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**“Godwin, Bulwer and Poe: Intellectual Elitism and
the Utopian Impulse of Popular Fiction” (2010)¹**

Evert Jan van Leeuwen

William Godwin (1756-1836), Edward Bulwer Lytton (1803-1873) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) were all three intellectual elitists, authors of popular fiction and, each in their own way, radicals with a utopian vision. Their strong belief in the superiority of their own intellects over that of their fellow authors marginalized them from any identifiable cultural community. At the same time, their individualism and sense of intellectual superiority endowed them also with a strong feeling that it was their duty to write in order to educate. They believed that their fictions would not only entertain but also improve the minds of the readers and consequently society as a whole. Even if all expressed a fear of the mob, the nature of their literary productions shows that it was in fact the less-educated masses to which they wanted to reach out. All three found literary fame by writing sensational stories of crime, mystery, detection, and the supernatural that reached a much wider audience than the work of contemporary intellectuals such as Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Amos Bronson Alcott or Ralph Waldo Emerson (to name just a few). This essay shows that as intellectual elitists who turned to popular fiction in order to improve the minds of many, which would raise the standards of the society in which they lived, Godwin, Bulwer, Poe in fact form a loose-knit transatlantic community of literary utopians.

William Godwin: visionary anarchist

¹ This article was published in *The Literary Utopias of Cultural Communities, 1790-1910*, edited by Marguérite Corporaal and Evert Jan van Leeuwen, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2010.

Godwin's utopian vision was of a state of ultimate happiness wherein every individual would use his rational faculty, as well as his innate sensibility and sympathy, to work towards the good of the whole community. Godwin wrote enthusiastically about "the right each man possesses to the assistance of his neighbour,"² and the fact that "the rich man therefore has no right to withhold his assistance from his brother-man in distress."³ In *Political Justice* (1793), Godwin expressed his belief that it was the duty of the wise to instruct the uneducated masses by means of persuasion, not coercion. He wanted each individual to cultivate a reason-controlled sensibility that would lead him or her to further curiosity for knowledge and would instil an innate sympathy that would allow him or her in turn to instruct the next generation. Godwin's utopian vision was based on a concept of gradual intellectual improvement over generations, leading to increasingly utopian socio-political conditions, never to explosive revolution by force. In Godwin's utopian scheme, the key factor in achieving social progress was the independence of the individual mind. *Political Justice* is at its most radical in its premise of doing away with traditional governing bodies such as monarchy, parliament, law, the church and state education. To Godwin, these institutions had played an important part over the centuries in keeping the individual mind enslaved within an ideology of inequality on the level of class, gender, race and intellect. What was needed was a revolution of the mind, in which each individual with a sound moral sense would be allowed to think and judge entirely for him- or herself. Through the cultivation of a Hutchesonian moral sensibility and an insatiable curiosity to acquire new knowledge of self and society, the individual would learn to act on disinterested motives for the benefit of the community. Unfortunately, after the publication of

² William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Penguin, 1985, 199.

³ Peter Marshall, ed., *The Anarchist Writings of William Godwin*, London, 1986, 78.

Political Justice, an expensive, dry and dense work of philosophy, Godwin slowly became an object of satire rather than admiration amongst his intellectual peers.⁴

Probably because of the limited readership of *Political Justice*, Godwin started work on a novel in which he set out to translate his anarchist philosophy into a form more easily palatable for less well-educated readers. The original title of the novel, *Things as They Are* (1794), accentuates the direct political nature of the text and its didactic purpose. In the original preface, Godwin made sure to emphasize that his novel was written to illustrate how “the spirit and character of the government intrudes itself into every rank of society” and that this pernicious truth needed to be “communicated to persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach.” What his readers should learn was that within the present socio-political structures “man becomes the destroyer of man.”⁵ As such *Caleb Williams*, the now more familiar title of the novel, was a dystopian novel that had as its didactic aim to awaken the minds of the readers to the need for radical socio-political change. Various critics picked up on the political purposes of the novel. A sympathetic critic noted that the novel described “thing as they ever have been,” while a hostile critic emphasized Godwin’s attack on institutions such as the government and the legal system, describing the novel as “a striking example of the evil use which may be made of considerable talents.”⁶ It is not surprising that Godwin turned to the popular genre of sensational fiction as a means to disseminate his socio-political criticism, as well as his utopian vision. Reading fiction had become an increasingly individualized leisure experience by the end of the eighteenth century. But it was an individual experience that was closely linked to the literary public sphere in which these individual reading experiences could be shared, discussed and evaluated. The popular novel, then, as vehicle for the communication

⁴ After denouncing marriage in *Political Justice* as “a system of fraud ... the worst of monopolies” (762), Godwin was satirized for failing to practice what he preached when he married Mary Wollstonecraft. Having called for the euthanasia of government, ironically at the end of his career Godwin accepted a government job.

