The Prison in Nineteenth-Century Literature

Examines the use of the prison as a symbol of both oppression and freedom in English, European, and American literature during the nineteenth century.

INTRODUCTION

Imagery of prisons in nineteenth-century literature owes much to the eighteenth century, when such penal institutions as London’s Newgate Prison and the Bastille in Paris were imposing structures that developed into powerful symbols of oppression. Newgate was rebuilt in the 1770s and attacked by mobs during the Gordon Riots of 1780, during which Protestant protest against laws promoting toleration for Catholics grew into an expression of frustration against the hardships of poverty. On July 14, 1789, crowds of angry Parisians stormed the Bastille, marking the entry of the poorest member of French society into the French Revolution. This day continues to be celebrated every year as the Independence Day of France, a testament to the tremendous significance of both the Bastille and its destruction. The late eighteenth century also gave rise to a prison that was never actually built, at least not exactly as its creator intended, but has nonetheless become famous: Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, designed by the British philosopher in 1791 to serve as a place of incarceration intended to control prisoners by making them feel that they were under constant surveillance. Actual prisons based somewhat on this model were built in New Jersey, Spain, the Netherlands, and Edinburgh, Scotland. According to French scholar Michel Foucault, whose *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) used the idea of the Panopticon as a model for less tangible forms of social control, the Panopticon was the basis of all discussions of prison reform during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Images of the prison in European literature generally fall into two broad categories: the prison as place of Romantic solitude and the prison as brutal, inhuman institution. Earlier writers tended to favor the former view. In keeping with the Romantic authors of the late eighteenth century, writers of the early nineteenth century imagined the prison as a place for the idealized suffering and monastic isolation that were necessary for creativity and growth. French Romantics including Victor Hugo, Stendhal, and Honoré de Balzac depict their protagonists longing for the solitude of the prison, where the pressures of the world cannot interfere with a purely spiritual existence. The prison for English Romantics like Lord Byron and John Keats is an almost entirely metaphorical locus: the poets find prisons in history, in nature, in the city, and if sometimes they express a desire to escape, they also acknowledge a certain degree of confinement as a condition of their art.

Toward the mid-nineteenth century, however, some authors became interested in the actual conditions of prisons. Although such eighteenth-century authors as Daniel Defoe and John Gay had featured the image of the infamous Newgate Prison in their writings, Charles Dickens’s explorations of the criminal world took a somewhat darker tone. Novels including *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Little Dorrit* (1857) and *Great Expectations* (1861) feature extended scenes in prison. Fyodor Dostoevsky based his novel, *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1860), on his experiences in a prison camp. Writings from prison also gained more visibility as more individuals who possessed the skill to write were incarcerated. Prison biography became a genre in itself, allowing inmates to express the horror of their condition to a wider public. By the time Oscar Wilde began writing about his experiences in prison from 1895-97, prison writing was much more realistic and sordid. Wilde’s *De Profundis* (1905), written during his prison term at Reading Gaol, reveals the witty Wilde completely altered by the utter humiliation and physical suffering of his punishment for “decency,” a verdict rendered after the author was tried for committing homosexual acts. In other writings, he describes the prison as “built with bricks of shame” where “only what is good in Man . . . wastes and withers there.” The subject of prison reform also took the stage with the 1865 drama *It Is Never Too Late to Mend*, although due to strong audience objection the grim scenes of prison torture did not remain in the play after the first night. Increasingly, writings about prison began to assert the rights of the criminal as a person with human dignity. Moreover, to the extent that society itself asserted a prison-like control over individual behavior, some authors pressed on the theme of liberty, questioning where it truly could be found.

Early American writers felt this question strongly. When the French author Alexis de Tocqueville visited America and wrote his famous observations *Democracy in America* (1835-40), he noted that the democracy that depended on a majority also seemed to enforce a sameness in order to create that majority: equality required conformity. Several American writers addressed the theme. Nathaniel Hawthorne demonstrated in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) how society could punish and oppress those who failed to adhere to social codes, drawing a parallel between a physical prison and the confinement of an oppressive culture. The sense of being watched marks a major difference between this literature and the European literature written earlier in the nineteenth century, when imprisonment meant privacy. In contrast, however, Herman Melville depicted the isolation of the office worker as a particularly dehumanizing kind of imprisonment. Surrounded by the walls of the cu-
bicycle or the corridors of Wall Street buildings, Melville’s characters are closed off from any form of life, virtually entombed by mind-numbing routine and lack of human contact.

For some writers, one of the most insidious ways that society could incarcerate its members was in the home. Women authors of the nineteenth century often described the home as a prison for wives. In some cases, the entrapment was literal, as with the “madwoman in the attic” of Jane Eyre (1846). But women’s sense of unyielding boundaries was also reflected in limited choices and frustrated attempts at self-realization. Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1856) is clearly imprisoned in her middle-class life; Jane Austen’s heroines chafe at their reliance on marriage to make their way in the world. In addition, the domestic realm increasingly came under the authority of the law in the nineteenth century, both in Europe and in America. Legal attention to property and the constitution of the family meant that the roles of wife and mother were even more strictly defined and under closer scrutiny. The home also became the foundation for a moral and productive workforce and less a retreat from society, further enhancing the sense of restriction.

Changes in prisons, the law, and society throughout the nineteenth century irrevocably altered the metaphorical connotations of the prison. The gloomy, castle-like Bastille and the criminal-heroes of Newgate Prison were replaced by more structured forms of imprisonment and surveillance, and the author longing for a monastic retreat was replaced by the author imprisoned by a repressive state. Finally, as French scholar Victor Brombert argues, the hope for liberty or redemption expressed through the prison images of the early nineteenth century gave way to existential hopelessness in the early twentieth century. If, as Albert Camus suggested, the city or society itself is a prison, then escape is impossible.

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REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Honoré de Balzac
La Peau de chagrin [The Wild Ass’s Skin] (novel) 1831
Le Père Goriot [Old Goriot] (novel) 1834

Charlotte Brontë
Jane Eyre (novel) 1846

Emily Brontë
Wuthering Heights (novel) 1847

James Fenimore Cooper
The Pioneers (novel) 1823

Rebecca Harding Davis
Life in the Iron Mills (novella) 1861
Margret Howth: A Story of To-Day (novel) 1862

Charles Dickens
Oliver Twist (novel) 1838
Little Dorrit (novel) 1857
Great Expectations (novel) 1861

Fyodor Dostoevsky
Notes from the House of the Dead (novel) 1860
Notes from Underground (novella) 1864

Gustave Flaubert
Madame Bovary (novel) 1856

Nathaniel Hawthorne
The Scarlet Letter (novel) 1850
The House of the Seven Gables (novel) 1851

Victor Hugo
Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné [The Last Day of A Convict] (novel) 1829
Les Misérables (novel) 1862

John Keats
Lamia (poetry) 1819

Herman Melville
Pierre (novel) 1852
Bartleby the Scrivener (novella) 1853

Charles Reade
Gold (novel) 1835
It is Never Too Late to Mend (drama) 1865

Sir Walter Scott
The Heart of Midlothian (novel) 1818

Stendhal
Le Rouge et le Noir [The Red and The Black] (novel) 1831
La Chartreuse de Parme [The Charterhouse of Parma] (novel) 1839

Oscar Wilde
Ballad of Reading Gaol (poetry) 1898
De Profundis (letter) 1905

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OVERVIEW

Victor Brombert (essay date 1978)


[In the following essay, Brombert suggests reasons for the historical connection between authors and imprisonment. He finds the precursors for the nineteenth-century fascina-
tion with prison imagery in both eighteenth-century Gothic literature and the dramatic fall of the Bastille, which reverberated throughout Europe.

The prisoner is a great dreamer.

—Dostoevsky

...this eternal image of the cell, always recurring in the poets’ songs...

—Albert Béguin

Prison haunts our civilization. Object of fear, it is also a subject of poetic reverie. The prison wish does exist. The image of immurement is essentially ambivalent in the Western tradition. Prison walls confine the “culprit,” victimize the innocent, affirm the power of society. But they also, it would seem, protect poetic meditation and religious fervor. The prisoner’s cell and the monastic cell look strangely alike.

Poets in particular, as Albert Béguin remarked, are taken with the prison image. Is this because they have been frequent inmates of jails, even since jails have existed? Béguin suggests a deeper reason: the poet sings of freedom. Between his vocation and the prisoner’s fate there appears to be “a natural and substantial bond, a significant affinity.” For the freedom in question is of the mind; it can be attained only through withdrawal into the self. It is the turbulence of life that the poet—a “spiritual anarchist”—comes to view as exile or captivity.

Romanticism, especially in France, has endowed the prison symbol with unusual prestige. This is not to deny that grim jails—real and metaphoric—served to bring out themes of terror and oppression; that images of labyrinths, undergrounds, traps, buried secrets, crushing covers, and asphyxiating encircllements provided the symbolic décor for a tragic awareness. The motif of the gloomy prison became insistent toward the end of the 18th century, in large part for political and ideological reasons. The symbolic value attributed to the Bastille and other state prisons viewed as tyrannical constructs, the nightmarish architectural perspectives in the famous “Prigioni” etchings of Piranesi, the cruel fantasies of the Marquis de Sade conceived in prison and projected into further enclosed spaces, the setting of Gothic novels in dungeons, vaults, and obliettes—all this can tell us a great deal about the structures of the Romantic imagination, and the favored dialectical tensions between oppression and the dream of freedom, between fate and revolt, between the awareness of the finite and the longing for infinity.

The link between enclosure and inner freedom is at the heart of the Romantic sensibility. The title of Stendhal’s novel, La Chartreuse de Parme, has puzzled many a reader, not merely because Parma is without a charter-house, but because not even a fictional charterhouse appears in the novel’s field of vision. It is clear, however, that the charterhouse in question is really none other than the Farnese Tower—in other words, the prison-fortress.

The title thus proposes the central metaphor, as well as the parable of a fear translated into a blessing. The link between enclosure and spirituality is unmistakable. Paul Jacob, one of the strangest figures of the period, noted in his preface to Saintine’s Piccola—the story of a disbeliever who regains his faith while in jail—that the prisoner in his dungeon and the monk in his cell are “eternal sources of reverie and meditation.”

Fictional metaphors and social problems overlap. The monastic model is explicitly brought to bear on utopian penalogy. Prison reform, very much debated since the end of the 18th century, became a burning issue under the Restoration. The controversy, which was to reach fever pitch under the July Monarchy, centered on the question of the cellular prison régime. Was the cell a redemptive punishment? Tocqueville and Beaumont travelled to the United States to observe and compare the model penitentiaries in Philadelphia and Auburn. Which was preferable, the cenobitic or the anchoritic system? One thing was clear: the monastic model seemed the pattern for the future. In 1838, Léon Faucher (De la Réforme des prisons, p. 180) came to the conclusion that the original inspiration for prison punishment (hence the word “penitentiary”!) was monastic existence, “voluntary penitence.” In 1847, the International Penitentiary Congress pronounced itself in favor of solitary confinement. Isolation in the cell was to be redemptive, regenerative. Salvation and rehabilitation were increasingly viewed as dependent on the privacy of the cell. Punitur ne pecatur: a prison historian somewhat ironically recalls this formula, after reminding his readers that it was the French Revolution, destroyer of the Bastille, which elevated prison to the dignity of rational punishment.

The monastic prison image is reflected in the popular imagination. Prison inmates themselves seem aware of the metaphor. A recent survey by the politically activist GIP (Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons) quotes a prisoner in the “model” prison of Fleury Mérogis: “No complaints about the cells. They’re not very big, but they’re clean. They’re a little like a monk’s cell” (ça fait un peu cellule de moine). The underlying shuttle or reversibility of images is profoundly revealed in a book that has left its imprint on generations of readers. Dantès, the hero-prisoner of Le Comte de Monte-Cristo, is fated to be reborn and liberated in the cell occupied by the monastic figure of Father Faria. The prisoner-monk and the monk-prisoner: the two images converge in Alexandre Dumas’ novel.

The place of enclosure and suffering is also conceived of as the protected and protective space, the locus of reverie and freedom. Our tradition is rich in tales that transmute sequestration into a symbol of security. Securum carcer facit. The motto is developed in lines that go back to the 17th century:

Celui qui le premier m’osta la liberté
Me mit en sûreté:
De sa grace je suis hors de prise et de crainte.
(He who first took away my freedom
Put me in safety:
Thanks to him, I am beyond reach and fear.)

But, even earlier, folklore, legends, fairy tales, the tradition of romance, provide variations on the theme of protective custody. The motif occurs repeatedly in Renaissance epics. The magician Atlantes builds an enchanted castle to lock up his favorite hero Rogero, the better to shield him from danger. Merlin renders similar service in the Arthurian legend. Psychoanalysis has since confirmed the yearning for the enclosed space, the latent fear of the threatening outside. Agoraphobia is a recognizable symptom. Constriction is not necessarily a feared condition. Bertram D. Lewin, in *The Psychoanalysis of Elation*, suggests that the idea of the closed space corresponds not to an anxiety phantasm but to a phantasm of safety.

But with the safety dream does the dream of freedom through transcendence. The spirit wills itself stronger than prison bars.

Stone Walls do not a Prison make,
Nor Iron bars a Cage . . .

writes the poet Richard Lovelace, who sings of the victory of the prisoner’s mind over suffering:

Tryumph in your Bonds and Paines,
And daunce to th’ Musick of your Chains.

It is in the same spirit that Byron conjures up the figure of the poet-prisoner Tasso to extol the tragic liberation through confinement. The “wings” of the mind make it possible to soar beyond oppressive walls:

For I have battled with mine agony,
And made me wings wherewith to overfly
The narrow surface of my dungeon wall.

Heine’s famous epigram is apposite: “The love of freedom is a prison flower” (*Die Freiheitsliebe ist eine Kerkerblume*). In this perspective, the characteristic Romantic figure of the convict—the *forçat*—acquires a special meaning. Larger even than the figure of revolt (Balzac’s convict Vautrin) looms the figure of salvation (Hugo’s convict Jean Valjean). For, in its mystic dimension, the carceral imagery implies the presence of a threshold, the possibility of a passage, an initiation—a passage from the inside to the beyond, from isolation to communion, from punishment and suffering to redemption, from sadness to that profound and mysterious joy which poets such as Hugo associate with the eternal secret of human bondage.

The prison fear and the prison dream have been powerful literary themes. But never, it would seem, have they so persistently pressed themselves on the writer’s imagination as during the 19th century. History and politics are no doubt largely responsible. The arbitrary arrests (*lettres de cachet*) and the state prisons of the Ancien Régime, the symbolism of the Bastille and of its epic fall, the revolutionary jails, the political detentions throughout Metternich’s Europe, the shadow of the Spielberg, where Silvio Pellico and other victims languished, the police repres-
sions of popular uprisings—all conspired to dramatize and poeticize the prison image. This pervasive prison concern explains in part why the 19th-century sensibility was incapable of separating moral indignation from poetic vision. The ambivalence was to be vividly illustrated, toward the end of the century, in the fictional biography of the revolutionary socialist Louis Auguste Blanqui. Gustave Geoffroy’s *L’Enfermé (The Captive)* is a documentary novel on the strange destiny of this political activist whose prison vocabulary made him live out his own fiction. For Blanqui, the *enfermé*, viewed himself as determined by literary models: the Mont-Saint-Michel fortress, where he and other inmates became fascinated with the prison fate of Silvio Pellico, is repeatedly referred to as the “French Spielberg”; his “cup of bitterness” makes of him, in his own eyes, a “Job” and a victim of “Dante’s hell”; the spiritual “freedom” discovered in jail becomes so precious to him that, having returned to “free life,” he reconstructs his own cell. “Prison followed the man, reconstructed itself around him by his own volition, no matter where he was.”

The Romantic imagination exploits the dramatic potential of sequestration and exile. But the importance of the carceral themes is clearly prefigured in the literature of the 18th century. The nightmarish locales of the Gothic novel indicate a yearning for the irrationality of depths and labyrinthine constriction. Their oniric structures are graphically confirmed in Piranesi’s imaginary prisons, his *carceri d’invenzione.* These dizzying descents to the underground, these crushing stone constructs, appear again in many a Romantic text. But it is not fortuitous if the taste for Piranesi and for Sade’s rape scenes (always in situations of confinement) corresponds historically to the growing dream of political freedom and individual dignity. The 18th century is known to be the age of “reason”; but it is also—especially as the century comes to a close—an age that delighted in horror, and was fascinated by all the manifestations of coercion. The obsession with walls, crypts, forced religious vocations, inquisitional procedures, parallels the beginnings of a revolt against arbitrariness.

