it? Who was right? Or were both sides partially right? The basic idea put forward by Malthus is certainly beyond dispute: If left completely unchecked, any biological population will grow exponentially and, in a surprisingly short time, it will outrun its means of support. Given the mathematical characteristics of exponential growth and the finite size of the earth, there is simply no way around this basic fact. Does it follow however, that the improvement in the human condition visualized by Condorcet and Godwin is an impossible dream? Obviously not, since we have seen this dream realized, or partially realized, in many parts of the world.

Because of its importance for our own times, it is interesting to reread this early debate on progress versus population, to revisit Malthus, Godwin, Condorcet and their contemporaries, and to hear what they had to say.

CONDORCET

MARIE-JEAN-ANTOINE-NICOLAS Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, was born in 1743 in the town of Ribemont in southern France. He was born into an ancient and noble family of the principality of Orange but there was nothing in his background to suggest that he might one day become a famous scientist and social philosopher. In fact, for several generations before, most of the men in the family had followed military or ecclesiastical careers and none were scholars.

Condorcet's father died when the boy was only four years old and his twice-widowed mother became excessively anxious to protect her son from any harm. To thwart the 'Evil Eye', she dedicated him to the Virgin and until her son was eight years old she dressed him as a girl. This prevented the young Condorcet from taking part in active physical exercise and it may have contributed to the delicate health that followed him throughout his life.

After an initial education received at home from his mother, Condorcet was sent to his uncle, the Bishop of Lisieux, who provided a Jesuit tutor for the boy. In 1758 Condorcet continued his studies with the Jesuits at the College of Navarre. After he graduated from the College, Condorcet's powerful and independent intelligence suddenly asserted itself. He announced that he intended to study mathematics. His family was unanimously and violently opposed to this idea. The privileges of the nobility were based on hereditary power and on a static society. Science, with its emphasis on individual talent and on progress, undermined both these principles. The opposition of Condorcet's family is therefore understandable but he persisted until they gave in.

Condorcet found rooms for himself in Paris at the Rue de Jacob and began a quiet life of study, avoiding society and reading mathematics ten hours a day. Madame de l'Espinasse, who knew him at this time, described him as 'a great hulking gawky youth, shy and embarrassed in manner, who walked stooping, bit his nails, blushed when spoken to, and either said nothing in reply or else spoke low and fast'. He retained his shyness all his life but it covered a warm heart. His friend, the mathematician d'Alembert, described him as 'a volcano covered with snow'. As his sensibility developed, Condorcet renounced hunting, which he had at one time enjoyed. He even avoided killing insects.

In 1765, when he was barely 22 years old, Condorcet presented an *Essay on the Integral Calculus* to the Academy of Sciences in Paris. This work attracted the favourable attention of the greatest mathematicians of the time, including Lagrange and d'Alembert and, together with the many other papers on mathematics which Condorcet composed at this time, it won him election to the Academy in 1769. Jean-le-Rond d'Alembert, especially, took the young Condorcet under his wing, and introduced him not only to the intricacies of advanced mathematics but also to those of the encyclopædists' salon at Rue de Belle Chasse. A few years later, Condorcet became Secretary of the Academy of Sciences; and he held this office throughout his life, becoming Permanent Secretary in 1777. One of Condorcet's duties as Secretary was to compose eulogies for deceased members of the Academy of Sciences. He did this with such grace and tact that he became very popular and, as a result, he was elected to the French Academy in 1782.

Meanwhile, under d'Alembert's influence, Condorcet had been turning his attention to social, ethical and economic problems. He became a close friend of the economist and statesman, Turgot. The two men shared liberal opinions concerning the benefits of free trade, the natural rights of man, the freedom of the individual, and the evils of slavery. When Turgot became Minister of Finance in 1774, he appointed his friend Condorcet to the post of Inspector-General of the Mint and Commission of Three, whose duty it was to report on an enormous project for improving inland navigation in France by linking the principal rivers with a system of canals. The other two members

of the Commission were d'Alembert and Bossut. All three members insisted on performing their duties without pay.

The year 1785 saw the publication of Condorcet's highly original mathematical work, *Essai sur l'application de l'analyse à la probabilité des décisions rendues à la pluralité des voix*, in which he pioneered the application of the theory of probability in the social sciences. A later, much enlarged, edition of this book extended the applications to games of chance.

In 1786, Condorcet married one of the most beautiful women of the time, Sophie de Grouchy (1764–1822). Condorcet's position as Inspector-General of the Mint meant that they lived at the Hôtel des Monnaies. Mme Condorcet's *salon* there was famous.

Unfortunately, Turgot was soon replaced by Necker, whose misguided financial policies accelerated the drift of France towards revolution. When Necker published a pamphlet opposing the free circulation of grain in France, Condorcet replied with *Letter of a Labourer in Picardy* and a larger paper entitled *Memoir on the Corn Trade*, in which he discusses the general advantages of free trade. With these publications, Condorcet gained applause from Voltaire but, at the same time, he attracted the bitter hostility of Necker and his followers. Condorcet felt that because of this hostility he could not continue as Inspector-General of the Mint under Necker and he resigned his post. In a letter to Voltaire, Condorcet wrote: 'We have had a beautiful dream, but it was too brief. I am about to return to geometry. It is cold comfort to labour for nothing but glory after flattering oneself for a time that one was working for the public good.'

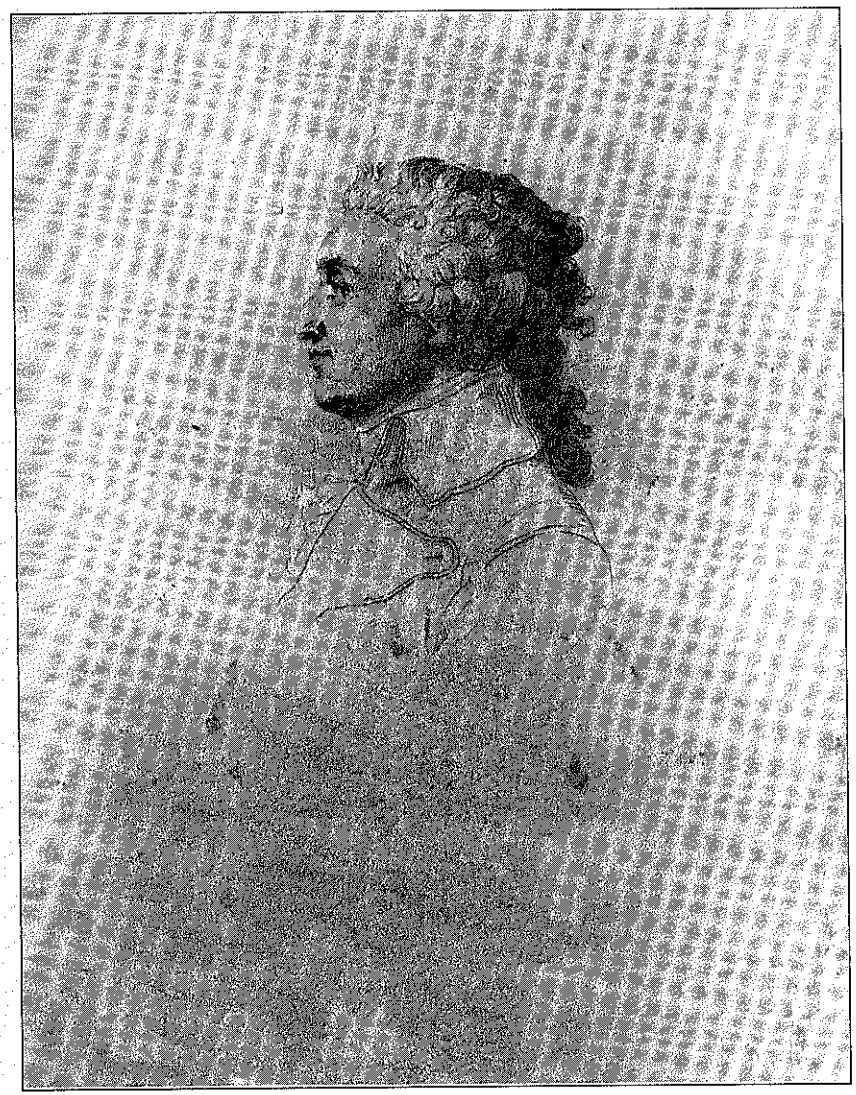
Ever since the age of 17, Condorcet had thought about questions of justice and virtue and especially about how it is in our own interest to be both just and virtuous. Very early in his life he had been occupied with the idea of human perfectibility. He was convinced that the primary duty of every person is to contribute as much as possible to the development of mankind, and that by making such a contribution, one can also achieve the greatest possible personal happiness. When the French Revolution broke out in 1789 he saw it as an unprecedented opportunity to do his part in the cause of progress and he entered the arena wholeheartedly.

