

William Godwin's Place in Eighteenth Century Memoir Writing: The Example of the *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*

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ABSTRACT

Godwin's *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* are a mixture of innovation and tradition in eighteenth-century life writing. In his readings of Hume, Gibbon, Johnson or Boswell, he would have found a philosophical approach to biography similar to his own. This approach implied a condensation of universal characteristics in the delineation of one single character, and an inextinguishable defence of the formative nature of all literature, inclusive of biography. The fact that Wollstonecraft had provided a variety of what the times considered scandals is of no matter to Godwin. Her mind and acts were in his view a consequence of her social and personal contingency – a view anchored in *Political Justice* – and it all could teach an example. My article shows how Godwin drank in the biographical tradition of his day, but also how his distinctive Dissenting insistence on detail, and his reckless adherence to truth – also remnants from *Political Justice* – marked his *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* as typical in his canon. I point also at the author's struggle with style, as his new awareness of the importance of sentiment and conversation, which he had expressed in 'Of History and Romance', imply a revision of his old pompous diction. Although alert to these changes, Godwin is not always capable of the graceful transition needed for the *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft.

Godwin had written biography before the *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* (both editions 1798) and would write more later, but none of them comes close to the *Memoirs* in tone, purpose or personal involvement. His more historical subjects, like Bolingbroke, Chatham

or Lady Jane Grey, like the literary ones – Milton, Chaucer – lied too far from him. Immediacy is the real protagonist in Mary's biography. Not only because Godwin had lived with, and read, his subject, but also because he had loved her. The clashes produced between their personal arrangement and Godwin's philosophy, most notably *Political Justice*, triggered the revision of previous works and the writing of new ones. Godwin, however, had already set out on a journey towards a new awareness of sentiment in society, prior to his experience with Mary. The real worth in his biographies is their potential for human improvement through the teaching of example, according to his deeply rooted Dissenting didacticism.

James L. Clifford, one of the most authoritative contemporary voices on biography, distinguishes between five different categories, applicable to productions from all literary periods. (1970: 84-87) His range covers from the so-called and very disputed 'objective' biography, the 'scholarly-historical', the 'artistic-scholarly', the 'narrative', and that in which the imagination is given free rein and the author works much in the way a novelist does. Their names explain their purposes.

Objectivity is the criterion that marks Clifford's classification. In the first type, the author merely decides which evidence to include and how to assemble it. In the second, guesswork is only included when absolutely necessary, and always admitted to. In the 'artistic-scholarly' type, the author does not interfere with the facts, but does behave as an artist in their assemblage of them, taking audiences as their reason for departing from the mere role of a historian. The next step involves an imaginary presentation of facts, without the author indulging in pure fiction. Finally the 'imaginative' type of biographer – although this is not Clifford's term but mine – works on secondary sources and makes up backgrounds, conversations and details. The subject of the biography is real, but the information is offered in an unreal wrapping, the end result reading more like a novel.

In this light, Godwin's *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* would fall strictly under neither category, but approximate a mixture of types three and four. Chronology is a pivotal issue, depending on the liveliness intended for the biography. Godwin chose a strict birth-life-death sequence, ignoring other approaches to the story. On the other hand, and to provide probably the most obvious case, *Tristram Shandy* was Sterne's revolutionary proof that chronology was an outmoded way of accounting for a person's life, and that mental processes involved much deeper interest, as Locke had suggested.

The inclusion of letters marks the passing of time while posing a problem: thematic profusion and grammatical inexactness get in the way. Godwin attempted to quote from, or at least inspire himself in, Mary's letters to Fuseli, but the painter's abrupt denial of access is well known. Her letters to Imlay were in Godwin's power, and he chose to include excerpts, in particular in his section on her *Letters from Sweden*. Here Godwin keeps the quotation marks, but nevertheless alters the text, sometimes to inconsistency, such as keeping a third person 'she' or 'her' in fragments which Mary supposedly had written about herself. (M 118)¹ Otherwise Godwin's use of epistolary material is scant. Godwin does not digress nor flash back, either, but follows a strict calendar order, provided in every chapter heading. Exceptions to this are chapters one, 1759-1775 – and that only in the *Memoirs*

revised edition – and ten, which suffocatingly concentrates on Mary's decay.² The last example shows that Godwin's use of time is economical, but also effective.

