CONCLUSION

I have tried in this book to offer a broad range of coverage that is selectively comprehensive. It is the least I could do for a group of novels that expanded the range of the genre itself. Politics, the church, the aristocracy, the family, the educational structure—all became objects for critical inspection.

The eighteenth-century novelists are mainly idealists rather than reformers. None is programmatic; none has a plan for specific reform of this or that, with the possible exception of Godwin. This differentiates them from nineteenth-century reformist writers like Disraeli, Reade, and Kingsley, though not so much, perhaps, from Dickens. The eighteenth-century novelists open up the genre to social protest, and they institutionalize a posture of strident moral outrage that is taken over whole cloth by the Victorians.

But the Victorians' subject is different, and this fact in part explains the difference in practicality of approach, that is, in the specific nature of the reforms called for. The Victorian protests are largely made about economic forces, and their complaints relate to the destruction of individual human beings by the tyranny of barely understood economic movements. I have alluded to the general paucity of revolution in the eighteenth-century novels of protest; it should be noted that the nineteenth-century novels advocate even less the dismantling of faulty social institutions. Hand in hand with expressions of horror at the destruction of industrialization come injunctions to the victims that industry and thrift, and above all religion, are virtues to be cultivated. In the mid-nineteenth century, the fear of violent disturbances was shared by the public and the
government to a greater extent, I think, than was true of the fear of political revolution in the 1790s. Thus while the Victorian novelists were protesting against horrendous social conditions, they were not advocating the overthrow of whatever social institutions they saw as responsible: in fact, in the face of “progress,” it would have seemed both ungrateful and impossible to try to stop the economic forces about which they wrote. Rather, there were specific, and somewhat remediable, social ills that could be attacked in Charles Kingsley’s and Mrs. Gaskell’s and Disraeli’s novels. Dickens, in the breadth of his censure and the concomitant generality of his injunctions for reform, is closer to his eighteenth-century forbears.

In the eighteenth century the novel had not yet been understood as a vehicle for the real reformist, except perhaps in Godwin’s use of it in *Caleb Williams*. The failings of social institutions are seen as a kind of cumulative failing of corrupted individuals, like Justice Thrasher in *Amelia*, who in their turn produce more corruption. The depredations of individuals upon one another produce social evils. Thus to improve society, the heart and mind of the individual must be reformed. Brooke and Day criticize the education of aristocrats rather than the class structure itself. In *Nature and Art* Inchbald reserves her primary anger for William, the powerful and callous man who destroys Hannah by willfully seducing her; only secondarily does she lament the support his individual action takes from the structures of society. Like Godwin and Bage, she sees the need for societal safeguards to protect the individual from abuse, but the abuse itself stems first from distorted relationships among men. Even Holcroft, whose *Hugh Trevor* comes very close to attacking the institutions themselves, stops short and attacks instead individual corrupted members such as the bishop and Lord Idford. Only Godwin carries through the logical premises of his novel to indict directly not only corrupt individuals but the institutions that corrupted them. In *Caleb Williams* the tyranny of society is so oppressive that nothing can save Caleb or Falkland.

The abuse of power is a common theme in the eighteenth-
century novels of protest and so too is the misuse of power—
the first being deliberate, the second in error. Critics have re­
marked on the depictions of arbitrary power that are so fre­
quent in these novels, but it has not been noted that many of
the novels attribute the misuse of power to misguidance rather
than to malice. Brooke, Day, and Inchbald suggest that aristo­
crats are badly educated and that an education in benevolence
and usefulness for them would create a better society. Godwin,
in one context, attributes Falkland's character to his education
in an outdated chivalry. Education is seen as a tremendously
powerful force, and although several of these novelists com­
plain that it is misused in many cases, especially with upper class
children, they also suggest that society has an extraordinary
potential for good precisely because of the promise that a so­
cially healthy education holds out. In Anna St. Ives Holcroft
insists that it is possible to "contribute to the great, the universal
cause... the general perfection of mind." While young
William in Nature and Art is the unhappy product of his educa­
tion, his cousin Henry is the wonderful human being his educa­
tion should make him. Belief in the power of education as a
force for the improvement of society colors the protest, for it
suggests that there is a relatively easy and likely cure for much
of what is wrong. Brooke, Day, Inchbald, Holcroft (in Anna St.
Ives), and Bage all imply that any man will choose goodness and
productivity if he is enlightened to those goals, and a society of
such enlightened men will be a juster society. Except for Caleb
Williams, the various protests are made within this context. The
prevailing spirit of these novels is that the failings of society,
when they are exposed, will be ameliorated by rational men of
good will.

