Essay

Romantic Microethics

ALEXANDER FREER

every Minute Particular is Holy

—William Blake, "Jerusalem"

Where ethical thought aspires to a general account of the good, bigger is invariably better. The fine details of conduct are condensed into cases, and cases are subsumed under principles, rules, or laws, whose validity derives from their consistency and reach. This essay considers a form of ethical attention that reverses these priorities, privileging individual cases in all their detail and particularity. Critics have long observed Romanticism's characteristic eye for minute particulars and exceptional objects (Liu 87; Gray 646–47). This is often understood in aesthetic terms, but Romanticism's openness to small, marginal, and limited forms can also be understood as its ethical project.[1] Extending that thought and applying some pressure to it, I show how Romantic writing conceives of ethics as the exemplary handling of minute particulars, even while registering the risk that without a general account of the good, ethical deliberation may be a limitless task. This approach, which I explore in general terms before focusing in particular on Thomas De Quincey, William Godwin, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, can be understood as a Romantic form of microethics.[2] From the steady attention of Shelley and the Wordsworths toward individual people and their circumstances, to the philosophical and juridical defense of individual acts in Godwin and De Quincey, this ethical mode encompasses a broad range of writing and intellectual commitments, yet it finds common ground in an insistence on the singularity and incommensurability of every case and detail.

Microethics produces a fine-grained ethical attention that, like the cinematic close-up, focuses on details yet treats each as a whole,

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and under its scrutiny even ordinary objects and cases appear exceptional (Doane 93). To a neoclassical eye, this register of attention will look myopic.[3] Yet it can be read, like the fragment form, as a sign of Romanticism's "radical modernity" (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 40). For Alan Liu, "the rhetoric of detail" provides a through line from Romanticism to postmodern cultural criticism (77). By the same token, insofar as it favors fragment over whole and exception over norm, Romantic microethics anticipates the antifoundational impulse found in some analytic and deconstructive philosophy and in Theodor Adorno's concept of ethical fragmentation.[4] It is not entirely surprising that Romanticism's own, earlier confrontation with instrumental reason produced comparable results. But the Romantic strain is distinguished by its positive commitment to individual cases and details. It values them not as elements of a general system, or as tools to critique that system, but as the totality of ethical life. At once a literary and ethical form, it binds both writing and reading practices to ethical particularity.

Two broad contextual factors help explain the attraction for Romantic writers. First, a commitment to particularity provided a clear point of opposition to influential forms of systematic moral philosophy such as the theological utilitarianism of clergymen such as John Gay, William Paley, and Thomas Malthus.[5] The "necessity of general rules" for Paley, like the notorious "law of population" for Malthus, served a rational, teleological account of nature drawn from Anglican natural theology (Paley 64; Malthus 366). "For young Cambridge radicals such as Wordsworth and Coleridge," Philip Connell notes, natural theology "amounted to something like an intellectual orthodoxy against which their own beliefs had to be tested and defined" (27–28). Yet these arguments circulated far beyond a local dispute. Echoes of Wordsworth's criticism of Paley can be heard in De Quincey's assault on the minister and philosopher Isaac Watts. And a defense of ethical particularity did not always imply an attack on rationalists. Similar maneuvers are vital to Godwin's own highly rationalist critique of the legal categories of sedition and treason, which were being mobilized throughout the 1790s in a campaign of repression against political radicals.

A second factor was a close, formal interest in attention itself. As Lily Gurton-Wachter has demonstrated, Romantic writers responded to the increasing (and increasingly manufactured) nationalist alarm and paranoia in the period by developing competing, literary forms of attention. William Blake, she argues, cultivated "a heightened though unsuspicious attention, vigorous in its passivity and rigorously divided, an unprepared attention that is always ready to be surprised" (35). Microethics too can be understood as a formal procedure, one intended to concentrate the attention and permit ways of looking that do not conform with prevailing opinion. Insofar as this procedure takes place under duress, it is of a piece with what Anahid Nersessian calls Romanticism's "calamitous forms," registering the ways in which universal law has become conscripted by the interests of capital, turned into a tool of political repression, or otherwise rendered inoperable.[6] Yet Romantic writing not only registers its opposition through these forms but resituates ethical deliberation itself.

The essential antagonism between ethical detail and general principle is articulated clearly in Blake's "Jerusalem":

> He who would do good to another, must do it in Minute Particulars
> General Good is the plea of the scoundrel hypocrite & flatterer:
> For Art & Science cannot exist but in minutely organized Particulars
> And not in generalizing Demonstrations of the Rational Power. (205)

For Blake, good actions cannot occur intransitively; good in the abstract is empty talk. General propositions about conduct, however internally robust, only distance us from the concrete and bodily apprehension of suffering and joy. Of course, if you refuse this premise, it is Blake's demand that risks hypocrisy (since it insists that however sound the rules, we need not apply them generally) and negligence (because it undermines any universal principles or

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laws). But the disruption of legislative power in Albion is precisely the aim:

> I act with benevolence & virtue & get murderd time after time:
> You accumulate Particulars, & murder by analyzing, that you
> May take the aggregate; & you call the aggregate Moral Law (251)

Analysis is murder, in this case, because it transforms the totality of individual cases into a general law, whose pious judges deal only in punishment. Indeed, a desire to regulate general conduct is one way to understand Blake's distinction between priests and poets. Refusing "General Good" does not mean shrinking from addressing the big picture, but resisting the urge to reach it at any cost. Adorno indicts philosophy for a lack of patience: its "passing-on and being unable to linger" that is also its "tacit assent to the primacy of the general over the particular" (74). Conversely, microethics insists on the need to linger. Staying with the particular, it refuses to treat singular cases as a route to generalities. Unlike in the technical fields from which I draw the term, Romantic microethics is not one half of a micro/macro whole, but a free-floating weak theory, operating solely in local and restricted contexts, through "stories, substories, tangles of associations, accrued layers of impact and reaction" (Stewart 129).