⁵ William Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, eds Gary Handwerk and A.A. Markley, Peterborough: Ontario, 2000, 55.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 555.

of knowledge, fitted Godwin's vision of how the mind of man could be un-coercively improved. Just as earlier sentimental novelists such as Henry Mackenzie and Francis Burney believed their fictions could directly improve the moral sentiments of their individual readers, Godwin used recognizable aspects of the popular genres of gothic and crime fiction in order to communicate his philosophy. In so doing, Godwin was engaging in exactly the kind of reform project he had theoretically outlined in his philosophical writings. Individual readers would enjoy his sensational stories while being simultaneously morally enlightened. By reading fiction, rather than listening to a lecture or a sermon, they would retain the freedom to interpret and react critically to the material and would have the opportunity to discuss it with friends and family who had also indulged in the pleasures of an individual reading experience. During the 1790s Godwin was not alone in his belief that popular fiction could be a fruitful vehicle for the dissemination of radical philosophy. Gary Kelly has shown that together with Thomas Holcroft, Robert Bage and Elizabeth Inchbald, Godwin formed a literary community of sorts, for a short while, now generally known as the Jacobin novelists. All these authors used popular fictional strategies to articulate to readers their visions of the radical reforms needed to improve British society in the 1790s. Mary Wollstonecraft can also be counted amongst this group, since she turned activist-novelist with the publication of *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798). The American literary pioneer, Charles Brockden Brown has also been mentioned in this context. Kelly explained that "it was by 'discussion and reasoning' that the heroes and heroines were to reform the villains of English Jacobin novels," not through a violent overturning of established authority. Popular fiction was the perfect vehicle to allow for the un-coerced individual attainment and public discussion of knowledge. While Godwin, Holcroft and the other Jacobin novelists were radical reformers, "they were not revolutionaries."⁷ Godwin's vision of human perfectibility was never a populist one, even though his novels were aimed at consumers of

⁷ Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel 1780-1805*, Oxford, 1976, 4.

popular culture. He feared the tyranny of an uneducated majority, and always considered the less-educated and less well-off masses to be reliant on an intellectual elite to raise them to a higher intellectual level before improvement could be attained. In contrast to his philosophical adversary Edmund Burke, Godwin did believe, however, that each individual had the potential to be raised to the same level of intellect. Peter Marshall neatly summarizes Godwin's position on the human potential for improvement: "Man is born equal and innocent ... all mankind, including Indians, negroes and women, are equally capable of exercising reason."⁸

Godwin was aware of social and intellectual inequality in the present, yet he felt that under the guidance of a benevolent and disinterested intelligentsia, and through a non-doctrinaire system of education, a state of equality could be aspired to – even if this utopian destination was not to be reached in his own lifetime, or even in that of the coming generations. One of the key ideological forces that Godwin wished to see broken down in order for proper progress to be effected was the social custom of deference to people of a higher social rank (this is also one of the key themes of *Caleb Williams*). Deference was an inherently conservative human quality that ensured an unquestioning trust in the superiority of others due only to the superior position they gained through the dominant structures of patriarchy, aristocracy, monarchy and law. In *Political Justice*, Godwin expressed the idea that even a quality such as gratitude "if by gratitude we understand a sentiment of preference, which I entertain towards another, upon the grounds of my having been the subject of his benefits, is no part either of justice or virtue."⁹ Gratitude, to Godwin, was a form of deference, because justice, in Godwin's philosophy, was "no respecter of persons."¹⁰ Speaking more generally about authority, the anarchist philosopher believed that

⁸ Peter Marshall, *William Godwin*, New Haven: CT and London, 1984, 94.

⁹ Godwin, *Political Justice*, 171.

¹⁰ ⁹ Ibid., 169.

... every man will find that there are some points in which he is the equal or perhaps the superior of other men, but that there are certainly some points in which other men are superior to him. The superiority in question in the present instance is superiority of intellect or information.

