This is a magnificent, definitive edition of William Godwin’s letters. It covers almost all of the crucial decade, the 1790s, in which he rose meteorically to national and international prestige as England’s pre-eminent political philosopher in the age of revolutions. It ends just before his almost equally precipitous descent from the heights of fame into anonymous obscurity, when for several years he could not publish anything in his own name but turned out historical primers and children’s literature under pseudonyms, working from the back rooms of his second wife’s bookshop. By the time of the last letter included in Volume I (to Mary Hays on December 27, 1797), Godwin has shown little awareness of what was about to happen to him, a fall whose tipping point might be dated from James Mackintosh’s 1799 lecture series, which effectively closed the curtain on liberal enthusiasm for the French revolution in Britain. Not that Godwin would have been paying attention to such career details: for him, the worst thing that could happen to him had already occurred, when his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, died on September 10, 1797, a few days after giving birth to their daughter, Mary.

Five more volumes of the letters are announced. Under the general editorship of Pamela Clemit, the next four will run from 1798 to the end of Godwin’s life in 1836, with each covering roughly a decade, plus a final volume of “Selected Incoming Letters.” The present volume does not state whether Clemit alone will edit all the remaining volumes, but if not she has set a marvelous model for those to follow. Astonishingly enough, this is the first scholarly edition of Godwin’s extant letters, some 1,200 in all, over his lifetime (Volume I inclues 191). Just as astonishing, only a quarter of these have been published before. Many as they are, however, they are far fewer than he actually wrote. The Godwin epistolary archive, as Clemit describes it, is a paradoxical mix of high organization and rigorous selection. Godwin was a meticulous record keeper, as we know from his diaries and their stenographic shorthand abbreviations (“nah” = not at home, etc.), and he tabulated and dated his correspondence with similar care. As a biographer and historian himself, he keenly recognized the importance of primary sources. But as a public figure, he knew how they could be used and distorted, and he and his heirs, especially on the Wollstonecraft/Shelley side of the family, were even more nervous about their effect on the posthumous reputations of what Julie Carlson has called “England’s first family of writers” (Godwin, Wollstonecraft, Mary W. Shelley, and Percy Shelley). Hence there were several “sanitizing” purges of the material as the nineteenth century progressed. As Clemit summarizes: “What is collected is what survives, and what survives is as much a matter of chance as of good custodianship” (xxx).

But let me not appear too “astonished” by all this, in the fussy rhetoric of scholarly convention. In another register, it is not at all surprising that we have not had a complete edition of Godwin’s letters until 2011, exactly one hundred seventy-five years after his death. For Godwin may be regarded as but one of the more notable victims of the two cultural earthquakes of his times that permanently altered the landscape of modern Britain as we have come to know it: 1) the massive reaction against hopes for liberal domestic reform which accompanied (and to some extent stimulated) the reaction against the French revolution beginning in 1792-93; and 2) the corollary “rise of Romanticism” which accompanied (and to some extent benefited from) it. Liberal politics were out, for decades to come, and conservative reaction was in. More generally, politics as such were “out,” and literature was in—with the corollary that politics, philosophy, science and many other crucial human discourses were relegated to the “background” in both the creation and study of imaginative literature, a legacy we have begun to suspect and reject only within the space of the last generation. Godwin, in short, became a footnote to Wordsworth—as the “wild theories” man of The Prelude and The Excursion—rather than the other way round, as might have looked more probable in the mid-90s. Not that I would rather have Godwin than Wordsworth. But it is good to have them restored to something like equal footing, or placed on a level playing field. Still, if Godwin (to say nothing of Wollstonecraft) had not been regarded as a dangerous “Jacobin” writer in the 1790s, it is likely his letters would have been preserved and published more completely, and sooner. This is yet another cultural price—an invisible but very high one—of the overflow effects of Pitt’s “war on terror”: a war against what I and others have called “the lost generation” of the 1790s.

