

“The Truth Lies”: The Affordances of Secrets in *Caleb Williams*

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English

Speaking to the inter-relatedness of secrets and lies in her twin book-length investigations, Sissela Bok concludes that both are “rooted in the most basic experience of what it means to live as one human being among others, needing both to hide and to share, both to seek out and to beware of the unknown” (xvi). For Bok, the question of how a person lives in society is fundamentally a choice between what information to conceal and reveal, when to lie or evade, and when to be completely honest. These were not questions that would have made sense to William Godwin in 1793. In the first edition of *Political Justice*, he writes that due to the moral obligation of sincerity, “I am not empowered to conceal any thing I know of myself” (239). In Godwin’s early system, a person loses the agency of deciding what secrets to keep because “real sincerity deposes me from all authority over the statement of facts,” making it inconsequential whether sincerity contributes to one’s “honour” or “disgrace” (239). Part of the reason the fundamental tension Bok foresees between honesty and social interaction is not a part of *Political Justice* (1793) is because, as a political treatise that makes almost no recourse to narrative, characterization, or historical precedent, it is not encumbered by the nuances of living “as one human being among others.” While critics Gary Handwerk and Evan Radcliffe have already demonstrated the ways Godwin’s political system is corrupted through narrative when he sets out to write the novel *Caleb Williams* a year later, and Ewha Chung has demonstrated truth’s centrality to the novel’s conception of virtue, this essay will shift focus onto the ways that the prejudice of public opinion that attaches to Caleb’s name after he flees Mr. Falkland’s estate complicates the absolute injunction against concealment in the 1793 edition of *Political Justice*.

Caleb's is forced to live as a fugitive from the lawⁱ after he learns that his friend and employer, Mr. Falkland, committed murder years ago and let two innocent people hang for his crime. His flight from Falkland, which forces Caleb to represent his character to new people and escape public opinion's consensus that he is an insolent and ungrateful servant to his honourable master, demonstrates that prejudice forecloses the opportunity for individual judgment. The novel's depiction of the affordances of secrets marks a turning point for Godwin's opinion of sincerity, which he had previously believed was immediately identifiable in a person's manner or tone of voice and would lead inexorably to the truth.

Despite the centrality of self-damaging secrets, and the accompanying curiosity directed towards their concealment, there are very few overt lies in *Caleb Williams*. Although the Godwin who wrote *Political Justice* (1793) would have rejected any statement that is intentionally misleading, because it conceals the whole truth, Thomas Carson's definition of a lie, set forth in his philosophical investigation, *Lying and Deception: Theory and Practice* (2010), helps to illuminate the importance of secrets, and how they differ from lies, in Godwin's novel. Carson writes that a lie is "a deliberate false statement that the speaker warrants to be true" (3). Carson's definition excludes disguise, partial truths, and even statements which willfully obscure the truth because "a lie must be a false statement" (3). According to Carson, even when a person misleads another, but does not actually utter a falsehood, no lie takes place. Therefore, when Caleb initially withholds his name from the old man who has been instructed to guard him, or withholds the entirety of his fugitive narrative from Laura, he does not, strictly speaking, lie. Added to this list are the numerous occasions Caleb obscures his appearance to hide his identity. While Caleb says, in one of these moments, "my life was a lie," Carson's work helps highlight that, actually, he does not utter a falsehood, even though he is being deceptive (*CW*, 353).

Instead of living a lie, Caleb is protecting a secret, one that becomes continuously more contentious: his name. This distinction will prove to be important because while Bok takes “concealment, or hiding, to be the defining trait of secrecy,” she also proves that “all secrecy is not meant to deceive” (7).ⁱⁱ At those moments in the narrative when Caleb keeps his name hidden, his name has already become inextricably attached to a prejudice that makes him, in the eyes of the public, a “monster” (*CW*, 345). Believing in the virtue of independent judgment like a good Godwinian, Caleb has confidence that there is no reason to lie about his character in these episodes; that if he can represent his true nature to the world without prejudice, he will be exonerated and accepted by the men and women he meets. In a world where the prejudice attached to his name would rob Caleb of independent judgment, however, he learns that keeping a secret, or concealing the whole truth, is the only way for him to present himself as he believes he really is, the only way for him to be sincere. Keeping secrets, *Caleb Williams* seems to suggest, is an inextricable part of giving a true account of one’s character.

The decision to hide his name from the narrative he tells is a personal decision that highlights both Caleb’s private sense of self, and his dependence on social relationality. Caleb’s use of secrets to mediate his interactions speaks to D.A. Miller’s belief that “Secrecy...is a mode whose ultimate meaning lies in the subject’s formal insistence that he is radically inaccessible to the culture that would otherwise entirely determine him” (195, c.f. Bugg 112). A large part of the reason solitude appears as such a powerful force in Caleb’s and Falkland’s narratives is because it would allow them the ability to elude surveillance without lying. Solitude is emotionally damaging in *Caleb Williams* because it is devoid of human kindness and sympathy,ⁱⁱⁱ flinging the individual back into society with the desire to be known, but not have their narrative “entirely determine[d]” by the surveillance and judgment of public opinion. While Nicolle Jordan’s essay