Paying strenuous attention to a singular tree or dog rose (as William Wordsworth or John Clare recommend) might seem a harmless fixation. Relinquishing the general good, however, is not without risks. When Wordsworth denounces "publications in which we formally & systematically lay down rules for the actions of Men," he contrasts the rational arguments of Paley and Godwin with the "delicious sensation" of individual good actions ("[Essay on Morals]" 103, 104). But the notorious ethical difficulties of "The Old Cumberland Beggar" demonstrate the danger of restricting the good to what is small and particular. The poem contrasts local, sentimental acts of charity that bind people together in communal sympathy—small blessings, a single handful of meal—to the institutional poor relief of the "House, misnamed of industry" (233). While the poem, like the denunciation of Paley and Godwin, begins from a defense of moral sentiment, its resistance to systematic state intervention would prove prescient for Wordsworth. Romantic opposition to abstract, economisic analysis of poverty crystallized around the expanded 1803 edition of Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (itself an outgrowth of a shorter attack on Godwin), and later in life, in conversation with Isabella Fenwick, Wordsworth would resituate the poem within a wider attack on "the 'heartless' political imperatives of the new economic science, culminating in the (arguably) Benthamite and Malthusian provisions of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834" (Connell 22).

The poem's own gift is attention: to the routes and days of its protagonist; the acts and pains that punctuate them; even the involuntary twitches of his hand that, by shedding crumbs to the benefit of small birds, represent an unwilled repetition of the benevolence he receives. Such observations recall the precise and sympathetic descriptive care of Dorothy Wordsworth's journals.[7] Yet the poem does not intervene, leaving the beggar to the graces of those immediately around him. Its legislative acts, signaled by the repeated imperative "let," come very close to doing nothing at all: "let him pass, a blessing on his head" and, worse, "in the eye of Nature let him die!" (233, 234). On the one hand, the poem insists that general ideas of charity can do no genuine good until "lifeless words, & abstract propositions" are translated into particular acts of affection and benevolence (W. Wordsworth, "[Essay on Morals]" 104). On the other, it tests just how small those acts can get before wise passivity becomes outright negligence.

Like Blake's suspicion of cynical appeals to the general good, Wordsworth's appeal to the moral sense tradition of Shaftesbury and veneration of Burkean benevolent habit can be defended on their own terms.[8] Yet I share the concern of almost all the students with whom I have read "The Old Cumberland Beggar" that the model of local, intimate charity it appears to endorse is, at least when

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viewed from the vantage of a modern welfare state, unconscionably minimal, because its resistance to the abstract arithmetic of "statesmen" forecloses any program of care that might address a whole population. The poem—and the promise of a restricted, small ethics—crystallizes a broader anxiety, acknowledged by advocates of a minimal Romanticism: that it might struggle to distinguish "unused powers and uncommitted acts" from "moral and political quietism" (François 30), and a "utopian doing-with-less" from a romanticized austerity program (Nersessian, *Utopia* 3; see also Clark and Khalip).[9] This is not to say that only small ethical projects encounter problems of scale.[10] But it signals the risk for a form of close ethical attention that refuses to generalize or legislate beyond the ambit of its own immediate vision.

Understanding Romantic ethics in this way, I am especially interested in two categories: the case and the detail. James Chandler's remarkable book *England in 1819* mobilizes the case as a political and literary category with its own distinct history. For Chandler, "Romanticism is itself describable in terms of a massive altering of 'the case,'" from an abstract exemplar to a historicized tool for deliberation (203). His work both highlights and expands the significance of casuistry, the art of distinguishing cases from general laws, in historical thinking, and I will take up the role of casuistry in what follows. More recently, Christopher Nealon has called for new aesthetic attention to the "exemplary case-making activity" of poetry (886). Crucially for this essay, the exceptional case provides the conceptual grounds for Romantic writers to defend ethical particulars.

The detail is helpful both to understand Romantic ethical attention and to consider our relation to it as readers. Most straightforwardly, the descriptive accumulation of detail is a way of sustaining attention and deferring judgments. Detail also suggests the closeness of observation. William Galperin argues that Jane Austen's "detailism" and Byron's fragmentary disposition in *Don Juan* give the work of both authors a quality of "eventfulness": not recording historical time from afar but embodying it (20). In this spirit, close and sustained attention to ethical detail can be understood as a way to inhabit a case without categorizing it. Detail also alerts us to the entanglement of ethical smallness with contemporary aesthetic debates. In the prevailing aesthetic theory of the Romantic period, Naomi Schor has demonstrated, detail undermined the two key qualities of "masculine," sublime objects—grandeur and uniformity—by introducing contingency and inconsistency, since "no patient piling on of details can produce a sublime object" (12). And conversely, Immanuel Kant explicitly claimed this "masculine" sublimity for systematic ethics by virtue of its analytic grandeur and force. By interrupting the operation of abstraction and paraphrase, detail grounds ethics instead in sustained, local observation. In the gendered and dichotomous terms of Edmund Burke's *Enquiry*, this would be an ethics of the beautiful.

Finally, microethics demonstrates the ethical value of literary attention. Not because literary reading yields moral lessons or examples, but almost the opposite: it rewards attention that does not rush to exemplify or generalize. This is something literary studies has long been refining—reading that is "close but not deep" (Love), and allied forms of sensitivity and "presence" (see Gumbrecht). If this local engagement comes at the cost of systematic analysis, for its advocates this is its virtue: slight but animating differences and details are the grounds on which to oppose ethical abstraction and, with it, the deficiencies of mass-produced justice. In what follows I trace the ambitions and limits of Romantic microethics through three related cases. Having touched on close attention in its most familiar domain—the lyric—I expand the discussion to encompass philosophical prose, fiction, and drama, exploring De Quincey's deployment of casuistry, Godwin's analysis of small actions, and Shelley's use of the ethical exception.

