Through the Eyes of a Contemporary: Henry Crabb Robinson on William Godwin

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HENRY CRABB ROBINSON (1775-1867) DID NOT HAVE ANY TALENT as an artist himself, but his interest lies in his relationships with more creative men and women. In addition, he showed considerable abilities in other fields, including journalism, literary criticism and translation. He was also an accomplished expositor of philosophy, particularly of Kant and Schelling. He recorded his impressions in a diary that he kept regularly for more than fifty years, which can be seen as a literary form in its own right. A couple of entries reveal a consciousness of the techniques he employed:

> This year [1811] I began to keep a Diary. This relieves me from one difficulty, but raises another. Hitherto I have had some trouble in bringing back to my memory the more material incidents in the proper order. It was a labour of collection. Now I have to select.[1]

Many years later, in 1836, Crabb Robinson records that William Wordsworth, among other friends, had suggested that he 'ought to leave in writing, if not myself publish, some account of my life' (Sadler, III, 84). Happily, although Crabb Robinson did not publish it himself, later generations have published various extracts from his diary, reminiscences and letters. Through the efforts of these scholars, it is possible to trace Crabb Robinson's evolving relationship with and opinions of William Godwin (1756-1836). This article will look at the many-sided view of Godwin's life and career that Crabb Robinson provided. The areas examined will include Crabb Robinson's reactions to Godwin's various publications, his response to Godwin's politics, Godwin's attitude towards the theatre and the Godwins as booksellers. Finally, this article will trace Crabb Robinson's ultimately unsatisfactory relationship with Godwin, which led to a complete breakdown in their relations and the withdrawal of Crabb Robinson's friendship.[2]

Firstly, then, this article will look at Crabb Robinson's responses to the Godwin's writings in chronological order, although many of Godwin's novels especially were never mentioned at all by Crabb Robinson. Crabb Robinson had an early friendship and correspondence with another young man who was also employed as a clerk in a legal office in Colchester. In some of these letters to William Pattisson, Crabb Robinson revealed the great influence of Godwin

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[1] *Diaries, Reminiscences and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. Thomas Sadler, 3 vols (London: Macmillan), I, 318. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as 'Sadler'. I gratefully acknowledge James Vigus's comments on a draft of this article.

[2] For other sources for Godwin's reputation during his lifetime and posthumously, see Pamela Clemit, 'Godwin's Citations, 1783-2005' (2015) at: https://pamelaclemit.wordpress.com/2015/08/25/new-online-publication-godwins-citations-1783-2005/. See further Kenneth W. Graham, *William Godwin Reviewed: A Reception History 1783-1834* (New York: AMS, 2001).

on his adolescent mind.[3] In a letter dated 25 April 1795, Crabb Robinson discussed his own essay, 'The Profession of a Barrister', which imitated Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793) by division into titled sections. Section I was 'Morality as a Principle of Action'. Although Crabb Robinson denied taking anything from Godwin 'verbatim', he admitted, 'I claim no Originality of Idea. The greatest part of the reasoning is derived from Godwin and is an abridgment of his Morality.'[4]

In a letter written in the following month, May 1795, Crabb Robinson sketched out what sounds a rather medieval, romantic attitude to his mentor Godwin:

> I will like a Knight Errant of the Days of Chivalry maintain that the fair beautiful and peerless System of Godwin is superior to all other systems. And I will defend with my Sword and Buckler its incomparable Worth.
>
> (Morley, 842)

However, amongst other contemporaries Godwin was often nicknamed Don Quixote, so perhaps Crabb Robinson was conforming to this practice.

Elsewhere, Morley made the following comment about the influence of Godwin upon the young man:

> Crabb Robinson may be regarded as typical of the average young Englishman who came under Godwin's influence at the most impressionable time of life, after growing into manhood during the thunder of the French Revolution and the reactionary government in England which was due to its reverberations.[5]

In the spring of 1795, Crabb Robinson said of *Political Justice*, that it 'gave a turn to my mind, and in effect directed the whole course of my life' (Morley, 2-3). At this time, Crabb Robinson declares, he was 'a Jacobin' (Sadler, I, 17). Crabb Robinson had already relished Godwin's pamphlet defending the accused at the 'State Trials of Hardy, Horne Tooke and Thelwall' in 1794 (Sadler, I, 26). Crabb Robinson was willing to become a 'martyr' to *Political Justice*, for it soon became a reproach to be a 'follower' of Godwin because of his alleged atheism (Sadler, I, 31). In the hero-worshipping fashion of his youth, Crabb Robinson 'could not feel aversion or contempt towards anything that Godwin was' (Morley, 3).

