



Paroxysms of the Mind: Narration, Consciousness, and the Self in William Godwin’s Things as They Are; Or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams.

James J. Fiumara

University of Colorado Denver

Abstract

This article positions William Godwin’s 1794 novel *Things as They Are; Or The Adventures of Caleb Williams* as anticipating a modern theory of consciousness (the “self”) found in psychoanalysis, philosophy, and cognitive psychology that argues that we do not have reliable access to the workings of our own minds (let alone another’s mind) and that our notion of the “self” is largely a fiction mediated and created through narrative (i.e., language). I argue that Godwin’s novel explores the peculiar nature of the human “self” as it exists at the unfathomable crossroads of rational contemplation and emotional impulse, or the “paroxysms of the mind.” Godwin does this through a complex construction of multiple narratives where acts of narration in both the public and private spheres compete to create a sense of a “self” (our character, our past, our self-consciousness), and is our only access to a self which is ultimately unknowable.

To cite as

Fiumara, J.J., 2014, ‘Paroxysms of the Mind: Narration, Consciousness, and the Self in William Godwin’s *Things as They Are; Or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*’, *PsyArt* **18**, pp. 131–147.

Rational Animals, Perverse Souls, and Biomechanical Puppets

The human capacity for rational deliberation is one of the most fundamental concepts in Western thought from Aristotle to the Age of Enlightenment. However, as psychologist Paul Bloom has recently stated, “Aristotle’s definition of man as a rational animal has recently taken quite a beating” (Bloom “The War on Reason”). Advances in neuroscience and technology, such as fMRI, have seemingly provided access to that which has long remained hidden and mysterious: the workings of the human mind. The now observable

knowledge that mental activity arises from the neural basis of brain activity which in turn is subject to the properties and laws of the physical world have led a number of scholars to consider rationality and free choice as illusions; some going as far as calling the human species “biochemical puppets” (qtd. in Bloom).

But long before neuroscientists began peering into the workings of our brains like mad scientists from a Universal horror movie, the limits of our rationality has been an ongoing subject of debate, particularly evident in Gothic fiction and psychoanalysis. In a moment surely influenced by Romantic novelist William Godwin[1], the first-person narrator in Edgar Allan Poe’s tale “The Black Cat” (1843) describes the “spirit of PERVERSENESS” as

one of the primitive impulses of the human heart—one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man.... Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such? ... It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself (322)

A little over a half-century later Sigmund Freud, himself strongly influenced by the literary Gothic, would theorize an account of human nature where behavior was “chiefly accounted for by motives that were *hidden* in the secret recesses of the individual psyche, and hidden not just from observers, but often from the subject’s own conscious mind” (Lodge 58). And, bringing us full circle, by the late twentieth century a number of neuroscientists, cognitive psychologists, and philosophers would similarly consider consciousness—that is, the qualitative experience of human sentience, or the “self”—as essentially narrative in character (which is to say fictive or even illusionary). For example, in his book *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion, and the Making of Consciousness*, the scientist Antonio Damasio states “telling stories is probably a brain obsession... I believe the brain’s pervasive ‘aboutness’ is rooted in the brain’s storytelling attitude” (189).

From the “perverseness” of the soul in Gothic fiction to the hidden unconscious of the mind in modern psychoanalysis to the narrative nature of the human “self” in post-structuralist theory and cognitive science (seemingly unlikely bedfellows!) to the idea that humans are “biomechanical puppets” helplessly steered by the laws of the material world, the common thread is that we do not have reliable access to the workings of our own minds (let alone another’s mind) and that our notion of the “self” is largely a fiction mediated and created through narrative (i.e., language). If the past hundred and fifty years of philosophical and scientific investigation has moved us beyond the notion of the unique, autonomous, transcendental “self” who has reliable knowledge of her inner life through introspection, then William Godwin can be seen as one of the forefathers of modern thought with—among other

writings—the 1794 publication of his influential novel *Things as They Are; Or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*.

Godwin began work on *Caleb Williams* at roughly the time he had completed his philosophical treatise *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness* (1793) and it is difficult, if not impossible, to not consider these texts as in a dialogue with each other. The central argument of *Political Justice* is that the way to overcome the oppressive power structures maintained by social and political institutions is through an individual ethics of justice and fairness which can be obtained by the rational employment of “private judgment” (Handwerk 941). For Godwin, the possibility of social and political change does not stem from correcting the faults of currently in power institutions or from the uniting of the masses under a liberating social contract, but rather through the individual as she thinks and behaves in a manner via a properly attuned rationality. If we then consider *Caleb Williams* as Godwin’s attempt to “exemplify his political ideals in dramatic form” (Handwerk 940), the novel becomes a complex and skeptical exploration of the possibility of obtaining political and social justice through the faculty of reason.

