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"Between Me and Liberty": *Caleb Williams* and the Carceral Imagination

In 1794, William Godwin might not have predicted growing levels of inequality, fights for equal rights, or enduring mass incarceration to be the defining issues of the 21st century. And yet, if his novel *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* is any indication, he probably wouldn't be surprised to hear about our predicament—injustice in the criminal justice system. In the novel, a benevolent if at times gullible Caleb Williams speaks of oppression at the hands of the wealthy landlord, Barnabas Tyrrel, and is thrown into prison after the false accusation from his feudal master, Mr. Falkland. The charge against Caleb—he was accused of theft—lays bare the failures of the legal system as much as it anticipates our current moment: the wealthy, corrupt employer saves his reputation at the expense of his humble employee—an expense that forces Caleb to reckon with his own lower-class social position. And reckon he does. Although Caleb's time in prison illustrates poor conditions and poorer miscarriages of justice, it nevertheless teaches him to locate justice outside of the legal and carceral institutions that confine him; in turn, he calls into question both old and then-new models of prison discipline. On the one hand, Caleb criticizes the old model of prisons, condemning its impact on the inmate's body. Yet, on the other hand, Caleb also critiques the burgeoning penal reform philosophies of Godwin's time-period: his imprisonment doesn't compel him to accept public authority; it helps him reject it.

At the time of Godwin's writing, the state of punishment was in flux. In his landmark history of the prison, *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault documents the switch from old to

new models of punishment. “At the beginning of the nineteenth century,” he explains, “the great spectacle of physical punishment disappeared; the tortured body was avoided; the theatrical representation of pain was excluded from punishment” (14). Whereas the old model of discipline focused on public displays of bodily pain, the burgeoning, private model confined the body in service of disciplining the mind and spirit. Caleb’s imprisonment—in its emphasis on bodily violence—criticizes and occupies the old model, even as it anticipates and critiques the new model.

Punishing the Exterior

Just as kings and magistrates in the old model of punishment found power in the spectacle of the scaffold, so too does the prison exercise power in taking hold of Caleb’s body. Indeed, what strikes Caleb upon his entrance into the prison are the conditions under which the convicted reside. “It is impossible to describe the sort of squalidness and filth with which these mansions are distinguished” (184). Such conditions generate their own critique: Caleb sees them as unfit for human life. That they are “impossible to describe” confirms that the prison presents a violence that eclipses the kind he sees in everyday life. What unites old and new models of punishment, literary scholar Caleb Smith explains in his book *The Prison and the American Imagination*, is the idea of punishment as a “theater for the performance of its society’s founding political myths” (7). Although Caleb’s punishment doesn’t occur on the scaffold, his punishment does obey the logic of the scaffold. The prison’s setting stages both the sovereign power of the state and the forced submission of Caleb and his convicted brethren. When he calls the prison a “mansion,” in other words, he’s drawing attention not only to its physical size but also to the spectacular power it contains. Wielding that power to debase and dehumanize, the state sees in

Caleb a body in need of battering rather than a mind in need of reform. The humiliating violence he witnesses and endures, then, remains central to the prison's larger project.

Although Caleb struggles to find the words to describe his experience, he does find a comparison in another form of dispossession: slavery. So dehumanizing is Caleb's experience that he remarks, "I have felt the iron of slavery grating upon my soul" (189). Caleb sees two parallels between incarceration and slavery—a similarity of conditions and of status. Bodies of both inmates and slaves remain subject to wanton violence: whereas the body of an enslaved person is made to belong to the master, the body of an inmate is made to belong to the state. Their status differences justify their material differences. And yet, as scholar of law and literature Colin Dayan clarifies, those similarities have their limits. "Unlike slaves," she writes, "felons remain citizens: citizens who are restrained in their liberty" (Dayan 63). Although both inmates and slaves witness spectacular violence, only the former retains the status of citizen, even as both are stripped of their personhood rights. The prisoner, in turn, falls into a liminal space: they become citizens without the benefits of citizenship. Caleb's experience echoes Dayan's insight. The doors, bolts, locks, and windows place Caleb, as he puts it, "between me and liberty" (188). In this way, Caleb remains chained—physically and figuratively—to his poor conditions and subjected status, all the while clutching tantalizing ideas of freedom. He believes slavery to be a reflection, however opaque, of his own experience.