Of course, Pamela Clemit’s edition is not alone in redressing this balance. Hers is rather a sign, and a most welcome one, that makes the appearance of Godwin’s complete letters at this moment perfectly apt, as part of a growing scholarly and critical reassessment of two things: not simply the 1790s, but also the intellectual paradigms and templates in which we frame literature when we come to study it. Nevertheless, though Godwin is bold and forthright in correspondence with recipients as different as Charles Fox, John Thelwall, and the Society of Friends of the Constitution at Pontoise (March, 1791), this first volume of Godwin’s letters offers perhaps less discussion of contemporary politics than one might have expected. Partly this is because Godwin is wary of consequences (he knew the government was opening the mail); and partly because political issues so permeated the events of the time, and the lives of most of Godwin’s correspondents, that he and they are often writing from very far “inside” a discourse whose external markers are taken for granted.
Clemit does not exaggerate when she says that to read Godwin’s letters is to read an engagé history of the 1790s. I would go further: reading these 191 letters is like reading an epistolary novel of the times, and a better one than many we have from that decade. Godwin makes an excellent epistolary hero, by turns serious, sympathetic, maddening, generous, petty, flirtatious, pompous, smart, passionate and temperamental, to name just a few of his more marked characteristics. He is better in person than in his literary model, Mr. Francis, in Mary Hays’s 1799 novel, A Victim of Prejudice, though in some instances the difference is negligible, since for the speeches of Mr. Francis Hays freely adapted the letters Godwin wrote to her.

We think of editions of letters as valuable research tools, and so they are. But I read this volume cover to cover for the story. It has an imaginative, psychological, and topical consistency. After the publication of Political Justice in 1793, Godwin was not only the intellectual hero for the young liberal generation; he was also its mentor, guru, lonely-hearts sib sister and, when necessary, tough-love advisor. To compare great things with smaller, the impact of Political Justice in the mid-1790s reminds me of the incredible impact (incredibly in retrospect, that is) of Charles Reich’s The Greening of America (1970) or Francis Fukuyama’s The End of History (essay, 1989; book, 1992), both of which prophesied a glowingly optimistic future for progressive liberal ideas and Enlightenment values. All terribly disappointed, alas, and Godwin suffered a good deal more than Reich or Fukuyama for his sins of optimism. Noam Chomsky comes also to mind as a parallel, for his linguistic philosophical rigor combined with radical politics.

Both in manner and in method, Godwin encouraged correspondents, inviting people to join in his on-going discussions, which were, in his mind, a kind of permanent, non-violent, personal-as-political revolutionary action—as if Ghandi and M.L. King had staged seminars instead of sit-ins. But more often, he encouraged direct conversational contact and was surprisingly ready to give it, even to young people he had never met. He did not actually encourage correspondence—letter writing—because it took up too much of his time and cut into the work he was already doing anyway: i.e., reading and writing non-stop. But he was always ready to meet at a time and date acceptable to both parties, and he came down hard on those who missed their appointments, while mildly extenuating or excusing the ones he missed himself.

Young people wrote him with their Big Questions about life. What can you tell me, asked the ever-disingenuous Mary Hays, about Rousseau, Voltaire, Sterne, Smollett and Fielding? Having spied "some spots in the ermine of their honor," she wanted to know if he saw them too. Don’t you think, she asked, that their writings rather tend to licentious modes of thinking? No, he did not, and to worry about their possible effects on immature young minds was an insult to their commanding intellectual and culture stature: "I will never forget," he wrote, "that their merits toward mankind swallow up their errors a thousand times told" (121). Less than a month after Wollstonecraft’s death, Hugh Skeys, a sympathetic Dublin merchant, pressed Godwin for a favor after giving him some details about Mary’s family life there. Couldn’t you, he asked, write a pamphlet defending the rights of Irishmen and clear up that whole sorry mess over the Lord’s Supper? No, he could not, Godwin replied, bluntly adding that nobody cared anything about Ireland anyway, at that late moment in 1797 when so many tremendous events were rocking Europe on an almost daily basis. Young Thomas Wedgwood was a trickier proposition, for he had lots of money at his disposal, which Godwin knew he could put to good use (to pay off Mary’s debts, for example), yet some of Wedgwood’s questions about human psychology in his proposed School for Genius were worryingly naïve.