Godwin’s anarchist utopia depends upon an Enlightenment vision of a rational self whose motivation is anchored in an intrinsic impartiality and benevolence capable of overcoming issues of power through unbiased judgments (Handwerk 942). Godwin puts this theory to the test in *Caleb Williams* through the relationship of the two central characters of Caleb and Falkland by exploring their (in)ability to navigate the power structures of social and political institutions—and the results are not encouraging. The exploration of the effects of external power structures on the individual is in itself a radical move for a literary work to take during this time, however, Godwin even further complicates this by filtering the narrative through Caleb’s interiority. As the narrative progresses it becomes clear that the individual is not only in the grips of external powers that he cannot control, but *internal* powers. It is this intertwined relationship of the “self to the world” and the “self to the self” as put forth by Godwin that I would like to explore. Specifically, I would like to consider the ways in which Godwin’s work explores the peculiar nature of the human ‘self’ as it exists at the unfathomable crossroads of rational contemplation and emotional impulse or, the “paroxysms of the mind.” And, further, how the novel explores this through the cyclical and perhaps even self-consuming manner in which the act of narration in both the public and private (or, exterior and interior) spheres works to create or, at least, make sense of a “self” (our character, our past, our self-consciousness) and is our only access to that self. In other words, “things as they are” is really “things as we tell them” (or, worse, “things as others tell them”) and are often things that remain hidden from us even as we create them. In *Caleb Williams*, Godwin has provided us with a radical model of human consciousness and subject

formation that anticipates much contemporary philosophical and scientific theories of the nature of the private self embedded in a social world.

The Epistemology of “Secret Wounds”

Already by the time of the publication of the first edition of *Political Justice*, Godwin was reworking and rethinking his ideas on the capacity of human reason. In his essay “Of History and Romance” (written in 1797, but unpublished in his lifetime), Godwin states that to understand the “machine of society” it

will be necessary for us to scrutinize the nature of man, before we can pronounce what it is of which social man is capable. Laying aside the generalities of historical abstraction, we must mark the operation of human passions; must observe the empire of motives.... (453)

Godwin clearly is putting this notion to practice in *Caleb William* and, all of its critiques of the oppressive nature of political and social institutions notwithstanding, arguably the novel’s real subject is the empire of human passions and motives. Godwin claims as much in his later account of the composition of *Caleb Williams*:

I began my narrative, as is more the usual way, in the third person. But I speedily became dissatisfied. I then assumed the first person, making the hero of my tale his own historian.... It was infinitely best adapted to.... the analysis of the private and internal operations of the mind, employing my metaphysical dissecting knife in tracing and laying bare the involutions of motives.... (“Godwin’s Account” 448)

However, what becomes apparent as the novel progresses is not only the difficulty of laying bare the “internal operations” and “motives” of another human being (Caleb attempting to discern the “secret wound” of Falkland’s mind), but the inscrutability of one’s own inner self (Caleb’s difficulty in understanding his own motives and behaviors).

Instead of the fixed and stable self of Western Enlightenment, Godwin provides us with a self (Caleb) that is in a constant state of creation and modification through its interactions with both the exterior world (i.e., other people and institutions) and the inner workings of conscious and unconscious mental operations. Caleb’s narration of his life story—especially as it incorporates multiple and even contradictory public and private networks of narratives—is his attempt to create a stable self in the face of an unstable and ultimately uncontrollable human existence. However, as becomes evident, “every time we try to describe the conscious self we misrepresent it because we are trying to fix something that is always changing” (Lodge 91). Therefore,

as the novel is narrated in the first-person by Caleb, “learning to mistrust the narrator... becomes the reader’s first task” (Butler 26).

Although Caleb claims he is “penning his memoirs” in an effort to “divert [his] mind” (59), he is also clearly tracing (writing) the course of events which has led to the “deplorableness” of his current situation in an effort to understand his past and subsequently his self. As Caleb admits, the “spring of action” which dictates the direction of his life is “curiosity” (60). Caleb attempts to satiate his curiosity through two epistemological models that guide his own enquiries into the nature of things—particularly in his disastrous attempts to discern the hidden “torments of [Falkland’s] mind” (63). The first is that of a “natural philosopher” (i.e., scientific discourse) as Caleb expresses his desire to trace “the variety of effects which might be produced from given causes” (60). The second stems from Caleb’s “attachment to books of narrative and romance” (60) that guides his attempt to understand both Falkland and himself through the process of narration. These two epistemological modes are not mutually exclusive, but rather exist in a dialectical relationship where inferences based on observing external behaviors become enmeshed with the process of plotting human motives and histories through narration. Similarly exploring the relationship between narrative and epistemology in *Caleb Williams*, Emily Anderson writes:

The power of explanation in an empirical framework parallels the power of

narrative: whichever narrative is the most coherent, we accept. In interrogating the construction of narrative, then, Caleb Williams gets at the heart of the empirical problem: are the stories we tell about the world true? (100).