“The Promise and Frustration of Plebeian Public Opinion in *Caleb Williams*” successfully argues that public opinion influences the novel’s plotting, and that Godwin’s representation of the power of the lower classes was tied to historical developments concerning the public’s role in the formation of political policy, public opinion also exerts an influence over Godwin’s concern for what Bugg calls, “the lived experience of individuals” (112).^{iv} As Quentin Bailey notes in an essay exploring the historical innovations of the police force at the time of the novel’s conception, “the 1792 Middlesex Justices Act...allow[ed] constables, watchmen, or other interested parties to arrest [and have] summarily imprisoned” suspicious looking persons and vagabonds to curtail crime and even reform potential future criminals (537). The extended reach of a proxy police force that seeks out Caleb’s environs and seeks to imprison him extends into even the most personal and domestic spaces, depicting a Foucauldian vision where the people watch themselves. In this way, prejudice invades the territory Caleb travels, establishing a narrative about his character that determines his relationship with others and forces him to find a way to represent himself without being identified by public opinion’s established narrative. It is Caleb’s need, and perhaps somewhat his duty, to establish a narrative that shows “things as they are,” that overtakes the compulsion to be completely sincere.^v In this way, *Caleb Williams* can be seen as a turning point in Godwin’s career that led to the change of his opinion on sincerity in the 1798 version of *Political Justice*: he no longer believes that a person’s countenance immediately communicates the sincerity of their tale, but rather that language “always modifies and colours the truth it seeks to tell” (Williams 484).

I. “A plain and unvarnished tale”

Uncovering Mr. Falkland’s secret (which will be addressed in the final section of this paper after discussing the ways in which Caleb’s attitude toward secrets changes over the course

of his time as a fugitive from justice) places Caleb in explicit opposition to Falkland's ability to continue living as a respected landowner. Caleb is forced to run away from the sheltered life he has known and exposes him to life in society and the ways individuals assemble into a mass. Caleb has not yet learned how "harmonious community interaction is integral to the text's moral economy," meaning that when he leaves for London he believes "[In London] I should be most safe from discovery, if the vengeance of Mr. Falkland should prompt him to pursue me" (Jordan 257; *CW*, 238). By merely extricating himself from Falkland's presence, Caleb seems to suggest, he will evade Falkland's influence because the new people he meets will be affected by his character. He has no conception of the ways Falkland might spread his vengeance through the public sphere, because he believes that people will not judge him until they meet him. When Caleb leaves Falkland's estate, the novel's storyline focuses on the conflict between Caleb and Falkland, which "hinges, significantly, on each man's capacity to win public favour," but Caleb begins this contest almost oblivious to the opinion of society (Jordan 246). Although Caleb is careful not to leave a "clew" behind him on his journey to London, he "[takes] it for granted" that if he is going to be "pursued," "it would be by some of Mr. Falkland's people, and not by a stranger" (*CW*, 241). The invocation of the "stranger" at this moment in his narrative appears inconsequential at first, but as Caleb's tale progresses, the amount of strangers he meets and whose favor he must secure increases. His initial negation of their purpose signals not only inexperience in his manner of escape, but, more consequentially, his inability to realize that society at large might come together to form an opinion about his character.^{vi}

Caleb's inability to imagine a stranger observing or interceding in his narrative is already slightly altered by the time he reaches the first neighboring town. While he notices that his "observation had been attracted by a man" who passes him on the way to the next town, and

further spots him at an alehouse, he reasons with himself that his suspicions of detection are “groundless” (341). When the man asks him “if [his] name were Williams,” Caleb is presented, for the first time, with the choice of telling the truth about his identity or lying. He asserts that he is the man known by that name and, after reading Forester’s letter, decides he must return to prevent Falkland from “sully[ing] the whiteness of my name” (242). It is as though in this short episode of departure and suspected surveillance, Caleb has already realized that if he is going to live in society, he will be met by strangers, and strangers will ask him his name and may be influenced by a narrative attached to that name. While Caleb appears concerned with the public’s opinion of him he expresses no anxiety about their ability to judge the truth. Caleb trusts the personal knowledge he has of his own innocence, and believes he is further protected because, in the case of innocence and guilt, “the former could not be confounded with the latter, unless the innocent man first allowed himself to be subdued in mind, before he was defrauded of the good opinion of mankind” (243). In matters of justice, Caleb believes, the corruption of the individual mind must *precede* the loss of the “good opinion of mankind” (243). Caleb echoes the affirmation of sincerity found in the 1793 version of *Political Justice*, where “in proportion that [the individual’s] motive is pure,” that person “will become unembarrassed” and possess a “frankness in...voice, fervor in...gesture, and kindness in...heart” that will be unmistakable to the rest of the human family (*PJ*, 242-243). For Godwin, it is as though “the body is the unfailing index of the mind” and our bodies “exemplify their own moral labels” (Williams 484; Elgin 90, c.f. Radcliffe 530). Caleb romanticizes his return and trial, where “Virtue ris[es] superior to every calamity, defeating by a *plain unvarnished tale* all the stratagems of Vice, and throw[s] back upon her adversary the confusion with which he had hoped to overwhelm her” (emphasis added, *CW*, 243). Caleb’s belief that a plain tale’s ability to overcome ingenuity speaks to what

Gary Handwerk calls his “excessive confidence in the power of rational ethics to circumvent relationships of power,” but he also expresses a too ready confidence that the truth of any narrative can be easily assembled (950).^{vii} Therefore it is a “very awful moment” when Caleb realizes, at his first trial, that “the power of ingenuity to subvert the distinctions of right and wrong” is inadequate and that indeed “in this very instant [they are] subverted” (257). If the truth can be subverted by ingenuity, however, the opposite can also be true: Caleb can present the truth using ingenuity.