The problem lies in drawing the line that separates fiction from reality in a memoir. A widely accepted distinction affiliates historiographic biography with a mere data bank, whereas a creative one bears links with fiction and autobiography. (Browning, 1980: 3) Clifford accords historians more practice in the exercise of life-writing, as it was traditionally not considered an art, a literary genre, although it might have been considered a scientific discipline. The lives written by those historians were of two types: "the formal panegyric, which stemmed from pious saints' lives of the middle-ages; and the nasty, scurrilous journalistic bits of debunking". What Clifford calls "the balanced, revealing type of life," (Daghlian, 1968: 76-77) lying in between these two, had yet to blossom.

Aristotle's unities provided a model for biographers, as did the classical philosophical differentiation between 'particulars' and 'universals'. Traditional biographies followed the birth-life-death structure, in what resembled Aristotle's beginning-middle-end artistic requisite. Also, because a biography partakes of both history and poetry, the biographer "must record the particular by the very nature of his art; but he cannot refrain from appraisals and values based upon universals". (Stauffer, 1941: 11) That balanced type of biography appeared with the biographer taking his place mid way between the chronicler, the pure historian, the encyclopedist who collects facts, and the pure artist, the poet who selects and combines facts and embellishes them with fiction.

The didactic function of biography originated in the spiritual biographies of the established church and sects like the Quakers and Wesleyans. Through omniscience the author of biography emphasised the importance of individual experience, the objective being teaching through example. Such was the intention in the biographies of criminals and rogues. It was presumably Oliver Goldsmith that prefaced Plutarch's *Lives* in 1762, where we find similar ideas:

An ingenuous gentleman of my acquaintance, when asked what was the best lesson for youth? answered, *The life of a good man*: being asked, what was the next? replied, *The life of a bad one*; for, that the first would make him in love with virtue, and teach him how to conduct himself through life, so as to become an ornament to society ... ; and the last would point out the hateful and horrid consequences of vice, and make him careful to avoid those actions which appeared so detestable in others (cited in Stauffer, 1941: 312).

Godwin, too, stresses his perennial wish to improve society through every possible means. In this light, Mary's *Memoirs* are one more step towards the cultivation of moral and social virtues, through the example of persons of merit. Words similar to the following, taken from Godwin's personal papers in the Abinger Collection, Bodleian Library (Oxford), would appear in the Preface to the *Memoirs*:

I think the world is entitled to some information respecting the persons who have enlightened and improved it. I think that it is a tribute due to the memory of such persons, as I [am] strongly

of opinion that the more intimately we are acquainted with their hearts, the more we shall be taught to respect and love them (Dep. b. 227/8(a)).³

A similar objective marked the appearance of successive biographies by Godwin. The different formative channels Godwin pursued in search of lessons for his readership include history, politics, children's literature, medieval and Renaissance authors, even Necromancy. From the *Life of Chatham* in 1783 to the little Preface note for his son's novel the year before Godwin's death, his goal was the communication of those virtues that made of his subjects worthy personalities.

Boswell had been warned by his friend Erskine not to pour truths into his diary, as he would be forced to tell of his robberies and murders. Boswell light-heartedly agreed: "I shall be upon my guard to mention nothing that can do harm. Truth shall ever be observed, and those things ... that require the gloss of falsehood shall be passed by in silence". (Butt, 1979: 296) Johnson thought that a biography told without concealment or modification would help others live a better life. However, he was faced with the problem of revealing compromising material about his subjects while related persons were still living. His design is to achieve a biography that like all art, will instruct and please, and to treat every case separately.