Following Anderson, Caleb initially believes in the power of empirical observation and rational deliberation as a means to understand and explain the reasons for human behaviors: as a means to tell a true story about the world.

Caleb’s impulsive curiosity is a source of intellectual vigor, but ultimately becomes his downfall when he turns his attention to the “study of [his] master’s character” which provides Caleb with an “ample field for speculation and conjecture” (62). His interest in “mechanical inventions” and the physical laws of the universe lead him to initially attempt to discern the inner workings of Falkland’s mind by observing his external demeanor and behavior. Following the idea of the “causal principle” (that every event has a preceding cause) and a Newtonian scientific worldview, Caleb attempts to understand Falkland’s mind as one would understand, say, the workings of gravity upon an object. In this view, the human mind becomes like the mechanical clockwork inside of a watch and one only needs to “open up” the mind to see what “makes it tick.” (It is also fitting that late in the narrative Caleb seeks employment as a watchmaker.)

Caleb believes that by observing Falkland's behavior he can determine the consistent "character" of Falkland and understand what makes him tick. But Caleb immediately runs into difficulty as he observes Falkland's "appearance" and "disposition" as being "extremely unequal" (63). Caleb describes Falkland as "compassionate and considerate of others," but presenting a "coldness of address" and impenetrable sentiments which prevent a reciprocation of kindness (62-63). Falkland appeared to be struck by an "incessant gloom" as he vacillated between being "peevish" and "tyrannical" and at times "entirely lost his self-possession" with his "behavior changed into frenzy" (63). It is precisely this inconsistency that proves to be problematic for Caleb as he cannot posit a fixed self for Falkland. As Caleb laments later in the narrative, "[t]here are few things that give a greater shock to the mind, than a phenomenon in the conduct of our fellow men, of great importance to our concerns, and for which we are unable to assign any plausible reason" (399). For Caleb, Falkland's inconsistent behavior and paroxysms of his disposition must be the external manifestations of a "secret" torment of mind and discovering this "secret wound" becomes Caleb's project. Although it is true that Falkland does in fact have a secret that torments his mind, there remains both an excess of behaviors and emotions that resist understanding and an absence at the core of the self that undermine Caleb's epistemological project.

The scene in which Caleb stumbles across Falkland anguishing within a small apartment recessed from the main library becomes the pivotal moment in the novel both in terms of narrative and theme. This small nearly hidden room and the trunk contained within become metaphors of Falkland's mind. Caleb describes his entering the small room with the intention "only to put any thing in order that I might find out of its place" (63). The obvious corollary is Caleb's underlying desire to put Falkland's mind in order. Caleb hears a groan from within the hidden room which he attributes as "expressive of intolerable anguish" thereby reading an inner cause to Falkland's external expression. Upon Caleb's entering the room, Falkland shuts and locks a trunk before chastising him for spying on his actions. Falkland cries out, "Do you think you shall watch my privacies with impunity?" (64), which is a double admonishment against Caleb spying not only into Falkland's private actions, but also his private thoughts—his mind. To discover what is contained within Falkland's trunk is to determine the "secret wound" of his mind. This becomes the catalyst for the progression of the narrative, but more importantly the organizing metaphor of the novel. The trunk represents both the mind of other humans to which we don't have *access* and our own unconscious that remains hidden from ourselves.

Caleb laments that Falkland's "mind [was] pregnant with various emotions, though I could not interpret them" (64). Caleb's obsessive need to interpret Falkland and learn the secret contained within his truck (his mind) without regard to the very real personal and social consequences are precisely what bring about his "theatre of calamity." As Caleb narrates, "[t]he reader will feel

how rapidly I was advancing to the brink of a precipice” and although “I had a confused apprehension of what I was doing, [...] I could not stop myself” (188). What began as a “curiosity” to understand Falkland rather quickly devolves into a compulsion. Caleb states that “[c]uriosity is a restless propensity, and often does but hurry us forward the more irresistibly, the greater is the danger that attends its indulgence” (187). This obsessive-compulsive behavior disrupts processes of rational thought, but it is an odd paradox because even when one recognizes that he or she is acting obsessively it is difficult to stop and, further, these obsessions are often a source of pleasure.

When Caleb first intrudes on Falkland and his trunk, he is “sufficiently terrified” by Falkland’s outburst, but more tellingly he is simultaneously “thrilled [to his] very vitals” (64). What Godwin perceptively realizes about human psychology is that there is a strange pleasure in breaking laws or taboos. Caleb is perfectly aware, at least retrospectively, of this tendency even if he can’t control it:

To do what is forbidden always has its charms, because we have an indistinct apprehension of something arbitrary and tyrannical in the prohibition. [...] The further I advanced the more the sensation was irresistible. [...] The more impenetrable Mr. Falkland was determined to be, the more uncontrollable was my curiosity. (180-181)

What is so interesting about Godwin’s exploration of this aspect of human behavior is that it contains both a psychological and political dimension. Human beings may be hardwired to rebel against tyrannical authority. However, the opposite may hold true as well, which pits mankind in a continual and shifting power struggle or, as Caleb remarks, “every man is fated to be, more or less, the tyrant or the slave” (238). Again, this statement moves in multiple directions describing the power relations inherent in political and social institutions, but also the inner psychology of human beings—we are both master and slaves to our own psyches.

