of the death penalty to "irrecoverables" such as mass murderers. Even in this case he decides against capital punishment, fearing judicial error (as in the case of Marie Bernard) or the pressures of public opinion (as in case of terrorist acts judged in the light of "accidents of the times... and of geography"). But even "monsters" he would not subject to the "absolute" punishment of death since there is no absolute innocence. As a matter of logic he would deny to no man the right of reparation by his later life in a secularized world which has lost faith in the possibility of redemption beyond the grave.

Camus' ultimate arguments are social and political. Capital punishment is wrong in Camus' view because it "destroys the human community united against death" (a community Dickens had sketched in small as the four men cheered by the revival of Rogue Riderhood). Moreover, our civilization defines itself, Camus concludes, by the fact that "for thirty years crimes of State have vastly exceeded crimes of individuals" not only through war but also political killings. He urges that the abolition of the death penalty is the first step in the denial of the right of the State to destroy its citizens.

The literature of capital punishment often dwells on the clumsiness of the tools of death. We read of the headsmen who missed; of the (almost literally) immortal Half Hanged Smith; of the ingeniously contrived "new drop" which was new but did not drop; of the electric chairs with defective circuiting. Doubts continue, we are told, that even the guillotine brings instant oblivion, and at least a qualm of credulity is aroused by the tale that the cheek of the severed head of Charlotte Corday, when slapped by the assistant executioner, flared with indignation. If one's mind is in close balance on the death penalty, it is tempting to divert the issue of "cruel and unusual punishment" from the fact of death to the means of killing. One might even become nostalgic over the days when a cup of hemlock was passed to troublesome philosophers. But death, however painless, remains the issue. John Webster's Duchess of Malfi reminded her executioner of this when he attempted to terrify her with the sight of her own coffin and the cord with which she was to be strangled:

What would it please me to have my throat cut
With diamonds? or to be smothered
With cassia? or to be shot to death with pearls?


WRITINGS BY CRIMINALS

H. Bruce Franklin

[Franklin is an American critic and educator. In the following excerpt from his Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist he surveys fiction and nonfiction writings by American convicts.]

Personal narratives of the lives of criminals—both fictional and actual—made their appearance along with colonialism and large-scale mercantile capitalism in the sixteenth century. Ever since, they have been developing as an integral part of the culture of capitalist society. In fact, the principal literary form of the capitalist epoch, the novel, originated as extended prose narratives of the lives of criminals.

The modern novel first appeared in the form of picaresque fiction, in sixteenth-century Spain. Whereas Don Quixote (1605-15) was to mark the transition from feudalism to capitalism by parading the aristocratic hero of feudal romance, the picaresque novel was already embodying this same transition by presenting the life story of what was to become the bourgeois hero, the self-made man who begins as an outlaw and, living by his own wits and energy, tries to make it for himself on a grand scale. At the very pinnacle of Spanish imperial power came Lazarillo de Tormes (1554), which broke away entirely from the maidens fair and knights errant of medieval romance; it is the tale of
the archetypal Lázaro, who, cast out as a boy, lives among beggars, thieves, and swindlers, becoming cynical, self-seeking, and independent. In the next half-century, some of the outlaws and bandits, usurers and confidence men springing up amidst the collapse of feudalism were beginning to transform themselves into powerful and respectable merchants. The first full-length realistic novel in European literature, Mateo Aleman’s Guzmán de Alfarache, presents this rise of the bourgeois in microcosm. In Part I (1599), the picaresque hero Guzmán details his adventures as a street urchin, a beggar, a gambler, a thief. In Part 2 (1604), he steals his way to a fortune and becomes a wealthy merchant. He is then found out, loses his fortune, and is imprisoned. Then he repents, gets a new wife, and starts on the way up again, this time by being her pimp. Down he falls again, now becoming a galley slave. Tortured by the captain of the ship, he is approached by his fellow galley slaves, including Moors, to be part of a planned rebellion. He manages to get a private word with the captain, betrays the would-be rebels, and is rewarded with his freedom. Guzmán de Alfarache thus epitomizes the underlying quest of the bourgeois epoch—to escape from rags to riches. And its archetypal man who makes himself by living by his wits is the living embodiment of the underlying epistemological, and even ontological, vision of bourgeois culture—“I think, therefore I am.” Descartes was just eight years old when this criminal hero has the wit to achieve his own freedom by betraying his fellow slaves.

From that moment until the present, real criminals and imagined criminals have been narrating their lives at length in European literature and in the literature of the European colonies, including such places of exile for transported convicts as America and Australia. Throughout this literature, certain features have been consistently present and for a long time were predominant. One is a special relationship between the narrator, whether fictional or actual, and the presumed audience. The criminal narrator characteristically is confessing his or her crimes, and this confession, especially its moral lesson, is ostensibly the purpose of the whole narrative. In Daniel Defoe’s The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, &c. Who was Born in Newgate, and during a Life of continu’d Variety for Threescore Years, besides her Childhood, was Twelve Year a Whore, five times a Wife (whereof once to her own Brother) Twelve Year a Thief, Eight Year a Transported Felon in Virginia, at last grew Rich, liv’d Honest, and died a Penitent (1722), Moll Flanders tells us in all earnestness that her “publishing this Account of my Life, is for the sake of the just Moral of every part of it, and for Instruction, Caution, Warning and Improvement to every Reader.” Obviously, however, most readers are not perusing the intimate details of Moll’s criminal life, or those of any of the countless other rogues, for the purpose of moral betterment. Whatever “Instruction, Caution, Warning and Improvement” the readers may hope to find is largely about the details of how professional criminals operate, the better to avoid their wiles (or, perhaps, to learn their craft). The main interest lies in vicarious participation in their thrilling, sordid adventures.

The criminal narrator is sharply marked off from the read-ers. He or she speaks as a lone “I”—an outlaw, a desperado, a deviant, or a member of an alien underworld—to society in general, or, more usually, a respectable reading public, incarnate in the reader. This relationship has much in common with that between the authors of the slave narratives and their audience, or between Melville and his audience, as he explicitly defines it in the first paragraph of Typee. The most extreme alternative to such a relationship lies in the songs of Black slaves and convicts, because there the audience is none other than the artists themselves.

America in its very origin was a society abounding in criminals and ex-prisoners, including those Puritans who came from the prisons of old England to New England. Throughout the eighteenth century, the shortage of labor in America and the heavy crime rate in England combined to make the transportation of felons to the American colonies a major component of British penology. All the colonies, especially Virginia and Maryland, received continual mass shipments of convicts to serve as cheap labor, usually for a seven-year indenture. The conditions and the death rate on these sea passages approached those for African slaves. This practice ended only with the American Revolution, after which Australia became Britain’s main convict colony. And lawlessness was the essence of colonial life, for the colonies prospered through the mass murder of the native peoples and the theft of their lands. Whatever domestic tranquility reigned on the farms and in the villages that sprang up on the conquered land, there was always the frontier to provide more bloody conquest, an area beyond all laws except those which grew directly out of the barrel of a gun. So it is no surprise that by the early nineteenth century the lives of criminals were becoming an especially popular American literary form. In eighteenth-century England, novels about criminals flourished among their more-or-less authentic biographies and autobiographies. In America there was very little picaresque fiction, but there were many narratives about actual criminals. Perhaps people felt little need to create fictional criminals to supplement the ones all around them.

The earliest literature by convicted American criminals of which I am aware is purely confessional. The author offers himself as an example for all other members of society to shun, and he seeks forgiveness not in this world but the next. An example is a broadside by Philip Kennison, published in Boston in 1738, “The Dying Lamentation and Advice of Philip Kennison, Who Was Executed at Cambridge in New-England (for burglary) on Friday the 15th day of September, 1738. . . . All written with his own hand, a few days before his death.” For forty stanzas, Kennison elaborates on his exemplary predicament:

Good People all both great & small, to whom these Lines shall come,
A warning take by my sad Fall,
and unto God return.
You see me here in Iron Chains,
in Prison now confin’d,
Within twelve Days my Life must end,
My Breath I must resign.

This purely confessional mode continued throughout the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth. For instance, James A. Clay’s A Voice from the Prison; Or,
In the next few decades personal narratives by American criminals were to become commonplace. Just as Tufts gives us an irreplaceable view of late eighteenth-century American life from its seamy side, these narratives do the same for early nineteenth-century American life. Most of them are also told in the picaresque mode. They are often far more realistic than most early American fiction, and the wide-ranging activities of their rascally heroes give authentic scenes of early American experience filled with frankness, vitality, and intimate detail. A good example is *Sketches of the Life of William Stuart, The First and Most Celebrated Counterfeiter of Connecticut, Comprising Startling Details of Daring Feats Performed by Himself—Perils by Sea and Land—Frequent Arrests and Imprisons. . . . As Given by Himself*—“Printed and Published by the Author” in Bridgeport, Connecticut, 1854. Though he acknowledges “I am the hero of my own story,” Stuart professes that “my heroism was displayed in direct opposition to the laws of the land,” and he then mouths the conventional confession expected of all rogues who narrate the thrilling stories of their lives: “. . . if I stand now as a beacon to warn the young and ambitious against vice and crime, my history will be a gain to the world.” After some more pious professions, Stuart launches his fine narrative of counterfeiting and other wild adventures covering even more territory than Tufts. Around 1807 he works a con game in the South as partner with a free Negro who runs away to rejoin Stuart each time Stewart sells him, until one day when he fails to reappear. Later our hero ships out on a privateer aiding South American states in revolt against Spanish rule. Stuart, as expected, tacks on the usual self-condemning moral at the very end.

By the time Melville published *The Confidence-Man* in 1857, the lives of famous “bad men” were a staple in the literary diet of America. As the passengers board his Mississippi River steamboat, they are given a wide choice of narratives about bloodthirsty outlaws and bandits. But Melville, who sets this scene in a book displaying all the tricks of riverboat confidence men and counterfeiters as a synecdoche for the criminality of capitalism itself, suggests that these passengers are being warned about the wrong kind of criminal:

. . . still another versatile cavalier, hawked, in the thick of the throng, the lives of Measan, the bandit of Ohio, Murrel, the pirate of the Missisippi, and the brothers Harper, the Thugs of the Green River country, in Kentucky—creatures, with others of the sort, one and all exterminated at the time, and for the most part, like the hunted generations of wolves in the same regions, leaving comparatively few successors; which would seem cause for unalloyed gratulation, and is such to all except those who think that in new countries, where the wolves are killed off, the foxes increase.