Imaginary plight and real plight reflect each other. Events were to confirm the latent sense of anguish. Many fami-

lies, at this turning point of history, underwent the harrowing experience of imprisonment. It was in prison that André Chénier composed some of his most powerful poems. The new century added further distress. For the young Hugo, as for the young Vigny, the word “prison” was to retain a grim resonance. The fall of Napoleon plunged Eu-

rope into a renewed fear of political detentions. If the image of the Bastille, after 1815, continued to function as a symbol, this is because it had come to mean more than itself. This Bastille metaphor was clearly understood as a meaningful anachronism: the prisons of post-Napoleonic, reactionary Europe were being denounced obliquely. Michelet, for whom the Bastille myth was a lasting inspi-
ration, diagnosed the anachronism. He knew full well that, from the Spielberg to Siberia, Europe was covered with prisons more terrible than the destroyed Bastille. Casanova, who had been detained in the infamous Piombi of Venice, knew it too: "I have seen at the Spielberg, in Moravia, prisons far more gruesome..." It is against this political background that one must assess the prestige of Casanova, Cellini, Sade, Baron von der Treneck, Latude, Lingueut, Pelllico, Andryane, as well as many other prison heroes past and present.

Certain favorite themes might also explain the intense interest of Romantic writers in the prison image: tragic beauty of solitude, glorification of the individual and concern for the problem of identity, existential anguish (Freud was later to insist on the relation between Angst and angustiae), spatio-temporal motifs (arrested prison time viewed as an utopian atemporality), exaltation of the rebellious outlaw who indicted society as a prison and himself becomes the hero of a double drama of fall and redemption, pride in any punishment under the dual aegis of Prometheus-Lucifer.

The topoi, or commonplace, of prison literature can also be listed: the sordid cell and the hospital table, the cruelty of jailors (but also the presence of the "good" jailor), glimpses of the landscape and of the sky, the contrast between the ugliness of the "inside" and the supposed splendor of the surrounding scenery, prisons within the prison (the image of the iron mask), the insanity of the captive, the inscriptions in the stone, the symbolism of the wall as an invitation to transcendence. If even the most atrocious jail can be transformed into a mediating space where consciousness learns to love despair and takes full possession of itself, it is no doubt because—as Gaston Bachelard put it—a man is a "great dreamer of locks." Even man's consolatory prison activities, as repeatedly presented in Romantic literature, betray the urge to exploit creatively the possibilities of concentration and expansion. On the one hand, mental prowess and experimentation (geometric progressions formulated without help of paper, imaginary chess games); on the other hand, an outward reach, love at a distance (often for the jailor's daughter), conversations with the beloved (in fairy tales the beloved may be changed into a bird!), a movement of the mind toward the outside which makes the prisoner reinvent communication. For the "other" remains a presence. Hence the obsession with writing, secret alphabets, tapings on the walls, underground communications.

Two opposing and simultaneous movements can here be followed: the one toward an inner center (a search for identity, knowledge, the operations of memory); the other toward a transcending outside which corresponds to the joys of the imagination and the ecstasy of spiritual escape. Intimacy with the elusive self is the aim of the first movement, the quest within. Essentially unheroic, the movement toward the internal cell of meditation corresponds to a nocturnal lyricism, to a quest for authenticity which, at its extreme point, tolerates no histrionics, leaves no room for any pose. Novalis speaks of the mysterious road that leads to this interior region. The most diverse texts, in our literary tradition, confirm this association of the prisoner's descent into the self with the quest for a personal truth, the quest for an original identity. Robinson Crusoe is an exemplary figure: on his prison-island, he is quick to create further limits within limits; he builds a fortification, he erects walls, not merely to ward off danger, but to surround himself, to confine himself—and thus to define himself. Rousseau, on another island, dreams of living for the rest of his life as a happy prisoner. In one of the basic texts for an understanding of Romanticism—the fifth "Promenade" in the Rêveries (where the Bastille image occurs in association with the very notion of reverie)—Rousseau describes his happy stay on the island of Saint Pierre, and expresses the desire to see the island refuge become for him a "prison perpetuelle." The key words (circonscrite, enfermé, asile, confiné) all suggest an interiorization of the prison image which corresponds to the sense of almost God-like self-sufficiency (this state in which "on se suffit à soi-même comme Dieu"), and points to the central metaphor of Rousseauistic solipsism: "... ce séjour isolé où je m'étais enlacé de moi-même..." (this isolated abode where I did entwine with myself . . . ).

But as Albert Béguin observed—precisely in talking about Novalis—the inward movement implies a glance toward what lies beyond, an ascent, an expansion.10 Neither the island nor the narrowest of cells represents an obstacle, in metaphoric terms, to the dynamics of escape. A wall asks to be scaled. The eye seeks the chink, measures the distance. The mind is carried through space. Nothing appears more constant than the notion of freedom associated with the cell—freedom, as it were, from the imperatives of time and space. Poets repeatedly sing of this utopia and of this atemporality.

There were no stars, no earth, no time
writes Byron in the admirable ninth stanza of The Prisoner of Chillon, entirely based on a series of negative constructions. To which Tristan Corbière, in a poem ironically entitled Libertà—A la Cellule IV bis (prison royale de Gênes), seems to provide an echo:

Plus de jours, plus de nuits... . . .

What is involved is an affirmation of tragic elation and dauntlessness. In Schiller's Die Räuber, not exactly the setting of a happy imprisonment, it is in the darkest dungeon that the dream of freedom penetrates "like lightning in the night" (. . . wie ein Blitz in der Nacht).

It is of course perfectly logical that the dynamics of escape (and escapism) should affirm themselves most powerfully within the context of captivity. Balzac evokes the art of convicts who know how to conceive and execute masterful schemes. Escape becomes a challenge to human ingenuity. Nineteenth-century readers were likely to appreciate Benvenuto Cellini's defiant advice to his jailors
comes to consider her prison as fitting for the visit of the celestial messenger who will show her the way to eternal freedom. Dimitri, in The Brothers Karamazov, declares that one cannot exist in prison without God. He discovers that a "new man" has risen up in him as he confronts the peeling walls that enclose him.

A wide range of mediating and stereotyped images links the dream-prisoner to what lies beyond the symbolic walls: windows, hills, clouds, birds—even water. The image of the bird seems favored, perhaps because it lends itself to a fundamental ambiguity. For the bird, in its free flight, brings to mind the cage from which it might have escaped, the cage that awaits it, the cage that it perhaps regrets. If indeed the quest for spiritual freedom and the redemptive thrust carry toward an elsewhere, a reverse impulse tends toward the still center, toward another form of release, a deliverance from the causal world of phenomena. It is at this still center, this still point of the turning world, that the hidden secret, the ineffable treasure, the perception of the numen, are to be found. Enclosure becomes the warrant of perfect fulfillment. It allows the constricted spirit to leave behind what Villiers de L'Isle-Adam calls the "геоле du monde," the worldly jail, and to escape from the world of Becoming."

The dream of the happy prison defies the worldly jail. How else is one to interpret King Lear's elation, toward the end of the play, at the thought of imprisonment together with Cordelia? "Come, let's away to prison"—he seems almost impatient to be locked up. How is one to explain this impatience and hint of joy? Is it battle fatigue (he has indeed incurred the worst!); is it mental derangement; is it despair? All is lost, to be sure—but Cordelia has been found. In twelve intensely suggestive lines, Shakespeare indicates the reason for this unexpected delight. For father and daughter, so Lear hopes, prison will be an enchanted cage. Indeed like "birds i'the cage" they will be able to sing their poem of love, forgiveness and innocence:

So we'll live.
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies.

In this cage they will feel freed from life's snares and servitudes; they will—so the old king dreams—be endowed with superior vision and glimpse the mystery of things "as if [they] were God's spies."

The idea that prison can be the locus of spiritual freedom and revelation is not merely a dream of mad, sinned-against kings. A similar notion determines Benvenuto Cellini, in his Vita, to write a chapter in praise of incarceration (In Lode di detta prigione) and to insist—he the fiery adventurer-artist—on the spiritual initiation he underwent in jail.

"Chi vuol saper quant'è il valor de dio,
e quant' un uomo a quel ben si assomiglia.
conven che stie'n prigione, al parer mio."
Similar effusions inspire the famous Le Mie Prigioni by Silvio Pellico, the Milanese liberal who experienced years of "hard prison" (carcere duro) in Metternich's political prison, the Spielberg. There were those who loudly deplored his Christian lyricism, discovered in jail, as a weakness. But the unusual success of Pellico's book (in France alone there were five translations during the first year after publication in 1833) suggests that its tone and message had immense appeal. Pellico insists on the rediscovered light; he copies with deep emotion the edifying graffiti on his prison walls (Benedico la prigione); he glorifies suffering. A century and a half later, his name is still revered by another famous political prisoner, Solzhenitsyn. The author of The Gulag Archipelago indeed sums up the prison theme: "It has been known for many centuries that prison causes the profound rebirth of a human being. The examples are innumerable—such as that of Silvio Pellico."

And Solzhenitsyn adds, as his own testament to the future: "...I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: 'Bless you, prison!'"

The rebirth in question implies the redemptive powers of imagination. Repressed freedom and poetic inventiveness are intimately related. This would explain the specific prestige of the sequestered artist. Tasso in jail continues to be a subject of inspiration for other poets. The enclosed space is also the locus of artistic creativity.

We return to the figure of the writer. If indeed poets experience an affinity for the world of walls, bars, and locks, it is because it reflects the image of their own condition. Leopardi, in the imaginary dialogue between Tasso and his own genio familiare exalts sequestration because it rejuvenates the soul (ringiovanisce l' animo) and galvanizes the imagination—the virtù di favellare. Gérard de Nerval imagines the jailor as eternally jealous of the prisoner's dreams. Tristan Corbière is more explicit still; in his poem on liberty-in-jail, he proclaims the lyric joy of the prisoner-poet singing about the inspiration of (and to) his happy cage:

—Moi: jamais je n'ai chanté
Que pour toi, dans ta cage,
Cage de la gaiété.  

The joyous confinement is here clearly associated with the creative act. It is also viewed as a sanctuary.

Prison, sûre conquête
Où le poète est roi!

Metaphor implies reversibility and the negation of literal meaning. The abhorred prison becomes a holy place. "A prison is a sacred asylum," affirms one of the characters in Pétrus Borel's Madame Putiphar. And Byron, whose Prisoner of Chillon explains in the final stanza that "These heavy walls to [him] have grown / A hermitage," writes even more directly in the Sonnet on Chillon (referring to "the eternal spirit of the chainless mind"):

Chillon! thy prison is a holy place,
And thy sad floor an altar...
Notes

1. In Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison (Gallimard, 1975), Michel Foucault has analyzed the strategy of punishment and the "politics of coercion" in modern society. See also "Les Intellectuels et le pouvoir," entretien Michel Foucault-Gilles Deleuze, L'Arc, 49, 1972, p. 6. Chekhov, in one of his most interesting short stories, had already suggested that society affirms itself through enclosure. ("Ward No. 6," in The Portable Russian Reader, ed. Bernard Guizot, New York, The Viking Press, 1947, pp. 244-320.)


10. See the remarkable pages by Jean Starobinski in L'Invention de la liberté, Skira, 1964, pp. 197-203.


13. See Albert Béguin’s development about Novalis in L'Ame romantique et le rêve, J. Corti, 1939, pp. 204-213.


20. Libertà—A la Cellule IV bis (prison royale de Gênes).


Victor Brombert (essay date 1978)


[In the following essay, Brombert analyzes the prison imagery in the writings of Victor Hugo, whose novels Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné and Les Misérables were influential for later writers using the prison as a setting or metaphor.]

Where would thought lead if not to jail?

—William Shakespeare

THE NEW VOICE

"On voit le soleil!" (One sees the sun!) This cry of the Condemned Man in Hugo's Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné is quoted from memory by Dostoevsky in the letter he writes his brother on December 22, 1849, a few hours after the macabre scenario of his sham execution. Imperial grace came at the last moment: the death sentence was commuted to hard labor. But the resuscitated man was never again the same.

The French quotation in the letter to Michael refers to the short chapter XXIX of Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné. The literary reference was part of a private language: Dostoevsky’s brother was indeed later to translate Hugo’s novel. And chapter XXIX is central to the novel, as well as dramatically relevant to Dostoevsky’s situation. The nameless protagonist, obsessed by the image of his head which the guillotine will transform into an object, desperately invokes his grace, even at the cost of life imprisonment. Dostoevsky had perceived the importance of the sun in this fiction about incarceration ("I love the sun," whose "warm" and "gay" rays trace luminous figures symbolizing life and freedom—iii, 659-660); and he had himself experienced the temporal anguish of a deadline inflicted with precision. Hugo’s title, echoed by the capitalized in-
dication Quatre Heures, at the end of the text, proposes suspense in the face of an ineluctable immediate future. This slow-motion death—“this six week agony and day-long death rattle” (n, 700)—was to be relived by Dostoevsky in The Brothers Karamazov, where he evokes the condemned man, unable until the last moment to believe that he will die, reassured because two streets still separate him from the scaffold. Such a repetition in the double register of lived experience and the act of writing testifies, through a symbiotic exchange, to the existential density of Hugo’s fiction.2

It is likely, moreover, that the Bicêtre prison of Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné, as much as personal memories of forced labor in Siberia, colored The House of the Dead. Turgenev felt that Dostoevsky, in the episode of the prisoners’ bath, had attained Dantesque grandeur. But is not the immediate model once again Hugo’s fiction? The riveting of the convicts’ iron collars and the departure of the chain gang in chapter xiii (Hugo had documented himself in situ, but had also just read the Mémoires of Vidocq) are translated into a tableau of a grimacing humanity set in hell. It is presented as a visual experience (the Condemned Man is spectator before becoming himself a spectacle): vivid faces of prisoners behind their bars; burning eyes, convulsive movements; clenched fists raised in a gesture of defiance. And it is an experience in sounds: the rattling of the chains, the curses and the strident laughter, the cacophony of voices. The demon-convict remains a thematic feature in the work of Hugo: the convict’s laughter, “echo of the demon’s laughter,” continues to be heard some thirty years later, in the pages of Les Misérables. When the chain gang, the infamous cadène, is glimpsed through the innocent eyes of Cosette, this hallucinatory vision points back to the inferno of the earlier novel. Hugo is quite explicit: “Dante would have believed he saw the seven circles of hell in motion” (x, 651).

Two literary traditions converge in Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné: the Last Judgment, or Dies irae, looming over the Western tradition; the more specifically romantic motif of solitary confinement, symbol of a hellish enclosure in the self. His sentence read, the Condemned Man goes into a state of stupor (ivre et stupéfait); he feels that a “revolution” has taken place inside him. He has discovered his incurable otherness: “...now I clearly perceived something like a fence between the world and me” (iii, 661). This new man deciphers his destiny on the four walls of his cell.

Hugo’s short novel set a trend; it precedes the texts of Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Andreiev, Sartre, Camus, Malraux, in which the prisoner, in a cachot deprived of Pascalian vision, undergoes an apprenticeship in the absurd. To be sure, Hugo draws on well-known images and topics: oozing walls, tempting windows, glimpsed or yearned-for sky, a benignly smiling jailer, dreams of escape, poignant graffiti, the sight of birds associated with the voice of a young girl, typical prison sounds (grating of bolts and locks, jarring of iron staircases), the chaplain’s visit, the attachment of the prisoner to his cell (“Je l’aimais, mon cachot”—iii, 68). And it is true that Vigny, in Cinq-Mars, had already evoked the “strange revolution” (étrange révolution) undergone by the prisoner confronting death. But the experience evoked by Vigny remains abstract: it is a meditation on eternity in the tradition of Pascal’s cachot.

