Whenever I have undertaken to write a novel, I have proposed to myself a specific moral purpose. This purpose, in Anna St. Ives, was to teach fortitude to females: in Hugh Trevor, to induce Youth (or their parents) carefully to inquire into the morality of the profession which each might intend for himself. . . .

The precise scenes . . . or nearly the same, might have happened, and that is sufficient for the purposes of a novel.

Thomas Holcroft, Memoirs of Bryan Perdue

Walter Allen says that “the novelist must deal with men in a specific place at a specific time, and the novelists . . . have normally been acutely conscious of their time and the qualities in it that appear to distinguish it from other times.”¹ This particular sense of time, that is, present as reality and past as reality, was not always part of the literary construct. His example is of course Elizabethan drama; no one would argue that Shakespeare’s plays, Hamlet, Lear, Henry IV, to use Allen’s examples, give us a “feel” for their respective historical periods: they give us human beings “outside history in our sense.” The novels of social protest, perhaps even more than others, are precisely, acutely conscious of their time and its qualities, and this is true of the form for any period it witnesses. It is as true for Dickens, and still later for Gissing, as it is for the eighteenth-century novelists I discuss. All of them make direct, even strident, reference to their own day, and such references themselves serve as a form of historical document.

Holcroft’s Hugh Trevor is a novel entirely of its time, chroni-
cling the abuses to which each of the professions is liable; it is little more. In its bareness, however, it offers us a chance to see these corruptions almost as starkly as if we were contemporaries of Holcroft. For the historical feel of a period, sometimes a lesser novelist gives us a more accurate sense than a greater one, for while the greater writer shapes his material into art, he enforces his vision upon it. The lesser writer gives us more of a snapshot—a picture less posed but at the same time perhaps with more of the quality of the moment. *Hugh Trevor* is not a great novel, but it is a good chronicle of an age’s peculiar corruptions. It bears close relation to the early chronicles that Allen and other critics have seen as so vital in the formation of the novel (Defoe’s debt to the travel books has been established, but the debt of other writers to the “soberly careful account of real life” tradition has not yet been adequately explored). *Hugh Trevor* shows an overwhelming sense of “now.” *Anna St. Ives* is a more ambitious novel; Holcroft tries to do more with his characters and he tries to create a comprehensive system for social improvement. It is a richer novel for these reasons, but it is not as valuable as *Hugh Trevor* as a historical document just because *Anna St. Ives* is Holcroft’s vision of what he would like to see, not of what is. *Hugh Trevor*, finally, rests on what is.

*Hugh Trevor*, like *Anna St. Ives*, is concerned with the role of a good man in a society that is largely corrupt. As in *Anna St. Ives*, the dominant feeling of the book is that benevolent rationalism can work wonderful improvements on the state of man and that man is essentially benevolent and rational. As in *Anna St. Ives*, we seem to be on the verge of an “age of light,” although the evils of society are much more sharply defined in this later book. The happy ending is accomplished in *Hugh Trevor*—and the resident villain duly converted to a benevolent contributor to the community—but there remains a strong sense of all the uncorrected evils that Holcroft has shown in the course of the novel. Essentially, the tenor of *Hugh Trevor* is that, although man is good and for the most part educable to virtue, society as it stands is so corrupt that it will take enormous changes to clean it up. The book catalogs the necessary changes.
Holcroft ranges over law, politics, and even science in his survey of existing evils. His vehicle for the survey is the familiar eighteenth-century *bildungsroman*. As the inexperienced Hugh Trevor plunges from situation to situation and from career to career, he weighs all the philosophical and moral details of each circumstance (far be it from the idealistic Hugh to consider materialistic considerations—the only reason he can accept for needing money is that he may one day support his love, Olivia). The first evil of society is its miseducation of various classes. It teaches women to be fearful creatures, unable to hold their own in the contests of the world; it keeps the poor in ignorance; and it teaches the rich, among other things, to eat themselves to death! But of course the worst thing it teaches the rich—and Holcroft complains here in common with Inchbald, Bage, and Godwin—is to be gluttonous for themselves but unsparing for the poor. As part of this lifestyle, dishonesty and hypocrisy are so widespread as to be almost universal.

The novel is a chronicle of Hugh’s education, both “formal” and “in the world,” and although that of the world occupies most of Holcroft’s attention, he does deal with school. As we might expect from what we know of the schools and universities of the time, his comments (like Godwin’s in *Fleetwood* and *Mandeville*) are negative. Boarding schools for young ladies are places “where every thing is taught and nothing understood; where airs, graces, mouth primming, shoulder-setting and elbow-holding are studied, and affectation, formality, hypocrisy, and pride are acquired; and where children the most promising are presently transformed into vain, pert misses, who imagine that to perk up their heads, turn out their toes, and exhibit the ostentatious opulence of their relations, in a tawdry ball night dress, is the summit of perfection.” Young Hugh meets many such a miss in the course of the book.