Condorcet was first elected as a member of the Municipality of Paris; and then, in 1791, he became one of the six Commissioners of the Treasury. Soon afterwards he was elected to the Legislative Assembly, of which he became first the Secretary and finally the President. In 1792, Condorcet proposed to the Assembly that all patents of nobility should be burned. The motion was carried unanimously; and on 19 June his own documents were thrown on a fire with the others at the foot of a statue of Louis XIV.

Condorcet was one of the chief authors of the proclamation which declared France to be a republic and which summoned a National Convention. As he remained above the personal political quarrels that were raging at the time, Condorcet was elected to the National Convention by five different constituencies. When the Convention brought Louis XVI to trial, Condorcet maintained that, according to the constitution, the monarch was inviolable and that the Convention therefore had no legal right to try the King. When the King was tried despite these protests, Condorcet voted in favour of an appeal to the people.

In October 1792, when the Convention set up a Committee of Nine to draft a new constitution for France, Condorcet sat on this committee as did the Englishman, Thomas Paine. Under sentence of death in England for publishing his pamphlet *The Rights of Man*, Paine had fled to France and had become a French citizen. He and Condorcet were the chief authors of a moderate (Gerondist) draft of the constitution. However, the Jacobin leader, Robespierre, bitterly resented being excluded from the Committee of Nine and, when the draft constitution was presented to the Assembly, he and his followers succeeded in having it shelved without a vote.

The Convention then gave the responsibility for drafting the new constitution to the Committee for Public Safety, which was enlarged for this purpose by five additional members. The result was a hastily produced document with many glaring defects. When it was presented to the Convention, however, it was accepted almost without discussion. This was too much for Condorcet to stomach and he published anonymously a letter entitled *Advice to the French on the New Constitution*, in which he exposed the defects of the Jacobin constitution and urged all Frenchmen to reject it.



1. Marquis de Condorcet (*by courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris*)

Condorcet's authorship of this letter was discovered and treated as an act of treason. On 8 July 1793, Condorcet was denounced in the Convention; and an order was sent out for his arrest. The officers tried to find him, first at his town house and then at his house in the country but, warned by a friend, Condorcet had gone into hiding.

The house where Condorcet took refuge was at Rue Servandoni, a small street in Paris leading down to the Luxembourg Gardens, and it was owned by Madame Vernet, the widow of a sculptor. Madame Vernet, who sometimes kept lodgings for students, had been asked by Condorcet's friends whether she would be willing to shelter a proscribed man. 'Is he a good man?', she had asked; and when assured that this was the case, she had said, 'Then let him come at once. You can tell me his name later. Don't waste even a moment. While we are speaking, he may be arrested.' She did not hesitate, although she knew that she risked death, the penalty imposed by the Convention for sheltering a proscribed man.

Although Robespierre's agents had been unable to arrest him, Condorcet was sentenced to the guillotine in *absentia*. He knew that in all probability he had only a few weeks or months to live and he began to write his last thoughts, racing against time. Hidden in the house at Rue Servandoni, and cared for by Madame Vernet, Condorcet returned to a project which he had begun in 1772, a history of the progress of human thought, stretching from the remote past to the distant future. Guessing that he would not have time to complete the full-scale work he had once planned, he began a sketch or outline: *Esquisse d'un Tableau Historique des progrès de l'Esprit Humain*.

In his *Esquisse*, Condorcet enthusiastically endorses the idea of infinite human perfectability that was current among the philosophers of the eighteenth century and he anticipates many of the evolutionary ideas which Charles Darwin later put forward. He compares humans with animals and finds many common traits. According to Condorcet, animals are able to think, and even to think rationally, although their thoughts are extremely simple compared with those of humans. Condorcet believed that humans historically began their existence on the same level as animals and gradually developed to their present state. Since this evolution took place historically, he reasoned, it is

probable, or even inevitable, that a similar evolution in the future will bring mankind to a level of physical, mental and moral development that will be as superior to our own present state as we are now superior to animals.

At the beginning of his manuscript, Condorcet stated his belief

> that nature has set no bounds on the improvement of human facilities; that the perfectability of man is really indefinite; and that its progress is henceforth independent of any power to arrest it, and has no limit except the duration of the globe upon which nature has placed us.

He also stated that 'the moral goodness of man is a necessary result of his organism; and it is, like all his other facilities, capable of indefinite improvement.'

Like the other scientists and philosophers of his period, Condorcet accepted the Newtonian idea of an orderly cosmos ruled by natural laws to which there are no exceptions. He asserted that the same natural laws must govern human evolution, since humans are also part of nature. Again and again, Condorcet stresses the fundamental similarity between humans and animals; and he regards all living things as belonging to the same great family. (It is perhaps this insight which made Condorcet so sensitive to the feelings of animals.) To explain the present differences between humans and animals, Condorcet tells us, we need only imagine gradual changes, continuing over an extremely long period of time. These long-continued small changes have very slowly improved human mental abilities and social organization so that now, at the end of an immense interval of time, large differences have appeared between ourselves and lower forms of life.

Condorcet regarded the family as the original social unit and in his *Esquisse* he calls attention to the unusually long period of dependency that characterizes the growth and education of human offspring. This prolonged childhood is unique among living beings. It is needed for the high level of mental development of the human species but it requires a stable family structure to protect the young during their

long upbringing. Thus, according to Condorcet, biological evolution brought into existence a moral precept: the sanctity of the family.

Similarly, Condorcet wrote, larger associations of humans would have been impossible without some degree of altruism and sensitivity to the suffering of others incorporated into human behaviour, either as instincts or as moral precepts or both. Thus the evolution of organized society entailed the development of sensibility and morality. Unlike Rousseau, Condorcet did not regard humans in organized civilizations as degraded and corrupt compared to 'natural' man; instead he saw civilized humans as more developed than their primitive ancestors.

Knowledge, Condorcet said, is not responsible for the vices of civilization. On the contrary, it is lack of knowledge that prevents us from seeing that the interests of the individual are identical with those of the community. He wrote that

> The stormy and painful passage of a primitive society to a state of enlightenment and freedom is by no means a degeneration of the human species, but a necessary crisis in its march towards a future state of absolute perfection. The reader will see that not the increase but the decay of knowledge has produced the vices of polished peoples; and finally that, far from corrupting mankind, knowledge has sweetened their temper even when it could not correct their faults or alter their character.

Regarding the future progress of human knowledge, Condorcet predict that many ideas, originally discovered by men of genius and in their original form perhaps only comprehensible to a few men of genius, would one day be systematized and simplified so that they would become comprehensible to a large portion of mankind. He perhaps had in mind his own work in mathematics, which helped to turn the calculus of Newton and Leibniz into an easily used everyday tool for scientists. Condorcet also foresaw the future development of the social sciences to which he himself greatly contributed by applying statistical theory to social and economic problems.

Believing that ignorance and error were responsible for vice, Condorcet discussed what he believed to be the main mistakes of civilization. Among these he named hereditary transmission of power, inequality between men and women, religious bigotry, disease, war, slavery, economic inequality, and the division of humanity into mutually exclusive linguistic groups.

Condorcet regarded the hereditary transmission of power to be the source of much of the tyranny under which humans suffer; and he looked forward to an era when republican governments would be established throughout the world. Condorcet could see no moral, physical or intellectual basis for the inequality between men and women. He called for complete social, legal, and educational equality between the sexes.

The *Esquisse* contains some strongly anti-clerical passages, which may have been a reaction by Condorcet against the excesses of his Jesuit upbringing. Throughout history, he wrote, priests usually possessed greater knowledge of the physical world than other classes of society. However, instead of transmitting this knowledge frankly to their fellow men, priests often guarded their secrets and used knowledge to maintain their own power. Condorcet then discussed some of the suffering that followed from religious bigotry, such as wars that were fought because of differences in belief.

Condorcet predicted that the progress of medical science would abolish disease. He also maintained that since evolution operated throughout the biological world, there was no reason why mankind's physical structure might not gradually improve, with the result that human life in the remote future could be greatly prolonged.

Condorcet believed that the intellectual and moral facilities of man were capable of continuous and steady improvement and he thought that one of the most important results of this improvement would be the abolition of war. As humans became enlightened, they would recognize war as an atrocious and unnecessary cause of suffering. As popular governments would replace hereditary ones, wars fought for dynastic reasons would disappear. Wars fought because of conflicting commercial interests would be the next to vanish. Finally, Condorcet predicted that the introduction of a universal language throughout the

world and the construction of perpetual confederations between nations would eliminate wars based on ethnic rivalries.

Believing in the benefits of free trade, Condorcet looked forward to the time when unjust monopolies like the Dutch and English East India Companies would be abolished. He hoped that the diffusion of technical knowledge to all countries would result in an end to colonial exploitation and an end to the slave trade.

With better laws, Condorcet predicted, social and financial inequalities would tend to diminish. To make the social conditions of the working class more equal to those of the wealthy, Condorcet advocated a system of insurance (either private or governmental) where the savings of workers would be used to provide pensions and to care for widows and orphans. Since social inequality is related to inequality of education, Condorcet advocated a system of universal public education supported by the State.