The experience suggested in Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné is of a visceral nature: imprisonment and confrontation with death are proposed in the register of fear and frailty. The Condemned Man is simply not a “hero.” The dialogued preface, “Une Comédie à propos d’une tragédie,” rightly stresses this aspect: “...what a horrible idea to develop, to probe, to analyze, without sparing us a single one, all the physical torments, all the moral tortures, that must be experienced by a man condemned to death, on the day of his execution!” The Condemned Man himself jots down the symptoms of his animal-like terror: headaches, excessive perspiration, cold, shivers, burning eyes, elbow pain, convulsive shudders—symptoms whose cause will also be the cure in “two hours and forty five minutes”! (n, 700.) For fear functions in a temporal perspective; it makes the present exclusive and intolerable.

Here lies the originality of the novel: Hugo confines his protagonist to a present that separates him from his past and denies him his future. Jean Massin speaks of the tyranny of the present indicative, of the cruel presence of an “ironic future.”3 The imagination of the Condemned Man is in fact forced to play on a negative future, a future radically deprived of a consoling dimension. “I think [. . .] that I will no longer think tonight” (iii, 685). Fictional technique and temporal perspective are closely wedded: the “diary” rhythm prefigures Sartre’s La Nausée (“They have just brought me food . . . I have tried to eat . . .”—“A man has just come in . . .”—iii, 694). Hugo also seems to strive toward what will be known as the interior monologue. The solipsistic use of the first person singular, much like the enclosure within the present indicative, confines the character in rhetorical and metaphorical terms. Hugo seems aware of the temporal and subjective challenge: the intellectual “autopsy” is referred to as a detailed, technical record of the intellect’s ultimate motions (procès verbal de la pensée agonisante—iii, 664). Once again we encounter Dostoevsky. Some five decades later, in the introduction to his tale Krotkaia (1876), discussing the relationship between reality and the fantastic, he imagines a hypothetical and invisible stenographer, and gives as his model Hugo’s “masterpiece” La Dernier Jour d’un Condamné.

Dostoevsky rightly stressed the oneric precision of Hugo’s text. If Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné is a novel of ideas, nothing could be further removed from a rational demonstration. The death penalty, as well as images of crime and punishment, are a lifelong obsession with Hugo. Beyond the ideological rejection of the guillotine (even where later he was to justify the Revolution), beyond the early personal encounter with the scaffold, the rigors of the “law” are in his mind obscurely associated with an underlying family drama. And many years later, in 1862, he
claimed still to hear the "frightening cry" of a woman being branded—a spectacle he witnessed in 1818 or 1819, and which allegedly determined his vocation to "fight for ever against the evil actions of the law." This vocation is confirmed by the 1832 preface, which suggests that the novel, written under the influence of Beccaria, should be read as a denunciation of capital punishment.

But this preface, published three years after the novel, and linked to the fiction-pamphlet Claude Gueux, unduly stresses the propagandistic nature of the text. Capital punishment is a live topic at the time. Vigny, in Cinq-Mars, had protested against judicial murder. Hugo, in his preface, calls for a complete reworking of the penal code: he raises the question of the scaffold in revolutionary times: the specter of the political guillotine announces the haunted imagery of much later historical works, as well as the central themes of Quatrevingt-Treize. In a striking passage where the substantive misérables appears, he even sketches out the criminal career of Jean Valjean. All this, however, has little to do with the text of the novel itself. The inspiration of Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné is hallucinatory rather than polemical. The prison, a monstrous presence (espèce d'être horrible), imposes itself as structure and as metaphor. This personification of the edifice leads to visionary contamination between the walls, the body, and the mind:

... it is prison incarnate, it is Bicêtre made flesh. All is prison around me; I find prison in all its forms, in a human form as well as in the form of bolts or iron bars. The wall is a prison of stone; this door is a prison of wood; these turnkeys are prisons of flesh and bone. Prison is a horrible creature, complete, indivisible, half edifice, half human being."

(m., 680)

Incarceration here suggests specular polyvalence. If Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné is indeed a novel of ideas, it is as a game of reflection, a drama of intelligence casting the image of its own thought back to itself. One of the officials finds the prisoner "rather pensive." He has good cause, as we have seen ("I think . . . that I will no longer think tonight"). Is not this novel the account of a mind's self-observation as it watches itself move toward death, "thought by thought" (pensée à pensée—m., 700)? Pensée and idée are among the most frequently recurring substantives, as well as the personifying pronouns that refer to them. The opening signals are telling. The first chapter, barely forty lines long, repeats the word idée three times, and the word pensée four times—not to mention the infinitive penser. To which must be added at least six pronouns referring to that "infernal thought" capable of jealousy, of assuming all sorts of personified forms, of making heard its tyrannical voice, of adhering to the walls of the cell.

Hugo was moving towards a drama of "ideas." In the notes and fragments collected under the title of Feuilles paginées, which belong mostly to the feverishly active year 1827, a figural correspondence is worked out between the images of the skull, the wall, the scaffold, and the intellect. "Each paving stone of the place de Grève [the place of public executions] is perhaps a naked skull"—a sentence that is echoed almost exactly in chapter xlv of the novel. And just after the image of the coupe-tête, which unavoidably summons the specter of the guillotine, this elliptic jotting: "C'est le pugilat de deux idées." These fragments are bound up with another terse remark obviously related to the novel: "They say I exaggerated the guillotine."

The rift between the thinking head and the head-as-object cannot be reduced to black humor. The fixation is only logical: what is at stake is precisely the head. Repeated puns stress this fixation. On the day of the execution, the "merchants of human blood" renting seats with head-splitting calls "criaient à tue-tête" (m., 709). The victim recalls how once, crossing the place de Grève, he turned his head so as not to see the guillotine. Soon it will be different: "Je ne détournerai pas la tête" (m., 692). When he sees the crowd waiting for his own execution, and hears them scream "Chapeaux bas" (Hats down), he remarks to the priest: "Eux les chapeaux, moi la tête" (m., 709). Slang also provides ironic images of disjunction. Hugo displays a range of convict argot, largely gleaned in Vidocq's Mémoires: the protagonist learns that the head is called the Sorbonne (when it meditates) and la trompe (when the executioner cuts it—m., 663). The cleavage between the head as object and subject is thus translated into metaphor by what Hugo considers the supremely metaphoric language of misery: the verbe-forçat. The language of the law further refines the "thinking head" (the "tête qui pense") by throwing it into what is called the "balance of justice" (m., 664). The public prosecutor asks specifically for the head.

The head fixation focuses on a more basic split: the separation from the trunk. The Condemned Man imagines the priest’s remaining with him until "the head is here and the body there" (m., 694). He puzzles over which part the ghost will choose: "Is the specter head or trunk?" (m., 702.) He sees himself as "something" foul (immonde): a head on the one side, a trunk on the other (m., 690). A double principle governs this body-object obsession: the head as an internal and an external reality; the glance of the subject and the glance of the other. At the beginning, in the episode of the chain gang, the victim is still the observed observer; as the text progresses, he increasingly views himself as the seen but unseeing object. Hence the insistence on his execution as spectacle. The words "spectacle" and "spectator" recur with frequency, invariably to suggest a morbid fascination ("avid" curiosity, "avid and cruel spectators"). The crowd, also viewed in terms of heads ("sea of heads," "mob of heads")—a horrible and hateful mob pushing for a good view of the gruesome solemnity—becomes the symbol of the other who rejects him within himself (m., 707-711, 706).

Locked up in his own being, the prisoner experiences what Baudelaire, in a different context, was to call "man’s fearful marriage to himself." The novel opens with the obser-
viation that he must henceforth live alone with his “thought” (“j’habite avec cette pensée, toujours seul avec elle...”). The obsession with the head thus assumes from the outset the value of a tête-à-tête: an intimate confrontation that confuses object and subject. Explicit mentions of a face-to-face in the cell stress the motif of the split personality. He finds himself “face à face” with his condemnation, “seul à seul” with an idea; holding his “heavy head” in his two hands, he withdraws into his own “self.” Courage itself is defined through the acceptance of a tête-à-tête with the fixed idea: “Well then! Let’s be courageous with death, let’s grip this horrible idea with our two hands, and let’s stare into its face” (m, 701).

This confrontation operates in fact as a major metaphorical inversion. For it is not so much prison that imposes itself as the locus of a fixation; that fixation truly “possesses” and imprisons him. It is external reality that here assumes a figural value. The opening signals of the text once again give precious hints. Chapter 1 begins and ends with the identical verbless exclamation (“Condemned to death!”), thus locking the chapter on itself, and prefiguring the locked-in structure of a novel whose very title begins with the terminal adjective “last” (dernier). The beginning of the opening paragraphs (“Now” and “Before”) establishes more than a contrast between life outside and inside of jail: it signals an initiation to a new sense of time. “Each minute had its own idea”: the notion of mental mobility is further stressed by the words “fantasies,” “arabesques,” “embroider,” “unfold” (déroutier). But that was before. Now temporal dynamics have been arrested. “Now I am a captive.” From the outset, the text, through a shift in temporal perspective, internalizes the enclosure. The third paragraph provides the pivot. The prison image is turned upside down: “...my mind is imprisoned in an idea.” From that point on, the development follows its own logic: the prison-thought is inscribed on the walls of the real prison (“cette fatale pensée écrite dans l’horrible réalité qui m’entoure”). This in turn establishes a correspondence between interiority and exteriority; it links the notion of writing to the metaphor of the wall.

The essence of metaphor is in the reversibility. The obsession of imprisonment becomes the prison of obsession. But this is not a one-way operation. The correlative thought-edifice is a recurrent feature in Hugo. In Notre-Dame de Paris: “...toute edifice est une pensée.” Inversely, Frollo states: “...I carry the dungeon within me.” The reference to the great bell of Notre-Dame, the bourdon, suggests that Hugo’s mind was already elaborating basic images of the historical novel. The intertextual bond between the two works is in fact deeper still, as hinted by the analogy of the two cavities, tower and skull, in chapter xxxvi of Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné. “There is something like the sound of bells that shakes the cavities of my brain. ...” As for the “almost co-substantial” coupling of a human being (Quasimodo) and an edifice (the cathedral), it is the obverse of the personification of the prison-edifice (“espèce d’être horrible”—m, 680).

Conversely, the incarcerated brain becomes a prison. Hugo plays on the container image. The brain pulsates against the walls of the skull (“les parois du crâne”—m, 699). The figure is a familiar one in Hugo’s work. In Les Misérables we shall again find these inner partitions of the prison-brain, the “cloisons de notre cerveau.” This metaphorical network relates to the notion of poetic vision. The image of the skull, the cerveau muré, must be read against that other image of the captive brain, somber restricted area where “doubt” weaves and suspends its spider-like web on the ceiling of its dungeon. Doubt, but also visionary transcendence. There is more than plot to explain why, in Quatrevingt-Treize, that other Condemned Man, the dreamer-soldier Gavain, experiences his intensest vision beneath the double vault of a real as well as figural dungeon: the voûte visionnaire of his brain confirms the convertibility of the metaphor.¹⁰

A nightmare, according to Bachelard, is a dungeon.¹¹ The Condemned Man’s cell is also the locus of a specific anguish: the walls on which his destiny is written, walls literally “covered with writing” (graffiti, bizarre drawings, fragments of thoughts left behind by former prisoners) and which assume the function of a “strange book,” keep alive a more fundamental question about the production of the text itself. To write or not to write? At this level, the novel obliquely deals with the writer’s vocation. Chapter vi assumes a special status: it focuses sharply on the confrontation with the idée fixe (seul à seul avec une idée), but also raises in explicit terms the problem of writing. “Since I have the means to write, why wouldn’t I? But to write what?” Prison punishment and poetic vocation are thus bound up; yet a gap is made manifest between saying and doing.

The opening signals once again have proleptic value. The “before” at the beginning of the second paragraph evokes the portrait of a man who, even though he is not called a poet, possesses a poetic nature. His youthful mind is described as “full of fantasies.” He speaks, much as an artist might, of his gifts. “There was a permanent feast in my imagination.” From the “stuff” (étouffé) of life, he elaborates “endless arabesques”: he weaves and textures. But this former self is now dead; the man supremely endowed for the joys of sensibility and creation has vanished. All that remains are vestigial clues. Unlike Claude Gueux, who does not even know how to read, the Condemned Man had a study (a “cabinet”) into which he retreated to work and converse with friends (m, 702). He is a man of culture; he knows Latin. And his first contact with capital punishment is literary: he remembers “having read in some book” that all men are condemned to death (m, 662). But these vestigial memories are also the signs of a cultural malaise, and more precisely of the malaise of culture itself. The Condemned Man is scoffingly addressed as “marquis” by the sardonic convict who inflicts on him his slangy eloquence and brutal laughter. Faced with this verbal realism, symptom of the realities of misery and crime, the protagonist experiences his refined education as guilt, while suffering from an “honest” man’s revulsion for
the outlaw: “I recoiled with horror” (iii, 688). Significantly, he is afraid of physical force. (“Had I refused, he would have struck me with his heavy fists”—iii, 690).

The discovery of legal and social alienation is indeed coupled with the intuition of a more fundamental estrangement. The rift within the self is the reflection of a painful awareness: the presence of the “other,” embodied not by abstract judges, but by the hostile crowd, the horrible people—laughing and screaming—in whose presence cultural refinement is not even worth a sneer. Hence a fascination akin to hatred that fuses into a single otherness the convict as well as the spectators of the execution. The “others,” with their “atrocious snickering” and their fingers pointed at him, are like demons about to assault his cell (iii, 673–674). The crowd waits for him with a furious joy. Hence also the prevailing notion of the spectacle and the aggressive glance. The presence of “avid and cruel spectators” moreover stresses a particular form of guilt. The collective glance takes on its full intensity during the nightmare that peoples his cell with figures carrying their head in their left arm. They shake their fists at him. Only one figure does not accuse him: the parricide (iii, 669). The affective network parricide-eye-guilt, central in Hugo’s work, spreads beyond the confines of this novel.

But what the novel does suggest within its own confines is that the poetic spirit, plein de fantaisies, dies, or is denied, only to allow for the emergence of a new consciousness. To write is henceforth conceived as a tragic activity: one writes on the wall, with one’s own blood. The Condemned Man thinks of his daughter who might read him: “...she must know...” why the name I leave her is covered with blood” (iii, 706). The old man is dead: the reborn consciousness knows that its place is with the victims, amidst the captives of this world. It knows that a “significant affinity”—as Albert Béguin put it—binds the destiny of the poet to that of the prisoner. Ever since “Le Poète dans les Révolutions,” Hugo did not tire proclaiming this affinity.

La prison est son sanctuaire,
Et l’échafaud est son trône.

Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné marks, however, a turning point. Theme and private phantasms have come to merge.

Dostoevsky too, in his moving letter to his brother, records the death of the esthete. The “head” that has lived for art has been brutally severed. (The image of decapitation, since Dostoevsky had been threatened with the firing squad, is clearly another allusion to Hugo’s novel.) Nonetheless he declares, a few paragraphs later, that life without the possibility of writing would be intolerable. And here is the point: writing will never again be the same activity. The new man becomes another: a man among men. Hugo liked to sum up his life with the terse formula: “solitaire, solidaire.” This lapidary statement supports Georges Poulet’s contention that no writer has lived out more intensely the “solitude of the self” and the “solitude of the world”; and yet the one exists only to the extent that it is fused with the other. “There is no real otherness because there is no real personality.” And indeed, the Condemned Man remains nameless; his own daughter, who does not recognize him, calls him “Monsieur” (iii, 704). Is this not because, at the heart of this novel, Hugo has situated the problem of the writer who strips himself of his own physiognomy, so as to find a voice which will never again be quite the same?

To Escape Is To Be Saved

This depersonalized, though by no means anonymous, voice henceforth speaks for the world. A rhetoric of space characterizes Hugo’s image of the poet: conversations with the ocean, boundless visions, the seer’s attraction to immense perspectives that guide him toward the unexplored center of an enigma. The prison seems forgotten. The cell appears incompatible with this glance toward the unknown.

Hugo likes to pose as nature’s privileged interlocutor; he sees himself as the bard of freedom and movement. Whether he flees the city, stares at windswept clouds, interrogates the tumultuous surface of the sea, freedom and space are linked in a rather conventional manner. Mountains symbolize proud independence. Flight toward the upper regions repeatedly tempts his imagination. Hence the frequent image of the open or half-open window, and the many dreams of levitation. All is in motion; all in fact is movement. Everywhere Hugo senses the sexual urge (the rut) of infinity. He associates poetic genius with the lack of all restraints. Constriction of any sort is for him a symptom of decadence. What he exalts above all is the potential of man, a potential defined in “anti-prison” terms. “Le monstre a le carcan, l’homme a la liberté,” proclaims the oracular voice of the “Bouche d’ombre.” God wants freedom, explains the Angel of Rationalism in the philosophical poem Dieu. This statement, less simplistic than appears at first, casts light on Bishop Myriel’s decision, early in Les Misérables, to have all locks removed. His house, before he moved into it, was armed with bolts and locks “like a prison door” (xi, 69).

