Chapter note 1: literature

This first of six chapter notes introduces our editorial procedures for this hypertext edition of Mary Shelley’s *Life of William Godwin* and invites the reader to study the congruence of those procedures with the unfinished text composed by Mary Shelley between 1836 and 1840.

It is evident from the manuscript *Life of William Godwin* that Mary Shelley was preoccupied throughout the four-year period of writing by two competing projects, one a biographical and personal memoir, the other (and perhaps the dominant) project an editorial redemption of Godwin’s written oeuvre, to revive his flagging reputation for literary eminence. Both aims were loosely accommodated in the formula of *Memoirs and Correspondence of the late ...,* as specified in the contract signed with publisher Henry Colburn by the widow Mary Jane Godwin and Godwin’s literary adviser John Hobart Caunter on 19 July 1836. But there was reason to doubt that a candid account of Godwin’s political and religious ideas would be well received by early Victorian readers, or that his trenchant private letters would accord with their notions of literary merit. Mary Shelley’s handling of her materials illustrates the peculiar dilemma of a daughter-biographer who is also a literary executor. Filial duty and editorial accuracy serve opposed interests.

As recently as 1832, the elderly Madame d’Arblay née Fanny Burney had published a *Memoirs* of her late father Dr Charles Burney, and John Wilson Croker, the anonymous chief reviewer for the *Quarterly* had had this to say:

Madame d’Arblay gives a hint that the original correspondence of Dr Burney is destined to the flames. We venture to intreat that this design may not be executed; the extracts from his own pen are ... the most satisfactory parts of these volumes, and without rating very highly the importance of Dr Burney to the general literature of the country, we think that the public would be glad to see a good life of him. ... Madame d’Arblay, with consummate art—or a confusion of ideas which has had the same effect as consummate art, --conceals from her readers, and
perhaps from herself, that it is her own Memoirs, and not those of her father that she has been writing; and we confess that we have a strong suspicion, that it was because her father’s auto-biography did not fulfil this object, that it has been suppressed.

The reviewer de-authorises d’Arblay’s book and calls for a biographer who will “give out” Dr Burney in the original, as a man endeared to public memory by abilities not above the middle-rank. This will rescue Burney’s writings from ‘the flames’, and guarantee them safe passage to posterity under the Quarterly’s influential imprimatur. When Frances d’Arblay herself died eight years later, the same reviewer returned to the attack on ‘that strange display of egotism which Madame D’Arblay was pleased to call ‘Memoirs of her Father’. It is quite possible that Mary Shelley and Godwin both took note of the 1833 review. From the start of her work on Godwin’s life and writings, Mary Shelley takes pains to subordinate her editorial persona to Godwin’s authorial presence. And if she invites the judgment that she is giving out Godwin in his own unembellished words, she is still cautious enough to preselect them.

A note attached to Godwin’s will had explicitly instructed Mary Shelley to publish his long-pondered work on Christian theism, titled in draft The Genius of Christianity Revealed. There was evident reluctance on Shelley’s part to publish a work that would so offend orthodox religionists and, as she put it in 1837 ‘to meet the misery that must be mine if I become the object of scurrility and attacks’ (Bennett ii, 281). A draft letter to John Hobart Caunter¹ and a memorandum (probably to Caunter) in May 1840 (see my chapter note to 5: women) refer to a one-volume work, combining Mary Shelley’s commentary and letters to and from Godwin, the number of letters still to be decided. But this announcement of a single volume only might be a decision taken faute de mieux.

¹ Bennett ii, 268, n1.
In late 1836, Shelley embarked on the *Life of William Godwin* as a compensatory exercise for her suppression of the restive *Genius*. The split that I have posited between her two projects, the one a vindication of Godwin the man and her father, the other a renovation of his literary reputation, colluded in the truncation or *askesis* of both man and writings at the approximate date December 1799, when Godwin published *St Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century*, enshrining Mary Wollstonecraft’s image in its portrait of the ideal wife and mother, Marguerite de Damville.

