in large part on the Protestant Reformation, an event which fortuitously terminated an intellectual dark age presided over by the Catholic Church.²⁴ Yet for Godwin, as for many other Dissenters, the libertarian

dynamic of the Reformation was unfulfilled. The scientist, theologian and historian Joseph Priestley, for example, insisted that the Reformation never really happened in England – except briefly under Edward VI. For from the time of Henry VIII, there had been no effective improvement in the “religious liberty” which he saw as the essence of the Reformation.²⁵ Certainly, Dissenters’ perceptions of British history were at odds with the popularly-accepted version proposed by the conservative and sceptical David Hume.²⁶ For Hume, British culture had gone far enough in the direction of religious and any other liberty. Indeed, the Scotsman maintained that the Settlement of 1689, from which Englishmen drew their enviable liberties, privileges and rights, was one in which an admirable balance had been struck between the oppressiveness and superstition of Catholicism and despotism on the one hand, and the all too recent experience of republicanism and Puritanism on the other.²⁷ Clearly, Hume's narrative excluded the more developed or radical sentiments of Nonconformist or Dissenting Whiggery which saw the Puritan revolution and republican experiment of the 1640s and 1650s as a central and positive moment in the story of modern Britain and subsequent history as, ideally, an open-ended process characterised by ever-increasing quanta of moral, intellectual and political liberty.

For Price, the Glorious, American and French Revolutions evidenced a progressive dynamic underlying modernity.²⁸ In *Political Justice*, Godwin was similarly optimistic that the accumulation and refinement of knowledge characteristic of recent times would necessarily lead to political and moral progress: “there is no science that is not capable of additions; there is no art that may not be carried to a still higher perfection. If this be true of all other sciences, why not of morals? If this be true of all

other arts, why not of social institution?" With the confidence that the "progress of mind" is "natural and regular," then, he insisted that we ought to learn from, and improve upon, the ideas of our ancestors rather than slavishly imitate them.²⁹

While Godwin felt sure that *Political Justice* "contained the dictates of an independent mind," he also observed that its "doctrines" "coincided in a great degree with the sentiments then prevailing in English society."³⁰ Although few readers would have subscribed to the more radical of the *Political Justice's* doctrines, Godwin's assessment of the public's response to the work's general themes and tone appears accurate: *Political Justice* was generally well-reviewed.³¹ Yet the popularity Godwin initially enjoyed was substantially eroded by the turn of the century as a result of a conservative sea-change in thought wrought by government vilification and repression of reformist activity during the period of the Revolutionary Wars. Godwin had himself specifically contributed to the decline of his reputation with his extremely frank biography of his much-loved and incessantly-mourned first wife Mary Wollstonecraft, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798).³² For the decade subsequent to the appearance of his novel *Fleetwood* (1805), the majority of Godwin's published work was, of necessity, pseudonymous children's literature. It was work written with both eyes on public taste and sales. One work from this period, which bucked this trend and was, he later recalled, "written merely from a private sentiment," was the *Essay on Sepulchres*.³³

Feeling and Memory

The men that have lived, are they less important than the men of the present day? Had their thoughts less of sinew and substance...? ...To him who is of a mind rightly framed, the world is a thousand times more populous, than to the man, to whom every thing that is not flesh and blood, is nothing. I pity the being of slender comprehension, who lives only with George the Third, and Alexander of Russia, and Wieland, and Schiller, and Kant, and Jeremy Bentham, and John Horne Tooke, when if the grosser film were removed from his eyes, he might live and sensibly mingle with Socrates, and Plato, and the Decii, and the Catos, with Chaucer, and Milton, and Thomas Aquinas, and Thomas a Becket, and all the stars that gild our mortal sphere. They are not dead....(23)

A number of things in this curious essay are immediately striking. First, Godwin desires a society in which the dead and living “sensibly mingle.” This mixing of corporeal and spiritual or material and immaterial terms is characteristic of the essay as a whole, as are descriptions of communication with the dead. For the dead are not really dead. Second, most of Godwin’s heroes are writers, in the broad sense: Plato, Chaucer, Milton, Aquinas, and so on. Third, Godwin’s objective is decidedly reformist:

I trust that none of my readers will be erroneous enough to consider the vivid recollection of things past, as hostile to that tone of spirit which should aspire to the boldest improvements in future. The genuine heroes of the times that have been, were the reformers, the instructors, and improvers of their

contemporaries; and he is the sincerest admirer of these men, who most earnestly aspires to become 'like unto them'(6).