The prison image, even when projected in such preteritonal terms, thus remains a permanent feature in Hugo’s work. Some of the oppressive visions of incarceration and degradation can be traced to early encounters with brutality: human limbs hanging from trees along an Italian road, scaffolds and bodies glimpsed by the young boy during his early travels in Spain. A case could also be made for strictly literary influences. The setting and the props of some of his works seem to be borrowed from Gothic fiction: rattling chains, spiral staircases, threatening fortresses. Keys, corridors, traps, are constantly mentioned. Frollo, who communicates secretly from cloister to church, seems to come straight out of a novel by Lewis or Ann Radcliffe. Even more suggestive of this Gothic influence are the haunted houses, the living structures (Notre-Dame sets itself in motion, its heavy columns become gruesome legs), the edifices that bury and are in turn buried alive.
Yet, for Hugo, this is not a passing fashion. His fascination for macabre scenes and for detailed accounts of tortures (redhot pincers, molten lead, wheels and racks, ships and shredding flesh) is part of a larger vision. Les Voix intérieures, which offer the bucolic notes of “A Virgile,” also impose the convulsive images of “A Albert Dürer”: forests of monstrous trees, with twisted branches, knotted underbrush, contorted vegetation—threatening excre- cences that seize and crush. The whirlpool, the vortex, the abyss are even more fundamental obsessions. “Gouffre amer” is not merely a cliché, conveniently rhyming with mer; it is a key formula. Text after text alludes to the love-fear of the vertiginous fall, of the trap, of the gaping void. This terror of the fall, in Dieu, is qualified as the “formidable amour de l’abîme.” Hugo’s Satan is a prisoner of infinity.

In his arsenal of terror, Hugo treasures of course more precise images of constriction and incarceration: oneric killings (the plafond effrayant) in “A Celle qui est voilée” (M, 339); endless varieties of webs and spiders; chains of all sizes (the “titanic” chain hanging from the axe tree near the Thénardier inn is a chain “worthy of a convict-Goliath”); caves and caverns; visions of granitic, geometric, immobilizing shapes, such as the heavy stone fortresses in Les Burgraves and La Légende des siècles.

Certain stone nightmares bring to mind Piranesi, whose name comes up in various contexts. In Les Orientales, Hugo had already projected a somber tower of Babel, a formidable “pile of towers” (m, 133). One of the settings of Marie Tudor is a room with stairs leading one does not know where. The immense edifice in “La Pente de la rêveverie,” a prefiguration of the metaphysical wall of La Légende des siècles, is an avatar of the Biblical tower. Babel is indeed a recurrent motif; it rhymes with Abel. In fact, Cain is never far off—and Cain is for Hugo the embodiment of crime and of bad conscience.8

The poem in which the Piranesian perspective is explicitly brought to bear on the Babel image is “Puits de l’Inde! . . .” in Les Rayons et les Ombres (“Effrayantes Babels que rêvait Piranèse!”)—a crucial poem which juxtaposes dizzying stairs and ramps, chaotic pilings-up of walls and landings, dark and damp cells, spiders in crypts, oozing partitions, threatening structures that seem to come to life. Dripping and trickling (the suintemt of the “cold drop” is elsewhere compared to a tear of infinity—ix, 315) suggest the action of time: a drop can in time hollow out an immense well. In one of the early episodes of Dieu, a drop of water scoops out gigantic holes, builds vast pediments, titanic portals, huge temple-like structures. Wherever these Piranesian effects appear—apocalyptic visions, intermingling images of scaffolds, archaeological rubble and massive prisons haunted by Michelangelesque silhouettes—the result is a figure of incarceration.46

To this must be added a wide range of subterranean images (the underground hole, the labyrinth, forms and beings buried alive) suggestive of entrapment in hell. Even in the luminous Orientales, the repeated epigraphs drawn from Dante reveal darker preoccupations. Every reader of Hugo’s poetry—even the early one—is familiar with the broadening spirals that lead towards underworld Last Judgment scenes. The repeated image of the labyrinth is equally striking: the Paris sewer system in Les Misérables, this gut of the modern Babylon, is filled with ducts, cacea, blind alleys, crypts, ancient cells. The Roman sewer in Les Châtiments is another hideous intestine whose fetid, suppurring quality suggests contamination and moral pathology. “Je suis le regarder formidable du puîts,” Hugo writes in Dieu (O.H., p. 22). He likes to define himself as the one who looks searchingly into the pit. Subterranean horror fascinates him, as does the theme of the inferi: not only because he cannot tolerate the idea of eternal punishment, but because he is haunted by the notion of death-in-life. Hence repeated scenes involving people buried alive: feeble voices of half-buried soldiers after the battle of Waterloo; Jean Valjean accepting the stratagem of being buried; the condemned man in Torquemada forced to descend step by step into the hole that is to be walled up.

Hugo’s vocabulary betrays this central obsession: the words carcan, écrou, fer, cachot, geôle, trappe, oubliette, barreaux, grilles, soupirail, cage (of iron, bronze, or stone), cellule, bagne, verrou, captif, boulet, the verbs ga-rîter, and murer appear with striking frequency. The prison image serves as a metaphor for a wide range of ideas: the restrictive rules of neo-classical tragedy (negative value), Eschylean fate (positive value), insomnia, states of alienation. As soon as monastic rules or values are brought up, the prison image almost automatically appears. In Les Misérables, the correlation is thematized: the convent of the Petit-Picpus, a blissful refuge for Colette and Jean Valjean, is for the latter a lugubrious reminder of the penitentiary. Throughout his work, Hugo mobilizes images of incarceration, as well as of tortures, physical degradation, and jail-rot. The digression on slang in Les Misérables becomes a pretext for evoking the underground jail, the hell-like sepulcher below the Châtelet. Elsewhere, he conjures up hallucinatory figures from myth, from literature, or from historical legends, such as Dante’s Ugolino (whom hunger in jail drove to feed on his children) or from the Man with the Iron Mask, whom he planned to make the hero of his drama Les Jumeaux.7

Many texts of Hugo in fact take place in prison, or turn around the theme of imprisonment: Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné, Claude Gueux, Marie Tudor, Les Burgraves, Les Misérables, La Fin de Satan (an important section of which is entitled “La Prison”), L’Homme qui rit with its penal cave and ritual of torture—not to mention diverse poems on Napoleon as the great captive. Notre-Dame de Paris, Hugo’s first elaborate fiction, can be read as systematic variations on the theme of claustro. Frollo is walled in by his books (solipsism of the intellect), just as Quasimodo is walled in by his deafness and his misshapen body. Spiritual deformity is in turn converted into metaphors of incarceration: Quasimodo’s soul is a chained psyche, in a dark cavern filled with blind alleys. Even
sexual repression and sadistic urges are translated into prison images. Frollo’s lust convulsively lifts the “chain of vows”: he yearns to copulate with his victim in her sordid cell, while proclaiming (motif of moral deformity): “I carry the cell within me.” Conversely, the cell-like room of the archdeacon, as well as the cathedral itself, are viewed as spaces of confinement. As for the numerous literal chains and literal jails in the novel, they seem to correspond to the private obsession which his wife Adèle, without suspecting the full meaning of the image, projects in Victor Hugo raconté par un témoin de sa vie (iv, 1192): the poet, about to begin Notre-Dame de Paris, bought himself ink, a heavy woolen sweater, locked up all his clothes so as not to be tempted to go out, and “entered into his novel as into a prison.”

A poetry of escape is elaborated through the metaphor of enclosure. Melodramatic flights take on moral and metaphysical meanings. In the cloistered night of Dieu, one hears the “fleeing” of the winds (évasion des vents—O.H., p. 27). Accounts of prisoners’ escapes are proposed as exploits of the highest order: Jean Valjean’s repeated achievement against all odds, that of thirty prisoners in Les Misérables who manage to vanish through the canal of the latrines, the mysterious disappearance of Clauvesous, the suspenseful escape of Thénardier. Such exploits are considered with something akin to awe. Hugo marvels at these “bold inventions of the penitentiary.” The link between artistic genius and the prisoners’ escape feat is made explicit: il y a des Benvenuto Cellini au bagne (xi, 587). These dynamics of escape ultimately transform even the most sordid escape into an inspired individual. “The effort toward liberation is no less surprising than the wing beat toward the sublime” (xi, 691). For Hugo, every escape is an allegory of the creative act. Poets, he explains in William Shakespeare, have revelatory “échappées” which allow them to pierce the clouds. (The substantive échappée means not only breakaway, but glimpse, and even vision.) “An escape is a cure” (Une évasion, c’est une guérison), he writes in Les Misérables (xi, 412). What is involved is the liberation of the soul, the freeing of the spirit. The “fearful thirst for freedom” sanctifies man, metabolizing stupidity into instinct, instinct into intelligence, intelligence into genius (xi, 691). All nature strives towards liberty. It is the itinerary of spiritual progress and universal redemption. The comet flying through space appears to Hugo as a sinister world cast loose in search of absolute purity:

Est-ce qu’on ne voit pas que c’est une échappée?
Peut-être est-ce un enfer dans le ciel envelopé.

(xv, 753)

PRISON AS INCUBATION

This dream of metaphysical freedom and of total redemption carries us to the heart of Hugo’s visionary world. Originally, however, the prison obsession operates at the socio-political level. The dream is at first limited to the destruction of all physical jails.

Saint-Lazare—il faudra broyer cette bâtisse!
Il n’en restera pas pierre sur pierre un jour!

(viii, 708)

This demolition-wish in Les Châtiments reflects a rebellion against all abuse of power. Prison, in this context, is both symbol and symptom of social injustice. Hugo turns vehement when speaking on behalf of the victims and the disinherited. Christ, Socrates, Jean Huss appear to him as archetypal figures of glorious outcasts. He prides himself on being the champion of a “damned” humanity, on being one of the first “socialists” (ix, 255; xii, 274). His hatred of the jailer is equalled only by his hatred of the hangman. The horror-fascination for the scaffold that allowed him to imagine the anguish of the Condemned Man still animates, many years later, the noble figure of Saint François de Paule in Torquemada. It could be said of Hugo what he himself said of Bishop Myriel in Les Misérables: “To have seen the guillotine was for him a shock. . . . The scaffold is a vision.”

There is ample evidence that Hugo documented himself in some detail on prison conditions: the convict scenes in Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné, the workshop in Claude Gueux, the Force prison “punishment chamber” in Les Misérables. An abandoned fragment of the latter novel is entirely given over to prison mores. Prison slang fascinates him. When he was elevated to the dignity of Pair de France, he made use of his new prerogatives to visit the jail of the Conciergerie. In Choses vues, he describes this inspection: the feeling of darkness and oppression, an odor sui generis, the death-cell, the torture chamber. The visit stimulates his imagination. In 1847, he is at it again, visiting a death row. In 1855, he asks the Provost of Guernesey for permission to visit the island’s prison. “L’Echafaud” of La Légende des siècles draws on this new inspection. Not only the décor (the thickness of the walls, the quality of light and air) holds his interest, but the psychology and behavior of the prisoners.

Society is severely indicted. For it is society that breeds crime. The father stealing bread for his child, the child forced to work under inhuman conditions, already live in a prison-hell. In Les Châtiments, Hugo evokes the horrible cave-dwellings of Lille, where a sordid sub-proletariat dies a daily death. The real prison, where these victims of the social order unavoidably end up, accelerates the process of degradation. Prison soils and distorts. It is ironic and revealing that Inspector Javert, the inverted image of the redeemed criminal Valjean whom he pursues, was born in prison. A chapter of Les Misérables is entitled “Embryonic formation of crime in the prison incubation” (Formation embryonnaire des crimes dans l’incubation des prisons). Injustice produces and justifies hatred. What does one hear in the penitentiary? “An immense curse, gnashing of teeth, hatred, desperate malice, an enraged cry against the human association, a sarcastic outburst against heaven” (xi, 426).

This curse, seeming to rise out of one of Dante’s bolge, must be met with immense love and pity. Higher even than the demands of justice, such love and pity are the su-
The political significance of the prison image is a permanent feature of Hugo’s writing. For him also the Bastille is the chief symbol of the Ancien Régime. But, like Michelet, he is aware that the Revolution has not put an end to the Bastille. The political symbolism logically becomes more pronounced as he moves away from his early conservative position. By the time he writes the vituperative Les Châtiments, after Louis Bonaparte’s coup d’état, all of France appears to him as a huge iron cage. And by the metaphor, he glimpses the suffering of the political victims: in French Guinea, in Bilhah, in anrless African penitentiaries. From his own exile, he predicts that the inflammatory torches of rebellion will soon fill Paris with awe and hope, that the hour of retribution is near. “Brisez vos fers, forcez vos geôles,” is his impassioned call to civil mutiny (vii, 684, 696, 716). The “sacred right” of Revolution haunts Hugo more than ever, after his conversion to Republican ideals. His last novel, Quatrevingts-Trente (1874), echoes his fear of popular violence expressed in the 1832 preface to Le Dernier Jour d’un Condamné (v, 484): “In times of revolution, watch out for the first head that falls. It makes the people thirsty for blood” (Elle met le people en appétit). Yet—at the surface at least—Hugo seems to have appeased his doubts (but how is one to reconcile hatred of violence and belief in history’s justice?) by absorbing Revolutionary excesses as a necessary remedy, by pitting the transitory against the eternal order.

Les révolutions, qui viennent tout venger,
Font un bien éternel dans leur mal passager.

(ix, 254)

It is because France towers as the “mother of revolutions” that its political enslavement by Napoleon-the-Little appears to him as a particularly hideous crime.

The Dark Captive

The myth-making process is more fundamental, however, than historical considerations. Even in the most political lines of Les Châtiments, where Hugo’s indignation enjoys free rein, it is the image of the glorious Convict (the forçat) that prevails. This image of the demonic convict, merging with that of the social and political victim, ultimately assumes metaphysical significance. For Hugo, as for Dostoevsky, the penitentiary is the house of the dead, the locus of the Dies irae, of a living hell-death (an affreuse mort vi-vante—ix, 206), but also of a possible redemption.

The penitential symbol of rebellion and damnation is first a symbol of the status of man. “Mankind is in jail” (Le genre humain est au cachot), cries out Gwyplaine in L’Homme qui rit (xv, 350). Echoes of Dante blend with echoes of Pascal. It is in the philosophical poems of Les Contemplations that this image of the cachot is most insist-ent. In the mournful poems “Pauca Meae,” man is shown as a convict weighted down by a heavy chain. In “Pleurs dans la nuit,” he is the somber prisoner (reclus ténébres) behind iron bolts and inflexible doors. In “Ce que dit la bouche d’ombre,” he is the regal captive, the majestic convict, sobbing in his oppressive cell. The motif in fact becomes redundant. In Dieu (O.H., p. 128), man glimpses the world through a hole in the prison wall; his one dream is to escape. Yet escape poses a serious problem. For man is prison; the fallen spirit has been transfixed into matter. Hugo’s vision implies metempsychosis and a hierarchy of spirits, beings, and things. The oracular voice from the dark, the bouche d’ombre explains: “L’ange devient l’esprit, et l’esprit devient l’Homme.” The fallen spirit, transfixed into matter, becomes the jail. The lapsed soul has been transmuted into man-prison, animal-prison, tree-prison, stone-prison. But this degradation also means nostalgia for what was lost. Hugo’s Lucifer cries out his hope for an upward movement: “Laissez-moi remonter, gour-fret!” Hence the title promising redemption: La Fin de Satan. The end will be the beginning: the law of Hugo’s world is a return up to daylight.23

Hugo’s originality, with regard to political and theological thinking, is to situate incarceration within man, to make of man’s own guilt his jailor. What is the “hidden cave” in Les Burggraves if not the metaphor of remorse, the private enclosure where the memory of crime continues to ooze? The spider is caught in its own web. Once again the “voice of darkness” is oracular, as it states the nature of this self-incarceration: “Toute faute qu’on fait est un cachot qu’on s’ouvre.” This formula casts light on the figure of Cain which haunts the poet’s imagination. Psychoanalytic criticism tends to interpret this figure as the expression of Hugo’s guilt toward his rival-brother who died insane. And surely the figure of Cain has intimate meaning. But does it relate only to the brother? Is Cain not the archetype of all of nature’s perverters, the “ancestor of the dark creatures,” as the poet puts it in La Fin de Satan? The nail, the stick, and the stone that served for fratricide have become War, Gallows, and Prison. Above all, Cain is the eternal prisoner of his inured conscience. For crime is the true dungeon: Cain cannot flee from the eye of God (x, 441-442).