Shelley’s procedures take their lead first of all from Godwin’s writings, published and unpublished. Our six chapters follow this lead from Chapter 1: *literature* (his early works listed from 1773 and published from 1783 to 1784) through to Chapter 6: *writing* (his unpublished letters to Harriet Lee in 1798 and his novel *St Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* published in December 1799). The arrangement in chapters is our editorial construct, as is the decision to group all the materials under six thematic headings. There is no extant draft or outline of Mary Shelley’s original plan of the whole biography. Nor do any of the Abinger papers convey information as to which and how many chapter divisions Shelley wanted to make. Our Chapter 2: *politics* carries Godwin’s political journalism from 1785 through the intense two-year period 1791-1793 of preparing and publishing his major work, *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, and concludes on his fortieth birthday in March 1796. Mary Shelley almost certainly designed to shape several chapters from these rich materials. Again, as will appear in our Chapter 5: *women*, Mary Shelley indicates that she planned to include a selection of Godwin’s correspondence of 1798, in a separate section from that treating of the death of Mary Wollstonecraft in September 1797, ‘which set a dark seal upon that year’ (c.606/4). And we have not located those letters or that portion of MWS script for inclusion in this edition. The correspondence between Godwin and Harriet Lee in 1798, in our chapter 6: *writing*, would not answer at all to the purpose.
Mark Philp’s pathbreaking 1992 introduction\(^2\) to Godwin’s *Autobiographies* reports (MP 58-9), that the papers of the 3-chapter ‘Autobiography 1756-1772’ (MP 3-38), in b.226/1, and the ‘Autobiographical fragments 1772-1796’ (MP 39-51), in b.226/2, bear watermarks of differing dates between 1796 and 1819. The Bodleian shelf numbers correspond to the mistaken supposition that Godwin followed a consecutive chronology for his autobiography-in-progress. That had not been his habit and was not the path he took in this case either. Godwin composed the 3-chapter manuscript ‘Autobiography 1756-1772’ (in b.226/1) in two segments in reverse chronological order. What Philp calls ‘the main section’, from his birth in 1756 to the death of his father in 1771 and his entry into Hoxton College in 1772, ‘was probably written in the last two years of the century’ (MP 58). But ‘the opening section on Godwin’s family background’ was not written until after 1807. There is only one indication in MWS script that she had read this least interesting of all portions of the manuscript, and that is by default when she itemises the chapter heads of ‘Chapter II Continuation of autobiography’ (Duke reel 2, Page 13), presumably after she had itemised Chapter I, now missing from the folders of MWS script.

Godwin’s first venture into writing his own lifestory between 1772 and 1796 is at the core of MWS script. Philp believes that Godwin began on the ‘Autobiographical fragments 1772-1796’ (in b.226/2) some time in 1798, and carried the summary story up to 1796, at the time of his fortieth birthday, when he attended Lord Lauderdale’s parties for Whig supporters, along with ‘Mrs Wollstonecraft’ and other friends (MP 51). These autobiographical passages are all the more suggestive for Mary Shelley’s biographical project in that they take the form of laconic summaries, an alternative expression of the daily jottings in the journals. The crucial twenty-one months January 1796 to September 1797, that saw ‘Mrs Wollstonecraft’ become ‘Mrs Imlay’

\(^2\) William Godwin, *Collected Novels and Memoirs*, i, ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1992), [MP]. Philp notes that MWS transcriptions in c.606/1 and c.606/2, of the fragments for 1781, 1782, 1790, 1791, 1792,
and then ‘femme Godwin,’ and ended with her death twelve days after daughter Mary’s birth, that period Godwin does not cover autobiographically, although writing it biographically in the Wollstonecraft Memoirs. See 5: women.

A subsidiary consideration for Mary Shelley was Godwin’s journalistic habit of dating the affective highs and lows of his career to epochal turning points. The autobiographical fragments spanning the years 1772 to 1796, each carries an annual date of identification. This identification is somewhat misleading as the fragments were all composed in retrospect. But Mary Shelley adopts these annual markers with enthusiasm. And this not altogether reliable technique of compiling historical annales has served us as a provisional guide through the scattered scripts of the Life of William Godwin. If it be conceded that our six-chapter plan does not directly represent Mary Shelley’s authorial intentions, it might also be allowed that chronological representation of Godwin’s writings between 1773 and the end of 1799—including his retrospective revisitations of each of those years in later memoranda or revisions to the published texts—is critically congruent with her realised intentions in the script.

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The Bodleian library has located its holdings of Abinger Shelley-Godwin manuscripts in manila folders labelled with shelf deposit numbers. The Bodleian folders’ division of manuscripts by chronology and handwriting spans the writings of two generations of the Godwin-Shelley family, and two periods of English history: London in Godwin’s first forty years 1756 to 1800; and London in the four years 1836 to 1840, when Mary Shelley, assisted by Mary Jane Godwin, worked at a single-volume Life of William Godwin, covering events in Godwin’s life before 1800. A set of six manila folders Dep. c.606/1-5 [see *Bodleian folder rubrics] describe

and part of that for 1788, are now the sole extant version
their contents as “Material for a biography of William Godwin”, sometimes but not always naming Mary Shelley as biographer or compiler.