Condorcet recognized that as conditions became more favourable, the population would increase; and he wrote:

> In this progress of industry and happiness, each generation will be called to more extended enjoyments, and in consequence, by the physical constitution of human frame, to an increase in the number of individuals. Must not a period then arrive when these laws, equally necessary, shall contradict each other; when the increase in the number of men surpassing their means of subsistence must necessarily result in either a continual diminution of happiness and population – a movement truly retrograde; or at least a kind of oscillation between good and evil? In societies arrived at this term, will not this oscillation be a constantly subsisting cause of periodical misery? Will it not mark the limit when all further melioration will become impossible, and point out that boundary to the perfectibility of the human race, which it may reach in the course of ages, but can never pass?
>
> There is no person who does not see how very distant such a period is from us. But shall we ever arrive at it? It is equally impossible to pronounce for or against the future realization

> of an event which cannot take place but in an era when the human race will have attained improvements, of which we can at present scarcely form a conception.

Condorcet then went on to say that when the time finally arrives when global overpopulation threatens to limit the possibility of human progress, mankind will have reached such a high level of enlightenment that superstitions will have vanished. At that time (which he imagined to be in the very distant future) either promiscuity or else birth control might be used to limit the further growth of population. Condorcet followed the opinion of his time in believing that promiscuity could be a means of reducing the number of births. Probably this belief was based on observation, since what are today considered to be minor venereal diseases would often produce sterility in Condorcet's time.

At the end of his *Esquisse*, Condorcet said that any person who has contributed to the progress of mankind to the best of his ability becomes immune to personal disaster and suffering. He knows that human progress is inevitable and can take comfort and courage from his inner picture of the epic march of mankind, through history, towards a better future.

Shortly after Condorcet completed the *Esquisse*, he received a mysterious warning that soldiers of the Convention were on their way to inspect Madame Vernet's house. Wishing to spare his generous hostess from danger, he disguised himself as well as he could and slipped past the portress. However, Condorcet had only gone a few steps outside the house when he was recognized by Madame Verdet's cousin, who risked his life to guide Condorcet past the sentinels at the gates of Paris, and into the open country beyond.

Condorcet wandered for several days without food or shelter, hiding himself in quarries and thickets. Finally, on 27 March 1794, hunger forced him to enter a tavern at the village of Clamart, where he ordered an omelette. When asked how many eggs it should contain, the exhausted and starving philosopher replied without thinking, 'twelve'. This reply, together with his appearance, excited suspicion. He was asked for his papers and, when it was found that he had none, soldiers

were sent for and he was arrested. He was taken to a prison at Bourg-la-Reine, but he was so weak that he was unable to walk there, and had to be carried in a cart. The next morning, Condorcet was found dead on the floor of his cell. The cause of his death is not known with certainty. It was listed in official documents as *congestion sanguine*, congestion of the blood but the real cause may have been cold, hunger, exhaustion or poison.

After Condorcet's death the currents of revolutionary politics shifted direction. Robespierre, the leader of the Terror, was himself soon arrested. The execution of Robespierre took place on 25 July 1794, only a few months after the death of Condorcet.

Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un Tableau Historique des Progrès de l'Esprit Humain* was published posthumously in 1795. In the post-Thermidor reconstruction, the Convention voted funds to have it printed in a large edition and distributed throughout France, thus adopting the *Esquisse* as its official manifesto. Condorcet is now chiefly remembered for this small prophetic book. It was destined to establish the form in which the eighteenth-century idea of progress was incorporated into Western thought, and (as we shall see) it provoked Robert Malthus to write *An Essay on the Principle of Population*.

GODWIN

In France, Condorcet's *Esquisse* defined the idea of progress but in England it was a book published two years earlier that played this role, also inspiring Malthus' essay on population. William Godwin's *Political Justice*, published in 1793, caught the imagination of the English-speaking world. As the eighteenth century neared its end, this book became the focus of hopes for political reform and the centre of the debate on human progress. Godwin was lifted briefly to enormous heights of fame and adulation, from which he plunged, a few years later, into relative obscurity.

William Godwin was born in 1756 in the village of Wisbech, Cambridgeshire. His father and grandfather had both been Dissenting ministers. The faith that they preached was a severe form of Calvinism, according to which most humans are born predestined to the eternal torments of Hell. Godwin's father discouraged any tendency towards playfulness in his children. 'One Sunday as I walked in the garden', Godwin remembered later, 'I happened to take the cat in my arms. My father saw me, and seriously reproved my levity, remarking that on the Lord's-day he was ashamed to see me demeaning myself with such levity.'

Besides the severity of the family's religion, the early death of Godwin's siblings tended to make his childhood a sombre one. Of the 13 children born into the family, seven died as infants. One of the books which the survivors read and reread was James Janeway's *A Token for Children, being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children*.

With this upbringing, it is not surprising that William Godwin

developed into a solemn and somewhat pompous child. However, he was unusually linguistically gifted, and he would deliver whole sermons from his high-chair to any member of his family who would listen. Starting at age of four, he became passionately fond of reading. His precocious gift for languages allowed him to escape from the severity of his surroundings into the world of books. After finishing all of the books in his father's library, he wondered with anxiety what he would do when he had read all the books in the world.

At the local village school, William Godwin was considered to be a prodigy and his family therefore decided to give him the best education that they could afford. It was assumed that, like his father and grandfather, he would become a Dissenting minister; and at the age of 11, he became the sole pupil of Revd Samuel Newton, a prominent churchman in Norwich. Newton was a harsh disciplinarian; and not only a Calvinist but also a Sandemanian – a follower of the Scottish theologians Sandeman and Glas. The Sandemanians held that belief in God and love of one's neighbour must be reasoned rather than emotional. They also disapproved of private property, private affections, exclusive friendships, and gratitude, maintaining that all wealth and all labour must be at the disposal of the church. The Sandemanian community insisted that all its members were equal and that community decisions must be unanimous. Debate was continued until all members of the congregation finally arrived at the same opinion. Although he suffered under Samuel Newton, Godwin absorbed many of the Sandemanian doctrines and they influenced his later writing.

In 1771, Newton sent William Godwin home, saying that he had nothing further to teach the boy. After working for two years as an instructor in his former school, Godwin enrolled in the Dissenting Academy at Hoxton (near London). As a Dissenter, he was not allowed to attend any of the established universities. This was actually an advantage, since the Dissenting academies of the time offered a more balanced and up-to-date education than the universities.

The Dissenters were a minority, but a vocal and highly-educated minority who saw themselves as intellectual and moral leaders – pioneers of political reform. Many of the influential newspapers and

reviews of England were owned and operated by Dissenters. For example, the *New Annual Register*, a yearly summary of current events, was run by them. The Act of Toleration of 1689 had given Dissenters freedom to worship as they chose but they were still officially barred from holding civil or military offices by the Test Act of 1673, which had never been repealed. However, the Dissenting community believed that great political advances would soon be achieved – the reform of Parliament, the repeal of the Test Act and the abolition of slavery.

In 1778, at the age of 22, Godwin graduated from Hoxton with a certificate that qualified him to preach, and with one of the best liberal educations that could be obtained in England. He became an assistant minister first at Ware and later at Stowmarket in Suffolk, and at Beaconsfield in Buckinghamshire. However, his sermons were too unusual to be popular. Furthermore, Godwin antagonized the local clergymen by administering sacraments before he had been officially ordained. When he was finally ordained, they boycotted the ceremony.

Meanwhile Godwin's politics and opinions had shifted. At Hoxton he had been a Tory, but he now became 'an oppositionist, chiefly influenced by my fervent admiration for the talents and virtues of Edmund Burke and James Fox'. Burke was the greatest Whig orator of the period and Fox, also a Whig, was the chief opponent in Parliament of the war against American independence.

While in Suffolk, Godwin had read Swift, as well as the French philosophers d'Holbach, Rousseau and Helvétius. 'My orthodoxy', he wrote later, 'was sensibly declining; I rejected the doctrine of eternal damnation; and my notions respecting the Trinity acquired a taint of heresy.'