After escaping from prison, Caleb fully acknowledges that he cannot merely escape Mr. Falkland’s men, and that society at large has formed together to believe that he is a “most miserable creature,” leading him to lose the hope that he can easily convince a stranger the innocence of his character (260). Instead, “safety” for Caleb consists in “keeping [him]self from the view of any human being,” signaling a ready acceptance of concealment as a means to avoid detection and confrontation (297). Concealment becomes Caleb’s mode of living, which leads him to actively contemplate the “mind of a stranger” who might happen upon a particular scene when he is hiding. He is driven to contacting another person, in two cases, one in which he is robbed and beaten by Gines and another when he asks an old man for help in the wake of the beating. While these examples do not portray the solitude as being emotionally painful, it makes contact with others materially necessary. Caleb goes further than these examples when, living with the pack of outlaws and having found himself impressed by their leader, Mr. Raymond, he tells the man his entire story, “except so far as related to the detection of Mr. Falkland’s secret” (311). Protecting this secret allows Caleb to represent himself without betraying his intimate bond to Mr. Falkland, but also suggests that Caleb, now disillusioned towards the truth’s persuasive function, feels he can determine how much information Mr. Raymond needs to know.

It can be inferred by the text that Caleb tells Raymond his real name, but it is remarkable that Caleb does not narrate the favorable revelation of his name in his memoirs, considering the importance his name assumes in the encounters that follow, a peculiarity that is repeated in the Welsh town where Laura lives. While Caleb discloses his secret in this instance, the disclosure takes place in a space defined by concealment and in open defiance of the law. Caleb appears conscious of his circumstances, congratulating himself “upon [his] present residence; it answered completely the purposes of concealment” (310). Mr. Raymond appears to be one of the novel’s few characters who can judge Caleb by his present situation and manner even while he knows the content of the handbill, yet his open defiance of the law and other political associations in society suggest Caleb cannot count on this kind of hearing when he leaves the outlaws and reenters the public sphere. If Godwin was deeply troubled by the political institutions of the day and the tendency of “public opinion to [stymie] individual integrity [leading] to the gross miscarriage of justice,” it makes sense that the virtue of independent judgment is located outside of government and in a small community hiding from the dominant public (Jordan 245).

II. “What was my name?”

The “social spaces” of the novel are continuously “transformed” by the meaning that attaches to Caleb’s name and is spread through the handbill, making him known to others before he meets them (Sullivan 334). After leaving the pack of outlaws and journeying to an obscure town, Caleb overhears a group of men at an inn talking about the terrible machinations of “Kit Williams.” Kit, Caleb infers, is a mistake; the men are talking about him, Caleb. But the mispronunciation, or possibly the misspelling, is instantaneously dismissed by Caleb, who hides his face in his corner of the “public-house” (330). It is as though Caleb automatically realizes that what matters is not what name is given, or the truth of any narrative, but rather to whom the

name refers and what meaning the group attaches to that name. Surrounded by these men, Caleb does not even consider revealing his name to the innkeeper of the establishment who is favorable to his history. Whereas the Godwin of *Political Justice* (1793) believed that print culture^{viii} would lead to the improvement of society through the dissemination of knowledge, here the narrative of Caleb's criminality, and the possible reward for turning him in, overcrowds the men's ability to exercise independent judgment and forecloses Caleb's chance to present his character. As Sullivan and Bailey both argue in their readings of the novel's historical influences, the 1790s was a time when police gazettes and other pamphlets played an increasingly important role in assembling public opinion. *Caleb Williams* rings a particularly pessimistic tone towards these forms of communication because "all of the readers in the world of the narrative have accepted false appearances, have taken pamphlets and handbills for representation of fact" (Sullivan 334). Surrounded by a society believing "false appearances," Caleb continues his journey using the "art of imitation" to provide himself some level of anonymity. But what is more striking than Caleb's decision to conceal^{ix} himself, is how unavoidable recourse to disguise or ingenuity now appears. Caleb defends his "art," saying:

"Such are the miserable expedients, and so great the studied artifice, which man, who never deserves the name of manhood but in proportion as he is erect and independent, *may find it necessary to employ, for the purpose of eluding the inexorable animosity and unfeeling tyranny of his fellow man.*"
(emphasis added, *CW* 333)

The importance of independence, not only in judgment but also social mobility, appears situated in an "inexorable" relationality to the prejudice of public opinion. In this state the value of complete sincerity vanishes, giving way to the necessity of "artifice" in securing independence.

The artifice that Caleb finds it "necessary to employ" leads to arrest, complicating its ultimate efficacy because disguise does not replace the prejudice with an alternative narrative.