Godwin was writing during a time of rampant reaction to Enlightenment liberalism and progressivism and wanted to stress that his looking to the past was emphatically *not* a conservative project, but one seeking a heritage of *innovation* - a word redolent, in the minds of Burkean conservatives, of revolutionary and un-British sympathies. As will be shown, however, the reformatory impetus Godwin sought in the past had little to do with those conceptions of rational and scientific progressivism with which his work is most usually associated. And Godwin's repudiation of such notions of progress and the historical narratives which typically accompanied them is intimately linked to the unusual subject and diction of *Essay on Sepulchres*. He emphasises how future improvement is to be sought not by *learning* from these admired innovators, but by *becoming like* them. For Godwin stresses that the political force or moral value to be gained from the remembrance of the exemplary dead is not merely a recollection of abstract moral lessons drawn from the writings or recorded character of these people, nor is it (simply) a veneration of those who have contributed to an ongoing process of knowledge-building enlightenment.

I would say, with Ezekiel, the Hebrew, in his Vision, 'Let these dry bones live!' Not let them live merely in cold generalities and idle homilies of morality; but let them live as my friends, my philosophers, my instructors and my guides!...I am not satisfied only to call them up by a strong effort of the imagination, but I would have them, and men like them, 'around my path, and around my bed,'

and not allow myself to hold a more frequent intercourse with the living, than with the good departed (22).

Godwin suggests that we ought to pursue a contact with these great dead approximating, as nearly as possible, the social contact we have with the living – and in particular those with whom we are on relatively intimate terms. His conception of memory, then, tends away from the purely ideational, and more, so to speak, to the necromantic.

Godwin opens the essay with a pre-emptive strike against the potential objection of immaterialists that in memorialising the site of the remains of the dead one is illogically attending to the incidental “carcass” housing the essential “intellectual spirit”(7). He emphasises the “reasonableness, the unavoidable, of our regard for the spot where the remains of a great and excellent man have been deposited” by positing this person, in a highly significant move, as a “friend,” even, “(to put the strongest case)...the wife of my bosom” (8-10). As part of his revised moral thought, Godwin had come to admit that sense-experiences had a superior (and often salutary) effect on human motivation.³⁴ Thus, because “man is a creature, who depends for his feelings upon the operations of sense,” we are more fully inspired by the virtuous dead where we can visit the places they frequented, and particularly, the site of their death or interment (20).³⁵ He remarks, of our responses to this deceased friend:

I am more inclined to the opinion of the immaterialists; than of the materialists.

But my acquaintance with the thoughts and the virtues of my friend, has been

made through my eyes and my ears...I can never separate my idea of his peculiarities and his actions, from my idea of his person. I cannot love my friend without loving his person (8).

While the essence and identity of an individual is ultimately intellectual or non-corporeal, identities or individuals can only connect with and meaningfully experience one another through the medium of the senses (9). Because our relationship was mediated and experienced physically, the physical remnants of our friend and the place of their interment thus become “sacred” to us. The essence of our friend may be immaterial and we may through purely cerebral “deductions of reasoning” or “suggestions of faith” envisage the survival of “the thinking principle which animated him,” but our strongest and most profound sentiments will be directed towards the physical remnants of his person:

It is our only reality. The solidity of the rest, the works of my friend, the words, the actions, the conclusions of his reasoning and the suggestions of faith, we feel to depend, as far as they are solid to us, upon the operations of our own mind. They stand, and are the sponsors, for my friend; but what the grave incloses is himself (10).