The adventures of horse thieves, highwaymen, rustlers, bank robbers, counterfeiters, riverboat gamblers, and assorted confidence men were narrated both as sensationalist tales by professional writers and as picaresque confessions by themselves. Meanwhile, another kind of “criminal” was also publishing autobiographical narratives,
often involving revelations of life in prison. These were what we would now call political prisoners.

Some of the earliest political prisoners were rebels who had risen up in open class warfare against semifeudal land tenure in the New York State Anti-Rent Wars of 1839-46. One of the imprisoned leaders of the Anti-Renters, Mortimer Belden ("Little Thunder"), improvised songs, accompanied by his fiddle, for his fellow inmates. His "The Prisoners in Jail (Lines Composed in the Columbia County Jail, July 9, 1845)," reprinted in the Anti-Renters' journal, The Albany Freeholder, protested against both prison and the oppression that led to their incarceration. Among the fourteen stanzas are these:

The sheriffs will out with their array of men,
The County will find them what money they spend;
They will seize upon prisoners, and into the cell—
If there's anything worse, it must be in Hell,
In these hard times.

And there they will keep them confined in the jail,
Without any liberty for to get bail;
They will do as they please in spite of your friends,
And God only knows where this matter will end,
In these hard times.

The judges and jurors are a very fine crew,
Their poor prisoners and drive them right thru;
The sheriffs will falter, all hell they don't fear,
They will bring them in guilty if they prove themselves clear,
In these hard times.

Most political prisoners prior to the Civil War were jailed for antislavery acts. Some of these people were conscious abolitionists, such as George Thompson, who was incarcerated for over four years, during which he wrote Prison Life and Reflections (1847) and The Prison Bard; Or, Poems on Various Subjects. Written in Prison (1848). Others were just individuals like Lewis W. Paine, a white machinist from the North working in Georgia, who decided to help a slave escape; Paine describes his decision and resulting imprisonment in Six Years in a Georgia Prison (1851).

These autobiographies by antislavery political prisoners have much the same intention as the narratives by escaped slaves: both attempt to use the authors' personal experience as a means of awakening the audience to the real nature of slavery and activating them to join the struggle against it. They attack the existing legal structure of society, which defines the slaveowners as respectable citizens and those who subvert slavery as "criminals." Thus both these autobiographical forms are diametrically opposed to the narratives of the lives of professional criminals, which are presented ostensibly as warnings about outlaws and confessions of the conventional definition of crime.

Viewed in the light of these contrasting forms, The Confessions of Nat Turner appears fundamentally different from the kind of document it is usually taken to be. Here a slave who has led a major revolt against slavery does not manage to escape and to write or tell his own narrative. Instead he falls into the clutches of the slaveowners, who not only try him, convict him, and execute him as a criminal, but actually force him to present the story of his life in the form of a conventional criminal confession. Rather than the voice of a rebel against slavery, The Confessions of Nat Turner is a narrative constructed by Thomas R. Gray, its white recorder and publisher, to fit into a widely read popular genre, the lives of bloodthirsty outlaws and bandits. A political prisoner is thus transmuted into a conventional criminal.

Gray's introduction sarcastically introduces "this 'great Bandit,' " and claims that the purpose of publishing this narrative is "the gratification of public curiosity." Gray describes "Nat Turner, and his band of ferocious miscreants" as "remorseless murderers." This was a "fendish band," Gray tells us, and "no cry for mercy penetrated their flinty bosoms." As usual in this confessional mode, this criminal now "frankly acknowledges his full participation in all the guilt." Nat Turner's "own account" is offered as "an awful, and it is hoped, a useful lesson." The underlying moral purpose of publishing this document is explicitly the preservation of slavery and the social status quo, exactly opposite from the narratives of imprisoned abolitionists and escaped slaves:

It is calculated also to induce the policy of our laws in restraint of this class of our population, and to induce all those entrusted with their execution, as well as our citizens generally, to see that they are strictly and rigidly enforced. Each particular community should look to its own safety, whilst the general guardians of the laws, keep a watchful eye over all.

Prior to the Civil War, two types of narratives by criminals were well established: one by the amateur or professional criminal writing in a confessional, often picturesque, mode, the other by the political reformer imprisoned as a criminal for an act many readers would commend. The Confessions of Nat Turner represents perhaps the earliest example of one form of overlap between these two types. Since Nat Turner was not a reformer but a revolutionary, his captors define him as just another criminal, an especially vicious and dangerous criminal. Until the rise of anarchism in the early twentieth century, autobiographical narratives by convicted revolutionaries were rare. But by the early 1860s another kind of overlap between the two forms was beginning to emerge, as some common criminals began to write the narratives of their lives, particularly their lives in prison, with a political perspective. Rather than wallowing in guilt, or professing to wallow in guilt, about their own crimes, these convict authors began to turn a critical gaze upon society. In these early works by prisoners the key question of much later prison literature was already beginning to emerge: Who is the real criminal, the prisoner or the society that imprisons people?

The modern prison system, based on the religious concept of the "penitentiary," developed first in the United States, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and then rapidly spread to Europe. Its first implementation, under the leadership of Pennsylvania Quakers, was in the
solitary cells established in 1790 in the Walnut Street jail in Philadelphia for the purpose of meditation and reformation; this is often referred to as the birthplace of the modern prison system. The first prison physically designed to achieve total isolation of each inmate was the Eastern State Penitentiary, better known as Cherry Hill, in Philadelphia, constructed in 1829 with cells laid out so that no prisoner ever saw another person but his guards.

Initially, this system was administered by idealists who encouraged what they believed to be moral growth among their captives. There were even a few successful examples of reformation, such as George Reno, who in 1844 published in Philadelphia, under a literary pseudonym, *Buds and Flowers of Leisure Hours, by Harry Hawser, Sailor, &c.*, a collection of rather well-executed poems, including a very moving antislavery piece entitled “On the Dying Slave.” In his preface, Reno asserts that the author “regards his confinement at Cherry Hill the happiest event of his life.”

The “separate system” represented by Cherry Hill was being rivaled by an alternative, designed specifically for exploiting mass convict labor, the “silent system,” under which prisoners were housed in solitary cells but worked together all day as an ideal source of cheap reliable labor, under rigorous enforcement of the rule that all convicts must maintain total silence. The model for this system was set up at Auburn, New York, in 1825, where they initiated the “lockstep” so that guards could maintain strict control as the prisoners marched back and forth between their cells and their industrial workshops.

Neither of these two competing systems apparently produced many successors to George Reno; extremely few subsequent prisoners have much good to say about any of the variants of modern prisons. (The last published work I have been able to find by someone confined under the “solitary system” is *Selections from the Writings of Jesse Harding Pomeroy, Life Prisoner Since 1874*, published in Boston in 1920; Pomeroy began his forty-three years of solitary confinement at the age of fourteen and was not released into the general prison population until 1917; his pathetic writings include a Rip Van Winkle experience, “My First Movie Show.”) In fact, as industrial capitalism rapidly developed in the middle of the nineteenth century, the prisons rapidly shed much of their early pretense of being places of reformation and became frankly acknowledged as places of cheap mass production. With this shift, literature by convicts became increasingly a form of protest literature against the brutality of prisons and sometimes against the prison system itself.

A remarkable early work in this genre appeared in the first years of the Civil War, shortly before the mass use of convict labor to replace slavery. This book, *An Autobiography of Gerald Toole, the State’s Prison Convict, who murdered Daniel Webster, Warden of the Connecticut State Prison, on the 27th of March, 1862 (Written by Himself)* Being a Full Confession of Crimes for which he was sent to the State Prison . . . , was published in 1862 in Hartford, Connecticut. The title would seem to indicate that this is a confession in the same vein as *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, and, as in that earlier work, the criminal’s “confession” is framed by the legal documents which preceded his execution. The main difference between the two works comes from the fact that Toole is actually speaking for himself, not having someone else narrate his alleged “confession.” Hence Gerald Toole, unlike Nat Turner, has the opportunity to articulate a political defense of the “murder” he committed. His position is precisely the same as the one Frederick Douglass presents in describing his physical attack on the “nigger-breaker” Edward Covey and the one that Melville presents in White Jacket’s preparations to murder his captain; it is the uprising, as a basic act of self-defense, of the slave against his oppressor. In fact Toole was defending himself against exactly the same punishment as the one that menaced Douglass and Melville—a flogging.

Despite the misleading title, Toole confesses nothing, including the “Crimes for which he was sent to the State Prison,” an alleged arson of part of the building which housed his small shop. In the main body of his story, he tells not of his own guilt but of the viciousness of the guards and prison officials, and of their slave-driving management of the convict labor. Along with Melville’s *The Tartarus of Maids* (1855) and Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861), this stands as one of the first American literary narratives set inside an industrial workshop. And Toole describes the actual scene of production in words that recall Melville’s picture of the life-robbing paper factory in “The Tartarus of Maids”:

> In the shop were about thirty men whose pale, emaciated looks showed that the very life blood was being worked out of them. They were all working at boot making. The coffers of unblushing contractors are filled from the labors of these poor convicts who work from dawn to dark.

Toole is set to work and then severely flogged for failing to produce twelve pairs of boots in a day. The next day, his back and shoulders still oozing blood, he is again being driven off to the flogging dungeon for punishment. As Captain Webster starts pushing him with a heavy mounted stick to the place of his torture, Toole stabs him with a shoe knife. “At that time had Webster twenty lives, I should have taken them,” Toole tells us with defiance and dignity. Toole is stomped, beaten, and whipped “until my whole body became one mass of torn flesh,” then tortured for a week, convicted of murder, and executed at the age of twenty-four. Toole’s autobiography is not a confession at all, but a justification of his act of rebellion against what he perceived as a criminal system.