The effect that *Political Justice* had on Crabb Robinson's character would surely have delighted Godwin, for his disciple wrote how 'No book ever made me feel more generously'. For the first time, Crabb Robinson realised that it

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[3] See further *Youth and Revolution in the 1790s: Letters of William Pattisson, Thomas Amyot and Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. Penelope J. Corfield and Chris Evans (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1996).

[4] *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers*, ed. Edith J. Morley, 3 vols (London: J.M. Dent, 1938), 841. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as 'Morley'.

[5] *Crabb Robinson in Germany 1800-1805*, ed. Edith J. Morley (London: OUP, 1929), 5. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *Crabb Robinson in Germany*.

was his duty not to pursue a selfish existence for himself alone, but to aim at conduct that would benefit the whole community. In his *Reminiscences*, Robinson stated that it was then that he adopted Godwin's idea of justice, an idea he retains (Morley, 3). Further, Crabb Robinson now believed himself 'qualified to be his [Godwin's] defender' (Morley, 3).

The young man's first defence of Godwin was printed in the *Cambridge Intelligencer*, edited by Benjamin Flower (Sadler, volume I, 32). Crabb Robinson identified himself as the author in a letter to his friend William Pattisson dated 17 November 1795. Here, '[w]ithout scruple', he admitted that in countering a letter by 'A.V.', he had adopted the pseudonym of '*Philo-Godwin*' (Morley, 842).[6] Though Crabb Robinson claimed he was acting as 'the defender, not the Eulogist of Godwin', he forthrightly denied that Godwin—'the fixed enemy of Kings and the eloquent defender of Republicanism'—would ever act with the government 'in the detestable project of enslaving the minds and bodies of the present race of men', or would accept payment to 'caricature the system of freedom and the Rights of Man.' Such suggestions indicate 'the blackest villainy.'

Crabb Robinson's defence is not entirely negative; he also explains some of the benefits of Godwin's system as they are presented in *Political Justice*. The diarist argues that the reader of Godwin's book will have his 'hatred of despotism', 'his love of virtue', and 'his habits of benevolence' all increased. As Whelan indicates:

> Robinson's letter was a serious reply to A.V.'s, defending Godwin on such points as 'gratitude as an evil positively', democracy and reform, equalisation of property and sexual relations between men and women.[7]

His next attempt at defending his political and philosophical idol was undertaken at a local book club meeting, which held regular debates. Before an audience of over eighty men and women Crabb Robinson gave what he believed to be a Godwinian reply to the question under debate: 'Is private affection inconsistent with universal benevolence?' Retrospectively he felt that his defence of Godwin was probably 'poor stuff, but I was very young, had great vivacity and an abundance of words' (Sadler, I, 36).

The young Crabb Robinson's final defence of *Political Justice* took the form of a letter written on 30 August 1798, addressed to Robert Hall. The latter had somewhat officiously it would seem, written to a mutual acquaintance that it was a disgrace for a Christian to admit a free-thinker like Crabb Robinson to his house. Crabb Robinson's revealing of Hall's extreme response to *Political Justice* suggests just how violently people responded to Godwin's book. Hall's response may be explained by the political situation of the time. Crabb Robinson's letter claims:

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[6] For the complete text of Robinson's article with analysis, see Timothy Whelan, 'Henry Crabb Robinson and Godwinism' in *The Wordsworth Circle*, 33:3 (Spring 2002), 58-69, from which the following quotations are drawn.

[7] Whelan, p. 60.

> I was told by a gentleman who knows you well, that so inveterate was your rage against Mr Godwin, that when any incident of unnatural depravity or abandoned profligacy was mentioned, your exclamation has been, 'I could not have supposed any man capable of such an action, except Godwin'. (Sadler, I, 45)

One can only sympathise with Crabb Robinson's comment that had anybody else made this remark, it would have provoked his 'great contempt' for him. Again, Robinson's letter catches the extreme disapproval many of his contemporaries felt for *Political Justice*, when he declared that the 'sprinkling' he has felt for his championing of this book 'is but a spray of the torrent cast on poor Godwin' (Sadler, I, 46).

Before examining Godwin's novels from Crabb Robinson's perspective, it is interesting to look at his attitude towards the older man during his first stay in Germany (1800-1805). Crabb Robinson told his brother in a letter of 1803: 'I came to Germany because I did not know what to do with myself in England' (*Crabb Robinson in Germany*, 131), though James Vigus has pointed out that his motive was not altogether negative: as he subsequently reminisced, 'I came to Germany merely because I understood it to be a country in which there was a rising literature.'[8] Here Crabb Robinson fell into the company of young intellectuals, mostly students, where he pursued the new Kantian philosophy as well as German literature.[9] He also observed the conditions of the working classes, and after staying overnight with an impoverished family, was reminded of 'an excellent Dissertation by Godwin on what he calls "The Murder of Intellect" by the Condition imposed on the lower classes by Society if not by Nature' (*Crabb Robinson in Germany*, 44). In March 1801, Crabb Robinson noted that 'my approbation of the great leading doctrines of Godwin are every day strengthened' (*Ibid*, 62).

