Godwin's Handshake

ANDREW FRANTA

IN *CALEB WILLIAMS*, WILLIAM GODWIN'S FIRST AND MOST SUCCESSFUL novel, the act that generates the narrative, Ferdinando Falkland's murder of his fellow landowner and rival Barnabas Tyrrel, is preceded by a scene that on first sight seems to represent little more than a missed opportunity. Falkland fears that Tyrrel's animosity will lead to bloodshed. "A strife between persons with our particularities and our weaknesses," he says to Tyrrel, "includes consequences that I shudder to think of. I fear, sir, that it is pregnant with death to at least one of us, and with misfortune and remorse to the survivor." In order to avoid death, misfortune, and remorse, he proposes a "compact" to "preserve mutual peace": "Mr. Falkland offered his hand to Mr. Tyrrel in a token of fellowship. But the gesture was too significant. The wayward rustic, who seemed to have been somewhat impressed by what had preceded, taken as he was by surprise, shrunk back" (29). Falkland's "fine talking" has drawn Tyrrel in; his extended hand drives him away (30). But if Tyrrel's refusal to shake Falkland's hand at first appears to be the product of his irrational anger, it quickly becomes clear that Tyrrel has reason on his side. Falkland's egalitarian gesture is undermined by his air of superiority: "even when he was most exemplary, there was an apparent loftiness in his manner that was calculated to irritate; and the very grandeur with which he suppressed his passions, operated indirectly as a taunt to his opponent" (31). Thus his claim of equality—"I come to you," he tells Tyrrel, "not as to a master, but an equal" (30)—is recognized by Tyrrel as nothing more than a thinly veiled assertion of mastery.

Hands are offered twice more in *Caleb Williams*, but none of the novel's three handshakes proves successful. What a successful handshake would mean is suggested by the observation of the cultural historian Herman Roodenburg that

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> in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and probably for a good deal of the eighteenth century, shaking hands had a very different meaning from the ritual act we know today. It looks as if the gesture was not part of any greeting or parting behavior at all but that it had quite different connotations which centered around such concepts as friendship, brotherhood, peace, reconciliation, accord, or mutual agreement. (174)

In its several contexts—juridical, diplomatic, commercial—the handshake did not so much assume social equality, as it does today, as effect it. Thus the purpose of the handshake in the eighteenth century was to demystify the issue Godwin raised in an appendix to his *Enquiry concerning Political Justice* entitled "Of Co-operation, Cohabitation and Marriage." "It is a curious subject," Godwin wrote, "to enquire into the due medium between individuality and concert" (756). Shaking hands is a gesture by which individuals acting in concert announce, to each other and to the world, that they have agreed to do so; it is a gesture designed to enact Godwin's "due medium." Hence Tyrrel refuses Falkland's hand not out of spite but because Falkland's condescending manner makes a compact between equals look like a gift that is his to give. Moreover, Tyrrel's fate (he is killed by the hand he will not shake) suggests that, in Godwin's version of the gothic at least, there is no "due medium between individuality and concert."

Caleb Williams has been called the first psychological novel. That it turns on a series of failed handshakes, however, looks less like Godwin's attempt to achieve a kind of novelistic realism by making his characters act as real people act than a novelistic rendering of the terms of a political debate in which, with the publication of *Political Justice* one year earlier, Godwin was already engaged. *Caleb Williams* recasts the English debate over the French Revolution not merely by fictionalizing the arguments of *Political Justice* (as Godwin's preface to the novel suggests) or by responding to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (as generations of critics have claimed). Instead, I argue, Godwin's novel calls into question both the conservative attack on the revolution and the radical defense of it. The encounter between Falkland and Tyrrel (precipitated by Tyrrel's resentful response to Falkland's "Ode to the Genius of Chivalry") attacks Burke by rejecting his nostalgic account of a bygone "age of chivalry" (170). The second of *Caleb Williams*'s failed handshakes, however, responds not to Burke's *Reflections* but to Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* by denying the revolutionary claim that a return to first principles and natural rights can reverse the ravages of history and custom. *Caleb Williams*'s political argument thus takes the form of a double reversal that pits Burke and Paine against each other. Godwin performs this maneuver by focusing on the repeated failure of a socially, and politically, significant gesture and insisting that both conservatism and radicalism are brought up short by the inability of individuals to recognize individuality in others.

The novel's third failed handshake does not arrive at a solution to this political problem. Nor does it propose a synthesis that transcends the conflict. Instead, the strangeness of the final handshake—Caleb discovers that it conceals a bribe—is that it turns out not to be a handshake at all. This final gesture is an empty one, which offers neither reconciliation nor the promise of mutual accord. In emptying the handshake of its meaning (by filling it with money), the gesture complicates a political reading of the novel by radically altering the terms of its political allegory. In his preface, Godwin claims that novels address "persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach" and that if he "shall have taught a valuable lesson . . . , he will have reason to congratulate himself upon the vehicle he has chosen" (1). This essay proposes that, for Godwin, the novel is a "vehicle" not merely for reaching a different set of readers but also for advancing a different kind of

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analysis than that afforded by "books of philosophy and science." By thinking through a series of ordinary yet significant gestures (which both expound plot and elucidate character), *Caleb Williams* moves beyond political allegory and, in so doing, recasts the meaning of that allegory. With the final handshake, Godwin shifts the terms of the novel's critique by shifting its focus from political analysis to social history. The novel's sequence of handshakes traces an episode in the history of manners and points to a historical development, the emergence of commercial society, that complicates the novel's political stance by undermining the conception of politics that underwrites it. In this way, the handshake and its history allow Godwin to speculate about an emerging, but not yet realized, transformation of politics and sociability.