While Caleb eludes Mr. Forester's servant with his disguise and makes an escape toward Ireland, upon the verge of disembarking he is mistaken for "one of the persons who robbed the Edinburgh mail" (337). Although the arrest seems at first to be an extremely unfortunate turn of events, the process of arrest reveals what Caleb has given up by taking a disguise. He narrates that the men "enquired my name, who I was, whence I came, and what had brought me there?" (335). Although Caleb says the men seized him before he "had scarcely opened [his] mouth to reply," complicating the extent to which Caleb is actually able to speak to his captors, their questions also press upon him the need to have a narrative that establishes his innocence. The apprehension of a man who disagrees with the description of the robber "in several material articles" suggests that not only does print culture undermine the individual's ability to freely judge, but also that Godwin was wary of the role that common people could successfully play in government (337). While Caleb's arrest is unlawful, supporting Jordan's claim that at this time Godwin did not think the government could include the "non-elite" in the formation of public opinion, Caleb is also unable to satisfactorily answer the men's questions and say who he is (245). He tries to get himself freed by dissembling his disguise, most vividly by "lay[ing] aside [his] Irish accent," but cannot complete the defense by revealing his true identity or by lying and giving a false name. Caleb's performance is not effective and his secrecy actually leads the magistrate to judge him unfavorably. Caleb relates that, to the magistrate, "it was clear":

"I was a vagabound and a suspicious person. The more earnest I showed myself to get off, the more reason there was he should keep me fast. Perhaps, after all, I should turn out to be the felon in question. But, if I was not that, he had no doubt I was worse; a poacher, or, for what he knew, a murderer. He had a kind of a notion that he had seen my face^x before about some such affair; out of all doubt I was an old offender."
(*CW*, 340)

It is clear by the magistrate's assumption of guilt that pleading innocence is not enough and that Caleb's manner is not clearly evoking that truth. The captive must be able to demonstrate his

innocence through narrative, by providing information that accounts for his presence in order to be truly considered innocent. Otherwise, by saying he is innocent, Caleb merely incites suspicion. While it is possible that the magistrate is alluding to a description of Caleb's face, it is Caleb's inability to properly represent or narrate himself that allows the magistrate's "kind of a notion" to assume priority over both the lack of evidence and Caleb's remonstrance of innocence. Protecting his secret in this example, however, allows Caleb to avoid being charged with the more serious crime without lying.

The limits of secrecy, and the affordances it bestow, are even more forcibly delineated when Caleb tells his story to "the old man" who guards him. Caleb believes he can ascertain instantly, without asking to hear the old man's story or learn his name, his "virtue" (342). Although it would seem that Caleb's first thoughts would be towards liberation, Caleb craves the old man's companionship even more intensely, writing that while his thoughts are directed to the "advantage to be drawn from the presence of such a person," he is even more "impressed with an ardent wish to be able to call this man his benefactor" (343). *Political Justice* (1793) had suggested that total sincerity would inexorably lead the individual into sympathy with others, but Godwin's novel actually makes the old man's sympathy dependent on Caleb's secrecy. When he tells his story to the old man, it's possible that Caleb merely forgets to include his name, or doesn't believe it is essential to an accurate description of his circumstances, and therefore doesn't intentionally deceive him. Carson's analysis upholds Caleb's actions as non-deceptive because "preventing someone from learning the truth about X is not the same as causing her to have or retain false beliefs about X" (54). He calls this "keeping someone in the dark" and draws a distinction between it and deception. This example agrees with Bok's work that reminds us, "all secrecy is not meant to deceive," and sometimes secrets are kept simply by judging what

information should be included in a narrative (7). However, because of the old man's eventual interest in his name, this episode still calls attention to how difficult it is to tell a narrative without concealing some important information. Because the question of Caleb's name was so clearly a part of the demand the arresting men placed on him, and he knows that his name is circulating through the handbill, it seems unlikely that he is not intentionally concealing his name, even if he is not deceiving the old man.

Since Caleb knows his name will change the character of his narrative in the old man's eyes, he keeps it a secret, in order to lead the old man to the truth. Godwin believed that we should not punish someone based on the actual event or crime they may have committed, but rather on the "injuriousness of [their] character" (*PJ*, 615, c.f. Radcliffe 535). Caleb's first task, in winning the man's sympathy, is to give an honest depiction of his character. Knowing that his name will communicate false prejudice, Caleb cannot reveal it if he wants the man to have an accurate understanding of his character. Caleb tells the man the manner in which he was arrested, eventually found to be innocent, but further detained in an effort to extort the "sum of money in [his] possession" (344). Finally, Caleb places himself "into [the old man's] hands" and "solemnly aver[s] the truth of the facts [he has] just stated" (344). Caleb's honesty in this episode is certainly part of the reason that the old man has "no doubt" from Caleb's "countenance and manner" about the "truth of what [he] had asserted to him" (344). Here, sincerity inspires the sympathy that convinces the old man Caleb is being honest. But the old man's reaction to Caleb's name proves that Caleb's honesty was only as important as his ability to keep his name secret. Not unlike the magistrate, the old man is suspicious because of what Caleb does not tell him, a lesson Caleb should be familiar with considering his attachment to Mr. Falkland's trunk. Caleb gives the old man the choice to either leave his name hidden or indulge his curiosity and

learn the unrevealed information. Caleb's relationship to Mr. Falkland's secret is reversed in this example, and the old man's curiosity forces the exposure of Caleb's secret which ruins the possibility of mutual esteem.