Crabb Robinson suggested that 'Godwin is an excellent bridge between the two System[s]' of philosophy, English and Germany (*Crabb Robinson in Germany*, 15 September 1802, 113); again, Godwin is the author 'whose System is most easily to be reconciled with the German Improvements' (*Crabb Robinson in Germany*, 21 April 1805, 166). In between these two dates, on 30 January 1804, Crabb Robinson wrote, after meeting the French translator of *Political Justice*, Benjamin Constant, that although certain of his views had altered, 'I am still attached to Godwin'. He was pleased to convey Constant's reply to his brother Thomas Robinson:

> He said he had translated it but that he held it his duty to repress the publication of it at a time when the current was so strongly running

[8] Quoted in James Vigus, 'Literary Reporter or Dissenting Autobiographer? Editing Henry Crabb Robinson's *Reminiscences*' (2014), http://f-origin.hypotheses.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/2007/files/2014/06/Texte-Vigus.pdf.

[9] Compare James Vigus's introduction to Henry Crabb Robinson, *Essays on Kant, Schelling and German Aesthetics* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2010).

> against liberal Sentiments—The Notions of Godwin sayd he, would be but a handle to libel liberty & free opinions but I will publish it soon or later as I think it one of the Masterpieces of our Age.
>
> (*Crabb Robinson in Germany*, 135)

His responses to Godwin's novels (except for *Mandeville*) are limited and many of the titles never appear (at least in the Sadler and Morley selections). He evidently was more interested in Godwin's philosophical and political ideas, as expressed in treatises or pamphlets. However, he recorded his initial reading of *Caleb Williams*, published in 1794, in January and February 1795. Thus, it appears that Crabb Robinson actually read *Caleb Williams* before *Political Justice*, although as we have seen, he discovered both in the first half of 1795. In his *Reminiscences,* he records that he had 'an unusual portion of pleasure in reading works of genius' (Morley, 1). Although retrospectively he wrote that he had 'strange notions of genius it seems', he originally included in this category *Caleb Williams*. Over thirty years later, in 1827, Crabb Robinson wrote that he re-read *Caleb Williams* 'with unexpected pleasure'. Nevertheless, he contrasts his two readings of 1795 and 1827: 'Thirty years ago, I idolised the book, now I enjoyed it'. In 1827, he ventures to criticise the novel, including what he considered its affected style, exaggerated feelings and lack of dramatic talent. Robinson also denied that it gave a fair picture of the upper and lower classes. Comments on the legal system as presented in the novel, he roundly condemned as 'unjust and false'. Nevertheless, Crabb Robinson also finds much to praise, including his impression that it 'interests from the eloquence and moral dignity which pervade the whole'. Crabb Robinson even claims to find a sense of religion in it, arguing that while Godwin does not accept 'a personal God' he 'worshipped a divine principle—the spirit of justice and truth' (Morley, 345-346).

In 1799, he read Godwin's second full-length novel, *St Leon*, published that year, very different from *Caleb Williams*, and which appealed less to him. He does not include it among the books that he had read with 'the most zest', merely commenting: 'Late in the year also Godwin's *St Leon*, a book of the day' (Morley, 7). Although *St Leon* was a historical novel, Crabb Robinson thought it would only interest contemporary readers.

In 1809, Godwin published *Essays on Sepulchres*. Crabb Robinson does not refer to this book in his 1809 diary, but over fifty years later, in 1851, records reading this work to amuse himself. He says it failed to arouse the 'old pleasure'. This may quite possibly reflect on Crabb Robinson himself rather than on the *Essays*. Later in his life, when his respect for Godwin as a man and as a writer had declined, Crabb Robinson condemned *Essays on Sepulchres* for their 'incurable blot' of 'gross materialism'. He continues: 'How monstrous to affirm that every particle of mould has once thought, and that the ashes are the real man! This is as bad physics as metaphysics' (Sadler, III, 373).