The paradox is flagrant: on the one hand, there is the horror of crime and punishment; on the other, prison becomes a holy place. Prison horror leads to nightmareish realism. The typical prisoner is described in his agitated immobility, permanently re-awakening to his desperate condition.

Le capif, va, vient, tremble: il fait de vagues pas,
Sent à son pied sa chaîne et s’arrête farouche.
Boit à sa cruche, mord à son pain noir, se couche,
Se lève, se rendort, tressaille, et, réveillé,

(La Fin de Satan, x, 1780)

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Yet in the earliest Odes (i, 811) prison is already called a sanctuary. The paradox is of a metaphysical nature: the convict is compared to the devil, and the devil in turn presented as a convict; inversely, the convict appears as a Promethean visionary, as hero and angel ("infamous angel" to be sure, and "hideous hero") and ultimately, in the final pages of Les Misérables, as a radiant, deified figure. Jean Valjean, in the apotheosis of his death, becomes Christ-like.

The pivot of the paradox is the theme of redemption. Here Hugo's ambiguities toward solitude become most revealing. He condemns solitude without reservations. It is a curse. "All of hell is in this word: solitude," he writes in La Fin de Satan. Solitude dehumanizes; it is a form of castration. The world, in the eyes of Hugo, is a "totality where no one is alone" (Dieu, O.H., 133). To cut oneself off from others is suicide. It is also a moral desertion. Woe to him who abandons his brothers!

_Bête aveugle aux lieux d'en haut,_
_Pour y prendre l'âme indignée_
_Suspend sa toile d'araignée_
_Au crâne, plafond du cachot._

(ix, 358)

But the ambiguity remains: solitude means Moses on the "mountain" as well as Satan in the "abyss."

_Toute solitude est un gouffre._
_Toute solitude est un mont._

(ix, 203)

This ambiguity is didactically illustrated in the long digression on convents in Les Misérables. The monastic life, with its mortification of the flesh, is a wasting away, a form of emasculation, a parasitic teeming hostile to progress, a basic dehumanization. Yet in those same pages on the Petit-Picpus convent, monastic virtues are extolled: the practice of equality and fraternity, the venerability of voluntary exile and renunciation, prayer as an opening unto the unknown. Behind it all, a personal note: the image of the convent is associated with the figures of the mother and the fiancée. Some of Hugo's intimate childhood impressions go back to the Parisian house and garden situated on the ground of the former Feuillantines convent.

Anchoritic and cenobitic aspirations compete with each other throughout his work. In his earliest poems, the "isolated cell," as well as the hermit's "desert," appear to him as privileged settings for the visionary poet. As an epigraph to his 25th Ode, he quotes Calderon's lines in praise of the amenity soledad (m, 463). Long before his own self-imposed exile, he described himself, in a sumptuous line, as "the banished, proud and solitary king" (le roi banni, superbe et solitaire)—m, 300. Solitude is the apanage of the strong. When Hugo qualifies himself as _l'homme des solitudes_ (the plural gives it a special dimension), he raises himself to the level of the free and mighty figures of his poems: the Cid who claims to be his own cage and his own key; Masferrer, a lonely "eagle" inebriated with space: Welf, fierce and free in his tower. It is a tragic, but also a creative solitude. Divine inspiration is to be found far from the crowd:

_Dieu t'attend dans les solitudes;_
_Dieu n'est pas dans les multitudes._

(vi, 26)

And so is love. Hugo's dream world favors the happy enclosure, the privileged garden: memories, no doubt, of the conventual childhood garden "closed in by high walls," of the "solitary garden," evoked by the Condemned Man, which later appears again as Cosette's and Marius' love paradise in Les Misérables.

As for visionary solitude, it is often conceived in terms of altitude or flight into space (iv, 388). The poem "Magnitude parvi" (ix, 204) tells of vatic solitude that leads to the
impenetrable realm of le démesuré—a favorite notion of Hugo, meaning the creatively excessive, the immoderate, the boundless. Solitude, in this prophetic perspective, implies an expansion toward infinity. These fervent stanzas do indicate that, despite his horror-fascination, Hugo also conceives of a happy prison. If indeed enclosure is a refuge (Esmeralda in the Rat’s Hole of the Reclusée, Valjean in the confined space of the Petit-Picpus), it also functions as the locus of inner freedom. The four walls of the cell serve the reverie of superior souls. Indeed Hugo reinforces the image by reversing the terms of the metaphor: intellectual concentration becomes the equivalent of prison walls (“... ces absorptions profondes... qui emprisonnent même le regard et qui équivalent à quatre murs”—xi, 649).

Visionary occultation is the obverse of spiritual flight. In either case, the prison symbol serves the dream of freedom. Salvation through prison is the exemplary itinerary of Jean Valjean. The Petit-Picpus convent—a prison shelter for the escapee—is a necessary stage, just as the escape through the sewer system implies an ascent through the fall. Valjean sees the light in the darkest hour. In Choses vues, Hugo explains: “When one is imprisoned one finds light in the darkest cave.” Not everyone of course is up to such trials. Hence the ambiguous status of solitude. “Solitude disturbs those it does not illumine” (vii, 966). But, on the other hand: “In profound souls isolation develops a particular wisdom that goes beyond man” (xv, 557).

That goes beyond man—such potential for grandeur and illumination justifies the conception of the mythic convict, of the Prometheus forcé. The titan-slaves of La Légende des siècles are his brothers. The prodigious satyr who, before the assembled gods, sings a paean to Man, reflects in his eyes the stolen fire. Prometheus, for Hugo, is “vanquished righteousness” (xii, 247). He is the chained liberator, admirable in the bitter enjoyment of his own tragedy.

A psycho-historical transfer brings myth to bear on autobiography. Hugo reads Napoleon as a modern Prometheus. On the rock of Saint-Helena, he is the “captive giant” hailed by misfortune. Several poems (“Deux îles,” “Lui”) reveal him in a tragic pose. The most striking image appears in the famous “L’Expiation,” where he is shown nailed to the hideous rock, with a vulture eating away at his heart. The “Homerian spectacle” of this chained Titan is again evoked in “Le Retour de l’Empereur.”

The autobiographical elaboration is obvious. Hugo himself had a vocation for exile. In his juvenile Odes he already assumed an exile’s pose. As for the real period of exile, after Louis Napoleon’s coup d’état in 1851—a self-exile he voluntarily prolonged—it only strengthened his vocation. Grandiloquent lines in Les Châtiments express his pride:

\[
\text{Je t’aime, exil! douleur, je t’aime!} \\
\text{Tristesse, sois mon diadème.}
\]

(vii, 616)

This stance of tragic joy is of course bound to the conviction that all great poets have been exiled, that exile of some sort is a requisite for greatness. In 1824 (Hugo is barely 22 years old), he observes: “Dante was banned before he became a poet” (ii, 473).

Such glorification of exile is hardly distinguishable from glorification of imprisonment. In Hugo’s terms, the shadow of the prison bars casts a light comparable to a saint’s nimbus or glory.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{J’admire, à vérité, plus que toute auréole,} \\
\text{Plus que le nimbe ordent des saints en oraison,} \\
\text{Plus que les trônes d’or devant qui tout s’efface,} \\
\text{L’ombre que font sur ta face} \\
\text{Les barreaux d’une prison.}
\end{align*}
\]

(viii, 274)

Even these lines have an autobiographic ring; they were addressed to his sons who, as editors of L’Evénement, had been jailed. Hugo later generalized, ironically: “Where would thought lead if not to prison?” (xi, 158.) After all, Voltaire’s career began in the Bastille! But there is also the almost religious conviction that the prisoner, much like the pauper, is venerable. In a discarded fragment of Les Misérables, Hugo recalls that Tertullian named prisoners and slaves the “preferred ones,” the praebentiae. To suffer is to deserve. In “Dolor” (Les Contemplations), suffering is blessed for providing a key to heaven: “Les souffrances sont des faveurs.” In the poem “Liberté” (La Légende des siècles) this spiritualization of the prisoner is more explicit still. “Wherever a prisoner cries and screams, God is witness” (“Partout où pleure et crie un captif, Dieu regarde”). The prisoner-martyr becomes a mediator between the human and the divine.

The Abolished Prison

The mediating witness is of course the poet as defined in “Les Mages.” Hugo proclaims the vatic mission of the visionary artist. Dark witnesses of space (noirs témoins de l’espace): the spatializing of the search for the ideal is a common topos. What characterizes Hugo is that elevation appears as flight; the movement towards light first implies a cage and the ability to make one’s way through bars.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ils sont le vrai, le saint, le juste,} \\
\text{Apparaissant à nos barreaux.} \\
\text{Nous sentons, dans la nuit mortelle,} \\
\text{La cage en même temps que l’aile.}
\end{align*}
\]

(ix, 360-361)

The effort to attain is bound to the discovery of a breach. The political context—in Les Châtiments, Hugo sees art as a chain-breaking activity (vii, 599)—banalizes the prisoner metaphor. Its full force is achieved as soon as it is transposed to a metaphysical context. In Dieu (S.G., 78) Hugo asserts that the thinker, navigator-explorer of the infinite, always dreaming of a beyond, sets out to climb space, or better still to force his way into a beyond through an act of transcendental burglary. The word “effraction” is here converted into a redemptive signal. The in comes to signify out.
This double action of flight and breakthrough, linked in either case to the theme of imprisonment, symbolizes the visionary enterprise of the “Mages” determined to find the cleft in the wall. The wall, as a poetic figure, looms in fact everywhere in the work of Hugo. Walls, barriers, ceilings represent the fascination of the unseen. The black curtain of “La Vision de Dante” and the wall of violence in Dieu imply partitions that conceal the mystery of things. They suggest the immured unknown. At the beginning of Notre-Dame de Paris, Hugo writes that there is something utterly intriguing about a “wall behind which something goes on.” The idea of a wall that prevents and promises a revelation, the “incurable desire” to peer over it, are to be found throughout Hugo’s work. The high walls of the Feuillantines garden—the garden of his childhood and of first love—surely contributed to the sense of mystery and impenetrability.

In a broader perspective, the wall signifies spiritual blindness. In the 13th Ode (“L’Antéchrist”), the poet has Satan erect a “funereal wall” between man and heaven. But the image also functions as the symbol of the hidden God, the Deus absconditus, who sets man “on the black side of the dark barrier” (ix, 330). In any case, the wall implies a larger space; it indicates that the world is not confined. “To disappear is to reveal oneself” was the original title of the poem “Suprématie” in La Légende des siècles. In Dieu, a sinister lock, a heavenly latch, an immense bolt protect divine mystery. As for man, in solitary confinement, imprisoned like a fly “beating against dim windowpanes,” he seeks an opening (O.H., 25). For he will never be content to remain on this side of the wall. The sequestered soul will search for a way out. Flashes of light open up hallucinating vistas. Now and then the obstacle becomes almost transparent; no longer a wall, nor even a fog-bank: a web. How is one to prevent the prisoner’s yearning for escape; how quell man’s desire to crash into the infinite? Who can say, asks Hugo, “you will go no further?” Thus the “Mages” assail the unknown:

[Ils] parlent à ce mystère,  
Il s’interrogent l’éternel,  
Ils appellent le solitaire,  
Ils montent, ils frappent au ciel.

(They speak to this mystery,  
They question the eternal,  
They summon the recluse,  
They ascend, they beat at heaven’s gate.)

The image of the breach extends and elevates the cell imagery. Certain key verbs (to open, pierce, bore, slit, gape, crack) correspond to the desire to cross over and reach an invisible goal. Everywhere perspectives are glimpsed through narrow openings; mists or veils part, affording limitless views. Booz, in his dream, sees the gate of heaven “ajar.” “La Pente de la réverie” begins in front of a window, symbol of a thousand perspectives that each gust of wind reveals to the poet’s glance. In “Magnitudo parvi,” the eye pierces through the mirror. Everywhere there is the search for openings, for “fatal chunks” (brèches fatales). Imagination is the great diver sounding the deep. “Mes yeux plongeaient plus loin que le monde réel” (My eyes plunged farther than the real world). The verbs “to sound” and “to dive” are also privileged terms. “J’ai plongé dans le gouffre et l’ai trouvé profond.” “In “La Vision de Dante,” there are two gates: one opens onto ethereal space, the other is the mouth of the nether regions. This passage to the inferi is a recurrent feature: the ever-broadening spiral in “La Pente de la réverie,” the enormous spiral in “Après une lecture de Dante,” the descent towards the invisible in the Parisian sewers, the Titan’s escape through the well he digs (La Légende des siècles). But this descent is an ascension. “Whether one moves up or down, one only goes towards God,” says the slave-architect in “Le Travail des captifs.” By virtue of digging, one rediscovers light. Thus in Dieu Hugo speaks of the “supreme ascension of the fall.” Death itself, at the end of the poem, is described in terms of a breakthrough.

The prison imagery thus encompasses the entire range of man’s spiritual adventure. “Earthly clausure is an escape to heaven,” Hugo writes in a notebook of 1860. The remark casts light on a series of recurring images: the prophet who sees the world open up through a crack; the gaze of the solitary dreamer whose vision extends beyond the stars; vast panoramas glimpsed from cells; narrow enclosures with “the sky for a ceiling.” In Dieu (O.H., 110), paradise is described through dungeon slits.

This rip caused by the “wind of infinity” (Dieu, O.H., 24), this partition that intensifies the hunger for the absolute, imply the desire to navigate on the twin seas of time and space. Yet there is terror in this desire. The will to fathom the unfathomable is arrogant and perilous. The vatic dreamer becomes a “prower along heaven’s barrier,” about to commit a crime—the crime of Icarus or of Nemrod, who, in his flying cage, takes off to conquer space and is then punished by God (La Fin de Satan). The terrifying ether should discourage even the hardiest. “Plein ciel,” a poem of utopian aeronautics, describes this spatial terror:

Pas si loin! pas si haut! redescendons. Restons  
L’homme, restons Adam . . .

Dieu begins with the advice to remain within the limits of mankind, locked within the human circle. The Sibyl in La Fin de Satan also counsels sedentary prudence. God wants to be contemplated, not looked at.

This terror in the face of the infinite explains the mortal pallor and dreadful cry of the poet at the end of “La Pente de la réverie.” One runs the risk of madness when confronting limitless space. There is nothing to hold on to. Infinity itself becomes a prison. One feels, as one of the voices in Dieu explains, thrown “into space, yet into jail.” Inferi proposes the image of an unwalled prison of the impalpable, a prison-space where nothing arrests the upward drift. These spaceless confinements are named lazarets de l’infini. Beyond the uncanny prison-globes and planet-jails stretches out an eternity that tolerates no intrusion.
Yet Hugo sings of the “wild will” (folle volonté) to fathom the unfathomable. Whatever the danger or impossibility of the venture, man wants to affirm himself in space; he aspires to read “the infinite work and the eternal poem.” What counts is the joy of liberation. For if Hugo’s God remains hidden, he nonetheless wants man’s emancipation from the shadows; he wants for man a freedom that delivers him from eternal hell. A double liberation: as humanity moves towards light, it also moves towards forgiveness.

Redemption, in Hugo’s terms, could in fact be called prison abolished. “L’univers Châtiment monte à l’univers joie” (Dieu, O.H., 140). Such indeed is the meaning of Saint François de Paule’s words in Songe: “Never a chain, never a cell.” The notion of progress has been transposed to the metaphysical realm. Just as social progress will abolish life imprisonment and capital punishment, so an immense pardon will reintegrate Judas amidst the elect. “Pardon is greater than Cain” (Dieu, O.H., 91). In the name of the victims, Hugo invokes pity for the jailor as well as for the hangman (ix, 313).