What of the university for boys? It is a place of dissipation, stuporific drunkenness, and little learning. Like the boarding school for girls, it seems to exist primarily to prepare the rich idler for his later life. Hugh’s introduction to the fabled Oxford is a speech of welcome from a friend, Hector, the words of
which are mostly profanities, and an orgy with students and tutors that night, which ends in a drunken stupor:

The night advanced, and they grew riotous. The lord and his tutor were for sporting the door of a glum: that is, breaking into the chamber of a gownsman who loves study. Hector vociferously seconded the motion, but the fellow and the master of arts cunningly endeavored to keep them quiet... by affirming the students they proposed to attack sported oak: in plain English, barred up their doors. Had they been without the walls of the college, there would have been a riot; but, having no other ventilator for their magnanimity, they fell with redoubled fury to drinking, and the jolly tutor proposed a rummer round—'D—n me,' said Hector, 'that's a famous thought! But you are a famous deep one, d—n me!'

The rummers were seized, the wine poured out, and his lordship began with—'D-mn-t—n to the flincher.' Who should that be? I, the freshman? Oh, no! For that night, I was too far gone in good fellowship.

This was the finishing blow to three of us. Hector fell on the floor; his lordship sunk in his chair; and I, after a hurrah and a hiccup, began to cast the cat: an Oxford phrase for what usually happens to a man after taking an emetic. Happily I had not far to go, and the fellow and the master of arts had just sense enough left to help me to my chamber, where at day light next morning I found myself, on the hearth, with my head resting against the fender, the pain of which awakened me. (p. 79)

Hugh gets his first taste of societal corruption at Oxford. Study is not rewarded, he learns, but dissipation is. The whole picture of Oxford is put before him by the exemplary Turl, who happens to reside there when Hugh does. Turl will be the rule by which Hugh can measure his values throughout the course of his maturation. Here they discuss the state of Oxford: "I am but just arrived," says Hugh, "will you be kind enough to give me such intelligence as may aid me to regulate my conduct?... I hoped for perfection which I begin to doubt I shall not find. What are the manners of the place?"

—'Such as must be expected from a multitude of youths, who are ashamed to be thought boys, and who do not know how to behave like men.' —'But are there not people appointed to teach them?' —
'No.' ‘What is the office of the proctors, heads of houses, deans, and other superintendants, of whom I have heard?’ —‘To watch and regulate the tufts of caps, the tying of bands, the stuff and tassels of which gowns are made. . . .’ —‘What are the public rewards for proficiency in learning?’ —‘Few, or in reality none.’ —‘Beside numerous offices, are not exhibitions, fellowships, professors’ chairs and presentations bestowed?’ —‘Yes, on those who have municipal or political influence; or who by servility and effrontery can court patronage.’ —‘Surely you have some men of worth and genius, who meet their due reward?’ —‘Few; very few, indeed. Sloth, inanity, and bloated pride are here too often the characteristics of office. Fastidiousness is virtue, and to keep the poor and unprotected in awe a duty. The rich indeed are indulged in all the licentious liberties they can desire.’ —‘Why do so many young men of family resort hither?’ —‘Some to get what is to be given away; others are sent by their parents, who imagine the place to be the reverse of what it is; and a third set, intended for the church, are obliged to go to a university before they can be admitted into holy orders. . . .’ —‘Then you would not advise a young person to come to this city to complete his education?’ —‘If he possess extraordinary fortitude and virtue, yes; if not, I would have him avoid Oxford as he would contagion.’ (p. 81)

Thus Turl, who is throughout the book a reliable witness, sees Oxford as a place where all the wrong things happen; where importance is given to form (wearing the right cap) rather than to substance; where tutors and housemasters join with students in degradation, idleness, and drunkenness. Oxford doesn’t come in with high points. About the only thing Hugh picks up in the vicinity of Oxford is an attack of Methodism—“My teeth began to gnash, as if by irresistible impulse; my hair stood on end, and large drops of sweat fell from my face! The eternal damnation, of which I had read and heard so much, seemed inevitable; till at last, in a torrent of phrenzy which I had not the power to controul, I began to blaspheme, believing myself to be already a fiend! It is by such horrible imagery that so many of the disciples of methodism have become maniacs” (p. 94). Fortunately, he recovers.

Hugh’s Methodism, however, comes to the attention of university officials, and he is suspended for two terms. Thus his formal education gives way to his worldly education, and he
sets out for London. All sorts of accidents come upon him, most caused by his own naiveté. His pocket is picked on the street. This shock is almost immediately followed by another of a different sort, a great disillusionment when he goes to present a letter of introduction to a clergyman (Hugh at this point hopes that he himself will join the clergy) only to find that clergymen (!) lie: he is told that the Reverend Enoch is not at home, but when he presents the letter, he learns that the good Reverend really has been there all along. Hugh exclaims, “This was another phenomenon in morals! A clergyman suffer, nay encourage, or, as it must be, command, his servant to tell a lie? It was inconceivable!” (p. 102). But then Hugh continues, from the more sophisticated vantage of his current understanding, “I knew nothing of fashionable manners, and that being denied to people whom you do not wish to see, instead of being thought insolent or false, was the general practice of the well bred. At that time I understood no single point of good breeding: I had it all to learn!” He never does learn it well. “But indeed, so dull am I on such topics, that, to this hour, how it can be a clergyman’s or any honest man’s duty or interest to teach servants to lie is to me incomprehensible. The difficulty, as I have found it, is to teach both them and all classes of people to tell the truth. What the morality of the practice is cannot be a serious question” (p. 102). Hugh’s—or Holcroft’s—comment deserves notice. He calls to our attention a common, “civilized” practice, and says it is immoral. What in most other observers of the time would be at most a humorous characteristic of society is for Holcroft an evil. It is evil because it is not true and rational. Holcroft’s stance on what is or is not moral is never less than forthright. What is sometimes striking, as here, is that he will often focus on something in society that, because it is so common, seems all right. Merely by commenting, he reminds his readers that the accepted is not necessarily the moral way to do things.