But audiences were shocked with every new revelatory biography.⁴ Godwin's attempt at social reformation through Mary's example lashed back on him. The lives of criminals intentionally exposed the horrors of vice for reformation, usually the former rogue himself or herself offering the first admonition, or sometimes the final dictum, against crime from their newly gained virtuous standing. Famously, Moll Flanders and her last husband end their days back in England, "where we resolve to spend the Remainder o four Years in sincere Penitence, for the wicked Lives we have lived". (Blewett, 1989: 427) Godwin *thought* he was writing towards improvement. His readers' reaction marked a line of hostility that impaired a neutral reception of Wollstonecraft's ideas for decades to come.

However other of Godwin's productions served their didactic purpose. His books for the Juvenile Library and his constant preoccupation with young protégés follow an indoctrination line that others had exploited before. Mary Wollstonecraft herself had written the bulk of her didactic productions – *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), *Lessons* (1798) – with a young readership in mind.⁵ Perhaps the most representative of eighteenth century formative biographers is Mrs Pilkington, whose *Biography for Boys* and *Biography for Girls* of 1799 were calculated to impress young minds with the appraisal of virtuous principles and rejection of vicious ones.

Hume's philosophy of the human mind played a paramount role in the division between character theory and portrait. His own views suffered an upside-down turn, as he progressively witnessed the incoherence between his Newtonian psychological rules and the characters he portrayed, in his immensely successful *History of England* in particular. This dichotomy is, according to James Noxon, responsible for the spate of eighteenth century biographical works. "Interest in human personality," he affirms, rests on "the infinitely diverse exemplification of these characteristics and principles in individual lives," rather than on "a specification of traits and principles common to all men". As a consequence,

"intellectuals of the eighteenth century turned from philosophical treatments of human nature in general to biographical studies of individual men and women". (Browning, 1980: 10-11) Richardson and Fielding provoked their readers with a possibility that, if fictional characters could be so much like real individuals, real individuals could be portrayed in the same depth. Fielding advances his didactic views on biography in *Joseph Andrews* in terms that recall Godwin's faith in the value of individuals to apprehend the universal:

But as it often happens that the best men are but little known, and consequently cannot extend the usefulness of their examples a great way: the writer may be called in aid to spread their history farther, and to present the amiable pictures to those who have not the happiness of knowing the originals; and so by communicating such valuable patterns to the world, he may perhaps do a more extensive service to mankind than the person whose life originally afforded the pattern (Brissenden, 1977: 39).

Rather than *Joseph Andrews*, it was another of Henry Fielding's hits, *Tom Jones*, that advanced the innovative conception that all individuals are made up of good and bad traits, vices and virtues, and that no one should be portrayed as neither a saint or a villain, but both in their share. This proposal, however, poses more questions than it answers, as the hydra-headed issue of influence takes the floor: realism could have influenced biography just as much as biography realism. Together with Hume, Smith provided the philosophical speculation for the eighteenth century flare for biography. His *Theory of Moral Sentiment* (1759), with its emphasis on the 'impartial spectator' and the importance of sympathy, regulates our moral judgements, as

The principle by which we naturally either approve or disapprove of our own conduct seems to be altogether the same with that by which we exercise the like judgements concerning the conduct of other people. ... We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it (cited in Kramnick, 1995: 280-81).

In issue number 60 of *The Rambler* Johnson conjoined this moral surveillance with its potential for the emergence of introspective literary material. Johnson's words are today taken as the literary sanction for biographical recollection:

All joy or sorrow for the happiness or calamities of others is produced by an act of the imagination that realizes the event however fictitious or approximates it however remote, by placing us, for a time, in the condition of him whose fortune we contemplate; so that we feel, while the deception lasts, whatever motions would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves (Greene, 1984: 204).

These words of Johnson's are close to those of Godwin in 'Of History and Romance' (1797). Both authors value the potential of individual, quotidian experience as an example for the whole of mankind: "I have often thought," said Johnson, "that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful". Then of

course, Johnson reputedly boasted he could write the life of a broomstick! Yet his faith in the didactic core of the simplest of lives is shared by Godwin. This is again *The Rambler*: "There is such an uniformity in the state of man, considered apart from adventitious and separable decorations and disguises, that there is scarce any possibility of good or ill, but is common to human kind" (Greene, 1984: 205).