Godwin observes that the tangible evidence of our friend’s existence, like our own faith in the endurance of his immaterial essence, survives only in subjective intellection or memory. Such artefacts, like memories, merely signify the reality of the departed friend – the unanimated physical remains seem more real. But these disengaged signifiers are also conduits to the real. Indeed, everything tangible with

which our friend was associated has significance: “his ring, his watch, his books, and his habitation.” He goes on,

The value of these as having been his, is not merely fictitious; they have an empire over my mind; they can make me happy or unhappy; they can torture, and they can tranquillise; they can purify my sentiments, and make me similar to the man I love; they possess the virtue which the Indian is said to attribute to the spoils of him he kills, and inspires me with the powers, the feelings and the heart of their preceding master (8).

It has been shown how in his revisions to *Political Justice*, and in novels like *Caleb Williams* (1794) and *St Leon* (1799), Godwin exhibits a strong attraction to Hume’s notion that ideas and sentiments could be automatically, physiologically transmitted – via the natural faculty of sympathy – between physically proximate individuals, especially intimate friends and family members.³⁶ Analogously, Godwin seems to suggest that the moral character of the dead can be transmitted to posterity through physical or material media. And the most conducive of these is the most real – the site of the bodily remains. Godwin thus seeks the “friendship” of the “Illustrious Dead of All Ages” (22). In visiting the tombs of the great dead we “indulge all the reality we can now have, of a sort of conference with these men, by repairing to the scene which, as far as they are at all on earth, *they still inhabit!*” (12).

While we can all understand why, in grief, we may wish to rekindle our relationship with a deceased friend or family member, why ought we wish to seek such an intimate relationship with the *persons* of Milton or Plato? As W. H. Auden once

commented: "Reading a poet whose work I admire, it is only very seldom that I find myself wishing: 'Oh, how I would like to have been an intimate friend of his!'"³⁷ Surely the important thing about these figures – as far as we are concerned – is their work: their art, their ideas, rather than their person. Godwin would have disagreed. For in an important sense, an individual's artistic and intellectual productions are merely *evidence* of their greatness, of their essential, inimitable spirit. And while the 'works' remain, the spirit is gone.

When a great and excellent man dies, the chief part of what he was (at least so far as this world is concerned) perishes. It is very little of him that survives, in his memory, and his works. The use and application of his experience, the counsels he could give, the firmness and sagacity with which he could have executed what he might have thus counselled, are gone...It is impossible to calculate how much of good perishes, when a great and excellent man dies. It is owing to this calamity of death, that the world for ever is, and in some degree for ever must be, in its infancy (8).

Death has not taken from us Plato's or Milton's 'knowledge' – in the usual sense. This continues to exist in *Symposium* or *Paradise Lost* – but these works are a relatively insignificant part of the great man. What we have lost are the active, practical capacities, the unique moral and intellectual energy and acuity of the dead genius. Tillotama Rajan comments that in his revision of Wollstonecraft's life and work "Godwin...writes Wollstonecraft's legacy not as a set of ideas, but as the sensibility that subtends them." Godwin thus "thinks of 'genius' as power rather than knowledge, as a capacity to respond and initiate."³⁸ In a sense, Wollstonecraft's

genius lies not in her texts, but in the honesty and intensity of her spirit of which the texts are evidence, instances or effervescence. Indeed, this is precisely how notable readers of Wollstonecraft have engaged with her, as Pamela Clemit points out.³⁹ Godwin does not, then, wish to resurrect Milton so that he can teach us how to be committed seventeenth century Puritan republicans, or Aquinas so that we can better become theologically-informed medieval Catholics. We don't require Milton's *knowledge* – which is really the application of his genius to his own highly specific historical circumstances. The passage quoted immediately above implies that we need Milton himself, as Wordsworth famously remarked. Knowledge, as usually understood, is of limited value; and contrary to Godwin's earlier faith in cumulative knowledges as the basis of progress, there is now little cause for optimism. While we may retain an idea or memory of an individual's talents or evidence of these in writings and other "works," we lose the vast majority of her as a unique person with the capacity to inform, inspire and modify our own character through that insensible, sympathetic modification which only physical proximity to, or relationship with, the living can enable. Indeed, says Godwin, humanity tends to learn little across the ages for in every generation we effectively have another class of first graders starting from scratch (14n.).