These shocks to young Hugh’s moral system do not, however, upset his animal spirits; he is much too well-balanced—rational—for that. “My health, appetite, and spirits suffered no
check, from this tide of novelty and tumult of accident. I eat heartily, slept soundly, and rose cheerfully. It is true, I came up to London with propensities which, from my education, that is, from the course of former events, would not suffer me to be idle; and in the space of a few hours I had already received several important lessons, that considerably increased my stock of knowledge. Of these I did not fail to make an active use" (p. 108). His pockets have been picked, his moral system considerably abused, but it is all part of education. Not for him that unhealthy nineteenth and twentieth-century lamenting for the ideal. Hugh, in the midst of the tumult, is not discomfited; he sees it as learning and is content that he will be able to use this new knowledge. It is a marvelously optimistic view, and so the book goes. Each situation is an educational opportunity for Hugh; each situation is a chance for Holcroft to put before his reader the list of corruptions needing cures. These ills may be loosely grouped into two sets: social and political. To portray social ills, Holcroft simply surveys each social group. Like the gentleman he wasn’t, he begins with ladies first.

Ladies, that is, women with pretensions, Holcroft finds quite ridiculous. He satirizes the whole class of women who are educated to be nothing but opinionated, useless, artificial counters in social games. One example shall have to suffice, Hugh’s introduction to the Reverend Enoch’s wife and daughter. The wife’s mode of “making herself agreeable” is by “learning the private history of all her acquaintance, and retailing it in such a manner as might best gratify the humours, prejudices, and passions of her hearers. She . . . made great pretensions to musical and theatrical taste, and the belles lettres” (p. 113). But her daughter—her daughter is a refinement of the mother in this sort of thing:

Eliza was mamma’s own child. She had an immense deal of taste, no small share of vanity, and a tongue that could not tire. . . . she was a musical amateur of the first note. . . . her [music] master, Signor Gridarini, affirmed every time he came to give her a lesson, that, among all the dilettanti in Europe, there was not so great a singer as herself. The most famous of the public performers scarcely
could equal her. In the bravura she astonished; in the cantabile she charmed; her maëstoso was inimitable! and her adagios! Oh! they were ravishing! killing...

Of personal beauty she herself was satisfied that the Gods had kindly granted her a full share. 'Tis true, her stature was dwarfish; but then, she had so genteel an air! Her staymaker was one of the ablest in town. Her complexion could not but be to her mind, for it was of her own making. The only thing that she could not correct to her perfect satisfaction was a something of a cast with her eyes; which especially when she imitated Enoch in making herself agreeable, was very like squinting. Not but that she thought squinting itself a pleasing kind of blemish. Nay there were instances in which she scarcely knew if it could be called a blemish.

They decide to put on a small entertainment: “Every body was sure, before any body heard, it would be monstrous fine. . . .”

We obeyed the composer’s commands, and played with might and main during the first thirty or forty bars, till the obligato part came, in which Miss was to exhibit her powers. She then, with all the dignity of a maestro di capella directed two intersecting rays full at Enoch, and called aloud, piano! After which casting a gracious smile to me, as much as to say I did not mean you, Sir; she heaved up an attitude with her elbows, gave a short cough to encourage herself, and proceeded.

Her fears give her no embarrassment, thought I, and all will be well. I could not have been more mistaken. The very first difficult passage she came to shewed me she was an ignorant pretender. Time, tune, and recollection were all lost. I was obliged to be silent in the accompaniment, for I knew as little what was become of her as she herself did. Enoch knew no more than either of us, but he kept strumming on. He was used to it, and his ears were not easily offended.

She certainly intended to have been very positive, but was at last obliged to come to a full stop; and, again casting an indignant squint at her father, she exclaimed ‘Lord, Sir! I declare, there is no keeping with you!’ ‘No, nor with you neither!’ said Enoch. ‘Will you have the goodness to begin again, Mr. Trevor?’ continued she. I saw no remedy: she was commander in chief, and I obeyed.

We might have begun again and again to eternity, had we stopped every time she failed; but as I partly perceived my silence in the accompaniment, instead of continuing to make a discordant noise with Enoch and herself, had chiefly disconcerted her, I deter-
mined to rattle away. My ears were never more completely flayed! But what could be done? Miss panted for fame, and the company wanted music!

We had the good luck to find one another out at the last bar, and gave a loud stroke to conclude with; which was followed by still louder applause. It was vastly fine! excessive charming! Miss was a ravishing performer, and every soul in the room was distractingly fond of music! 'There!' said Enoch, taking off his spectacles. 'There, ladies! Now you hear things done as they should be!' (pp. 113-16)

The ridiculousness of young Miss and the sickening flattery of her admirers is all very amusing, and Holcroft wants us to be amused. But we must remember, too, that these are the fashionable people, those with (at the least) the pretension to be leaders of society. Holcroft finds such behavior not simply ridiculous but symptomatic of a lack of seriousness, purpose, and commitment in these classes. It is only his first step in a series of delineations of social nauseas, and it is meant to get us, pleasantly enough, into the critical mood. On page 116 he chops down Miss. On page 117 Holcroft aims his shaft at "his lordship." Next he will attack bigger targets, such as the bishop.

