PETER NELSON '78

AN INTERVIEW WITH GAIL GODWIN

Kathleen Welch

WELCH: Two aspects of your writing fascinate me. The first one is your use of Victorian heroines and the many literary allusions, especially in *The Odd Woman* but also in *Violet Clay*. And your going back to that tradition, your protagonist returning to that tradition. It seemed you were often inviting the reader to compare Clifford to Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*. And Jane Austen is talked about. At one point, at the beginning of *The Odd Woman*, you say, "Oh, Jane Clifford can never be in an Austen novel but she might be in an Eliot novel." I'm also interested in the use of the Evans-Lewes relationship as a paradigm of the perfect female-male relationship. I was wondering if you could begin by talking about Brooke and Clifford and how much of Eliot you were trying to incorporate. Were you making a conscious contrast?

GODWIN: No. I should explain what I was doing. I wanted Jane Clifford to be a complete character. While a lot of it did come from experiences in my life, I had to give her her own identity. And one of the things she did was she taught English and she did her dissertation on George Eliot. I didn't do a dissertation on George Eliot. That's Jane's dissertation. And I would figure that if someone sat in the library and worked on a dissertation, feeling the guilt in the novels of George Eliot she would begin to think in those terms and she would compare herself with Eliot heroines. So it was all within Jane. I have other writers I like as much as or even more than Eliot. That was Jane's thing. Violet was trapped in the Gothic romance syndrome, where everything stops on the last page. Both of these women, Violet and Jane Clifford, just happened to be in lines of work where they would think about literary heroines. In Violet's case it was the Gothic heroines, Jane Eyre or Mrs. Rochester. And Jane was the academic who would care about Eliot. Also Eliot was a very good parallel because she did get this man and it was twenty-five years, the same as Jane's mother and stepfather, the same as her lover and his wife. I was conscious of those parallels.

WELCH: Some other parallels that I noticed were the—I hesitate to use the word moral—but there does seem to be a moral commitment you share with Eliot as well, as far as the individual's relationship to the society is concerned. You have a very good balance between the individual characters and the changing society. *Middlemarch* takes place in the middle 1830's, which was a great period of transition, and the early 1970's is the time of *The Odd Woman*. It seemed to parallel that very well. Both of you seem to me to be dealing in very different ways with the problems a

young woman has changing socially. And part of that problem is the problem of not fitting in. I noticed in *The Odd Woman* that you have Jane's mother reading St. Theresa. This harking back to the sixteenth-century saint who had a mission, who lived in a world which offered her something vital to do. St. Theresa is also mentioned in *Middlemarch*. We see right away that Dorothea has nothing to do. What interests me about that is the fact that Jane, you see, has something to do, something important, something that she is devoted to. But then early on in the book, right after Edith's death, she was remembering what Edith said to her: "You're not meant for the married state." Some people aren't like that and this worried her. She says at one point in this internal monologue, "I've got these degrees, I've got independence, I've got financial security, but something is wrong." It seems to be again a situation in which you have an odd woman. You obviously have this situation from Gissing's book, *The Odd Women,* somebody who doesn't fit in. So you still have the problem that Dorothea had, but it's reversed. All Dorothea has is marriage and there's no vocation for her.

GODWIN: Yes, but she does have different little dreams. I mean, at one point she does want to build cottages for the laborers.

WELCH: And she married this Milton figure, Casaubon.

GODWIN: So she could read to him and help him with his index. But I'm constantly worried about including the world enough.

WELCH: It seems to me that your books include the world to an amazing extent.

GODWIN: Well, probably I need this tension in myself, worrying about it so I can keep doing it. Maybe all I can do is write about intense, intelligent characters, who worry whether they're conscious enough about the world.

WELCH: Gabriel Weeks is somewhat similar to Mr. Casaubon. Some readers find Weeks sympathetically portrayed. I didn't have that reaction. It seemed to me that Weeks is not sympathetically portrayed at all. If you want to extend this *Middlemarch* comparison, he would be the Casaubon figure. Jane takes up with him and doesn't get anything out of the relationship, except occasional sex and some nice dreams. She seems to have attached a lot of importance to him, as Dorothea attached to Casaubon. And there is this dead-endedness about each relationship. Had you thought of that?

