Those gentlemen who, when they are told of the misery which our prisoners suffer, content themselves with saying, Let them take care to keep out . . . seem not duly sensible of the favour of Providence which distinguishes them from the sufferers . . . they also forget the vicissitudes of human affairs; the unexpected changes to which all men are liable: and that those whose circumstances are affluent, may in time be reduced to indigence, and become debtors and prisoners. And as to criminality, it is possible that a man who has often shuddered at hearing the account of a murder, may on a sudden temptation commit that very crime. Let him that thinks he standeth take heed lest he fall and commiserate those that are fallen.

John Howard, The State of the Prisons

As we near the end of the century, the tone of rebuke in the novel becomes increasingly sharp, and nowhere is this asperity more obvious than in Godwin's fiction, not only in Caleb Williams but in his later novels such as Fleetwood and Mandeville. From beginning to end, Caleb Williams cries out against tyranny and privilege. What is perhaps most remarkable about the book is that its nightmare sense of undeserved and inevitable disaster is based in fact, not fiction; that is, in its most horrifying scenes, in the prison for example, Godwin essentially reports on his society and its devices. The sense of danger in the novel, the apprehension that any mistake may be quite fatal, is built on the probability of such mischance that Godwin sees as he looks around him.

Caleb Williams is a very angry book. Godwin directs his anger at social institutions that misshape men, turning them against
each other in the name of values that are meaningless or even destructive. Falkland's honor is the obvious example that comes to mind, and others abound in the book: Collins' hesitation to learn the truth about the revered Falkland, because it would destroy his scaffolding of good and evil, is as strong if not perhaps as obvious an example.¹ Second, and more specifically, Godwin's anger is directed against a social system that not only warps men but puts some men in such a position that they can offer no defense against injustices committed against them. Caleb, as a secretary or servant, simply has no recourse to the law. In the final confrontation, Falkland's confession establishes Caleb's innocence; Caleb's protestations would otherwise avail him nothing.² This defines the struggle as one of class. Godwin has introduced a new dimension to the novel of protest that did not exist before him but is very prominent in the protest novel after him.

Logically, none of the missteps in the novel seem serious enough to cause the disasters they precipitate. It is unfortunate that a boor like Tyrrel lives in Falkland's neighborhood, but that shouldn't result in Falkland's disgrace nor should disgrace result in murder. It is perhaps silly of Caleb to let his curiosity get the better of his judgment, but such a slip should not blight his whole life. At every step in the book, disastrous consequences always follow relatively unimportant acts. All of the opening encounters are innocuous enough. Falkland is a benevolent aristocrat who uses his wealth and influence to do good, as when he takes in the orphaned young Caleb Williams, the son of one of his tenants. Caleb is a bright, alert young man, full of energy and enthusiasm, who honestly wishes to serve his new master well. Squire Tyrrel is a boorish character, but even he has taken under his protection a helpless young relative, Emily, and a hardworking family named Hawkins. Emily and the Hawkinses are fine, moral people. Thus the main characters in the book, with the exception of Tyrrel, are all upstanding and likeable people, even beyond the ordinary in their humanity. From this set of morally ordinary, even above average people, so much horror and evil accrues. The essential question
in *Caleb Williams* is why this happens. The ultimate answer Godwin gives is that the fault lies not in men but in the institutions that corrupt them.³

The main part of the book is given over to the series of petty and gross oppressions visited by Falkland, and by society, on an essentially helpless Caleb. The book has a nightmare quality, and yet the details of the nightmare come from an objective examination of contemporary society. Descriptions of the legal and (especially) the penal systems, which may seem to a reader to be gross exaggerations, are documentably accurate. A great deal of the social criticism in Godwin’s book, in fact, comes from the piling up of detail of the tyrannies inflicted by men upon men, particularly by the more powerful upon the less powerful. The series of tyrannies Godwin sets before us constitutes a crushing indictment of his society. Godwin uses a double view to emphasize the pervasiveness of this tyranny, with first a series of unfair and oppressing actions committed by the brutal Tyrrel and then a series of equally vicious acts committed by his supposed antithesis, chivalrous Mr. Falkland. Godwin creates a sense of outrage in the reader through Tyrrel’s devastating attacks on the Hawkinses and on Emily; the reader shares that outrage with Falkland. It is not shocking, although it is of course unpleasant, that a man like Tyrrel can wreak such havoc on innocent lives. The shock comes when the kind and responsible Falkland shows himself to be as tyrannical as Tyrrel. It is this second view of “things as they are” that is horrifying, because if the helpless innocent must fear the upstanding as well as the evil man, then there is no place to turn for help.

The situation of Emily, the young, impecunious cousin of Tyrrel, is a good case in point. Emily’s mother had been disinherited because she had married against the family’s wishes. With her father and mother dead, Emily goes to live in the Tyrrel house, where she enters into “a sort of equivocal situation, which was neither precisely that of a domestic, nor yet marked with the treatment that might seem due to one of the family” (p. 38). She is treated reasonably well, as long as she
does not displease the master of the house. But her well-being is subject entirely to his whim, and it is this vulnerability that horrifies Godwin. Her situation is not unlike that of many a woman in Godwin's time who was by custom and by law at the mercy of any relative who would feed and clothe her. The nature of youth, its dependence on others for subsistence, makes us all at some time vulnerable to domestic tyranny, and this fact, although painful to Godwin, is to some degree accepted by him. But when that tyranny becomes acute, there must be recourse to outside arbitors, that is, to the law, and the fact that law protects tyrant rather than victim makes the situation intolerable. This is the case Godwin puts before us.