Just as the flogging of slaves is often central to personal narratives and fiction about slave life, and the flogging of seamen is often central to nineteenth-century literature about sailor life, the flogging of prisoners is a common theme in many works of convict literature for the next hundred years. Many readers of this book may not comprehend the severity of this punishment; a flogging is not what is usually thought of as a spanking or a paddling or a switching. It is administered with a long, heavy strap often weighted at the tip with metal; many prisoners describe guards and “captains” practicing by breaking bricks with a single blow of this whip. Prison literature
contains innumerable scenes of convicts being flogged to death. I do not wish to inflict on the readers many of the detailed descriptions of floggings found in prison literature from the 1860s through the 1970s. These descriptions become increasingly appalling, and increasingly excellent as narrative prose, as our literary standards move toward approval of concrete, realistic detail and away from emotional adjectives. Whenever flogging is mentioned, the reader might envision the experience as described, with the purity and precision of a simple modern style, by Dale Woodcock in Ruled by the Whip: Hell behind Bars in America’s Devil’s Island—the Arkansas State Penitentiary (1958):

I was given twenty-seven lashes as I lay on the concrete floor. The warden threw his weight behind each lash and pulled on the whip as it struck my buttocks, thus twisting and tearing the skin. Soon blood and skin together were flipped away at every blow... Blood was pouring from my rectum.

In the period immediately following Toole’s autobiography, prison literature began to present prisoners as a definite category of being in society, rather than merely individual criminals being punished. Less than a decade after Emancipation, there appeared a personal narrative by an anonymous convict who saw prisoners as the most oppressed people in society, An Illustrated History and Description of State Prison Life, published in Toledo, Ohio, in 1871. The author describes himself as writing in a cell in Southern Indiana State Prison “not for compensation or fame, but in defense of the most unfortunate being on earth, the convict.” He tells a grisly tale of torture, convict labor, and the routine rape of female inmates by prison officials, concluding with an ardent plea to the reader to do something about reforming or abolishing prisons.

Up through the first half of the nineteenth century, literature by convicts, except those convicted of political crimes, had appeared as the words of criminals, whether they were sincerely confessing to help their readers avoid their life of sin or merely conventionally confessing to entertain their readers with their life of rascality. But with the development of prison as a systematic means to achieve its professed goals of punishment and reformation, and its practical purpose of cheap convict labor, literature by convicts more and more appeared as the words of a new subclass in society, prisoners. By the turn of the century, this shift is quite striking.

Even in works primarily intended to use an individual convict’s own life as a means of exploring the sociology and psychology of the criminal, the main interest often shifts to the sociology and psychology of the prisoner. For example, The Autobiography of a Thief, recorded by Hutchins Hapgood (1903), starts off as a narrative of criminal life but soon becomes an investigation into prison life. The anonymous author tells us that he was born of “poor but honest parents” in 1868, but “I have been a professional thief for more than twenty years. Half of that time I have spent in state’s prison...” He tells of his crimes and his various imprisonments, including stretches in Sing Sing and the Dannemora asylum for the criminal insane. He documents the viciousness of the prison system and describes the new class of being it is creating. For example, here he shows the responses of prisoners to an environment designed to deprive them of love and human affection:

Convicts, particularly if they are broken in health, often become like little children. It is not unusual for them to grow dependent on dumb pets, which they smuggle into prison... The man in stir who has a white mouse or robin is envied by other convicts, for he has something to love.

The very same year these words were being published, 1903, another ex-convict writer was explaining that his own personal descent, at the age of eighteen, into this subclass below the industrial proletariat had been the turning point in his life. Rather than making him a crippled and pathetic victim, this experience had converted him from “rampant individualism” to revolutionary socialism. Jack London describes this change in his life in “How I Became a Socialist,” first published in The Conrade (March 1903). According to London, “no economic argument, no lucid demonstration of the logic and inevitability of socialism affects me as profoundly and convincingly as I was affected on the day when I first saw the walls of the Social Pit rise around me and felt myself slipping down, down, into the shambles at the bottom.” The decisive event had come in 1894, when, as a tramp “I strayed into Niagara Falls, was nabbed by a fee-hunting constable, denied the right to plead guilty or not guilty, sentenced out of hand to thirty days’ imprisonment for having no fixed abode and no visible means of support, handcuffed and chained to a bunch of men similarly circumstanced, carted down country to Buffalo, registered at the Erie County Penitentiary, had my head clipped and by budding mustache shaved, was dressed in convict stripes, compulsorily vaccinated by a medical student who practised on such as we, made to march the lock-step, and put to work under the eyes of guards armed with Winchester rifles.”

London’s crime was the same as that of Melville’s Bartleby. But by this point, forty years later, imprisonment for vagrancy was not intended merely to get nuisances out of sight; prisoners were now used as part of a slave labor force, even if they preferred not to work. London’s experiences as a tramp and as a prisoner led him to his understanding of how both groups form a critical part of the surplus army of labor essential to the survival and growth of capitalism, as he explains at length in “The Class Struggle” (The Independent, November 5, 1903) and “The Tramp” (Wilshire’s Magazine, February 1904). In the latter article he shows how thin a line separates the employed worker from either the tramp or the criminal:

The tramp is one of two kinds of men: he is either a discouraged worker or a discouraged criminal. Now a discouraged criminal, on investigation, proves to be a discouraged worker, or the descendant of discouraged workers; so that, in the last analysis, the tramp is a discouraged worker. Since there is not work for all, discouragement for some is unavoidable.

In 1907-08, London published My Life in the Underworld as a series of articles in Cosmopolitan Magazine, narrating his life as a tramp and his month as a convict in the Erie
County Penitentiary. In “Pinched: A Prison Experience” (July 1907) and “The Pen: Long Days in a County Penitentiary” (August 1907), he explains in vivid detail how his arrest, his so-called trial, and what he lived through in prison shattered all his earlier concepts of the police, the laws, the criminal justice system, and his own relation to them all. He shows how this experience led directly to his political and social analysis. But here he is less concerned with his analytical procedure than his emotional response, for his adolescent, naïve, heroic, superman view of himself had collapsed beneath the iron heel of the American state, and he had come to feel what it is like to be part of the class routinely crushed at the bottom of this society:

I saw with my own eyes, there in that prison, things unbelievable and monstrous. And the more convinced I became, the profounder grew the respect in me for the sleuth-hounds of the law and for the whole institution of criminal justice. My indignation ebbed away, and into my being rushed the tides of fear. I saw at last, clear-eyed, what I was up against.

The same year as this autobiographical narrative, London put all these ideas and feelings into the novel I regard as his masterpiece, The Iron Heel, perhaps the first vision of the fascist nightmare which was to haunt the rest of the twentieth century, at least through the present. Jack London imagined capitalism, faced with socialist revolution, turning its whole society into one gigantic penitentiary.

As long-term prisoners began to write of themselves as a subclass, as that category of slave laborers provided for in 1865 by Article 13 of the Constitution, they began to express a sense of being branded as outcasts, of being treated as less than human, caged up and walled off in the midst of society. This dehumanization is summed up for them in the practice of assigning numbers to convicts to substitute for their names. Thus American convicts become the first people actually to experience the exact form of what was to become that recurrent nightmare of the twentieth century — living as a nameless number in a society of numbers.

Their situation, however, was even worse than this nightmare, for their numbers also separated and distinguished them from a surrounding society, stigmatizing both them and their families. “Mourn Not for Me (To His Wife),” a poem published by two prisoners, James Stell and John Null, in Convict Verse (1908), expresses this double branding and alienation:

Mourn not for me because my shame
Is hedged by towered walls,
And black across my humbled name
A hated number falls.

Weep for yourself, and not for me;
Dear, all your flood of tears
Can never set the captive free
Nor cleanse his sullied years.

Weep not for me; for always, wife,
The angry coals of shame
Burn deepest in the guileless life
That bears the branded name.

In the same year, a novel entitled 9009 (1908), written as an indictment of the prison system by James Hopper and Fred R. Bechdolt (neither of them convicts as far as I know), achieves a bone-chilling effect by consistently using “9009” as the name of the protagonist. (Eugene Zamiatin’s enormously influential Soviet antiutopian novel We, with its city-state in which all citizens have numbers for names, was not to appear until 1924.) This was rapidly becoming a convention used, and somewhat overused, by prison writers in books with purposes as varied as these: Life in Sing-Sing (1904) by “Number 1500,” who still resents being incarcerated with “cheap criminals”; Thru the Mill, by “4342”; A Prison Story That’s Different (1915), a rather dry but quite informative circumstantial account of Minnesota State Prison at Stillwater; A Tale of a Walled Town, and Other Verses by B. 8266; —-Penitentiary (1921), a collection of the author’s archaic religious poetry.

The significance of having a number for a name, and the estranged relationship between the prisoner-author and his audience, form part of the design in An Open Letter to Society from Convict 1776 (1911). This thoughtful, well-constructed disquisition on the prison system by a seven-time loser carries the form of the prison narrative to a logical, if rather bizarre, extreme: a 160-page letter addressed from this author with a patriotic, revolutionary pseudonym to “My Dear Madam Society.” Convict 1776 asserts that he does “not in the least justify crime, whether it is committed by us against you, or by you against us.” His analysis, however, proceeds from the fact that “the greater part of our offences is against your accepted suitor, Mr. Dollar.”

In order to understand what all this is, it may be helpful here to see, through contrast, what it is not. Except for London, these white prisoners see themselves first as isolated individuals, then as members of some social subclass defined by their alienation from the rest of their society. As I discussed at length in the preceding chapter, this is not at all the situation of Black prisoners, whose situation is qualitatively little different from the rest of their people. A personal narrative published during this same period, the opening years of the twentieth century, displays how this Black situation contrasts starkly with the white.

This remarkable document, “The New Slavery in the South—An Autobiography, By a Georgia Negro Peon” (1904), transcribed by a reporter “who took the liberty to correct the narrator’s errors of grammar and put it in form suitable for publication,” chronicles the development of a plantation from chattel slavery to convict slavery. The twentieth-century illiterate Black narrator opens his story just like the narrative of a nineteenth-century fugitive slave: he confesses that he knows neither the date of his birth nor the identity of his father. He figures he must have been born during the Civil War: “I reckon by this time I must be a little over forty years old”; “I never knew who my father was or anything about him.” When he is about ten years old, he is “bound out” to a plantation owner. Around the age of seventeen or eighteen, he goes to a neighboring plantation and hires himself out. His former contractor immediately claims him, and gives him “thir-
ty lashes with a buggy whip across my bare back" for running off. At the age of twenty-one, he is allowed to contract himself for annual terms. When the owner dies, his son takes over:

... this son had been serving at Atlanta in some big office to which he had been elected. I think it was in the Legislature or something of that sort—anyhow, all the people called him Senator. At the end of the fifth year the Senator suggested that I sign up a contract for ten years; then, he said, we wouldn't have to fix up papers every year. I asked my wife about it; she consented; and so I made a ten-year contract.