In the end, *Caleb Williams*'s handshakes do not simply symbolize political positions (despite their obvious allusion to eighteenth-century discourses about the social contract). Godwin's use of the gesture draws on both its symbolic status, which he exploits in offering handshakes as markers of crucial moments in the novel's symbolic economy, and its historical development. In the eighteenth century, the meaning of the handshake was in flux; what had been a ritual gesture "centered around such concepts as friendship, brotherhood, peace, reconciliation, accord, or mutual agreement" was in the process of becoming merely a sign of greeting or parting. The history of the handshake's transformation subtends Godwin's analysis of a historical shift in the forms of association that underwrite social relations. The conventions of novelistic representation—which, his preface indicates, allow "the existing constitution of society" to be "faithfully developed in its practical effects" (1)—afford Godwin the opportunity to move politics to the terrain of gesture and thus not only to diagnose a political impasse but also to describe a more profound historical rupture. Just as the handshake's transformation from ritual gesture to neutral symbol of greeting and parting augurs the coming of a more egalitarian society and empties the gesture of its power to effect equality, *Caleb Williams*'s final handshake reflects on the changes that modern commercial society was introducing into a political world conceived in terms of virtue, equality, law, and rights from the perspective of the worldview in eclipse.

[I]

The historical origins of the handshake are enigmatic: they are presumed to be widely known yet are in fact difficult to specify. Casual commentators confidently assert that the handshake originally served to assure each party that the other was not carrying a weapon.[1] In his influential *Principles of Sociology* (1888), Herbert Spencer offered a more fanciful account, describing a greeting, practiced by "polite Arabs," in which "the offer of an inferior to kiss a superior's hand, is resisted by the superior if he is condescending, and . . . the conflict ends by the inferior kissing his own hand to the superior" (135). This imagined scene prompts the question, "Have we not here, then, the origin of shaking hands? If of two persons each wishes to make an obeisance to the other by kissing his hand, and each out of compliment to the other refuses to have his own hand kissed, what will happen?" Spencer argues that the process by which this "irregular" action became "regular and rhythmical" constitutes the origin of the handshake (136).

Spencer identifies the handshake as a sign of deference. But he emphasizes the development of the gesture, classing it among those "obeisances between equals" that "have resulted by diffusion from obeisances which originally expressed surrender to a conqueror" (134). More recent anthropological approaches to the handshake arrive at similar conclusions. In *Symbols: Private and Public*, Raymond Firth concludes that "status considerations" are "at the core of the symbolism of greeting and part-

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ing rituals" and notes that "[i]n Western society of the 'polite order' it was formerly proper to greet servants verbally, but never to shake them by the hand, which would have been an admission of equality" (321, 327). Like Spencer, Firth is particularly interested in how the meaning of the handshake has changed over time:

> Apart from modifications associated with changes of fashion in dress—men who do not wear hats cannot raise them, and must bow or wave a hand instead—what appear to be deeply-rooted modes of behaviour seem able to change quite rapidly. The comparatively recent spread of the Western handshake is a case in point. There is a paradox here. At any one period in any one society conventional forms of greeting and parting tend to be fairly limited, and to be regarded as of aesthetic and moral significance. Failure to give the "correct" signals tends to be criticized, even in children, as insulting to the party affected. (326)

Firth raises two issues that I have already suggested are central to Godwin's use of the handshake in *Caleb Williams*. First, despite its rigidly defined symbolic significance, the meaning of the handshake is not stable; it is given to rapid transformations. Second, because of its rigid symbolic significance, the handshake is a gesture that can go wrong. Handshakes can fail.

What it might mean for a handshake to fail is illuminated by studies of the gesture in the classical world. In *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, Walter Burkert elaborates on the symbolic significance of the gesture in a way that comprehends popular accounts of the handshake's origins: "An agreement can be expressed quickly and clearly in words, but it is only made effective by a ritual gesture: open, weaponless hands stretched out toward one another, grasping each other in a mutual handshake—a mutual display of aggression sealing what had previously merely been spoken" (34). Understanding the handshake as a form of sublimated aggression suggests that we might regard the gesture as an early example of the kind of behavior studied by Norbert Elias in *The Civilizing Process* (1939). The handshake, however, is not among Elias's "modes of behavior considered typical of Western civilized man" (xi), and its omission is instructive. The gesture does not fall within the parameters of *The Civilizing Process*, because in its earlier incarnation, as "a ritual gesture," the handshake did not fall within the realm of manners.[2]

The handshake's ceremonial and symbolic status in the ancient world returns us to the account of the gesture I cited at the outset. In a recent study of gestures in ancient Rome, Anthony Corbeill claims that "the hand visually enacts, and ultimately symbolizes, the legal relations that govern commerce, property, and the Roman family" (21). The force of Roodenburg's account lies in its suggestion that the handshake might not merely reflect social relations but also enact social equality. Shaking the hand of a servant is dangerous not merely because it is "an admission of equality" (Firth 321) but also because the gesture itself might be capable of conferring equality. If we tend not to understand social gestures as performatives in this sense, it is because ours is a less formal, less ceremonial society. It is precisely the performative dimension of the handshake, however, that explains the interest Godwin takes in a gesture that at first glance seems insignificant. In the late eighteenth century, the handshake was at once perfectly ordinary (or on its way to becoming so) and imbued with residual political significance. From this standpoint, Firth's sense that the handshake, like other gestures of greeting and parting, marks "the arrival or departure of a person from the social scene" is in fact closely tied to the "status considerations at the core of the symbolism of greeting and parting rituals" (301, 327). The "social scene" in the late eighteenth century, in other words, is not merely a place; it comprises the intensely political realm of the status hierarchy.