Tyrrel becomes set against Emily because she admires his rival, Falkland, and to punish her he tries to make her marry the repulsive Grimes. The normally compliant Emily sets herself in opposition to the plan, saying that she wants only to leave Tyrrel's protection and fend for herself; he responds, "Do you think, strumpet, that you shall get the better of me by sheer impudence... So you want to know by what right you are here, do you? By the right of possession. This house is mine, and you are in my power... When did you ever know any body resist my will without being made to repent?... Damn you, who brought you up? I will make you a bill for clothing and lodging. Do you not know that every creditor has a right to stop his runaway debtor? You may think as you please; but here you are till you marry Grimes" (p. 57). When Tyrrel says that she is in his power, he makes not an exaggerated claim but a statement of fact. Later on when Falkland contends with Caleb Williams, Falkland makes essentially the same statement, and the reader understands that the nature of the man does not change the frightening destructiveness of the power he wields.

Tyrrel's threat to have Emily arrested for the debt of the money he has paid out over the years for her subsistence has the ring of an empty boast. What law would arrest a young girl for owing the price of her room and board to her cousin? The answer, of course, is that England's law would. When Tyrrel, having had Emily dragged to prison from her sick bed and having thus caused her death, is confronted as a murderer by
her friends, his justification is that "I did nothing but what the law allows" (p. 91).

That law allows him, as the wealthy landowner, virtually complete sway over anyone within his circle who is not equally wealthy and powerful. A poor man’s redress from the tyranny of an unfair landlord is only to be fortunate enough to put himself under the protection of another—who may be the same or worse. Thus Hawkins, a tenant farmer on the land of one of Tyrrel’s neighbors, comes to Tyrrel when he angers his own landlord by refusing to vote for the landlord’s man in an election. Godwin makes us aware of this corruption in English political life that in effect forces the less powerful to give up their franchise to the more powerful. This disenfranchisement is so taken for granted that it is Hawkins’ refusal that is seen as criminal, a point reiterated to Tyrrel by the first landowner, Mr. Underwood, who says that harboring Hawkins would lead to “an end . . . to all regulation. . . . Any gentleman . . . would rather lose his election, than do a thing which, if once established into a practice, would deprive them for ever of the power of managing any election” (p. 68). Although he is in full agreement with the sentiments, this time Tyrrel protects Hawkins—both to show his own power and independence and because Hawkins is, in fact, supporting Tyrrel’s candidate.

There is no benevolence in Tyrrel’s helping Hawkins, however, as is clear when Hawkins quite innocently crosses his new master. Tyrrel gets the idea that Hawkins’ son should be in his service, but Hawkins does not want his favorite son to “go to service” and has higher goals for him. For this offense, Tyrrel determines to ruin Hawkins. Sure of his power, he vows to Hawkins that “I will tread you into paste!”, and he orders Hawkins immediately to quit the land he farms. Hawkins refuses to be cowed. He has a lease, he says, and he hopes that “there is some law for poor folk, as well as for rich” (p. 71). Hawkins believes that the law will protect him. Godwin’s perspective on the matter is unequivocal, if ironic:

Hawkins, to borrow the language of the world, was guilty in this affair of a double imprudence. He talked to his landlord in a more peremptory manner than the constitution and practices of this
country allow a dependent to assume. But above all, having been thus hurried away by his resentment, he ought to have foreseen the consequences. It was mere madness in him to think of contesting with a man of Mr. Tyrrel's eminence and fortune. It was a fawn contending with a lion. Nothing could have been more easy to predict, than that it was of no avail for him to have right on his side, when his adversary had influence and wealth, and therefore could so victoriously justify any extravagancies that he might think proper to commit. This maxim was completely illustrated in the sequel. Wealth and despotism easily know how to engage those laws as the coadjutors of their oppression which were perhaps at first intended (witless and miserable precaution!) for the safeguards of the poor. (p. 72)

As the sequel shows, Hawkins indeed is in error. All the power rests with those who have the wealth, if only because of the expense of any legal proceeding. If legal proceedings are expensive enough to deplete the reserves of the wealthy, then justice certainly lies beyond the financial means of the poor. Additionally, the judges themselves incline toward the side of the substantial landowner rather than the poorer man. Later in the novel, Caleb, pitted against Falkland, is in the same position as Hawkins is relative to Tyrrel: when the man of power sets out to destroy the powerless, the smaller man has no recourse and is destroyed.

Tyrrel persecutes Hawkins, among other ways, by causing his land to be flooded shortly before harvest. When Tyrrel has Hawkins' stock poisoned, Hawkins finally decides to seek legal redress, although he

had hitherto carefully avoided ... the attempting to right himself by legal process, being of opinion that law was better adapted for a weapon of tyranny in the hands of the rich, than for a shield to protect the humbler part of the community against their usurpations. (p. 73)

But

in this last instance however he conceived that the offence was so atrocious as to make it impossible that any rank could protect the culprit against the severity of justice. (p. 73)
Tyrrel is delighted, realizing that right and wrong not entering into the matter at all, he can now even more thoroughly ruin Hawkins:

This was the very point to which Mr. Tyrrel wanted to bring him, and he could scarcely credit his good fortune, when he was told that Hawkins had entered an action. His congratulation upon this occasion was immoderate, as he now conceived that the ruin of his late favourite was irretrievable. He consulted his attorney, and urged him by every motive he could devise to employ the whole series of his subterfuges in the present affair. The direct repelling of the charge exhibited against him was the least part of his care; the business was, by affidavits, motions, pleas, demurrers, flaws and appeals, to protract the question from term to term and from court to court. It would, as Mr. Tyrrel argued, be the disgrace of a civilized country, if a gentleman ... could not convert the cause into a question of the longest purse, and stick in the skirts of his adversary till he had reduced him to beggary. (p. 73)

This dance through the courts does not exhaust Tyrrel's means of legal persecution. He has the road cut off which passes Hawkins' house; the son, unable to stand this additional burden, breaks down the barricade one night and is jailed under a law intended for poachers—which Tyrrel and a cooperating judge twist to meet the facts of this case. Godwin's allusion here to the Black Act, from which he quotes the relevant clause, is one more of those precise references that support the accuracy of the charges he makes against his society. Thus it is through entirely legal means that Hawkins, like Emily, can be ruined by Tyrrel simply because he had incurred his displeasure. Hawkins helps his son to escape and they both run away, only to be found after Tyrrel's death and tried and executed for his murder—the murder committed by the rich Falkland, whose standing in the community, of course, protects him.