On the liberal side of most questions, Godwin was Philosophy Central for the 1790s, and his list of correspondents and range of acquaintance is there to prove it: Amelia Alderson, James Barry, Edmund Burke, Thomas Cooper, Thomas Erskine, James Eyre (Lord Chief Justice), Charles James Fox, Joseph Gerrald, Mary Hays, Thomas Holcroft, Thomas Brand Hollis, Elizabeth Inchbald, Joseph Johnson, Andrew Kippis, Thomas Lawrence ...and so on, to select only some of the most pertinent names from the first half of the alphabet, and not including the equal number of important figures who were often in company with Godwin at dinner, the theater, or present at others’ houses when he came calling. (The recently launched Godwin Diary Project, edited by Mark Philp and David O’Shaunessey, will be an invaluable complement to the volumes of his letters as they appear.)

This deep-structure "feel" for the 1790s, however, springs not just from reading Godwin’s letters. Much of it comes from Pamela Clemit’s learned, concise, and perfectly balanced notes on the identity of each correspondent, including especially her quoting of exactly the parts of their writings to which Godwin is referring or replying. Thus edited, each letter enables us to witness a little dialogue between Godwin and his interlocutors, even though many of them have faded much further back into obscurity than he: to name a few, they inclue Gerrald, Thelwall, Parr and Priestley. In some scholarly editions of letters, some annotations can be tediously particular about uninteresting points. By contrast, Clemit’s notes are lively and enlivening. Author of The Godwinian Novel (1993) and several other editions of Godwin’s writing, notably the Oxford Classics edition of Caleb Williams (2009), she is an editor of superb critical acumen. Typically, she states the archival facts about a letter in a line or two, then glosses its references with five or ten more notes that sometimes run to a page or more. Yet I am struck by her taste and tact. She provides just what is essential (to me, anyway) to the immediate context: neither more nor less reference to something we could look up (but won’t), nor so much additional information that we lose the point and interest. As a result, the volume gains a valuable momentum of cross-references as it moves along, and we can refer back to refresh our memory of what Joseph Fawcett or Andrew Kippis or anyone else said a year or two earlier.

Another highly significant contribution of this edition is the large number of hitherto unpublished letters it contains, many of them substantial pieces written to substantial persons about significant events. As a result of Clemit’s great work, I should think that a good deal of fine tuning, if not outright revisionism or probes in wholly new directions, might become possible in scholarship on "Godwin and His Circle." To take but one example, consider Godwin’s letter of 15 December 1794 to Charles Sinclair, on the still-unresolved issue of whether Sinclair acted in a double capacity in his role in the trials of the "Scottish Martyrs" in Edinburgh in 1793-94. Whether, that is, Sinclair was a spy or had turned state’s evidence in return for immunity from his own prosecution. In a word, Godwin thinks he did—or rather, reports that John Horne Tooke thought he did, and that is good enough for Godwin. The letter is also a good example of Godwin’s manner of proceeding, starting out by saying he (Godwin) is "extremely ready" to help Sinclair wipe off "any unjust suspicions that may have been fixed upon his character." One can imagine young Sinclair’s heart rising up in relief as he read. But then Godwin reports what Tooke said to him, concluding, "The general impression of the conversation upon Mr. Godwin was that Mr. Tooke had now scarcely a doubt upon his mind that Mr. Sinclair acted in a double capacity" (111). Nor is that all. Since Godwin knows that recollections of past conversations cannot always be trusted, he follows his report of Tooke’s conversation with seven numbered reasons summarizing why he too, William Godwin, has reasons "for entertaining doubts about the character of Mr. Sinclair," circling back to the clinching final point: "Mr. Tooke’s opinion, whose habits seem extremely remote from
vague suspicion, had considerable weight with Mr. Godwin.* Moral of the story: don't write William Godwin with questions whose answers might make you uncomfortable. This is the only letter to Sinclair in the volume.

Many letters are, not deracinating, but what might be called "hyper-ratiocinative." Godwin is so careful to ground his premises before he speaks that it is easy to lose sight of the issue, or original question, altogether. Some recipients must have reacted with a late eighteenth-century version of our contemporary colloquialism, "Say what??" But Godwin is no mere logic machine; his emotions are in fine fettle as well, and freely expressed here: he knows very well himself why reason is important to check emotion. Some of his letters bristle with feeling; he trades insult and umbrage with men such as Thelwall, Holcroft and George Dyson -- and these were his friends. They say they are not angry, but it's hard to believe.