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It is in the light of the issues raised by the history of the handshake that we should understand Godwin's inquiry into "the due medium between individuality and concert." This relation is the "curious subject" of *Political Justice* in its entirety, and the conclusion Godwin reaches in the appendix on marriage—"that everything that is usually understood by the term co-operation is, in some degree, an evil"—is its guiding principle. He advises that "all supererogatory co-operation is carefully to be avoided," including "common labour and common meals" (758). Cohabitation and marriage receive similar treatment, but perhaps the most striking critique of cooperation in *Political Justice* is the argument that "promises are, absolutely considered, an evil, and stand in opposition to the genuine and wholesome exercise of an intellectual nature" (218). His critique of promises, which he elaborates into a principled rejection of the social contract, radicalizes his case against cooperation by insisting that individuals should avoid even cooperation with their future selves.[3]

From this standpoint, it comes as no surprise that *Caleb Williams* cannot imagine a successful handshake. The gesture's utility from Godwin's perspective as a novelist is that its repeated failure to effect what it promises dramatizes what Godwin regards as the necessary failure of cooperation. In *Caleb Williams*, handshakes fail not because the two parties involved do not observe the gesture's significance; whether the offered hand is refused or a successfully completed handshake is unsuccessful in bringing about the agreement or compact it is intended to effect, handshakes fail precisely because of what they are intended to signify. While we might regard *Caleb Williams*'s failed handshakes as illustrations of Godwin's skepticism about promises between individuals, the history of the handshake—as it is reflected in the novel—emphasizes the social dimension of the agreements and alliances the novel explores.

[II]

When Falkland offers Tyrrel his hand, his aim is to effect a social agreement, if not quite an alliance. The reconciliation Falkland envisions at once appeals to Tyrrel's sense of honor and reflects his own adherence to the chivalric code:

> We are in a critical situation. We are upon the brink of a whirlpool which, if once it get hold of us, will render all farther deliberation impotent. An unfortunate jealousy seems to have insinuated itself between us, which I would willingly remove; and I come to ask your assistance. We are both of us nice of temper; we are both apt to kindle, and warm of resentment. Precaution in this stage can be dishonourable to neither; the time may come when we shall wish we had employed it, and find it too late. Why should we be enemies? Our tastes are different; our pursuits need not interfere. (28–29)

Caleb offers a similar assessment of the feud, describing Tyrell as "a true model of the English squire" devoted to "the science of horseflesh, and . . . expert in the arts of shooting, fishing and hunting . . . the theory and practice of boxing, cudgel-play and quarter-staff" (16, 17). "This man," Caleb writes, "one might at first have supposed of all others least qualified from instruction, or inclined by the habits of life, to disturb the enjoyments of a mind so richly endowed as that of Mr. Falkland" (16). But Falkland's arrival and ascendancy in the society that Tyrell had ruled "with an inflexible hand" enrages the English squire and fuels his hatred for "this outlandish, foreign-made Englishman" (18, 20). Commenting on this reversal of fortune, Caleb notes, "It is scarcely necessary to remark that the revolution of sentiment in this rural vicinity, belongs to one of the most obvious features of the human mind. The rudest exhibition of art is at first admired; till a nobler is presented, and we are taught to wonder at the facility with which before we had been satisfied" (20–21).[4] The result, he informs the reader, has dire conse-

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quences both for the antagonists and for himself: "The feud that sprung up between them was nourished by concurring circumstances, till it attained a magnitude difficult to be paralleled; and, because they regarded each other with a deadly hatred, I have become an object of misery and abhorrence" (19).

That Falkland and Tyrrel's "concurring circumstances" will lead to no good is reinforced by Caleb's account of Falkland's character and, in particular, by the incident from Falkland's past that exemplifies it. Caleb begins his biographical sketch of Falkland by observing that "[a]mong the favourite authors of his early years were the heroic poets of Italy. From them he imbibed the love of chivalry and romance." Falkland "conceived that there was in the manners depicted by these celebrated poets, something to imitate, as well as something to avoid," and both the appeal and the danger of this early "model of heroism" are on display in Falkland's "adventures" on the grand tour (10). Taken in by the marquis Pisani at Rome and "received upon a footing of great familiarity" (12), Falkland becomes an intimate of the marquis's daughter and heir, Lucretia Pisani, which leads in turn to a misunderstanding with count Malvesi, Lucretia's chief suitor. Challenged to a duel by Malvesi, Falkland reconciles him with Lucretia, prompting Malvesi's extravagant apology to "this god-like Englishman." In accepting the apology, Falkland reviews the catastrophe they have narrowly avoided, remarking that "the laws of honour are in the utmost degree rigid, and there was reason to fear that, however anxious I were to be your friend, I might be obliged to be your murderer" (15).

Falkland's Italian interlude clarifies the meaning of his feud with Tyrrel by establishing that the rift between the Italianate English gentleman and the "true model of the English squire" is more than a clash of personalities (16).[5] Just as Falkland figures romance and chivalry, Tyrrel epitomizes time-honored English values. Against Falkland's conviction that "nothing was so well calculated to make men delicate, gallant and humane, as a temper perpetually alive to the sentiments of birth and honour," Tyrrel maintains that "[a] nation of such animals [as Falkland] would have no chance with a single regiment of the old English votaries of beef and pudding" (10, 20). In the contrast between Falkland's refinement and gentility and Tyrrel's plainspoken common sense and practical knowledge, Godwin takes aim at Burke's picture of English national character. When in the *Reflections* Burke announces that "the age of chivalry is gone," he is lamenting the extinction of "that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness." His encomium on "[t]his mixed system of opinion and sentiment" (170) captures Falkland's character exactly (hence the critical identification of Falkland and Burke [see Furbank; McCracken; and Butler, "Godwin"]). But Godwin's depiction of Tyrrel, "this rural Antaeus" who "quelled" "all opposition . . . with a high hand" (18), as both tyrant and model squire argues that the social equilibrium Burke had described and had attributed to "the antient chivalry" was in fact merely a romance (170). If Tyrrel represents a type in decline, his claim to authority is nonetheless real. As Caleb puts it, "The tyranny of Mr. Tyrrel would not have been so patiently endured, had not his colloquial accomplishments perpetually come in aid of that authority which his rank and prowess originally obtained" (18).