The attack on arbitrary power is largely fueled by this expec­
tation, for the notion of arbitrariness is antithetical to ra­
tionality. Arbitrary power is attacked in most of the novels I
have studied here, as well as in almost all of Smollett's novels,
Goldsmith's The Vicar of Wakefield—Walter Allen finds it a
theme in Richardson. What has not been remarked by critics is
the extent to which the questioning of traditional relationships
of the powerful to the less powerful extends even to the most basic and sanctioned hierarchical relationship, the family. Authority figures in every walk of life are viewed negatively in these novels, and parents often seem just another variety of tyrant. Some novelists, as I have shown, even go so far as to redefine the parent-child relationship: a human being owes his love, honor, and respect not to the biological parent but to the person who guides and educates him—to the nurturer of the mind, not of the body.

This notion of education as the primary function of parenting is central to the latter part of the century. If biological parents cannot educate their children properly, then the children must be taken away and raised by more fit preceptors. Aristocratic parents especially seem to be poor risks; their children are brought up to believe in the same corrupt values that have distorted the moral nature of the parents. But to suggest that it is necessary to remove children from the authority of their parents is to attack the family itself. If a child may be better off under the guidance of someone other than his parents, then he may have the right to question the opinions and decisions of those parents. In the third quarter of the eighteenth century, novelists go so far as to remove children from their parents to the care of more fit guardians; in the 1790s the novelists go even further and question the very basis of the parent-child relationship.

In the earlier books, the basic challenge to the family structure does not come from the child. None of the children in *The Fool of Quality* and *Sandford and Merton* questions authority; as far as the children are concerned, they obey their guardians just as they would their parents. Clarissa in Richardson’s novel and Sophia in *Tom Jones* believe in parental authority even while defying it. It is the given premise of the books that is the challenge to the family structure: the child, and society, may be better off if the child is removed from his parents’ influence.

Fanny Burney presents the same pattern a few years later in *Evelina*. Evelina is a very well brought-up young lady, but she is raised by the clergyman Mr. Villars, not by her father. Nev-
ertheless, her feelings of love and respect for her father are undiminished—even if she has never met the man and knows only detrimental facts about him. Although Burney recognizes that a natural parent may be unfit to raise his child and that the child and society will both gain if the child is in someone else's care, she also insists on the sanctity of the relationship between the natural parent and his offspring. It is an inconsistent attitude that questions the traditional view of parent-child relationships while at the same time confirming its validity. That questioning becomes much more dominant in the novels of the nineties.

In the 1790s the assumption that parents have unlimited authority over their children merely by virtue of their parenthood is no longer accepted. Parents are to be judged by the same rules as everyone else. A stupid parent should not be respected; a tyrannical parent should not be obeyed. It is each person's duty to become the most productive member of society he can be, and anything that interferes with that goal, a bad or misguided parent included, must be avoided. In these later novels, reason rather than custom is the ideal mover in human affairs, and so in *Anna St. Ives* for example, it is not acceptable to say, as Evelina does, that one must obey a father just because he is a father. One must obey only the dictates of one's reason.

The hero and heroine of *Anna St. Ives* act according to these principles, and they live happily ever after. Not only do they run their own lives by rational design, they also influence others, thus improving society. But as I have shown, neither of them is blessed with regard to parents. As happens quite often in the novels of this period, there is no female parent in sight for either of them. The venal and crafty Abimelech Henley and the silly Baronet St. Ives are clearly, each in his way, models to be avoided. Thus neither Frank nor Anna has a parent who is worthy of respect. The revolutionary aspect of the book is that, this fact being evident, neither Frank nor Anna feels compelled to behave according to his parent's wishes or precepts. Frank and Anna try in all things to act in accord with reason, and when reason contradicts a parent's injunction, it is reason that is
obeyed. *Anna St. Ives* is the earliest novel in this study in which the authority figure is directly questioned. In *Anna St. Ives*, the parent has no special authority just because he is a parent; authority is earned in a relationship rather than assumed by hierarchical right. This is the pattern in all four of the novels of the 1790s I examine.

In Robert Bage's *Hermsprong*, Caroline Campinet at first insists that she owes obedience to Lord Grondale just because he is her biological parent. Like Evelina in Burney's novel, Caroline does not consider whether her father's actions are right or wrong; she believes she must honor his commands only because they are his. Hermsprong, the hero of the book, has very different ideas, and by the end of the novel Caroline has been converted—although not without a considerable struggle. Bage insists that human beings must be of use both to themselves and to others. It is as an individual, rather than as a member of a group, that one assumes personal and social responsibility. Bage draws the same corollary from this premise that Holcroft does: if the responsibility for spreading truth and enlightenment is individual, no authority supersedes the individual's duty to govern himself by truth. Duty to a parent does not excuse the grown child from carrying out his moral imperatives. Frank Henley in *Anna St. Ives* owed no particular allegiance to the dishonest and selfish Abimelech, and in Bage's novel Caroline Campinet owes no respect to Lord Grondale.