Godwin's delineation early in the novel of the legal and social forces that militate against the poor and prevent them from redressing the tyrannies inflicted upon them by their "betters" serves to set in the reader's eye the image of an England in
which tyranny and brutality are in no sense forces that exist only in bygone days or in foreign lands. Later, when Godwin is talking about the horrendous conditions in the prisons, he says that those who thank God that there is no Bastille in England speak only from ignorance. Before he can get on with his main story, that is, the depiction of the specific tyranny of mind and spirit that Falkland is empowered to exert over Caleb, Godwin must convince the reader that such an exertion of tyranny within the structure of his society is not a freakish accident but an everyday occurrence and that, further, this sort of tyranny is built into the structure of society itself.

Godwin is careful to show the inevitable steps by which innocents like the Hawkinses and Emily are ruined because his book is a protest against precisely these tyrannies. Godwin need not have gone into such detail about Tyrrel's depredations in order to give Falkland motive; actually, Falkland's motive for the murder has nothing to do with Tyrrel's actions upon anyone but himself. Godwin's details present a pattern of legal and social callousness that is itself a severe indictment of his society and which, as background to the depiction of the relationship between Falkland and Caleb, provides a powerful conviction that for men (especially the powerless in Godwin's England) almost any sort of misstep can be the cause of extraordinarily painful, even fatal, consequences. The precariousness of the balance that holds a man's affairs in order is a recurrent theme in the eighteenth-century novel, as in Fielding's tale of Amelia and Booth, in Brooke's story of Mr. Clement, and in Inchbald's story of Hannah. Because that precariousness stems largely from the corruption of social institutions, the resulting helplessness is extremely frightening, for one cannot look outside oneself for aid. It is from this source that the nightmarish quality of *Caleb Williams* proceeds—there is no recourse, no fallback apparent in any of the cases Godwin describes. To whom should Emily, or the Hawkinses, or Caleb turn? Like Amelia and Booth in Fielding's novel, they have no one who can help them; unlike Fielding, however, Godwin, forty years later, will not take the fairy-tale way out and invent a fall into fortune for
characters who, without such intervention, could be expected to perish. And so they do. But Falkland is destroyed too; so deep are the traps of society that even the powerful are ensnared by them. These traps are not only legal and political; they are also psychological. And while he delineates the institutional abuses, Godwin also chooses to stress the psychological pressures in society that destroy the core of the benevolent interaction he assumes would otherwise operate between men. Thus Falkland, a man of undoubted intelligence, benevolence, and fine character, commits murder, allows innocent men to be executed for his act, and hounds Caleb virtually to the end of his bearing, all because of a narrow notion of honor that is simply a deteriorated concept of pride. Falkland’s society destroys men not simply by its overt actions through legal, economic, or political institutions but through the mistaken codes it foists upon them. Godwin’s attack is then twofold: society creates not only physical and institutional tyrannies but psychological ones as well. In Falkland’s relationship with Caleb, the two areas of tyranny meet.

Godwin’s delineation of his characters’ psychological functioning is based on his view of society, for the ills of individuals reflect the conditions of their society. Falkland’s initial conception of honor and chivalry is not a product solely of his own imagination but is a function of his upbringing and of social reinforcement. So, too, the largely irrational streak in men’s relationships can be at least partially explained by referring to failings in the structure of society itself. As Burton Pollin suggests in the context of Political Justice, “The too frequent interference of the irrational, the subconscious, and the blindly habitual is admitted only as symptomatic of the bad training and the evil institutions that now prevail.”4 Society, in effect, creates the occasion for unhealthy human relationships because, as D. H. Monro points out in Godwin’s Moral Philosophy, “society fosters certain attitudes that make men incapable of seeing things (and people) as they are.”5 Once we can no longer see reality, we cannot act in accord with reason but only in accord with our faulty perceptions. Godwin seems to be saying that
most of the destruction man wreaks on man arises not from reason—given Godwin's views on the hand-in-hand nature of reason and benevolence this would be absurd—but from non-rational motivations. An action may seem to have a rational motivation although it in fact does not. Falkland's destruction of Caleb would seem to be caused by his fear that Caleb will discredit him: in fact, as Caleb points out and as Falkland might have been expected to notice, Caleb repeatedly indicates that he has no intention of informing on Falkland. The whole chase might have been avoided had Falkland seen Caleb as he is and had he realized that Caleb would not inform, as is made clear in the novel at so many points: "I would undertake that Mr. Falkland should never sustain injury through my means" (p. 144); or "so far as related to myself, I resolved, and this resolution has never been entirely forgotten by me, to hold myself disengaged from this odious scene, and never fill the part either of the oppressor or the sufferer" (p. 156); or "I determined never to prove an instrument of destruction to Mr. Falkland" (pp. 160-61).