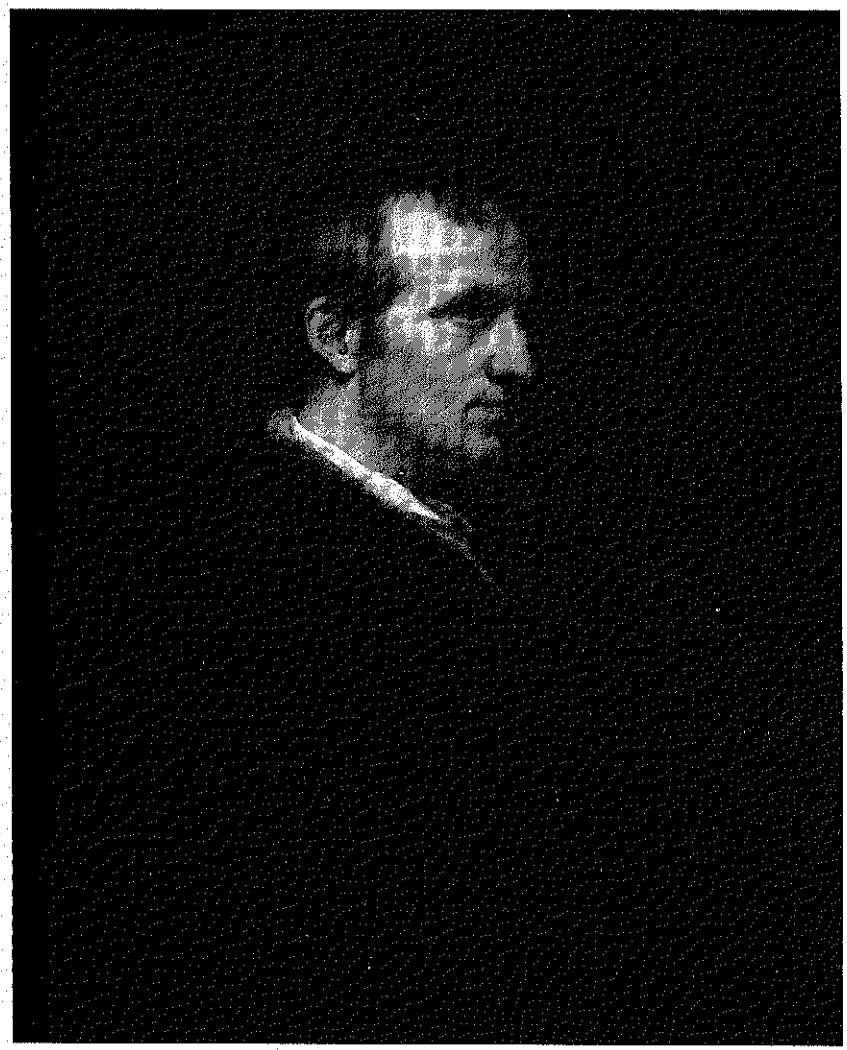
Under the influence of d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature* and the writings of Joseph Priestley, Godwin's religious beliefs became still weaker and he began to ask himself whether he could in good conscience continue his career as a minister. Meanwhile, while waiting in London for a new post, he tried his hand at writing. The resulting book was a biography of William Pitt the Elder (Lord Chatham), who had died four years previously. Godwin's *Life of Chatham* was successful enough to be reprinted immediately and in 1783 he resigned from the

ministry and informed his family that he intended to become a writer. Godwin now intended to devote himself, through writing and teaching, to the political reform and to the progress of humanity. 'I know of nothing worth living for', he wrote to his mother, 'but the usefulness and service of my fellow-creatures. The only object I pursue is to increase, as far as lies in my power, the quantity of their knowledge, goodness and happiness.'

In July 1783, Godwin published *An Account of the Seminary that will be opened on Monday, the Fourth Day of August, at Epsom in Surrey, for the Instruction of Twelve Pupils in the Greek, Latin, French and English Languages*. The pupils who came forward were too few in number, and the Seminary never opened but Godwin's prospectus is interesting as a statement of progressive educational principles, and as an indication of how far his opinions had evolved. 'The state of society is incontestably artificial', he wrote in an opening paragraph:

> The power of one man over another must always be derived from convention or from conquest; by nature we are equal. The necessary consequence is, that government must always depend upon the opinion of the governed. Let the most oppressed people under heaven once change their mode of thinking, and they are free.

In addition to his *Life of Chatham* and *Account of the Seminary*, during 1783 Godwin published a political pamphlet (*A Defence of the Rockingham Party*), a literary parody (*The Herald of Literature*), and a collection of his own sermons (*Sketches of History*) and during the same year he also translated Lord Lovat's autobiography from French to English. In 1784, Godwin published a satirical political pamphlet (*Instructions to a Statesman*), and three novels, (*Damon and Delia*, *Italian Letters*, and *Imogen*). He also began writing as a literary critic for the *English Review* and as an historian of current events for the *New Annual Register*. The hours that Godwin spent in writing were almost as long as those of an exploited factory worker of the period; and the pay which he received for his efforts was almost as meagre. He lived in a slum area of London, not far from Grub Street and he often had to make a



2. William Godwin (*by courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London*)

trip to the pawnbroker before eating. Nevertheless, he was becoming known as a competent writer and he was gaining strength and skill, finding his true voice.

During this period, Godwin began a lifelong friendship with Thomas Holcroft, who, like himself, was a versatile and prolific writer. Holcroft, the self-taught son of a bootmaker, had become a popular playwright and novelist. He had travelled to Paris especially to see Beaumarchais' *Marriage of Figaro*, which he hoped to translate into English. When the producers of the play refused to sell him a copy of the manuscript, Holcroft attended *The Marriage of Figaro* on eight successive nights and wrote down the script from memory. He subsequently translated the play and produced it successfully in London. Both Godwin and Holcroft believed in absolute honesty and their criticisms of each other's work were sometimes harsh. Nevertheless their close friendship survived. Holcroft admired Godwin's prodigious knowledge of books, while Godwin had much to learn from Holcroft's familiarity with people in all walks of life, and his knowledge of the practical world.

In 1785, Fox, Burke and Sheridan founded the *Political Herald*, a new and progressive political journal representing the opinions of the opposition party in Parliament. Godwin's reputation as a writer had by this time become so well established that they invited him to become a contributor; and shortly afterward they made him assistant editor. The first two issues of the *Political Herald* contained long articles written by Godwin, *Critique of the Administration of Mr. Pitt* and *Grounds of a Constitutional Opposition*.

When the Editor of the *Political Herald* (Gilbert Stuart) became ill, Godwin became acting editor; and when Stuart died soon afterward, Fox, Burke, and Sheridan offered Godwin the post of Editor. Amazingly, he refused. If he had accepted the post, it could have brought him from Grub Street into England's highest social and political circles. However, Godwin believed so strongly that the individual conscience must be the sole judge of issues that he refused to accept a salary from any political party, even the party to which he most closely adhered. In spite of repeated discussions with Sheridan, who urged him to change his mind, Godwin persisted in this decision.

Lacking a suitable editor, the Whig leaders decided to discontinue the publication of the *Political Herald*, which in any case had become a financial burden for the party.

Godwin continued to write the history of current political developments for the *New Annual Register* and, in 1789, he began to face the challenge of doing justice to the important and rapidly moving events of the French Revolution. When the Bastille fell on 14 July, the reform movement in England was filled with enthusiasm. 'How much the greatest event that ever happened in the history of the world!', Fox exclaimed, 'And how much the best!'

On 4 November 1789, Godwin heard the Dissenting minister Richard Price deliver the traditional annual sermon to the Society for Commemorating the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Price had based his sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan, from which he concluded that we ought to replace our narrow loyalty to family and country by a greater principle, general justice and 'good will which embraces all the world'. He went on to emphasize the need for knowledge, since vice is produced by error. Finally he called for an abolition of the institution of war throughout the world with the help of a federation of sovereign states. 'And now', Price concluded, 'methinks I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading; a general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed to the dominion of laws; the dominion of priests changed to the dominion of reason and conscience.'

The following day the Society began a political meeting, with Lord Stanhope in the chair. The radical Dissenters at the meeting passed numerous resolutions linking the Glorious Revolution of 1688 with the French Revolution and they concluded that the time was right to make another attempt in Parliament to have the Test and Corporation Acts repealed.

The Bill to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts was defeated by a large majority, however, although it had almost passed the previous year. The attempt to repeal the two Acts was opposed by Edmund Burke, who broke with Fox on this issue. Burke was hostile to philosophy and to the idea of progress, believing that theory could never replace empirical knowledge, and that the only safe basis for

government is tradition. In a speech to the Commons, reported by Godwin, Burke said that he had never been able to bear abstract principles, that he had detested them as a boy, and that he liked them no better now that he had silver hair.

In November 1790, Edmund Burke published *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in which he took as his starting point the sermon given the previous year by Price. 'I almost venture to affirm', Burke wrote

> that not one in a hundred amongst us participates in the 'triumph' of the Revolution Society ... We are not converts of Rousseau; we are not disciples of Voltaire; Helvétius has made no progress among us. Atheists are not our preachers; madmen are not our lawgivers. We know that *we* have made no discoveries; and we think that no discoveries are to be made, in morality; nor many in the great principles of government, nor in the ideas of liberty, which were understood long before we were born, altogether as well as they will be after the grave has heaped its mould upon our presumption, and the silent tomb shall have imposed its law upon our pert loquacity ... We have real hearts of flesh and blood beating in our bosoms. We fear God; we look up with awe to kings; with affection to parliaments; with duty to magistrates; with reverence to priests; and with respect to nobility.

Reverence for the existing establishment, Burke believed, is in fact reverence for the accumulated wisdom of mankind. He felt that the institutions of society are so complex that they have to grow organically, over a long period of time. No intellectual construction could replace experience. To attempt such a replacement would be like trying to start a business without capital.