Shortly thereafter, the Senator has constructed a "long, low shanty" with "a double row of stalls or pens" which "looked for all the world like stalls for horses":

Nobody seemed to know what the Senator was fixing for. All doubts were put aside one bright day in April when about forty able-bodied negroes bound in iron chains, and some of them handcuffed, were brought out to the Senator's farm in three big wagons. They were quartered in the long, low shanty, and it was afterward called the stockade. This was the beginning of the Senator's convict camp.

The narrator tells us that "when I saw these men in shackles, and the guards with their guns, I was scared nearly to death. I felt like running away, but I didn't know where to go." He and the other peasants under contract had considered themselves "free laborers"; they meet, and send a representative with a threat to quit. Then they learn just how much difference there is between Black convicts and free Black people:

Word came back that we were all under contract for ten years and that the Senator would hold us to the letter of the contract, or put us in chains and lock us up—the same as the other prisoners. It was made plain to us by some white people we talked to that in the contracts we had signed we had all agreed to be locked up in a stockade at night or at any other time that our employer saw fit; further, we learned that we could not lawfully break our contract for any reason and go and hire ourselves to somebody else without the consent of our employer, and, more than that, if we got mad and ran away, we could be run down by bloodhounds, arrested without process of law, and be returned to our employer, who, according to the contract, might beat us brutally or administer any other kind of punishment that he thought proper. In other words, we had sold ourselves into slavery—and what could we do about it? The white folks had all the courts, all the guns, all the hounds, all the railroads, all the telegraph wires, all the newspapers, all the money, and nearly all the land—and we had only our ignorance, our poverty and our empty hands.

The Senator begins to add additional stockades, bring in more convicts, and buy more land:

Within two years the Senator had in all nearly 200 negroes working on his plantation—about half of them free laborers, so-called, and about half of them convicts. The only difference between the free laborers and the others was that the free laborers could come and go as they pleased, at night—that is, they were not locked up at night, and were not, as a general thing, whipped for slight offenses.

But all this is in the relatively happy days of "contract" labor, when there was still some faint distinction between the "free laborers" and "the other prisoners." The real "troubles of the free laborers began at the close of the ten-year period." Then they discover that, since they all had been compelled to buy all their food, clothing, and other supplies on credit from the Senator's commissary, they were now debt peons. Henceforward, "we were treated just like convicts." He is locked up in one of the filthy stockades, which "were but little more than cow lots, horse stables or hog pens." When he is put in the stockade, his nine-year-old son is given away to someone in South Carolina and his wife is taken into the "Big House" to serve as one of the white men's mistresses. The antebellum split between house slaves and field slaves is reproduced:

... the poor negro women who were not in the class with my wife fared about as bad as the helpless negro men. Most of the time the women who were peons or convicts were compelled to wear men's clothes. Sometimes, when I have seen them dressed like men, and plowing or hoeing or hauling logs or working at the blacksmith's trade, just the same as men, my heart would bleed and my blood would boil, but I was powerless to raise a hand. It would have meant death on the spot to have said a word.

What kind of crime had these convicts committed? The narrator learns that the great majority were convicted of the usual minor offenses established to provide a constant flow of cheap convict labor. The most common crime of convicts on the Senator's farm, and several other convict farms in the area, was adultery, committed in a certain county in south Georgia "way down in the turpentine district":

... I learned that down in that county a number of negro lewd women were employed by certain white men to entice negro men into their houses; and then, on certain nights, at a given signal, when all was in readiness, raids would be made by the officers upon these houses, and the men would be arrested and charged with living in adultery.

To the Black convict or peon, imprisonment did not mean becoming an alien being isolated from the rest of his people but rather becoming the typical representative of his people. Even during the early years of the twentieth century, some white prisoner-authors began to perceive their own situation as not entirely different. Convict 1776 shows a class perception of social reality when he argues to Madam Society that "the vagrancy laws should be strictly enforced against the tramp and the millionaire alike." John Carter, whose poems were published in Century Magazine, Harper's Weekly, The Bellman, The Smart Set, Cosmopolitan, and Lippincott's Magazine, divided his col
lection of prison poems, *Hard Labor, and Other Poems of Prison Life* (1911), into two sections indicating a perception of society to be expressed by the Black Panther Party half a century later. The poems about life in prison he places in the section entitled "Under the Lash"; the poems about "free" life he places in the section entitled "In the Greater Prison." Then in 1912 appeared a very influential work by a convict who claims that he is not a criminal, though he is a burglar, because he belongs to an entire social class driven to "crime" in order to survive—Donald Lowrie's first book, *My Life in Prison*.

Lowrie writes as a poor person to "the taxpayers and the conscientious citizens of the community," hoping to move them toward the reformation of prison and society. His first words establish the relationship between himself and his reader, and between the two social classes embodied by them:

I was broke. I had not eaten for three days.

I had walked the streets for three nights. Every fibre of my being, every precept of my home training protested against and would not permit my begging.

I saw persons all about me spending money for trifles, or luxuries. I envied the ragged street urchin as he took a nickel in exchange for a newspaper and ran expectantly to the next pedestrian. But I was broke and utterly miserable.

Have you ever been broke?

Have you ever been hungry and miserable, not knowing when or where you were going to get your next meal, nor where you were going to spend your next night? . . .

If you have not felt each and all of these things, it will, perhaps, be futile for you to read what they brought to one who has felt them. . . .

Lowrie's books did have some effect on the movement toward prison reform and were also studied by later prison authors, as attested to in the confessional, picaresque autobiography of the professional thief Jack Black, *You Can't Win* (1926), when he praises "Donald Lowrie, whose writings did for American prisons what John Howard's did for those of England."

And already another kind of convict was writing not from a reformist but a revolutionary perspective. These were prisoners serving time for revolutionary political crimes, and they brought into the prisons a theoretical class perspective, even though some of them lacked the proletarian class experience of most "common" criminals.

An important early book by a committed revolutionary was Alexander Berkman's *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* (1912). In 1892 the Carnegie Steel Corporation locked out the Iron and Steel Workers union from its Homestead, Pennsylvania, plant. Henry Frick, the company's superintendent, brought in a boatload of three hundred Pinkerton gunmen to put down the protesting strikers. A pitched battle was fought, in which ten men were killed, and the three hundred Pinkertons surrendered as "prisoners of war" to the armed workers. The workers, however, were then crushed by thousands of Pennsylvania state militiamen. Berkman, hearing of the outrages committed against the defeated workers, went to Homestead, where he shot and stabbed Frick in an unsuccessful assassination attempt. Imprisoned, Berkman narrates the story of his own actions in the Homestead strike, then carefully interrelates the class oppression of the workers and his fellow prisoners. He dedicates his book "To all those who in and out of prison fight against their bondage."

My main concern throughout this chapter is with people who became creators of literature because of their incarceration as victims of American society. Although there are many twentieth-century prisoner-authors convicted for outright political crimes whose perception of society has been deeply intensified, if not fundamentally altered, by their prison experience, I am essentially limiting my analysis to "common criminals" whose understanding of their own situation developed directly as a consequence of their crime and punishment. The reader should, however, be aware of the rich and ever-increasing body of twentieth-century writing by political prisoners, dating at least from Berkman. These include such notable early works as Carlo de Forano's *A Modern Purgatory* (1917) a narrative of life in the New York City Tombs by "an artist, writer, editor, revolutionary"; *A Fragment of the Prison Experiences of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman in the State Prison at Jefferson City, Missouri, and the U.S. Penitentiary at Atlanta, Georgia* (1919); *Bars and Shadows: The Prison Poems of Ralph Chaplin* (1922), including some fine sonnets by this leading I.W.W. organizer; *In Prison* (1923) by Kate Richards O'Hare, who spent fourteen months in the Missouri State Penitentiary and became committed to prison reform; *Wall Shadows: A Study in American Prisons* (1927) by Frank Tannenbaum, whose many years of work on prison reform began while he was serving a year for unlawful assembly in 1913-14; and Eugene Debs's *Walls and Bars* (1927). (Debs's cellmate in the Atlanta Penitentiary, the forger Roger Benton, devoted a chapter of his own book, *Where Do I Go From Here?* [1936] to "A Man Named Gene Debs," "the most Christ-like man I have ever met in my life.")

Another group of convict writers beyond the main scope of this chapter are those who were professional writers before they became convicts. One of the most popular and prolific American authors. Julian Hawthorne, who published close to forty books of fiction, essays, and biography, far more than his father Nathaniel, was sent to the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary (for mail fraud) at the age of sixty-seven and the height of his career. He served almost a year. When he got out, he immediately began work on *The Subterranean Brotherhood* (1914) a narrative of prison life, written with more passion and commitment than any of his other works I have read. In his preface, Hawthorne declares that "these chapters were begun the day after I got back to New York from the Atlanta Penitentiary" and that he worked on the book without interruption until it was complete. "Though I had read as much in 'prison literature' as most people," he discovered that he had very little conception of what life in prison really meant. His experience leads him to the "radical and astounding" conclusion that there is only one solution:
“nothing less than that Penal Imprisonment for Crime be Abolished.” Julian Hawthorne penetrates, through his experience, to part of the historical significance of the prison system:

Before the Civil War there were some millions of negro slaves in the South, whom to set free we spent some billions of dollars and several hundred thousand lives. It was held that the result was worth the cost. But to-day we are creating some five hundred thousand slaves, white and black, each year. . . .

Hawthorne repeats the deeply held belief of “every convict and ex-convict”: “Let every judge, attorney general, district attorney, and juryman at a trial spend a bona fide term in jail, and there would be no more convictions—prisons would end.”

This last statement is borne out by still another group of prisoner-authors I pass over without much attention, the prominent and respectable citizens who suddenly awake to find themselves convicts. For example, Charles Stuart Wharton, former Illinois congressman, for many years an assistant district attorney in Cook County, and then a prominent businessman, was convicted of being an accomplice in a spectacular armed mail robbery in 1928. After serving his two-year sentence at Leavenworth, he describes that institution and prison in general, to which he had sent many a criminal, in *The House of Whispering Hate* (1932):

Leavenworth is a great mill through which men pass in an endless chain to be turned out as ex-convicts. It is as useful as a sausage machine which grinds up meat with poison. Most of the men it sends forth will be a burden on their communities, and the few who can ever benefit themselves or the world at large after their release are made fearful by the brand upon them.