Similarly, Caleb's picking at Falkland's scab is equally obsessive. Caleb, while protesting his good feelings toward Falkland, relentlessly breaks down his stability. He slowly works toward an intellectual intercourse with Falkland, of whom Caleb says, "He had long been a stranger to pleasure of every sort, and my artless and untaught remarks appeared to promise him some amusement. Could an amusement of this sort be dangerous?" (p. 108). But Caleb's own language, even while dwelling on his innocence, gives him away. Caleb, as he pulls Falkland into this intimacy, says that "Mr. Falkland's situation was like that of a fish that plays with the bait employed to entrap him" (p. 109), so that Caleb clearly sees not only the danger but his own less-than-innocent role as well. Caleb goads and sympathizes at the same time: "By my manner he was in a certain degree encouraged to lay aside his customary reserve, and relax his stateliness; till some abrupt observation or interrogatory stung him into recollection and brought back his alarm. Still it was evident that he bore about him a secret
wound” (p. 109). Caleb allows Falkland to relax with him, then makes some “abrupt . . . interrogatory.” To harrow and to sympathize is, in essence, the pattern of Caleb’s response to Falkland, even in the last scenes when Caleb forces the magistrate to call Falkland before a tribunal only to decide that “there must have been some dreadful mistake in the train of argument that persuaded me to be the author of this hateful scene” (p. 320).

An evil society, such as the England that gives all power to an aristocrat like Falkland and none to a servant like Caleb, forces men into unnatural relationships that in turn produce more sickness. Part of Caleb’s pleasure in goading Falkland, for example, is clearly derived from the sense of power it gives him. “I could never enough wonder at finding myself, humble as I was by my birth; obscure as I had hitherto been, thus suddenly become of so much importance to the happiness of one of the most enlightened and accomplished men in England” (p. 121). A healthy society, in which men were equal and could react to each other not in terms of social position or social advantage but in terms of individual merit, would not foster such feelings of pleasure in power. This feeling of pleasure is not confined to the underling. Falkland, as corrupted by the society as Caleb is, clearly enjoys his power when the time comes. For example, when Caleb strikes up a friendly relationship with Mr. Forester, which Falkland does not want, Falkland reacts violently: “Why do you trifle with me: You little suspect the extent of my power. . . . You might as well think of escaping from the power of the omnipresent God, as from mine!” (p. 144).

Falkland and Caleb are in many ways parts of each other, like Frankenstein and his monster in Mary Shelley’s novel. The symbiotic relationship is so strong that when Falkland is destroyed, Caleb is also destroyed. While Caleb is hounded and lives the hard life of a fugitive, the marks of wear and destruction are visible on Falkland. And when one man ceases to exist, Godwin clearly indicates that the real life of the other is over. When Caleb describes the scene of his public humiliation of Falkland and Falkland’s subsequent demise, it is in terms of
such unshakable guilt that his own future life becomes meaningless: "Meanwhile I endure the penalty of my crime [the prosecution of Falkland]. His figure is ever in imagination before me. Waking or sleeping, I still behold him. . . . I live the devoted victim of conscious reproach. . . . I thought that, if Falkland were dead, I should return once again to all that makes life worth possessing. I thought that, if the guilt of Falkland were established, fortune and the world would smile upon my efforts. Both these events are accomplished; and it is now only that I am truly miserable" (p. 325).

It is part of the power of the book that the veil of misapplied motivation never tears. Falkland and Caleb, Tyrrel and Emily, all are caught up not only in institutional snares but in equally crippling psychological ones. Caleb is unable to escape Falkland physically throughout the book; only in the last scene is it obvious that he has not been able to separate himself psychologically either. Falkland has internalized society's conception of honor so well that it has become his obsession, and that obsession makes Falkland, pillar of his community and protector of the helpless, into a murderer and tyrant. The society that has so distorted such a potentially useful individual then offers no protection from his actions. That is why Caleb cannot escape: society as it stands damages men and then encourages them to do their worst. From the keeper in his prison to the squire on his manor, societal controls are nightmarishly lacking.

The tensions between Falkland and Caleb come into the open when Falkland discovers Caleb opening a secret trunk. Their next interview establishes the sinister quality that hereafter will inform the relationship between the two men. Falkland understands the nature of his own motivation, and that understanding includes a certainty of his absolute inability to change. Thus when he explains to Caleb that his own foolish obsession with upholding his reputation has led him to commit one murder and to allow the deaths of two innocent men, he also says that he knows he will go on committing terrible acts in the service of his honor:
This it is to be a gentleman! a man of honour! I was the fool of fame. My virtue, my honesty, my everlasting peace of mind were cheap sacrifices to be made at the shrine of this divinity. But, what is worse, there is nothing that has happened that has in any degree contributed to my cure. I am as much the fool of fame as ever. I cling to it to my last breath. Though I be the blackest of villains, I will leave behind me a spotless and illustrious name. There is no crime so malignant, no scene of blood so horrible, in which that object cannot engage me. It is no matter that I regard these things at a distance with aversion;—I am sure of it; bring me to the test, and I shall yield. I despise myself; but thus I am; things are gone too far to be recalled. (pp. 135–36)

Falkland holds out no hope to Caleb; there is no persuasion, rational or irrational, that will turn Falkland from the path he must follow. Caleb, having made the mistake of forcing himself into the circle of Falkland's desperation, is now irrevocably trapped.