There is no mention in the published selections of Crabb Robinson's diary of Godwin's third full-length novel *Fleetwood* (1805). After a lengthy interval,

Godwin published another novel, *Mandeville* (1817). This received much commentary in Crabb Robinson's diary. He recorded that he was pleased to hear from Charles Lamb 'that Godwin's *Mandeville* is written with a force of composition not inferior to his earlier novels'. Lamb also—mistakenly—told Crabb Robinson that the story of *Mandeville* was based on Joanna Baillie's *Hate*; it actually has strong echoes from her play *De Monfort*. Lamb further informed Crabb Robinson that though the story was uninteresting 'the book manifests no decline of talent'. Crabb Robinson generously concludes: 'This gives me great pleasure, for it is mournful to witness the decay of genius. I read the preface: there is a dignified tone in it which is very respectable' (Morley, 212).

Later diary entries record Crabb Robinson's responses to *Mandeville* as he progresses with his reading through the novel. He was impressed with the opening scenes in Ireland and felt that Godwin understood the strength of different religious opinions. Still reading volume one of the novel, he was pleased to discover that Godwin 'retains his equal style and eloquence'. However, he did not find the second volume of *Mandeville* as interesting as the first. He thinks it retains the same 'moral fervour' but finds the eponymous hero's uncle Audley, the subject of a lengthy digression, a more interesting character than Mandeville himself (Morley, 215). Before embarking on the third volume, he praised the novel to the author himself. Godwin prepared Crabb Robinson for an incomplete tale, or, at least, one that 'does stop short of what he had originally planned'. Accordingly, he commented that it is 'not finished' and that 'Certainly if Godwin has health he ought to go on with the work' (Morley, 216). Nevertheless, the diarist found fault with the novel's main characters: Clifford is not 'rendered sufficiently enviable to the reader's imagination to justify Mandeville's hatred'; Henrietta is not shown so much as the reader is told that she is 'lovely and admirable'. Further, her 'homilies' are 'insufferably tedious'. Crabb Robinson even feels that a third person narrator would have been able to create Mandeville's character more consistently, avoiding the clash of 'passion' and 'philosophic contemplation'. However, Crabb Robinson's conclusion is favourable to *Mandeville:* 'With these exceptions, and others of less importance, it is a curious book, and not unworthy Godwin's earlier days' (Morley, 216).

Before reading *Mandeville,* however, Godwin consulted Crabb Robinson about the possibility of publishing the novel in France and Germany first, which the author thought would increase his financial rewards for his work. Crabb Robinson felt that he could not encourage this plan and told Godwin that the Germans were poor and did not pay high sums to original writers. Crabb Robinson kept to himself the knowledge that Godwin had no great popularity in Germany. Although he agreed to help Godwin, Crabb Robinson was plainly reluctant to get involved in this transaction (Morley, 206). Two days later, he visited Godwin again accompanied by the novelist Ludwig Tieck, who was more hopeful about the prospects for *Mandeville* in Germany. Tieck proposed that Crabb Robinson should pursue these negotiations on his trip to

the continent, who evidently agreed, though he confided to his diary: 'I dread the burthen and the responsibility towards a man somewhat exigeant and not easily satisfied' (Morley, 208). Presumably, he reconsidered the matter and decided he did not want any involvement in the project, for eight days later he visited Godwin again and recommended him to ask Tieck to deal with the selling of *Mandeville* to a German bookseller (Morley, 209).

In 1818, Godwin had produced another piece of writing, this time 'a very small pamphlet', *Letters of Advice to a Young American*. On returning from his employment on the barristers' circuit, Crabb Robinson visited Godwin in April 1818 and was presented with a copy of the pamphlet. Having read it 'with pleasure' that night in bed, Crabb Robinson judged it to be 'a sensible letter'. He noted that in the list of books recommended by Godwin there was only one title that had 'an infidel tendency—Hume on *Human Nature*', which fact he found 'remarkable' (Morley, 221).

Overall, Crabb Robinson appears to have preferred Godwin's non-fiction to his fiction. Certainly, he was stimulated and impressed by Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Population* written in 1820. This was a reply to Malthus' writings on population, and Crabb Robinson wrote, 'seemed written in his [Godwin's] old spirit'. Despite the fact that he is not as much in sympathy with Godwin's ideas as he had once been, the philosopher's zeal for his 'peculiar speculations' are still acceptable to Crabb Robinson who retains his belief 'in the moral dignity of his system' (Morley, 263).[10] Over a month later, the diarist was still pondering the *Enquiry Concerning Population*, and was convinced that Godwin had disproved the arguments of Malthus. From his concluding remarks on this work it is apparent that Crabb Robinson continued to be attracted by Godwin's ideas: Godwin's 'conclusion is that though there is a tendency to increase among men, it is not so strong as to alarm a provident and benevolent government or men who have confidence in the perfectibility of our nature' (Morley, 263-264). Unfortunately, despite the fact that Godwin's reply to Malthus's arguments had received much praise, it had not sold well, as Crabb Robinson was aware.