An uncritical belief in such superiority, according to Godwin, brings about obedience through unreserved confidence in others. This confidence, while useful in practical cases, Godwin warns, should be “guarded with as much jealousy, and kept by the person yielding obedience within as narrow limits, as possible,” because obedience to others, through unreserved confidence in them, strengthens the realm of ignorance in society.¹¹

The paradox here is that Godwin – himself no respecter of persons – did expect to be respected and listened to when he addressed his audience. His timely intervention in the treason trials of 1794, when his solidly argued critique of government policy saved John Thelwall and Horne Tooke from the gallows, is evidence that those in the highest positions of British society did respect and listen to his reasoning. Godwin himself always stressed, however, that an individual’s private judgement is the cornerstone of an equal society, and thus opened himself to the ridicule and serious criticism he eventually would receive from his peers. Godwin’s *Essay on Sepulchres* (1809) suggests that, in time, his disgust of deference and gratitude softened, as he conjured up the great intellectual dead as mentors for another age. In *Sepulchres* Godwin shows that he allowed for unquestioning reverence of acknowledged great minds. His more educational oriented essays in *The Enquirer* (1797) and *Thoughts on Man* (1820) also stress that individual reading of the classics as well as modern greats, would go a long way in cultivating in the individual mind the kind of rational sensibility he perceived necessary to achieve his utopian schemes: “Every man who is changed from what he was by the perusal of their works [Epictetus, Seneca, Shakespeare or Milton], communicates a portion of the

¹¹ Ibid., 240.

inspiration all around him.”¹² Godwin follows the eighteenth-century theorist of sensibility Francis Hutcheson in believing that literature not only appeals to readers’ emotions, but that through the mechanism of sympathy it also actively shapes a reader’s moral sense.¹³ Since reading would have been deemed a private, un-coercive experience it is understandable that Godwin felt he was not contradicting himself in stressing the benefits of taking to heart the lessons written down by the intellectual giants of past eras. By the early nineteenth century, Godwin, who had briefly enjoyed a spell as one of the recognized great minds of his era, read and respected by all (Wordsworth, Coleridge Southey and Shelley had all been outspoken admirers of Godwin’s utopian anarchism at one point), found himself instead on the margins of his culture. Even if his consistent intellectual elitism had ostracized Godwin from many of his intellectual peers in the course of the 1790s and into the nineteenth century, he managed to find a new disciple towards the end of his career in the eccentric aristocrat Edward Bulwer Lytton.

Edward Bulwer Lytton: radical aristocrat

In 1826, writing from the comfort of his ancestral estate, Bulwer complained in a letter to a friend that England was a “land of wealth and rheumatism, corruption, vulgarity, and flannel waistcoats.”¹⁴ Andrew Brown explains that Bulwer was troubled by the materialist ethic of his day.¹⁵ In 1831, Bulwer became an MP and called out for the need to completely reform the political-economic structure of Britain which he believed too much controlled by an aloof aristocracy. Bulwer “carefully dissected” his own class “and found” them “responsible for most of the national ills.”¹⁶ Bulwer “belonged to Lord Durham’s group of philosophical radicals, a

¹² William Godwin, *The Enquirer*, New York, 1965, 140.

¹³ See Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, Indianapolis, 2002, 48-65.

¹⁴ Edward Robert Bulwer Lytton, *The Life, Letters and Literary Remains of Edward Bulwer, Lord Lytton*, 2 vols, London, 1883, 125.

¹⁵ See Andrew Brown, “Bulwer’s Reputation,” in *The Subverting Vision of Bulwer Lytton*, ed. Allan Conrad Christensen, Newark: NJ, 2004, 30.

¹⁶ Allan Conrad Christensen, *Edward Bulwer Lytton: The Fiction of New Regions*, Athens: GA, 1976, 7.

faction of ardent political reformers on the Whig left.” The young Bulwer was averse to party politics and “prized his political independence, voting for the issue rather than the man or party.” During this period, Bulwer “corresponded frequently with John Stuart Mill and with the radical philosopher William Godwin.”¹⁷ By June 1830 Godwin had become the young aristocrat’s mentor and expressed his concern about the author’s decision to enter into parliament as a radical. He warns Bulwer of the dangers of losing his independence as a thinker:

... if you succeed, you can never in the same sense, be your own man again, and I have scarcely any materials to judge whether it will prove a good or an ill thing. I scarcely know anything of your political creed; I know less of what it is, being in Parliament that you propose to effect.

Significantly, in the same letter, Godwin stresses that his doubts about Bulwer’s political ambitions should not stand in the way of their friendship. While he wishes that he had met Bulwer “five years sooner” (so as to have been able to tutor him I presume), he also respects the young radical’s independence of thought and wishes him “smooth seas, favouring gales, and a prosperous voyage.” Godwin even softens his criticism of Bulwer political plans by adding in a postscript that he feels he has “expressed [him]self too coldly.”¹⁸ Four months later, Godwin expresses his delight with the progress Bulwer had made as a political radical, by stating: “I am your convert.” True to his own radical doctrine of disinterested benevolence, he urges Bulwer to fully embrace his new role as an advocate of “the real interests of mankind,” even if such preoccupations would mean the dissolution of their friendship.¹⁹ These letters suggest that the aged Godwin saw in the independent radical aristocrat an individual who had the intellect and willpower to carry the flag for his own brand of individualist, intellectual utopianism and his gradualist reform strategy. Heather Worthington points out that, “motivated

¹⁷ James L. Campbell Sr., *Edward Bulwer-Lytton*, Boston: MA, 1986, 31.