Caleb critiques the old model of imprisonment not just by detailing the violence it metes out on inmates; he also caricatures the prison's voice. That caricature allows Caleb to distinguish his lived experience from the prison's purpose:

> 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' (189).

Satirizing the language of the prison draws attention to the violence that it wields—a violence that would all but unsettle readers of Caleb's narrative. As the old model of punishment gave way to the reformed model, so too did the public begin to reform their own opinions. Rather than view extreme spectacles of bodily violence as a natural deterrent to crime, citizens began to view such violence as excessive, troubling, inhumane (Smith 8). By translating his physical experience into prison rhetoric, Caleb makes felt the violence that he endures. In practice, the "consultation" the prison "affords" is by no means supporting or comfortable; instead, Caleb protests, it is characterized by dangerous spectacles: staying "shut out from the light of day," becoming the "slave of jailers," being "loaded with fetters." Using his own experience to make a caricature of the prison empowers Caleb to satirize the prison's voice and critique the bodily violence that he witnesses.

Troubling Justice, (Re)claiming Voice

Besides witnessing—and, by extension, critiquing—the bodily violence of the old model of punishment, Caleb also prefigures the flaws of the up-and-coming penal reform philosophy that would soon dominate prisons from 19th century Britain to 21st century America. In this

newer carceral regime, the prison prioritizes justice and reform over wanton displays of violence. Internalizing justice requires a sort of rebirth, a process of learning to accept the sovereign power of law and of government. Prison, the logic goes, provides precisely the conditions for prisoners to move through that rebirth. Tracing how this logic of imprisonment came to be, Smith's book sheds important light on how the newer model recast the goal of punishment. Reformers like Benjamin Rush, William Roscoe, and Alexis de Tocqueville worked to "depict the prisoner's character according to a sentimental concept of humanity," Smith explains, "presenting him as a wretched creature who needs the healing embrace of a benevolent authority" (Smith 17). In this figuration, penal reformers situated justice alongside the institutions that enforced it. By coupling criminality with immorality and authority with justice, they naturalized governments, laws, and the legal system as benevolent. Put another way, these institutions came to embody justice, regardless of whether or not they carried out unjust acts. Relying on the sentimental concept of humanity, reformers inscribed these myths of morality into public view. In doing so, the public could overlook conditions, no matter how detestable, under the banner of reformation. With a rhetorical sleight-of-hand, prison reformers legitimized authority and stigmatized criminality in order to make judgments about each group's intrinsic justice. In this reformist model, only by undergoing the process of reformation could inmates remove the stamp of criminality.

Godwin's *Caleb Williams,* however, explodes these judgments by revealing how institutions of authority are as capable of injustice as convicted inmates are capable of benevolence. Consider the first man that Caleb describes at length in the prison, Brightwel—a friend of Caleb committed for highway-robbery but whose actual criminal status is unclear. Although the prosecutor "swore positively to his person," what strikes Caleb is the man's good character: "His integrity was proverbially great," Caleb recounts, "his habits of thinking were

strictly his own, full of justice, simplicity, and wisdom" (186). In juxtaposing the prosecutor's accusation with Brightwel's character, Caleb intimates that Brightwel's role in the crime remains either an open question or a wrongful indictment. In either case, he rejects the assumption that one's status of incarceration determines his character. Through calling attention to Brightwel's independence—"his habits of thinking were strictly his own"—Caleb centralizes justice in his character, not in the prison that holds him. In fact, Caleb mounts evidence that testifies to Brightwel's benevolence: his integrity, his absence of "guile," his trustworthiness outside the prison. That he remains a prisoner suggests that judgments about an inmate's intrinsic (in)justice hold little weight. He embodies the kind of justice that reformers had typically ascribed to governments and prisons.