"His lordship," the Earl of Idford, is an unscrupulous, un­
generous man. He has political pretensions and uses the ide­
alism and the intelligence of Hugh to further his plans. While
Hugh is anxious to remedy present ills of government—"The
want of . . . parliamentary reform . . . extension of the excise
laws . . . the enormous and accumulating national debt" (p.
117)—the earl is concerned solely with his own political maneu­
vering. The earl is antigovernment, and so seconds Hugh on all
points, until the minister admits him to the party. At that
juncture, he becomes a loyal advocate of the government.
Holcroft is dealing here with several social and political issues.
In prose as in practice, it is difficult to draw a line between the
two. First, we should notice the explicit listing of governmental
faults; Holcroft, as here, sometimes sounds more like a pam­
phleteer than a novelist. His criticism of the morality that gov­
erns those who would pretend to leadership is a recurring
theme in the book. Holcroft is not gentle in his delineation of
those with pretensions to either political or religious power and their methods of gaining it. He sees the systems of religion and of secular government as corrupt. Lord Idford, for example, is a man with no scruples; he does very well within the system. He changes sides so quickly when it is expedient that poor Hugh cannot get his pamphlets out fast enough to keep pace. While Hugh is still writing his antigovernment tracts, Idford already has gained preferment from the incumbent prime minister and become a party man. Hugh is left with the now out-of-place antigovernment brochure.

But Holcroft is not content merely to complain of the rise of unprincipled men who gain power by exploiting their own lack of morality. Because we can assume that not all men in government would be as unpleasant as the Earl of Idford, it is logical to assume that the remainder would be empowered to do good. Holcroft, however, has a much more pessimistic view. Although part of what he sees wrong with the English government is that it attracts unscrupulous men like Idford, an even more serious problem is that the system itself is so corrupt that it corrupts even those men of idealism and firm moral principle who come to it. Holcroft's point is that even good men, in order to join the ranks of government, are in the very process of joining corrupted. For how does a newcomer enter the ranks? He must buy (or have bought for him) a borough. For the man without great wealth, this implies a patron, to whom the idealistic newcomer will then have certain obligations. But even the rich, once entered into the contest, can ruin themselves within the corruptions of the system. Holcroft shows us both possibilities: in either case, what emerges is bad for the participants and destructive to society.

First Holcroft gets Hugh into government. Hugh is fortunate in that, though he himself is poor, he has found a magnanimous and idealistic patron, Mr. Evelyn. Without making any demands in return, Evelyn supplies the necessary funding as well as political connections through his cousin the baronet. Hugh is thus provided with both money and influence. The baronet under whose tutelage Hugh finds himself is not a bad
man. But he is part of the system and therefore somewhat corrupt—or, at the least, not entirely in touch with moral realities. However, he is a member of the opposition, and his rhetoric is, if somewhat strong, "on the right side":

You know, cousin, how I hate corruption. It is undoing us all, it will undo the nation! The influence of the crown is monstrous. The aristocracy is degraded by annual batches of mundungus and parchment lords; and the constitution is tumbling about our ears. The old English spirit is dead. The nation has lost all sense and feeling. The people are so vile and selfish that they are bought and sold like swine; to which, for my part, I think they have been very properly compared. There is no such thing now as public virtue. No, no! That happy time is gone by! Every man is for all he can get; and as for the means, he cares nothing about them. There is absolutely no such thing as patriotism existing; and, to own the truth, damn me if I believe there is a man in the kingdom that cares one farthing for those rights and liberties, about which so many people that you and I know pretend to bawl!

The Minister knows very well he could move the Monument sooner than me. I . . . love the people; and am half mad to see that they have no love for themselves. Why do not they meet? Why do not they petition? Why do not they besiege the throne with their clamors? They are no better than beasts of burthen! If they were any thing else, the whole kingdom would rise, as one man, and drive this arrogant upstart from the helm. I . . . love the people; I love my country; I love the constitution; and I hate the swarms of mushroom peers, and petty traders, that are daily pouring in upon us, to overturn it. (pp. 361–62)

Hugh can’t help remarking that the baronet’s antipathy to petty traders is somewhat misplaced in that the baronet’s father had been “a common porter in a warehouse, had raised an immense fortune by trade, had purchased the boroughs which descended to his son, and had himself been bought with the title of Baronet by a former minister” (p. 362). But that is a small matter.

So Hugh enters politics already in debt to two men, Mr. Evelyn and the baronet. One is of spotless integrity; the other is more or less run-of-the-mill in virtue and motivation (the baronet’s opposition to the incumbent government stems mainly
from the fact that he had been denied a peerage). Hugh comes to the contest fresh and unsullied, a gentleman who "not only possesses a good education but a sense of justice which makes him regard every man as his brother; and which will neither suffer him to crouch to the haughty nor trample on the poor" (p. 363). But his purity is compromised simply by the acts necessary to get into government. In order to get votes, one must court not only patrons but voters. Hugh finds he must give so many "gifts" that he makes a return trip to Mr. Evelyn to ask for still more money. Of the baronet, Hugh laments that "he had purchased me as well as his borough; for he had made me his own member, and meant to profit by me in all possible ways" (p. 451). One of these ways is to use Hugh's now-proven electioneering talents to support one of the baronet's choices.