Another book that impressed Crabb Robinson, as reflecting the author's own political and philosophical values, was Godwin's *History of the Commonwealth of England*, a four-volume work published between 1824 and 1828. Godwin took pains to thoroughly research the period and asked Crabb Robinson to find some information about the appointment of judges during the Commonwealth. Crabb Robinson conscientiously researched the period and supplied Godwin with the information he was seeking; indeed, it 'doubtless contains more than he wants' (Morley, 311).

Two years later, in 1826, Crabb Robinson was reading the second volume of Godwin's *History of the Commonwealth*. In his opinion, Godwin displayed 'the merit of great boldness' not only by exposing the character of Charles I but fearlessly declaring his republican sympathies. From this period onwards,

[10] Godwin and Malthus's debate on population was a long-running one, dating from 1797, when Malthus challenged some of Godwin's statements in *The Enquirer*.

he was increasingly critical of Godwin's works, and was no longer on visiting terms with his former hero, which may have soured his reactions to the *History of the Commonwealth*. Certainly, his conclusion about this massive work was not kind or positive: 'Either, however, my taste is mightily altered or Godwin has fallen very far from his former station as a moral writer' (Morley, 338-339).[11]

The last two works of Godwin discussed by Crabb Robinson in his diary were written in the 1830s. Crabb Robinson's comments rather cruelly mix literary judgment with his own view of the effects of old age on authors. Thus, *Thoughts on Man* (1831) is dismissed as 'a book of senilities'. As such, it would never have had the kind of influence on Crabb Robinson that Godwin's early works had. It is 'full of commonplaces', and has nothing original or 'even well expressed'. Crabb Robinson draws his own moral from his perusal of *Thoughts on Man*: 'To such do writers come at last if they continue their exercises beyond the seventieth year' (Morley, 418). This warning was probably never communicated to Godwin, and two years later, he published his last novel, *Deloraine*, about which Crabb Robinson was utterly damning: although Godwin retains his youthful style, 'the vigour of the thought is gone—it seemed to me mere words, words!' Unless other readers of *Deloraine* are able to assure him that it improves as he progresses, he will not even continue to read it himself (Morley, 423). Evidently, by this time he had shifted his support to the younger generation of writers, ironically to Godwin's daughter Mary Shelley and his son-in-law, P B Shelley. Crabb Robinson records his reactions to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *Lodore* and increasingly admires Shelley's poetry, much of which was only posthumously published. His comment on *Frankenstein* shows how highly he once regarded Godwin: it was written 'by Godwin's daughter and to a great degree the inheritor of his genius' (Morley, 419).

As Crabb Robinson became more critical of Godwin's, he also became more disparaging of his former idol's political opinions. *Political Justice* was a work of Godwin's maturity; by contrast, Crabb Robinson as a teenager had been bowled over by it at a time before his adult values were entirely formed. Thus it is not surprising that while Godwin adhered more or less completely to the political and philosophical ideas formulated in *Political Justice* (apart from his later conversion to the importance of the human affections), Crabb Robinson rejected some of his youthful allegiance to Godwin. Repeatedly in his record of Godwin's political beliefs, he reveals that it is he himself and not Godwin who is the turncoat. An outstanding example of this is to be found in the two men's reactions to unfolding events in France. While Godwin retained his attachment to the French and their experiment of being a republic, later also supporting Bonaparte, Crabb Robinson recanted on all of these. In the summer of 1815, Bonaparte returned to France from his exile in Elba—an event to which the two Englishmen reacted very differently. (Ironically, the

[11] The rise and decline in the social relationship between Crabb Robinson and Godwin can be traced on the online Godwin diary graph at http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/.

discussions of this event took place on 22 June, when the Battle of Waterloo had already been fought on 18 June). Not yet aware of this battle and only aware of the resurgence of Bonaparte, Crabb Robinson writes: it 'awakened all my patriotic fears, for I had lost all my predilections for France, and nearly all for democracy' (Morley, 171).

By contrast, Godwin was 'quite impassioned' in his wish for Bonaparte to be victorious. He hopes any allies who might enter France at war with that country would die, 'and affirmed that no man who did not abandon all moral principles and love of liberty could wish otherwise.' Godwin argued that foreign countries should not interfere in the domestic politics of any other country. He refused to accept Crabb Robinson's argument that the allies wanted merely to free the French people from their own government's repression. Godwin feared that if the Bourbon dynasty was re-established so might their despotic rule return. Thus, Godwin 'would on no account have the allies successful'. Crabb Robinson thought increasing liberty for the French people was a greater danger (Sadler, I, 489-490). His apostasy from Godwinian standards is plainly expressed: 'And I no longer imagine, as I once did, that it is only monarchs and governments which can be unjust and love war' (Sadler, I, 491). The following day news of the Battle of Waterloo was common knowledge in England. Crabb Robinson recorded that only three of the men he knew were in low spirits at the allied victory—one of these was Godwin. With some assumption of superiority and condescension, Crabb Robinson accepts that these three men's 'intentions and motives are respectable' but arise from 'mistaken theory, and an inveterate hatred of old names' (Sadler, I, 491). However, it has to be acknowledged that Godwin was in a minority in retaining his original position after the failure of the French Revolution.