Besides emphasizing the imprisoned man's sense of justice, Caleb inverts the intrinsic justice of authority by criticizing the prison's central authority figures: the prison officers. Unlike Brightwel's benevolence, the guards fail to embody a sense of justice. "They felt no man's sorrow; they were of all men least capable of any sort of feeling," Caleb reports about the jailors. "They had a barbarous and sullen pleasure in issuing their detested mandates" (187). Notable about Caleb's description is the guard's lack of feeling. In other words, the guards can't sympathetically identify with the inmates. His observation calls into question the argument, following Smith, that the prison was organized around a sentimental concept of humanity. Instead, the officers are the figures least likely to embrace sentimental recognition; they allow their status to distinguish them from—and by extension mistreat—the prison inmates. The "mandates" that arise from their "barbarous and sullen pleasure" show that the guards exercise their power and authority for its own sake, thereby hindering the kind of rebirth that prison reformers had long upheld. And the price for resistance, Caleb asserts, is a steep one. "Whatever

they directed, it was in vain to expostulate; fetters and bread and water were the sure consequences of resistance" (187). For the inmates: their status as prisoners renders their resistance futile; rejecting the guards' authority risks bodily harm. For the prison officers: the prison offers a theater to exercise authority, even if doing so betrays a sense of justice. By illustrating how prison officers exercise their authority for its own sake, Caleb reveals their unjust actions in the face of an ostensibly just identity.

Through troubling the myth of the wicked convict and the benevolent authority figure, Caleb opens up a structural critique of the prison to-be. That is, he lays blame not just with the prison itself but also with a society that would come to see prison as the natural consequence of his dilemma. "My resentment was not restricted to my prosecutor, but extended itself to the whole machine of society," he declares. "Every heart was steeled against me; every hand was ready to lend its force to make my ruin secure" (190). Locating his resentment in society, Caleb sees in the public a tacit acceptance of his condition. True, that public did not directly order his imprisonment. But their hands and hearts also did not intervene against the "ruin" that he endures. To allow injustice to prevail against an otherwise just man is its own form of injustice.

In expanding the frame of culpability past his prosecutor, Caleb offers a narrative retelling of Godwin's political philosophy. Caleb's gesture to all of society resonates with Godwin's praise of the common good in his book *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. As critic Suzanna Geiser puts it, "Godwin introduces the political and moral issue of punishment by reference to 'utility' and the notion that "whatever is not attended with any beneficial purpose, is not just': thus 'It cannot be just that we should inflict suffering on any man, except so far as it tends to good" (Geiser 139). Although Godwin preaches a nascent version of utilitarianism, he incorporates the justice done to individual men into that philosophy. He sees false convictions,

say, not as an aberration from a just system but as a feature of an unjust one. Godwin's political philosophy, like Caleb's critique, challenges the notion that only benevolence circuits through judicial and carceral institutions. In this way, *Caleb Williams* offers a powerful, if fictionalized, medium for narrating that philosophy: it casts *An Enquiry* in a new light. "I could never believe that all this was the fair result of institutions inseparable from the general good," Caleb says (190). Much like Godwin's philosophy, Caleb, too, interrogates society's institutions of "justice," particularly the ones responsible for confining him. While they narrate themselves as advocates for the "general good," men like Caleb prove such narratives otherwise; they are aspirational rather than accurate. In fictionalizing his philosophy, Godwin offers Caleb as a case in point to suggest that systems of justice can unjustly ensnare those who have committed no crime.

Caleb's experience is not unique. Most men in the prison bear similar stories of wrongful conviction. "Upon enquiry," Caleb reports, "three 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" (189). Here, Caleb's experience uncovers yet another myth of the justice system: that evidence, above all, guides convictions. In fact, his realization suggests quite the opposite; despite the promises of "supercilious" courts of law, most of those courts convict without regard for the evidence that they claim to value. The wrongful convictions of most men, in turn, calls the ethics of the entire justice system into question. Put simply, the principles of the courts misalign with their practices.

