It is now widely accepted that both Godwin’s treatise, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), and his major work of narrative fiction, *Things as They Are; or, Caleb Williams* (1794), are ‘designed to achieve change and also designed to refute the case for the status quo familiarized, above all, by Burke’. Nevertheless, the two books must be designed to fulfil this objective in different ways, if only because the design – the form – of a novel and a treatise are different.

That the political argument had something to do with narrative would not, however, have been equally recognized by all parties. Burke identified politics closely with aesthetics, but my attempt to place his work in the context of thinking about narrative would probably have puzzled him. William Godwin, by contrast, would not have been surprised to find his work discussed in these terms. As Gary Kelly, Pamela Clemit, Jon Klancher and others have demonstrated, Godwin was interestingly alert to the relationship between politics and narrative form. My aim in this chapter is to take their argument further. The relationship between politics and narrative is, I shall suggest, a principle preoccupation of both *Caleb Williams* and *Political Justice*. I shall also argue, however, that Godwin’s treatment of this relationship is as interesting for its uncertainties as for its intelligence, uncertainties which derive in part from the semantic instability of the vocabulary available for its discussion.

To focus a discussion of narrative and politics, as the title of this chapter suggests we should, on ‘stories and families’ is immediately to beg one of the questions it is my purpose to answer. That is, is a family a political institution? The answer to that question will clearly depend on what is meant by the word ‘family’; and it will also depend, I shall suggest, on what is meant by the word ‘story’. In exploring the relationship
between stories and families in *Caleb Williams* and *Political Justice* we need to pay serious attention to Godwin’s often puzzling use of two groups of words: on the one hand, words used to describe narrative or features of narrative, including ‘story’, ‘history’, ‘character’ and ‘narrative’ itself; on the other hand, words for significant social relationships, including ‘family’, ‘domestic’, ‘servant’ and ‘master’. The importance of both the groups has already been noted, for instance in the use of the word ‘character’ by Johnson and Boswell, and in Burke’s use of ‘family’ to mean lineage. In Godwin it is significantly harder for us to be sure what these important words mean.

These words – the narrative words and the social words – have always been complex. They were especially complex in the period of Godwin’s writing life because they were all undergoing semantic transformation. They are of course distinct groups of words and a change of meaning within one group does not necessarily or immediately entail a shift of meaning in the other. The two lexical groups are nevertheless connected, if only because all of these words helped to alter the way in which the distinction between public life and private life was conceived. Private life came to be associated with, on the one hand, the family as James Mill defined it in 1829, ‘the group which consists of a Father, Mother, and Children’, and, on the other hand, with a conception of personal identity that was inward in the specific sense of being detached – in a sense I shall explain – from any open connection to narrative representation.

It is interesting to watch some of these words at work in specific passages of Godwin’s writing, first of all by putting a passage from the Preface to *Caleb Williams* beside the opening sentences of the 1796 edition of *Political Justice*. ‘The following narrative’, Godwin writes in the Preface,

is intended to answer a purpose more general and important than immediately appears upon the face of it. The question now afloat in the world respecting Things As They Are is the most interesting that can be presented to the human mind. While one party pleads for reformation and change, the other extols in the warmest terms the existing constitution of society. It seemed as if something would be gained for the decision of this question, if that constitution were faithfully developed in its practical effects. What is now presented to the public is no refined and abstract speculation; it is a study and delineation of things passing in the moral world. It is but of late that the inestimable importance of political principles has been