Crabb Robinson became increasingly alienated not only from Godwin himself but also the latter's political friends. This appears in his diary entry for 4 February 1818. On this occasion when he called on Godwin, he met some of Godwin's friends, whom the diarist describes as 'a party of originals'. Although the names of these other visitors no longer convey much to the reader, Crabb Robinson identified them all as Jacobins. Once again, the diarist makes it plain that it is he who has changed his politics and not Godwin: 'I was thrown back some ten years in my feelings. The party would have suited me very well about that time'. He claims that he has 'not grown altogether out of it', but he is clearly experiencing the company as an outsider rather than a potential member of their group (Sadler, II, 86).

As a man deeply fascinated by Godwin, it is to be expected that Crabb Robinson should be interested in the writer's comments on past and contemporary authors. Despite his explicit denial of this ('I do not often quote Godwin's critical opinions': Morley, 66), such information is to be found in the diary. Further, it is quite often Crabb Robinson himself who draws these ideas on writers from Godwin through his own observations and comments, but he also gives equal weight to his companion's views. Godwin on S.T. Coleridge

still makes fascinating reading.[12] He severely criticised Coleridge's 1811 Shakespeare lectures as being inferior to his conversation, which always suggested a vast knowledge. By contrast, Coleridge's lectures made Godwin feel that the lecturer was 'grossly ignorant' (Morley, 55). On a later occasion, Godwin spoke disrespectfully of Coleridge, denying that he could 'think with steadiness and effect on any one subject' (Morley, 92). This asperity may be partly attributed to the fact that Coleridge failed to supply free tickets to Godwin's daughters to his lectures! In 1813 Godwin condemned what he considered the 'vulgar hypocrisy' of Coleridge' (Morley, 127).

However, if we are interested in Godwin's views on Shakespeare, we are indebted to Coleridge's lectures for provoking them. Taking a modern view and differing from both Coleridge and Charles Lamb, Godwin rejected the idea that Shakespeare's plays were intended to be read rather than performed on a stage. This view may have been prevalent also among Godwin's less illustrious contemporaries, but Godwin did not hesitate to declare it as 'absolutely false. No plays but Shakespeare's deserve to be represented, so well are they fitted for performance' (Morley, 55).

Godwin also rejected the idea that Shakespeare excelled in the creation of heroes in his tragedies and histories. As an instance of this, Godwin cited Julius Caesar: 'Shakespeare meant to make Julius Caesar a great man, though he failed in the attempt'. Robinson responded that one line in the play ('The coward dies many times before his death') was 'ostentatious bravado'. Godwin conceded this point, but suggested that the bombastic expressions of Julius Caesar were intended by Shakespeare 'to be heroic' (Morley, 66).

Godwin's literary opinions are usually carefully considered utterances on past texts. It is true that he discusses such minor and now almost forgotten contemporaries as Mrs Barbauld and Miss Aikin, but this is rare. He praised books, which still survive such as *The Fables of the Bees* by Mandeville (1670-1733). With the addition of William Hazlitt as Godwin's guest, the conversation traced the leading ideas of Mandeville's text to an essay by Montaigne entitled, 'One man's gain, another's loss'. Crabb Robinson tells us that both Godwin and Hazlitt 'expressed themselves very strongly in admiration of Montaigne' (Morley, 179). Godwin evidently read widely in past and present literature in both the English and foreign languages.

A literary idol of Godwin was John Milton. One of the company 'declared *Paradise Lost* to be the worst poem in the language'. He continued, to condemn Milton's attitude towards women, declaring that Milton 'was incapable of a delicate or tender sentiment towards woman.' What Crabb Robinson described as these 'heresies' was not made 'palatable by either originality or pleasantry'. Godwin immediately responded, defending Milton with 'zeal' (Sadler, I, 421).

Godwin was able to see fault in Crabb Robinson's favourite poet and idol William Wordsworth. Godwin was 'not satisfied with Wordsworth's *Letter on*

[12] This relationship is discussed at length in Pamela Clemit, 'Coleridge and Godwin: A Literary Friendship' (2015): https://wordsworth.org.uk/blog/2015/05/19/coleridge-and-godwin-a-literary-friendship/.