Once the courts designate criminal status, they place convicted bodies into a state of civil death. During his time in prison, Caleb reaches a state of melancholy. Scanning the prison walls that enclose him, he foretells a looming "premature death I had too much reason to expect"

(189). While Caleb probably thinks of this imminent death in terms of his corporeal existence, his statement also reflects his dissolving political existence in the eyes of the law. That is, narratives of and theories about imprisonment have long registered the inmate's life in terms of a living death. Alternatively, Smith and other prison theorists dub this state "civil death": a "legal fiction" wherein one is stripped bare of their civil rights and capacities (Smith 29). Such a fiction revises and recasts our understanding of personhood. In the formulation of civil death, personhood is not so much tied to one's biological life, although some definitions have included that; rather, personhood status is legally inflected, subject to removal or reconfiguration. In other words, the prisoner—like Caleb—loses his civil life even as he retains his body, his mind, and his capacity for feeling. In short: he is human, but not in the eyes of the law.

Reading Caleb's gesture to death as a civil one reveals how the legal fiction of personhood attempts to render Caleb's body as politically insignificant. In simpler terms, he is unmade as a person. Dayan argues that the law's power of "making and unmaking persons" endured the medieval ages, found a home in the kleptocratic U.S. South, and persists into the present predicament of (mass) incarceration (xii). Across time periods and geographies, then, the law has served as a tool not just for imparting rights but also for inscribing inequality. Dividing the population into distinct political categories—citizen, slave, inmate—designates who maintains the right to exercise civil rights, say, or a political voice. Upon entering the prison, Caleb begins to question his own political power. "What probability was there that the trial I had endured in the house of Mr. Falkland was not just as fair as any that might be expected to follow?" Caleb queries. "No; I anticipated my own condemnation" (190). Bearing the mark of a prisoner, Caleb doubts that his reputation continues to hold any political power. And he believes that his reduction in power spells disaster for precisely the area where that power is most

significant: a trial. In this context, Caleb supposes that his new status not only unmakes his personhood but also his ability to produce credible testimony. His legal unmaking reflects both a change in status and a change in political power.

And yet, one's legal status is not the only way that they bear political significance: although imprisonment denudes Caleb's political status, it can't denude his political voice. For all the bodily punishment and political erasure that he endures, Caleb continues to pursue justice by resisting the institutions that enclose him. "Every sentiment of vanity, or rather of independence and justice within me," Caleb proclaims, "instigated me to say to my persecutor, 'You may cut off my existence, but you cannot disturb my serenity" (194). In one motion, Caleb separates himself from his prosecutor—and the larger legal system—after celebrating his own sentiments of "independence" and "justice." Put differently, he claims justice for himself, refusing to allow the pressures and perils of the prison to threaten his independence and serenity. Whereas new-model prison reformers would align justice strictly with the justice system, Caleb, by contrast, considers justice less an identity that we hold than a sentiment that we act on. And in rejecting, rather than accepting, the authority of the legal system, he vocalizes a critique of that system. Caleb (re)claims his political voice in the wake of civic death.

Imprisonment Beyond the Prison

Inside the prison, Caleb levels a critique of both old and emerging systems of punishment. He speaks against the violence—both bodily and political—that undergirds both systems with a satirical voice (for the old system) and a political voice (for the new system). But what to make, then, of Caleb's experience *outside* prison walls? In what ways does the logic of the prison alter Caleb's behavior, even unknowingly? Is Caleb's escape really an escape?