¹⁸ E. Robert Bulwer Lytton, *Life, Letters and Literary Remains*, 300-301, 301-302.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 303.

by a spirit of rebellion,” Bulwer was “in both his politics and his writings ... against the law,” meaning that, like Godwin, he fervently opposed the political and legal establishment of his day.²⁰

In 1833, Godwin could only have been pleased with the publication of Bulwer’s *England and the English* (1833). In this sociological enquiry into the nation’s ills, the eccentric aristocrat expressed his sympathetic stance and benevolent intentions towards those strands of English society that had suffered most under the old regime, and expressed his distrust of the positive outcome of mere legal reforms. Just as Godwin felt that humans were primarily social beings, one of Bulwer’s main criticisms of English society during the 1830s was that there was no sense of a community spirit amongst the country’s citizens. Within the present social structure, he argues: “all amongst us, save those of the highest ranks, live very much alone. Our crowded parties are not society; we assemble all our acquaintance for the pleasure of saying nothing to them.” A primary cause of this social isolation, Bulwer believed, was the powerful influence of the domestic sentimentalists who idolized the home above any other social sphere. For Bulwer, “the unsocial” is “the milder epithet of the Domestic.” The ideology of separate spheres, vindicated by what he believes is the cultural dominance of a sentimental worldview, articulated through sentimental culture, imprisons individuals within the family home. This in turn necessarily distances them from the wider community, increasing a selfish outlook on life and decreasing the cultivation of benevolence, the necessary ingredient for the improvement of society.

Bulwer believed that commercial developments underscored this unsocial English behaviour, since the daily pressures of the public world of commerce leave the individual wishing not for social amusement but for the tranquillity of the family home.²¹ The development

²⁰ Heather Worthington, “Against the Law: Bulwer’s Fictions of Crime,” in *The Subverting Vision of Bulwer Lytton*, 54.

²¹ Edward Bulwer Lytton, *England and the English*, London, 1876, 24.

of free-market capitalism, Bulwer believed, while underscoring an ideology of separate spheres, also strengthened rather than weakened the traditional class divisions and hierarchy. According to Bulwer, “wealth is the greatest leveller of all.” Therefore, most of the property would remain in the hands of the aristocracy, since “the highest of the English nobles [will] willingly repair the fortunes of hereditary extravagance by intermarriage with the families of the banker, the lawyer, and the merchant.” For Bulwer, the intermingling of an aristocratic and a capitalist elite, the “money spiders, who would sell England for Is.6d,” as he called them, was detrimental to the cause of socio-political equality, because it “tends to extend the roots of their influence among the middle classes, who, in other countries, are the natural barrier of the aristocracy.” A Burkean reverence for aristocratic lineage – Godwin’s deference – has instilled into the British middle classes a natural desire to belong to this class.

Like Godwin, Bulwer expressed his concern that one of the greatest barriers to universal sympathy and benevolence between equal individuals is this perpetuation of a social system founded on deference toward the aristocracy. Proof of this continuing tradition, Bulwer argued, is found in the fact that “the highest offices have been open by law to any man, no matter what his pedigree or his quarterings; but, influences, stronger than laws, have determined that it is only through the aid of one portion or the other of the aristocracy that those offices can be obtained.”²² Like Godwin, Bulwer rejected the idea that constructing a republic would dissolve the tradition of aristocratic rule. Changing the political structure will not change the way people think, because it leaves the same group of people in power, even if they give themselves a different name. Having styled himself as an independent intellectual, Bulwer’s greatest lament, unsurprisingly, was that the social and economic developments of the early nineteenth century ensured that “the rank gained by intellect, or by interest, is open but to a few,” while “the rank that may be obtained by fashion seems delusively to be open to all.” This creates a society ruled

²² Ibid., 26.

by “that eternal vying with each other; that spirit of show; that lust of imitation which characterise our countrymen and countrywomen.”²³ Money gives you the power to buy what the rich own, and to own what the rich own is to buy into power, since those who have the money can buy themselves into the traditional social ranks that hold political power and create the laws under which it operates. Here Bulwer follows up Godwin’s argument that socio-political developments have moral consequences. England’s favourite word, “respectability,” Bulwer argued, under the influence of a social structure founded on the inequality of property, excludes the concept of virtue, “but never a decent sufficiency of wealth.” Consequently, “to be rich becomes a merit; to be poor, an offence.”²⁴

Like Godwin, Bulwer was aware that the immorality of the contemporary social structure, founded on the inequality of property, was perpetuated by a legal system that supported it: “poverty being associated in men’s minds with something disreputable, they have had little scruple in making laws unfavourable to the poor!”²⁵ Socio-political reform, then, cannot be achieved by substituting a monarchy for a republic, reforming existent laws, or by developing a free-market capitalist economy that creates the illusion of fair competition in which anyone has the chance to win and climb the social ladder.