For Godwin, then, historically-accumulated knowledge cannot be relied upon to secure progress. He comes instead to insist upon the resuscitation of the moral energy, the dynamic character, the living essence underpinning the literary, scientific and philosophical achievements of the great dead. Knowledge in the form of generally-formulated "designs and maxims" will not save us; but good people might. That is, progress depends on moral knowledge conceived as a living capacity or

energy, the vital character and capacity necessary to conceive, express and enact grand projects and think great thoughts.

If the essence, the spirit, the virtue of our deceased friend can be resuscitated, experienced and absorbed as we encounter her physical remains or former possessions, then perhaps proximate exposure to the remains of the great dead may allow us to imbibe their spirit. But we will recall that we can re-experience the spirit of our departed friend precisely because she already was our intimate. How can we attain similar intimacy with the great dead whom we have never met? In describing who these great dead are, Godwin reveals how this is to be achieved.

Military and naval achievements are of temporary operation: the victories of Cimon and Scipio are passed away; these great heroes have dwindled into a name; but whole Plato, and Xenophon, and Virgil have descended to us, undefaced, undismembered, and complete. I can dwell upon them for days and for weeks: I am acquainted with their peculiarities; their inmost thoughts are familiar to me; they appear before me with all the attributes of individuality; I can ruminate upon their lessons and sentiments, till my whole soul is lighted up with the spirit of these authors (28-29).

In preferring literary figures over the military heroes so much more usually idolized by the generality, Godwin doubtless betrays his own conceptions of greatness. But he has another reason to prefer the memorialisation of writers. In the usual, ideational sense of public memory the work of writers obviously has the potential to outlive the person. But, crucially, because of the extensiveness, detail and

complexity of great writing, the “whole” personality producing these has, in some sense, “descended to us, undefaced, undismembered, and complete.” Great writing is of value here not because it embodies, preserves or presents eternal – or even useful – truths, but because it gives us access to the complete, complex, fully human individuals who produced these “lessons and sentiments.” These are individuals with whom we can have ‘normal’ relations and *from whom* we can absorb moral direction, sustenance and energy. Moral knowledge is not, then, simply an Arnoldian matter of becoming acquainted with the best that has been thought and said, anymore than (proper) memory is merely an unimpassioned and ideational conceptualization of dead people and their achievements (nor progress of standing on the shoulders of giants). For Godwin, memory is a matter of becoming acquainted, intimately, with those *people* who have thought and said these things. As we thus enter into more fully human relations with them, our character is affected and modified in those imperceptible, sympathetic and imitative ways which approach most closely to the more telling and significant modes of normal social life. Proper moral knowledge is not a passively downloaded database of the moral principles or teachings, the “cold generalities and idle homilies of morality,” of the great. Rather, moral knowledge derives from an intimate and imitative relationship with authors who function as “my friends, my philosophers, my instructors and my guides!” (22).

J. B. Schneewind outlines how Anglophone moral discourse after (Godwin’s contemporary) Jeremy Bentham fell into two camps – the utilitarian and the intuitionist. Intuitionists maintained that the distinctively moral quality of any action lay in the motives or intentions of its performer. They insisted that moral truths were known instinctively or intuitively and that such knowledge was a motive in its own

right, provided the will was strong enough to counter any competing motives.⁴⁰ Schneewind argues that intuitionism most naturally occurs among friends and family, small groups wherein sympathetic understanding is possible and sentiments can be exchanged intuitively and unreflectively. Moreover, he tells us that in educational practice intuitionists relied on the so-called “pattern person” – exemplary moral characters – often fictitious – from whom children could intuitively and imaginatively appropriate moral awareness and know-how.