With Hugh, Holcroft shows us what it is to be poor and to get into government. But surely for the rich these inherent corruptions of patronage don't exist? Holcroft chronicles for his reader the contest for a borough between two men of fortune, the Earl of Idford and Hector Mowbray. Hector is the man favored by the baronet; fortunately, Hugh has no trouble supporting him because Hector is the brother of Hugh's love, Olivia. Hugh and Hector go off "to the field of battle" (p. 452). They enter into a scene of revelry, drunkenness, and gross bribery. The camps of the two rivals outdo each other in carousing and swearing. The scene is reminiscent of Oxford, and Hugh is as repulsed as he had been on his entry to the university. (One of Holcroft's points is that the boys who are taught dissolute ways in their youth grow up to be leaders with no better sense as adults than they had as students.) Hugh says, "I had been disgusted with the eating and drinking at the ready-bought borough of * * * * [his own constituency]: but that was abstinence itself, compared to [this] scene . . ." (p. 453). So drunk is Hector, the principle actor, that he throws his glass against the wall, inviting his comrades to do the same. When Hugh calls out that a waiter has been cut by the flying glass, "pointing to a man whose face was smeared with blood," Hector yells, "Put him down in the bill." Hugh finally finds himself alone, ruminating
on "waiters who, being maimed or killed, are to be charged in the bill" (pp. 453–54).

Drinking gives way to equally serious pursuits, such as deliberating on the course of bribery necessary for winning the contest. Hugh is appalled at the idea of bribery and equally shocked at the extent of it:

Meanwhile the waste that was committed, the bribes that were paid, and the money that was squandered in every way, as well in London, where voters were eagerly purchased and sent down by coach loads, as in distant parts of the county and kingdom, convinced me that the sums which this election would cost must be enormous. I even thought it my duty to take an opportunity, in one of Hector's half sober moments, to remonstrate with all the arguments and energy I could collect; and endeavored to persuade him to decline the poll. But my efforts were useless. He was equally vain of his wealth and his influence. His purse perhaps was as deep as that of the proud peer; his friends as numerous; and he would carry his election though he were to mortgage every foot of land he possessed. (p. 455)

The struggle builds on each side, with violence, scandal, and rancor increasing continually. By the end of the contest, it almost does not matter which man wins because both have been ruined. Thus it is in debauchery and waste that the seats of government are transferred. Hugh, disgusted with these and other corruptions, resigns his seat. He is no longer friends with the baronet (who switched sides when the king made him a baron) and cannot remain his man.5

No matter whether a man be rich or poor, entrance into the political arena is corrupting. Holcroft seems to be saying that under the existing political system, no amount of idealism can survive intact—except by retreating from politics. Clearly such retreat does not ameliorate the system. Moreover, although Holcroft makes many statements about the natural goodness of man and his natural instinct to do good, he does not seem to see any hope for reform from within the system as a result of that natural goodness, nor does he posit any method for revamping the entire edifice. Rather disappointingly, he has Hugh merely
turn away from it all, leaving the reader with the sense that reform of the political system is simply hopeless. The reader might have expected more after Holcroft's lengthy exposition of political evils.

Holcroft seems to feel the same disillusionment with the state of religion in England. The case in point here is the bishop, whose main diversion in life is gluttony and whose talents are basically confined to signing his name to other men's work. He is a parody of a human being: "His legs were the pillars of Hercules, his body a brewer's butt, his face the sun rising in a red mist. We have been told that magnitude is a powerful cause of the sublime; and if this be true, the dimensions of his lordship certainly had a copious and indisputable claim to sublimity. . . . His mighty belly heaved and his cheeks swelled with the spiritual inflations of church power" (p. 129). The bishop is anything but spiritually minded. His dinners are gross affairs of gargantuan feasting, followed by table talk verging on the obscene: "Allusions that were evidently their [the bishop's and his friends'] common-place table talk, and that approached as nearly as they durst venture to obscenity, were their pastime. With these they tickled their fancy till it gurgled in their throats . . . and, while they hypocritically avoided words which the ear could not endure, they taxed their dull wit to conjure up their corresponding ideas." Hugh comments wryly, "I must own that, in my mind, poor mother church at that moment made but a pitiful appearance" (p. 148). When we remember that the bishop presents one of Hugh's sermons as his own and later publishes a tract written by Hugh under his own name, the purity of the church, as represented by the bishop, seems curiously lacking. Among his lesser faults, we might add, the bishop is a panderer of sorts. When Hugh not only refuses to take the bishop's "cousin" off his hands but refuses also to allow the bishop to publish his tract (the bishop steals it anyway), they fall out; another door is closed to Hugh.

Hugh tries the political and the religious roads more or less at the same time; in fact, at one point he is turning out pamphlets for both his lordship and the bishop concurrently.
Among the other professions he explores are those of critic (he finds that in order to do enough reviewing to make a living one must review books without taking the time to read them) and law (which his friend Trotman explains to him has nothing to do with justice—only with statute). Holcroft has Hugh try or consider virtually every profession that is open to the man of limited means but decent education (even medicine—it seems science still has a long way to go). Each of them is so corrupted and corrupting that no man of principle can long remain in any one. Holcroft has thought out his complaints but not his solutions, for were we to judge by Hugh Trevor, virtually the only way a man of principle could earn a living without compromising his morals would be to inherit wealth (without plotting for that contingency, of course). Fortunately, in the concluding chapter, Hugh does just that. Clearly, the lack of any solution but the deus ex machina of a long-lost rich relative is a flaw in the moral framework of the novel itself. All through the book, we have been told that a man must be usefully employed in his society; the fact that many of those employments carry built-in moral risks does not excuse him for retreating into the womb of inherited livelihood.