[I]

In his *Letters to a Young Man Whose Education Has Been Neglected*, De Quincey identifies a fault in a whole class of works on "the improvement of our understandings" and "the moral valuation of

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actions" (55), of which Watts's *Improvement of the Mind* is only "the most imbecile" (54). While they brim with general rules, what "has made them more or less useless for any practical purpose," he contends, is their silence on how those rules apply (55). "For any practical use in that way, a *casuistry, i.e.* a subsumption of the *cases* most frequently recurring in ordinary life, should be combined with the system of moral principles" (56). Providing (or rather, recuperating) a suitable casuistic practice is central to De Quincey's ethical thought.

The term *casuistry* remained associated in England with Roman Catholic (and specifically Jesuit) moral and legal reasoning, and it could suggest a lawyerly effort to evade the rules by drawing wafer-thin distinctions—as a theological dictionary of the time put it, "the art of quibbling with God" (Buck 67). As Chandler has argued, it also became available as a way of understanding historical contingency and context, noting that "a distinctively Romantic form of historical representation" develops out of "the literature of secular casuistry": advice columns, conduct guides, and ultimately the novel (*England* 226). Around the turn of the century, *casuistry* functioned as a speculative term, encompassing both serious moral inquiry and disingenuous spiritual litigation.

De Quincey's essays on the subject attempt to distinguish casuistry as a moral tool from the perceived excesses of Catholic practice. His two-part essay for *Blackwood's* argues that "the abuses of the Popish Confessional" are responsible for casuistry's disrepute and that the discipline itself "is absolutely indispensable to the *practical* treatment of morals" ("Casuistry" 347, 348). It is in the service of auricular confession that casuists tarnished their trade. When drawing out the details of sinful action, "from lubricity of morals or the irritations of curiosity," they "pushed their investigations into unhallowed paths of speculation." A passion for careful moral analysis can become a desire to observe all the scurrilous details of a penitent's transgressions, and casuistry "a torch for exploring guilty recesses of human life" (348). A subsequent essay for *Tait's Magazine* titled "The Casuistry of Duelling" presents a different but allied argument: the problem with casuistry in the "Church of Rome" is not in kind but in quantity. A "supplementary section of ethics take[s] precedency of its elementary doctrines in their catholic simplicity" (65). Catholic moralists are too willing to grant exceptions; they are not catholic enough. They proceed "as though the plain and broad highway of morality were scarcely ever the safe road, but that every case of human conduct were to be treated as an exception, and never as lying within the universal rule" (65). De Quincey opposes this caricature to an image he calls Wordsworthian, where "[t]he primal duties of life, like the primal charities, are placed high above us—legible to every eye, and shining like the stars, with a splendour that is read in every clime, and translates itself into every language at once" (66–67). Instead of making casuistry secular, De Quincey makes it sectarian, claiming that while "Romish" usage runs to excess, sensible, Wordsworthian Anglicanism can act as ballast. The self-evidence of "primal duties" allows him to neutralize casuistry's tendency to self-propagate: in exceptions, it is used too generally, but generally, it remains exceptional. Effectively, De Quincey performs a casuistic defense of casuistry itself. There are flaws, but these are special cases, "for none applies to the essence of the case, but only to its accidents, or separable adjuncts" (69).

Yet casuistry also resists De Quincey's attempts to confine it, not least because he abstracts it from its doctrinal and institutional (that is, "Romish") particularity. In constructing a bulwark against its bad reputation among Protestants, he attempts to limit casuistry to special cases, but how else are we to decide which cases are special except by invoking it more generally? "The necessity of casuistry," he writes in the essay for *Blackwood's*, can be deduced from the word itself: the root meaning of *case* as variation or deviation always required us "to indicate whether it did or did not fall under the general rule" ("Casuistry" 349). As J. Mark Smith observes, this etymological redefinition ultimately generalizes the practice, so that "even where the aspiration to reconstruct in minute detail the whole and complete context around any action . . . may be practically

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impossible, casuistry is something we cannot do without" (691). In spite of De Quincey's attempts to make exceptional cases exceptional, he finds that they are quite routine; "ordinary life, in its most domestic paths, teems with cases of difficult decision" (De Quincey, "Casuistry" 364). This is why "the word casuistry . . . may be evaded, but the thing cannot: nor is it evaded in our daily conversations" (350–51). In the end, there can be no end to casuistry because cases vary, and "[t]he tendency of such variations is, in all states of complex civilisation, to absolute infinity" (350). His own society's increasing complexity and speed (as charted by his essay "The English Mail-Coach") seemingly explain the profusion of difficult cases. Ultimately, De Quincey's "complexity" diagnoses a social-historical fracturing of the moral universe, which renders a Lockean general principle or Kantian universal law insufficient. Post-Enlightenment societies effectively grow out of universal rules by sheer entropy.

De Quincey's commitment to detail is not jubilant, like Blake's, but melancholic. In a remark on Wordsworth, De Quincey compares the clarity of childhood to "the burden of that distraction which lurks in the infinite littleness of details" in adulthood (*Autobiographic Sketches* 68). And one of the charms of opium, he records elsewhere, is that it permits the user to sublimate the myriad small details of a musical performance into an abstract aesthetic mass (*Confessions* 225). Rei Terada has brought to our attention De Quincey's distinctly conscious sense of "ruined life" as wakeful melancholy rather than unconscious trauma (218–19). Casuistry's particularizing gaze is a way to hold still while life fragments around you. Faced with "the infinite littleness of details" and the endless variation of life in "complex societies," De Quincey invokes "the power of reflective judgment to recognize and savor the singular entity" (Smith 689).