GODWIN: Not one minute did I think of it. Maybe it was unconscious. I didn't even think of it.

WELCH: That led me to wonder who Ladislaw was. There's no Ladislaw unless it's, say, Gerda.

GODWIN: I don't think we can go any further with these parallels. No. I mean, someone could make something of it, but *I* wasn't aware of these

things. The only parallel I consciously put in, so to speak, was the George Eliot and George Henry Lewes one and Jane's mother and stepfather and her lover and his wife. I wanted to compare those three marriages. Oh, and the fourth one of course was Sonia Marks and her husband. I deliberately made the first three of them twenty-five years.

WELCH: Yes, with the 1948 reference. Do you read mostly Victorian fiction? Do you prefer it to contemporary fiction?

GODWIN: No. I went through a period when I did, but then I read most of it. I think I read everything, even all the bad stuff. And there's no more Victorian fiction being written, of course, because they're all dead. So now I'm reading a lot of very current stuff.

WELCH: Do you consider yourself to be a feminist writer?

GODWIN: No. Absolutely not.

WELCH: What does that phrase mean to you?

GODWIN: That some little questioner is trying to stick me in a box that I don't want to be in. I'm not an Episcopalian writer. I'm not a Democratic writer. I'm not a southern writer. I'm a novelist interested in the inner life.

WELCH: I was interested in the fact that yesterday you were saying you had received about a thousand letters in reaction to *The Odd Woman*.

GODWIN: Yes.

WELCH: That seemed to me to be a big reaction.

GODWIN: That's four years, though.

WELCH: Yes. The reason that I was interested in this issue of your feminism is that among academic literary women, you're sort of this, well, if not a cult figure, then an important model. *The Odd Woman* is a sort of reference book for some women. When I was studying for my comps a friend of mine said, "Oh, read the page where Jane Clifford is in a flashback of comps: 10 a.m. Rossetti, 10:15 Morris, 10:30 Swinburne."

GODWIN: Different colored inks.

WELCH: Yes. All of these kinds of compulsive things that you have to do to take these exams. Your books are a constant source of interest, at least for women in, say, the EPB. I was wondering if you knew the kind of effect it had. There's identification with Jane Clifford.

GODWIN: I know there is. It's almost frightening. I really did think I was creating a character who was unlike anyone else. I thought I would put all my oddities in her. Then I got all those letters. It seems as if there are a thousand Jane Cliffords.

WELCH: What frightens you about that identification?

GODWIN: Just that it makes me feel sort of responsible that they might use it as a handbook. For instance, with *Violet Clay* now I just got a letter

from a woman and she said it's changed her life. And she's made some decisions that maybe she shouldn't have made. She was married to a young lawyer and she wanted to be a writer but her mother-in-law kept saying you really ought to work, to pull your own load and she was going out to get a job that morning. She had a job interview lined up. She finished reading *Violet Clay*—and you remember Violet Clay said now or never—and this woman said she called up and cancelled the interview, left her husband, and is taking a year of her life to try to write this book. Now what if she's not a writer? What if she can't write? Her whole life will be messed up. Or maybe it won't. Maybe she'll then evolve into something else. So this woman wrote me a letter saying this was all because of your book. It's like being a therapist without any right to be. And yet that's happened to me, too. I have books that I look to as moral models.

WELCH: Yes, that's what Jane Clifford does over and over. In one passage Gabriel says to her, "I like you because you're indestructible"—which from the reader's point of view is funny because she's so vulnerable. It says a lot about that relationship. Later when she's reflecting on Gabriel's comment, she says, "Yes, I am indestructible. If I'm indestructible, it's because I haven't let myself conform to a novel. I haven't lived anybody else's story." There is this open-endedness there. That's what fascinated me about *The Odd Woman.* There's the idea of making a story of oneself and how it is you're formed, especially with all the literary allusions, and all the comparisons to Edith, the grandmother, her story being over and Edith's deciding when she looked in the mirror and actually saw how she was that it was time to die and for the story to end. My initial reaction to that was that Jane was trying to live through various literary characters, that she was trying to make her life some way into a Victorian novel. Sometimes I had the impression that Jane wasn't living her own life. When she has lunch with Sonia Marks, Marks dreams up literary characters for Jane and says, "Well, Knightley isn't good enough for you because he's this and of course Heathcliff's wonderful but he's really unstable and you wouldn't really like him. Rochester has Bertha in the attic."