And the tyrannical power available to Tyrrel is equally available to Falkland. Before the fatal series of incidents, Falkland had exercised his power in benevolent actions; afterwards, he uses it to thwart any discovery of his dishonor. Godwin has carefully built for the reader a picture of just how much power a rich man of his day has—we have already seen with what ease Tyrrel destroys Emily and the Hawkinses. The structural purpose of this early exposition is to set Falkland's control over Caleb in perspective; Falkland's persecution of Caleb is part of a pattern of tyranny. Without real legal limit, the rich take as their hereditary prerogative control over other people's lives. Thus when Caleb attempts to flee, Falkland tells him that he will crush him with "the same indifference" that he would "any other little insect that disturbed [his] serenity" (p. 153). He assures Caleb that no one will ever take Caleb's word against his. Had we not the example of Tyrrel in front of us, this unblushing assertion of power might seem exaggerated:

You write me here, that you are desirous to quit my service. To that I have a short answer, You never shall quit it with life. If you
attempt it, you shall never cease to rue your folly as long as you exist. That is my will; and I will not have it resisted. The very next time you disobey me in that or any other article, there is an end of your vagaries for ever... 

I have dug a pit for you; and, whichever way you move, backward or forward, to the right or to the left, it is ready to swallow you... If once you fall, call as loud as you will, no man on earth shall hear your cries; prepare a tale however plausible, or however true, the whole world shall execrate you for an impostor. Your innocence shall be of no service to you; I laugh at so feeble a defence. It is I that say it; you may believe what I tell you... Begone, miscreant! reptile! and cease to contend with unsurmountable power! (pp. 153-54)

This is a frightening speech. It is obviously the speech of someone not in control of himself, but its terror lies not in its irrationality but in its accuracy. Falkland indeed does have the incredible power he claims. That he is obsessive, even insane, is irrelevant. He can and he does hereafter tailor Caleb's life to his own fit.

Caleb appeals to Mr. Forester, Falkland's brother, who earlier had shown him some kindness, and Mr. Forester attempts to give Caleb a fair hearing. Mr. Forester and some servants are to consider the case against Caleb. The informal "trial" is soon over. Falkland accuses Caleb of running away from his service because he had stolen some property, and when Caleb denies the charge, Falkland produces false evidence. Everyone, of course, believes Falkland. Caleb quickly is remanded to prison, there to await his real trial. Caleb, not yet having been tried or found guilty of any crime, nonetheless is subject to precisely the same prison conditions as the worst convicted felon. Those conditions are unspeakably awful, with dirt, disease, lack of food, lack of privacy, and various modes of brutality and torture all in order. The picture Caleb draws is so horrible that it defies our belief and suggests that he is grossly exaggerating, if not imagining, the conditions. It is, however, a precisely accurate picture of eighteenth-century prison conditions. The details in Godwin's descriptions are corroborated point by point in John Howard's The State of the Prisons.
When Caleb first walks into the prison, he is struck by the "squalidness and filth with which these mansions are distinguished. . . . the dirt . . . appears to be already in a state of putridity and infection" (p. 177). Far from exaggerating, Godwin here merely glosses over one of the most scandalous aspects of the contemporary prison system, that incredible neglect of the most elementary sanitary measures that made the prisons breeding grounds for disease and death. According to Howard, "many more prisoners were destroyed by [gaol fever], than were put to death by all the public executions in the kingdom." He goes on to suggest that the "mischief is not confined to prisons. Not to mention now the number of sailors, and of families in America, that have been infected by transports;—multitudes caught the distemper by going to their relatives and acquaintance in the gaols: many others from prisoners discharged; and not a few in the courts of judicature." Conditions are so bad in many prisons that even if a man is released, he may never be physically fit for work again. Thus Caleb's tale of his friend Brightwel, a man committed for no provable cause who dies "of a disease the consequence of his confinement" while awaiting trial, is an indictment not only of the unjust system that keeps a man in prison without having tried him, but also is an accurate assessment of the likely result of that injustice.

Upon his admission to the prison, Caleb is put into the day room with the other prisoners, where both convicted criminals and men just awaiting trial are kept penned together: "I spent the day in the midst of profligacy and execrations . . . I saw reflected from every countenance agonies only inferior to my own[.] He that would form a lively idea of the regions of the damned, need only to witness for six hours a scene to which I was confined for many months. Not for one hour could I withdraw myself from this complexity of horrors, or take refuge in the calmness of meditation. Air, exercise . . . I was . . . debarred [from]" . . . (pp. 183-84). This practice of herding all prisoners, young and old (even male and female) together is corroborated by Howard, as I indicated earlier. He decries the lack
of privacy for meditation and the forcible keeping of bad company. He also carefully explains the inmate's physical need for fresh air as well as his spiritual need for some form of occupation.

If the day room with its noxious closeness and almost equally unsavory company is bad, the accommodations for night are worse. The cell in which Caleb spends fourteen or fifteen hours per day is a dungeon "7½ feet by 6½, below the surface of the ground, damp, without . . . light or air, except from a few holes worked for that purpose in the door" (p. 181). "Its only furniture was the straw that served me for my repose. It was narrow, damp, and unwholesome" (p. 184). A below ground dungeon with only straw for a bed in England in the eighteenth century? According to Howard: "... anyone may judge of the probability there is against the health, and life, of prisoners crowded in close rooms, cells, and subterranean dungeons, for fourteen or fifteen hours out of the four and twenty. In some of those caverns the floor is very damp: in others there is sometimes an inch or two of water: and the straw, or bedding is laid on such floors; seldom on barracks-bedsteads. . . . In many gaols . . . there is no allowance of bedding or straw for prisoners to sleep on; and if by any means they get a little, it is not changed for months together, so that it is offensive and almost worn to dust. Some lie upon rags, others upon the bare floors."