The book has two basic premises: all of society’s major institutions are corrupt, and men themselves are good. The structural problem of the book is that Holcroft does not manage to articulate these two concepts into a whole. Holcroft posits that men are essentially—naturally—good. His hero, Hugh, is always seeking for the upright way. Hugh has not only a natural predisposition for good but an intellectual commitment as well. The fact that he is constantly disappointed does not lessen his goodness; it merely points up the corruption in society. Natural goodness, of course, even accompanied by social corruption as in Hugh Trevor, is perhaps the staple of eighteenth-century fiction. Holcroft, however, draws a much more convincing case for corruption than for virtue.

Holcroft gives us a good protagonist; he gives us also the good wise man Turl, who is, again, only one in a series of wise-man figures in the novel of the time. Turl is so good that he
refuses to engage in any of the corruptions which modern society requires; in order to keep himself from being corrupted, he opts to retire from the world and sets himself up as a small private craftsman. Hugh, in the world of action, is impotent to change its corruption and is continually frustrated. Turl, in retirement, is unsullied by the world but, at the same time, also has little power to effect improvements. The man of action and the philosopher, good men both, are both quite powerless. Then there is Mr. Evelyn, who is somewhere between the man of action and the retiring philosopher. He lives his life, a life devoted to science and good deeds, in a secluded spot where he can carry on his work but not be too much tempered by the world. He considers his large estate "a trust which I find it very difficult conscientiously to discharge" (p. 298), and his other sentiments are equally impeccable: "Happiness is the end of man: but it cannot be single. On the contrary, the more beings are happy the greater is the individual happiness of each: for each is a being of sympathies, and affections; which are increased by being called into action" (p. 299). He becomes Hugh's patron, and while Mr. Evelyn would not enter the political lists, he is ready to compete in the real world to the extent that he enthusiastically supports Hugh's efforts with both money and patronage. Although Mr. Evelyn is not fully engaged in the society around him, he is the closest Holcroft comes in 

Hugh Trevor to drawing a fully functioning man of the upper classes.

Perhaps the most interesting good man in the book is Hugh's plebian friend Clarke, a carpenter who embodies all the manly virtues in his untutored heart. Although he is a good Englishman, he is of course a near intellectual relation to Rousseau's noble savage—or, at least, he is as near as Holcroft can get. Hugh first meets Clarke when he mistakes Clarke for a pickpocket; by the time he discovers his mistake, Clarke has been enthusiastically trounced by a mob. Clarke demands the satisfaction of challenging Hugh, and all of Hugh's apologies fall on deaf ears. As much as Hugh does not want to fight this man he has already wronged, he finds he must. Without meaning to, Hugh almost kills him. The "satisfaction" accomplished,
Clarke accepts Hugh's obviously sincere apologies. Not only that, but overcome by Hugh's generous attitude (Hugh tries to repay Clarke's injury with money, and Hugh is at the time considerably more in want than Clarke), the even more generous Clarke insists on following Hugh in his travels. Hugh, not a bit the snob, is only too glad to have the company of this good fellow.

Clarke is not one of Holcroft's most convincing characters, and the relationship between Hugh and Clarke remains one-dimensional throughout. Clarke is in the book to show the value of the common man as human being, and he and Hugh together are to show the reader how wonderful relationships can be between human beings when they are able to forget about artificial distinctions of class and rank and are able to see each other simply as people. But here, as in Anna St. Ives, Holcroft is not quite capable of overcoming his own fascination with rank. Holcroft makes the relationship between Hugh and Clarke so chummy that Clarke keeps forgetting his place and addressing Hugh familiarly. Each time he realizes what he's done, Clarke apologizes. Holcroft, apparently, does not realize what this implies. If Clarke must keep apologizing, then Hugh is not democratic: he is merely exhibiting a form of class condescension. It is not that Hugh is a snob but that Holcroft is. When Hugh and Clarke ride together in the coach with Olivia and her aunt, for example, we are aware that it is a kindness in Hugh to allow Clarke to sit with him. Holcroft here, as in numerous passages in Anna St. Ives, thinks that he is writing one thing while he is really showing quite another.

At any rate, whatever the flaws in the relationship between Hugh and Clarke, Clarke himself represents human virtue unsullied either by institutions or philosophy. His instincts are toward kindness, compassion—and responsibility. It is not the upper classes who are to be envied, Holcroft suggests, but the solid working class. It is Hugh who is always at the mercy of changing currents and affiliations for his living; he cannot support himself simply by the work of his hands. Clarke, on the other side, is a truly independent man; wherever he is, he can
set up shop and earn a living, secure in his own capabilities. Novels of several members of the Godwin circle repeat the sentiment that in order to be free, a man must be capable of supporting himself. Bage remarks to this effect in *Hermsprong*; Inchbald in *Nature and Art* makes a point of having Henry, the good character, put off his marriage for a year in order to learn a trade because "in this country, people of a certain class are so educated they cannot exist without the assistance, or what is called the patronage, of others . . ." and he does not want to join this class. He will defer his marriage for a year, he says, until he can "learn some occupation that shall raise [him] to the eminence of maintaining both [his wife and himself] without one obligation. . . ."