GODWIN: Yes, because it was set in an English department, so they would be talking about that. But I don't think Jane lived through these characters. She knew many of them and she examined their lives to see what she could take. But then she would discard what she didn't need. Many people think the book ends sadly, but at the end she knows what she doesn't want. She's discarded the stories that she doesn't want, and that certainly is a great step in the right direction. It's sort of pure and clean, like the snow falling. And she's accepted her vulnerability, her insomnia, her terror at nighttime and also the kind of world she can make for herself. It would be like that piano at night, trying to make a shape.

WELCH: Yes. I thought the ending of *The Odd Woman* was affirmative. I've heard many reactions that it was devastatingly pessimistic. Here's

Jane cowering in her little apartment with snow falling, hearing a distant piano. Maybe it is ambiguous.

GODWIN: I don't think there's any ambiguity. I think some readers don't read as deeply as they should. They kind of skim or they miss the humor. That book is also a wry book. It has humor. It's not ha-ha humor, but if you miss that, then I guess it could be a sad book. But I don't see it as sad at all.

WELCH: That would almost be a misreading.

GODWIN: Yes, it would be a misreading.

WELCH: The end of *Violet Clay* is positive. She's successful. There were a number of critics who were upset.

GODWIN: The funny thing is that in many reviews—I don't know how many you read—not a single man objected to Violet's success, but the women were furious. It made me think, what do women want? First they were mad that Jane Clifford didn't get a man and now they're mad that Violet Clay didn't need a man and so it's silly.

WELCH: I was angered by this sort of sex-linked critical reaction, too, to the end of *Violet Clay*.

GODWIN: She didn't get that much success. My God, one little picture in a show?

WELCH: It is an emotional breakthrough of a kind that Clifford had in *The Odd Woman*. I was wondering if you could talk about your use of the family and the family tradition in those two books. The use of three generations of women was one of your most effective structuring devices.

GODWIN: Yes.

WELCH: They were very interesting characters. We can watch Jane being formed by them and learning and getting strength from them, even from Kitty, who in many ways is despicable.

GODWIN: When I grew up, writing a fiction was not to make big, broad canvases but to treat one person and stay within the Jamesean point of view. You limited your point of view, but I think that's changing again. I think there will be more novels where the past of the person and the people in the family are brought up to the same level of dialogue, even if they're in the past, even if it's a memory.

WELCH: I would like to discuss your use of family as a negative force in *Violet Clay*. You have a corroded family structure in Violet's family and she is orphaned and has a strange grandmother, but she seems to be self-consciously going about constructing a family for herself and takes on her uncle who becomes a parent figure. In fact, he's a kind of foil.

GODWIN: Yes, he is a foil, an example and a shadow.

WELCH: The successful heroine in *Violet Clay* is a product of fragmenta-

tion, a product of a decayed, old southern family.

GODWIN: Yes. Now some of the family business in *Violet Clay* I was using intentionally as a device, because when I began the novel *Violet Clay* I was going to stick closer to the Gothic form. I always wanted to write a Gothic novel, but then I got into *Violet Clay* and I realized it was going to become a novel about someone becoming an artist.

WELCH: You mean the Mrs. Radcliffe kind of Gothic novel? Or do you mean the modern variety?

GODWIN: Well, just what we mean by the *Jane Eyre* formula, where the person is orphaned, so that's why Violet had to be orphaned and then goes through a series of experiences in life and faces some sort of terror which usually is objectified in Gothics with real stairways, or someone trying to kill her, or a real man. But what it really is, it's the dark side of yourself, the family things you haven't dealt with that are all inside of yourself. So I was conscious of doing that and that's why there had to be something wrong with all the members of the family. I think the structure of the book is almost like an allegory and everyone in it is either a threat, a foreshadowing of the bad way Violet could go, or an example for what she could do. Milo is a good influence, and Sam is a good influence.