Tyrrel stands as a rebuke to Burke. But the opposition between Falkland and Tyrrel, which pits "chivalry and romance" against "beef and pudding," also suggests that identifying Falkland with Burke and Caleb with "Godwin himself in the act of writing *Political Justice*" misses a crucial dimension of the political allegory of the first two volumes of *Caleb Williams* (Furbank 215).[6] As Caleb makes plain, the rift

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between Falkland and Tyrrel becomes his inheritance, as Falkland's guilt precipitates Falkland's persecution of Caleb. But Caleb inherits not only the guilt that torments Falkland after Falkland murders Tyrrel; he also inherits the structural relation that linked Tyrrel and Falkland. This relation takes the form of an analogy that elaborates the purpose Godwin describes in the novel's preface: "to comprehend, as far as the progressive nature of a single story would allow, a general review of the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism, by which man becomes the destroyer of man" (1). Just as Falkland destroys Tyrrel, so Caleb destroys Falkland: Tyrrel's public beating of Falkland transforms Falkland into a tyrant; Falkland's persecution of Caleb makes Caleb Falkland's murderer when, in the published ending of the novel, Caleb's public revelation of Falkland's crime leads to Falkland's death.

Of course, there are differences between Falkland's destruction of Tyrrel and Caleb's of Falkland. For one thing, before he dies, Falkland confesses and forgives Caleb. My aim in identifying this analogy, however, is to elucidate the grounds on which Godwin stages arguments against both counterrevolution and revolution.[7] Falkland's secret murder of Tyrrel, like the failed reconciliation that precipitates it, puts the lie to Burke's age of chivalry. In Caleb's pursuit of that secret, however, Godwin's political allegory encompasses Paine as well as Burke. One of Paine's central contentions in *Rights of Man* is that Burke's *Reflections* transposes cause and effect. "It suits his purpose," Paine writes, "to exhibit the consequences without their causes" (60). For his part, Burke feared that the revolutionaries would attempt to disguise their excesses by just such a confusion of means and ends: "Justifying murder and perfidy for public benefit, public benefit would soon become the pretext, and perfidy and murder the end" (177). Paine's response to Burke's argument is enlightened: he offers a series of narratives of the origins of the revolution to replace what he calls Burke's "tragic" or "horrid paintings" (49, 50). Paine claims that the fall of the Bastille can be understood only when its causes are known—among them that the Bastille itself was in truth a "horrid painting," an image of despotism. Paintings seize the imagination and arrest the intellect; narratives that explain origins point the way to freedom. Paine pursues origins because knowledge of origins constitutes the ground of liberty: "To possess ourselves of a clear idea of what government is, or ought to be, we must trace it to its origin" (70–71). But in the novel's reversible narrative of pursuit—in volume 2, Caleb pursues Falkland's secret; in volume 3, Falkland pursues Caleb to preserve his reputation—the attempt to trace origins, "to possess ourselves of a clear idea," takes a gothic turn.

Godwin mounts a critique of Paine's originary narratives by means of Caleb's curiosity—his central character trait—and his enlightened inquiry into Falkland's past. In describing his curiosity, "[t]he spring of action which, perhaps more than any other, characterized the whole train of my life," Caleb links rational inquiry with romance reading:

> I was desirous of tracing the variety of effects which might be produced from given causes. It was this that made me a sort of natural philosopher; I could not rest till I had acquainted myself with the solutions that had been invented for the phenomena of the universe. In fine, this produced in me an invincible attachment to books of narrative and romance. I panted for the unravelling of an adventure, with an anxiety, perhaps almost equal to that of the man whose future happiness or misery depended on its issue. I read, I devoured compositions of this sort. They took possession of my soul. . . . (4)

Here, strangely, natural philosophy leads to love of romance, and both scientific inquiry and romance reading are presented as extensions, even consequences, of innate curiosity.[8] Caleb reads Falkland's past as he reads the romance, but uncovering the cause of his master's melancholy yields no "solutions." He

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learns of Falkland's sin, but the knowledge does not set him free. Instead, it binds him forever to an origin that is not his own, making Falkland's sin his inheritance: in taking possession of Falkland's secret, he becomes possessed by it.[9] Moreover, the lineage that links Caleb to Falkland must be traced ever further back, because when Caleb finally exposes Falkland as Tyrrel's murderer, he repeats the pattern set by Tyrrel's persecution of Emily Melville. Just as Tyrrel's charges against his cousin lead to her imprisonment and death, so Caleb's accusation of murder forces the confession that kills Falkland. In each case, the charges are legally justified, but, as Caleb realizes only after it is too late, morally unjust; in each case, the death is wrongful.