Burke maintained that the British Constitution represented the best form of government that could ever be devised. 'I wish my countrymen', he wrote, 'rather to recommend to our neighbours the example of the British Constitution than to take models from them for the improvement of our own.'

Burke proposed that the requirement of adherence to the Church of England in the Test and Corporation Acts be changed to a solemn declaration that the English political establishment is in harmony with the law of God and should not be changed. He was not entirely opposed to change. He believed, in fact, that some mechanism for gradual change is necessary for the conservation of any system but he wished the change to be extremely gradual and his emphasis was not on change but on the conservation of England's political and social institutions.

In 1790, when Burke was writing, the French Revolution had not yet become violent and France seemed to most people to be headed towards some form of liberal democracy. Nevertheless Burke predicted that, in France, moderation would give way to extremism, republicanism, civil war, anarchy, executions, and finally a military dictatorship. These predictions later proved to be entirely accurate, and the same pattern has characterized many subsequent revolutions; but to most people in England at the time Burke's forecast seemed cynical. In 1790, most people believed that the French Revolution was already over, having achieved its reforms with little violence.

Burke's *Reflections* opened a debate on the fundamental principles of government. Starting with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Man*, over a hundred pamphlets were published. Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the first great writers of the feminist movement, was indignant at Burke's contempt for the poor. Burke had written that the poor 'must respect that property of which they cannot partake ... they must be taught to find their consolation in the final properties of eternal justice.' Mary Wollstonecraft replied: 'It is, Sir, possible to render the poor happier in this world without depriving them of the consolation which you so gratuitously offer them in the next.'

Among the most powerful and influential of the pamphlets provoked by Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was Thomas Paine's essay *The Rights of Man*, Part I of which appeared in February 1791. It was quickly withdrawn because the printer feared prosecution, but it reappeared in March, when a more courageous printer was found; and Part II was published in 1792.

Thomas Paine had already helped to sway public opinion in favour

of the American colonists with his pamphlet *Common Sense*; and he had been present in France at the outbreak of the Revolution. Having experienced two successful revolutions, the American and the French, he hoped that a third might take place in England – not a violent revolution, but a radical reform of the government.

Paine had little difficulty in refuting Burke's assertion that the British Constitution could not be improved. He had only to point to the buying and selling of constituencies and to gross anomalies between population and representation. For example, the town of Old Sarum, with only three houses, sent two members to Parliament, the same number as Yorkshire whose population was a million. Paine could also point to corruption in the British government of the time, where pensions and patronage were used routinely to obtain support for the established order. One of Paine's telling accusations was that Burke himself had changed from a liberal to a conservative in exchange for a pension.

Godwin was anxious to make his own contribution to the debate which had been opened by Burke's *Reflections;* and he suggested to his publisher, Robinson, the idea of a treatise on Political Principles. 'In the first fervour of my enthusiasm', Godwin wrote later, 'I entertained the vain imagination of "hewing a stone from the rock" which, by its inherent energy and weight, should overbear and annihilate all opposition and place the principles of politics on an immovable basis.' On 10 July 1791, Robinson generously offered the financial support which allowed Godwin to begin work on his masterpiece.

Both Godwin and Robinson realized that the impact of the book would be increased if it could be brought out quickly, while the debate was at its height. However, Godwin was determined to keep the quality of his writing as high as possible and he therefore limited his composition to the morning hours when he felt strongest. His days soon settled into a regular pattern. He rose early and spent an hour or two reading the works of a Greek or Latin author as an example of literary excellence, and to remind himself of the high level of civilization which had been achieved in Greece and Rome under a republican form of government. The rest of the morning he devoted to writing and correcting, or to reading books directly related to the

topic on which he was working. (Among the many authors whose works he studied during the autumn of 1791 were Plato, Locke, Hume, Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvétius, d'Holbach, Condilliac, Condorcet, Montesquieu, Price, Burke, Paine, Mackintosh and Bentham.) Godwin's friends soon became aware that he was unavailable to visitors during the morning hours. In the afternoons and evenings he visited friends – often Thomas Holcroft or the writer William Nicholson, who was a good source of information on natural science. Godwin believed that sparks of truth can be produced by a verbal clash of minds, like the sparks which scatter when flint clashes with steel. He liked to test his ideas on his friends, whose honesty he knew to be as hard as flint or steel.

During this period, Godwin wrote to Thomas Paine, hoping to arrange a meeting with him where some sparks of truth might be generated. A few days later he was invited to meet Paine at a dinner given by the publisher, Joseph Johnson. Mary Wollstonecraft was also present. She was at that time a better-known writer than Godwin and, to his annoyance, she dominated the conversation, while Paine said very little. Godwin returned from the dinner irritated with himself for his own poor performance, irritated with Mary Wollstonecraft, and disappointed at having missed a unique opportunity to test his ideas against those of Thomas Paine. This was Godwin's first meeting with Mary Wollstonecraft, his future wife.

During the late summer and autumn of 1792, the political situation in France began to change rapidly and alarmingly in exactly the way that Burke had predicted. The Jacobin faction under Robespierre seized control of the French government. Meanwhile supporters of the old order planned a counter-revolution with the help of foreign armies. In August, Louis XVI and his wife were arrested, and more than a thousand suspected supporters of the counter-revolution were summarily put to death.

In England, opinion was becoming strongly polarized. Joseph Priestley's house and laboratory in Birmingham had already been burned in anti-Dissenter riots condoned by authorities; and Priestley had fled to America. When the French government made an offer to aid revolutionary movements in neighbouring countries, the

government of England countered with strong measures to suppress republican ideas. On 13 September 1792, as Thomas Paine left a meeting, he was warned by the poet William Blake that if he returned to his home he would be going to his death. Paine escaped to France, narrowly eluding arrest and he was sentenced to death *in absentia*.

In this tense atmosphere, Godwin continued to work on his book, knowing that he risked the same sentence that had been given to Paine. As Godwin worked on the final parts, Robinson began printing the initial chapters. The emerging book, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*, contains internal contradictions, since Godwin was carried away by enthusiasm and he allowed his opinions to develop as he went along; but he was unable to correct the already-printed parts.

William Godwin's *Political Justice* is not a direct reply to Edmund Burke's *Reflections*, and he refers respectfully to Burke as an 'illustrious and virtuous hero of former times'; but their points of view are exactly opposite: Burke maintained that existing political and social institutions deserved obedience because they represented the accumulated wisdom of mankind. The more ancient the institution, the more tenaciously we should strive to conserve it. Reason and theory are suspect in Burke's view, since the institutions of society are so complex that if invented on the basis of theory they are certain to be monstrous; they must be allowed to grow slowly and organically. Empirical knowledge is the only kind that Burke believes we can trust.

By contrast, Godwin maintains that the time has come for a thorough reform of society. Every political and social institution without exception must be examined in the blazing light of reason, and must be discarded if found to be corrupt, irrational or unjust. No institution is safe or sacred just because it is ancient. He utterly denies Burke's contention that traditional institutions should be conserved simply because they are old and it was probably this aspect of Godwin's book which so captured the imagination and enthusiasm of his contemporaries.

Godwin insisted that there was an indissoluble link between politics, ethics and knowledge. *Political Justice* is an enthusiastic vision of what humans could be like at some future period when the trend

towards moral and intellectual improvement had lifted men and women above their present state of ignorance and vice. Godwin believed that much of the savage structure of the penal system would then be unnecessary. (At the time when he was writing, there were more than a hundred capital offenses in England, and this number had soon increased to almost two hundred. The theft of any object of greater value than ten shillings was punishable by hanging.)

In its present state, Godwin said, society decrees that the majority of its citizens 'should be kept in abject penury, rendered stupid with ignorance and disgustful with vice, perpetuated in nakedness and hunger, goaded to the commission of crimes, and made victims to the merciless laws which the rich have instituted to oppress them'. Godwin pointed out that human behaviour is produced by environment and education. If the conditions of upbringing are improved, behaviour will also improve. In fact, men and women are subject to natural laws no less than the planets of Newton's solar system. 'In the life of every human', Godwin wrote, 'there is a chain of causes, generated in that eternity which preceded his birth, and going on in regular procession through the whole period of his existence, in consequence of which it was impossible for him to act in any instance otherwise than he has acted.'

The chain of causality in human affairs implies that vice and crime should be regarded with the same attitude with which we regard disease. The causes of poverty, ignorance, vice and crime should be removed. Human failings should be cured rather than punished. With this in mind, Godwin says, 'our disapprobation of vice will be of the same nature as our disapprobation of an infectious distemper.'

With improved environment and education, humans will reach a higher moral level. But what is morality? Here Godwin draws heavily on his Christian background, especially on the moral principles of the Dissenting community. In his sermon to the Society for Commemorating the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Richard Price took as his starting point the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which illustrates the central principle of Christian ethics: we must love our neighbour as much as we love ourselves; but our neighbour is not necessarily a member of our immediate circle. He may be distant from us, in culture,

in ethnic background or in geographical distance. Nevertheless, he is still our neighbour, a member of the human family, and our duty to him is no less than our duty to those who are closest to us. It follows that narrow loyalties must be replaced or supplemented by loyalty to the interests of humanity as a whole.