The literature about prison experience written by highly educated, formerly respectable convicts, even that by a leading professional author such as Julian Hawthorne, rarely matches the quality of writing, at least by late twentieth-century standards, of much proletarian and lumpen-proletarian prison literature (just as the slave songs of the nineteenth century now seem to us finer literary creations than most of the elegant poetry of the literary periodicals). These respectable citizens tended to follow the archaic literary models then in fashion, and their prose is therefore generally lifeless, vague, effusive, humorless, verbose, and now rather difficult to read. Many of the “common” criminals, however, wrote with direct, economical, colloquial, often raw prose, filled with frank realism and spiced with humor; their books still bubble with life.

There was, however, one formerly respectable citizen who, by learning the lingo of his fellow criminals and convicts, was to achieve a wide popularity and depth, though perhaps transitory, influence on the writing of fiction. This was William Porter, whose strange career was to anticipate much literature by twentieth-century criminals just as the equally strange career of his sidekick Al Jennings, also once a respectable citizen, was to echo much literature by nineteenth-century criminals.

Al Jennings was one of the last of the famous outlaws of the Wild West, leader of the daring Jennings Gang of train robbers. Fleeing to Honduras with $30,000, he there met Bill Porter, on the lam from a bank embezzlement charge. The two traveled around Mexico and Central America together, Porter living off the loot of Jennings, who at one point shot a man about to stab Porter. Both eventually ended up in the State Penitentiary at Columbus, Ohio, where each began serious writing. Jennings’s life story, *Beating Back* (1914), was one of the final tales of the nineteenth-century picaros, with its thrilling adventures and detailed how-to-do-it accounts of robbing trains. Much earlier, while still in prison, Porter was smuggling out his characteristic short stories to be published under the name O. Henry. Some of his best-known stories were published in this manner, including “A Blackjack Bargainer,” “A Fog in Santone,” “An Afternoon Miracle,” “Money Maze,” “No Story,” “The Enchanted Kiss,” “Hygeia at the Solito,” “Rouge et Noir,” “The Marionettes,” and “The Duplicity of Hargraves.”

O. Henry did not publish as an acknowledged prison author. In fact, it was not until after his death in 1910 that it became widely known that he had been a convict who had served almost four years in the state penitentiary. Then, however, he did influence the direction of prison writing, more by personal example than through his already somewhat outdated trick-story technique. From this point on, prison writers began to see possibilities in fiction as well as autobiographical narrative, essays about crime and prison, and lyric poetry; they began to think of themselves as potential professional authors rather than just criminals with their own tale to tell. Of course, this process would no doubt have taken place anyhow, but for aspiring convict authors O. Henry was a supportive patron saint.

In the 1920s, novels and short stories by prisoners started to develop, especially after H. L. Mencken actively began to encourage convicts to submit their material to the *American Mercury*. This fiction of course varied widely in both quality and intention.

Some of it was romantic and escapist, like Howard D. Bolling’s novel *The Mystery of the Cumberlands* (1927). Bolling was born and reared in the foothills of the Cumberland Mountains in Virginia. While traveling through Winona, Missouri, he was accosted without cause by the town marshal, who, pistol in hand and not identifying himself, demanded Bolling’s surrender. Bolling pulled his own gun, killed the marshal, and was sentenced to thirty-five years in a Missouri prison. He wrote *The Mystery of the Cumberlands* in prison, partly to raise money to re-open his case. The novel is a strange and rather fascinating tale of a wild, mysterious boy named “D,” born to a strong, heroic mountain woman. “D” grows up to become a kind of savior-adventurer not only in his native Cumberlands but in Africa as well.

More typical fantasy was churned out by Jack Callahan, who describes the facts of his own life as a gangster, a prisoner, and an author in *Man’s Grim Justice: My Life Outside the Law* (1928). Callahan makes little pretense to moral reformation as he narrates his own lurid adven-
tures. He seems especially to enjoy telling of a shoot out in a boxcar where he and his pals kill three “bad niggers,” the “notorious nigger, ‘Brooklyn Shine,’ ” and “two other coons, ‘The Riverside Shine’ and ‘Boston Yellow.’ ” Callahan writes hard-boiled prose with great skill, and he is not totally devoid of moral sensibilities, as shown in his concluding sketch, a brilliant and shocking description of the hideous execution of a Black prisoner in the electric chair, which comes out as a far more criminal act than Callahan’s own killings. Because of Callahan’s extraordinary frankness, the description of his own career as a writer of fiction is exceptionally revealing.

His first venture as an author was an autobiographical article “on how a bank burglar attained success in the automobile business.” He “pounded out” this article, giving it a suitable “inspirational twist,” and then went wild with joy when it was published. He decides to become a “great writer” by creating stories about criminals. With straightforward ironic humor about both himself and his editors, he tells of his early success:

. . . I began my crook serial. I wrote myself into the story. I called it “The Philanthropic Bank Burglar.” I was robbing banks and building hospitals with the money I got. I was a burglar with an ideal. Prisons were all wrong. Criminals should be treated in hospitals by psychiatrists and pathologists. I was sending all the money that I got out of the banks to a well-known pathologist. I was sending it anonymously and he was building a hospital with it. I had celebrated detectives on my trail all through the story and just about the time that they were going to capture me, the reader read “continued in the next installment.” I had learned how to leave readers “hanging in the air” gasping for breath, and I was sure that I was a great novelist when the readers began writing me letters complimenting me on the “marvelous Philanthropic Bank Burglar.”

But I was not so good on endings. I killed the detective at the end of the story. One of the Editors said that wouldn’t do, that I would have to change the ending.

“We must have a moral in the story,” he said, “and the moral of this story should be defeat. A burglar should never succeed.”

So I switched the ending. I had myself killed by the detective! Needless to say I didn’t like that ending. I preferred killing the dick to being killed.

This kind of fantasy fiction by convicts, in which a loser can imagine himself a winner, reached its full development almost half a century later, when it was no longer necessary to point toward the moral that crime doesn’t pay. E. Richard Johnson, serving forty years in Stillwater Prison, Minnesota, for a hold-up killing, churns out hard-boiled crime novels at a rapid rate: Silver Street (1968), Mongo’s Back in Town (1969), The God Keepers (1970), Case Load-Maximum (1971), The Judas (1971). In some the criminal-protagonist ends up like Callahan’s philanthropic bank burglar. But in The Judas, the hero—and first-person narrator—is a professional killer who single-handedly wipes out the really mean criminals in Kansas City and lives to enjoy his trade. (Johnson writes a more honest kind of fiction in Cage Five Is Going To Break
Suddenly her voice rose in harshness: “Mary, go on in and get to work! Go on! Go on! There’s nothing more to wait for. It’s all over!”

Then through that thin pane of glass and out into the heavy fog, there came Mary’s cry: “All over?” And all the bleakness of the endless years before she was in her final anguished scream: “Over? God no! It’s just starting!”

Booth transmutes this material, but still uses it for reformist purposes, in With Sirens Screaming. In this earnest and somewhat dated novel, a young World War II veteran and his seventeen-year-old sweetheart unwittingly commit a crime just by traveling together. She is held as a juvenile delinquent. He is imprisoned on a morals charge, escapes, commits a crime, becomes involved in a prison riot, is convicted for another crime that he did not commit, and is sentenced to capital punishment, as Ann, his lover, here tells in protest against his fate and the system which determined it:

“Mark is unjustly condemned to die. Actually, he has not committed a crime. Trying to get married, we were treated like children. Mark escaped, so he could see my mother and get her to withdraw the charge against him. During a rainstorm he took an overcoat. For that he was given a life sentence. In Folsom Prison he was near by when a guard was cut with a knife. For that he has been tried and now the State will kill him. All he wanted to do was marry me, live honorably, work hard, and be a credit to his parents and the country he has served.”

This protest in some ways is actually a retreat from the consciousness of much previous writing from prison, because it is directed primarily against the inflexibility of a legal system which victimizes an innocent individual, not a people or a social class. On the other hand, the novel can also be read as a forerunner of the protest movement against the oppression of youth, with even that movement’s individualist anarchism and escape to a fantasy of life outside society. Faced with an unreasonably repressive society, Ann, unlike Mary, her model in real life, turns into a heroic figure of action. She pulls a gun in prison, and forces the warden to come with them to cover Mark’s escape. She leads Mark to a well-stocked mountain cabin in an idyllic wilderness setting. At the end, the two lovers are preparing to live in this wilderness while the machinery of state, “with sirens screaming,” is trying to apprehend them and all other youthful threats to the well-being of society.

The main ex-convict contributor to the American Mercury was Jim Tully, who published no fewer than thirteen stories and sketches in its pages between 1925 and 1933. Tully, born of a poverty-stricken Irish immigrant family in 1888, had become a “road-kid” at the age of eleven, and his adventures in the ensuing twelve years as a hobo, circus roustabout, prisoner, and professional prizefighter provided the materials for all his early books, which ranged from novels to autobiographical narratives, mostly falling somewhere in between. Emmett Lawler, an autobiographical novel, appeared in 1922, but his real reputation began in 1924 with the publication of Beggars of Life.
which described his initiation into the life of a hobo, his first arrests, and the lives and deaths of people on the fringes of society—tramps, jailbirds, and prostitutes.

_Beggars of Life_ displayed all the main characteristics of the style and method Tully was to use in his subsequent twenty-four books: fast-paced, episodic, alternating between cynicism and sentimentality, tough and ostensibly detached on the outside but obviously filled with compassion, always aligned with the victims and misfits against organized society. Here, for example, is his description of a lynching in a western town:

I left the good woman’s home and walked toward the centre of the town, carrying a “hand-out” which solved my eating problem for the day. As I reached the court-house square, a crowd yelled madly. They stood in front of the court-house jail yelling loudly at someone inside. Some broken iron bars hung from a third story window. Soon the end of a rope was thrown from the window to the waiting crowd below. Many men grabbed it. Framed in the window, with a rope around his neck, and men screaming behind him, was a negro, with eyes as big as eggs.

“Kill the nigger! Kill the nigger!” yelled many voices. “Pop his neck. Make it crack.”

The negro’s face wrinkled in fear, as women, men and children hurried from all directions into the square.

A terrific shout went up, and the rope was jerked by many men. The black body shot into space, whirled, and fell crashing into a tree. “Don’t shoot,” screamed a voice.

A man untangled the wriggling body, and, shaking and horror-stricken, it fell to the ground. They dragged the half-conscious negro to the business square, where a fire burned slowly.

He was placed upright above it, his armpits in heavy post-like crutches.