Godwin, in *Caleb Williams*, postulates the case of the person who is tyrannized by a guardian and who has no friends to help in the escape from tyranny. Falkland is in a sense a father-figure to Caleb. He cares for Caleb until Caleb disobeys, and then Falkland hounds him constantly, punishing yet sustaining him in a bizarre relationship that is powerful enough to reach Caleb no matter how far he runs from his former protector. And when one man is destroyed, the other is as well. The Falkland-Caleb relationship is paralleled and preceded in *Caleb Williams* by the story of another guardian and his dependent, Tyrrel and Emily. Because Emily is under his care, Tyrrel believes that he should have complete control not only over her
actions but over her emotions as well, and the law supports him in this view. Godwin finds that the existing legal structure gives so much latitude to the domestic tyrant that he can murder his ward before any restraining hand will be raised against him. For Godwin, domestic tyranny is no different from any of the other tyrannies to which society subjects the helpless. Godwin's is the bleakest of these novels, but his analysis differs from Holcroft's or Bage's in degree, not in kind. As I have noted, Lord Grondale in *Hermsprong* is capable of very serious mischief—left to his care, Caroline's life would be blighted in a marriage to the odious Sir Philip Chestrum.

Other institutions of society come in for equal, if less surprising, criticism. The corruption complained of within the family is seen on the larger scale in the church and in politics. In all of the novels that discuss both, the two are closely linked, as in the “state of the nation” pamphlets of Dean William in Inchbald's *Nature and Art*. William's career, in fact, although it is in the church, closely approximates a politician's. He curries favor with his superiors, he plots his upward moves, and, of course, he evaluates the state of the nation solely in terms of his satisfaction with his professional progress. The needs of those whom he is supposed to serve, the poor and the helpless, do not concern him. William is an example rather than an exception; the bishop whose favor he cultivates and whose place he waits patiently to inherit is no better a churchman. The church is a powerful institution, and men like the dean and the bishop are power brokers. Instead of helping to temper the harshness of society, they contribute to the oppression of the poor. The dean and his family are so much of society that they are even the stuff of the scandal sheets, or that is what Lady Clementina believes.

Holcroft so closely identifies the corruption of church and state in *Hugh Trevor* that at one point, as I noted, Hugh concurrently is writing pamphlets for a corrupt bishop and an equally corrupt politician. Holcroft's parallel figures, Lord Idford and the bishop, like William and his bishop in *Nature and Art*, are guided only by principles of self-aggrandizement. Bage in
Hermesproung also pairs political and religious corruption in Lord Grondale and his toady Dr. Blick. Lord Grondale, like Holcroft’s Lord Idford, changes his allegiance each time the opposition party offers him a new inducement. And Dr. Blick is another in the series of clerics who care only to please those in power in order to become richer and more powerful themselves. Bage explicitly contrasts Dr. Blick with Mr. Woodcock, a fine, caring cleric. Mr. Woodcock, like Hermesproung himself, stands as a measure of appropriate behavior.

There is a dual sense in many of the novels that corruption in society is pervasive, but that a grand potential for a clean, rational world also exists. The improvement scheme may be based on Brooke and Day’s middle-class merchant morality or on Holcroft’s Political Justice-like utopia, but the premise is that society can be reformed. The reader is distanced from any shock of dismay by the content of the discussions. Because the assumption is that faults in society are remediable through rational means, exposing those faults brings the reader to a sense not of despair but of hope. Although the mode for playing on the reader’s emotions already had been developed, sentiment is only used in these novels at particular moments. Even The Fool of Quality, which has often been dismissed as “merely” a sentimental novel, presents almost all of its major demands for reform not to the reader’s heart but to his mind. Brooke explains why the producing merchant is more valuable to society than the consuming aristocrat in a reasoned rather than an emotional appeal. Bage, at the end of my time span, shows the reader that Lord Grondale is a ridiculous and potentially dangerous tyrant, and the effect is intellectual amusement rather than emotional distress at the foibles Bage is presenting. It is frightening that Lord Grondale has quite so much power, but the safeguards in the social structure do work—even if their protection is only barely adequate—and Hermesproung’s voice of reason is, with no real struggle, totally triumphant. Bage, like most of the other novelists I have discussed, gives us a social world marred by serious flaws but still essentially ordered.

Godwin’s Caleb Williams presents a different premise, and in its uniqueness is remarkable not only in terms of its place within
the eighteenth-century novel but as it prepares us for the nineteenth century. *Caleb Williams* suggests that the flaw in the social structure is so deep as to be irremediable; for the first time in the protest novel, the flaw is seen as a schism of class.