In this context, De Quincey's essay "System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse's Telescopes" can be understood as a riposte to Kantian ethical, as well as cosmological, self-confidence. Through new optical technology, the heavens appear far larger, and emptier, than previously thought. The "unutterable and self-repeating infinity" of space, previously the stuff of his opium dreams, has become scientific fact and spiritual wound (*Confessions* 256). To look up at the night sky is no longer to see a celestial map but an infinite void, which the stargazer contemplates, "feeling it to be, boding it to be, fearing it to be, and sometimes hoping it to be, the mirror to a mightier abyss that will one day be expanded in himself" ("System" 570). This is "a universe in which there is no final landing place" (Henchman 48). As in György Lukács's shimmering account of modernity at the start of his *Theory of the Novel*, the starry sky is no longer "the map of all possible paths" but a figure of ontological homelessness (29). In the fractured image of the heavens, as in the "infinite littleness" of moral cases, De Quincey rejects the grandeur and uniformity of traditional sublime experience but finds instead a low sublimity in which everything in life is immeasurably small: an endless void, specked with incandescent dust. The telescope, like the ethical microscope of casuistry, reveals more detail and produces less clarity. To look through either is to see the world on a scale at which there is no totality, only sparse glimmers of light.

[II]

When Wordsworth announces, with almost the bite of De Quincey, that he considers the work of Godwin, Paley, and "those of the whole tribe of authors of that class as impotent," the conflation of disparate authors with abstract moral reasoning itself does not seem totally unjustified ("[Essay on Morals]" 104). After all, Godwin is so ostentatiously principled that he insists you should leave your own mother in a burning building if it means preserving Archbishop Fénelon to write *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (*Political Justice* 50–51). Yet far from relying on abstract categories of analysis, Godwin is scrupulously (and sometimes claustrophobically) committed to personal and ethical detail. As Mark Salber Phillips has shown, eighteenth-century history, as well as the novel, is profoundly shaped by growing interest in domestic, social, and sentimental life. In this context, Godwin's unpublished 1797

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essay "Of History and Romance" can be understood as "an attack on the rational abstractions of philosophical history, against which he presents a contrary demand for a history that is detailed, concrete, and emotionally compelling" (Phillips 118). Contrary to the argument Wordsworth will make in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, that poetry has greater claim to knowledge than history because it is more universal, Godwin elevates romance over history because of its particularity. "General history will furnish us with precedents in abundance," yet "we must then not rest contented with considering society in a mass" ("Of History" 293). The alternative is to consider individual characters in minute detail. "I am not contented to observe such a man upon the public stage, I would follow him into his closet. . . . I should rejoice to have, or to be enabled to make, if that were possible, a journal of his ordinary and minutest actions. I believe I should be better employed in thus studying one man, than in perusing the abridgement of Universal History in sixty volumes" (294). A similar impulse to prize personal detail and idiosyncrasy recurs in Godwin's remarkable "Essay on Sepulchres": what remains lovable of our beloved dead is not their corpses, which "the system of the universe" has ensured will degrade, but the small possessions and peculiarities of their lives: a ring, a watch, a book (10; see 8–10).

Godwin's interest in detail can be understood in the context of a shifting relation between history and biography, the latter encroaching on the territory of the former (Phillips 131–46). Pamela Clemit connects Godwin's account to "Johnson's classic statement on the importance of domestic minutiae as a source of historical truth in *The Rambler*, No. 60" ("Self-Analysis" 163), in which Johnson counsels the biographer to "display the minute details of daily life" (Johnson 321). In the year following Godwin's 1797 composition, Joanna Baillie claimed a similar privilege for drama in the introduction to her *Plays on the Passions*, on the basis that tragedy renders not only the particularity of lives but their innermost articulations, "those exclamations of the soul which heaven alone may hear" (86). Read in these contexts, Godwin might appear interested in what is small simply because it is private; Jon Klancher argues that Godwin's "localist, agent-centered historicism" is a form of private-sphere political response to a historical moment in which public politics are wholly compromised (156). Yet this thirst for detail is itself a political intervention. Clemit connects it to his plea in *Political Justice* for a general, rather than "popish," form of "auricular confession," in which "every man would make the world his confessional" (Godwin, *Political Justice* 136; see Clemit, "Self-Analysis" 164).

Godwin's essay signals his broader commitment to observing historical and ethical cases at the level of minute feelings and actions: "He who would study the history of nations abstracted from individuals whose passions and peculiarities are interesting to our minds, will find it a dry and frigid science. It will supply him with no clear ideas. The mass, as fast as he endeavours to cement and unite it, crumbles from his grasp, like a lump of sand" ("Of History" 292). History itself is stable only at the extremely granular level of idiosyncratic differences: between persons, their "passions and peculiarities," their "ordinary and minutest actions." Such details are for Godwin not an alternative realm of inquiry to public life or an undisclosed element of it; they are the stuff of history itself. This in turn provides a model for ethical thought: "Naturalists tell us that a single grain of sand more or less on the surface of the earth, would have altered its motion, and, in the process of ages, have diversified its events. We have no reason to suppose in this respect, that what is true in matter, is false in morals" (301). This image of the grain of sand as a minimal difference with maximal consequences appeared a year earlier in the second edition of *Political Justice*, which Klancher notes "revises the original 1793 edition away from the discourse of 'necessity' toward that of unforeseen and consequential circumstances" (163). But while the sand grain of 1793 anticipates the butterfly effect of chaos theory, in this context the sheer volume of sand signals that the writer of romance will have an impossible task. Romance must encompass an infinitude of small details, while the historian has much of the story "taken out of his hands and determined by the

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system of the universe" (Godwin, "Of History" 301). Yet the image, like the essay itself, "leaves us with a justification for a new philosophical history of the individual, for which fiction, not history, is the ideal vehicle" (Phillips 121). The smallest "passions and peculiarities" are the crystalline grains of individual and social life. If "history is what hurts," then you sense it by the grit in your eye.