Like Godwin, Bulwer believed strongly that reform needed to be effected gradually, by initially reforming the minds of the people through uncoercive intellectual influence. Only by ensuring that individuals came to think differently and independently about their place and role within the community and wider society would it be possible for them to discuss their ideas in public. Then the social structures that define that community and society would gradually, but inevitably, alter as the most persuasive and intelligent arguments were increasingly communicated between individuals and shared among all classes. Unsurprisingly, following in

²³ Ibid., 31.

²⁴ Ibid., 34 and 33.

²⁵ Ibid., 34.

his mentor's footsteps, Bulwer became "an artist in words," in order to bring about the necessary change in the individual's way of thinking about his or her position within society. Bulwer, like Godwin, believed that the man of letters had a duty to perform as a cultural prophet. The young author "claimed a superiority because the artist was superior to his fellows, and the great artist had the right and duty to live by his own rules."²⁶

As with Godwin and Shelley, in Bulwer the identity of the utopian radical, the literary author and the cultural prophet of change writing from the social margins, are inextricably intertwined. Bulwer's early novels taught their readers how the identities and actions of individuals are formed and generated for the most part by their adherence to social customs and traditions. Bulwer's public persona showed his readers that it was possible to consciously refuse to act out the prescribed social role, to criticize the dominant ideology, and still be successful. Early literary success, especially with *Pelham* (1828) and *Paul Clifford* (1830) must have confirmed Bulwer in his "contention that the novel [was] the most popular and powerful mode of communicating ideas" and therefore "should play a key role in countering" the materialist ethic that Bulwer believed dominated society.²⁷ According to Bulwer's son, the popular crime novel *Paul Clifford*:

... did much to stimulate public opinion in favour of carrying Criminal Law Reform beyond the point at which it had been left by the labours of Romilly; and the book itself was an incident in my father's constant course of endeavour to improve the condition of that large portion of the population which is most tempted to crime through poverty and ignorance, – not by proclamation of utopian promises, or recourse to violent constitutional changes, but through a better intellectual training facilitated by timely administrative reforms.²⁸

²⁶ Leslie Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Man of Letters*, London, 2003, 90.

²⁷ Andrew Brown, "Bulwer's Reputation," in *The Subverting Vision of Bulwer Lytton*, 31.

²⁸ Lytton, *Life, Letters and Literary Remains*, 244.

Unsurprisingly, Godwin praised Bulwer's fiction and wrote that:

... there are parts of the book I read with transport. There are many parts of it so divinely written that my first impulse was to throw my implements of writing into the fire, and to wish that I could consign all I have published in the province of fiction to the same pyre.²⁹

Godwin found in *Paul Clifford* a strong social message for change with which he could agree. Campbell argues that the novel "parallels William Godwin's argument in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) ... that the law is an instrument of class control."³⁰ Like Godwin, Bulwer believed that "government sponsored violence could never be a solution" to the socio-political problems England faced, and he argued that "artists were the harbingers of change" and consequently the instigators of reform.³¹ The public reaction to *Paul Clifford* showed Bulwer that the visionary popular novelist had the potential to become a more successful practical reformer than the radical politician. In *England and the English*, Bulwer continued his argument that "fiction, with its graphic delineation and appeals to the familiar emotions, is adapted to the crowd," adding that, in fact, popular fiction "is the oratory of literature."³² Laurence Poston argues that, in his novels of the 1830s, Bulwer parallels "a tendency already present in Godwin's and [Mary] Shelley's novels: to shift the focus from legislatively enacted political reform to personal self-redefinition."³³ The novel, with its potential mass appeal, could alter the way each individual thought about his or her place and role in society, bringing about a natural change in the social system. After the success of his didactic crime novels, Bulwer founded the *Monthly Chronicle* in 1838.

²⁹ Ibid., 258.

³⁰ Campbell, *Edward Bulwer-Lytton*, 40.

³¹ Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton*, 174.

³² Lytton, *England and the English*, 261.