In his case history, “Notes Upon A Case of Obsessional Neurosis” (1919), Sigmund Freud states that

[i]f an intense love is opposed by an almost equally powerful hatred, and is at the same time inseparably bound up with it, the immediate consequence is certain to be partial paralysis of the will and an incapacity for coming to a decision upon any of those actions for which love ought to provide the motive power. [...] So the paralysis of his powers of decision gradually extends itself over the entire field of the patient’s behavior. And here we have the domination of compulsion and doubt such as we meet with in the mental life of obsessional neurotics. (*Three Case Histories* 74-75)

Although there is no need here to put forth a clinical diagnosis of Caleb (or Godwin for that matter) as an obsessive neurotic, Freud's theories do provide a framework for understanding the behavior of and relationship between Caleb and Falkland. Whether intentional or not, Godwin tests his commitment to the power of rational thought by exploring the obsessive and often uncontrollable aspects of human passions.

The relationship between Caleb and Falkland is one of frequent and intense vacillations between love and hate. In one moment curses and venom would be spewed and, in the next, love and admiration. Even after years of persecution and defiance, the indissoluble connection between them remained. After saving Caleb from the gallows, Falkland exclaims, "Were you so stupid and undistinguishing as not to know that the preservation of your life was the uniform object of my exertions?" (382). And Caleb, even when accusing Falkland of murder, cannot help but emotionally claim, "I have revered him; he was worthy of reverence, I have loved him; he was endowed with qualities that partook of divine. From the first moment I saw him, I conceived the most ardent admiration" (428). Caleb is overwhelmed with pity for Falkland precisely at the moment when Falkland is at his most vulnerable which becomes manifest in his physical "appearance of a corpse" (426). It is Caleb's mixture of intense love and hate for Falkland that results in his "obsessive-neurotic" behavior.

Continuously throughout the novel, Caleb is plagued by doubt and indecision. First, Caleb doubts whether or not Falkland is a murderer and is unable to come to a definitive conclusion. Then, even after Falkland admits his guilt, Caleb second-guesses and regrets his own actions. In the revised ending Falkland admits his guilt and Caleb is vindicated. However, what remains after the conviction of Falkland is Caleb's guilt as a sort of "excess" which represents the "limits of [Caleb's] self-recognition" (Handwerk 954). Falkland's physical deterioration and death become not a punishment for Falkland (in fact, one can interpret this as liberating Falkland from the burden of his secret past), but for Caleb as Falkland's anguish is transferred to Caleb:

I have been his murderer. [...] It would have been merciful in comparison, if I had planted a dagger in his heart. [...] But atrocious, execrable wretch that I have been! I wantonly inflicted on him an anguish a thousand times worse than death. (433)

It becomes clear that Falkland's guilt is also Caleb's guilt and that Falkland's persecution is also Caleb's persecution. That is, Falkland becomes Caleb's "double" and the external symbol of Caleb's own guilty conscience. Falkland's downfall and death does not liberate Caleb, but rather is the true source of Caleb's misery. Caleb narrates, "I thought that, if the guilt of Falkland were established, fortune and the world would smile upon my efforts. Both these events are accomplished; and it is now only that I am truly miserable" (433).

Godwin's use of the "double" is ingenious as, once again, it works both psychologically and politically. On the political level, the relationship between Falkland and Caleb symbolizes all institutional relations of power, which are based on a structure of "tyrant and slave." For Falkland to retain his position of power he cannot grant Caleb complete freedom or autonomy—the structural relation must be maintained. For Godwin, this power structure is inherent in all institutions and that is why simply substituting a new "leader" into power doesn't change anything—the system still remains. This is evident in the revised ending where Caleb obtains power over Falkland—they switch positions—but the end result is the same: tyranny. Caleb's guilt, at least in part, surfaces from the recognition that he has become that which he rebelled against for all those years.

However, the doubling of Caleb and Falkland also resonates on a psychological level and helped instigate what would become a common trope in Gothic fiction from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to Poe's "William Wilson" (1839) to Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde* (1886)—the double as "divided self." The theme of the double as developed in Gothic literature became a framework for psychoanalytic theories of a split consciousness in the work of Otto Rank and Sigmund Freud. In his book *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*, Rank recognized that the

use of the double-theme derived not so much from the author's conscious fondness for describing preternatural situations [...] as from their unconscious impulse to lend imagery to a universal human problem—that of the relation of the self to the self. (xiv)

The first part of Rank's statement reveals a weakness in both Rank and Freud's tendency to interpret literature as a means of psychoanalyzing the author's own unconscious. However, their theories are still useful in providing an explicit framework for theorizing the theme of the divided-self as found in literature and cinema.