Discussions of Godwin's broader intellectual project often converge on his transition from philosophical to fictional prose (Radcliffe; Lindstrom; Grenby). Many factors are important, including the increasingly fraught publishing environment for political prose, but one way to think of Godwin's move toward the novel is as a response to the questions of genre and scale that drive the essay "Of History and Romance." If ethical and political life subsists in the smallest details of action and conduct, the novel is finely attuned to analyze it, and problems of ethical smallness raised by Godwin's philosophy receive further investigation in his fiction. As a way of illustrating, although not comprehensively mapping, this relation, I will briefly consider book 7 of *Political Justice* alongside sections of *Caleb Williams*, which both explore the particularity of small actions.

While arguing against the evidential value of hearsay evidence, *Political Justice* theorizes a problem of communicating the minute but vital details of intimate speech:

> Before the intention of any man can be ascertained in a court of justice from the consideration of the words he has employed, a variety of circumstances must be taken into account . . . the exact tone with which they were delivered, and gesture with which they were accompanied . . . the context, and the occasion which produced them. Their construction will depend on the quantity of momentary heat or rooted malice with which they were delivered; and words, which appear at first sight of tremendous import, will sometimes be found upon accurate investigation to have had a meaning purely ironical in the mind of the speaker. (409)

Reported speech, however incriminating it appears, requires so much contextual detail to be understood that nobody should be condemned on the strength of their words alone. The detail of articulation is ephemeral yet crucial, and judgment can turn on nothing more than "momentary heat." The passage is clearly directed against a judiciary convicting radicals such as John Frost for sedition on the basis of overheard conversation (Epstein). But it also resembles advice for literary engagement: hearsay evidence is language abstracted from the acts and sentiments of speech, and so the prosecutor who abuses it is for Godwin like the superficial, "late" reader of fiction who cannot achieve sympathy with an author (Godwin, "Of an Early Taste for Reading" 96).

Godwin works through the same problem in *Caleb Williams*, where the challenge of representing "momentary heat" is central. The novel's taste for small details has long been acknowledged. Godwin later remarked in the preface to *Fleetwood* that the novel had employed a "metaphysical dissecting knife" (Preface 10), and Elizabeth Inchbald commended the book for its "most *minute* and yet most *concise* method of delineating human sensations" (qtd. in Clemit, "Godwin" 74). It is concerned, recent readers have noted, as much with reading the details of bodies as with mens rea (Juengel 74; Bender 173). At the novel's most decisive moments, its scrutiny of speech and its scrutiny of bodies converge. Here is one: "Mr. Falkland put out his hand in token of fellowship. But the gesture was too significant. The wayward Tyrrel, who seemed to have been somewhat impressed by what had preceded, taken as he was now by surprise, shrunk back" (Godwin, *Caleb Williams* 28). Tyrrel's rebuke, which will end in his murder by Falkland, is caused not by Falkland's words but by his tone (Franta 697). Merely the pitch of the words causes a seemingly routine exercise in male intimacy to go spectacularly off the rails. Similarly, details in Caleb's perilous investigations of Falkland are at once minimal and decisive. Caleb needles Falkland with allusions to the murder of Tyrrel in a fashion that is practically flirtatious: meaningful glances, double entendres, little hints intended to draw a reaction. At one point the two play a kind of judicial parlor game, Caleb prosecuting Alexander

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the Great and Falkland defending him, which proceeds relatively lightheartedly until Caleb levels the charge that "a momentary provocation" could lead the Macedonian "into the commission of murders." "The instant I had uttered these words, I felt what it was that I had done. There was a magnetical sympathy between me and my master, so that their effect was not sooner produced upon him, than my own mind reproached me with the inhumanity of the allusion" (Godwin, *Caleb Williams* 109). Prospectively, this is just one more turn in the game; retrospectively, it is a leap into danger. Yet what the novel communicates of this intimate transaction to readers, Caleb cannot to the various officers and magistrates who will demand public testimony. Caleb knows. Falkland knows it. But the evidence is nothing more than a flush of his face, which quickly drains away. The problem of hearsay returns in concrete form: no reported speech can adequately capture the evidential value of a look.

Both works attend to a broader opposition between law and case. As Godwin writes in *Political Justice*, "Every case is a rule to itself. No action of any man was ever the same as any other action, had ever the same degree of utility or injury. . . . As new cases occur, the law is perpetually found deficient." Consequently, states resort to more and more legislation, and what results is an "infinitude of law" (411). As in the opposition between history and romance, a form that aspires to encompass a totality is, by its nature, unable to capture the particularity of the singular. As David Collings notes, "no code could ever anticipate the contingencies of any specific case" (850). And the same bind applies to punishment. "[D]elinquency and coercion are in all cases incommensurable. No standard of delinquency ever has been or ever can be discovered" (Godwin, *Political Justice* 383). While Godwin allows that the just society may need to restrain individuals for reasons of safety, there is in his account no such thing as a just system of punishment. In this respect Godwin anticipates John Caputo's deconstructive account of ethics, in which the only just law would be one as detailed and dense as the cases over which it asserted power:

> A perfect set of laws would have to be cut to fit; it would have to mention everyone by name . . . . It would include a biography of everyone—including the strays, the stragglers, the nameless and homeless, the nomadic, the ones the census takers do not count, the ones who do not count. . . . A perfect set of laws would be like a map so perfect that it would match in size the region of which it is the map. (88)

A just law would take the differences between people and cases so seriously that nothing would be lost. The map would be equal to the territory. The implied legislative project would contain billions of biographical threads and the case notes would each be a novel.