Such doublings and reversals are the signature and stock-in-trade of the gothic novel.[10] In particular, they shape the family romance of *Frankenstein*: just as Caleb pursues Falkland's secret out of sympathy but in learning it becomes his enemy, so Victor Frankenstein pursues the secret of life only to have the embodiment of that knowledge return to stalk him. But in *Caleb Williams*, doubling elaborates the relationship not between creator and created but between romance and enlightenment. If Ferdinando Falkland's very name identifies him as a figure of romance, Caleb's obsessive need to inquire into origins, to discover the truth behind Falkland's secret, figures enlightenment. His initial desire is to discover the truth in order to relieve Falkland's suffering, if only by offering the comfort of fellowship. In learning that Falkland is indeed a murderer, however, he finds himself trapped in a different kind of relationship. Caleb's knowledge of Falkland's secret cannot undo what has already been done. Moreover, as Falkland and Tyrrel's failed handshake demonstrates, it cannot do what has been left undone. Because Caleb is drawn in where Tyrrel "shrunk back," Caleb cannot escape the grip of Falkland's outstretched hand. By means of Caleb's "inquisitive mind" (3), Godwin radicalizes Paine's claim for the past's connection to the present. Caleb's knowledge of Falkland's past does not yield Paine's "clear idea"; instead, the past holds the present in thrall. In *Caleb Williams*, when the enlightened reader reads the romance, the result is gothic possession.[11] Through this conflation of romance reading and enlightened inquiry—and the assertion that they spring from the same source—Godwin joins his critiques of Burke and Paine.

[III]

In *Political Justice*, Godwin set himself against both sides of the revolution debate. Burkean conservatism and Painite radicalism each threaten what he calls "[t]he great cause of humanity" (261). Left to its own devices, Godwin argues, government will wither away, and "[t]he proper method for hastening the decline of error, and producing uniformity of judgment, is not by brute force, by laws, or by imitation; but, on the contrary, by exciting every man to think for himself" (758). "We ought," he concludes, "to be able to do without one another" (761). But in testing this conclusion against "Things As They Are" in *Caleb Williams*, he emphasizes not the perfectibility of individual judgment but the "invincible attachment" that inescapably and involuntarily binds one individual to another (4). Thus, while the debate between Burke and Paine is largely concerned with the first two terms of the revolutionary trinity—*liberté* and *egalité*—Godwin suggests that it is the third term, *fraternité*, that poses the ultimate threat to political justice.

The novel's second handshake takes up the issue of *fraternité*. Framed by Falkland, then tried, convicted, and imprisoned, Caleb reflects on his situation and is led to Painite conclusions. He begins by mocking English self-satisfaction—"Thank God, exclaims the Englishman, we have no Bastille! Thank God, with us no man can be punished without a crime! Unthinking wretch! Is that a country of liberty where thousands languish in dungeons

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and fetters? Go, ignorant fool! and visit the scenes of our prisons!" (181)—and, looking "round upon [his] walls," concludes with a larger generalization: "This is society. This is the object, the distribution of justice, which is the end of human reason. For this sages have toiled, and the midnight oil has been wasted. This!" (182). Regarding "the whole human species as so many hangmen and torturers," Caleb turns inward, "draw[ing] amusement from the stores of [his] own mind," an exercise that first convinces him that "[t]he mind is master of itself" and then furnishes him with the resources necessary for his escape (183, 185, 188). His imprisonment is a conversion experience: he rejects "the man of artificial society" in favor of the "advantages" of "solitude" (187, 201).

On Caleb's escape, Godwin obliges his protagonist's preference for solitude by plunging him into a forest. Here the novel offers another version of society's primal scene, as Caleb falls in with a band of robbers whose offer of protection seems to represent his salvation from "the whole machine of society" (183). The thieves form a kind of natural society, outside the bounds of law, and their captain, Mr. Raymond, espouses a distinctly Jacobin understanding of his calling. "Our profession is the profession of justice," Raymond says, addressing his "comrades." "We, who are thieves without a license, are at open war with another set of men, who are thieves according to law.—A thief is of course a man living among his equals; I do not pretend therefore to assume any authority among you; act as you think proper" (216). As this brief oration suggests, Raymond's version of honor among thieves appeals not to proverbial wisdom but to revolutionary principles.[12] His response to the one member of the band who opposes Caleb's admission to the group, for example, is to ask, "Do you think we will be your slaves?" (216).

But when Caleb is finally offered entry into the den of thieves—as "a man living among his equals"—he, like Tyrrel, shrinks back. The scene describes an attempt to substitute one kind of contract for another: one of Raymond's men comes upon a handbill advertising a reward for Caleb's return to the authorities, calling it "a prize . . . as good as a bank note of a hundred guineas" (222). Raymond once again comes to Caleb's defense, arguing that because they live outside the law, thieves must not only resist its incursions but also refuse its rewards:

> You certainly ought not to employ against people that you hate, supposing your hatred to be reasonable, the instrumentality of that law which in your practice you defy. Be consistent. Either be a friend of law, or its adversary. Depend upon it that, wherever there are laws at all, there will be laws against such people as you and me. Either therefore we all of us deserve the vengeance of the law, or law is not the proper instrument of correcting the misdeeds of mankind. (222–23)

Raymond's eloquence is persuasive, and especially so for Larkins, the man originally in favor of turning Caleb in for the reward.

The novel's second failed handshake follows: "Larkins in particular thanked the captain for his interference, and swore that he would rather part with his right hand, than injure so worthy a lad, or assist such an unheard-of villainy. Saying this, he took me by the hand, and bade me fear nothing" (224–25). Here the failure of the handshake lies not in its execution—Larkins and Caleb do in fact clasp hands—but in the inability of the gesture to effect the solidarity that it is intended to enact. For, while Caleb accepts Larkins's hand, he cannot accept what the handshake entails. In Raymond's brotherhood of thieves, equality does not so much make men into siblings, related to one another by bonds prior to law, as transform them into a corporate body. Thus when Larkins extends his hand to Caleb, the gesture signifies his willingness to "part with" it—a recognition that it is, in effect, no more a part of him than of Caleb. Handshakes among Raymond's men mark a kind of interchange-

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ability of parts within the corporate body and make a claim on the individual that Caleb, for one, cannot honor. He explains his changed perspective after the incident: "though I did not cease to love them as individuals, my eyes were perfectly opened to their mistakes" (226). Justified as individuals but mistaken as a group, Raymond and his men are as threatening to Caleb as the prison he has just escaped.