The reading of Falkland as a projection of Caleb's own unconscious (second self) is reinforced by the overall plot structure of the novel, which is based on repetition. Godwin masterfully takes the Gothic convention of "flight and pursuit" and makes it the organizing principle of the plot. The doubling between Caleb and Falkland becomes enmeshed into the structure of the narrative itself as the positions of "pursuer" and the "pursued" repeat and shift. Caleb realizes the futility of this situation as he laments that

[m]y prospects were indeed sufficiently gloomy and discouraging. How much labour had I exerted, first to extricate myself from prison, and next to evade the diligence of my pursuers; and the result of all, to be brought back to the point from which I began! (374)

In the organizing patterns of the plot, Godwin has captured both the repeating patterns of power structures and the “dominance of a compulsion to repeat” in the unconscious mind which “proceeds from instinctual impulses” (Freud, *The Uncanny* 145).

Billiard Balls, Self-Consciousness, and Narrative

The question that ultimately arises within Godwin’s narrative of oppressive institutional powers and uncontrollable human compulsions is that of the possibility of an individual *conscious will*, or “voluntary action.” Otto Rank describes the ‘birth of individuality’ as when

civilized man, even if he fights the outside world, is no longer opposed to a natural enemy but at bottom to himself, to his own creation, as he finds himself mirrored, particularly in manners and customs, morality and conventions, social and cultural institutions. (Truth and Reality 7)

This is not a reading that privileges psychology at the expense of politics, but rather a dialectical reading revealing that power structures of the external world, in fact, mirror the internal conflict of conscious and unconscious impulses and, perhaps, vice-versa. In many ways this relates back to Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, particularly to his concepts of the “Doctrine of Necessity” and the “Voluntary Actions of Men.”

Godwin’s Doctrine of Necessity follows the scientific principle of cause and effect in a material world with the problematic (though logical given the premises) conclusion that in one sense “there is no such thing as action” (*Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* 488). Godwin states that “[m]an is in no case strictly speaking the beginner of any event or series of events that takes place in the universe, but only a vehicle through which certain causes operate” (*Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* 488). Godwin likens the operations of the human mind to the material cause and effect action of one billiard ball striking another governed by Newtonian Laws of Motion. For Godwin both physical and mental actions are guided by the “system of necessity, as a link in the great chain of events which could not have been otherwise than it is” (*Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* 489). It is difficult to contradict the logic of this statement, but the problem for Godwin—and for all of us—is the conclusion that we exist within oppressive structures of institutions, psychology, and laws of physics none of which allow for voluntary actions. For all of Godwin’s belief in the revolutionary potential of rational judgments, he understands the dilemma and concedes that the “perfection of the human character consists in approaching as nearly as possible to the perfectly voluntary state” (*Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* 493)—a state which he knows we can never reach. Godwin goes on to state that individuals

ought to be upon all occasions prepared to render a reason for our actions. [...] We should be cautious of thinking it a sufficient reason for an action, that we are accustomed to perform it, and that we once thought it right. [...] We should therefore subject [reasons] to perpetual revisal. (Enquiry Concerning Political Justice 493)

Although Godwin realizes that an individual cannot remove herself from the structures of the mind or the physical world, the difference between billiard balls and human beings is our ability for “self-examination.” It is precisely through our ability to examine our consciousness (i.e., our “self-consciousness”) that we can question and, at least, navigate the oppressive structures of existence even if we cannot completely control or transcend them. Of course, this is a very difficult task itself filled with contradictions and blind spots. Otto Rank sums up this situation as consisting of three inter-related difficulties:

[F]irst, that we, as said, are aware of will phenomena only through the medium of consciousness; second, that this conscious self offers us no fixed standpoint for observation of these phenomena, but itself ceaselessly alters, displaces and broadens them. This leads to the third and perhaps most important point, namely, that we can observe these fluctuating phenomena of consciousness itself only through a kind of super-consciousness which we call self-consciousness. (Truth and Reality 19)

This “self-consciousness” or the ability of an individual to examine his own consciousness is itself a narrative: a function of language. This is precisely what Godwin gives us through Caleb’s first-person narration—the externalization of his self-consciousness.