His [the moral exemplar’s] knowledge of what to do cannot be put into any set of explicit formulae, just as the know-how of the skilled craftsman or artist cannot be summed up verbally. Consequently, to understand and to follow the model, sympathy and intuition are necessary - the one enabling us to grasp his hidden motives, the other showing us the rightness of his practice.⁴¹

The special value of appropriating and exemplifying such an ideal ‘character’ – rather than learning a set of general moral rules – is that one is thus habitually or constitutionally disposed to react morally in *any* situation. In *Political Justice* Godwin insisted that such automatic and appropriately-directed moral behaviour was guaranteed by an *independent* character. Therewith an individual could evaluate the exigencies of each situation rationally without relying on (probably) inappropriate habits, instincts and static, generalised moral or legal codes. As such, rational autonomy was the guarantee of moral and political progress. While exchanging an intuitionism based in disengaged rational autonomy for one more reliant on the sympathetic exchange of feelings and ideas, Godwin remains committed to moral truth and political reform in pursuit of which he turns from philosophical, discursive

analysis to the detailed, particularist narratives of history, biography and fiction.⁴² Personal engagement with exemplary historical and fictional characters provides us not with a set of static principles or behaviours to apply rigidly to our own lives, but with a sensibility and energy appropriate to a variety of circumstances and which can be employed in the critique and reform of established practice. As Schneewind observes:

Since the model person responds to the uniqueness of each individual with the uniquely right action, he is beyond rules; and an appeal to what he would think or do can therefore serve as support for the criticism or modification of a rule that has become rigid and lifeless.⁴³

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to Godwin's growing critique of Enlightenment philosophical history and his exchange of historical grand narratives for studies emphasizing particularity and contingency.⁴⁴ Certainly the progressivist view to which he had subscribed was under stress from anti-Enlightenment, post-Revolution reaction. Moreover, as a Dissenter, Godwin's relationship with the mainstream, Humean conception of moderate progress and qualified liberty was always problematic. Jon Klancher alerts us particularly to Godwin's efforts to undermine the generalising sweep of Enlightenment historiography uniformly employed in the defence and celebration of the Whig Settlement of 1689.⁴⁵ Godwin's revised approach in *Essay on Sepulchres* is one which is both less orthodoxly Whiggish and more radical. He tends to reject the teleological vision of the gradual emancipation of the individual, the democratization of institutional life and the progress of reason and science. In its place he proposes a less totalizing version.

In her study of Godwin's *The Lives of Edward and John Philips, Nephews and Pupils of Milton* (1815) Tillotama Rajan points out how Godwin replaces his erstwhile Whiggish sense of history as "linear, unified and progressive" with one more akin to Foucault's rhizomic "genealogy" – a particularist structure or focus which is consequently less susceptible to totalising interpretations and more accommodating of contingency.⁴⁶ Like Rajan, I find Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome a useful trope with which to understand some of Godwin's historiographical and biographical practices. Much of Western thought and perception is dominated or determined by the image of the tree. The "arborescent" or tree structure embodies an image of cumulative growth and hierarchy in which multiplicity ultimately depends on, and must be understood in terms of, a unitary fundamental "One."⁴⁷ To this, Deleuze and Guattari oppose another natural image: the "rhizome" – an expression of dynamic multiplicity which cannot be reduced to, or described in terms of, a totalizing, concretizing unity. Grass is a rhizome: in uprooting any section, the health of the system or network as a whole is unimpeded. A system of subterranean burrows is also a rhizome. It may be entered and exited at a variety of points. "Any point of a rhizome can be connected to any thing other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order."⁴⁸ The figure of the rhizome enables us to conceive dynamic systems as not, ultimately, static concrete entities with perfect, complete, reductive signification: "...a rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model. It is a stranger to any idea of genetic axis or deep structure." In "tree logic" we represent things and place them, reductively, in a hierarchical, totalizing order. Thus, "the rhizome is an anti-genealogy" opposed to the uni-directionality of movement and the privileging of specific components or units.⁴⁹