WELCH: The uncle.

GODWIN: The uncle is good and bad. He is a mirror of Violet in some ways, with the possibility of going the other way.

WELCH: You used a lot more important male characters in *Violet Clay*. Do you find it harder to do male characters?

GODWIN: I'm getting more of them in. I'm trying to do more men. I mean, I'm consciously trying. I think that men writers now are trying to do more getting into the psyche of women. So, yes, in fact, I hope my next book will have even more men.

WELCH: I'm wondering if we can go back to our earlier comments about feminism. I was interested in your visceral reaction to feminism. Obviously no one wants to be categorized, but you know I'm interested in this reaction because there are a lot of successful women who don't want to be called feminists. It was typical, too, in the nineteenth century. A lot of women who are successful or who do the things that offer more possibilities for women are scornful.

GODWIN: I'm not scornful of a lot of women ever. I'm not scornful of anyone, but I think the label "feminist writer" limits me. I do travel a lot, to different universities, and there are inevitably one or two women who are usually not very friendly who accost me in a public place, sitting on a stage with a spotlight on me and sort of shriek, "Are you a feminist writer?" And I find that not only rude but unfair, because, you see, I would have to say, "Yes, I'm for E.R.A. and I believe in equal pay for equal work and I

want every woman to realize her life, but I don't want to be called a feminist writer." That's not enough, that limits me, that makes me a political animal, and that's only one part of life: politics.

WELCH: Would it be fair to say that you feel a certain political obligation as well as an aesthetic one? Or is the word "obligation" a bad one?

GODWIN: I don't have an obligation to do anything except write books that will save my soul and that please me aesthetically. In doing so I seem to be reaching some other people. If I started looking outside myself and saying, "Gee, what can I do for the women's movement?" I'd write perfectly awful books. They would be diatribes.

WELCH: Adrienne Rich is one writer who thinks of the political aspect of feminism as an important one. You don't feel that urgency she has?

GODWIN: I certainly don't feel the urgency that Adrienne Rich has.

WELCH: Do you know her?

GODWIN: No. I know her essays and things. I think she's limiting herself by refusing to deal with the other half of the human race, which I think she's refusing to do. I think women do need to be educated and they do need to know, by reading literature and by seeing good examples, what they can do. And this is happening. I'm very glad to contribute, but I'm not a product of feminism, so why should I claim it? I mean, it would be claiming something that just would be—I don't know—claiming to be from a kind of family that I wasn't. I suppose the feminist movement—the current one—started about 1970.

WELCH: When you were at Iowa.

GODWIN: When I was at Iowa. But none of my decisions to become what I am and am still becoming were based on any political movement. They were individual decisions. I had examples of good people, some of them women, some of them men, and lots of books.

WELCH: I was interested in the scene in *Violet Clay* in the chapter "Still Life with Taxi," in the rape dream that Violet has. Frankly, I was offended by that because I thought that you can interpret that as women secretly wanting to be raped, that whole lie, that women secretly desire to be raped. After all, this was a dream, it was an unconscious, involuntary thing. But then I thought, maybe I'm missing the humor. Was this merely a satire?

GODWIN: No, it was not a satire. It was a dream that Violet had that would fit in very well with her state of mind.

WELCH: Of having violent things happen to her?

GODWIN: No, that if she could not have what she wanted with her art, she wanted to be destroyed, or humiliated, and the humiliation took the form of a rape dream.

WELCH: Have you had any other criticism of that?

GODWIN: No, not of that. I don't think that dreams are in the same world. It's just a separate thing, I think.

WELCH: When you read the critical reviews by women about Violet's happy ending, how did you react? Did you get angry? Were you resigned to it?

GODWIN: No, I just waited 'til they all came in and I thought, "Isn't that funny, that these women, obviously, even if they're writing for a newspaper, are trying to do something." So many of them said they were short story writers or novelists. It's funny that they would resent Violet for doing that. Did they want it to end badly? Did they want her to get raped? Did they want her to end with snow falling again? It would have been different in Jane's case. Jane had a vocation. Violet didn't. No, I read a lot of reviews and get disturbed and sometimes laugh. I put them all in a little folder.