³³ Laurence Poston, "Bulwer's Godwinian Myth," in *The Subverting Vision of Bulwer Lytton*, 79.

In setting up this magazine Bulwer was acting on principles similar to those that would inspire Edgar Allan Poe to try to establish his own revolutionary literary magazine across the Atlantic. Bulwer “aimed to supplant politically biased journals and raise the standards of reviewing.” From his sense of intellectual independence, a belief in the positive influence of reading on the individual, and a duty to educate the public, Bulwer battled fiercely with his reviewers and fellow authors, defending both his own unusual novelistic and often harsh critical practice. Such battles led to “alienation from his kind,” a plight Poe would also experience in America. Bulwer’s outcast status led him to become the champion of the unrecognized literati. He campaigned to set up an association of authors whose work could raise the minds of the public. Bulwer, together with his friend Charles Dickens, became “prime movers in the setting up of the Guild of Literature and Art.”³⁴ Bulwer, like Godwin, was inspired by a belief in “the inevitability of major change.”³⁵ For positive change to come about, Bulwer argued, the individual needed to “learn to detach respectability from acres and rent-rolls,” to “learn indifference for fashion and fine people; for the whereabouts of lords and ladies; for the orations of men boasting of the virtue of making money,” to “learn to prize at their full worth a high integrity, and a lofty intellect,” and to “find yourselves running to gaze, not on foreign Princes and Lord Mayors’ coaches, but on those who elevate, benefit, and instruct you.” Then “you will behold a new influence pushing its leaves and blossoms from amidst the dead corruption of the old.”³⁶

Like Godwin, Bulwer was convinced that those who live too much within the ideological boundaries will not be able to effect the necessary reform since “society is crowded with the insipid and beset with the insincere.”³⁷ In a public world dominated by a materialist creed, Bulwer believed that “it is the property of moral philosophy to keep alive the refining

³⁴ Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton*, 119, 123, 124.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

³⁶ Lytton, *England and the English*, 336.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

and unworldly springs of thought and action; a counter attraction to the mire and clay of earth, and drawing us insensibly upward to a higher and purer air of Intellectual Being.”³⁸ Bulwer’s belief that words had the power to transform social structures led him to propose a utopian scheme in which cottages would be built at Knebworth “where writers could live free of charge and devote themselves to literature” – a literature that Bulwer hoped would reach a wide audience and change the minds of its readers, and British society as a whole.³⁹

Edgar Allan Poe: prophetic magazinist

Had Bulwer managed to establish a community of like-minded intellectuals at Knebworth, it probably would have appealed strongly to Edgar Allan Poe, who was struggling to make ends meet in antebellum America at the time Bulwer was experiencing such great success in Britain. Poe’s reviews of Bulwer’s work show that the aloof American magazinist respected the eccentric aristocrat’s radical fictions. While always critical in some points, Poe heaps up praise for Bulwer in his review of *Rienzi* (1835), calling him a man of “fine intellect.” He confesses that in reading his work “we feel sure of rising from the perusal a wiser if not better man.”⁴⁰ Implicitly, Poe highlights the novel’s Godwinian character by writing of its “profound and lucid exposition of the morale of Government – of the Philosophies of Rule and Misrule – of the absolute incompatibility of Freedom and Ignorance – Tyranny in the few and Virtue in the many.” Poe acknowledges the novel’s radical political message by pointing out the moral of the story to his own readers: “that it is absolutely necessary to model upon the character of the governed, the machinery, whether simple or complex, of the governmental legislation.”⁴¹ While Poe admired Bulwer as an author with an “appreciation of the right, the

³⁸ Ibid., 192.

³⁹ Mitchell, *Bulwer Lytton*, 125.

⁴⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, New York, 1984, 142.

⁴¹ Ibid., 146.

beautiful, and the true,”⁴² it is not such a great surprise that in his review of *Rienzi* he also singles out the Godwinian political maxim that any government structure should be the natural outflow of the character of those who will be, or allow themselves to be governed by it.

Burton R. Pollin has argued that Poe suffered from an “entrenched ‘Godwinolatry’.” Godwin’s novels provided Poe with “the keystones of his criticism” as well as “thematic germs” for his fiction. According to Pollin, however, Poe seemed “entirely to ignore Godwin’s social critique,” and “regarded Godwin as primarily a writer of fiction.”⁴³ As a professional literary critic Poe indeed closely engaged with Godwin’s novelistic style and method of composition in his magazine articles. This focus on form does not mean, however, that Poe entirely missed or rejected the political philosophy that Godwin incorporated into his fictions. His review of Bulwer’s *Rienzi* shows that he was sensitive to an author’s didactic intentions, even when they were directly political rather than ethical or even aesthetic. In his criticism, Poe described Godwin as “a very remarkable man, not even yet thoroughly understood.”⁴⁴ This judgement suggests a closer affinity between the two men of letters than a shared preference for purely literary themes and style. Poe even expressed the hope that “the pen which wrote *Caleb Williams*, should never for a moment be idle.”⁴⁵ Poe’s judgement of Godwin here suggests idolatry rather than merely objective praise of the British radical’s literary technique. Poe’s repeated attempts to create a community of American authors who would work together in secret to improve the mind of Americans and improve society as a whole dovetails closely with both Godwin’s, and specifically Bulwer’s similarly elitist style of literary utopianism.