As the shoes were ripped off, the blaze burned his feet. He wriggled his body frantically as more fuel was placed on the fire and the flame shot upward. “Not too fast,” yelled a voice. “Let him burn slow.” The doomed Ethiopian’s eyes rolled swiftly as the poles were knocked from under him and his body fell into the fire. A blood-curdling “Ouch, ouch, O God! Oh, ouch, O God, O God hab mercy.”

“We’ll mercy you—you black bastard,” yelled a man.

The poles were made upright, and the negro’s armpits were fitted into the clutch-like end of them. Wriggling loose, the black mortal tried to eat fire to end his agony. That boon was denied him. A club crashed his wrist. His head went on his breast. His eyes closed a moment, and as the blaze shot higher, they opened in awful pain.

The clothes burned first, and then the flame ate the hair from his skull. The ears charred and melted on his head. He moaned in prolonged and dying pain, “oooooo-ooch, oo-oh-oh-oh.”

The burnt body fell from its moorings, and the poles dropped over it. Kerosene was thrown on the hissing fire.

Sick at heart, I turned away. Some children skipped the death-rope gracefully.

At the end of the book, Tully assures us that “I am no reformer, but a weary writer who has been living in the memory of adventure.” In 1928, _Beggars of Life_ was dramatized by Maxwell Anderson with the appropriate title _Outside Looking In._

Tully’s _Jarnegan_ (1925) was a fast-moving novel about a supermasculine figure, something of a self-fantasy, who kills a man in a fist fight, is imprisoned, but eventually becomes a successful Hollywood director. _Circus Parade_ (1927), consisting of fictionalized sketches of Tully’s life as a roustabout in a traveling circus, was another sensation, chosen by the Literary Guild and banned in Boston. One of the tendencies in Tully’s fiction is brought out in an extreme form in this book. Tully’s sense of all his fellow outcasts as misfits and oddities leads to an art which always threatens to convert even the most sympathetic characters into caricatures. In _Circus Parade,_ his misfits are actually turned into freaks, like “the female Hercules,” the love-starved giantess who kills herself over unrequited love, or the “repressed but deeply emotional” beautiful young woman who converts herself into “the Moss-Haired Girl.”

_Shanty Irish_ (1928), a book dominated by the fine portrait of his Irish grandfather, describes Tully’s impoverished childhood. _Shadows of Men_ (1930) is, in Tully’s own words, about “the tribulations, vagaries, and hallucinations of men in jail.” _Blood on the Moon_ (1931) brings the story of his life up through his career as a prizefighter and his decision to become a writer; it ends with the words, “In ten years my first book was published.” _Laughter in Hell_ (1932) is a novel about an Irishman who kills his wife and her lover. _The Bruiser_ (1936) returns to Tully’s days as a pugilist, and _A Hollywood Decameron_ (1937) describes his life in the movie capital, where he went in the early 1930s, soon to become a publicist for Charlie Chaplin and ultimately to get rich doing articles for screen magazines. His final works included the novel _Biddy Brogan’s Boy_ (1942) and a series of short biographies of famous contemporaries, _Dozen and One_ (1943), introduced by Damon Runyon, who describes Tully as at least “among the first five” of living writers.

During his days on the road, Tully spent a total of about five years in jail, almost all on vagrancy and similar charges. In other words, his “crime” was much like that of Bartleby, a refusal to fit into the workaday world of his society. This was not merely his crime but also the center of vision in his literary art. The category of literature I have established as a touchstone in this chapter about literature by criminals, the picaresque, is precisely the one in which Tully places his own literary achievement. Tully does not, however, see himself as a conventional picaresque novelist imagining the life of an outlaw and outsid-
er, but as one of these beings actually opening up communication with polite society. As he puts it in the introduction to *Blood on the Moon* (1931):

To those critics, however kind, who contend that I am a novelist trying to find myself, I will here answer for the first and only time. If I have not been able to invent a new medium in my picaresque books, I have at least been strong enough not to conform to one that is outworn. I did not study the people in these books as an entomologist does a bug on a pin. I was of them. I am still of them. I can taste the bitterness of their lives in the bread I eat today.

Tully's literary vision of the victim as the criminal is developed most fully in *Shadows of Men*, his book about life in jail. *Shadows of Men* opens with the chapter "Sapping Day" (which had appeared in the *American Mercury* in 1929), presenting in microcosm Tully's sense of a world divided between good citizens who are really vicious monsters, and their no-good victims, who are really good-hearted misfits. It takes place in Kansas, and Sapping Day is a ritualized mass brutalization of the tramps and vagrants:

Lined up on each side of the lane, hundreds of men awaited us. They were well supplied with clubs, stones, and long rattan whips.

At a signal we started to run.

On both sides of us were the leering and tobacco-stained faces of rustics, old, middle aged, and young. The lashing of long whips could be heard on naked skin. The hoboes grunted and staggered on. We, the despised and rejected, ran as if it were part of the day's work.

We had not gone far when two old vagabonds fell exhausted to the ground.

A group of rustics gathered about them.

Mud was thrown in their aged faces. They tried to ward off the brutality by holding their arms over their eyes. They were kicked in the sides. Hard hands slapped viciously against their hollow cheeks.

"We'll teach you, damn you, to stay away from honest men," a rustic in a rubber collar shouted. As if to better shield themselves from the fury, the two old codgers turned on their stomachs and buried their faces in the mud.

A farmer spat tobacco juice in their ears.

They took it in silence.

At the end of the chapter "Sapping Day," Tully and the other vagrants are arrested on the charge of "having no visible means of support" and booked into jail, the scene of the main narrative. *Shadows of Men* concludes with a sketch restating the theme of the opening festivities in Kansas, "A California Holiday" (originally written in 1928 on assignment for the *American Mercury*), the hanging of an innocent convict in San Quentin, accompanied by all the solemn rituals of officialdom. From first to last, the book displays the victimization of the "criminal" by law-abiding society.

The vision of the loner, the outsider, the outlaw, the scapegoat persecuted and tormented by society is carried to its logical extreme in *Philosophy of the Dusk* (1929), an autobiographical and speculative narrative by Kain O'Dare, a professional criminal who had become a short-story writer. O'Dare, hanging from his thumbs in a midwestern penitentiary, being tortured to make him betray a fellow prisoner, perceives himself as reliving the experience of Christ:

> My thumbs were being torn out of their sockets. I was dripping wet with sweat. Every bone in my body was aching. I was gradually slipping away into some vague world. Little flashes were appearing in the darkness. My mother was speaking to me. My sister was speaking to me. I was a child again. And I remembered a story that I had heard when I was a child.

> It was the story of Christ nailed to the cross. Bleeding. Taking a repentant thief into paradise. I knew how much Christ must have felt, with his hands nailed high and his feet nailed low. And I knew in the bottom of my heart that Christ had never been a squealer, and that he would have helped John Gaber to escape so he could have reached the bedside of his dying wife.

Not all prison writers saw themselves as loners or as part of an outcast class. In one of the most famous prison narratives of the 1920s, *The Twenty-Fifth Man. The Strange Story of Ed Morrell, the Hero of Jack London's "Star Rover"* (1924), Ed Morrell does describe his own experience of unspeakable torture in San Quentin and Folsom in terms very much like those used by Kain O'Dare, and he does dedicate much of his subsequent life to aiding prisoners. But Morrell's original crimes came from an identification with the very people Tully perceived as part of the hostile organized society, the working class and small property owners. Morrell had been involved with people who had been dispossessed by Leland Stanford's railroad and who were fighting back with night robberies of railroad funds. When his lover's father was jailed in this war, Morrell organized a successful jail-break, during which a sheriff was wounded, leading eventually to Morrell's imprisonment as a lifer, first in Folsom and later in San Quentin. There he helped, as the "twenty-fifth man," to organize a prison mutiny, which was betrayed. During weeks of unimaginable torture, he experienced an almost mystical vision of his future mission in life, prison reform. Eventually pardoned, Morrell became an indefatigable worker for his "New Era Penology" and a writer of short stories on the side. *The Twenty-Fifth Man*, his major work, is introduced by George Hunt, the first governor of Arizona, who praises the courage of Morrell and the many others who had unsuccessfully fought back against the plundering of California by the railroad magnates.

The autobiographical narratives by prisoners in the 1920s were gradually leading toward a more radical social analysis. Toward the end of the decade, Charles Patrick Murphy, a lifer in the Idaho State Penitentiary who had previously published three books of autobiographical and other writing, brought out *Shadows of the Gallows* (1928), a
CRIME IN LITERATURE


THE PRISON SYSTEM RESTED SOLIDLY ON THE BELIEF THAT CONVICTS WERE NOT HUMAN BEINGS, AND THIS ASSUMPTION PERMEATED ALL ASPECTS OF THE INSTITUTIONS, WITH ONLY RARE EXCEPTIONS. SO THE SPECTACLE OF PRISONERS ACTUALLY PUBLISHING BOOKS WHICH WERE RECEIVED AS LITERARY ACHIEVEMENTS OR INTELLIGENT SOCIAL ANALYSIS OR BOTH WAS FUNDAMENTALLY THREATENING. THESE BOOKS POSED THE SAME KIND OF SUBVERSIVE THREAT THAT NARRATIVES BY FUGITIVE SLAVES HAD PRESENTED IN THE YEARS BETWEEN 1830 AND 1860; FOR THE PRACTICES OF THE MODERN PRISON SYSTEM, AND PERHAPS THAT SYSTEM ITSELF, LIKE SLAVERY, COULD NOT LAST IF SOCIETY RECOGNIZED ITS VICTIMS AS INTELLIGENT HUMAN BEINGS.