Clarke is already in this enviable position. He thus has all the qualities that Holcroft would demand in a man, not the least of which is the ability to support himself and those for whom he is responsible. Additionally, he is brave, honorable, loyal, and so on. He would be the perfect gentleman, except that he is not a gentleman. Holcroft does his best to present to the reader "man as he should be," but still Clarke is a bit too simple for Holcroft's taste. Holcroft seems to be suggesting that, for the corrupt moment, all these sterling qualities are most likely to be found in simple folk such as Clarke. Yet Clarke cannot be a leader, and Holcroft is aware that England is sorely in need of leaders.

Unfortunately, those who are likely to lead are also most subjected to corrupting influences. That fact may be part of the reason for Holcroft's final evasion of the issue, in that Hugh does not become a leader nor, really, does he even figure out what to do with himself. He is merely saved by a graceful fall into fortune. Although Hugh himself never seems corrupt, because he is so angered by corruption, he does indeed find his ideals sullied at each step in his education. When he arrives at Oxford, he is dismayed to find everyone drinking and swearing; he too wakes up drunk. He goes to London and finds a temporary mentor in the Reverend Enoch; soon he finds himself copying Enoch in assiduously flattering the bishop. At the
time, this behavior seems to him only the way of the world. Later he realizes it is a pollution of values. He allows the bishop to present his sermon as if it were the bishop’s own; he is flattered. He gives his support to a politician of questionable moral integrity because it seems the way of advancement, and therefore of doing good, in the world. He runs for office from a pocket borough and gives “presents” to the voters:

Disinterested as these worthy voters were, and purchased by wholesale as they had been when the family of the Brays bought the borough, they yet had wives and daughters; who wore watches, and rings, and gowns; and who would each of them think themselves so flattered, by a genteel present from me, that there was no describing the pleasure it would give them!

Beside which, one lady had a great affection for a few pounds of the best green tea, bought in London. Another discovered that the loaf sugar in the country was abominable. A third could not but think that a few jars of India pickles . . . would be a very pretty present. It would always remind her of the giver . . .

The men too were troubled with their longings. With one it was London porter; with another it was Cheshire cheese and bottled beer. They would both drink to the donor . . . (pp. 449-50)

Not until Hugh finishes his contest and goes on to another borough to campaign for someone else—only to find with shock that this Hector is bribing the voters—does all the “present” giving seem like bribery: “In what light could the presents that I had made be considered? In what were they different from and how much better than bribes?” (p. 454). Whatever Hugh attempts to do, he is forced into corruption. In the world Holcroft draws for us in Hugh Trevor, the only way to avoid corruption seems to be to refuse actively to participate in the institutions of society.

There is a nod at the idea of individual reform, but Holcroft’s case is not convincing. All through the novel, the reader is aware of a terrible villain, one who seduces innocent women (always the worst crime in the eighteenth-century novel) and bilks widows of their fortunes (the widow happens to be Hugh’s mother), one Wakefield. There is also a rather
interesting character named Belmont, who is somewhat mysterious but seems in general to be a worthwhile type. Belmont, strangely enough, repeatedly insists to Hugh that Wakefield might be a likely character to reform. Wakefield and Belmont are the same; it is Wakefield's way of seeking reformation thus actively to apply to Hugh. Hugh's mother conveniently dies, and Wakefield marries Lydia Wilmot, the girl he had seduced and abandoned but always loved. Nicely set with the fortune Hugh should have inherited (but Hugh does not mind because he has just inherited a different fortune), Wakefield lives a reformed and virtuous life. Hugh graciously exults:

Neither shall I be required to particularize the present happiness of Lydia, now Mrs. Wakefield; and of that man of brilliant and astonishing faculties who is her affectionate companion and friend, and from whose exertions, if I am not strangely mistaken, the world has so much to profit and so much to expect. Like me, he is in the enjoyment of affluence; and he enjoys it with a liberal and munificent spirit. Are there any who hate him, because he once was guilty of hateful crimes? I hope not. It is a spirit that would sweep away half the inhabitants of the 'peopled earth.' For my own part, I delight in his conversation, am enlivened by his wit, and prompted to enquiry by the acuteness of his remarks. He is a man whom I am proud to say I love. (p. 496)

But we have seen no reforming process worthy of our respect, and the reform remains unconvincing; Holcroft takes a great deal more time and trouble with the characterization and attempts at reform of Coke Clifton in *Anna St. Ives*, and there we do come to believe that, perhaps, it is possible to precipitate such change. But in this later book, the reform of Wakefield-Belmont is unlikely in terms of what we know of the character; in addition, there has been no concerted attempt at reform by the positive characters. The reform is Holcroft's concession to his own feeling that this is an age of light, but between *Anna St. Ives* and *Hugh Trevor* the "is" has become "ought to be." Holcroft has come to realize that his is not a particularly enlightened or idealistic age, and his attempt with Wakefield to suggest a universal potential for good is not carefully executed.
In fact, the shallowness of Wakefield's reform only underscores the generally negative outlook of the book.