I have suggested that Caleb's rejection of Raymond and his band at once undoes the meaning of his handshake with Larkins and reinforces his sense that solitude has its advantages. But if imprisonment convinces Caleb, with Godwin, that "[w]e ought to be able to do without one another," the rest of the novel insists on the impossibility of living by a belief in radical self-sufficiency. Caleb can leave the den of thieves behind; he cannot so easily escape his connection to Falkland. Both Falkland's persistent surveillance (carried out by his agent, Gines, and the stories circulating about Caleb in the press) and Caleb's own desire for human community (reflected in his failed attempt to settle down with Laura and her family in Wales) put the lie to Godwin's maxim—or at least push the realization of this conditional aim into a distant future. By the end of the novel, Caleb has arrived at a very different conclusion:

> Solitude, separation, banishment! These are words often in the mouths of human beings; but few men, except myself, have felt the full latitude of their meaning. The pride of philosophy has taught us to treat man as an individual. He is no such thing. He holds, necessarily, indispensibly, to his species. He is like those twin-births, that have two heads indeed, and four hands; but, if you attempt to detach them from each other, they are inevitably subjected to miserable and lingering destruction. (303)

Here monstrosity figures the problem of *fraternité*, and the attempt to separate the conjoined twins recalls Larkins's adjuration that "he would rather part with his right hand" than see Caleb come to harm. Caleb recoiled from Larkins as he now recoils from the "miserable and lingering destruction" that "inevitably" follows the "attempt to detach" the individual man from his species being. But the irony of this passage is that in lamenting his outcast state, Caleb also identifies its source: it is his necessary, indispensable connection to Falkland that has left him "cut off from the whole human species" (303).[13]

Caleb's isolation resembles that of the novel's other orphan, Emily Melville, who, after Tyrrel turns against her, "now for the first time experienced the anguish of never having known her parents, and being cast entirely upon the charity of people with whom she had too little equality to hope to receive from them the offices of friendship" (61). But the episode in the den of thieves makes plain that, for Caleb, equality is not the issue. His inability to join Raymond's band of brothers has nothing to do with the sense in which "too little equality" dashes his hopes of receiving "the offices of friendship." Instead, it underscores the perils of friendship itself. We might understand Godwin's decision to revise the ending of the novel in a similar light. In the manuscript version of the ending, Caleb accuses Falkland of murder, is not believed, and, imprisoned once again, descends into madness: things continue as they are, and Caleb is left with "not an enemy in the world—*nor a* FRIEND!" (333). In the published version, his accusation prompts Falkland's improbable confession and act of forgiveness, which lead in turn to Falkland's death and Caleb's remorse. Caleb's anxiety to be Falkland's friend has obliged him to be his murderer, and Godwin's revision suggests that if not having friends means madness, having friends is equally hazardous. It also reiterates Caleb's account of the individual as monstrous twin by concluding a tale of persecution with the moral that you always hurt the one you love.

[IV]

The third and last failed handshake of *Caleb Williams* suggests a bleak solution to the prob-

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lem of *fraternité*, one that addresses the perils of friendship by divesting the gesture of its meaning. Tyrrel recoils from Falkland's outstretched hand and Caleb leaves the robbers behind because neither can abide what the gesture entails. More than merely symbolizing the failure to arrive at agreement or mutual accord, in these scenes Godwin dramatizes the critique of social contract theory advanced in *Political Justice*. The novel's last handshake is a different kind of failure, and its difference from the first two failed gestures complicates both the novel's political allegory and Godwin's critique of social relations. It intimates that the political conflict the novel has been allegorizing has begun to be supplanted by a new form of social relations. With the last handshake, the individual's necessary and indispensable connection to others, which Godwin so clearly finds inimical to individual freedom, gives way to something that looks more like purely impersonal exchange. Perhaps the final measure of the novel's pessimism is that this kind of impersonality does not bring us any closer to "the most perfect man" of *Political Justice*, "to whom society is not a necessary of life, but a luxury, innocent and enviable, in which he joyfully indulges" (761). Instead, in *Caleb Williams*, with the coming of a social realm in which political conflict appears to be giving way to impersonal exchange, political justice escapes the terms in which Godwin sought to critique and refine it.

Following his penultimate interview with Falkland, in which he refuses to sign a paper professing Falkland's innocence, Caleb meets Falkland's servant, Thomas, who was once Caleb's friend. Taking his master's side, Thomas urges Caleb to repent his "reprobate doings" and retract the accusations he has made:

> Saying this, he held out his hand, and took hold of mine. This action seemed strange, but I at first thought it the unpremeditated result of his solemn and well-intentioned adjuration. I felt however that he put something into my hand. The next moment he quitted his hold, and hastened from me with the swiftness of an arrow. What he had thus given me was a bank-note of twenty pounds. I had no doubt that he had been charged to deliver it to me from Mr. Falkland. (286–87)

This is not the first time Caleb receives money from Falkland. Early in the novel, Falkland "[put] five guineas into [Caleb's] hand" to buy his silence (or, more precisely, his loyalty, since at this point Caleb had yet to learn Falkland's secret) (8). Falkland's motives appear to be the same in this instance, but, as Caleb remarks, there is something strange about the gesture. After the novel has alerted us to the significance of the handshake, we are presented with a gesture that is both more and less than a handshake. Rather than an "unpremeditated" act, it is a calculated maneuver—and the calculation is not Thomas's but Falkland's. Thomas acts not *in propria persona* but as Falkland's intermediary; in this sense, one might say that the hand he offers is less his than Falkland's. Nor does the act reflect Thomas's, or Falkland's, "solemn and well-intentioned adjuration." The gesture is bound up with the money Thomas delivers, and whatever Falkland intends to communicate to Caleb—whether the twenty-pound note is a bribe or a test of loyalty—it is mediated both by Thomas, who carries the message, and by the money that is the message. When Larkins offered Caleb his hand, the gesture spoke to his willingness to part with it on Caleb's behalf (literalizing the oath that often accompanies the gesture: "I give you my hand"). The intensely personal nature of that encounter highlights the strangely disembodied quality of Thomas's gesture. What looks like a face-to-face interaction between two individuals is in fact a far more complicated, ambiguous, and impersonal transaction: Falkland reaches out to Caleb, but only through the mediation of Thomas and the banknote.