IN THE ECONOMIC BOOM TIMES OF THE 1920S, HOWEVER, THERE WAS NOT MUCH OPPORTUNITY FOR PRISONERS TO LINK UP WITH RADICAL SOCIAL FORCES IN THE SOCIETY AS A WHOLE. THEN CAME THE CRASH OF 1929, AND IMMEDIATELY A WAVE OF SUPPRESSION SWEPT OVER THE CONVICTS TRYING TO WRITE FROM INSIDE THE PRISON TO THE PEOPLE OUTSIDE. THIS SUDDEN SHIFT OF POLICY WAS DESCRIBED IN 1945 BY HERMAN K. SPECTOR AS MERELY A REACTION TO THE SUCCESS OF PRISON WRITING IN THE 1920S: "IRONICALLY ENOUGH, THEIR FLURRY OF SUCCESS SET OFF A COUNTERFLOW OF PROHIBITION, DURING WHICH CALIFORNIA ADOPTED THE POLICY THAT CONVICTS WERE IN PRISON "TO BE PUNISHED, NOT TO MAKE MONEY"; "WHAT MEN WRITE IN PRISON," TOMORROW, DECEMBER 1945]. CERTAINLY THE PRISON AUTHORITIES DID NOT WANT TO SEE THEIR INMATES MAKING MONEY DURING THE DEPRESSION. DID THEY ALSO FEAR THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION BEING OPENED BETWEEN PRISONERS INSIDE THE WALLS AND THE MILLIONS OF ANGRY PEOPLE ON THE OTHER SIDE? WHATSOEVER THEIR MOTIVES, THEIR NEW POLICY OF SUPPRESSION FOR A WHILE HAD DEVASTATING RESULTS, AS MIRIAM ALLEN DE FORD DESCRIBES IN "SHALL CONVICTS WRITE BOOKS?" AN ARTICLE PUBLISHED BY THE NATION IN LATE 1930: "... CELLS WERE SEARCHED ALL THROUGH SAN QUENTIN—NOT FOR NARCOTICS OR KNIVES, BUT FOR MANUSCRIPTS," AND ALL THOSE FOUND WERE REMOVED AND PRESUMABLY DESTROYED.

THE SUPPRESSION WAS BY NO MEANS ENTIRELY SUCCESSFUL. A LARGE BREAKTHROUGH WAS MADE WHEN ROBERT E. BURNS'S I AM A FUGITIVE FROM A GEORGIA CHAIN GANG! SUDDENLY BECAME A NATIONAL SENSATION IN 1932, THE SAME YEAR THAT SCORES OF COAL MINERS STRIKING IN HARLAN COUNTY, KENTUCKY, WERE IMPRISONED FOR "CRIMINAL SYNDICALISM," A YEAR IN WHICH OVER A QUARTER-MILLION ACRES OF LAND IN THE UNITED STATES WERE UNDER CULTIVATION BY CONVICTS.

BURNS HAD BEEN LAUNCHED INTO NATIONAL PROMINENCE BEFORE HE WROTE HIS BEST-SELLING BOOK; WHAT MADE IT SO POPULAR AND INFLUENTIAL WAS NOT ONLY ITS HORRIFYING REVELATIONS ABOUT CONVICT LABOR BUT ALSO THE EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES OF BURNS'S LIFE. BEFORE WORLD WAR I, BURNS HAD BEEN A SUCCESSFUL YOUNG ACCOUNTANT. HE ENLISTED, SERVED IN A MEDICAL DETACHMENT AT THE FRONT, AND RETURNED A FAIRLY TYPICAL CASE OF WHAT WAS THEN CALLED "SHELL-SHOCK." DRIFTING INTO PENNLESS DESPARATION, HE WAS MORE OR LESS FORCED BY ANOTHER MAN TO PARTICIPATE IN A GROCERY STORE HOLDUP WHICH YIELDED $5.80. HE WAS SENTENCED TO SIX TO TEN YEARS ON A GEORGIA CHAIN GANG. A BLACK CONVICT, WHO "HAD BEEN IN THE GANG SO LONG AND HAD USED A SLEDGE SO MUCH THAT HE HAD BECOME AN EXPERT," DEFORMED BURNS'S ANKLE SHACKLES FOR HIM; BURNS SLIPPED THEM OFF HIS EMACIATED LEGS AND MADE A HAIR-RAISING ESCAPE, EVENTUALLY ENDING UP IN CHICAGO. IT WAS THEN 1922. BY 1929, BURNS WAS A PROMINENT EDITOR AND BUSINESSMAN IN CHICAGO. THEN HE WAS BETRAYED AS A FUGITIVE, AND GEORGIA'S SUCCESSFUL REQUEST FOR EXTRADITION AROUSED A NATIONAL STORM OF PROTEST. HE WAS SENT TO LA GRANGE, THE TOUGHEST STOCKADE AMONG THE 140 CHAIN-GANG CAMPS OF THE STATE, "A PLACE SHUNNED BY EVERYONE OF GEORGIA'S 5,000-ODD FELONS." THERE HE BECAME A WELL-EDUCATED, NOW WIDELY RESPECTED WHITE BUSINESSMAN AND JOURNALIST COMES TO SHARE THE FATE OF THE MOST BRUTALLY OPPRESSED MEN IN GEORGIA. HE BECOMES PART OF A MINORITY IN WHAT HE CALLS "HELL:"

AS I WAS LOCKED IN THE BULL PEN, A GUARD CHANGED THE FIGURES ON A SMALL BLACKBOARD TO READ:

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<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WHITE PRISONERS</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>BLACK PRISONERS</td>
<td>69</td>
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<td>TOTAL</td>
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BURNS ESCAPES ONCE AGAIN. AND LIKE THE FUGITIVE SLAVES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, HE ONCE AGAIN HEADS NORTH. WHEN I AM A FUGITIVE FROM A GEORGIA CHAIN GANG! WAS PUBLISHED IN 1932, BURNS WAS LIVING A FURTIVE EXISTENCE UNDER FALSE NAMES IN NEW JERSEY.


OTHER PRISON NARRATIVES BY WHITE MEN HAVE REPORTED TO THEIR BASICALLY WHITE AUDIENCES ABOUT BLACK SONGS. IN YOU CAN'T WIN, JACK BLACK ON THE NIGHT OF HIS FIRST ARREST HEARS "A COLORED WOMAN" PRISONER "SINGING A MOURNFUL DIRGE ABOUT 'THAT BAD STACKALEE'"; HE TELLS US THAT HE LATER LEARNED "THAT THIS SONG IS A FAVORITE AMONG NEGROES WHEN IN GREAT TROUBLE, SUCH AS BEING LOCKED IN JAIL, BEING DOUBLE-CROSSED BY A FRIEND, OR PARTING WITH THEIR MONEY IN A DICE
game. At such times thirty or forty verses of 'Stackalee' invariably restores the laughing good humor and childlike confidence of the wronged one.' In Shadows of Men, Jim Tully describes a condemned Black convict singing a modern version of a song that we saw as a slave song recorded by William Wells Brown in Clotel, but Tully takes this singing merely as evidence that the Negro was facing "the meaningless futility of his chaotic life with the laughter of a fool":

"Hang up de fiddle an' de bow,  
Lay down de shobel an' de hoe,  
Dey's no moah stealin' fo' pooh ol' Ned,  
He's goin' wheah de bad niggahs go."

Burns, however, reporting from inside convict slave labor, the matrix of many Black songs, understands their true significance:

Just as day was breaking in the east we commenced our endless heart-breaking toil. We began in mechanical unison and kept at it in rhythmical cadence until sundown—fifteen and a half hours of steady toil—as regular as the ticking of a clock.

In the chain gangs, human labor has been synchronized as the goose step was in the German Army. When using pickaxes, all picks hit the ground at the same time, all are raised and steadied for the next blow with uncanny mechanical precision. So it is with all work, shoveling, hammering, drilling. The convict bodies and muscles move in time and in unison as one man. The tempo and speed is regulated by the chanting of Negro bondage songs, led by a tol-hardened Negro of years of servitude as follows:

"A long steel rail," croons the leader.

"Ump!" grunts all the rest in chorus as pickaxes came down.

"An' a short cross tie," croons the leader.

"Ump!" grunts all the rest in chorus as pickaxes come up.

"It rings lik' sil-vah," croons the leader.

"Ump!" goes the chorus as the picks come down.

"It shin's lik' go-old," croons the leader.

"Ump!" and all the picks come up.

And so it goes all day long, with the torrid rays of the blazing monarch of the skies adding their touch of additional misery.

This working in unison is called "Keeping the lick."

Later Burns tells us that the usual "lick" was sixteen per minute, a very precise measure of a certain kind of musical time.

Burns by no means feels at one with his Black fellow prisoners. He not only habitually refers to them as "niggers," but when he protests against Georgia's violations of its own penal regulations, one of his complaints is that contrary to the law "whites and Negroes worked side by side." Nevertheless, he has many passages of deep sympathy for the special oppression of the Black prisoners, and he understands that their servitude, unlike his own, is part of the history of a people. When two Black convicts flee in desperation, he perceives their predicament historically, even echoing Frederick Douglass's definition of their white pursuers as "beasts of prey":

Two illiterate Negroes, battling for freedom in the wilds of Georgia's swamps, hunted by white men like beasts of prey. For more than two hundred years the woods and swamps of Georgia have witnessed similar exciting scenes.

And even before that in the wilds of Africa the tragedy was enacted, the purpose the same, the result foretold.

And he does not see the hell of convict labor as something unique to the South but as part of "Twentieth Century America, the land of ideals, human justice, liberty and progress."

During this period, relatively little literature was published by women prisoners, partly because far fewer women than men were in prison and partly because their typical crimes—prostitution, shoplifting, drug addiction, begging, check passing—were merely part of the humdrum daily activity of poverty rather than the thrilling adventures of train robbery, bank stick-ups, professional forger-y, and burglary. The real-life counterparts of Stephen Crane's "Maggie: Girl of the Streets" were not publishing their stories. If there were any happy hookers like Xaviera Hollander, they were certainly not convicts. And after all, even Moll Flanders had told her tale from the vantage of a now reformed—and wealthy—character.

One notable woman criminal who was something of an author was Bonnie Parker, but she wrote as a defiant fugitive, not a convict. Her famous doggerel ballad "Bonnie and Clyde," published by the Dallas Morning News on May 23, 1934, shortly after she and Clyde Barrow were shot to death in a police ambush, does illustrate one tendency in early twentieth-century prison literature, a mixture of rebellion against the state machinery with a sense of guilt and doom. As she puts it in some of the key stanzas:

Now Bonnie and Clyde are the Barrow gang,  
I'm sure you all have read  
How they rob and steal and how those who squeal  
Are usually found dying or dead.

There are lots of untruths to their write-ups,  
They are not so merciless as that;  
And they fight because they hate all the laws,  
The stool pigeons, spotters and rats.

They class them as cold-blooded killers,  
They say they are heartless and mean;  
But I saw this with pride that I once knew Clyde  
When he was honest and upright and clean.

But the law pestered them, fooled around  
And kept locking him up in a cell;  
Till he said to me, "I will never be free,
So I’ll meet a few of them in hell.”