Thus the descriptions in the novel are conservative with respect to the real-life conditions that Howard found. Godwin could have given Caleb a dungeon with two inches of water and no straw—but perhaps he thought that might strain credibility. Along these lines, one wonders how many of Godwin's readers have assumed that Godwin was using artistic license in having the jailor attach iron fetters to Caleb's swelling ankle as punishment for his attempted escape. In fact, we learn from Howard that the use of fetters for hands, feet, or both was quite common in English prisons, and he even pleads that doctors, when attending sick prisoners, should have their irons removed. Generally, Howard notes, he must condemn the "loading pris-
oners with heavy irons, which make their walking and even lying down to sleep, difficult and painful . . . .” Thus, Godwin’s descriptions of Caleb—left in fetters with an increasingly swollen leg (until he bribes the jailor to get him a doctor); or unable to move more than eighteen inches from the staple in the ground to which his chain is attached (p. 199); or incarcerated in the “strong room,” the door of which “had not been opened for years; the air was putrid; and the walls hung round with damps and mildew,” for the awful crime of having loosened his fetter so that he could sleep; or further punished in the strong room by “the fetters, padlock and the staple . . . as in the former case, in addition to which they put on . . . a pair of hand cuffs” and sent “nothing but a bit of bread, mouldy and black, and some dirty and stinking water” (pp. 200–201)—are factual if we judge by Howard’s descriptions in *The State of the Prisons*. The details of moldy bread and putrid water are not poetic either; Howard notes that many prisoners get little or no food and, as for water, “many prisons have no water . . . in some places where there is water, prisoners are always locked up within doors, and have no more than the keeper . . . think[s] fit to bring them.” Godwin’s prison scenes then, horrible as they are, accurately describe contemporary prison life. In some cases, as I have noted with the description of the dungeon, Godwin did not even use the worst examples, perhaps feeling that the reader might reject these darkest truths as unlikely imaginings. Once we are aware of the truth of Godwin’s descriptions, we perhaps should look more closely at the rhetoric that accompanies them.

*Caleb Williams* is written in rather flamboyant style, with many exclamation points and an even greater number of grand oratorical declarative statements: “No man that has not felt in his own most momentous concerns justice, eternal truth, unalterable equity engaged in his behalf, and on the other side brute force, impenetrable obstinacy and unfeeling insolence, can imagine the sensations that then passed through my mind” (p. 183). The style, however, should not disguise for a modern reader the validity of the complaints Godwin lodges against his
government and the society that allows that government to maintain its policies. Godwin sees those policies as highly repressive and destructive. When we consider the factual truthfulness of his descriptions, the appeals to the reader to recognize the injustices and barbarities endemic in his society become statements of necessity rather than of political rhetoric:

We talk of instruments of torture; Englishmen take credit to themselves for having banished the use of them from their happy shore! Alas, he that has observed the secrets of a prison, well knows that there is more torture in the lingering existence of a criminal... than in the tangible misery of whips and racks. (p. 180)

Thank God, exclaims the Englishman, we have no Bastille! Thank God, with us no man can be punished without a crime! Unthinking wretch! Is that a country of liberty where thousands languish in dungeons and fetters? Go, go, ignorant fool! and visit the scenes of our prisons! witness their unwholesomeness, their filth, the tyranny of their governors, the misery of their inmates! After that show me the man shameless enough to triumph, and say, England has no Bastille! Is there any charge so frivolous upon which men are not consigned to those detested abodes? Is there any villainy that is not practised by justices and prosecutors? But against all this, perhaps you have been told, there is redress. Yes, a redress, that it is the consummation of insult so much as to name! Where shall the poor wretch, reduced to the last despair, and to whom acquittal perhaps comes just time enough to save him from perishing,—where shall this man find leisure, and much less money, to see counsel and officers, and purchase the tedious, dear bought remedy of the law? No, he is too happy to leave his dungeon and the memory of his dungeon behind him; and the same tyranny and wanton oppression become the inheritance of his successor....

I consulted my own heart that whispered nothing but innocence; and I said, This is society. This is the object, the distribution of justice, which is the end of human reason. For this sages have toiled, and the midnight oil has been wasted....

The language which these institutions hold out to the unfortunate is, Come, and be shut out from the light of day, be the associate of those whom society has marked out for her abhorrence, be the slave of jailers, be loaded with fetters; thus shall you be cleared from every unworthy aspersion, and restored to reputation and honour! This is the consolation she affords to those whom malignity or folly, private pique or unfounded positiveness have without
the smallest foundation loaded with calumny. For myself I felt my own innocence, and I soon found upon enquiry that three fourths of those who are regularly subjected to a similar treatment are persons whom even with all the superciliousness and precipitation of our courts of justice no evidence can be found sufficient to convict. How slender then must be that man's portion of information and discernment, who is willing to commit his character and welfare to such guardianship! (pp. 181–83)

During [this] period . . . the assizes, which were held twice a year in the town in which I was a prisoner, came on. Upon this occasion my case was not brought forward, but was suffered to stand over six months longer. It would have been just the same, if I had had as strong reason to expect acquittal, as I had conviction. If I had been apprehended upon the most frivolous reasons upon which any justice of the peace ever thought proper to commit a naked beggar for trial, I must still have waited about two hundred and seventeen days, before my innocence could be cleared. So imperfect are the effects of the boasted laws of a country whose legislators hold their assembly from four to six months in every year! I could never discover with certainty, whether this delay were owing to any interference on the part of my prosecutor, or whether it fell out in the regular administration of justice, which is too solemn and dignified to accommodate itself to the rights or benefit of an insignificant individual. (p. 189)

The appeal to his countrymen to recognize that, indeed, only ignorance allows Englishmen to be sanguine about their own institutions is well taken. John Howard's works were specifically addressed to that ignorant complacence, and obviously the publication of his findings had made only the smallest improvement in a situation that was still, as Godwin wrote, the stuff of which nightmares are made. The bitterness of Godwin's plaints, within this context, seems almost restrained. When Godwin, toward the close of the prison scenes, recapitulates what the reader has already seen of imprisonment and due process—including the fact that the order is long imprisonment and then legal process—the dialogue is as much educational as polemical. This summation comes in an exchange between Caleb and Thomas, Mr. Falkland's old servant, as Thomas visits Caleb in prison:
Lord bless us! said he, in a voice in which commiseration was sufficiently perceptible, is this you?