The novel's previous handshakes conform to the gesture's customary function. Even in

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failure, each serves to clarify the status of the relationship between individuals. Clearly, one reason that Godwin is interested in the handshake is that it is a practice of everyday life whose purpose is to announce its own symbolic significance. In the novel's political allegory, the handshake thus takes on a kind of second-order symbolism, becoming for Godwin an interpersonal and corporeal manifestation of the kind of political significance that revolutionaries in France invested in dress.[14] Thomas's empty gesture seems to do away with this political frame of reference, instead recalling an earlier regime of patronage and corruption (see Kramnick; Speck). But this gesture is more than an allusion to the bad old days. While we might read the exchange between Thomas and Caleb as Godwin's indictment of political corruption, the very fact that it takes the form of an exchange, the way that it is linked to the novel's previous handshakes, and what Caleb makes of the gesture all contribute to the sense that Godwin is pointing not to the past but to the future, that we are meant to recognize the gesture as a transaction, and that its meaning is bound up with its strangely abstract and impersonal character.

In puzzling out the meaning of this encounter, we can take our lead from Caleb himself, who turns his attention to the meaning of the banknote. He meditates on the injuries Falkland has done him and weighs the propriety of receiving money from "the hands that were embrued in [his] blood." To this way of thinking, the banknote is blood money, and accepting it makes Caleb complicit not only in Falkland's crimes but also in his own persecution. But Caleb does not stop here. He goes on to observe that "[t]he actual means of existence are the property of all," which prompts him to ask, "What should hinder me from taking that of which I was really in want, when in taking it I risked no vengeance and perpetrated no violence?" (287). Finally, he decides that his need of the money and his right to sustain himself must outweigh its source: "He that lately possessed it has injured me," he reasons, "[but] does that alter its value as a medium of exchange?" (288). Caleb is right, of course, but in turning from questions about his values to this question of value, the conclusion he reaches is also a rationalization. While Falkland's bribe is in no way a commercial transaction—no goods are exchanged, nothing is bought or sold—Caleb's thoughts about it call attention to the money's transferability and exchangeability and thereby underscore the different conception of value at hand.

While one could just as easily read Caleb's conviction that "[t]he actual means of existence are the property of all" as a critique of exchange value, my point here is to make Caleb into neither an apologist for the market nor a kind of socialist before the fact. The novel's final handshake steps outside these terms altogether. In Caleb's reflections on value, Godwin recasts the terms of his political critique by calling to mind the discourse about manners that accompanied the emergence of commercial society. If the gesture by which Thomas passes the banknote to Caleb is meaningless in itself, for Godwin its emptiness is the sign of a historical transformation that threatens to supersede the form of political conflict in which he, Burke, and Paine had been engaged. The shift to which Godwin alludes has been characterized by J. G. A. Pocock as a product of the growth of commercial society. Pocock argues:

> As the individual moved from the farmer-warrior world of ancient citizenship or Gothic *libertas*, he entered an increasingly transactional universe of "commerce and the arts," . . . in which his relationships and interactions with other social beings, and with their products, became increasingly complex and various, modifying and developing more and more aspects of his personality. (*Virtue* 48–49)[15]

The precise terms of Pocock's analysis are less important than the stakes of the transformation he describes, particularly the way in

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which in the late eighteenth century manners were supplanting virtues and social values were replacing political values. And we need not make Godwin into a classical republican or civic humanist in order to recognize a version of Caleb in Pocock's description of "the classical citizen" as "at heart a tragic hero, unsafe to associate with, who insists that he is living in the realm of freedom and not that of necessity" (*Virtue* 44).[16]

In the end, transposing politics into gesture allows Godwin to address a form of political discourse that is not merely new but in fact unrecognizable as politics from the point of view of the political world—of virtue, equality, law, and rights—that both he and Caleb imagined themselves to inhabit. *Caleb Williams*'s political allegory seems to require a political solution. Instead, Caleb enters a realm in which relationships among individuals are necessarily negotiated through exchange and mediated by others. It is this "increasingly transactional universe" to which Caleb's encounter with Thomas alludes. With the final handshake, the questions of value with which the novel has been concerned—the ethical dilemmas that constitute Caleb's "theater of calamity" (3)—are supplanted by his meditation on exchange value, as blood money is transmuted into "[t]he actual means of existence." This redefinition of value, moreover, circumvents the problem of equality by replacing it with a notion of equivalence. Thomas shakes Caleb's hand not as a recognition of mutual agreement or fellowship but as a gesture of leave-taking, an expediency that does not assert equality so much as suggest that equality is no longer at stake. Falkland offers the banknote, perhaps as a test of loyalty; Caleb receives it as a means to an end. In this sense, the final failed handshake suggests that "the due medium between individuality and concert" will be "a medium of exchange."