In *Anna St. Ives* Holcroft articulates the concepts of corrupt institutions and good human beings by positing that good people can reform both bad institutions and badly educated human beings (for there are no bad people). In the world of *Anna St. Ives*, everything is possible: benevolent intervention can do wonders. We remember Frank Henley, the hero of *Anna St. Ives*, saying with no irony at all that "my feelings are all rapture! . . . I live in an age when light begins to appear even in regions that have hitherto been thick darkness, and . . . I myself am so highly fortunate as to be able to contribute to the great the universal cause; the progress of truth, the extirpation of error, and the general perfection of mind." But in *Hugh Trevor* such a statement would have to be ironic. We do not see an age of light in *Hugh Trevor*; we see an age in which men may perhaps be basically good but their institutions are definitely bad—and the good men do not seem to have much power. Turl, the most meritorious character in the book, advises Hugh in the paths of righteousness, but he himself takes no action in the arenas of power. Turl remains at his work, engraving. The philosopher-sage has chosen a clean way to make a living "by administering as little as he could to the false wants . . . of men" (p. 140). While Turl's distance from the tumult of the world seems proper for a sage, it hardly seems the way to go in terms of reforming the world. Holcroft in *Anna St. Ives* sees a direct road to reform: Frank wades into the thick of the fight. But in *Hugh Trevor* Holcroft has lost that focus. Hugh, we have seen, looks at the field—be it religious, political, or legal—and runs.

Godwin's *Caleb Williams* was published in the same year as the first part of *Hugh Trevor*. Both novels are highly critical of the state of "things as they are," to use Godwin's subtitle, and both can see little hope for improvement; although it is not usually stressed in critical interpretations of *Caleb Williams*, Godwin plots no course for the reforms he believes necessary in English society. Surprisingly, it is quite the opposite: when Caleb finally gets the justice he has fought for, that is, when his friend-
turned-persecutor Falkland is brought before the bar on the charge of murder, Caleb himself is crushed and can only lament “that I am myself the basest and most odious of mankind! Never will I forgive myself the iniquity of this day. The memory will always haunt me, and embitter every hour of my existence. In thus acting [to bring Falkland to trial] I have been a murderer...” Thus, even justice, as Godwin draws the picture, does not satisfy the human need; none of the social institutions in Caleb Williams ever do satisfy human needs. If we backtrack in Caleb Williams a moment, it was the social institutions of honor and rank that initially pushed Falkland to commit murder, thus setting in motion the whole horrible chain of events that leads to the destruction of both protagonists.

As the eighteenth century turned into the nineteenth, men were conscious of an intense feeling of helplessness; things were simply not in their control. Among the causes of this unease, I have pointed to the enormous changes in English society wrought by the industrial revolution, with its displacement of large segments of the English peasantry and its creation of a newly powerful (but not yet assimilated) middle class, and, of course, the French Revolution. As Carl Woodring notes, “after the French Revolution it was in the nature of ‘nature’ to change. Suddenly in the late eighteenth century to look about was to see alteration, accelerated speed, and flux.” England herself at this time was undergoing frightening political convulsions, partially in reaction to the French Revolution, and Holcroft himself in 1794 was imprisoned on a charge of high treason. Thinkers such as Holcroft and Godwin believed that man was inherently benevolent and rational, but it was hard to hold to that belief in the face of a world that more and more seemed not to have a satisfactory, nor even particularly discernible, order. In the work of a better novelist such as Godwin, the unease takes a psychological or symbolic form; the dislocations of man and society are symbolized in Caleb’s and Falkland’s flailings. As Caleb’s would-be recanting at Falkland’s trial shows, no amount of struggle gets one through the nightmare net of disorder. In the work of a lesser novelist such as
Holcroft, the parts of the picture simply do not fit. That which men cannot make sense of in life, small artists cannot bring together in art. And so Holcroft puts before us the two aspects of what he sees, the good of men and the evil of institutions, and leaves it there. He is not about to attempt to bring the two together in terms of what happens to the mind of man within such constructs—as Godwin does in all of his novels from Caleb Williams on. And since there is no societal grid for these two seemingly antithetical observations, no God as in the middle ages, no chain of being as in the early part of the eighteenth century, he cannot come to any but a hollow conclusion.

If, as in Anna St. Ives, one believes that benevolent intervention can make grand improvements, then the natural benevolence of man and the (temporary) evil of society can be reconciled. But if one recognizes that benevolent interaction is at best ineffectual and at worst harmful, there is no way to reconcile the two. That is where Holcroft left Hugh Trevor.

2. Gary Kelly, in The English Jacobin Novel: 1780–1805 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), is one of the few critics who devotes significant attention to Hugh Trevor; although his discussion is very useful for its many historical identifications, his reading of the book as an English Jacobin tract sometimes leads to rather strained interpretations of particular incidents.
4. Holcroft did of course do political pamphleteering of his own. See, for example, A Plain and Succint Narrative of the Gordon Riots (London, 1780), ed. Garland Garvey Smith (Atlanta: The Library, Emory University, 1944).
5. In addition, he is in debt to the baron, and refuses to hide from prosecution behind his constitutionally privileged status as an MP.
this theme in *Caleb Williams*, see my "From Mind to Society: *Caleb Williams* as a Psychological Novel," *Dutch Quarterly Review*, 7 (June 1977).


10. In chapter eight, I discuss the Treason Trials and their implications more fully in connection with the trial scene in Bage's *Hermesprong*. 