If human consciousness is itself an act of narrating one’s own story, then the advantage of the novel—over science, over history—is in its unique ability to explore the nature of human experience, or consciousness. Historical and scientific discourses can certainly provide us with knowledge about the facts of events or the physical laws of our environment, but they fail to represent “the density of those events as consciously experienced” (Lodge 14). However, that is precisely what narrative literature—what the novel—sets out to do. As literary critic and novelist David Lodge points out, the novel creates “fictional models of what it is like to be a human being, moving through time and space ... captur[ing] the density of experienced events by its rhetoric, and ... show[ing] the connectedness of events through the devices of plot” (14). Thus, Godwin’s novel is itself comprised of various embedded narratives all of which are filtered through Caleb’s interiority, but which overlap, resist, and at times outright contradict Caleb’s ability to control them. Caleb’s proclamation, “I will unfold a tale!” is an attempt to exonerate himself by revealing Falkland’s guilt, but it is also an attempt to write his own consciousness—that is, to

navigate and fix a self. Although the pretense of Caleb “penning his memoirs” is to describe the history of his persecution at the hands of Falkland, it is as much about Caleb trying to understand and fix the “paroxysms” of his own mind. Immediately prior to Caleb proclaiming that he will “tell a tale” he complains that his “thoughts wander from one idea of horror to another, with incredible rapidity” (420). However, even Caleb’s act of narration cannot fix his self as his perspective is constantly shifting and running up against competing external (public) narratives as well as conflicting inner narratives.

The scene in which Caleb is first imprisoned enacts the potentially liberating power of narrative, but also its inherent contradictions. In order to escape (at least mentally) the confines of his prison cell, Caleb employs his mind by tasking the “stores of [his] memory, and [his] powers of imagination” (271). Caleb begins by “recollecting the history of [his] life” but “by degrees” quits his “own story” and employs himself in “imaginary adventures” (272). Here Caleb places himself in imaginary situations and conceives the “conduct to be observed in each” (272). The ease with which Caleb moves from “history” to “imagination” calls into question the entire “memoir” (narrative) that Caleb is penning—not only how can the reader distinguish history from fiction, but how can an individual adequately distinguish memory from imagination when our very consciousness exists at the intersections of multiple narratives? As Jerrold Hogle states, “Caleb is now the ‘subject’ of multiple texts in the most literal sense of the word [...] [and] is subjected to them and ruled by them even as he longs to find a significance within himself” (267). The prison cell, like Falkland’s trunk, becomes a metaphor for the individual’s interiority. On the one hand, Caleb remains “free” because the cell only imprisons his body not his mind. As he exclaims, “What power is able to hold in chains a mind ardent and determined?” (238). But on the other hand, Caleb is never free and his persecution comes as much from within as from without. Like Milton’s Lucifer, he carries his own hell around with him.

After Caleb’s curiosity is sparked further by the mystery of the contents of Falkland’s mind (his trunk) which cannot be obtained through external observation (represented by the trunk being locked), he turns to narrative in order to try to reconstruct Falkland’s past and learn the hidden cause of his current anguish. Caleb convinces Collins to relay what he knows of the tragic story of Falkland’s past, but this narrative itself becomes unreliable as it is filtered and, in fact, fractured through Caleb. In a curious move, Caleb-as-narrator confesses that

I shall interweave with Mr. Collin’s story various information which I afterwards received from other quarters, that I may give all possible perspicuity to the series of events. To avoid confusion in my narrative, I shall drop the person of Collins, and assume to be myself the historian of our patron.
(66)

Ironically, this merging of narrative voices adds to the confused mixture in the narrative rather than avoiding it. This is a rather strange move for Godwin to make, but it fits as it forefronts the idea that this entire story is filtered through Caleb's consciousness. The story of Falkland's past that is ultimately presented to the reader is not the omniscient facts of Falkland's life, nor Falkland's own description of his past, nor Collins's description of Falkland's past, but rather a patchwork of narratives cobbled together by Caleb. Although not completely divorced from so-called "reality," the Falkland that is presented is a Falkland that is constructed in Caleb's mind, which further reinforces the notion of Falkland as a projection of Caleb's "second-self." As Caleb states, "[m]y heart bleeds at the recollection of his misfortunes, as if they were my own" (66).

Almost the entirety of Volume 1 of Caleb Williams (excepting Chapter 1) is taken up by the hybrid Collins-Caleb narrative of Falkland's history with his nemesis Tyrrel. Although Caleb claims that he will "drop the person of Collins" during this narration, he also mostly drops himself out of this narrative as well and it primarily becomes a third-person narration (with a few first-person interventions). The mode of this narrative is peculiar. The narrative clearly presents more knowledge of Falkland's history and character than could possibly be known by Caleb. However, it is not an omniscient narrative as it concerns itself with mostly external aspects of Falkland—his actions, behaviors, demeanor, and his observable 'character.' Appropriately, it does not venture too deeply into Falkland's interiority and, on those occasions that it does, puts forth speculations rather than transparent access to the inner workings of his mind. The narration is filled with qualifying phrases such as "he seemed" and "it is probable" and frequently limits itself to descriptions of Falkland and Tyrrel's observable reactions and discernible demeanor during any given situation.