The manuscript archive is replete with material clues like watermarks and handwriting, and legible signs such as page numbers, dates and signatures. In our edition a shelf deposit number appears at the left margin above the page of script, changing each time the page of script is located in a different folder. By playing off material clues from paper and handwriting against thematic continuities that cross over the arbitrary folder ‘line’ we have been able to link up sequences of the papers now scattered into separate Bodleian folders.

Our transcriptions from the Bodleian MSS are supplemented from the set of microfilms of the Abinger Shelley-Godwin papers on loan to us from the Library of Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. The ‘Duke reel’ number appears in the left margin above each microfilm page of script, as for the Bodleian MSS. The disadvantage of microfilm is its imperfect reproduction of legible signs, and the loss of material evidence of watermarks, paper, and content on verso; the advantage is that the filmed page can be printed off and studied.

Mary Shelley dealt with her massive manuscript legacy from Godwin according to two working methods. She either transcribed original documents, or pinned them, with page numbers and/or headings in her own hand, to her script-in-progress. Shelley’s transcriptions of Godwin’s original letters and memoranda are faithful to the original, with which they can be compared thanks to the Abinger archive. Her transcriptions culled from Godwin’s journals (in c.606/1 and c.606/2 ) are more properly described as ‘citations’, in a diplomatic procedure of abbreviation and selection. This is still more the case in her brief citations of the affectionate notes that passed between Mary Wollstonecraft’s and Godwin’s London lodgings during their courtship in 1796. Shelley’s practice compares favourably with the editorial
standard of Godwin’s Victorian official biographer Charles Kegan Paul, who exercised an unseen hand over Godwin’s letters by introducing a number of silent omissions and emendations, as may be seen in our chapter 6: writing.

We have sought to place original letters, drafts, wetpress copies, and memoranda in the hands of Godwin and his contemporaries, written on a variety of papers between 1773 and 1801, in the context prepared for them in Mary Shelley’s script. We have restored sequences of page numbers, occasionally matched up the pinholes which formerly attached the leaves of her script, and been guided by Mary Shelley’s preamble to their contents. Shelley sometimes gives notice of an insertion: ‘I give these some of these; they are at least specimens of the manners of the times’ (c.606/5: 128). In a few cases, such as (in our chapter 6: writing) the original letters that passed between Godwin and Harriet Leee in 1798, these are still in the folder Dep. b.228/4, held together with Mary Shelley’s comments on their courtship, on 1839 watermark paper.

Most of those original documents that Mary Shelley selected and pinned to her commentary on Godwin’s life have since been separated from MWS script and located in other folders, for example, among other letters written by that same person, or by various authors at a particular period. In cases where there is no certainty that Shelley selected a particular document for inclusion, but it has demonstrable relevance to her composition, it is shown in the *documents appended to the chapter, and contextualised in the endnotes.

Mary Shelley delegated the task of transcribing chapters and parts of chapters from Godwin’s published books to her stepmother Mary Jane Godwin. As an amanuensis and copyist, Mary Jane’s legible handwriting had served Godwin well in his last years, after his longstanding assistant James Marshall had retired. Her transcription in c.606/5 from the 1st edition of Godwin’s novel *Damon and Delia*
[BL 1784] is shown in this chapter 1: literature in the section ‘early works’. Her transcription in c.532/8 from the 1st edition of Godwin’s Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft [Memoirs 1798], on 1839 watermark paper, is shown in Chapter 5: women. In both cases there is internal evidence that Mary Shelley marked out the passages she wanted copied and introduced them in her commentary. In chapter 4: pedagogy, Amelia Alderson’s letters of 1795 to 1797 to Godwin and Wollstonecraft (addressed as Mrs Imlay) were numbered and annotated by Mary Jane Godwin. A reference by Mary Shelley in Dep. c.532/8 shows that she had read these letters (in b.210/6) as part of her work on the biography, and drew on them for her comments on Godwin’s relationship with Amelia Alderson, shown in Chapter 5: women. The absence of any contribution by Mary Jane to chapter 6: writing is noted in the chapter note to that chapter.