For Godwin, the structural characteristic of history is not a neatly progressive narrative in which liberty, reason and enlightenment become ever more evident, normative and privileged. The cataclysm of the French Revolution had obviously put paid to many of the optimistic and progressivist notions of Enlightenment – as conservatives and moderate Whigs since Burke have been fond of pointing out. Godwin finds much to recommend this more pessimistic, anti-Whiggish view. But in rejecting Whiggism's uni-directional, teleological, even necessitarian vision, Godwin – at least in *Essay on Sepulchres* – still insists on freedom and reason as the highest aspirations and most noble features of humankind. But he no longer sees these qualities as the structuring dynamic of a total historical narrative. Rather, he sees history rhizomically: instances of moral and intellectual energy occur sporadically in particular individual characters and in particular epochs. But as Deleuze and Guattari remind us: "There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines."⁵⁰ Therefore nothing is privileged, there is no hierarchy: every thing connects to everything else, remaining potentially connected to, and accessible by, everything else. Like the components of an individual's psychological history, historical processes and events should not be seen as crudely determining and thus disempowering of the present: the "drives and part-objects [established by psychoanalysis] are neither stages on a genetic axis nor positions in a deep structure; they are political options for problems, they are entryways and exits, impasses the child lives out politically, in other words, with all the force of his or her desire."⁵¹ The 'historical' lives on not as a rigidly determining component of the present but as a perennially available resource for the appropriation of moral knowledge and the exercise of political action.

One of the historical 'points' at which Godwin prefers to access these moral resources is, unsurprisingly, the Puritan Republic of the mid-seventeenth century, the Republic's Parliamentary leaders – or "master spirits" – among his pantheon of the great dead.⁵² With this egregious exception, he insists, English history presents an endless trail of moral mediocrity, brutality and corruption.⁵³ The British mainstream tended to designate the republican period the Interregnum – a term constituting the English republic as an interruption to the normal, proper (monarchical) state of things, a curious, inconsequential and immoral (and, for that latter reason alone, instructive) digression or footnote in an otherwise seamless narrative exhibiting the unfolding of a peculiarly British form of progress.

Godwin comes to agree. The Puritan moment *is* an interruption, a spectacular eruption of virtue, an instance of the profoundly aporetic. It doesn't represent a stage in the onward march of freedom and enlightenment. There is no such onward march. And for this reason, Godwin insists that such undoubted instances of individual and corporate virtue be perennially accessible. Things are not improving naturally or inevitably, as it were. And if we are to retain the real moral and intellectual potential of the human species, we need to access historical persons, rather than merely memorialize or memorize their works – the laws, dictums, institutions and knowledges that inevitably limit our capacity to live truly moral lives. In a sense, the immortality of such persons is essential to progress.

The possibility of human immortality was one of the more derided and readily dismissed elements of *Political Justice*. Siobhan Ni Chonail astutely notes how

Godwin saw immortality less as an outcome of progress than as a precondition for it: “For Godwin, death places a constraint on progress by taking from the world persons of genius and knowledge.”⁵⁴ It would seem, then, that Godwin had early sensed that the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge observed, practiced and celebrated by radicals and reformers of the late Enlightenment was not a sufficient condition for progress. By 1809 this trepidation had become explicit.

¹ I wish to thank the following for their assistance in preparing this essay: James Beattie, Giselle Byrnes, Cathy Coleborne, Gita Rao, Raymond Richards and Douglas Simes.

² See, for example, Andreas Huyssen, “Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia,” *Public Culture* 12 (winter 2000): 21-38.

³ William Godwin, *Essay on Sepulchres*, in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, vol. 6, *Essays* Mark Philp ed., (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1993): 1-30. Subsequent references to this work will be made parenthetically in the text.

⁴ This is most fulsomely elaborated in Mark Philp, *Godwin’s Political Justice* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 1986).

⁵ William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, And Its Influence On Morals and Happiness*, 3rd ed., 3 vols, ed. F.E.L.Priestley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1946), 1: 86.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1: 382.