Why not, Thomas? You knew I was sent to prison, did not you? Prison! and must people in prison be shackled and bound of that fashion?—And where do you lay of nights?

Here.

Here? Why there is no bed!

No, Thomas, I am not allowed a bed. I had straw formerly, but that is taken away.

And do they take off them there things of nights?

No; I am expected to sleep just as you see.

Sleep? Why I thought this was a Christian country; but this usage is too bad for a dog.

You must not say so, Thomas. It is what the wisdom of government has thought fit to provide.

Zounds, how I have been deceived! They told me what a fine thing it was to be an Englishman, and about liberty and property, and all that there; and I find it is all a flam. Lord, what fools we be! Things are done under our very noses, and we know nothing of the matter; and a parcel of fellows with grave faces swear to us that such things never happen but in France, and other countries the like of that. Why, you han't been tried, ha'you?

No.

And what signifies being tried, when they do worse than hang a man, and all beforehand? Well, master Williams, you have been very wicked to be sure, and I thought it would have done me good to see you hanged. But, I do not know how it is, one's heart melts, and pity comes over one, if we take time to cool. I know that ought not to be; but, damn it, when I talked of your being hanged, I did not think of your suffering all this into the bargain. (p. 202–3)

Godwin’s horror at the destruction that the legal system wreaks on men, and his view of that system as a tool of the powerful ("[Mr. Falkland] exhibited . . . a copy of what monarchs are . . . who reckon among the instruments of their power prisons of state" [p. 177]) leads him to consider briefly the alternative to legality, the existence of the criminal outside the law. Although he finds that there are some good arguments to be made for existing outside such a thoroughly corrupt system, he finally rejects that alternative. Godwin, although he has been called the father of anarchy, is not ready to espouse it in Caleb Williams, and after a brief flirtation he turns away.
The servant Thomas, who had wished to see Caleb hanged until he saw him suffering in imprisonment, manages to slip Caleb some tools and Caleb escapes. Half starved and totally exhausted, Caleb is found by a group of robbers. When they discover that he has no money, they demand his clothes! Caleb sees them as fellow fighters against oppression, and as such he appeals to them not to take what little he possesses: “The same hatred of oppression that arms you against the insolence of wealth, will teach you to relieve those who are perishing like me” (p. 211). His protestations are wasted upon the foremost assailant, Gines, who attacks him and leaves him to die. Mr. Raymond, the leader of the band, accidentally finds Caleb and takes him back to their hideaway. Caleb’s mistreatment by members of Raymond’s band results in the expulsion of Gines for not being up to the level of humanity demanded by the robber leader. A man of high principle, Raymond explains to his followers that “our profession is the profession of justice” and “we, who are thieves without a licence, are at open war with another set of men, who are thieves according to law.” Each of them is “a man living among his equals” (p. 216). The principles espoused by Mr. Raymond seem higher than those we have seen operating throughout the book: justice, open statements of purpose as opposed to hypocritical posturings, and equality seem to be the rules governing the robber band. When Caleb tells his tale, Mr. Raymond sees it as “only one fresh instance of the tyranny and perfidiousness exercised by the powerful members of the community against those who were less privileged than themselves” (p. 220). Because society is so corrupt, men are forced into a stance like his, for who that saw the situation in its true light would wait till their oppressors thought fit to decree their destruction, and not take arms in their defence while it was yet in their power? Which was most meritorious, the unresisting and dastardly submission of a slave, or the enterprise and gallantry of the man who dared to assert his claims? Since by the partial administration of our laws innocence, when power was armed against it, had nothing better to hope for than guilt, what man of true courage would fail to set
these laws at defiance, and, if he must suffer by their injustice, at least take care that he had first shown his contempt of their yoke? For himself he should certainly never have embraced his present calling, had he not been stimulated to it by these cogent and irresistible reasons. . . . (p. 220)

Godwin is clearly sympathetic to Mr. Raymond, although he carefully has Caleb disprove these arguments: the essential criticism of the robber life is that it is not socially productive, and if Godwin is angry at the social waste aristocratic corruption implies, he must also warn against the destructive potential of life outside the law. He notes that these outlaws have great funds of imagination and energy and laments that the corrupt nature of the political system forces so much of its human potential into destructive channels. Caleb’s arguments against viewing the outlaw as avenger are so strong that Mr. Raymond is convinced—but, the final irony in the laws of the country, he has no choice but to continue in his path. The laws of England, he reminds Caleb, “leave no room for amendment” (p. 227), and so a man’s earliest mistake dooms him to a life of crime. Once more Godwin has returned to the theme of the one false step.