The materials in the five folders of Deps. 606/1-5 consist throughout of Mary Shelley’s holograph script [MWS script] with the one exception noted above, Mary Jane’s transcription from Damon and Delia [BL 1784]. The papers of MWS script in c.606/1 are dated by watermarks 1835; in c.606/4 are dated 1839, and in the other folders of c.606 are mostly undated. Mary Shelley’s page numbers, displayed in semicircular parenthesis at the top left margin of the manuscript page, are important guides to continuity of subject matter. And watermarks are reliable clues for establishing the sequences of her composition of the Life of William Godwin.

On all too few occasions these legible and material clues complement and reinforce each other, as in the first pages of Chapter 1: literature where Mary Shelley’s pages numbered 1) and 2) are written on 1835 watermark paper, and located in the Bodleian folder c.606/1. For the most part the sequences of page numbers are not complete and fail to accommodate Mary Shelley’s practice of adding afterthoughts on the verso of already completed recto pages, and cancelling passages in one page only to rewrite them on another. Accordingly there are numerous broken
sequences in our arrangement, signalled by editorial signs “[blank]” and “[...]”. And although some sequences scattered into separate folders have been reconstituted, both missing sheets and duplicated page numbers have to be noted.

Mary Shelley’s holograph [MWS script], a major portion on paper watermarked 1835 and 1839, includes her transcriptions of portions of Godwin’s autobiographical essays, his journals, and his private and public letters. It is complemented by Mary Jane Godwin’s [MJG] transcriptions from Godwin’s published texts, some of which is on unwatermarked paper and may have been undertaken at dates earlier than 1836 and handed over to Mary Shelley for incorporation into the Life of Godwin.

Mary Shelley knew that her father had first met her mother Mary Wollstonecraft at a Sunday evening gathering at the radical publisher Joseph Johnson’s in November 1791: and an unpublished autobiographical fragment hailing 1791 as ‘the main crisis of my life’ opens the Life of William Godwin, transcribed by Mary Shelley on 1835 watermark paper. With that ringing announcement Godwin was reshaping his immediate past endeavours for fame and influence, picturing himself as devoting his attention in 1791 exclusively to the ambitious project realised by the publication in February 1793 of his major book An Enquiry concerning Political Justice. And in fact that first meeting with Wollstonecraft had led to no further personal acquaintance until January 1796; and was not publicly inscribed until January 1798 when Godwin’s Memoirs of his late wife were published. The productive tension between Godwin’s public career and his private relationship with Wollstonecraft is articulated throughout Mary Shelley’s script. It draws to its solemn denouement with Wollstonecraft’s marriage and death, written on 1839 paper (in Deps. c.606/4 and c.532/8) and shown in our Chapter 5: women. A long transcription in Mary Jane Godwin’s hand, on 1839 paper, of chapters 9 and 10 of the 1st edition of Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, fulfils the intrinsic shapeliness of the biography in Godwin’s own words about their first meeting in November 1791.
Our final chapter 6: *writing* is in the nature of a postscript and even an anti-climax. The chapter consists of letters that passed between Godwin and Miss Harriet Lee of Bath during the spring and summer of 1798. The original letters are located in Deps. b.228/4, and c.507/6, together with MWS script on 1839 paper. Supplementary *documents* to the chapter consist of letters from Harriet Lee and her elder sister Sophia to Godwin in June and December 1799, when Godwin published *St Leon*. And for once the entire contents of the two relevant folders b.228/4 and c.507/6 have found a place in the chapter. The chapter note to this sixth chapter outlines our thinking in presenting this material from 1798, with a 1799 sequel in *documents* as a separate chapter following after the Chapter 5: *women*, which spans events from 1796 to mid-1799.
Chapter 1: literature is set out in subsections:- autobiographies; letters; journals; early works; sermons and novels 1783/4; Holcroft and Dunstan; literary London. These sections are followed and supplemented by *documents: Ann Godwin; Life of Chatham; Fawcett; Criticisms; Monthly Mirror; Marshall 1817; Curran obit. 1817. The materials of this chapter are drawn from (in order of first appearance): Dep. c.606/1, Duke reel 2, Deps. c.532/8, c.606/5, c.606/2, c.516/1, c.607/2, b.227/2(a), Duke reel 5, Deps. b.227/6(b), c.606/4, b.214/5. Endnote and *document references to c.516/1; c.607/2; Duke reel 5; c.607/1; Duke reel 13; b.214/6; b.214/8.