Joy in redemption, yes. But first comes the experience of confinement. Numerous passages describe universal pardon through the image of the abolished jail. “No eternal hell” (Pas d’enfer éternel) says the bouche d’ombre, the voice from the dark: a good enough reason for rejecting, or rather for transcending the penal notions of Christianity. “No eternal hell,” repeats the Angel in Dieu. For it is inconceivable that God punishes eternally and that paradise is a balcony overlooking the gallows. “No prison is eternal”—was already man’s dream in the poem “Océan” (La Légende des siècles). And in the last lines of La Fin de Satan, at the instant of great pardon, God explains: “prison once destroyed abolishes Gehenna” (la prison détruite abolit la géhenne). Joy in redemption; nothing could be clearer. But for liberation to acquire its full beauty and meaning, it was first necessary, as in the case of Jean Valjean in Les Misérables, to know imprisonment and darkness; it was necessary to go through the evil narrows (rétrécissement vicieux) of the sewer. There, however, the light and the exit were to be found. For no one knows better than the prisoner the longing for a lost paradise.

Notes


2. Such a density was denied by Jules Janin (see chapter xxv of L’Ane mort et la Femme guillotinée, and Nodier’s article in Journal des Débats, 26 February 1829.)


7. Œuvres complètes, Le Club Français du Livre, iii, 1153, 1199, 1196, 1195.

8. Ibid., iv, 154, 233.

9. Ibid., xi, 361; ix, 292, 358.

10. Ibid., xv, 504-505.


15. The psychoanalytic criticism of Charles Baudoin (Psychoanalyse de Victor Hugo, Editions du Mont-Blanc, Geneva, 1943) takes as its point of departure the poem “La Conscience” and stresses the motif of the brother-hatred.

16. The name of Piranesi appears frequently. In “Puits de l’Inde!” it is associated with the “effrayantes Babels.” In William Shakespeare, his “vertige tragique” is evoked. In Dieu, he is called “maçon d’apocalypses.” It is moreover interesting that in Les Contemplations, Hugo not only associates Piranesi’s “noir cerveau” to the image of the tower of Babel, but that he counts him among the “Mages.” On Piranesi and French Romanticism, see Georges Poulet, “Piranesè et les poètes romantiques français,” in Nouvelle Revue Française, pp. 160 and 161, April and May 1966, pp. 660-671, 849-862; and Luzius Keller, Piranèse et les Romantiques français, J. Corti, 1966.

17. Charles Baudoin (op. cit.) sees in this motif of the Iron Mask the double symbolism of the sacrificed brother and the guilty brother. In “A Eugène Vicomte H.,” the brother who has just died appears in his cage charnelle. God has “compressed” his head.

18. Les Burgravcs also seem composed under the sign of immurement. The exposition of the play is done by a choir of captives; the first character to appear is Guaninara, the chained symbolic figure of slave-hatred.

19. Les Misérables (xi, 64).

THE PRISON

21. It is not impossible that his curiosity was awakened, during his childhood, through the proximity of his school, the pension Cordier, to the prison of the Abbeye. See Victor Hugo raconté par un témoin de sa vie, i, 952.


23. In Les Contemplations (ix, 149), Dante was first a mountain, then an oak, finally a man and a poet. On death as liberation and as prison, see Œuvres complètes, ix, 335-336, 274.


26. Ibid., ii, 837.

27. According to Enjolras, in Les Misérables (xi, 785): “Comme il n’y aura plus de Satan, il n’y aura plus de Michel.”

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THE ROMANTIC PRISON

Victor Brombert (essay date 1973)


[In the following essay, Brombert reviews the many variations on the theme of the prison in Romantic literature, including the prison as a place of fortunate solitude and as an opportunity for escaping temporal and physical restraints to spiritual development. Brombert suggests that the Romantics’ emphasis on the individual prisoner allowed for a more poetic view of imprisonment than would become possible in the twentieth century, when the horrors of collective prisoners would be a familiar image.]

Et le bonheur est une forte prison.

—Paul Claudel

What causes King Lear’s elation, toward the end of the play, at the thought of going to prison? “Come, let’s away to prison”—he seems almost impatient to be locked up. How is one to explain this impatience and hint of joy? Is it battle fatigue (he has indeed incurred the worst!); is it mental derangement, is it despair? All is lost, to be sure—but Cordelia has been found. In twelve intensely suggestive lines, Shakespeare indicates the reasons for this unexpected delight. For father and daughter, prison will be an enchanted cage. Indeed like “birds in the cage” they will be able to sing their poem of love, forgiveness and innocence:

So we’ll live,

And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh

At gilded butterflies.

In this cage they will feel freed from life’s snares and servitudes; they will—so the old king dreams—be endowed with a superior vision and glimpse the mystery of things “as if [they] were God’s spies.” In short, prison is here conceived as the locus of spiritual freedom and revelation.
A very similar joy is experienced in Stendhal’s *Charterhouse of Parma*, though by a young man and in a different register, namely by the hero Fabrice del Dongo, as he is locked up in the cell of the Farnese tower and discovers to his surprise the lyric potential of incarceration. He who feared the Spielberg fortress, as a symbol of reactionary despotism, now allows himself to be charmed by the “douleurs de la prison”: the altitude, the splendid view, Clelia Conti’s birds (they too are locked up in their “lovely cages”: cages within a cage)—all contribute to bringing about a secret joy that Fabrice can only translate into an interrogation: “Is this truly a prison? is this what I feared so much?” Here, too, imprisonment implies a purification and the experience of freedom. In his “solitude aérienne” Fabrice feels far removed from the worldly pettiness of Parma. *Fortress of dreams and amorous contemplation*, the Farnese tower stands in Stendhal’s metaphoric landscape very clearly on the side of happiness, and from this happiness Fabrice has no desire to escape.

Examples of the happy prison abound in Romantic literature. I am referring less to a period concept than to a form of imagination which expands beyond a given historical period. The illustrations taken from Shakespeare and Stendhal suggest a double tradition, of a theme and of metaphor. The image of immurement is essentially ambivalent in the western tradition: the walls of the cell punish the culprit and victimize the innocent; but they also protect poetic meditation and religious fervor. The prisoner’s cell and the monastic cell look strangely alike. There exists no doubt a nostalgia for enclosure, as well as a prison wish. “The sweet prison cells” (“les douces cellules de la prison”), writes Jean Genêt, for whom incarceration appears as a guarantee of peace, security, stripping of all vain lendings—in other words a return to the self. The released prisoner’s agoraphobia is a well-known motif: it is the fear of the threatening outside. Psychology and psychoanalysis have much to say on this subject. Bertram D. Lewin, in *The Psychoanalysis of Elation* (New York: Norton, 1950), suggests that the idea of the closed space corresponds not to an anxiety fantasy but to one of safety, of being in hiding. Poets, novelists, intuited as much: Balzac in one of his most astonishing melodramatic and symbolic scenes, shows us the great criminal and escape artist Vautrin newly locked up in the prison of the Conciergerie, inspecting his cell to make sure that not a single hole might allow for the intrusion of a foreign glance. He carefully probes all the walls and then paradoxically concludes, in the heart of his dark jail, “Je suis en sûreté”—“I am safe!”

This is not to deny that real and metaphoric jails serve the theme of terror and oppression, that images of labyrinths, undergrounds, traps, buried secrets, crushing covers and asphyxiating encircllements have haunted the Romantic imagination, providing a symbolic décor for a tragic awareness. The motif of the gloomy prison becomes especially insistent toward the end of the 18th century—no doubt, in large part, for political and philosophical reasons. The symbolic value attributed to the Bastille and other political or state prisons viewed as tyrannical constructs, the nightmarish architectural perspectives in the famous “Prigionii” etchings of Piranesi, the cruel fantasies of the Marquis de Sade conceived in prison and projected into further enclosed spaces, the setting of the Gothic novels in dungeons, vaults andoubliettes—all this tells us a great deal about the structures of the Romantic imagination, and the favored dialectical tensions between oppression and the dream of freedom, between fatality and revolt, between the finite and infinity.

But one need only evoke Pascal to realize that the metaphoric correspondence between imprisonment and the human condition is not a new idea. The notions that the soul is tragically engaged in the body, that the body is tragically exiled in the world’s prison, are commonplace in the Gnostic, Christian, and Neo-Platonic tradition. The Pythagorean pun on the terms *soma-sema* (body-tomb) is well-known. If writers, after the classical age, insist particularly on the prison image, this is no doubt bound up with a poetization of suffering and of a tragic condemnation. Thus Alfred de Vigny, filled with his readings of Pascal, denounces all vain hope: “Dans cette prison nommée la vie, d’où nous partons les uns après les autres pour aller à la mort” (“In this jail called life . . .”).3 But inversely—and this seems revealing—the documentary and humanitarian texts describing prison conditions in the pre-Romantic and Romantic periods, even when avowedly rationalistic and documentary, tend to poetize imprisonment. Beccaria, denouncing the “fredda atrocità” of jails in *Dei Delitti e delle pene*, evokes the tragedy of time, the oppressive and erosive workings of the imagination. Texts such as *Des Lettres de cachet et des Prisons d’éat* by Mirabeau, or *La Bastille dévoilée et Mémoires historiques et authentiques sur la Bastille*, as well as the famous *Mémoires* of the state prisoners Linguet and Latude, all have in common mythopoeic tendencies; their denunciation is also a metaphorical amplification: the poetry of silence and allusions to Dante’s *Inferno* go together with mythological images of Cerberus, Charon, of the Hydra, of caverns, of Tartarus.

The confrontation with anguish and nothingness in a prison setting is a recurrent motif, fully and almost abusively exploited by Romantic as well as by Existentialist writers. Hugo, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Sartre, Camus—to name but a few—have thus dramatized the tête-à-tête with ultimate fear. The alienation is seen as twofold, social as well as visceral. Leonid Andreev, in *The Seven Who Were Hanged*, admirably conveys the situation of the condemned prisoner as he views his cigarette and cigarette-holding hand with surprise and terror. Few images, it would seem, lend themselves more readily to a suggestion of absurdity or negativity than that of the cell. What better illustration than the admirable ninth stanza of *The Prisoner of Chillon* where Byron, by means of a series of negative constructions (no thought, no feeling, not night, not day, not even dungeon-light) suggests the loss of consciousness within the context of stagnant atemporality! All he apprehends is
vacancy absorbing space.
And fixedness—without a place.

As for spatial despair, it has been analyzed by Jung and others concerned with extra-terrestrial projections and cosmic dreams. The entire work of Victor Hugo is an illustration of the desire and hope for a breakthrough. The recurrent image of the wall, the enigma of this wall and of the massive jail door, function in his case as part of a vast soteriological scheme. On the one hand there is the desperate observation

Nous sommes au cachot, la porte est inflexible.

But the answer is always ready. To the cry “Ouvrez les soupiraux” corresponds the clinking of the mysterious keys.

On entend le trousseau des clefs mystérieuses
Sonner confusément.1

Finally, among the images of the tragic prison most favored by the Romantics there are those which interiorize the experience of claustrophobia, and in particular the image of the skull or the brain. Victor Hugo, once again, provides rich illustration. The “noir cerveau” of Piranesi in the poem The Magi prepares for the metaphor of the brain-jail (“crâne-cachot”) where the infamous spider suspends its web. There is an obvious association between Hugo’s walled-in images of the brain and Baudelaire’s brain-as-rotten-ceiling: same spider web, same blind animal, same lack of light. But there is one significant difference—and on that difference hinges the very ambivalence of the prison metaphor. For Baudelaire, the unfathomable sadness of all vaults implies ideas of asphyxia and lethal oppression; the refuge in solipsism involves the terror of being buried alive. For Hugo, on the other hand, man’s captive mind will hear the jingling of the mysterious keys, the doors—all doors—will open, not only jails but Hell itself will be abolished, a universal liberation will come about. What is involved is the very activity of the poet as a liberating, almost divine force—for what the brain of the poet holds locked up preciously is nothing less than the infinite dimension of poetry and the secret of the world. “Un poète est un monde enfermé dans un homme.”2

The ambivalence of the metaphor may help explain the Romantic fascination with the image of the sequestered poet, and in particular the fortune of a legend: that of the mad, enchained bard, Torquato Tasso. For in its larger mythic dimension, the carceral imagery implies the presence of a threshold, the possibility of a passage, an initiation—a passage from the inside to the beyond, from isolation to communion, from punishment and suffering to redemption, from sadness to that profound and mysterious joy which Hugo van Hoffmannsthal, in Die Frau ohne Schatten, associates with the eternal secret of human bondage—“das ewige Geheimnis der Verkettung alles Irdischen.”

We are back to the “mystery of things” which the prisoner as God’s spy will take upon himself; we have come full back to the theme of the happy prison. It would appear that this theme of the happy prison is only an apparent contradiction, that there is here a dialectic logic. It is this kind of logic that determines Benvenuto Cellini in his Vita—an autobiography much prized by the Romantics—to write a chapter entitled “In Lode di detta prigione” and to insist—he the fiery adventurer-artist!—on a spiritual initiation in prison.

Chi vuol saper quant’è il valor de dio,
e quant’ un uomo a quel ben si assomiglia,
conviene che sti’n prigione, al parer mio.

Very similar effusions seem to inspire the famous Le Mie Prigioni by Silvio Pellico, the Milanese liberal who experienced years of carcere duro in Metternich’s political prison, the Spielberg. Friends of Pellico later reproached him his Christian lyricism, discovered in jail, as a weakness. But the unusual success of the book (in France alone there were five translations during the first year after publication, in 1833) suggests that its tone had immense appeal. Beyond the clichés of prison literature (the good jailer, the beautiful panorama, the view of the sky, the familiarity and friendship with spiders, the contrasts between the ugliness and horror of the inside and the splendor of the surrounding landscape), Pellico insists on the rediscovered light; he copies with deep emotion the edifying graffiti on the walls (“Benedico la prigione”): he glorifies suffering.

What does all this mean if not that the real and the metaphoric prison assume the value of holy place? “A prison is a sacred asylum,” affirms one of the characters in Petrus Borel’s Madame Putiphar. And Byron, whose Prisoner of Chillon explains in the last stanza that “These heavy walls to [him] have grown / A hermitage,” writes even more explicitly in the Sonnet on Chillon (referring to “the eternal spirit of the chainsless mind”):

Chillon! thy prison is a holy place,
And thy sad floor an altar . . .

Poets seem to entertain a particular affection for the world of walls, bars, and locks. Leopoldi, in his imaginary dialogue between Tasso and his “genio familiare” exalts sequestration because it rejuvenates the soul (“ringiovanisce l’animo”) and galvanizes the imagination—the “virtu di faveliare”; the locked-in individual in his solipsistic “recreation” learns how to enter into dialogue with the self, learns how to “conversare seco medesima.” Gérard de Nerval imagines the jailer as eternally jealous of the prisoner’s dreams. Tristan Corbière, in his poem entitled Liberté—A la cellule IV bis (prison royale de Gênes), proclaims the joy of imprisonment:

jamais [je] n’ai chanté
Que pour toi, dans ta cage,
Cage de la gaité!

The joyous cage is here explicitly associated with the creative act. And this indeed is the most important feature of this “cage de la gaité”: it involves the very function of the poet.
The notion of a conquest relates no doubt to the unavoidable and fecund tension between vision and order, between the freedom of imagination and the discipline of form.

Dans un cauchemar de verrous
L'Ordre est né

writes a more recent poet.6

One could no doubt pause here to open several large parentheses. Aesthetically speaking, the Romantic mind, attracted to the picturesque, the historical detail, the omninous setting, exploits the dramatic and melodramatic potential of any situation of sequestration and exile. But this poetic prestige is not separable from an ethical valorization. What is involved is the significance of any condemnation, which also means the significance of any destiny and of any rebellion against it—even and perhaps especially if that destiny is self-chosen. If on one level the act of writing implies a tension and ideal reconciliation between "inspiration" and constraining will, this aesthetic dilemma is a figuration of an abstract struggle between forces of freedom and forces of constraint. It is revealing that Baudelaire, who lived this aesthetic and ethical conflict more acutely perhaps than any other Romantic writer, should have admired Edgar Allan Poe for his prisoner-destiny (all of the United States, according to Baudelaire, was for Poe a "vaste prison"), and at the same time also for his lesson of aesthetic control. What Baudelaire says of the sonnet, of the relationship between any constricting form ("formes contraignantes") and a perspective on infinity, is crucial to an understanding of his poetry.4

Balzac views the rapport of the writer to confinement in a different light; he is certainly not concerned with form as constriction (not he, Balzac!), but with the very locus of creative suffering in which the artistic creator, any creator, is himself locked up or chooses to be locked up. Hence the recurring image, in Balzac’s work, of the writer’s prison garret, the place of austerity and abnegation and self-discipline, from which, however, the roofs of the capital as well as the sky can be seen, much as an opening unto the world beyond. This garret, prison and watchtower, sordid enclosure of the loftiest vocation, is defined in the Balzacian metaphor as a sépulcre aérien, an almost supra-terrestrial tomb in which the artist dies to life (that is, to all the temptations of Paris beyond that window) in order to live the life of the spirit, and by so doing, consents, not without regret and bitterness, to make a true monastic sacrifice in view of an ultimate salvation.