Such enthusiasm ties in with Pope's assertion that "The proper study of mankind is man",⁶ a uniform 'study' in spite of the diversity reigning in the social universe. Johnson considered that biography should instruct, delight and impart 'real character'. Conversation would reveal more of a man's character than a narrative of his life from his pedigree to his funeral. Thus Johnson questioned the polite eighteenth-century art of the *Biographia Britannica*. On a further level, Godwin's preference for the study of the individual over that of history, as indicated in 'Of History and Romance', stresses his understanding of the relationship between public character, social contingency and private mind, as well as the metaphorical interpretation of one period following the events of a previous one. From the end of 1799 onwards, Godwin devised a series of biographies, of Shakespeare, Bolingbroke and even Coleridge, but his major fulfilled work was the impressive *Life of Chaucer*.

With Godwin, childhood experience is always of relevance to man's future development. The doctrine "show me the child, and I will show you the man," is evident in all his writings, including his novels, which afford through the likes of Falkland and St Leon paramount examples of lives of crimes and ambition after the appraisal of honour inculcated by their progenitors. In biography, Godwin is alert to the episodes, and particularly the changes experienced by later men of talents. He affirms this in the case of Gibbon, his admired historian, whose *Memoirs* he read, as he notes in his diary, in April 1796:

If he had never turned Catholic, if at the death of his father he had been left in easy affluence, he would never have been the historian of the Roman Empire. Circumstances decide our pursuits: our pursuits are the sources of our talents (dep. b. 229/2(a)).

With such flare for intimate detail, Godwin meant his tribute to Mary to be comprehensive of both her literary and personal achievements. His innate self-centredness, however, and his tendency towards professional jealousy vitiated his impartiality and scope. As a result, Godwin failed in his assessment of Mary's psychological complexity and professional richness, but a justification of this claim would demand attention in a separate article. Nevertheless Godwin's purpose, albeit unfulfilled, conditioned the type of memoir he wrote, as his knowledge of the different types of literary lives demanded different skills and techniques.

Godwin's choice of the name 'memoir' for his life of Mary is only partly in accordance with the genre's specifications. A memoir is meant to be a short, "cursorily complete biographical record produced from the memory of the author's association with the subject". This holds in the case of Godwin's *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*. As a rule it dealt "with figures who had lived within the same time-span as that of the authors, but the

line of demarcation between the biographical sketch and the memoir was not clearly drawn in the English mind" (Longaker, 1931: 492).

In its strict sense, the *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* contain a narrative of events directly witnessed by the author, who had in addition been a part in the subject's life. If these are met criteria, the same cannot be said about its purpose, historical as well as biographical, or its style, "usually chatty and rambling". The difference with the *Life* would be in scope, for the latter covers the subject's whole history. In addition, the author's subjective reactions to the protagonist are voiced in the memoir. Mark Longaker wonders why the English preferred to write *Lives* even when they would be better equipped to produce memoirs, and answers himself that it must be because of "an hereditary regard for completeness. The English mind is serious" (1931: 293). Leaving aside considerations of national character, it must be said that this seriousness conforms to Godwin's Dissenting background. Biography in any case was a better considered genre than the chattier, gossipy, unsophisticated, French-inspired and less comprehensive memoir.

The inclusion of anecdotes gave brilliance to biographical narration. Such scenes in Godwin's *Memoirs* are for instance Mary's visit to Fanny Blood in Portugal, (*M* 98-99) or the miserable vignettes in the Wollstonecraft household when Mary was a little girl under her father's violent outbursts. (*M* 89-91) However, Godwin's lack of conversational gift means that episodes are often dryly retold, and often with a characteristic didactic tone that detracts from their vivacious potential. For instance, the moment when Mary visits Johnson on occasion of her difficulties writing the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* includes no dialogue. Boswell had shown how dialogue, even of the snappy sort that characterised Johnson, could be amusing while instructive. Godwin, however, flattens it all into running syntax.