Additionally, given Caleb's own admonitions and the general plot that unfolds as Falkland's history, it becomes clear that Caleb is (re)writing Falkland's past as a romance novel. In Chapter 1 the reader has already been made aware of Caleb's passion for "books of narrative and romance." Caleb states that

I panted for the unraveling of an adventure with anxiety, perhaps almost equal to that of the man whose future happiness of misery depended on its issue. I read, I devoured compositions of this sort. They took possession of my soul; and the effects they produced were frequently discernible in my external appearance and my health. (60)

In Falkland's story Caleb has unraveled an adventure that does impact his own happiness as, according to Caleb, because of the feud between Falkland and Tyrrel, he has "become an object of misery and abhorrence" (77). Caleb has taken the scraps of information about Falkland's past and written his own romance-tragedy replete with murder, revenge, and damsels in distress. In one

of the handful of first-person interventions during this narrative, Caleb breaks stride with the narration just prior to telling of the catastrophic incident in Falkland's past. He then continues, "I go on with my tale. I go on to relate those incidents which my own fate was so mysteriously involved. I lift the curtain, and bring forward the last act of the tragedy" (145). Not only does Caleb self-consciously refer to Falkland's history as a "tragedy" divided into "acts," but even more tellingly he calls it *his* tale.

Furthermore, Caleb describes his reactions to the story of Falkland's past in a manner akin to his reactions to romances: "My feelings were successively interested for the different persons that were brought upon the scene"; "I paid tribute of my tears to the memory of the artless Miss Melville"; and "I found a thousand fresh reasons to admire and love Mr. Falkland" (179). However, Caleb also realizes that there are gaps in the narrative and, not unlike Falkland's trunk, there is something more contained within that falls outside of his knowledge. Caleb's obsessive curiosity leads him to further examine and interpret the events presented in the story: "I turned it a thousand ways, and examined it in every point of view. In the original communication it appeared sufficiently distinct and satisfactory; but as I brooded over it, it gradually became mysterious" (179-180). It is here that Caleb begins to suspect that the "secret wound" at the heart of Falkland's character stems from guilt which results from his murder of Tyrrel and by letting Hawkins and son take the blame for it. However, there is actually very little evidence in the narrative of Falkland's past to cause this doubt in Caleb. There is physical evidence that Hawkins was guilty as well as a confession.

The sticking point for Caleb is, once again, based on external behaviors that Caleb continues to believe accurately reflect one's inner being. He is perplexed about the character of Hawkins, "[s]o firm, so sturdily honest and just [...] all at once to become a murderer! His first behavior under the prosecution, how accurately was it calculated to prepossess one in his favour!" (180). For Caleb, one's external displays of virtue, grace, and sentiment are transparent reflections of one's interiority. Falkland, then, is an interpretive problem for Caleb because of his external inconsistencies of character. However, despite Caleb's confidence that he is able to interpret Falkland based on his behaviors and the narrative he has reconstructed (and despite the fact that Caleb's belief that Falkland is a murderer is true), the efficacy of this is undermined in that the very same epistemological methods are used against Caleb.

Caleb is confident that there are external clues that reveal the inner truth. At the inquest of the peasant accused of murder, Caleb believes that the public claims against the peasant will cause Falkland to tip his own hand. Caleb states that he "will trace all the mazes of [Falkland's] thought. Surely at such a time his secret anguish must betray itself" (203). And, sure enough, Caleb interprets Falkland's flustered reactions as proving his guilt. Caleb's act of bias confirmation is exposed in his description of the peasant on trial as

demonstrating “poignant sensibility” and with a countenance that was “ingenuous and benevolent, without folly” (204). Even worse is that Caleb is exasperated that the other spectators “seemed to take little notice of the favourable appearances visible in the person of the accused” (205). Caleb’s model of cause and effect necessitates that he observe a physical effect and then postulate an interior cause. However, unlike observing the cause and effect process of the movement of billiard balls, Caleb must link the effect to a prior cause by a process of narrative—that is, he must construct a story which explains the effects. After witnessing Falkland’s agitated behavior, Caleb concludes that “Mr. Falkland is the murder! He is guilty! I see it! I feel it! I am sure of it!” (208). Caleb’s conclusion results as much from the paroxysms of his own mind than any credible evidence.

The irony is that Caleb’s method of observing external behaviors and then creating a narrative to explain those behaviors is also used against him. When Caleb is on the run he receives a letter from Forester who, like Caleb, bases an interpretation of guilt solely on external behavior: “if you are a villain and a rascal, you will perhaps endeavor to fly; if your conscience tells you, ‘You are innocent,’ you will out of all doubt, come back” (242). When Falkland constructs a narrative that accuses Caleb of theft, he builds it in a plausible way based on the external situations and Caleb’s behaviors. Forester agrees that Caleb’s behavior “appeared at the time mysterious and extraordinary” (249). And just as Caleb interprets inscrutable and inconsistent behavior to be the external mark of some “secret wound,” others are led to believe that Caleb is guilty as well. This exasperates Caleb and he cries to Forester, “[y]ou are a man of penetration; look at me! Do you see any of the marks of guilt?” (255). Although the rationalist Godwin of *Political Justice* states with confidence that the wise man “ought to see things precisely as they are” (qtd. in Clemit 41), here we get ‘things as they are’ clouded not only by structures of power, but also by the failures of epistemological models and the idiosyncrasies of human psychology.