Chapter 1: literature opens with two pages of c.606/1, numbered 1) and 2), on 1835 watermark paper. These pages transcribe in MWS holograph Godwin’s unpublished autobiographical fragment for the year 1791. Godwin characterises 1791 as ‘the main crisis of my life’, a portentous announcement of his decision to become a full time freelance author unobehden to any one political faction or publishing house.

Dep. c.516/1, b.227/2(a), b.227/6(b) and b.214/5 contain original letters and drafts of letters, to and from Godwin, in various hands, some dated. Most have no signature and may have been unsigned drafts. Godwin’s correspondences with his widowed mother Ann (c.516/1), his early mentor Rev. Joseph Fawcett (c.607/2), his friend Thomas Holcroft (b.214/6, c.607/2, b.227/2(a) and b.227/6(b)), and his fellow collegian and amanuensis James Marshall (b.214/5), are shown in the context announced for them by MWS script.

Dep. c.532/8 contributes only two pages of MWS script (pages 45) and 46)) to this first chapter. On undated paper, these two pages contain MWS summaries of Godwin’s unpublished autobiography, the same topic as the page from Duke reel 2 with which we have grouped them. The random allocation of papers in the folders and pages in the microfilms is illustrated in this chapter by the division of two
undated scraps of MWS script on the topic of Godwin’s unpublished autobiographical writings between Duke reel 2 and Dep. c.532/8. Most of Duke reel 2 contains film of Godwin’s journals; most of MWS script on Godwin’s unpublished journals and autobiographies is in c.606/1 and c.606/2, and is shown in chapter 1: literature, and in chapter 2: politics. For the rest, Dep. c.532/8 is a major contributor to our chapter 5: women. It contains a mixture of papers, including MWS script on Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, and MJG transcription of the 1st edition of Godwin’s Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft [Memoirs 1798], both on 1839 watermark paper.

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We title our first chapter, 1: literature, to exemplify the thematic priority Mary Shelley gives throughout Life of William Godwin to Godwin the author of English literature. The MWS script is shaped as a retrospective sweep of Godwin’s earliest experiences and the origins of his thought, towards a high valuation of literary culture and a self-concept as secular theologian, pedagogue, and novelist-anatomist of the English character. Godwin’s novel of May 1794, Caleb Williams; or Things as They Are, epitomises the essential Godwin for Mary Shelley. Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley had collaborated to publish her Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus in 1818 with a dedication to ‘William Godwin, Author of Caleb Williams’. Commencing work for the biography on 1835 paper, Mary Shelley combs through Godwin’s papers dating from the 1770s in search of the seeds of Caleb Williams embedded in those immature ‘early works’:

& several years passed before the idea of Caleb Williams was generated conceived - & those powers ideas were yet as it were in chaos, assumed the shape which still haunts the work with forms of power & excellence. (c.606/5: 105)

An echo of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem of 1816, Mont Blanc, haunts this attempt to shape a secure future for Godwin in canonical English literature.
This concentration on imaginative fiction converges in our chapter 2: politics with MWS script’s revisionist reading of Godwin’s Enquiry concerning Political Justice. Between the two publication dates, Political Justice February 1793 and Caleb Williams May 1794, Mary Shelley sites a turn towards literature, a prelude to Godwin’s realisation of his fullest powers as author. She draws an invidious comparison between these two publications, Godwin’s ‘twin peaks of Parnassus’, subsuming in the process Godwin’s retrospective tamperings with the published text of Political Justice, and his antithetical stance against intolerable ‘Things as they are’.

Published in 1794, a year marked by the trials for sedition and high treason that devastated Godwin’s political associates, Caleb Williams represents Godwin’s interrogation of the social and psychological consequences of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon; or The Inspection House (1791). Bentham’s Advertisement ([i]-iii). proclaims the advent of ‘A new mode of obtaining power, power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example: such is the engine: ... such the work that may be done with it’. Horror and claustrophobia define Godwin’s reaction to such an ‘engine’ of surveillance, and his fiction attempts to defend against such institutionalised power by dramatising an internal psychological agonism --Jacob’s wrestle with the dark angel--as an exemplary contention against politics, politics itself extruded into externality.