Caleb's rationalization thus reflects the emergence not only of commercial society but also of an increasingly impersonal and abstract concept of the social. If his decision to accept the money looks like corruption or false consciousness, it also reveals a conception of utility that would supersede such familiar moral or epistemological judgments. As Caleb puts it, "The property in question will be beneficial to me, and the voluntary surrender of it is accompanied with no injury to its late proprietor; what other condition can be necessary to render the use of it on my part a duty?" (287–88). This utilitarian calculus leaves the old world of politics and ethics behind: Caleb's "duty" to make use of the money is no virtue. But neither is it a moral failing. Instead, his calculation divests the idea of duty of its ethical implications, just as it reduces all value to use-value. Caleb's indulgence in abstraction (his recourse to notions of equivalence and utility to defend his actions) might provide us with another way of reading *Political Justice*, in that Godwin seems to suggest that "the right of private judgment" depends on this kind of abstraction for its philosophical justification.[17] The concept of utility, from this standpoint, enables Caleb to test—or allows Godwin to imagine that Caleb is testing—the validity of competing social values.[18]

Larger questions about Godwin's political philosophy aside, these shifting definitions of value and equality mark Caleb and Thomas's handshake as a modern gesture, one that announces a new relationship that is, as Pocock puts it, "social and not political in character" (*Virtue* 49). But if the novel's final handshake offers money and manners as compensation for the loss of political virtue, it is crucial to Godwin that the gesture looks both forward and back. It stands as a reminder of what has been lost, or is in the process of being lost, and points to a form of relationship toward which the novel can only gesture. The partial and imperfect emergence of commercial society, in history and in the novel, might thus be understood as Godwin's reflection on the limits of the kind of political allegorization in which he had been engaged. The abstraction of Caleb's reflec-

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tions on value represents a kind of philosophical solitude that puts Caleb in the impossible position of being the judge in his own case. As every reader of *Caleb Williams* knows, Caleb's encounter with Thomas is not the novel's climactic scene. But if the novel's endings famously leave unresolved the problems it poses, the absence of resolution is itself a measure of the full range of problems the novel addresses.

Notes

1. This story frequently appears in popular histories of human culture (see, e.g., Sims 152). That it also turns up on the Web page of a contemporary dating service reflects its widespread circulation (*History*).

2. For complementary accounts of the classical handshake, see Herman 49–53; Boegehold 23–24.

3. On Godwin's critique of promises, see Balfour; Esterhammer.

4. Here Caleb rehearses the argument of Hume's "Of Refinement in the Arts."

5. Tyrrel points to another dimension of the novel's allegory of national difference when he calls Falkland a "Frenchified rascal" (54).

6. Of the "intermittent association" between Burke and Falkland, Butler remarks, "this cannot be all. Falkland has a far wider range of reference than merely to Burke" (*Jane Austen* 70).

7. While Falkland and Caleb's relationship and its political implications might be understood in terms of the oedipal structure and the slaying of the father, which are so evident in *Caleb Williams* and in the gothic in general, reading the novel in this way misses the full scope of Godwin's political allegory. An interpretation like Gold's, for example, which argues convincingly for the close relation between the novel's psychological dynamics and its political significance by pointing out the symmetry between Caleb's story and Freud's account of paranoia (as a symptom of repressed homosexuality), elucidates one aspect of the novel (Caleb's vexed relation to Falkland) in a way that obscures other features of Godwin's analytic project (e.g., the historical specificity of Caleb's problem). Conversely, historicist approaches run the risk of construing the novel's conception of politics too narrowly. For example, while Caleb's paranoia certainly reflects the political paranoia of the 1790s (see Pfau), the historical transformation Godwin examines in *Caleb Williams* is complicated in crucial ways precisely because it is not finally circumscribed by the understanding of politics that defined the French Revolution debate.

8. On the peculiar connection made in this passage between Caleb's scientific bent and his love of narrative, see Thorne 323–25. In addition to the "natural philosopher," Caleb also resembles another Enlightenment type, the literary hack, who makes his living by writing and hopes to support himself by serving as a secretary to a great man and patron like Falkland (see Darnton).

9. Paulson addresses the dynamic of inheritance in the gothic more generally (215–47).

10. Here one could cite such later examples as Hoffmann's "The Sandman," Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Poe's "William Wilson," and Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, as well as note the centrality of doubling and self-division to the gothic more generally (see Sedgwick).

11. For studies that explore the role that hands, both literal and metaphoric, play in gothic possession, see Andriopoulos; Rowe 111–59. On hands in the nineteenth-century novel, in relation to sexuality, see Cohen; in relation to work, see Scarry.

12. Hobsbawm's classic study of "primitive" radical social movements offers further coordinates for placing Raymond's politics.

13. On Caleb's solitude, see Ferguson 97–113.

14. See, for example, Hertz on the cap of liberty (179–91) and Hunt on the *sans-culottes* (76–81).

15. See also Pocock, *Virtue* 103–23 and *Machiavellian Moment*.

16. For a different account of Godwin and republicanism, see Klancher.

17. In chapter 6 of *Political Justice*, Godwin identifies the right of private judgment as "the most essential of those rights which constitute the peculiar sphere appropriate to each individual, and the right upon which every other depends as its basis" (200).

18. Developing such a reading in detail would necessarily extend beyond the scope of my argument here. I offer these speculations, however, because they point to a line of inquiry into Godwin's political philosophy, and the novel's contribution to philosophical speculation, that is worth pursuing. I am grateful to David Collings for this suggestion. Collings's own reading of *Caleb Williams*, which traces "the emergence of a negative definition both of identity and of justice," arguing that at the end of the novel "Caleb finds his place in the world of a mutable and progressive reason, one whose ultimate form must also be retrospective, knowable only in the future perfect tense, beyond reach from within history as it is actually lived," moves in this direction (861).

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