Conclusion

The novel ends with Caleb claiming, “I began these memoirs with the idea of vindicating my character. I have now no character that I wish to vindicate” (434). The implication of this statement is that Caleb—and all of us—do not have a transcendent, essential character (a ‘fixed’ consciousness), but that the individual is in a constant state of creation through the processes of both external and internal narratives. The individual is in a constant struggle against the external forces (political, social, cultural) that attempt to write our ‘self’ and against various conflicting inner forces. Caleb initially believes that his story “faithfully digested, would carry in it an impression of truth that few men would be able to resist” (409). However, by the end his only hope is that the “world may at least not hear and repeat a half-told and mangled tale” (434).

But even this is an impossibility as Caleb's constructed tale is, in fact, "mangled" as it is but one of many intertwined narratives. It is the narrative of Caleb's inner story (the story he tells himself), but this 'private' story must compete with other 'public' tales; for example the publicly circulating pamphlet titled "MOST WONDERFUL AND SURPRISING HISTORY AND MIRACULOUS ADVENTURES OF CALEB WILLIAMS" (368). Additionally, Caleb's narrative of Falkland's past must compete with other versions. For here is what ultimately lies locked inside Falkland's trunk. Caleb may believe that the trunk contains a "narrative" of Falkland's guilt and, in a way, it does. But more precisely what the trunk contains is Falkland's "self-consciousness," which is necessarily his own narrative and one that Caleb can never gain access to.

In "Of History and Romance" Godwin states, "we never know any man's character. My most intimate and sagacious friend continually misapprehends my motives. He is in most cases a little worse judge of them than myself and I am perpetually mistaken" (466). While this is not a promising state of affairs, it is also not to advocate nihilism and give up. Rather it is a call for constant self-examination and to not merely accept reasons or definitions as given by culture and society. To be a rational human is to employ our faculty of "self-consciousness" and intellect to question the actions of individuals and to be willing to subject not only others' actions and reasons to perpetual revision, but also our own. That is, despite the limitations of our rationality, we must use our intellects to continually rewrite our narratives in our ongoing efforts to strive towards progress and truth.

References

- Anderson, Emily R. "I Will Unfold A Tale--!: Narrative, Epistemology, and Caleb Williams." *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, Volume 22, Number 1. (Fall 1999): 99-114.
- Bloom, Paul. "The War on Reason." *Atlantic Monthly*, 19 Feb. 2014. Web.
- Butler, Marilyn and Mark Philip. Introduction. *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*. Vol. 1. Ed. Mark Philip. London: William Pickering, 1992.
- Clemit, Pamela. *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin*, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelly. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Demasio, Antonio. *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion, and the Making of Consciousness*. New York: Harcourt, 1999.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Three Case Histories*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963.
- . *The Uncanny*. Trans. by David McLintock. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Godwin, William. Caleb Williams. Eds. Gary Handwerk and A.A. Markley. New York: Broadview Books, 2000.
- . "From Enquiry Concerning Political Justice. Caleb Williams. Eds. Gary Handwerk and A.A. Markley. New York: Broadview Books, 2000. 483-498.

- . “Godwin’s Account of the Composition of the Novel from the Preface to the 1832 ‘Standard Novels’ Edition of *Fleetwood*.” *Caleb Williams*. Eds. Gary Handwerk and A.A. Markley. New York: Broadview Books, 2000. 443-450.
- . “Of History and Romance.” *Caleb Williams*. Eds. Gary Handwerk and A.A. Markley. New York: Broadview Books, 2000. 453-467.
- Handwerk, Gary. “Of Caleb’s Guilt and Godwin’s Truth: Ideology and Ethics in Caleb Williams.” *ELH*, Vol. 60, No. 4. (Winter, 1993): 939-960.
- Hogle, Jerrold E. “The Texture of the Self in Godwin’s Things as They Are.” *boundary* 2. Vol. 7, No. 2, Revisions of the Anglo-American Tradition: Part 1. (Winter, 1979): 261-282.
- Lodge, David. *Consciousness & The Novel*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*. Ed. by David Galloway. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Pollin, Burton R. “Poe and Godwin.” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 20, No. 3. (Dec., 1965): 237-253.
- Rank, Otto. *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*. Trans. and Ed. by Harry Tucker, Jr. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971.
- . *Truth and Reality: A Life History of the Human Will*. Trans. by Jessie Taft. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936.