Burns'. Crabb Robinson attributed this disharmony between Godwin and Wordsworth to their different approaches to their writing on similar subjects. This distinction of 1816 helps identify Crabb Robinson's own approach to his records of literary men and women:

> Godwin would have written an acute disputation on the evil or good of saying all the evil of great men, which can be said of them with truth. Wordsworth's pamphlet develops a generous feeling only in their favour, and would cover as with a mantle the infirmities of men of great intellectual powers who have rendered themselves objects of admiration to the public. (Morley, 184)

Crabb Robinson admired Wordsworth at this period far more than he did Godwin, but it is Godwin rather than Wordsworth whose method he adopts when writing about great people. Thus, Crabb Robinson does not shrink from detailing all Godwin's 'pecuniary embarrassments' as he expresses it, or the alcoholism of Charles Lamb. Crabb Robinson's approach in fact anticipates the modern 'warts and all' approach of the biographer, rather than the hagiography which came to be common among nineteenth-century records of great lives. This may partly account for Crabb Robinson's continuing popularity as a diarist.

As well as being fond of literary discussion, he was also an inveterate theatregoer. Although Godwin went to the theatre less often, (perhaps because of his 'pecuniary embarrassments') Crabb Robinson does record discussion of plays and actors with Godwin, though unfortunately there is no discussion of the four plays Godwin wrote. However, Mrs Godwin once told Crabb Robinson that for Godwin's final play, *Faulkener* (1807), the playwright had reckoned he would clear £800. On this expectation the Godwins had moved house, but unhappily Mrs Godwin concluded: 'We lost £800 by that play' (Morley, 118).

An example of the early growing division between the two men, which was to become a total breach later, is their different responses to the actor William Henry West Betty (1794-1874). Betty had been a famous child actor but he did not find the transition to performing as an adult easy. As well as appearing in such Shakespearean roles as Hamlet, Richard III and Macbeth, he also performed roles in such contemporary plays as Elizabeth Inchbald's *Lover's Vows* (which reappeared most famously in Austen's *Mansfield Park*).

On 3 November 1812, Godwin went to see Betty perform on the stage as a young adult of twenty-one. He was impressed by Betty 'though he does not think he will be a Garrick'.[13] On 14 November 1812, Crabb Robinson and his father went to Covent Garden Theatre to see Betty in *Douglas*, written by one J. Home. Crabb Robinson thought he had never heard a worse voice and found Betty's face repugnant. Only his 'audible whisper' impressed in scenes of

[13] *The London Theatre 1811-1866 Selections from the Diary of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. Eluned Brown (London: The Society for Theatre Research, 1966), 48. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as 'Brown'.

tenderness. Surprisingly he concluded, 'And though I saw nothing to admire I saw a great deal to approve in the laboured propriety of his acting' (Brown, 48). Nevertheless, he could not coincide with Godwin's opinion on Betty's acting. Apparently, Godwin's comments on Betty's acting were more civil than most people's and he insisted that the actor already excelled at declaiming. After seeing Betty perform in *J d'Egville* and J.P. Kemble's *Alexander the Great*, Crabb Robinson expressed violent objection to his acting. Noting, 'I certainly cannot feel with Godwin', he went on memorably to condemn Betty as 'A fair fat ranting screaming fellow who might much better represent a Persian Eunuch than a Macedonian conqueror'. But he did concede that the play was a poor vehicle for Betty (Brown, 49).

Four years later, in December 1816, Crabb Robinson was a spectator of the dramatized version of Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, adapted by George Colman as *The Iron Chest*. (Incidentally, it of interest to note that later in the century Betty himself acted in this play based on Godwin's novel). Colman surely took his title from one of the book's most memorable scenes. Crabb Robinson found the play of 'little merit' and all the 'psychological interest' had been created by Godwin. Colman had added 'nothing that is excellent'. The subplot, or 'underplot', which Colman did add, was both 'insipid' and not properly connected to the main plot (Brown, 74). Godwin did not receive any payment for the dramatized *Caleb Williams*. Playwriting, together with all other forms of employment failed to free the Godwins from their 'pecuniary embarrassments'.