The following quotation from Roger North's *Lives of the Norths* (1742-44) illustrates the relevance granted to little detail, already in classical times.⁷ North, like Plutarch, believed that "an action of small note, a short saying, or a jest, shall distinguish a person's real character more than the greatest sieges, or the most important battles". (Longaker, 1931: 509) The idea is elaborated into a clever botanical simile, implying that when writing a life, one should do as when drawing a tree, for

the Leaves, and minor Branches, are very small and confused, and give the Artist more pain to describe, than the solid Trunk and greater Branches. But, if these small things were left out, it would make but a sorry Picture of a Tree (Butt, 1979: 270).

Godwin exercises his flare for anecdotes in some passages in the *Herald of Literature* (1783). Also in *Lady Jane Grey* there are included a number of anecdotes to keep the interest of young readers, as for example Lady Jane's interview with her tutor. The tone in this little historical biography, however, sharply reverts to dramatic tension when the time comes of the executions for cause of religion. When Godwin read Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) around October 1796, he saw that what makes of this canonical biography a landmark in not only biographical, but broadly, literary writing, is that Boswell depicts Johnson's character, rather than just telling his life. The author's intention is to make the

reader partake emphatically of the character of the great man, with his virtues and his foibles.

Boswell has been charged with obscuring his idol's real character through manipulation and magnification. He often heaps criticism on his own person to lend more light to that of Johnson. Affection and scholarship blend in Boswell's tribute, but there is also much inclusion of Johnson's defects, for which the author was criticised.⁸ Likewise, critics often point out that Boswell could not possibly have remembered the precise conversations after a lapse of years, thereby supplying the missing information through invention. So much so that it is a received opinion amongst Boswellians and Johnsonians that "the Johnson of the *Life* is more Johnsonian than Johnson himself could invariably be". (Rader, 1985: 29) One other charge against Boswell's masterpiece is that it lacks temporal and narrative cohesion. The very nature of his portrait of Johnson explains this, as it is made up of images, of moments in time, not structured on a sequence.

There is not much information as to the method Godwin followed in his compilation of data on Mary. We do know that he wrote to several people concerned, and that he tried to get Fuseli to show him Mary's letters to him. Also, from details in some of his private letters, we understand that some extracts of the *Memoirs* were passed on to a friend for correction and suggestions – a different question is whether Godwin later accepted their corrections, as this personal note shows:

The only reason why I do not approve of your pencil alterations in p. 9, is because I think they bear harder upon Mary's father than the passage as it stands. *Severity*, if it does mean blows, means *whipping*, and this would be the obvious meaning, taken with the context (dep. b. 227/8(a)).

The passage not only exemplifies Godwin's fastidiousness in matters of his own conception of the message offered – it is also indicative of the precision with which he intended judging the actions of those concerned with Mary. In this particular case, the underlined words refer to the physical hardships Mr Wollstonecraft exerted on the females in his own family, which rooted in Mary the wish for female independence, as she would express it later in her works. Godwin collects information about all of his subject matters with characteristic determination and exhaustiveness. In his letters of the weeks following Mary's death, he addresses one of his correspondents with his intention of adding

some questions for Mrs Bishop and Everina ... respecting my wife's past history, but I am not well prepared on the subject. ... The period about which I know least is that of her early life. I would be glad to be informed respecting the schools she was sent to, and any other anecdotes of her juvenile years (dep. b. 227/8).

Since the 1790s the production of individual histories had grown steadily; round 1813 there was a developing theoretical interest in the subject. Southey's biographies celebrated distinguished national characters rather than anatomising them: *The Life of Nelson* (1813) and *The Life of Wesley and the Rise and Progress of Methodism* (1820). Godwin probably

anticipated the nineteenth century trend of reintroducing an estranged figure to its reading public. His celebration of the character and ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft, albeit not altogether understood by his contemporaries, indicated an effort to turn her into a cult figure. Mary Shelley would do the same some years later with her deceased husband P. B. Shelley, and Thomas Moore established the Byron cult for posterity.⁹