Caleb Williams works through this problem of incommensurability by setting individual acts and desires against systems of investigation, law, and justice that cannot accommodate their particularity. The deadlock is made plain to the point of didacticism when Tyrrel asserts his right to contrive a case against Emily Melville: "The law justifies it.—What do you think laws were made for? . . . Do not tell me of It cannot, and It can. To my knowledge it has been done before, and it shall be done again" (Godwin, *Caleb Williams* 79). That his suit is a response to being spurned, rather than defrauded, is patent to Tyrrel's steward Barnes but is elided by Tyrrel's appeal to precedent. But the problem is not only the law's uneven application, tilted toward propertied men. By the time we reach the novel's resolution, individual acts appear incommensurable with the system of laws. Like the persecutions of the fugitive Caleb, Falkland's evasion and manipulation of justice are possible because there is a rift between public procedure and private knowledge. In the original draft, this gap never closes. In Godwin's revised version, Falkland is at last brought to confess, yet his disclosure does not resolve the narrative tension so much as redouble it, leading Caleb to recognize that he has merely swapped places with his pursuer. In both cases, narrative and judicial logic fail to connect, and the charges that echo through the tale—thief, robber, murderer—never adequately describe the person to whom they apply. Such terms always underdetermine the possibility of justice.

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Tilottama Rajan argues in Kantian terms that Godwin opposes determinate judgment (which subsumes particulars under established universals) in favor of reflective judgement (which begins with established particulars). Yet unlike Kant, Godwin does not universalize from reflective judgment. He attempts to free individual cases from forms of institutional generalization whose inevitable prejudice will always favor the rich. "Political justice," Rajan contends, "is the ongoing work of unworking what in the very taking of positions fails to do justice to the other" (343). Such "unworking" is ultimately a kind of particularizing critique. Justice is nothing more than addressing cases individually, so that reason, and not precedent or prejudice (which for Godwin amount to the same thing), might determine their outcome.

[III]

While clearly influenced by Godwin's particularizing account of justice, Shelley's play *The Cenci* both pleads for and strenuously tests its audience's tolerance for moral exception. Its central character, Beatrice Cenci, is raped by her father and conspires in his murder. In his preface to the play, Shelley contends that while Beatrice is driven by "the necessity of circumstance and opinion," her part in Count Cenci's killing, and her absolute refusal of culpability, are "pernicious mistakes" (Preface 141, 142). Indeed, her conduct violates principles Shelley elsewhere asserts: in *Proposals for an Association of Philanthropists*, he declares that "concealment implies falsehood," while Beatrice acts secretly and deceptively (47); in his *Declaration of Rights*, he argues that "no man has a right to do an evil thing that good may come," yet Beatrice does just that (58). Beatrice also confounds dramatic expectations: because she never doubts her innocence, there is no space in the play for the anagnorisis we might conventionally expect to soften her conduct (Dempsey 880). Nevertheless, Shelley holds open the possibility that hers is an exceptional case, and he stages the Cenci story as a dramatic reflection on ethical exception. Beatrice's character, Shelley writes, consists in "the restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification" (Preface 142). It is no coincidence that Shelley, too, raises the subject of casuistry in relation to a tale of "Catholics deeply tinged with religion" (142). Yet the papal court in the play is immune to special pleading; it is the members of Shelley's audience who are asked (and indeed predicted) to take on the role of casuists. If, as Chandler has claimed, Beatrice is "the most compelling dramatic character, in all of English Romantic theater," it is because of, and not in spite of, her moral ambiguity (*England* 498–99). In short, it is in the invitation to consider her tragic case as exceptional that the drama becomes available to us as ethical thought.

While contemporary reviewers objected to the terrible crimes implied (although never represented) in the play, a larger concern was its moral ambiguity. An anonymous reviewer for the *Literary Gazette* complained that "the dreadful association of virtuous principles with incest, parricide, and every deadly sin, form a picture which, 'To look upon we dare not'" (Review 209). In this context, Shelley's most radical move is to make his tragic heroine—and alleged parricide—the play's most acute ethical observer. At the play's opening, the priest Orsino declares his love for Beatrice, in spite of the vows he has taken. Having agonized over the choice between marrying Beatrice and taking holy orders, and chosen the latter, Orsino now suggests to Beatrice that he may obtain dispensation to marry, but she immediately detects his desire to have it both ways: "it is well perhaps we shall not marry. / You have a sly, equivocating vein / That suits me not." (Shelley, *Cenci* 1.2.27–29). Orsino defends himself but doesn't stand a chance. Once Beatrice leaves, Orsino registers both his bad faith and Beatrice's exemplary scrutiny:

> I fear
> Her subtle mind, her awe-inspiring gaze,
> Whose beams anatomize me nerve by nerve
> And lay me bare, and make me blush to see
> My hidden thoughts. (1.2.83–87)

Likewise, when Cenci is feigning the role of gracious and blithe host at the banquet, Beatrice reads his evil

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intent from the smallest of facial details: "I fear that wicked laughter round his eye / Which wrinkles up the skin even to the hair" (1.3.37–38). As well as being the play's finest observer, Beatrice is also the conduit for vital plot information, since her insinuations of Cenci's crimes are the only way the audience learns of them. Because she is both an object of interest for the audience and its best informer, viewers can hardly be blamed for entangling their ethical understanding with her own, whatever cautions Shelley gives.