These queries point to a flaw in Caleb's understanding of his experience outside the prison. Indeed, it would be a mistake to see Caleb's time in the walls of the prison as the only form of imprisonment that the novel takes up; imprisonment can—and does—work beyond the prison. In this way, Caleb is, perhaps, too quick to claim his liberty after escaping the physical prison. "I stretched forth my arms with rapture, I clapped my hands one upon the other, and exclaimed, 'Ah! this is indeed to be a man. These wrists were lately galled with fetters; all my motions what delight a prisoner, who has just broke forth from his dungeon" (218). On the one hand, Caleb identifies the bodily autonomy he enjoys—"these wrists were lately galled with fetters"—by clasping his hands to allude to his newfound mobility. In effect, he escapes the punishment that the old prison model sought to impart: deliberate pain. No longer, Caleb thinks, does the prison confine his spatial options; his body, not the prison bricks, limits him now. Yet, on the other hand, Caleb overstates the freedom he now possesses. Rejoicing in newfound "liberty," he calls his escape a "sacred and indescribable moment, when man regains his rights!" (218). Here, his brief moment of physical freedom glosses over the string of disguises he must take on and escapes he must plot in order to evade the state's authoritative gaze. In this sense, Caleb isn't free at all: to escape prison is not regain one's freedom in the eyes of the law. As a fugitive, he remains dispossessed of the rights previously granted to his person. Although Caleb's escape recovers his bodily agency, he nonetheless lacks legal recognition.

Before and after his entry into the prison, Caleb submits to prison logics—not least the power of surveillance. According to Foucault, surveillance as a technology of the prison was born out of architectural plans by one Jeremy Bentham, an English social reformer whose model of the prison included a central tower that allowed a single guard to oversee all the inmates. The goal of this "panopticon," Foucault writes, is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and

permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). That the prisoners could not perceive the guard—though the guard *could* perceive them—is what gave the panopticon its power. The illusion of surveillance could control behavior as much as surveillance itself. Both demanded that inmates obey the watchful eye of authority, compelling proper behavior.

Although both Bentham's plans and surveillance as tool of discipline evinced the new model of prison reform, Caleb anticipates the prison's power of surveillance in his reflections about Falkland's watchful eye. "I was his prisoner; and what a prisoner! All my actions observed; all my gestures marked. I could move neither to the right nor the left, but the eye of my keeper was upon me. He watched me; and his vigilance was a sickness to my heart" (149). Following Falkland's confession to murdering Tyrrel, Caleb equates his feelings of being under surveillance to that of a prisoner. Like Foucault's depiction of the inmate, Caleb could scarce make a move without awakening the "eye of [his] keeper," Falkland, who tracks his behavior. Such feelings, Caleb indicates, manifest in physical and emotional discomfort. The observed "actions" and marked "gestures" conjure up a sort of sickness that reaches not simply his body at large, but his heart, the very core of his being. Death—of himself or of his watchmen, Caleb reveals later in the passage—is the only means of escape. Even after his prison escape, Caleb internalizes the panoptic logic, still fleeing from the watchful gaze of Gines and Falkland: "It was like what has been described of the eye of Omniscience, pursuing the guilty sinner, and darting a ray that awakens him to new sensibility" (316). Here, as above, Caleb describes how the near "Omniscience" of surveillance tracks and traces his every move. Even bodily freedom is compromised, for Caleb must organize his escapes and escapades around that eye, limiting

where he can go and who he can see. While Caleb first lays claim to freedom upon exiting the prison, he later proclaims how the surveilling "eye" of Falkland limits that freedom.

In this sense, Caleb both finds and loses freedom in places where he least expects to. On the one hand, he loses his political rights and regulates his path under the watchful gaze of Falkland, even and especially outside prison walls. On the other hand, Caleb finds a political voice in a prison premised on destroying that voice, along with the rest of his body. In fact, his imprisonment helps deliver a trenchant critique of the justice system generally and the prison system specifically. By highlighting and satirizing the violence that he witnesses, Caleb criticizes the old model of punishment; by claiming his political voice to argue against the narrative of the justice system as a benevolent authority, he at once anticipates and castigates the soon-to-be vision of the prison put forth by penal reforms, even as such a vision taxes his mind and body outside prison walls. Replete with contradictions, Godwin's *Caleb Williams* nonetheless asserts that our prisons demand a gaze from all our watchful eyes.

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