The Romantic quality of such an image becomes even more apparent if one recalls that Rousseau, in much the same spirit, conceives of the Bastille as the ideal place to write on the subject of liberty. In one of the key texts of Romanticism—the fifth "Promenade" in the Réveries (where the Bastille image again occurs in association with the very notion of revery)—Rousseau describes his happy stay on the island of Saint Pierre, and expresses the desire to see the island-refuge become for him a "prison perpétuelle." The telling words in this text ("circonscrite," "enfermé," "asile," "confiné") all suggest an interiorization of the prison image which corresponds to the sense of almost divine self-sufficiency (this state in which "on se suffit à soi-même comme Dieu"), and all correspond in fact to the central metaphor of Rousseauistic solipsism: "ce séjour isolé où je m'étais enlacé de moi-même..." ("where I did entwine with myself").

Perhaps the most remarkable in this respect is the dialectical link—very strong throughout the Western tradition—between a visible loss and an invisible, secret victory. This paradox underlies the theme of the happy prison; it is of course not unrelated to the Christian notion of a lost paradise and a felix culpa. Robinson Crusoe, a hero very much in favor with the Romantics, declares that he has never been happier than in his "forsaken solitary condition," and gives thanks to God for having there opened his eyes, for providing cause "to praise Him for dungeons and prisons."

We are touching here on one of the fundamental aspects of Romanticism: the value conferred on solitude. The title of Stendhal’s novel, The Charterhouse of Parma, has puzzled some readers, not only because Parma has no charterhouse, but because in the novel itself the charterhouse does not appear except as a withdrawal from Parma in the very last pages. But it is evident that the real charterhouse in the novel is the Farnese Tower which indeed does occupy the center of the landscape: in other words, the prison. The title of the novel thus proposes the central metaphor, as well as the parable of a fear translated into a blessing. Similarly, Julien Sorel, in The Red and the Black, discovers that the only discomfort in prison has to do with his not being able to lock the door from the inside, and thus shut out the world. He rediscovers the truth proclaimed by Saint Bernard: "O solitude, sola beatitudo..."—a poetry of silence and serenity in which the gloomiest dungeon is metamorphosed into a felicitous space. Even the fearful incarceration in the Prisoner of Chillon is converted into a precious solitude, a second home. "Even I," he concludes, "regained my freedom with a sigh."

If even the most atrocious jail can be transformed into a mediating space where consciousness learns to love despair and takes full possession of itself, it is no doubt because—as Gaston Bachelard puts it—man is a "great dreamer of locks."7 Even man’s consolatory prison activities, as repeatedly viewed in Romantic literature, betray the urge to exploit creatively, as it were, the physical and abstract realities of concentration and expansion. On the one hand, mental prowess and experimentation (geometric progressions formulated without help of paper, imaginary chess games, sadistic or masochistic choreographies); on the other hand, an outward reach: love at a distance, conversation with the beloved (in fairy tales this often turns out to be the beloved changed into a bird!), an obsession
with writing, secret alphabets, tappings on the walls, underground communications.

Two opposing and simultaneous movements can here be followed: the one toward an inner center (a search for identity, knowledge, discovery of self); the other toward a transcending outside which corresponds to the ecstasy of spiritual escape. Intimacy with the elusive self is the aim of the first movement, the quest within. Essentially unheroic (for heroism, or the heroic stance, requires an audience), the movement toward the internal cell of meditation corresponds to the quest for authenticity which, at its extreme point, tolerates no histrionics, leaves no room for any pose. Novalis speaks of the mysterious road that leads toward this interior region. The most diverse texts, in our literary tradition, confirm this association of the prisoner’s descent into the self with the quest for a truth, even the quest for an identity. Robinson Crusoe, once again an exemplary figure, is quick to create on his prison island further limits within limits: he builds a fortification, he surrounds himself with walls, not only to ward off danger but to surround himself, to confine himself—and thus to define himself. He makes a puritan inventory of his own being.

Yet, as Albert Béguin remarked—and precisely in talking about Novalis—the inward movement implies a glance toward external reality, an ascent, an expansion. Here again the most diverse texts confirm the crucial notion that the narrowest of cells does not, even metaphorically, represent an obstacle to the dynamics of escape. Nothing is more constant than the notion of freedom associated with the cell—freedom, as it were, from the imperatives of time and space. Poets repeatedly sing of this utopia and of this atemporality:

There were no stars, no earth, no time,

writes Byron—a line on which Tristan Corbière seems to play his own variation:

Plus de jours, plus de nuits.

What is involved, primarily, is the cult of liberty conceived in individualistic terms. “Die Freiheitsliebe ist eine Kerkerblume,” explains Heinrich Heine. And in Schiller’s Die Räuber, not exactly the setting of a happy imprisonment, it is nonetheless in the darkness of the dungeon that the dream of freedom penetrates “wie ein Blitz in der Nacht.”

It is of course perfectly logical that the dynamics of escape—and this involves not just escape, but Romantic escapism—should affirm themselves within the context of captivity. Balzac evokes the art of these convicts who know how to conceive and execute masterful schemes. It is a proud sport, a challenge to the human potential of ingenuity and perseverance. Nineteenth-century readers must have been particularly sensitive to Benvenuto Cellini’s advice to his jailers to lock him up well (“guardatemi bene”) because he promised them that he would do all in his power to escape. Romanticism has of course its own virtuoso jail-breakers in the works of Stendhal, Dumas, and above all Victor Hugo, who describes with poetic relish the “muscle science” of convicts eternally envious of all that which flies (“Ces éternels envieux des mouches et des oiseaux”), and the “incredible art” of rising perpendicularly. Hugo indeed sees in the most mediocre man obsessed by the frightful thirst for liberty an inspired dreamer tending toward the sublime.*

A wide range of mediating and stereotyped images links the dream-prisoner to a transcending reality: walls as a symbolic boundary, windows, hills, clouds, birds—even water. The bird seems favored—perhaps because the image of the bird lends itself to a fundamental ambiguity. For the bird flies freely, but in its flight it also recalls the cage from which it flew away, the cage that awaits it, perhaps the cage it regrets. The exploitation of the image confirms the double movement inherent in the prison theme. If indeed the quest of spiritual freedom and the redemptive thrust carry toward an elsewhere, a reverse impulse tends toward the still center, toward another form of release, a deliverance from the causal world of phenomena. It is at this still center, this still point of the turning world, that is to be found the hidden secret, the ineffable treasure, the perception of the numen. It is, I believe, in this spirit that one must view Axel’s castle in Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s weird play: the isolated castle in the midst of the dark forest, the dungeon atmosphere, and the funereal vaults—all are the warrants of a perfect fulfillment. For Sara and Axel, the protagonists of this spiritual drama, this fulfillment is intimately bound up with their ability to extract themselves from the “geôle du monde,” the worldly jail—that is, from the world of Becoming.

One could almost trace how, within the context of the prison theme, the dynamics of Romanticism can lead to the stasis of Decadentism. “Vivre?” says one of the characters in Axel, “les serviteurs feront cela pour nous” (to live—our servants will do that for us!). It is revealing that Huysmans, the author of A Rebours, that breviary of Decadentism, also invokes the penitentiary of worldly existence to justify his retirement into an inner exile. Nothing is in fact more characteristic of the mixture of decadentist and spiritually nostalgic literature than this inner exile, this contempt for action, this taste for an enclosed, nocturnal, artificial existence where rooms are furnished with ascetic elegance and hermetically sealed, where it is possible to surround oneself with silence, and to surrender to the selfish enjoyment of art as well as to a passive, vaguely onanistic eroticism seasoned by reveries of orgies and impotence. A Rebours proposes the comfortably heated cell—the “cellule tiède,” the “thêbaide rafinée,” a sophisticated hermit retreat, a privileged and self-chosen encagement in which the aesthete lives in fruitless comfort, surrounded by mirrors that reflect the image of his own haughty sterility. At the extreme point of this type of sensibility, the self-pitying prison ceases to have any tragic or lyric potential: it becomes the enervating enclosure for the self-centered hypochondriac dilettante suffering from moral as well as
physical dyspepsia. Very appropriately, when in his later work Huysmans begins to flirt with religion and toys with the idea of retiring to a monastery—but it must be a comfortable monastery!—he utilizes the expression "mettre son âme dans une pension."

Of course, in a tragically and poetically endowed temperament, such as Proust's (who owes a great deal to Huysmans), the combination of decadentist sophistication and aesthetic hedonism can, as though in an ultimate metamorphosis, transform the inner space, the sound- and light-proof room, into the symbolic area of poetic experimentation and poetic insight. A study of such inner spaces in the work of Marcel Proust would surely yield rich results. The novel begins in bed, in the most intimate space of the most intimate room; it is written by a recluse in his bed, and that bed stands in a cork-lined room that shuts out all the voices of this world. If one recalls moreover the importance, in Proust's work, of the very notion of imprisoned essences that have to be liberated in order to overcome death—essences saved by the almost divine grace of memory providing the individual with his identity—it does become clear that what is involved is an intensely private kind of salvation. Proust has spoken beautifully of his early, intimate experiences, when reading in his darkened room as a boy, he uncovered from the inside of this darkness the "spectacle total de l'âge," and—even more dramatically—in a passage describing his childhood experience of sickness and reclusion: "I understood then that Noah was never able to see the world so clearly as from inside the ark, though it was locked and though there was darkness on the earth."18

It would of course be tempting to conclude on this note of happy confinement, glorifying redemptive artistic creation. The image of the ark seems like a promise of survival. Yet one cannot deny that artistic redemption is viewed here essentially as a form of private salvation. All suffering is justified to the extent that it can be assimilated to private needs. It is probably not a coincidence that the poetic prestige of the prison image corresponds culturally to a period when the writer becomes increasingly his own favorite subject—indeed almost his unique subject: art becomes the subject of art, and thought the subject of thought, as the nineteenth-century writer indulges in a mirror disease at the cost of delicious self-torture. Baudelaire, poet of artificial paradises, speaks of that inner theater, of that limpid tête-à-tête with the self, of the ironic and self-destructive inventory of one's impotence, while enjoying this private tragedy in which the self (already viewed posthumously) appears as an inviolable actor. His dream is one of dandyish, aristocratic self-sufficiency: "Le vrai héros s'amuse tout seul."19

"Solitude gives birth to the original in us, to beauty unfamiliar and perilous—to poetry," writes Thomas Mann. "But also, it gives birth to the opposite: to the perverse, the illicit, the absurd."20 I have already alluded to the decadent aberrations. What remains to be stressed is the fundamental gloom that hides behind the conquest of intimacy and images of self-possession. Behind the impregnable solitude and compulsive self-centeredness lurks the secret awareness that no relation can exist between man and man. There are no echoes to the cries of Sade's secret torture rooms—the cries cannot even be heard. And walls remain mute.

Of course, another story can be told; it also has deep roots in Romanticism, though it is our own period, alas, that was destined to experience it in the flesh. It is the story of collective imprisonment, whose historical and symbolic manifestations are the penal colony, the penitentiary. One recognizes, of course, the old tradition of the Dies Irae, of the purgatorial horrors, or worse, of a hopeless condemnation: "Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate." Victor Hugo in Le Dernier Jour d'un condamné, describes a grimacing prison-humanity in a purgatorial atmosphere. As for Dostoevsky's House of the Dead, Turgenev was quite right in saying that the famous passage of the bath provides a truly Dantesque image. The fact is that both Dostoevsky and Hugo are convinced that private salvation is not possible; both glorify the criminal-convict for being other, that is for being a meditator; both view the convict with "sacred awe" as a kind of demonic and collective Redeemer. For both are deeply convinced that man as individual cannot save himself, that he is implicated in a collective drama.

This sense of a collective drama has been confirmed most bitterly by our own era of totalitarianism and concentration camps. The catastrophic nature of the twentieth century seems to have cancelled out the possibility of dreaming within the context of a poetic privacy. The nostalgia for this privacy remains strong no doubt, but it is also steadily denied. If Camus still writes about what he himself calls the "cellular lyricism" in The Stranger and The Fall, he also recognizes the oppression of History, and in The Plague proclaims that there can be no individual destiny, that there can only be a collective destiny. The original title of The Plague was Les Prisonniers—and it is characteristic that the modern prison turns out to be the entire city. Much could be said on this notion of the collective habitat, metropolis or megalopolis, as the modern figurative of a dehumanizing penitentiary. Nightmarish or futuristically utopian texts—many of them Russian—deal with this prophetic subject: Briussov, Zamiati, Biely in the geometrically onieic Saint Petersburg... I recall in particular Briussov's story, The Republic of Southern Cross, in which the chief city, Star City, with its windowless buildings, is covered by an "impenetrable and opaque roof," a city that finally appears as an immense, black, polluted coffer. Whether in Briussov's, Zamiati's, Orwell's, Walter Jens's, or Solzhenitsin's nightmare, the predominant feeling is that humanism and bourgeois culture, and even the concept of man, are doomed.

Finally, when the prison image has become so pervasive that the very notion of a prison-hermitage seems inconceivable, or at best an anachronistic revery, this seems to be evidence that individualism has become an impossible luxury. Stendhal, in the face of the increasing pressures
and oppression of History, Ideologies, and anonymous, collective tyranny, could still believe that one can lock oneself out by locking oneself in—and thus protect a precious self-possession. Perhaps it is this that ultimately separates us most sharply from our Romantic heritage: the very dream of a happy prison has become hard to entertain in a world of penal colonies and extermination camps, in a world in which we may well fear that somehow even our suffering can no longer be our refuge.

Notes


Nicola Trott (essay date 1995)


[In the following essay, Trott proposes a tension between history and poetry in Keats’ writings, in part reflected in his use of prison metaphors, in which history is imagined as a constraining force on the imagination.]
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Lisa G. Algazi (essay date 1998)


[In the following essay, Algazi discusses the novels La Chartreuse de Parme and Le Rouge et le Noir extending the analysis of Victor Brombert’s The Romantic Prison to suggest that the happiness and self-discovery of the prison relied partially on the fantasy of the prison as a return to the mother-infant relationship.]

. . . vivre sans vous voir tous les jours serait pour moi un bien autre supplice que cette prison! de la vie je ne fus aussi heureux! . . . N’est-il pas plaisant de voir que le bonheur m’attendait en prison?

Stendhal, La Chartreuse de Parme (2: 174)

. . . je serais mort sans connaître le bonheur, si vous n’êtes venue me voir dans cette prison.

Stendhal, Le Rouge et le Noir (1: 320)

In the words of Fabrice, protagonist of La Chartreuse de Parme, and Julien, hero of Le Rouge et le Noir, the Stendhalian prison is a place of discovery, an unexpected chance to find the happiness denied them by the strictures of nineteenth-century society. In this world apart that they have discovered, or re-discovered, the Mother controls their fate, protecting them from the hostility of patriarchal law in the very place where that law should reign supreme. Both Fabrice and Julien cling desperately to this imaginary island of maternal space in an attempt to escape the stormy seas of patriarchy; both ultimately fail. Although their desire to return to the Mother, to the remembered bliss of mother-child symbiosis, is temporarily fulfilled by their experience in prison, such a regression to a world-outside-the-world proves impossible to maintain, forcing both Fabrice and Julien to return to the harsh masculine realm of the Symbolic and their eventual deaths.