The corollary of this conversion to ‘second nature’ in imaginative literature is a turning away from political activism, and a desire to wean Godwin off radical politics and political ‘theory’ prompts the MWS script’s emphasis Caleb Williams as nonpareil in Godwin’s corpus of writings. Mary Shelley’s plotting of Godwin’s half-decade 1793 to 1798 demonstrably abets a movement away from radical political engagement, a movement stamped all over with the poetical signature of William
Wordsworth. By committing her account of Godwin’s life and work to the figure of conversion, Shelley entails her narrative in a series of half-turns, as our chapters 1 to 6 will serially illustrate.

At the outset of her work for Life of William Godwin, writing on 1835 watermarked paper, Mary Shelley announces that her biography will consist in large measure of words written by Godwin himself and demonstrates this plan by selecting passages from his unpublished autobiographical fragments, ‘brief annals’ she calls them, covering the active years 1772 to 1796 (c.606/5: 54). Shelley is a ‘constant reader’, reading even as she is transcribing, and evidently hearing Godwin’s words in her head, since she will frequently catch and echo his turns of phrase, within the space of a page or so.

The first section in this chapter 1: literature, subheaded ‘autobiographies’, and its first document, on 1835 paper, replicates a fifty-year-old Godwin script, and dramatises a turn, or half-turn, from political journalism on a paper subsidised by the Whig party, to the independent pursuit of scholarly writing, philosophy, and ultimately ‘literature’. MWS holograph script in Dep. c.606/1, on Green & Son 1835 watermark paper, on two pages numbered in MWS style 1) and 2), is a transcription in Mary Shelley’s hand of Godwin’s autobiographical fragment summarising the year 1791. This indicates the successive layers of MWS and Godwin script in the c.606 folders. The 1835 paper and the page numbers combine to make it an obvious starting point for our first chapter, yet the script is enclosed in double quotation marks, a muffled opening gambit for Mary Shelley’s Life of William Godwin.

Godwin’s April 1791 open letter to Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and a companion letter to Charles James Fox which has strayed from the fold of the Bodleian folders,

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3 Bentham, Jeremy Panopticon; or The Inspection House (2 vols.; Dublin rpr London: T. Payne, 1791)
are commemorated in Godwin’s autobiographical fragment for 1791. (Mary Shelley’s partial transcription of the Sheridan letter is shown in our chapter 2: politics.) Mary Shelley’s emphasis on Godwin’s ‘literature’ is embedded in the draft, on which Godwin had written a heading ‘from a well-known literary character’. This self-naming is the rubric under which Shelley places the letter and moreover places Godwin’s politics themselves, the politics according to her of a man of literature and of a literary character that transcends political faction, conflict, and ambition.

MWS script habitually reacts with a negative to the massive archive of papers with which Mary Shelley was confronted. She nominates the unpublished autobiographies, fragmentary and inconclusive though they are, as the only proper resource for a biographer of Godwin’s early life:

The following skeleton of his life. Indeed nothing but conjecture is left us with regard to the early manhood of Mr Godwin - & we are glad to see the path through these years traced by his own hand, however slight the sketch may be - (MWS script, c.606/5: 54)

Here we find Mary Shelley divesting and impoverishing her text in the name of an oral and embodied priority which forswears print publication. MWS script subsumes the occasion and place of writing under the recorded event, accords literal privilege to ‘the operations of mind’ (c.532/8: 46), and sets herself on ‘the path traced through these years by his own hand’ (c.606/5: 54). Her work-in-progress is veneered over this indelible tracery. She moves back and forth from these summaries to the daily journals on which they are based. Godwin habitually wrote up his journal for the year just past on New Year’s Eve, as a supplement to his journal-keeping during the year, and as a full-dress rehearsal for a future biographer. He drew on these laconic notes when he began to write his folio of

At one juncture, Mary Shelley breaks away from the fragmentary autobiographies, and secures her script with quotations from a published text, ‘one of the last - & in many respects the wisest of Mr Godwin’s works’ (c.606/1: 53). This was Thoughts on Man, his Nature, Productions, and Discoveries, published in 1831 at the grandfatherly age of seventy-five.