WELCH: Do you ever write poetry or nonfiction prose?

GODWIN: I've written three libretti. Libretti are sort of like poetry.

WELCH: In what way?

GODWIN: Well, you think about how they sound and you're conscious of a rhythm and even at certain times you want things to rhyme, so that it will sound well when the voice does it. And, yes, I have written a little poetry in my youth. And I write essays.

WELCH: Where do you publish them?

GODWIN: I had a long essay in *Antaeus* on keeping journals. And then I have one on travel on inner and outer landscape. It was about travel but also about the mind of a person—how you're really never where you are at any particular time.

WELCH: I was interested in your story "A Cultural Exchange" in the *Atlantic*. That seemed to me different from your other writing. I'm mostly familiar with your novels.

GODWIN: Do you mean simple?

WELCH: No. I didn't think it was simple. The character of this woman mystified me. The older man in whose house she boarded and her relationship with him. I thought it was a strange story. I didn't know how to react to it.

GODWIN: Why strange? That's what my H&R Block man said, too. He said it was a weird story. He said, "I read it and I liked it, but it was a weird story."

WELCH: Uh oh.

GODWIN: No, he used to be a literary agent. There are all kinds of nice H&R Block people.

WELCH: I know. Maybe it was because I didn't have any sense of a resolution. I didn't have the identification with the woman that I had with Violet, that I had with Jane. It might be the form of the short story. It was a strange had with Jane. It might be the form of the short story. It was a strange thing to do, to go off to this Scandinavian country and live in this house like that and to take over. You have almost another character in the dead wife. Her presence pervades the room she stayed in, and I was expecting this character to take over, somehow, the wife's identity. Certainly the husband wants something of that, wants a daughter figure. I was disturbed, somehow, by that man. And then I thought the title was strange, "A Cultural Exchange."

GODWIN: It's a perfect title.

WELCH: Is it?

GODWIN: Yes, I mean, it's ironic in a way. It represents the callousness of youth. She did consider it a cultural exchange, but a great deal of hurt went on there. The old man was hurt.

WELCH: There was a great deal of misunderstanding between them.

GODWIN: She was one of these young American girls who goes off to kind of appropriate the world. No one else is three-dimensional in the story, just she. The first title of that story was "A Dollar's Worth of *Hygge*," which is the Danish word for a kind of mind-expanding well-being. There's no real translation. Then I changed it to a more ironic title or one that would have resonances. Also, a foreign word in a title, especially in a language not many people know, is a little pretentious and would put readers off.

WELCH: Who are you reading?

GODWIN: I reread Drabble a lot.

WELCH: Do you know her?

GODWIN: No. I talk to her on the phone, though. And I reread D. H. Lawrence an awful lot.

WELCH: Do you think he's influenced your fiction?

GODWIN: Probably.

WELCH: The family structure of *The Odd Woman* reminded me of *The Rainbow* and the generational aspect.

GODWIN: What else have I read? I'm going to reread John Irving's book, *The World According to Garp*. He's an Iowa person. I originally read the book out of order, because we're friends and we exchange pieces of our work.

WELCH: Were you here with him?

GODWIN: We overlapped once, but we remained friends. So we send each other parts of our manuscripts, sort of as a little, private workshop. So I read *Garp* in installments, but it was all different from the way the final book is, so I've never had the experience of the book.

WELCH: What do you think of the state of American fiction?

GODWIN: I think it's fermenting in an interesting way. I think we're asking ourselves a lot of questions, and that is always good.

WELCH: In your remarks yesterday you said you thought they were exploring different aspects of women.

GODWIN: In *Garp* John made a real attempt to write about women. It turned out to be as much about the man's mother as it is about him. John Hawkes's new book is about a man who is a famous feminist who has been reeducated by women. They teach him what womanhood is.

WELCH: And you have read that manuscript?

GODWIN: Yes. I've read that manuscript. I think the world is changing. Evolution is speeding up. It's a tremendously exciting world. It's almost too exciting.