Poe’s drive to become the greatest American magazinist, and to raise the aesthetic and moral standards of his culture through such a popular print medium, illustrates that he too shared Godwin and Bulwer’s vision that popular literature could be a major player in the process of

⁴² Ibid., 161.

⁴³ Burton R. Pollin, *Discoveries in Poe*, Notre Dame: IN, 1970, 119, 109, 126-27.

⁴⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 122.

⁴⁵ Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 260.

the gradual reform of an entire society. Speaking of his attempt to set up *The Penn*, not long after being fired from *Burton's Gentlemen's Magazine*, Poe writes:

I have been led to make the attempt at establishing it through an earnest yet natural desire of rendering myself independent – I mean not so much as regards money, as in respect to my literary opinions and conduct. So far I have not only labored solely for the benefit of others (receiving for myself a miserable pittance) but have been forced to model my thoughts at the will of men whose imbecility was evident to all but themselves.⁴⁶

Poe envisions himself, as in his final revenge tale “Hop-Frog” (1849), playing the role of the vengeful jester who opposes a despotic king and asserts his independence on both an intellectual and financial level, while articulating his sense of duty in improving the state of American letters.

Like Bulwer, Poe was disgruntled by an increasingly capitalist economy that did little to improve the conditions for idealistic authors in the literary marketplace. Poe’s plan to start his own magazine was his attempt to assert independence from a publishing world that was dominated by profit margins instead of literary idealism. In Poe’s own words, his magazine, once established, would “kick up dust”⁴⁷ by keeping clear of the political cock-fights that were being staged in the other magazines and staying strictly within the field of letters. Poe was not a political author in the style of Godwin and Bulwer. But he did share with the British radicals, whose work he admired, the “ambition of serving the great cause of truth, while endeavouring to forward the literature of the country.”⁴⁸ Poe wished to transform the American literary scene into a national treasure. For Poe, his proposed popular literary magazine was endowed with

⁴⁶ *Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. John Ward Ostrom, Cambridge: MA, 1948, 154.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

utopian potential because it would strive to bring together a cultural community of great minds who would use the magazine to bring about the intellectual reform of its readers:

The new journal will endeavor to be at the same time more varied and more unique; – more vigorous, more pungent, more original, more individual, and more independent. It will discuss not only the BellesLettres, but, very thoroughly, the Fine Arts, with the Drama; and more in brief, will give each month, a Retrospect of our Political History. I will enlist the loftiest talent, but employ it not always in the loftiest – at least not always in the most pompous or Puritanical way. It will aim at affording a fair and not dishonourable field for the true intellect of the land, without reference to the mere prestige of celebrated names. It will support the general interests of the Republic of Letters, and insist upon regarding the world at large as the sole proper audience for the author.⁴⁹

While emphasizing the literary nature of the journal, Poe shows in his prospectus that he, like Godwin and Bulwer, believed literature to be inseparable from broader socio-political issues. Evidence for this is the mere fact that he makes columns on American politics a permanent feature in the magazine.

Like Godwin and Bulwer, he clearly wished to reach the largest possible audience so as to have the greatest influence on the development of as many American minds as possible. Like Godwin and Bulwer, who in the wake of popular success found public ridicule and private tragedy, Poe found literary success only as editor of magazines owned by others, and with a few selected tales and poems such as “The Gold-Bug” (1843) and “The Raven” (1845). He never managed to successfully edit a magazine he owned for any length of time and, like Bulwer and Godwin, became increasingly reclusive in his habits. Despite enjoying moments of celebrity, Poe’s major biographers have shown that, much like Bulwer, the American

⁴⁹ “Prospectus for the Stylus,” quoted in Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*, Baltimore, 1998, 376.