While the two men were able to exist in sympathy while a secret existed between them, the revelation of the secret destroys the old man's ability to sympathize with Caleb. Caleb relates that, although the old man does not suspect him of lying, he asks for "one thing at least...to be faithfully informed in some degree respecting the person he was desired to oblige, What was my name?" (345). The importance of the inclusion and absence of the name in the way Caleb tells his narrative, in this episode and throughout the novel, furthers Ewha Chung's sense that "the power struggle over discourse to make others accept one's own version of events as authoritative resides in the language of the novel" (16). It complicates Godwin's earlier "notion of the body as an 'index' to the mind," which represents, for Nicholas Williams, "an attempt to evade the mediation of language and its persuasive functions, proposing a 'natural sign' which requires no interpretation and no rhetorical force" (483). I propose that the weight of Caleb's name in this scene is a "rhetorical force" that presses upon Caleb^{xi} the need for ingenuity. When Caleb tells the old man his name, the man rejects his "version of events" and denies him the chance to explain, proving that secrecy was just as important as his "countenance and manner" in gaining the old man's sympathy. Telling the truth turns the man against Caleb, suggesting that perhaps *Political Justice* (1793) was correct. If concealing information may eventually require lying, which Caleb seems set on avoiding,^{xii} having to admit the truth that was concealed could make Caleb appear even more guilty. However, in these circumstances the truth convinces the old man of a false impression, while the secret, if properly maintained, convinces another person what

Caleb believes is true. Armed with this lesson, Caleb negotiates his place in the world by presenting his story more strategically, believing explicitly in the efficacy of secrets.

III. “I found it necessary, for the present, to keep myself private”

Caleb is forced to present himself to a public that would arrest him if they learn his name, because, in the novel solitude is emotionally crippling, and therefore seemingly untenable,^{xiii} but also because it appears difficult, perhaps impossible, to provide oneself an existence in absolute isolation. In addition to the emotional cost of isolation, Caleb recognizes that “the necessity of earning for [himself] the means of existence, evidently tended to thwart the plan of secrecy to which [he] was condemned” (354). The incompatibility of absolute secrecy with economic sustainability is an issue that is also raised by Mr. Falkland’s narrative and his secret. While his economic superiority to Caleb would seem to provide the ability to seclude himself from human interaction, Mr. Falkland is frequently observed by his servants called upon to serve as judge, and forms an intimacy^{xiv} with Caleb through his social position, despite his better judgment. What allows Falkland’s secret greater security and gives him the ability to present himself to others is not simply wealth, but rather that his secret is not attached to his name or physical appearance.

The handbill forces Caleb to search for a way to make money that also provides him a satisfactory amount of secrecy. He decides to pursue “literature” as the “field of his first experiment” because it calls for the “least preparation” and can be “exercised with [the] least observation” (355). Caleb believes it is just for himself, the wrongly accused, to evade capture through secrecy and thus conceals his name from his writing to avoid both lying and discovery. But Caleb’s mode of living, much like Falkland’s, cannot exist in absolute secrecy. He looks to a “solitary woman” to be an instrument for “disposing of [his] productions,” which, echoing his

relationship with Mr. Raymond, suggests that exposing himself to someone who does not regularly participate in society strengthens his security (355).^{xv} Although it is no surprise that Caleb's tales are not attributed to his name in print, what is remarkable is that the narrative never mentions a pseudonym or clarifies that they were published anonymously, strengthening the notion that a false name constitutes a lie and would be immoral. It could be thought that Caleb is simply after privacy in this episode, and Bok warns against conflating privacy and secrecy to protect secrets from always being associated with "privacy, deceit and shame" (14). While privacy involves boundaries, "privacy need not hide," while a secret "guards against unwanted access by others—against their coming too near, learning too much, observing too closely" (13). Caleb might desire privacy, but his interaction with the solitary woman finds him guarding her access to information which he possesses. He knows that soliciting her help is precarious because of his earlier encounter with the old man, who appeared just as virtuous and forgiving as the solitary woman appears. He narrates that it is *because* he "anticipates occasions of suspicion" that he proceeds to justify his position to her, anticipating what he has already learned; that secrecy invites additional questions about what is hidden or untold. If he tells her a passionate tale that excludes his identity and swears to its veracity, she might be moved to compassion, and believe he is telling the truth, but, like the old man, she could be incited by curiosity to wonder why Caleb has not told her his name. Although the "suspicion" Caleb is referring to here is mainly the suspicion of the publishing houses or their readership, which may be directed to this woman and find its way back to him, the root of Caleb's problem remains the same. He must assure the woman that his mode of living and the knowledge she has of him is justifiable. While the old man had been moved to curiosity by too much information, the perfunctory explanation

he gives leads her to say she has “no desire for any further information” (356). The relationship they establish between themselves is just as much about what they don’t say as what they do.

Caleb had earlier believed that to carry the favor of society in court, he should tell a “plain unvarnished tale,” but now, to be free from surveillance, he ingenuously obscures himself to this woman. Caleb writes: “I frankly told her that, for reasons which I wished to be excused from relating, but which, if related, I was sure would not deprive me of her good opinion, I found it necessary, for the present, to keep myself private” (356). This short speech, almost an aside in Caleb’s narrative, is, I believe, the most intricate intertwining of lying, mere deception, and honesty that is engaged in service of the secret. Caleb’s initial appeal to sincerity situates himself as the author of his memoir looking back on this moment in time, suggesting to the reader that he knows he did not make a false statement that he warranted to be true. Believing that Caleb is not a thief, was wrongfully convicted of stealing, and has actually been ill-treated by Mr. Falkland, the reader is particularly suited to feel Caleb is justified making this comment. However, Caleb has already seen that all he must do is reveal his name for even the most humble and honest-looking of strangers to assume that he is a “monster” and irrevocably lose their “good opinion.” If Caleb knows from experience that his name can erase someone’s good opinion of him, then to tell them that hearing more about his identity would not change that good opinion is deceptive, because deception “intentionally caus[es] someone to have a false belief that the deceiver believes to be false” (Bok 46).