This principle is adopted wholeheartedly by Godwin and carried to its logical conclusion. Godwin maintains that in every act, we have a duty to weigh the amount of good which we are doing for the benefit of humanity. If we could do a greater amount of good by acting differently, then we have a duty to do so. 'I am bound', Godwin writes, 'to employ my talents, my understanding, my strength and my time for the production of the greatest quantity of the general good'. Since virtue consists in promoting the happiness of society, widespread pleasure is to be desired, but not all pleasures are equally good. Intellectual pleasures are more valuable than sensual pleasures, Godwin says. Best of all is the pleasure that we receive by sharing the happiness of others since this pleasure is not limited in amount but grows as we extend our sympathies more widely.

Judging the benevolence of our actions is the responsibility of each individual conscience, Godwin says, not the responsibility of the State, and the individual must follow his or her conscience even if it conflicts with the dictates of the State. Each individual case should be judged by itself. If our institutions and laws meet the criteria of benevolence, justice and truth, we should give them our enthusiastic support; if not, we should struggle to change them. In giving personal judgement such a dominant role, Godwin anticipates the ideas of Thoreau, Tolstoy and Gandhi.

The exercise of individual judgement requires great honesty and objectivity. In order for the power of truth and reason to overcome prejudice and error, Godwin says, it is necessary for each person always to speak and act with complete sincerity. Even the degree of insincerity necessary for elegant manners is wrong in Godwin's opinion.

Starting with these ethical principles, Godwin proceeds with almost mathematical logic to deduce the consequences, intoxicated by his enthusiasm and not stopping even when the conclusions to which he

is driven conflict with conventional wisdom and intuition. For example, he denies that humans have rights and maintains that they only have duties.

Regarding the right to dispose of private property as one chooses, Godwin says:

> To whom does any article, suppose a loaf of bread, justly belong? ... I have an hundred loaves in my possession, and in the next street there is a poor man expiring with hunger, to whom one of these loaves would be a means of preserving his life. If I withhold this loaf from him, am I not unjust? If I impart it, am I not complying with what justice demands? To whom does the loaf justly belong?

In other words, according to Godwin, our duty to act for the benefit of humanity implies a sacrifice of our private rights as individuals. Private property is not really our own, to be used as we wish; it is held in trust, to be used where it will do the greatest amount of good for humanity as a whole.

Godwin also denies that several commonly admired virtues really are virtues. Keeping promises, he says, is not a virtue because at any given moment we have a duty to do the greatest possible good through our actions. If an act is good, we should do it because we believe it to be good, not because we have promised to do it; and a promise should not force us to perform an act which we believe to be bad. A virtuous person therefore does not make promises. Similarly, Godwin maintains that gratitude is a vice since it distorts our judgement of the benevolence of our actions. When he heard of Godwin's doctrine on gratitude, Edmund Burke remarked 'I would save him from that vice by not doing him any service!'

Godwin saw the system of promises, loyalty, and gratitude as a means by which individual judgement can be suspended and tyranny maintained. People can be forced to act against their consciences because of promises which they have made or services which they have received. An example of this is the suspension of private ethical judgement which follows a soldier's induction into an army. We should

perform an act, Godwin maintains, not because of fear of punishment or hope of reward or in return for favours that we have received, but rather because we believe the act to be of the highest benefit to humanity as a whole.

Many of our political institutions may be needed now, Godwin said, because of mankind's present faults; but in the future, when humanity has reached a higher level of perfection, they will be needed less and less. The system of nation states might then be replaced by a loose federation of small communities, within each of which problems could be resolved by face-to-face discussion. Regarding this future ideal system, Godwin writes:

> It is earnestly to be desired that each man was wise enough to govern himself without the interference of any compulsory restraint; and since government in its best state is an evil, the object principally to be aimed at is, that we should have as little of it as the general peace of human society will permit.

Godwin predicted that in a future society, with the institution of war abolished, with a more equal distribution of property, and with the help of scientific improvements in agriculture and industry, much less labour would be needed to support life. Luxuries were used to maintain artificial distinctions between the classes of society but in the future, Godwin said, values would change; humans would live more simply, and their efforts would be devoted to self-fulfilment and to intellectual and moral improvement, rather than to securing material possessions. With the help of automated agriculture, the citizens of a future society would need only a few hours a day to earn their bread.

Godwin went on to say:

> The spirit of oppression, the spirit of servility and the spirit of fraud – these are the immediate growth of the established administration of property. They are alike hostile to intellectual improvement. The other vices of envy, malice, and

> revenge are their inseparable companions. In a state of society where men lived in the midst of plenty, and where all shared alike the bounties of nature, these sentiments would inevitably expire. The narrow principle of selfishness would vanish. No man being obliged to guard his little store, or provide with anxiety and pain for his restless wants, each would lose his own individual existence in the thought of the general good. No man would be the enemy of his neighbour, for they would have nothing to contend; and of consequence philanthropy would resume the empire which reason assigns her. Mind would be delivered from her perpetual anxiety about corporal support, and free to expatiate in the field of thought which is congenial to her. Each man would assist the inquiries of all.

In such a state of enlightenment, Godwin said, humans would no longer be the slaves of their passions, and even the institution of marriage would disappear, since marriage is basically an affair of property. At present, he wrote:

> The habit is, for a thoughtless youth of each sex to come together, to see each other a few times under circumstances full of delusion, and then to vow to each other eternal attachment. What is the consequence of this? In almost every instance they find themselves deceived. They are reduced to make the best of an irretrievable mistake.

In a future society the whole community would help in bringing up children, and the question of the paternity of each child would have only a minor importance.

Godwin called his book *An Enquiry* ..., emphasizing that it was a contribution to the current debate, and that he was willing to change his mind if argument or evidence proved him to be wrong. After it was published he soon realized that his whole system rested on assumptions concerning human nature which he had not proved; and in later editions of *Political Justice* he attempted to demonstrate that

humans in the future may really be capable of rationality, sincerity, and benevolence to the degree that he assumed possible. Godwin also soon saw that he had given too little weight to 'private and domestic affections'. In his own life, he was about to experience the overpowering strength of such emotions.

Political Justice is a vision or prophesy of what human life might be like, not in the world as it is but in an ideal world of the future. As Godwin's disciple, Percy Bysshe Shelley, later expressed it in his verse-drama *Prometheus Unbound*,

> The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
> Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
> Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
> Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
> Over himself; just, gentle, wise ...

Political Justice was published on 14 February 1793, in the tense weeks between a French declaration of war against England and England's counter-declaration of war with France. The book was 895 pages in length and sold for one pound, sixteen shillings – more than three times the average weekly wage of a labourer. Pitt and his cabinet considered prosecuting the author and publisher, but decided against it because (as Pitt is said to have remarked) 'a three-guinea book could never do much harm among those who have not three shillings to spare'. Pitt was wrong, however, in thinking that the length and price of the book would prevent it from being influential. As Godwin's first biographer (John Fenwick) wrote in 1799: 'Perhaps no work of equal bulk ever had such a number of readers; and certainly no book of such profound inquiry ever made so many proselytes in an equal space of time'.

The quarto edition of *Political Justice* was a best seller and the book was soon republished in a less expensive octavo edition which sold equally well. It was pirated in Ireland, Scotland, and America and hundreds of groups of workers who could not afford to buy the book individually bought joint copies, which then circulated among the subscribers or were read aloud to groups. The doctrines advocated in

Political Justice were soon being called the 'New Philosophy'.

Godwin became famous overnight: 'I was nowhere a stranger', he wrote later, '... I was everywhere received with curiosity and kindness. If temporary fame ever was an object worthy to be coveted by the human mind, I certainly obtained it in a degree that has seldom been exceeded.' Godwin's friend, the essayist William Hazlitt, described this sudden burst of fame in the following words:

> ... he blazed as a sun in the firmament of reputation; no-one was more talked of, more looked up to, more sought after, and wherever liberty, truth, justice was the theme, his name was not far off.

Among the many converts to Godwinism were the poets Robert Southey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth. Coleridge and Southey planned to emigrate to America together with their friend Robert Lovell, where they hoped to buy land on the banks of the Susquehanna River and to start a community based on Godwinian principles. It was to be called a 'pantisocracy', a word invented by Coleridge meaning a society governed equally by all its members. There were to be 12 men and 12 women in the community, sharing all their property, bringing up their children in common, and free to change partners according to their changing perceptions. Southey and Coleridge were engaged to marry two sisters from Bristol. Robert Lovell married a third sister, and two other ladies from the family were also prepared to go, as was Southey's mother. The pantisocrats contacted Godwin and Holcroft and received advice on their project but, in the end, the plan was abandoned. By 1796, Coleridge had become an anti-Godwinian but in 1799 he met Godwin again and became his close and lifelong friend.