They don’t think they are too tough and desper-
ate.
They know that the law always wins;
They’ve been shot at before, but they do not ig-
nore
That death is the wages of sin.

Quite different from Bonnie Parker, both as a criminal and as an author, was Agnes Smedley. Her crime was aiding friends from India in their struggle for independence from British colonialism. In 1918 she was arrested, charged with violating the Neutrality Law, and placed in solitary confinement in the Tombs for about nine months. There she wrote her first published narratives, Cell Mates, sketches of fellow women prisoners. This experience as a prisoner helped shape her future as one of America’s most internationally respected writers of the 1930s and 1940s. Smedley’s books about the Chinese revolution—Chinese Destinies (1933), China’s Red Army Marches (1934), China Fights Back: An American Woman with the Eighth Route Army (1938), Battle Hymn of China (1943)—are just beginning to come back into acclaim in America after their suppression in the 1950s, but their international reputation has never waned. Her autobiographical novel Daughter of Earth, originally published in 1929, reappeared in 1935 with a long new section describing her imprisonment and its effects on her consciousness. Since the reissue of Daughter of Earth in 1973, many teachers of literature have come to regard it as the finest proletarian novel of the 1920s and 1930s, and a few make even larger claims for it.

The imprisonment of women convicts is the main subject of two autobiographical narratives published in the mid-1930s: the anonymous Female Convict (1934) and Edna O’Brien’s So I Went to Prison (1938). These two books offer a startling, and most revealing, comparison.

Edna O’Brien is another one of those examples proving Julian Hawthorne’s contention that prisons would not survive if enough respected citizens ever experienced them from inside. What makes O’Brien’s narrative extraordinary is her sex. She had been vice-president and treasurer of a small manufacturing company. Then in the heady days of the late 1920s she began to branch out as a professional speculator on the stock market. Her first “radical” act was having a stock ticker installed in her office; in this man’s world of business, “a ticker in a woman’s private office was radical.” When the Crash came, she found herself unable to deliver some stock due to a friend, a wealthy woman doctor. She thought little of this until early 1933, when she was arrested for grand larceny, in a case making the front pages of the New York newspapers. Convicted in 1935, she served a year in the State Prison for Women at Bedford Hills, New York. For her, the main torments of prison are merely the routine physical discomforts, the personal indignities, and the deprivation of her normal luxury and freedom. Nevertheless, she becomes a passion-ate opponent of penal imprisonment, wondering “Why do we keep deluding ourselves that herding people behind bars prevents crime?”

Female Convict is a far more powerful book. One of seven children, the anonymous narrator tells how she grew up in her family of ten “in two rooms on the top floor of a tenement,” with “two grimy windows” through which seeped “the foul odors of the stockyards.” The physical prison conditions described by Edna O’Brien would have been a welcome relief from the childhood experienced by this woman. Her family “had but three beds for ten peo-
ple,” and “there was absolutely no privacy”; “... in order that my father or brother might sleep for their work the next morning, my little sister and I played on the roof or on the street until two or three in the morning.” They had “no electric lights, no bathroom, no heat”:

In the hall-way was a dirty sink with the only running water in the house. The only toilet facil-
ities were in the back yard. The place was used by twelve families, some of them as large as our own. The yard was a rubbish pile, consisting of the garbage thrown from the windows of the ten-
ements which looked out upon it. An ugly heap of refuse, sardine and tomato cans, beer bottles, whiskey flasks, old shoes and rags. A stable, a junk-yard and a box factory flanked our row of tenements. And across the street stood a kosher slaughter-house.

A row of saloons and booze joints down the street kept the neighborhood in a constant uproar with rum-hound rows and drunken brawls. On Saturday nights the sidewalks were lined with drunks and tipsters. ... Early every morning, at five o’clock, we were awakened by the bleating of sheep, and the cries of the cattle, as they were driven down the street to the slaughter-house.

This is the norm of her prose: terse, precise, straightforward, unsentimental, clear, drawing its enormous strength from the reality of its remembered physical and psycho-
logical detail. It is a prose that flows naturally from her class experience, a prose that makes many of the would-be proletarian novels and plays of the 1930s seem hollow imitations. When she does generalize on the basis of her experience, it has the ring of truth, even when she uses language that has been purposely discredited, such as “the unabating exploitation of the masses.” For in her next sen-
tence she reminds us, “When I speak of the exploited class I speak from experience.”

There is nothing roundabout or abstract in her own understand-
ing of both the causes of crime and the various schemes for punishing or eliminating it. She cuts directly through to the heart of the matter:

Gangsters? They were grown as naturally in the alleys and gutters of our slum neighborhood as mosquitoes grow in a swamp. Now when I pick up a paper and read of one more noble crusade against gangsters, I smile—and understand. To whip up a crusade against gangsters is as ludi-
crous as to organize an army of mosquito-swatters while the swamplands where they multi-
tply are left untouched.

Society makes gunmen and then gets excited when their guns go off.
"I understand," she adds, because "I saw how my own brother became a gangster."

Her father drank "to defend himself . . . against the hopeless cage of poverty which permanently imprisoned him. When drunk he was vicious." When Jack, her oldest brother, was nineteen, he returned home with the news that he had been laid off from the automobile parts factory because they had just installed new automated equipment. The result was the experience that makes her perceive the "criminal" as the desperate victim:

That night my father happened to be drunk. When he learned of Jack's discharge he was enraged. He threw Jack out of the house and told him not to come back until he had another job. Jack was on the street without a nickel. He did the only thing he could think of—went to a pool-room dive and slept that night on a pool-table. There he met a gang of unfortunate slum lads like himself—most of them farther down the road of ruin than he. Two months later Jack was caught in a hold-up and sent to Joliet for ten years.

Jack's story is the story of thousands of unlucky lads whom our social order labels criminals.

Soon after, her father, who worked in the Gary steel mills, is "burned alive by a wave of fiery iron." She is forced to leave high school. Before long, she is writing bad checks to survive. She is arrested, put in jail for six months awaiting trial, and is then sent to prison on a sentence of seven years maximum.

What oppresses her about jail is not, as it would be later for Edna O'Brien, primarily the physical conditions, though these are bad enough. What makes jail and prison qualitatively more hellish than the cage of her childhood poverty is the relationships among the human beings there. This comes out initially as she sits on a bench at her first dinner, where she witnesses a racist incident that fills her with a profound "loathing for the place."

I squeezed in between a burly negress and a thin-faced, tired little woman. The latter gave a snarl of protest and poked me with her elbows.

The former was very friendly. "What's yo' name, honey?"

"Call me Eleanor," I replied.

"Mah name's Mary, dey call's me Black Mary. Whatta yo' all up for, Eleanor?" she queried.

"I guess you'd call it forgery," I replied. We became quite chummy. I rather liked Black Mary. Hers was a frank, friendly face . . .

The coffee-pourer for some reason had overlooked my companion, Black Mary. She held up her tin cup. "Give me some of dat dere chicory-soup, Mamie," said Black Mary, with a friendly grin.

"You dirty nigger, you got your coffee," said the woman with the pot in her hand, and as she passed behind Black Mary she gave her a vicious kick to emphasize it. Black Mary sat up straight with a cry of pain.

"Please, mam, don't do dat to me. . . Ah ain't had a bit a coffee . . . ah swear ah ain't. . . ."

She didn't finish the sentence. The prison flunky came back and gave Black Mary a resounding smack alongside the jaw with a dirty towel she was carrying. With an oath, Black Mary leaped to her feet. They closed in a furious, rough-and-tumble fight. The rest of the prisoners began to cheer and yell, stamping their feet and pounding the table with their tin cups.

"Bite her ear off, Black Mary," some of them cried.

Others yelled, "Kill that nigger, kill that nigger." . . .

The whole thing sickened me. I got up and left the table, my meal practically untouched. I went back to my cell, with a loathing for the place that burned in my heart like fire.

When she arrives in prison, she is marched in company with the other new "fish" to visit the warden's office. Her description of this "sorry-looking crew," in "our gray prison dresses" without "a scrap of underwear or a stock in the gang," gives a brilliantly vivid picture of the kinds of women confined as criminals in the cages of the "penitentiary":

Directly behind Red-frozt [the matron] walked Laura, the Candy Kid, seventeen year old shop-lifter, prostitute and drug-addict, an inveterate thief, pretty as a picture.

Then Rebecca, thirty year old Jewess, diseased, heavily sentenced after a fourth offence at shop-lifting.

Next Old Lady Cuno, eighty-seven, arrested for begging, always wearing in German and smelling like a fish factory.

Following her, Stephanie, the Czechoslovakian girl, with swarthy complexion and large black eyes, with her deep guttural voice, an all-around crook and shoplifter.

Then back of her, Dora Coningsby, drug-addict and prostitute, with the needle-pocked body.

Next "Bugs," an old Irish woman who smoked a pipe and swore like a trooper, and had a habit of spitting in your face if she was angry.

Following "Bugs," Big Bertha, a burly dark-complexioned drug-addict, with her mottled hair in curlers and skirts above her bare knees.

Then Pauline, the most beautiful girl in the prison, kleptomaniac, graduate of Vassar, with the background of a fine family, up the second time for casing bad checks.

Behind her, Lilian Johnson, six feet tall, pretty but a badly diseased prostitute.

Then the Kid from Georgia, a nineteen year old
CRIME IN LITERATURE

Contains discussion of the criminal aspects of prostitution represented in the art and literature of nineteenth-century France.

Collection of essays on crime in literature.

Examines various nineteenth-century sensationalist publications, some centering on crime.

Asserts that the early English novel was considered dangerous not only because of the tendency of writers to feature criminal activity in their plots, but also because the novel form “was specifically associated with the fear of threatened violence and social unrest from the lower classes.”

Examines the depiction of violence in the novels of several twentieth-century American writers.

Provides a brief history of English true-crime fiction.

Argues that the violence and grotesqueness portrayed in contemporary Southern writing are manifestations of fears of social disorder.

Analyzes popular late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century dramatic recreations of the story of Jesse James and his gang.

Argues that twentieth-century criminals and gangsters used popular literature, newspapers, and films to create myths out of their otherwise unromantic activities.

Discusses theatrical renderings of real-life crimes in early twentieth-century popular drama.

Contains discussion of nineteenth-century American criminal memoirs in a work that examines the “crime-related products [that] traveled every avenue into the cultural marketplace” of that period.