Like Caleb, Beatrice knows far more than she can articulate to those in positions of power, and her early efforts to denounce her father come to nothing. The particularity of Cenci's crime, like that of Falkland's in *Caleb Williams*, outstrips categorization. After his central crime has been committed, when Beatrice is called on by Lucretia to explain her distress, she pointedly refuses to name the crime. When she meets Orsino, Beatrice makes the same refusal:

> I have to tell you that, since we last met,
> I have endured a wrong so great and strange,
> That neither life or death can give me rest.
> Ask me not what it is, for there are deeds
> Which have no form, sufferings which have no tongue.
> (3.1.138–42)

Stephen Cheeke argues that this crime "must be left unnamed *not* because she is unable to contemplate what has occurred, but because no name can do it justice" (153). Others have characterized Beatrice's conduct as a traumatic retreat into silence (Forbes 400; Kohler 574; Worton 109). But whether we understand the refusal to name in terms of Beatrice's psychology, her judgment that those around her will not comprehend, or the limitations of what Shelley could reasonably expect to stage, Cenci's crime cannot be generalized into a class of action.

It would not be unexpected for *The Cenci* to dissolve into the moral confusion and chaos of revenge tragedy. Beatrice, however, resists both passive victimhood and blind passion, and by the third act her conviction and clarity become the fulcrum around which the play turns. While Shelley both countenances and cautions against a belief in truly exceptional cases in his preface, he gives Beatrice his best arguments for it. Beatrice's case is that the crime she suffered was an exception to the categories of law and therefore so was her revenge (Dempsey 897). She argues before the papal court in act 5 that she "endured what never any / Guilty or innocent, endured before" (5.2.139–40), having previously used the same argument to convince Marzio the assassin that she is not a parricide. Beatrice rebukes Lucretia's plea to Savella that "we are not guilty" with these words: "Guilty! Who dares talk of guilt? My Lord, / I am more innocent of parricide / Than is a child born fatherless" (4.4.112–14). Parricide is not only practically impossible (as in the case of an orphan) but logically impossible. When she goes on to assert "'Tis most false / That I am guilty of foul parricide" (4.4.146–47), Beatrice does not mean only in the technical sense that her plot in act 3 could not be executed and that although she clasped the assassin's dagger, it was not her hands that finally strangled Cenci. She means that killing Cenci was not murder. In a more radical sense than De Quincey's defense of dueling (in which some murders are not crimes), this is a case in which no standard or summary of violence and recompense can apply. Beatrice remains a moral actor by refusing to be subject to general laws that would deem her both corrupted and guilty. In the play's final moments, Beatrice reaffirms that she, "Though wrapped in a strange cloud of crime and shame, / Lived ever holy and unstained" (5.4.148–49).

Shelley sets Beatrice's claims into relief by contrasting them with the abstract logic of the papal court. Its logic is personified in Pope Clement, "a marble form, / A rite, a law, a custom: not a man" (5.4.4–5). He cannot imagine without generalizing. When Camillo describes the case to him, the pope responds drily, "Parricide grows so rife / That soon, for some just cause no doubt, the young / Will strangle us all, dozing in our chairs" (5.4.20–22). Indeed, his talent of abstracting criminal behavior is central to the story's premise: it is because the pope converted Cenci's past crimes into indulgences with which he

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could buy "perilous impunity" that Cenci's violence continued (1.1.6). But others in the play share his logic. Cenci's son, Giacomo, remarks, "It was a wicked thought, a piteous deed, / To kill an old and hoary-headed father" (5.1.10–11). Is it tenable to make this generalization? To treat Cenci as one would any murdered father? The whole question of justice hinges on whether an exception should be made.

By situating the play among a broader Romantic interest in ethical particularity, we can contest William Hazlitt's complaint that Shelley's "electrical experiments in morals and philosophy" aim "to overturn all established creeds and systems . . . not so much to convince or inform as to shock the public" (131). Shelley's rendering of the Cenci story solicits the very speculation his preface cautions against. It asks audiences to consider whether there are cases in which parricide is no crime. But the play goes beyond mere provocation. While the prose preface offers a clear rebuke to Beatrice's case, Shelley's verse drama is committed to the possibility of her enduring goodness. Indeed, "[t]he unequivocal condemnation of Beatrice's 'pernicious mistakes' . . . would commit Shelley to the very dogmatism he abjures in his preface and contests in the high sublime. He is careful to render Beatrice resistant to easy denunciation" (Endo 380). Earl Wasserman captures the essence of the debate over Beatrice's guilt in his distinction between "pernicious casuistry" (Shelley's characterization of her actions in his preface) and "sublime casuistry" (Shelley's description of Godwin's method in *Caleb Williams* [120]). And when Shelley imputes an "anatomizing casuistry" to his audiences, he binds them to the anatomizing gaze of Beatrice.

Like De Quincey's mournful awe, or the descriptive tenderness of the Wordsworths, the ethical claims of *The Cenci* have aesthetic implications. Beatrice resembles another ethically complex dramatic character who enthralled Shelley, Antigone (for whom, notoriously, a brother was a special case). The two protagonists are related by situation and character. Both crystallized Shelley's misgivings over an individual's duty to an immoral state.[11] Both Beatrice and Antigone "unravel the purity and universality of those structuralist rules" by which all laws operate (Butler 18). And both plead an exceptional case with a singular conviction that damns them before the law of the land and raises them as characters far above it. The appeal of their radiant, unyielding ways of looking seemed to Shelley a form of beauty. Two years after writing *The Cenci*, he remarked to John Gisborn that "[s]ome of us have in a prior existence been in love with an Antigone, & that makes us find no full content in any mortal tie" (Letter to John Gisborn 364). At least in these literary cases, that love is not just the sensuous and possessive apprehension of physical beauty; it also encompasses what Mary Wollstonecraft called "the beauty of moral loveliness" (240).