William Wordsworth read *Political Justice* in 1794 and was greatly influenced by it. Between February and August 1795, Wordsworth met Godwin seven times for long private discussions. Much of Wordsworth's writing from the Great Decade shows the mark of Godwin's ideas, as can be seen, for example in the following lines from *The Prelude*:

How glorious! in self-knowledge and self-rule,
To look through all the frailties of the world,
And, with a resolute mastery shaking off
Infirmities of nature, time and place,
Build social upon personal Liberty,
Which, to the blind restraints of general laws
Superior, magisterally adopts
One guide, the light of circumstances, flashed
Upon an independent intellect

On 26 May 1794, Godwin added to his already great reputation by publishing a powerful and original psychological novel, *Things as They Are*, later renamed *Caleb Williams*. Godwin's purpose in writing this novel was to illustrate some of the themes of *Political Justice* and to bring his ideas to readers who might not be directly interested in philosophy.

In *Caleb Williams*, Godwin makes several literary innovations which were to influence such writers as Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Balzac, and Victor Hugo. *Caleb Williams* is, in fact, the ancestor of the modern thriller and detective story. Its theme is flight and pursuit, terror, capture, escape, recapture, and confrontation. The story deals with a nobleman, Falkland, who is driven to commit a murder by excessive concern for his reputation in the eyes of the world. He is basically an extremely good person, but circumstances make him evil. His servant, Caleb Williams, discovers evidence for the murder in an iron chest kept by his master, but he is seen by Falkland and forced to flee. Caleb Williams is falsely accused of theft by Falkland, and is arrested. Williams knows that as a servant, he has no chance of being believed when his word is contradicted by that of his master. He must escape or die.

The dramatic scenes of terror and flight were Godwin's starting-point, and he invented the device of back-plotting to construct a situation which would lead up to them. The scenes of court-room confrontation in *Caleb Williams* were unprecedented at the time Godwin introduced them, although they have since become a literary cliché. *Caleb Williams* proved to be as much of a sensation as *Political*

Justice and it was considered to be a brilliant achievement for Godwin to have produced two such different, original, and powerful works in quick succession. *Caleb Williams* was republished 26 times during Godwin's lifetime and many times after his death.

Godwin had written a Preface to *Caleb Williams* in which he said:

> The question now afloat in the world respecting THINGS AS THEY ARE, is the most interesting which can be presented to the human mind. While one party pleads for reformation and change, the other extols in the warmest terms the existing constitution of society ... It is now known to philosophers that the spirit and character of a government intrudes itself into every rank of society. But this is a truth highly worthy to be communicated to persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach. Accordingly it was proposed in the invention of the following work, to comprehend, 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.

This Preface was never printed, because Godwin's publisher, Crosby, was afraid of prosecution. In fact, the publication of *Caleb Williams* coincided with a decision by Pitt's government that a few hangings were needed in order to cast a chill on public discussion of political reform. On the day of publication, orders went out for the arrest of Godwin's friends in the reform movement, Hardy, Thelwall, and Horne Tooke. Although the radical leaders were arrested in May, *habeas corpus* was suspended, and it was not until 2 October 1794 that a charge was brought against them. A few days later, on a trip to Warwickshire, Godwin heard that his closest friend, Thomas Holcroft, also had been arrested.

Godwin hurried back to London and locked himself in his home, studying the charges that had been brought by Lord Chief Justice Eyre against Holcroft and the others. The charge was high treason and the law under which Eyre brought this charge had been passed

in the fourteenth century, during the reign of Edward III. It defined high treason as any act which could 'compass or imagine the Death of a King'. The penalty for this offence was to be hanged by the neck, to be cut down while still living, to be disembowelled, to have one's bowels burnt before one's eyes, and then to be beheaded and quartered. It was rumoured that as soon as the 12 prisoners were convicted, 800 further arrest warrants were ready to go out and Godwin's own name might well have been among them.

Godwin soon saw that Eyre's argument involved an unprecedented broadening of the definition of high treason. Essentially Eyre was arguing that the actions of the accused might cause events in England to follow the same course as in France, where Louis XVI had recently been executed. On 21 October Godwin published an anonymous article in the *Morning Chronicle* entitled *Cursory Strictures on the Charge Delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre*. It was a carefully written legal argument, completely different in style from anything that Godwin had written previously. In this article, he argued that in broadening the interpretation of high treason without precedent, Eyre was in effect creating a new law and judging the prisoners *ex post facto*. It was especially necessary for high treason to have a narrow definition, Godwin pointed out, since a broad definition could lead to the abridgement of all English civil liberties.

After the publication of *Cursory Strictures* it became clear to everyone that Eyre's charge lay outside the boundary of the law and that it would probably not be upheld. Nevertheless, the atmosphere in the courtroom was tense as the jury returned its verdicts. As soon as Holcroft was acquitted, he left the dock and went to sit beside Godwin. The artist, Sir Thomas Lawrence, made a sketch of the two friends sitting side-by-side and waiting for the verdict on the other prisoners, Godwin's bending and contemplative figure contrasting with Holcroft's upright and defiant stance. In the end, all charges were dropped.

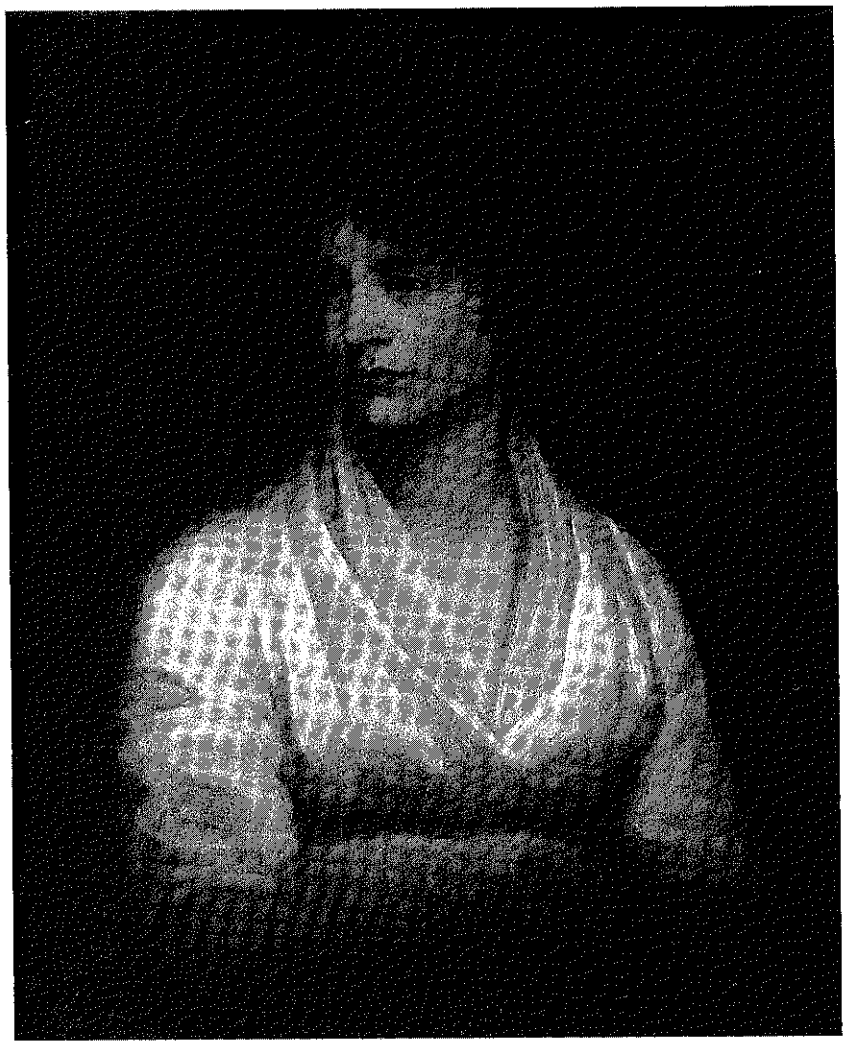
While these dramatic events were happening, Godwin's future wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, had been involved in dramas of her own. In 1792, she published *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a book which gained her immortality as a great pioneer of feminism, and she also travelled

to France. In Paris, in 1793, she met and fell in love with an American, Gilbert Imlay. He was a romantic but unreliable man, who was in Paris promoting land schemes in the United States. Imlay had written a book entitled *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America*, which he followed with a novel called *The Emigrants*, describing an idyllic romance on the banks of the Ohio River. When war broke out between England and France, Imlay registered Mary as his wife at the American Embassy. They were never formally married but she regarded herself as his wife and bore him a daughter, whom they named Fanny.

During the summer of 1795, Mary Wollstonecraft travelled to Scandinavia with her daughter as Imlay's business representative. When she returned from this trip and met Imlay in London, he was living with another woman and he plainly did not wish to continue his relationship with Mary. Left alone with her baby, without money, and deserted by most of her former friends, Mary fell into a deep depression. After walking up and down in the rain so that her clothes would become soaked and heavy, she threw herself from Putney Bridge. The suicide attempt, her second, almost succeeded but she was saved by a boatman.