⁷ F.E.L. Priestly, “Platonism in William Godwin’s *Political Justice*,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 4 (March 1943): 63-69.

⁸ For this reading of Lockean epistemology, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 239-45.

⁹ Philp, 145-47.

¹⁰ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1: 62-69, 345.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2: 399-400. See D. H. Monro, *Godwin’s Moral Philosophy* (Westport: Greenwood Press Inc., 1978), 7-12, 34-35.

¹² Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1:126-28. See *Ibid.*, 3: 146 for the original phrasing of the first edition.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2: 500-506.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1: 173.

¹⁵ For a complex defence of Godwin as a utilitarian and a summary of the more significant contributions to this debate, see Robert Lamb, "William Godwin on the Morality of Freedom," *History of Political Thought* 28 (winter 2007): 661-77.

¹⁶ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1: 149, 2: 332-33. See also William Stafford, "Dissenting religion translated into politics: Godwin's *Political Justice*," *History of Political Thought* 1 (1980): 287.

¹⁷ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1: 276, 1: 167-68, 2: 52.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1: 68.

¹⁹ Philp, 142-43

²⁰ R. Bellamy, "Godwin and the Development of the 'New Man of Feeling'," *History of Political Thought* 6 (1985): 411-32; Rowland Weston, "Politics, Passion and the 'Puritan Temper': Godwin's Critique of Enlightened Modernity," *Studies in Romanticism* 41 (fall 2002): 445-70, 458-63.

²¹ See Gary Handwerk, "History, trauma, and the limits of the liberal imagination: William Godwin's historical fiction," in *Romanticism, History, and the Possibilities of Genre: Re-forming Literature 1789-1837*, ed. Tillotama Rajan and Julia M. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 64-85, 67.

²² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution on France* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969), 93ff, 157-59.

²³ Attitudes to Dissent over the Long Eighteenth Century are thoroughly covered – if occasionally overstated – in J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1688-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). See also J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 219, 235-37.

²⁴ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1: 450-51.

²⁵ Joseph Priestley, *A view of the principles and conduct of the Protestant dissenters with respect to the civil and ecclesiastical constitution of England*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Johnson, 1769), 50. Indeed, for many Rational Dissenters, including Godwin, the Reformation, had failed to fulfil its logical promise to establish the rule of individual conscience as the new Protestant sects had aligned themselves, necessarily, to secular powers. Martin Fitzpatrick, "Toleration and Truth" *Enlightenment and Dissent*, 1 (1982): 3-31, 11. See William Godwin, *History of the Commonwealth of England. From its*

Commencement, to the Restoration of Charles the Second. 4 volumes (London: Henry Colburn, 1824-28), 1: 342-47.

²⁶ Hume's *History* remained the most popular and acceptable version of events until well into the nineteenth century, going through a publishing resurgence in the late eighteenth century, then through a boom of 11 editions between 1808 and 1832, and was continually republished into the 1890s. See John Kenyon, *The History Men: The Historical Profession in England Since the Renaissance*, 2nd. Ed. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), 59, 86; and R. C. Richardson, *The Debate on the English Revolution* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1977), 48.

²⁷ David Hume, *The History of England: from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to The Revolution in 1688* 6 Vols (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1983), 530-31. See also Hume's essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm", in *Essays. Moral, Political, and Literary* (Indianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1985), 73-79.

²⁸ "I have lived to see a diffusion of knowledge, which has undermined superstition and error...I see the ardor for liberty catching and spreading, a general amendment beginning in human affairs, the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience." Richard Price, "Discourse on the love of our Country" in *Richard Price: Political Writings* ed. D. O. Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 195. In an earlier published sermon, Price had noted the cumulative nature of this process: "One generation...improved[,] communicates improvement to the next, till at last a progress in improvement may take place rapid and irresistible which may issue in the happiest state of things that can exist on this earth." See Price, "The Evidence for a Future Period of Improvement in the State of Mankind" in Thomas, 167.

²⁹ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 1: 118-19.

³⁰ Quoted in *William Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries*, 2 vols, ed. C. Kegan Paul (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1876), 1: 118.