The prospect of "sublime casuistry" (the aesthetic elevation of the ethical exception) might characterize the potential of Romantic microethics in general. Whether we deem its logic pernicious or liberatory depends on our tolerance for a standard of goodness bereft of law, composed only of singular cases, passions, and peculiarities. From the standpoint of systematic philosophy, the classic Hegelian frustration with Romanticism recurs again: microethics appears as one more case of perpetual longing, in which the pursuit is endless but the payoff never arrives. Hegel's term for this structure is the "bad infinite." In fact, "the bad infinite is in itself the same as the perpetual *ought*; it is indeed the negation of the finite, but in truth it is unable to free itself from it," Hegel says (113). What looks like progress is, in practice, an infinite series of finite particulars. No accumulation of individual cases will ever amount to a comprehensive understanding, and so we are left with a "perpetual *ought*," or something evermore about to be. Yet bad infinity may not be so bad, provided you aren't rushing to get beyond particulars.[12] Leaving behind accounts of Romanticism as a faulty form of transcendence (be it logically, linguistically, or ideologically compromised), and ethics as a discipline that requires transcendence, it becomes possible to reappraise Romanticism's endless patience for finite things. Its restrained approach gives up broad legislative power but discovers forms of local ethical commitment that the rigors of systematic moral philosophy

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will always overlook or discard in their impatience to reach a general conclusion. A commitment to "the infinite littleness of details" would preserve, rather than abstract away, the particularity of individual lives, deeds, and experiences. Whether experienced as a tender attachment to particulars or a sober recognition of endless complexity, microethics emerges as a form of sublimity without transcendence.

Following Liu's account of post-Romantic cultural criticism, we can identify a persistent post-Romantic strain of microethical practice. It is palpable in an anthropologist's decision to interpret people's choices and actions through local observation rather than systematic analysis. In *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Stewart seeks "to approach the intensities of the ordinary through a close ethnographic attention to pressure points and forms of attention and attachment" rather than through a general analytic frame (5). She reads "socialities, identities, dream worlds, bodily states and public feelings of all kinds" as individual moments and vignettes, none "simply 'good' or 'bad' but always, first, both powerful and mixed" (10, 11). I will end by observing that Stewart's method can highlight one final aspect of microethical attention: a capacity for sustained interest and even attachment that is logically prior to judgment and through which new forms of judgment become possible. Its potential can be felt in forms of investigative journalism and narrative that refuse to turn every case into an exemplary story, patiently demonstrating that even ostensibly routine cases are difficult, nuanced, and inadequately served by mass-produced justice.[13] These forms resist the instinct, scholarly and philosophical as much as journalistic and legalistic, to exemplify and abstract. They imagine justice as nothing more than sufficiently close and patient attention to the individual histories, acts, and decisions that constitute the dense particularity of communal life.

Notes

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1. See François 133; Nersessian, *Utopia* 3.

2. The terms *macroethics* and *microethics* are used in technical fields (such as engineering, computer science, social work, and medicine) to distinguish between general principles in the field and the evaluation of individual cases or questions (Herkert). In borrowing the term *microethics*, but not the technical concerns, I am not supposing a singular ethical position or doctrine. Instead, I am outlining a heterogeneous family of approaches that focus on individual cases and ethical details rather than abstract or systematic principles.

3. Consider Pope: "Why has not Man a microscopic eye? / For this plain reason, Man is not a Fly" (lines 38–39).

4. See Dancy's defense of moral particularism, Caputo's deconstructive polemic against ethics, and Adorno's "small ethics" in *Minima Moralia*.

5. See Crisp 187–205; Heavner.

6. The calamity form, Nersessian writes, "is a thing in the world with an objective character, and it is also an attempt to match up this thing in the world with a performance, habit, or style, and attempt to give the calamity a cultural expression" (*Calamity Form* 4).

7. See Dorothy's remarkable entry of 10 June 1800, which anticipates William's poem "Beggars" (D. Wordsworth 9–10).

8. See, respectively, Potkay 35; Chandler, *Wordsworth's Second Nature* 87–89.

9. In other words, "doing-with-less" must be distinguished from the political rhetoric that says that teachers, nurses, and other public sector workers should "do more with less," a demand that tends to result only in them, and the state, doing less. See Marr and Creelman; and the critique by Esteve et al.

10. The vast chronological and conceptual range of an increasingly important ethical rubric, the Anthropocene, presents a similar risk: "One possible outcome of scaling up is of course a quietism, if not nihilism—a resignation ahead of time—brought on by the near certainty of extinction from the standpoint of a cosmic *longue durée*" (Dimock 614).

11. Shelley wrote to Thomas Hogg on 9 May 1811: "is the *Antigone* immoral. Did she wrong when she acted in direct in noble violation of the laws of a prejudiced society" (Letter to Thomas Hogg 81).

12. In making this argument about Hegel I am drawing on Martin.

13. I am thinking about the criminal justice journalism work of the Marshall Project or the third season of the podcast *Serial*, in which Sarah Koenig and Emmanuel Dzotsi dwell on routine procedure in a single courthouse in Cleveland, Ohio, until "the extraordinary stories of ordinary cases" emerge ("About Season Three").

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Abstract: Ethical thought typically aims to provide a general account of the good. This essay explores a form of localized ethical attention through British Romantic writing that eschews that aspiration, privileging individual cases in all their detail and particularity. This form, which I term "microethics," is small in two senses, permitting extremely close observation of individual cases and limiting itself to equally small conclusions. It is most recognizable in poetry but recurs across fiction, drama, and philosophical prose. Considering such thinking allows us to assess and extend recent arguments for the value of Romanticism's small and marginal forms. While Romantic microethics develops in opposition to emerging utilitarian thought and the politically repressive conditions of the 1790s, it anticipates a range of later forms, from Adorno's ethical fragments to deconstruction to anthropological method. At once literary and philosophical, it binds both writing and reading practices to acts of singular attention.

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