Caleb stays with the robbers long enough to recuperate, but he is not a criminal and his abhorrence of their way of life and its damaging effect on their humanity forces him to leave their protection and set off on his own. He wishes to find some small place where he can quietly live until Falkland’s pursuit ends, through death or simply disinterest, and he is free of Falkland’s curse. Falkland’s ability to tyrannize Caleb is virtually unlimited, however, and wherever Caleb goes Falkland thwarts his attempts to reinstate himself in society. Each time Caleb establishes a new identity and begins to make friends, Falkland has his agent make it known in the village that Caleb is an outlaw, a thief, a liar—whatever is detestable. By this means, Caleb is effectively cut off from any social bonds, for he is never left in peace long enough to form them. Falkland’s scheme makes Caleb helpless. Whatever Caleb tries, wherever he goes, at the crucial moment of reentering society, he finds that Falkland’s insinuations of his supposed crimes have deprived
him not only of his livelihood but of the sustenance of human contact. This, finally, is what is unbearable. Caleb, who even during the tortures of prison had kept silent, now forces the authorities to call Falkland before them and publicly accuses him of Tyrrel's murder.

The published ending of the novel allows Caleb to find a justice of sorts: the much weakened Falkland, once again publicly brought face to face with the charge of murder, confesses all. Caleb's innocence of any crime is established; however, he feels that he has destroyed Falkland by forcing this public avowal, and his guilt and repentance for that act make his own acquittal unimportant. He laments of Falkland that "a nobler spirit lived not among the sons of men" (p. 325). The fault is society's. Of himself, Caleb insists, "Where is the man that has suffered more from the injustice of society than I have done?" (p. 321). With regard to Falkland, he wonders "of what use are talents and sentiments in the corrupt wilderness of human society?" (p. 325). Caleb and Falkland, as the book stands in its published version, are both victims of the society that has molded them and deformed their relations with each other. This ending is fascinating from a psychological point of view, emphasizing as it does the essential "doubleness" of Caleb and Falkland that Godwin has suggested at many points. It insists on the genuine value of Falkland as a human being and presents him finally as an unwilling oppressor, at once a tool and a victim of a society whose corrupt institutions destroy the sound and just relations between men. At the end, both Caleb and Falkland are destroyed; Caleb survives only to mourn, and Falkland, we are told, dies a few weeks after the hearing.

This is the published ending. But it is Godwin's second thought, and a departure from the original ending. In the first ending, Caleb does succeed in bringing Falkland to a new hearing, where he makes a passionate plea of his innocence. Falkland coolly answers the plea by referring to his own reputation and standing in society and opposing them to Caleb's "known" status as a thief and a liar. The court once again believes the aristocrat against the poor man, and Caleb is de-
nounced by the court for even daring to attempt to sully the name of such a pillar of the community. Caleb is remanded to prison where, tortured and alone, he sinks into madness. Even the news of Falkland’s death some time later does not mean anything to him, for he has so far retreated into madness that he cannot remember who Falkland was. The account of the vibrant, energetic, ambitious young man who was Caleb ends with him completely broken: “True happiness lies in being like a stone—Nobody can complain of me—all day long I do nothing—am a stone—a GRAVE-STONE!—an obelisk to tell you, HERE LIES WHAT WAS ONCE A MAN!” (p. 334). Falkland in this original ending is not co-victim with Caleb; in fact, after Caleb is safely locked away, Falkland’s health improves!

The earlier ending downplays the psychological closeness between Falkland and Caleb, emphasizing only the destructiveness of the social hierarchy itself. It is a weaker ending than the second, published one because it simplifies the human issues Godwin had raised. In the first ending, Falkland finds respite from Caleb, but the novel all along has shown that society misshaped both men so badly that neither is fit to function. Godwin’s revised ending, with both men destroyed, insists that society’s distortion of human relations creates a horror that no amount of human maneuvering can avoid. Even foreseeing danger and trying to elude it cannot ward off terrible consequences—thus Hawkins does not want his son to go into service because he might learn bad habits from fellow servants, but instead the boy is jailed and later hanged, all effects somehow resulting from this initial step. Caleb decides to find out what happened to Falkland . . . and having made that rather unconconsidered (as opposed to ill-considered) decision, his life is permanently blighted. The book is colored by a sense of imminent, unavoidable danger. And this is not Godwin’s vision alone, but rather, I think, a reflection of his time. It is interesting, for example, that John Howard twice in The State of the Prisons makes the point that the most prosperous, respected man can suddenly tumble into poverty or commit a murder and that no
one of us can thus assume that he is safe, that what happens to other men is not his concern.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Caleb Williams} inveighs against the abuses of power to which society subjects its members. Godwin’s attack on the class system marks a new and essential direction for the protest novel; he is not suggesting that there is a need for a more egalitarian view of men, with less emphasis on rank, as had Brooke and even Holcroft, but that the abuses inherent in the class system itself are explosively and unavoidably destructive. Godwin’s protest is informed by that intuition Howard describes that the step from social health to social catastrophe is often an insignificant one. Men have failings: they can be over-curious, they can have too much pride, they can have too much respect for the importance of their own reputations. Society itself is responsible for the most part of these misperceptions. And society itself stands ready, once a man has erred, to compound and compound that error until he is beyond the reach of any help. Godwin leaves us no hope that there is any way out.


2. Caleb’s own helplessness before the law is even more obvious in the unpublished ending: in Godwin’s first version of the conclusion, Falkland simply refutes Caleb’s accusations, and Caleb is sent to prison, there to be tortured into insanity by Gynes.

3. This had been his point in \textit{Political Justice} as well, but there he had arrived at a rather more optimistic conclusion than he does in \textit{Caleb Williams}.


13. In addition to the epigraph for this chapter, note Howard, p. 14, "My mind reverts to an admirable thought of Mr. Eden's, Principles of Penal Law, p. 330. 'A very slight reflection, on the numberless unforeseen events which a day might bring forth, will be sufficient to show that we are all liable to the imputation of guilt; and consequently all interested, not only in the protection of innocence, but in the assignment to every particular offense, of the smallest punishment compatible with the safety of society.'"