³¹ Peter Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1984), 119-121.

³² See Introduction to *Lives of the Great Romantics III: Godwin, Wollstonecraft & Mary Shelley by their Contemporaries, Volume 1: Godwin* ed. Pamela Clemit (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), xvi-xvii.

³³ William Godwin, *Mandeville: A Tale of the Seventeenth Century in England*, in *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, vol. 6, ed. Pamela Clemit (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1992), 8.

³⁴ Weston, 450-55.

³⁵ Mark Salber Phillips places Godwin's text among others of the period which employ notions of psychological associationism to encourage *personal* responses to historic places. See *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton, NJ: 2000), 322-27.

³⁶ Weston, 456-60.

³⁷ W. H. Auden, *Herbert: Poems and Prose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1973), 7.

³⁸ Tillotama Rajan, "Framing the corpus: Godwin's "editing" of Wollstonecraft in 1798," *Studies in Romanticism* 39 4 (2000): 511-31, 520, 514.

³⁹ Pamela Clemit, "Writing a Revolutionary Life: Godwin's Memoirs of Wollstonecraft", *Romantic Circles Features and Events Chamber Music: the Life-Writing of William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, and Mary Shelley*. Ed. Gina Luria Walker, September 2002.

<<http://www.rc.umd.edu/features/features/chambermusic/clemit.html>>

⁴⁰ J. B. Schneewind, "Moral Problems and Moral Philosophy in the Victorian Period," in *English Literature and British Philosophy* ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (Chicago & London : The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 185-192.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 195-96.

⁴² Evan Radcliffe has recently observed that Godwin's turn to fiction after *Political Justice* was partly motivated by a desire to avail himself of the poetic and affective attributes of narrative writing in order to portray and analyse character in a more sophisticated way. See "Godwin from 'Metaphysician' to Novelist: *Political Justice*, *Caleb Williams*, and the Tension between Philosophical Argument and Narrative," *Modern Philology* 97 (May 2000): 528-53. For Godwin's attraction to "biography as an agent of reform", see Clemit, "Writing a Revolutionary Life: Godwin's Memoirs of Wollstonecraft".

⁴³ Schneewind, "Moral Problems and Moral Philosophy", 195-96. Radcliffe also employs Schneewind's analysis to underline Godwin's acknowledgement of the practical inefficacy of rigid moral propositions. Yet he neglects to mention the extent to which Godwin's more philosophical or discursive approach to character and ethics in *Political Justice* also emphasised the uniqueness of all moral situations or problems. See "Godwin from 'Metaphysician' to Novelist", 546.

⁴⁴ See Jon Klancher, "Godwin and the genre reformers: on necessity and contingency in romantic narrative theory", in Rajan and Wright, 21-38. See also Weston, 465-70.

⁴⁵ Jon Klancher, "Godwin and the Republican romance: genre, politics and the contingency in cultural history," *Modern Language Quarterly* 56 (June 1995): 145-65.

⁴⁶ Tillotama Rajan, "Uncertain Futures: History and Genealogy in William Godwin's *The Lives of Edward and John Philips, Nephews and Pupils of Milton*," *Milton Quarterly* 32 (October 1998): 75-86, 77-78.

⁴⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. Brian Massumi (London: The Athlone Press Ltd, 1988), 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 5-9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 11-12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 8.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 13.

⁵² Godwin, *History of the Commonwealth*, 2: 499. "It is probable that, considering politics as a science, they were much beyond almost any body of men of the present age, in the knowledge of what will conduce to the happiness of men in a community, and advance them most in intellectual improvements, magnanimity, and virtue." *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵³ William Godwin, "Essay of History and Romance", in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin* vol. 5, *Educational and Literary Writings* ed. Pamela Clemit (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1993): 291-301.

⁵⁴ Siobhan Ni Chonail, "'Why may not man one day be immortal?': Population, perfectibility, and the immortality question in Godwin's *Political Justice*," *History of European Ideas* 33 (March 2007): 36.