The Godwins' other attempt to make themselves financially secure involved setting up the Juvenile Library. Godwin developed this as another linked career as a bookseller and printer of children's books. It was run under the name of the second Mrs Godwin, Mary Jane Clairmont, as Godwin was too unpopular with many of his contemporaries because of Political Justice. Both Godwins wrote children's tales, but Mrs Godwin more commonly translated stories from the French for juvenile readers. When Crabb Robinson first became personally acquainted with Godwin in 1810, Godwin was following this career as his regular employment. Crabb Robinson was soon made aware by the Godwins that though their books were aimed at children, it was the parents who purchased them and they were thus the ones that had to be satisfied. Thus in 1812 Crabb Robinson recorded a visit to the Godwins when they expressed their admiration of 'Miss Flaxman's designs for Robin Goodfellow', but told him that 'they would not sell' (Morley, 69).

It is therefore possible to trace the relationship between Godwin and Crabb Robinson over many years, but ultimately it was a friendship that failed and eventually ceased altogether. Crabb Robinson entered this explanation in his diary:

> My early admiration of his works led me to form an acquaintance with him which I regretted but from wh. I did not withdraw till I had suffered largely both substantially & in spirits. His pecuniary distresses seemed to

have entirely blunted his moral sense.[14]

Robinson states that after a particularly egregious piece of financial chicanery on Godwin's part, 'I ultimately declined all future intercourse with him' (*Blake, etc*, 77). Indeed, there are dozens of references to the Godwins' 'pecuniary embarrassments' in the diary.

However, more generally Crabb Robinson had felt his relationship with Godwin to be unsatisfactory almost from the beginning. Initially he seemed willing to endure Godwin for the advantages of meeting other people there: 'I now and then saw interesting persons at his house; indeed, I saw none but remarkable persons there' (Morley, 14). Simultaneously, Godwin 'made me feel my inferiority unpleasantly' and 'tried to make use of me with others' (Morley, 14). The following year, Crabb Robinson complained to Mrs Godwin that her husband often behaved indelicately by forcing him to either say or hear things which the younger man found offensive, such as criticising his friends (Morley, 56). In 1812, Godwin told the diarist that he generally affronted him during every other visit. This was unpleasant enough, and it was not helped by the fact that it was impossible to know whether Godwin was jesting (Morley, 105). On numerous occasions, Godwin was rude and argumentative.[15]

The relationship could be ambiguous and not entirely negative on the part of the diarist. Quite often he seems to have felt pity and sympathy for Godwin. For example, he and Coleridge sympathised with what they considered an unjust review of Godwin's four-volume *Life of Chaucer*, *the Early English Poet* (Morley, 28). Again, both the diarist and Coleridge felt strongly about formerly extravagant admirers of Godwin who had transformed themselves into bitter opponents (Sadler, volume I, 324). Crabb Robinson was also present when Lady Mackintosh apologised to Madame de Stael for Godwin's behaviour: 'he had been hardly treated, and almost driven out of society; he was living in retirement' (Sadler, volume I, 421). The diarist recorded on this occasion that the company generally supported Lady Mackintosh's view.

Then again, Godwin could sometimes be agreeable and friendly and these occasions disarmed Robinson, such as those recorded on 25 November 1812, and later, on 28 November 1823. Additionally, while disapproving of the Godwins' perpetual financial difficulties, Crabb Robinson felt concerned for the anxiety it caused them and even contributed to funds raised among their friends. In February 1815, Crabb Robinson remarked that the Godwins 'are, indeed, objects of great pity' (Morley, 163).

Despite his ambivalent feelings, Crabb Robinson eventually decided that he wanted nothing further to do with the Godwins and discontinued his visits to their home. In 1833, Crabb Robinson recorded an accidental encounter with Godwin, after a ten-year estrangement. The diarist described his former friend

[14] *Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb etc, being Selections from the Remains of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. Edith J. Morley (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 77. Henceforth: *Blake, etc.*

[15] A few references to examples of this in the diary are recorded on 10 June 1813, 4 July 1813, and 10 November 1813; and from a later period: 27 February 1819 and 16 May 1824.

as 'poor old William Godwin, the worn-out philosopher who survived his philosophy.' The sight of Godwin undoubtedly troubled Crabb Robinson, which was 'melancholy'. Godwin was now considered as 'One of the most signal of intellectual failures' (Morley, 426).

Although Crabb Robinson made a few comments about Godwin after the older man's death, the observations recorded above in 1833 seem to represent Crabb Robinson's conclusions about Godwin. It seems a sad summing up of a relationship with a man whom he had earlier idolised. During the period when their lives crossed, Godwin interested Crabb Robinson as a writer on politics and philosophy, as a novelist, playwright and essayist. Of all of these, he left a record in his massive diary and other writings. Ultimately, Godwin's life of continuous debt and his often-abrasive personality alienated Crabb Robinson. Now that much time has passed, the republication of Godwin's major work reveals that Crabb Robinson's final judgment must be challenged. The life of Godwin may not have been inspiring but much of his writing is.