When Caleb withheld his name from the old man, he could claim that he was seeking to establish his innocence, something he believes is true, and was actually saving the old man from being deceived by public opinion. In this case, he is suggesting learning his name would not change her opinion, something he cannot be “sure” is true.^{xvi} What he tells the woman does not

appear to be a lie though, because nothing that Caleb has said *to this woman* can be proven to be false. However, Caleb tells his readers that he “frankly” tells her this information, which cannot be true, because he must know that his name can damage her good opinion and he is therefore being deceptive by suggesting that it cannot. Caleb, I argue, lies to his readers, but does not lie to the old woman.^{xvii} This distinction seems important because if not enough information is given to this woman, his concealment might incite suspicion, and if Caleb were lying to her, Godwinian philosophy suggests that something in his manner would become apparent to the woman which could also endanger the secret’s security.

The literary career cannot ultimately uphold that high standard of secrecy which Caleb requires. While the ingenuity with which he presents himself to the solitary woman allows their relationship to thrive, he is eventually identified through the content of his writing. While his decision to publish stories about jailbreaks and other criminals seems hopelessly ill-advised, it also bespeaks his craving for sympathy and perhaps even a longing to be identified. Realizing he has been discovered, however, Caleb retreats to “some distant, rural scene, a scene of calmness and obscurity, where for a few years at least, perhaps during the life of Mr. Falkland, [he] might be hidden from the world,”^{xviii} which, at first, seems to be sanctioned by Mr. Falkland’s power.^{xix} The relaxation of oppression that seems to be afforded in the initial stages of this episode are not procured by Caleb, as in the other two examples, through disguise. Describing his choice of location Caleb writes: “[I was] influenced in this deliberation by the strong loathing I conceived for the situations in which I had lately been engaged...I was seized by so unconquerable an aversion to disguise, and the idea of spending my life in personating a fictitious character, that I could not, for the present at least, reconcile my mind to anything of that nature” (*CW*, 391). Caleb hates the idea of living in the “metropolis,” which encourages him to live by “artifice,”

and instead journeys to a “small market-town in Wales” where he does not have to obscure his appearance or hide his name (392). However, as will soon become clear, he is still protecting his secret; the difference is that now he has advanced to a position similar to Falkland’s, where his name does not immediately reveal his criminal identity and can therefore be shared openly.

His narration of the period he spends in Wales is peculiar because, similar to the first couple of days he spends with the outlaws, he never mentions telling his neighbors his name, or represents them calling him by his name in his narrative. Yet, in the course of the unveiling^{xx} of Caleb’s secret, Laura and the rest of the town are immediately described calling him “Mr. Williams” (402). It is as though his name has become so intricately linked to the secret of his criminality that either Caleb, in writing his memoirs, or perhaps even Godwin, in assembling Caleb’s narrative, could not address him by his name during a period where he lives openly by his name and innocent in the eyes of society. Whereas keeping his secret had secured him an initial impartial hearing with the old man, and the deception Caleb practiced upon the solitary woman afforded him the ability to support himself and live in her house, Laura’s reaction to the revelation of his secret produces an unsettling repetition of Caleb’s earlier views on virtue and honesty succeeding with only a “plain unvarnished tale” (243). She tells Caleb that “true virtue shines by its own light, and needs no art to set it off” because a tale which “in its plain and unadorned state” is virtuous or destructive cannot be colored by eloquence to change its internal structure. It is not possible for Laura to believe that Caleb is being “honest” in the moment of their conversation, because if he were an “honest” person he would have “acquainted [Laura] with [his] story” and not “left [her] to be informed of it by a mere accident” (404). Laura argues that Caleb was wrong to keep this secret from her, and Caleb’s attitude toward her argument signals the change that society has wrought on his thinking through his new belief in the

importance of secrets. He tells Laura, almost as though he were speaking to his former self, “it would be impossible for you to hold this language, if you had not always lived in this obscure retreat,^{xxi} if you had ever been conversant with the passion and institutions of men” (404).

Astonishingly, Caleb never tells Laura that he made a mistake and should have trusted her to keep his secret concealed from the rest of the town. His reasoning suggests instead that despite shared affection, mutual knowledge of Caleb’s secret would have ruined their relationship and therefore, to protect their friendship, he had to conceal the secret from her. Caleb’s position seems to be almost entirely reversed from his first appearance in court. At that moment he could not convince the public that he was telling the truth, but now he cannot convince Laura that he should not have had to tell the truth, that he was right to keep this information concealed. Caleb’s narrative journey, and psychological maturation, would seem to justify Mr. Falkland’s decision to conceal his secret from Caleb, making his curiosity an ill-advised breach of Falkland’s friendship.