MWS script for the section ‘letters’ halts to survey Godwin’s archive of papers, objectifying as gaps in the record what we might guess was the subjective strain between the evidence in Godwin’s autograph and the aim of a memorial biography. Choosing to place Godwin’s writings at centre stage: ‘The briefest outline written by the man himself contains more real information in matters of biography than pages of uncertain guesses’ (c.606/5: 54), nevertheless Shelley laments a paucity of firsthand materials:

No letters of his remain written during this period. I find a correspondance with [illeg.] that concerns the carrying on the Annual Register & a few letters from his family. ... there are some few memoranda & notes which continue the history of his life - together with scattered remarks on the progress & formation of his opinions. These were written later in life. (MWS script, c.532/8: 45) A few notes carry on Mr Godwin’s personal history for some years - & in process of time a good many letters fill up the void. (MWS script, c.606/1: 53)

Until 1795, when Thomas Wedgwood gave Godwin a wet-press copier, Godwin could not regularly make and keep copies of his own letters. This did not stop him from making handwritten copies and drafts, and in 1788 he began to keep a journal to supplement the record. MWS script takes note of Wedgwood’s gift, and the contribution it made to Godwin’s librarianship of his own writings, at the latest
stage of her composition of Godwin’s Life, on 1839 paper, in chapter 4: pedagogy (c.606/4: 41).

By 1792 Godwin was settled in his bachelor lodgings and writing fulltime as an independent author, and MWS script c.606/2 announces ‘a series of letters which mark & illustrate a very interesting portion of Godwin’s Life’. This happily coincides with Mary Shelley’s declared interest in Godwin’s authorship of literature as coeval with his life in the best sense. ‘Unfortunately’ she adds, ‘many of these letters are to him, instead of from him’. She will proceed by selecting from among them those which throw light ‘in a just measure’ on my Father’s feelings & opinions’ (c.606/2: 8, [8v]). Whether or not because of the Bodleian’s shelving of original letters in other folders, the only letter that can be identified as one of this announced series is ‘the first of the series’, a letter from Ann Godwin to her son, and a letter from Godwin to his mother, which is definitely not, as Mary Shelley proposes, a letter in reply to the first.

In the section ‘journals’, the name of Thomas Holcroft first appears, in MWS script c.606/1, written on 1835 paper, and introducing a three-page letter from Godwin to Thomas Holcroft, written in August 1788 from Guildford, where Godwin had evidently gone to collect the boy Tom Cooper. Holcroft’s part in Godwin’s life was undoubtedly central, and his name will recur in four of the six chapters of this edition. Throughout her script, Mary Shelley pursues a dialectical opposition between the political leanings and literary achievements of Godwin and those of the somewhat older Holcroft. In the final section ‘literary London’, we read that Godwin dated his acquaintance with Holcroft to 1786, two years earlier, but MWS is drawing her material from the journals that Godwin started to keep only in 1788. Shelley describes this as ‘[t]he earliest letter that I possess of [Godwin’s]’, and attaches it to several pages of extracts from the first volume of Godwin’s journals, in which the name Holcroft is already prominent (c.606/1: 123)-124).
Shelley then sums up the friendship as follows:

From these brief notices we find the intimacy between that Godwin & Holcroft are already intimate friends see each other several times a week & communicate their writing & aid each other by mutual criticism. [illeg.] the more polished education & great acquirements of Godwin led him to be of most use to his friend - but when he undertook the writing a drama Holcroft's criticisms became valuable & important. (c.606/1: 123)

Twice MWS script cancels the term 'intimate', even though it bears Godwin's warrant from his autobiographical note to 1788, transcribed on the previous page 122): 'It was at this time that I became extremely intimate with Mr Holcroft'.

The friendship between Godwin and Holcroft is a source of agitated comment throughout MWS script, especially when it touches on Holcroft’s radical political opinions.

In the section subheaded ‘Holcroft and Dunstan’ MWS script heightens the contrast between Godwin and Holcroft as literary critics, and as dramatists. Holcroft’s critique of the manuscript of Godwin’s verse tragedy St Dunstan was ‘unsparing’, she writes. ‘He detected every fault & laid it bare without pity’ (c.606/2/159). Note however that in the section ‘literary London’ that ends this chapter, MWS script introduces an attached note from Godwin (b.227/6(b)) criticising Holcroft’s novel Anna St Ives in comparably harsh terms.