When the other novelists discuss rank, it is within an egalitarian context. The rich and powerful are not necessarily better than other people; because they have means, they owe it to others to be as socially productive as possible. None of the authors wants to strip the upper classes of either position or power; each requires from them only responsibility. Bage's Lord Grondale is not bad because he is a lord but because he is an overbearing, ignorant tyrant. Hermsprong himself is of equal rank and, as the real owner of Lord Grondale's estate, he possesses much greater wealth. Burney's Lord Orville is a paragon, and lovely Evelina, fortunately, not only is of equally good character but of appropriately high rank. Holcroft's Frank Henley may be a commoner, but Anna is the daughter of the baronet. Most of these authors are still fascinated by rank even as they talk of equality.

The ideal is the unostentatious, responsible aristocrat: "the father of Lord Bottom, who came in a plain napped coat" in Brooke's novel. Brooke does not claw at the idea of rank—his little hero is, after all, an aristocrat himself—but he does redefine the role of the aristocrat in society. What C. J. Rawson says of Fielding in *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal Under Stress* is true as well for Brooke: the "assumption is that it is more important for the highly-placed to fulfil the ideal responsibilities of their rank, than to relinquish their claims to high titles." Both aristocrats and merchants can be fine men, and there need be no conflict between them. There is not even an economic class between them; one of the most affecting stories in *The Fool of Quality* is the tale of Mr. Clement, the gentleman's son who, along with his wife and child, nearly dies of hunger because he has no skill with which to make a living. Holcroft's Hugh Trevor feels inferior to the carpenter Clarke because the simple workman is more fit to make a living than the higher class Hugh.

Holcroft, surely a more radical writer than Brooke, in *Anna*
St. Ives delimits the institution of rank in much the same terms Brooke had used. Social usefulness rather than rank determines the worthiness of a person. Coke Clifton is wrong to consider himself a better person than Frank Henley. But Coke’s rank does not itself make him reprehensible nor does it preclude his transformation into a valuable member of society. For Holcroft, rank is an irrelevancy between human beings, a premise that he exemplifies in the courtship between the plebeian Frank and the aristocratic Anna. As Anna insists, “The word gentleman . . . is a word without a meaning. Or, if it have a meaning, that he who is the best man is the most a gentleman.” Rank creates artificial distinctions among men, and it must therefore be ignored because it is only a prejudice, and rational men as they join in that “universal benevolence which shall render them all equals” will overcome prejudice and go beyond it. Holcroft, like the other novelists in this study, sees class schisms as irrational rather than irreparable.

In the nineteenth-century novel, the class question becomes a paramount concern; novels like Mrs. Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* chronicle the clash of irreconcilable forces, forces so powerful that it seems irrelevant even to attempt to fix blame for the resultant destruction. *Caleb Williams* presents just this viewpoint in the eighteenth century: Godwin seems to show that it is not so much the fact of class as it is the inevitable corruption and inevitable collision between classes in the struggle toward equity that is profoundly destructive—socially, politically, personally. This is a dimension of the protest novel that is without precedent before Godwin but very prominent after him. Falkland’s position in society gives him both the power and the motivation to destroy Caleb; Caleb’s position prevents him from defending himself. As Caleb finds in his anguished response to the prosecution he has finally won, there is no righting of the wrongs he and Falkland have suffered. His last, revealing lament is “I have no character to vindicate.”

“Things” are out of control in *Caleb Williams*. Godwin is the only one of all the novelists I have dealt with in this study who does not force his characters and events into a semblance of
order before the final scene. The reader is not distanced from the horror in *Caleb Williams*; there is no scaffolding of the rational by which Caleb and Falkland can be led from their misery, as Coke Clifton in *Anna St. Ives* could be. Falkland is both a good man and an intelligent one—he knows that what he is doing is heinous, and yet he is no more in control of the situation than Caleb. This is a large part of the horror. Such lack of control marks much of Romantic literature, the poetry in particular, and is a primary chord in the Victorian novel. And as in Romantic poetry and the later novel, emotion is close to the surface and is wrenching rather than politely moving. One of the conclusions to which the discussions in this book lead is a new appreciation for Godwin's achievement in *Caleb Williams*. Although it has been recognized as one of the more important of the late eighteenth-century novels, *Caleb Williams* has not, I think, been accorded quite the stature it deserves as a pivotal work. Not only does Godwin delineate what will be perhaps the central question for the social novel of the following fifty years, he also sets the tone of those novels. For finally we must recognize that protest in the novel of the eighteenth century is a quite civilized affair: irony, satire, and a great deal of rationalistic optimism intervene between the reader and the social pain. Only Godwin put the pain first.