Anger is one emotion to hold in check, and passion is another. Godwin as flirt, courtier and man about town is also well in evidence here. Nothing can match the moving effect of his outpourings to Mary once their relationship re-kindled in January, 1796. Where is the stodgy philosopher now? Flirting, joking, teasing, apologizing, wounded, contrite, grateful--all the accents and topics of passionate love are there, especially moving not only because we know what's shortly to come, but because we have been reading dozens of letters of a markedly cooler emotional tenor for years before this sudden change. For five years after they first met and quarreled in 1791, no letters passed between them. But once their acquaintance and friendship rekindle, and they fall in love, there are nearly fifty letters in a row between June 1796 and June 1797, with barely half a dozen from Godwin to anybody else.

But Mary was not the only recipient of his letters about love. On the task of overcoming its disappointments he has good advice for Mary Hays, a difficult person to deal with no matter how much one sympathizes with her, and for Amelia Alderson, a younger (and prettier) confidante, who seems not to realize her effect on members of the opposite sex (though Godwin doubts that she is quite so unconscious of her charms as she protests). Some of his female correspondents, however, wrote not to gain his counsel but to set him straight. Feeling compromised by, and perhaps jealous of, his marriage to Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Inchbald says that she cannot meet with him anymore--and she doesn't, except as they happen to meet in public.

Two hitherto unpublished letters to unknown women are excellent examples of the rationalistic philosopher negotiating the cross-currents of passion. One is from March, 1791, a "Breaking Up is Hard to Do" letter, Godwin-style. It seems that the lady went to church one Friday evening, which Godwin considered hypocritical, either based on his or her beliefs, or perhaps on some understanding he thought existed between them. She ridiculed him, then gave him the lie, and he proceeds to explode rationally (as it were) with a staccato sequence of I-said-you-said rebuttals that contain his anger--paradoxically, in both senses of "contain"--while expressing it. He excuses himself: "the coolest man on earth must in that situation have been warm." And through much of the 1790s Godwin may well be considered--again in two senses--the coolest man in England.

In another letter, from June, 1795, he is anything but cool; he is about as warmly flirtatious as can be, promising a woman with whom he has exchanged two letters that nothing will "escape[] through his lips or pass[] through his spectacles, other than the languishing words & glances of love." (120) He is an accomplished rake, intellectual-style: "you may repel my advances, but you shall never erase from my mind the sentiments with which the strength & richness of yours have impressed it." Lovelace couldn't have said it better. He is setting up an assignation for when he returns to London; one trembles for the lady in the sequel, which we shall probably never know.

But except for his letters to Mary Wollstonecraft, flirtation and courtship sound only a minor strain in Godwin's letters. The bulk of them radiate moral philosophy in action, making the personal political and the political personal with what might be called rationalistic fervor. Probably never before or since have rational expectations for the improvement of humankind reached such a high pitch. "The period in which I am now writing is a period from which the liberty and melioration of the world will take their date. Nothing can stop the dissemination of principle. No power on earth can shut the scene that has been opened" (87). Thus Godwin to Fox, in September of 1793, paraphrasing Fox's own words in Parliament and echoing the words of Tom Paine ("these are the times that try men's souls"), which Washington found so inspiring that he ordered them read to his troops at Valley Forge in 1776. To these expressions of optimism, uttered by men in or close to power, Wordsworth's more famous words ("Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive") are but a late literary echo, and already contain the seeds of their own qualification ("but to be young was very heaven"), as indicated by the full title of the excerpt under which they first appeared: "The French Revolution as it Appeared to Enthusiasts at its Commencement" (in Coleridge's The Friend of 1809).

In letter after letter, Godwin easily--often too easily--connects the particular advice or behavior he is recommending or censuring to his principled hopes and expectations for human improvement. He is what he says he is. We may smile at his Olympian postures, but at a distance of two hundred years, our smiles are more than a little rueful.

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