Boswell modified eighteenth-century panegyric traditions of biography by insisting that "in every picture there should be a shade as well as a light," (McCalman, 1999: 425) and suggested the significance of childhood and inner life for biography as well as adult activities and achievements. The cult to truth was to inform the purpose of biography. In this light, Godwin's references to Mary's 'passion' demand specification. Eighteenth century biography did not readily acknowledge the complexity of life in psychological terms. Rather, the test to interpret an individual's existence was carried out in terms of a more rational, and perhaps simpler, belief – the belief in a ruling passion.¹⁰

Its origin may have been Latin, or in Elizabethan comedy, but was best explained in Pope's *Moral Essays*: An individual's ruling passion may be hidden, but once its nature is determined, an interpretation of his or her actions and character features will follow. In this light, 'passion' in Godwin should not be interpreted only as sexual or emotional passion, but rather as Mary's psychological drives – her need for companionship, her slightly psychopathic tendencies, her generosity or her capacity for love. Godwin had earlier analysed Chatham's character in much the same way, his personality being marked by a love for political power.

When Godwin set about writing his panegyric of Mary Wollstonecraft, he little knew he was embarking on a process that would not only harm her reputation for future generations, but also strike a fatal blow to his own. After the biography appeared to almost universal condemnation, from friend and foe, Godwin resumed his place at his desk and rephrased certain paragraphs, those he thought were responsible for public ire. But he miscalculated again, and the second edition did little to subvert the opinion tide that was stigmatising radicals, atheists, New Philosophers, liberals, and independent females amongst others. Of course the tide was one which neither Godwin nor anyone could have thwarted, for it was the culmination of the anti-Jacobin campaign that had raged for over a decade, and which had finally turned into a publicly acquiesced attitude. But his outspoken support for Mary's unbecoming acts – personal, sexual, religious or social – certainly came as grist to the reactionary mill. Godwin's next move was a return to fiction, and this time, with *St Leon*, his tribute to Mary was both sensitive and sensible.

Notes

1. The italicised initial *M* shall be kept for the parenthetic references to the *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*. All quotations refer to the same edition, whose full bibliographic details are given in the bibliography below.

2. Philp in his edition of the *Memoirs* for the *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin* does not give a time span for chapter seven, (*M* 114) although Holmes does: 1792-1795. (1987: 238) It is the latter that follows the original edition.

3. The uncatalogued Godwin papers at the Bodleian Library have been grouped in more or less random batches, with the only identification aid of letters and numbers, sometimes with up to four subdivisions.

4. This was the scenario at the time of the appearance of Mrs Piozzi's *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* (1786). Hannah More wrote to her sister that "the new-fashioned biography... seems to value itself upon perpetuating every thing that is injurious and detracting". (Cited in Daghlian, 1968: 89).

5. The eighteenth century brought to the fore the new concerns about the rearing and teaching of children. It was Locke – *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) – and Rousseau – *Émile* (1762) – that first stressed children's emotional as well as physical needs, influencing the growth of schooling and the interest in the affections.

6. From Epistle II, *Essay on Man* (1733-34). Butt, 1963: 516.

7. Roger North (1653-1734) was known for the biographies of his brothers and for his autobiography. His inclination for full coverage and avoidance of slanted accounts made him a forerunner of Johnson and Boswell, in spite of his lack of ethical analysis or his avoidance of personal details. (Daghlian, 1968: 73-74).

8. Boswell was the victim, like Godwin, of public reaction against his truthful account of Johnson. He was apparently "studiously excluded" from certain circles that had previously fêted him. One certain lady complained about Boswell's "gross gossipation" and commented "how well he deserves what he daily meets with that of people shutting their doors against him as they would against any other wild Beast" (cited in Daghlian, 1968: 91).

9. After a dispute over the memoirs of Byron in 1824 which ended in the burning of the text, the Irish writer Thomas Moore (1779-1852) produced his own version of the poet's life in 1830, the first relevant biography of Byron.

10. The use was widespread in the period, most notably in Joanna Baillie's series of plays that "trace the rise and progress [of an obsessive passion] in the heart". (Philp and Clemit, 1992: 1, 35) The principle is also visible most clearly in Godwin's own *Fleetwood* and very especially *Mandeville*. Joanna Baillie (1762-1851) greatly influenced Romantic drama with her innovative use of psychological intensity and realism.

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