Conclusion: “The secret was a most painful burthen to me”

Caleb’s journey, from the naïve young man who believed that complete sincerity would exonerate him in the eyes of the public, to the experienced traveler who cannot believe Laura does not recognize how necessary secrets are to the ability to accurately represent identity, does not transform his relationship to Mr. Falkland in the final trial scene, because Caleb maintains that their intimacy should have made the affordances that secrets provide unnecessary. At the beginning of his narrative, Caleb took Mr. Falkland’s secret as an affront to the equality of their relationship, feeling minutely that those ways “to have no insight into what others conceal is to lack power” (Bok 18). Caleb’s infamous curiosity had been “a desire to know Falkland’s secrets and to use them, Caleb hardly admits to himself, as a way of intensifying their bond” (Haggerty

140). Caleb, in his love for Mr. Falkland, sees secrets as an impediment to their intimacy. He is somewhat emblematic of Jean-Paul Sartre's startling suggestion that the time when mutual transparency is realized can be imagined and will coincide with the time when material inequality has been eradicated, or the "subjective life, just as much as the objective life, will be totally offered, given" (Sartre 72, c.f. Bok 17). Revealing the secret, for Caleb, is therefore a way to derive a sense of equality between himself and Falkland, whose superior social status leaves Caleb longing to "intensify" their bond. Caleb seems as though he would be unable to consider Bok's question, which she raises to trouble Sartre's position: "Would we be able to cope with not only the quantity but also the impact upon us of the information thus within reach?" (18). Caleb, with his thoughts still centered on himself, believes the secret, freely given, would not have impacted him. In the final courtroom scene he asks Mr. Falkland if he "ever prove[d] [him]self unworthy of [his] confidence?," suggesting that his continued loyalty proves that the crime was not his curiosity, but instead Mr. Falkland's secrecy (429). It is as though Caleb cannot remember his own position in front of Laura, when he claimed he was forced to keep himself a secret to her, despite his affection. Although the entire written account of his trials and tribulations impresses his reader with just "how difficult it is [for him] to make his narratives into a fair reflection of what he is and has done," he is unable to imagine that Mr. Falkland might have been in a similar position and is unwilling to grant him the same latitude he gave himself toward Laura (Radcliffe 547). The difference is both his inability to direct his thoughts beyond himself to consider Falkland's position and the preeminent importance his bond with Mr. Falkland receives. These circumstances heightens their intimacy to such a pitch that a secret becomes a betrayal.

This intimacy, which George Haggerty believes is originally structured around a “dark privacy,” is finally loosened to allow for the possibility of secrets after the trial (141). This possibility contradicts the 1793 version of *Political Justice* and marks *Caleb Williams* as, what Nicholas Williams calls, “a turning point in Godwin's thought on the nature of subjectivity,” because it gives the individual the ability to construct their narrative and make certain information private (484). Whereas Quentin Bailey says that the revised ending of *Caleb Williams* “establishes [Caleb’s] position as an obedient subject,” the ending also betrays early signs of the revised 1798 version of *Political Justice* where “Godwin now realizes that the taint of language always modifies and colours the truth it seeks to tell” (Williams 484). Caleb calls uncovering Falkland’s secret “the beginning of misfortune” in the final trial scene, and labels himself Falkland’s murderer for exposing his story to the public. By uncovering Mr. Falkland’s secret, Caleb assumed the power of telling Falkland’s story—as Falkland himself says, he “extorted all the treasures of [his] soul” (*CW*, 193). Caleb had thought he was wronged by Falkland’s secrecy while his “thoughts centred upon [himself],” but directing them elsewhere teaches him that “mutual knowledge is as dangerous as it is wonderful for two men to share” (*CW*, 433; Haggerty 139). Falkland had originally told Caleb that, because he has learned his secret, he “can never share [his] affection,” and while Caleb criticizes his hardheartedness, Caleb’s narrative supports Falkland’s judgment—his secret allows them to maintain friendship (*CW*, 145). But, as Haggerty points out, in the novel, “intimacy breeds mutual suspicion, if not contempt.” (139). While secrets protect Caleb from the law and allow him to represent his character to strangers, the insufficiency of secrets in this case ultimately resides in the intensity of Caleb and Falkland’s intimacy. Whereas the solitary woman was content without further information, their relationship pits the will to know and the desire to conceal against one another.

Secrecy helps to both secure and maintain sympathetic bonds in Godwin's novel. Contrary to the 1793 version of *Political Justice*, Caleb is empowered to conceal information because it presents the truth in the place of prejudice and protects friendship from the secret that would unbind it. While Gary Handwerk is certainly right to argue that "the response [to the ending] implied by the text...[is] that revelation is not the best solution" because "utility" does not "coincide in this case with speaking the truth publicly," I hope to have demonstrated that his conclusion can be extended yet further (948). Not only does *Caleb Williams* complicate the 1793 *Political Justice*'s stringent denial of concealment, the novel actually supports Bok's conviction that secrets, which imply hiding and concealing information, are, not simply useful, but "indispensable to human life" (18). Caleb's story is minutely entangled in those ways that "judgments of character may not emerge clearly from narrative [or] that individual incidents may seem to escape definitions of character as a stable disposition," forcing him to give up his pretensions that a "plain unvarnished tale" can narrate his story and present the truth. Not only is even the simplest construction of narrative conditioned upon what information is hidden, but it is often impossible to say that hiding that information was not an ingenuity that affected a certain disposition. Public opinion is a detrimental force, not simply because it calls individuals to submit to a dominant narrative, but because the narrative it establishes forecloses the individual's ability to tell their own story. Caleb's skillful secrecy allows him to represent his character to others without lying and revealing a false countenance, and without telling his name and revealing a false prejudice.

Notes

¹ Falkland is seeking to imprison Caleb for theft, a charge he has constructed to foreclose Caleb's ability to convict him of his secret crime.