On 8 January 1796, Mary Hayes, a friend and admirer of Mary Wollstonecraft, invited her to tea together with William Godwin and Thomas Holcroft. The tea was a success, and Godwin found Mary Wollstonecraft very much changed from the carelessly dressed and irritating woman who had dominated the conversation at Johnson's dinner when he had wanted to hear Thomas Paine. Now, several years later, she had become much more attractive. Mary's beauty and her charming, intelligent conversation won Godwin's heart. He also greatly admired her recently published book, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*.

On 13 February, Godwin called on Mary Wollstonecraft, but she was not at home. On 14 April, she broke the social rules of the time and returned his call. During the next few months they often appeared together at literary and artistic dinners in London. They had many friends in common and both of them had many admirers of the opposite sex. Godwin was not a tall man and his nose was rather large.



3. Mary Godwin (*by courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London*)

On the other hand, he had fine eyes and a high, impressive brow; his manners had become more gallant and fame is a powerful aphrodisiac. A number of attractive intellectual women fluttered around him. Mary's admirers included the poet Robert Southey, the distinguished artist John Opie, and Godwin's closest friend, Thomas Holcroft.

Gradually, during the spring and summer of 1796, the friendship between Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin deepened into love. Outwardly, nothing was changed. Both partners were hard at work, Godwin preparing a new edition of *Political Justice* and Mary writing a novel, *The Wrongs of Woman*. Like *Caleb Williams*, Mary's novel was designed to illustrate the themes of the New Philosophy. They kept their relationship a secret, continued to live separately, and continued to meet their friends as before, but they had become lovers. For Godwin, this was the first real love affair of his life and he was at first very awkward, afraid of the strong emotions he was experiencing. Mary tenderly and good-humouredly guided him through his difficulties.

As winter approached, a crisis occurred: Johnson, Mary's publisher insisted that she should settle her debts and refused to give her more credit. At the same time, Mary realized that she was pregnant. She experienced some of the harsh penalties with which English society of that time punished unwed mothers. Many of her former friends had dropped away. Her remaining friends called her Mrs Imlay, maintaining the fiction that she had been legally married; but with the new baby no such cover would be possible. Johnson offered a solution: He knew of a rich but somewhat elderly admirer who was willing to solve all of Mary's problems, both financial and social, by marrying her. Mary felt insulted and would not hear of this solution. In her books she had often denounced marriage for the sake of property as 'legalized prostitution'. Instead, she asked Godwin to marry her. He did this in spite of his own disapproval of the institution of marriage as practised at that time in Europe – an institution which he had called 'the most odious of all monopolies'.

Although he agreed to undergo the marriage ceremony to save the woman whom he loved from social ostracism, Godwin continued his opposition to the institution of marriage and he was very conscious

that the inconsistency between his behaviour and his theories would become the butt of many jokes. For days after his marriage he told no one about it and when he finally told Thomas Holcroft it was in a joking note which even omitted the name of his wife.

Holcroft replied:

> From my very heart I give you joy. I think you the most extraordinary married pair in existence. May your happiness be as pure as I firmly persuade myself it must be. I hope and expect to see you both very soon ... I cannot be mistaken concerning the woman whom you have married. It is Mrs W. Your secrecy a little pains me. It tells me that you do not yet know me.

Godwin and Mary were in fact extremely happy together. They were not at all alike: He relied on reason, while she placed more trust in her emotions. These differences meant that each revealed a new world for the other. For Godwin, Mary opened a world of strong feelings; and he acquired from her a taste for the writings of Rousseau, whom she called 'the Prometheus of Sentiment'. Godwin was never the same again. All his later novels and books of philosophy were to stress the importance of domestic affections and sensitivity to the forces of nature.

Mary's baby was due at the end of August 1797. She insisted that no doctor was needed – only a midwife. After a long labour, she gave birth to a baby girl at 11 p.m. and Godwin was overjoyed that all had gone well. However, at 2 a.m. the midwife warned Godwin that his wife was still in danger, since the afterbirth had not yet appeared. A doctor was sent for; and following the accepted medical practice of the time, he removed the afterbirth surgically. Mary at first seemed to be recovering well; but in a few days it became clear that she was fatally ill with an infection, very likely the result of the operation to remove the afterbirth. On 10 September she died, brave and affectionate to the end. In her last words, she spoke of Godwin as 'the kindest, best man in the world'.

Godwin was left heartbroken by Mary's death. In a letter to Holcroft he wrote:

> My wife is now dead. I firmly believe that there does not exist her equal in the world. I know from experience that we were formed to make each other happy. I have not the least expectation that I can now ever know happiness again.

In his sorrow, he sat rereading Mary's books and letters, seeming to hear her voice again through the words that she had written.

Soon Godwin found consolation for his grief by editing the unpublished works of his dead wife and by writing her biography. Believing strongly in the principle of absolute honesty, he tried to describe her life and work as simply and as accurately as he could, not hiding her human weaknesses, but at the same time doing full justice to her stature as a great pioneer of woman's rights. He included her letters to Imlay, and a description of an affair between Mary and the Swiss artist Fuseli, which had taken place before her departure for France. On 29 January 1798, Johnson published Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, together with four small volumes of Mary's posthumous works, including her unfinished novel, *The Wrongs of Woman*.

Godwin's moving and honest portrait of his wife is one of his most enduring and readable books but its honesty shocked his contemporaries more than anything else that he had written. The *European Magazine*, for example, said that it would be read

> with disgust by every female who has any pretensions to delicacy; with detestation by everyone attached to the interests of religion and morality; and with indignation by any one who might feel any regard for the unhappy woman, whose frailties should have been buried in oblivion.

This reaction against the *Memoirs* was part of a much more general reaction against all liberal ideas. In 1798, Napoleon's armies were victorious on the continent, and the French were massing their forces for an invasion of England. Napoleon believed that the ordinary people of England would welcome him as a liberator and, in fact, the English government was facing a mutiny in its own navy, massive riots, and

rebellion in Ireland. The Establishment was fighting for its life and was not in the mood to make fine distinctions about whether the blows that it struck were above or below the belt. Pitt and Grenville had already introduced the 'Gagging Acts', which effectively put an end to freedom of speech and assembly. The government now sponsored, by means of a secret subsidy, the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, a periodical which attacked all of the leading liberals in turn. Among the abusive poems, articles and drawings published was C.K. Sharpe's poem *The Vision of Liberty*:

> Then saw I mounted on a braying ass
> William and Mary, sooth, a couple jolly;
> Who married, note ye how it came to pass,
> Although each held that marriage was but folly? –
> And she of curses would discharge a volley
> If the ass stumbled leaping pales and ditches:
> Her husband, sans culottes, was melancholy,
> For Mary verily would wear the breeches –
> God help poor silly men from such usurping b——s.
>
> William hath penn'd a wagon-load of stuff,
> And Mary's life at last he needs must write,
> Thinking her whoredoms were not known enough,
> Till fairly printed off in black and white. –
> With wondrous glee and pride, this simple wight
> Her brothel feats of wantonness sets down,
> Being her spouse, he tells, with huge delight,
> How oft she cuckolded the silly clown,
> And lent, O lovely piece! herself to half the town.

Godwin had been carried to great heights by the wave of hope which accompanied the French Revolution; and as the wave crashed he was carried down with it. Despite the abuse and ridicule which were increasingly heaped upon him, he maintained a philosophical attitude, confident that he had already made a permanent contribution to the idea of human progress.

FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER

BY 1801, ALTHOUGH Godwin's reputation was still high in Scotland, Ireland and America, he was decidedly out of fashion in England, where he was considered by many to be the Jacobin Monster incarnate, the enemy of England's traditional social and political institutions. Godwin was past his prime as a writer, middle aged and in poor health, appearing older than his years. Nevertheless, the future still held a few dramatic episodes in store for him. On 5 May 1801, he wrote in his diary: 'Meet Mrs Clairmont'.

There are several stories of how the meeting took place. According to one story, Godwin was sitting on his balcony when Mary Jane Clairmont, an attractive blond woman in her thirties, called from a nearby window: 'Is it possible that I behold the immortal Godwin?' According to another story, Mrs Clairmont, who was Godwin's neighbour, waited until the time of day when he usually walked in his garden. She then walked up and down on her side of the wall which separated them, saying in a distinctly audible voice, 'You great Being, how I adore you!' When this did not produce the desired effect, she is said to have stopped him on the street and exclaimed: 'Mr. Godwin, I have compromised myself for I adore you.'

On 10 September 1801, Godwin's friend Charles Lamb wrote in a letter:

> I know no more news from here except that the *Professor* (Godwin) is *Courting*. The lady is a Widow with green spectacles & one child, and the Professor is grown quite juvenile. He bows when he is spoke to, and smiles without occasion, and