magazinish was a social outcast throughout his professional career.⁵⁰ Poe's correspondence with fellow literati shows, however, that he did not lose his utopian literary vision. In 1844, he suggested in a letter to Lowell the idea "that the elite of our men of letters should combine secretly" in order to retain their independence from the popular magazines which would allow them to raise American culture to a higher standard.⁵¹ In the same year that he addressed Lowell about his idea for a secret order of American authors, Poe wrote to his friend Chivers of another literary scheme: "when you feel ready to attempt the enterprise, you will find me here – at New York – where I live, at present, in strict seclusion, busied with books and ambitious thoughts, until the hour shall arrive when I may come forth with a certainty of success."⁵² Through his tone of secrecy and seclusion Poe seems increasingly alienated in a world that seems to care little for his idealistic schemes of a revolution in American letters. Poe even acknowledges the conscious nature of his social withdrawal to F.W. Thomas when he writes, "for the last seven or eight months I have been playing Hermit."⁵³

By 1848, Poe's description becomes that of the solitary mystic as he writes to Jane E. Locke of "the hermit life which for the past three years I have led, buried in the woods of Fordham."⁵⁴ As with Godwin and Bulwer, Poe's ingrained sense of his own superior intellect marginalized him from the culture he wished to improve. Wagenknecht writes that: "Poe once permitted himself to declare that 'the style of the profound thinker is never closely logical,' but he never wished to throw out either logic or close reasoning; he merely wished to supplement them with intuition and imagination."⁵⁵ Poe's peculiar mode of thought, in which reason and imagination blend into one, dovetails with Godwin's "fantasy of reason"⁵⁶ and Bulwer's

⁵⁰ See Quinn, Edgar Allan Poe; and Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance*, New York, 1992.

⁵¹ *Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, 247.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 259.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁵⁵ Edward Wagenknecht, *Edgar Allan Poe: The Man Behind the Legend*, New York and Oxford, 1963, 100-101.

⁵⁶ This phrase was coined by Don Locke as the title of his biography of Godwin published by Routledge in 1980.

visionary radicalism. All three believed in the importance of recognizing the symbiotic relationship between reason and imagination, thought and feeling, the head and the heart. A focus on reason alone led to a binary either/or mode of thought, which stifles the articulation of the utopian alternative: both/and. Literature was the best vehicle through which to raise intellectual and moral standards because it forced the individual reader to combine reason and imagination in the act of interpretation. Imaginative literature, unlike conduct books, political pamphlets, or other forms of print culture, cultivated the reader's independent moral sense. Poe shared with Godwin and Bulwer a belief that one of the key obstacles towards improving American culture, and through it the minds of its citizens, was the deference to institutionalized authority.

Consequently, Poe, like Godwin and Bulwer, was no respecter of persons. His own belief in the superiority of his critical judgement over that of his peers led him famously to be called the Tomahawk critic. As with Godwin and Bulwer, this self-righteous attitude, even if fuelled by a benevolent motive to raise cultural standards, led to Poe's marginalization from the very scene on which he wished to take centre stage. Poe found it hard to imagine why intellectual peers, whose books he killed and buried in his critiques, held a personal grudge towards him and would refuse to aid him in his idealistic literary reform projects. Were his critiques not honest condemnations of hackwork that should not be tolerated? In his "Letter to B—" (1836), Poe attacks the tyrannical nature of the American literary marketplace and echoes Godwin's concern that social structures founded on deference towards earlier-established authorities hold back individual enlightenment and encourage despotism. In his discussion of how literary reputations are constructed and upheld, Poe reveals his Godwinian distrust in deference. In the letter Poe makes this point by discussing the thesis that "a 'fool' can be made to hold the same opinion as a 'genius' – in this case the opinion that 'Shakespeare is the greatest

of poets’.”⁵⁷ His discussion of how the fool’s obedience to the superior judgment of the supposed genius superior judgment is identical to Godwin’s argument on the pernicious influence of deference. Like Godwin, Poe attributes the belief of the fool that Shakespeare is the greatest of poets to an unfounded trust in the authority of his more intellectual neighbour (who holds the opinion that Shakespeare is the greatest of poets). Because of such ungrounded confidence, the allocation of literary reputation within the literary field becomes the province of the empowered few, who are considered by the fools to be geniuses, only because of the fool’s unreserved confidence in their judgement. According to Poe, the real genius could only be established when the fool learned to think independently and to weigh up critically the arguments of the established authorities. As self-professed prophets of change and independent intellectuals, Godwin, Bulwer and Poe were all three convinced that they were able to spot the fools masquerading as kings. As popular authors who believed in the power of imaginative literature to raise the intellectual standards of their readers Godwin, Bulwer, and Poe were convinced that their fantastic fictions would be able to cultivate the minds of their readers, so that they too would be able to learn how to unmask the kings of their cultures as fools, and they themselves come to take the position of king.

⁵⁷ Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 5.