ⁱⁱ Here Bok asks her readers to consider “the many forms of secrecy in which there is no aim to mislead: that which may accompany human intimacy, for instance, or protect voters in casting their ballot” (7). While her second example proves her point, Caleb would disagree with her first example as intimacy appears to be the very reason he cannot allow Falkland to keep his secret concealed from him.

ⁱⁱⁱ The negative effects of solitude in *Caleb Williams* suggest Godwin was already acknowledging “the role of feeling and sympathy in moral judgments” Clemit locates in the third edition of *Political Justice* published in 1798 (86). It’s also startling how the detrimental effects of isolation appear to be self-evident in the novel, as though Godwin believed solitude obviously produced a “paroxysm” in the individual that led them back into the company of others (*CW*, 63).

^{iv} Godwin believed that to study “our social existence” one could not exclusively look at “society in a mass,” but must also investigate the individual. Attention to the influence of public opinion expresses both the larger construction of political or social life in the novel and the way it effects the individual’s sense of self (Bugg 112). Attention to the way public opinion affects the individual is important for Godwinian philosophy because “the moral reform of individuals was a necessary prelude to social change” (Clemit 86).

^v In this way, secrets foster the use of personal judgment and encourage independence, making them appear not so antithetical to Godwin’s political system after all.

^{vi} If Caleb believes in the values of *Political Justice* (1793) before he leaves the estate, then he would not think these strangers will be impressed by a handbill, or the ruling of a distant court, because “Instead of making each man an individual, which the interest of the whole requires, [political association] resolves all understandings into one common mass, and subtracts from each the varieties, that could alone distinguish him from a brute machine” (1:289, c.f. Jordan 253).

^{vii} Radcliffe suggests Godwin himself may have been guilty of this confidence himself as his use of “the unmediated transparency of rationalist language” in *Political Justice* (1793) appears similar to Caleb’s “plain unvarnished tale” (Radcliffe 533). Both Godwin and Caleb are able to transform this confidence and grow to appreciate the ways the “truth claim of each version [of a narrative] cannot be considered independently of features of style or form, which in part constitute the way in which any narrative connects its various aspects” (533).

^{viii} It seems appropriate to assume these characters have been influenced by the handbill because they reference the reward and a physical description.

^{ix} Curiously Caleb does not find it “necessary to write [the Irish brogue],” which he adopts in this case, “down in [his narrative]” (333). Perhaps concealing the brogue makes him feel that his narrative voice appears more sincere.

^x It is unlikely that the magistrate has seen Caleb’s face, or a drawing of that face, before because Jones’ handbill is said to include a description of Caleb’s appearance. While it is possible he knows this description, it seems more likely, due to the reference to the face, that suspicion is getting the best of him.

^{xi} The changes Godwin made to the 1798 version of *Political Justice* suggest that he learned this lesson as well. Whereas in the earlier version, the truth would become honest in the speaker’s manner, the later version states: “There is no instance in which truth can be communicated absolutely pure. We can only make approximations to such a proceeding, without ever being able fully to arrive at it” (“1798”, 327; c.f. Williams 484).

^{xii} Bok, while not as stringent as Godwin and Kant are towards lying, would seem to agree with Caleb that it is worse to lie than to keep a secret. She writes that while secrets do not have to have a negative connotation, lying is “*prima facie* wrong,” even though there are occasions when lying can be necessary or the lesser of two evils (xv).

^{xiii} Caleb, narrating the period of his tale in which his “life was a lie,” says that he “looked forward without hope through the series of my existence, tears of anguish rushed from my eyes, my courage became extinct, and I cursed the conscious life that was reproduced with every returning day” (354).

^{xiv} While this intimacy might seem to be a mistake, Caleb’s notion that we are not individuals, but hold “necessarily, indispensably, to [our] species,” suggests that forming an intimacy with someone is almost an inevitability (408).

^{xv} Hiding or concealing information from one person rather than many would not necessarily be less morally injurious for Godwin, and for that reason, Caleb appears to be plotting the most effective way to protect his secret.

^{xvi} Although it could be argued that Caleb truly believes the woman would not have lost her good opinion of him if she learns his name, this seems unlikely because he has just written about the old man for the reader and that betrayal must be fresh in his mind. I would also add that if he believes himself here he would not find it necessary to keep himself “private” in the first place (356).

^{xvii} Perhaps it is because we share Caleb's secret and do not believe the prejudice that Caleb feels this lie is justified. It's my feeling that Caleb's lie is not a betrayal of my trust as his reader, because, were society less corrupt, he would be able to say this information "frankly" (356).

^{xviii} Caleb does not seem to be hiding from other people entirely, as is implied by his stated intention in his search "not to incur the hazards...of solitude" (392).

^{xix} I would argue this allowance exists because Caleb has driven himself to a corner of the world where Mr. Falkland's name is not known, and therefore his secret could not really damage his reputation. Unfortunately for Caleb, Laura's father knew Falkland, forcing Falkland to publish the handbill and reveal Caleb's secret before he can slander his own name. This conjecture seems supported by Laura who tells Caleb: "I am astonished you have the effrontery to pronounce his name. *That name has been a denomination*, as far back as my memory can reach, for the most exalted of mortals, the wisest and most generous of men" (emphasis added, 405).

^{xx} It should come as no surprise therefore that Caleb's secret is ultimately exposed through the paper titled: "WONDERFUL AND SURPRISING HISTORY OF CALEB WILLIAMS" (406).

^{xxi} Again the suggestion is that secrecy is more necessary in a city or for those who regularly interact with others.

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