Contrasting with this stringency, MWS script’s references to ‘Hazlitt’s Life of Holcroft’ (c.606/2: 95) are positive throughout. The first volume of Memoirs of the late Thomas Holcroft (1816) is in Holcroft’s own words, dictated in his last illness to his favourite daughter Fanny. Volumes 2 and 3 were composed by Hazlitt from whatever materials came to hand, splicing Holcroft’s single autobiographical
volume, together with original first-person documents, letters, diaries, informal memoranda, into his third-person narrative. Thus Holcroft and Hazlitt may be regarded as co-authors of an auto/biographical compendium. Mary Shelley went to Hazlitt purely as a technical model for Life of William Godwin, since her preferred models for biography, especially the 1828 biography of Samuel Parr by William Field, were ideologically conservative and hagiographic. She probably had also read Hazlitt’s preface to Memoirs of Holcroft, dated 1810, referring to Godwin’s objections to the publication of certain letters of Mary Wollstonecraft, objections which delayed publication for a further six years. Mary Shelley kept to a policy of editorial discretion on the issue of private letters, and at the same time, pressed Hazlitt’s innovative technique of splicing informal with formal texts into service for her account of Godwin.

By the date of his death, Godwin had outlived many correspondents and all the friends of his youth, and only a few of those men whom Mary Shelley contacted after Godwin’s death to request the return of Godwin’s letters, obliged her (Bennett ii 269-77). At the same time Shelley was in possession of Godwin’s published works, the unpublished essay on religion which Godwin had adjured her to publish, a multi-volume daily journal kept from April 1788 to March 1836, a mass of private correspondence, open letters to public men, as well as the autobiographies with which she begins. The cautious circumspection which constrains Shelley’s undertaking enters into MWS script-in-progress as a legible struggle with the topic of Godwin’s agnosticism and his defection from the dissenting ministry:

There are few written documents & few survivors to tell the story of the years intervening between 1773 & 1793 - twenty years during which ^a double^ the momentous struggle was going ^forward^ mentally it brought Godwin from being learned & a teacher the learning & teaching of the Latinistic form of Christianity into the character of an apostle of disbelief In a more worldly view (c.532/8: 45) [cancellations in script shown as underlines]
The tell-tale pretext: ‘There are few written documents & few survivors to tell the story’ belies Mary Shelley’s constant reading of Godwin’s testimony in his autobiographies of the ‘Principal revolutions of opinion’ that decided his views on religion ‘till 1788, when I took my last farewel of the Christian faith’ (MP 52-54, from b.228/9). On the following page (c.532/8: 46), Shelley moves clear of these embarrassments (if we overlook a subheading ‘Chapter IV’, followed by a blank space):

During these years Mr Godwin prepared for the ecclesiastical state; became a preacher of the gospel - seceded from the church - entered on an arduous struggle// for a maintenance by the literary labour & finally established his fame as a man of genius.

Even when his thoughts are fixed on his literary vocation, Godwin’s personal circumstances occasionally surface, as in the note ‘My residence this year was in Titchfield Street, Marybone’ that closes the autobiographical summary of 1791 (c.606/1: 2). His changes of address after Tom Cooper left his household were dictated by the need to retrench expenses, but also served as occasion to dedicate himself to the work of writing, governed solely by ‘the promptings of my own mind’ (c.606/1: 1). This is hailed by Mary Shelley as a turn to literature in the literary London that Samuel Johnson had brought to pass, a metropolitan instantiation of the individual’s scholarly acquirements and creative talents, surrogates for the landed property, wealth and rank which had qualified an earlier generation of men. Yet at the same moment when Godwin farewelled his employment by the Foxite Whigs, April 1791, he wrote his open letter against heritable advantage to R. B. Sheridan. And this demonstrates that he had not disentangled his writerly ambitions from politics, and still had not done so at his fortieth birthday in 1796, nor in 1798 when he was writing up 1791 as ‘the main crisis of my life’.
A concluding page of our second chapter 2: politics, like the opening page of this chapter 1: literature, is a Janus gate. Writing in 1796 on the eve of turning forty, Godwin states: ‘I ought to be in Parliament’. But Mary Shelley interrupts this musing, with a judgment that Godwin was temperamentally unfitted for a career in politics, and that she has found no evidence that Godwin sustained his political aspirations beyond the date of this memorandum:

There is something in this paper that looks rather like consoling himself for not being in parliament rather than exciting himself to undertake the responsibility (c.606/5: 120).

Spanning our first two chapters, MWS script opens the first with Godwin ending his stint on a Whig journal, in order to concentrate on literary authorship, and ends the second with Mary Shelley contradicting his wish to be bought into a seat in parliament for the Whigs.

Frequently cited texts +abbreviations:
William Godwin Thoughts on Man, his Nature, Productions, and Discoveries London: Effingham Wilson, 1831 [Thoughts on Man]

Kegan Paul  *William Godwin and his Contemporaries*  London: Henry S. King, 1876  [CKP]


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