In his book, The Romantic Prison, Victor Brombert examines the Romantic obsession with the prison space as an idealized locus of self-discovery and self-creation. Brom-
bert states that the happy prison as seen in Stendhal’s novels represents a vision of the garreted writer, locked in a quest for identity and self-actualization. Stendhal’s “nostalgia for silence” (85), the silence of introspection and revelation, is reflected in the sublime happiness of his incarcerated protagonists who all, as Brombert points out, “share a longing for enclosure” (77). In Brombert’s view, this “descent into himself” takes precedence over love as the cause of joy in confinement; more important to the hero than his discovery of love is the discovery, or rediscovery, of himself, made possible by the meditative silence of the prison.

While Brombert discounts the presence of the beloved as the major factor in the protagonist’s soul-searching, I would suggest that it is precisely because of her presence in the prison space that the hero finds an atmosphere conducive to self-discovery. In his relationship with his beloved, the Stendhalian hero retreats from the strictures of patriarchal society and begins to re-create his own identity, starting again from the source of all identity: the Mother.

Psychoanalytic theory defines the self as a construct resulting from primary separation and individuation from the mother, who is at first perceived as an extension of one’s self. This first act of subjectivity, the rejection of the mother, ends the period of mother-child symbiosis and begins the child’s journey into society. According to the Lacanian paradigm of language as a system of signs based on the phallus, the child’s entry into language constitutes an early break with the world of the mother, a nonverbal world of coos, cries, and lullabies. Julia Kristeva sees this period of child development, before the interference of the father and the patriarchal society he represents, as a source of prelinguistic communication. The sensual, wordless language between mother and child becomes le sémiotique, drawing on the rhythms of the merging bodies and the strength of the instinctive drives expressed between mother and infant. For Kristeva, this special time prior to patriarchal intervention allows both mother and child to experience a world free from the strictures of patriarchal law, the laws of language.

For Stendhal, as for his protagonists, the realm of the preverbal represents a coveted escape from the repressive rules of patriarchy. The memory of unity with the mother, and of the abrupt end of that blissful unity, is the necessary condition for the Stendhalian paradox as embodied by his androgynous heroes.1 Never having been imprisoned, Stendhal creates a haven for his heroes in an imaginary maternal prison, allowing them to experience the preverbal bliss that Stendhal himself longs to rediscover. Only in prison will Fabrice and Julien finally discover true love, or amour-passion, in their relationships with their maternal mistresses.2 Numerous Freudian critics, including Béatrice Didier, have equated the Stendhalian prison with the womb: a dark, peaceful place of total symbiosis with the mother, the uterus that man wishes to re-enter when he dreams of making love to his mother.3 I prefer a less literal interpretation based on the Lacanian concept of language and the Kristeva sémiotique, in which the Stendhalian prison re-creates the pre-linguistic bliss and total interdependency of the early mother/infant relationship.

In La Chartreuse de Parme, Fabrice experiences overwhelming terror at the mere thought of imprisonment. Upon his arrival in prison, however, and the discovery that the young and beautiful Clélia, daughter of the head jailer, lives in the citadel, Fabrice forgets to be afraid, thinking: “Quoi! J’ai besoin de me raisonner pour être affligé de cette prison, qui . . . peut durer dix ans comme dix mois?” (Romans 2: 164). When he sees her sitting in the aviary across from his cell, his happiness is complete: thus their relationship begins in a preverbal state, in which Fabrice depends solely on visual contact with Clélia for his spiritual sustenance. Clélia literally becomes his whole world, the source of all joy and sorrow whose power over him even frightens him a little: “. . . l’image sublême de Clélia Conti, en s’emparant de toute son âme, allait jusqu’à lui donner de la terreur . . . il était en son pouvoir de faire de lui le plus malheureux des hommes” (2: 168).

For Fabrice, this total dependence on, and symbiotic unity with, Clélia affords a sense of timeless bliss. Just as the mother is the sole source of both good and evil, fulfillment and frustration, for the helpless infant, Clélia becomes both a giver of life and of death to Fabrice, since his life depends on her whim: “Chaque jour il craignait mortellement de voir se terminer tout à coup, par un caprice sans appel de sa volonté, cette sorte de vie singulière et délirante qu’il trouvait auprès d’elle . . .” (2: 168). Should Clélia suddenly decide not to see him any more, his life, the new life that she has given him since he entered the prison, will be terminated. Upon entering the prison, Fabrice was reborn; while the old Fabrice felt incapable of love, the new Fabrice experiences the passionate attachment of the newborn for its mother. His emotional health depends on her continued acceptance of his advances, even though the barrier of silence between them limits these advances to the realm of enigmatic signals.

His relationship with Clélia long remains outside the bounds of language, relying on more physical means of communication such as gestures and glances. As Clélia sits playing the piano in the aviary, “elle répondait des yeux aux questions de Fabrice. Sur un seul sujet elle ne faisait jamais de réponse . . . c’était lorsque les signes de Fabrice indiquaient des sentiments dont il était trop difficile de ne pas comprendre l’aveu; elle était inexorable sur ce point” (2: 168). The intimacy of this extralingual intercourse makes dissimulation almost impossible, as illustrated by Fabrice’s astute analysis of her feelings for him: “Tous ses gestes volontaires disent non, mais ce qui est involontaire dans le mouvement de ses yeux semble avouer qu’elle prend de l’amitié pour moi” (2: 168). This preverbal stage of their relationship, in which Fabrice and Clélia rely on their eyes and a series of gestures to express their feelings, is a source of both security and frustration to Clélia. Although she feels safer within the ambiguities of gestures and glances, fearing that the explicit nature of
spoken communication would compromise her virtue, she also longs to ask Fabrice about his relationship with his beautiful young aunt: “si l’on se fût parlé, de combien de façons différentes n’eût-elle pas pu chercher à deviner quelle était précisément la nature des sentiments que Fabrice avait pour la duchesse!” (2: 168). Fabrice, on the other hand, desires nothing more than to receive explicit confirmation through language of Clélia’s interest in him. To avoid reaching the point of “un aveu” (2: 168). Clélia delays their entry into the realm of language, refusing Fabrice’s proposal to communicate “au moyen de caractères qu’il traçait sur sa main avec un morceau de charbon” (2: 168). Stubbornly she continues to cling to the comforting ambiguity of preverbal discourse, until the day when imminent danger to Fabrice’s life overrides her fears for her virtue.

When she discovers the plot to poison Fabrice, Clélia uses language to save her lover’s life. Still bound by their situation, which precludes direct speech (due to the guards on duty just below their windows), Clélia sings a warning to Fabrice:

. . . elle se précipita à son piano et, feignant de chanter un récitatif . . . elle lui dit . . . “Grand Dieu! vous êtes encore en vie; Que ma reconnaissance est grande envers le Ciel! Barbome . . . est rentré. et depuis hier j’ai lieu de croire qu’il cherche à vous empoisonner. Je mourrais d’inquiétude ne vous voyant pas paraître. je vous croyais mort.”

(2: 172)

Clélia’s entry into language remains both ambiguous and impractical, however, as she uses a traditionally feminine form of discourse, music, to express her concerns to her lover. However, Fabrice, who wants to use language to express his love in no uncertain terms, feigns confusion over the meaning of her musical message in order to establish a more explicit form of exchange, using his previously conceived system of tracing letters to do so:

. . . il se hâta . . . d’écrire sur sa main une suite de lettres dont l’apparition successive formait ces mots: “Je vous aime, et la vie ne m’est précieuse que parce que je vous vois; surtout envoyez-moi du papier et un crayon.” . . . Fabrice eut l’esprit d’ajouter: “. . . je n’entends que fort imparfaitement les avis que vous daignez me donner . . . Qu’est-ce que c’est, par exemple, que ce poison dont vous me parlez?” A ce mot, . . . elle se mit à tracer de grandes lettres sur les pages d’un livre . . . Fabrice fut transporté de joie en voyant enfin établi, après trois mois de soins, ce moyen de correspondance qu’il avait si vainement sollicité.

(2: 172)

With the advent of the urgent danger that motivates Clélia’s move into language, Fabrice pushes their relationship over the edge of ambiguity into social and linguistic reality, forcing Clélia to face the fact that her relationship with him directly transgresses her duty to her father and thus to patriarchal society.

At the first threat of poison, Clélia becomes Fabrice’s sole source of nourishment, transferring his previous emotional dependence to the more physical need for sustenance. In her first attempt at direct communication, the song, she orders him: “Abstenez-vous de tout aliment jusqu’à nouvel avis, je vais faire l’impossible pour vous faire parvenir quelque peu de chocolat” (2: 172). In her first written communication, attached to a jug of water, she warns him: “Ne buvez que cette eau, vivez avec du chocolat; demain je ferai tout au monde pour vous faire parvenir du pain, je le marquerai de tous les côtés de petites croix” (2: 172). Fabrice must consume only the food and water that has passed through the hands of his maternal guardian, must eat only bread that she has purified with a series of crosses. In spite of her sense of sin, awakened by their entry into language, Clélia provides sustenance to the helpless prisoner. By assuring the purity of his food and water and by advising him to beware of his unseen enemy, Clélia fulfills her nurturing function, both feeding and defending her newborn lover. However, unlike the instinctive mutual attraction of their preverbal relationship, this protection has a reflective and guilty quality, aroused by her realization that, by helping Fabrice, she betrays her father.

In spite of the guilt caused by her undermining of the patriarchal system as represented by her father, Clélia’s newfound maternal mission takes precedence over her obedience to her father and even her own personal happiness. When Fabrice refuses to escape, she forces him to reconsider, threatening never to see him again. Caught between her duty to her father and her desire to help her lover, the pious Clélia swears to the Madonna, symbol of maternal purity, never to lay eyes on Fabrice again. Even Clélia’s vow stresses the nonverbal side of their relationship, forbidding her the visual contact she holds most dear: the symbolic tool of language means little to her, therefore constituting an insufficient sacrifice.

Some time after his escape, when Fabrice learns that he must stand trial in order to be cleared of the charge of murder, he immediately turns himself in to Clélia’s father, disregarding the danger to himself for the chance of recreating his former life of blissful isolation with, and total dependence on, Clélia. Once again, Fabrice rejects the patriarchal world in favor of the world of the maternal prison and the peaceful reunion with his mistress. Unintentionally, Clélia violates her vow, glancing at the window of his former room only to see him waving at her. The shock of seeing him there causes her to faint; when she awakens, still oblivious to her sin, “son premier regret était pour Fabrice” (2: 218). In these first moments, they have no need for words: “ils restèrent quelque temps comme enchantés dans la vue l’un de l’autre” (2: 218). However, when Fabrice breaks the spell of specular bliss with a first foray into language (again, through music), Clélia suddenly remembers her vow:

Fabrice osa chanter . . . quelques mots improvisés et qui disaient: C’est pour vous revoir que je suis revenu en prison. . . .

Ces mots semblaient réveiller toute la vertu de Clélia: elle . . . s’enfuit indignée et se jurant à elle-même que
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jamais elle ne le reverrait, car tels étais les termes précis de son vœu à la Madone: Mes yeux ne le reverront jamais.

(2: 218)

Later the same day, however, she learns of a renewed plot to poison Fabrice, originated this time by her own father. In a frenzy of total panic, she rushes to warn her lover and protect him from the anger of her father, telling herself that the Madonna, a mother herself, will surely forgive her transgression for the sake of her lover’s life. Once more, her maternal mission takes priority over all, even over her sacred promise to the Madonna; with a rush of energy so unnatural to such a contemplative and timid creature, Clélia races past the guards and bursts into Fabrice’s cell, crying out: “As-tu mangé?” (2: 220). Caught up in her passionate desire to protect Fabrice, Clélia submits to his embrace, disregarding her duty to her father and to the Holy Mother and justifying her action by the thought: “Je vais sauver mon mari” (2: 314). Once again, she provides him with bread that must be his only sustenance, saving his life and succeeding in protecting him from the punishment of patriarchy. While Clélia dreams of the peace of the convent, a haven from society, her lover appropriates her dreams; after his first experience with the maternal prison, Fabrice will continue to seek a similar blissful security, isolating himself first in a convent and finally, after his mistress’s death, in the Chartreuse. His attempts to recreate the sense of merged identity that he shared with Clélia must fail, however; his makeshift prisons may replicate the solitude of the Farnese Tower, but they lack the element of maternal symbiosis that made his nine months in prison a virtual rebirth. As Stendhal himself tells us, Fabrice emerged from prison a changed man; his new identity, forged in the heat of that first wordless passion, leads him to seek the healing embrace of the maternal prison until the time of his lonely death.

In Le Rouge et le Noir, Julien is imprisoned as a direct result of his stormy relationship with his maternal mistress, Mme de Réval. Following his clumsy attempt to kill Mme de Réval, Julien goes to prison to await trial; there he discovers a quiet retreat, far from the repressive elements of patriarchal society, in which to ponder his past and his feelings for both his mistresses. Although his second mistress, Mathilde, carries his child, she has none of the maternal qualities that he admires in Mme de Réval; even her apparently selfless devotion is calculated to uphold her ideal of the devoted mistress. Mme de Réval, however, is capable of true passion, or amour-passion, the type of love most valued by Stendhal and which Julien discovers only in prison. Freed at last from his worldly ambition by his exclusion from society, Julien can experience the passionate embrace of the mother in a place where real men fear to tread: the prison.

After her attempted murder, Mme de Réval defies patriarchal religion by defending her attacker, trying every means available to bring about his pardon. However, her efforts are and must be in vain: as a woman and mother, she has no power over the symbolic order. Only in the maternal space of the prison can she control the surroundings of her lover, just as she brought him food and water when he was temporarily imprisoned in her bedroom. Her appearance in his cell, and the contrast between her unself-conscious devotion and the ostentatious displays of Mathilde, renew Julien’s will to live. His claim that he never loved anyone but her is an indication of his redefinition of love since the time of his imprisonment; Julien finally understands the value of maternal passion and the futility of l’amour-vanité. Only in prison does he recognize that his infatuation with Mathilde had more to do with vanity and ambition than with his own emotions; belatedly, he grasps the full extent of Mme de Réval’s maternal devotion, entrusting his fate and that of his unborn son to her care. In the midst of their love-making, Julien tells her: “songe... qu’il faut que tu vives pour mon fils, que Mathilde abandonnera à des laquais...” (1: 315). His perception of Mathilde’s inability to mother becomes the determining factor in his preference for the engulfing efficacy of his own surrogate mother, Mme de Réval.

In their moment of reunion, language seems unimportant and occasionally impossible; both Mme de Réval and Julien have trouble speaking. Unable to form words to express his extreme felicity, they resort to nonverbal forms of exchange: “... longtemps ils pleurèrent en silence” (1: 314). Language seems inadequate to convey the depth of their relationship; just as Fabrice and Clélia resorted to nonverbal signals, Julien and his mother/mistress share embraces and tears, two privileged forms of communication between mother and child. Attempting to describe her love to Julien, Mme de Réval cannot find words strong enough to express her passion, since this type of maternal passion exists in a realm outside of language, before the invention of language. Even the narrator calls attention to the extralinguistic quality of their passion, assuring the reader that “aucune parole ne peut rendre l’excès à la foi de l’amour de Julien” (319). Brombert notes that Stendhal seems to equate such silence with amorous bliss in his early work entitled Filosofia Nova, where he writes: “... the more passionate one becomes, the more speech fails one” (Brombert 85).

Sacrificing her reputation and her religion to her desire, Mme de Réval achieves total separation from patriarchal authority, returning to the prison against her husband’s explicit orders. Exceeding even the efforts of the wealthy and aggressive Mathilde, Mme de Réval obtains permission to see Julien twice a day, and the two lovers treasure their last moments together in his little cell, finally isolated from the petty interference of society by the walls of the prison. Within this protected maternal space, Mme de Réval becomes Julien’s mother once more, protecting him from his jailers and living from day to day in a blissfully symbiotic harmony that not even their time in the woods of Vergy had granted them. United at last with his adored mother/mistress, free of the distractions of petty patriarchal ambition, Julien finally finds the happiness that had heretofore eluded him:

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... il vivait d’amour et sans presque songer à l’avenir. Par un étrange effet de cette passion, quand elle est extrême et sans feinte aucune, Mme de Rénal partageait presque son insouciance et sa douce gaieté.

—Autrefois, lui disait Julien, quand j’aurais pu être si heureux pendant nos promenades dans les bois de Vergy, une ambition fougueuse entraînait mon âme... je serais mort sans connaître le bonheur, si vous n’étiez venue me voir dans cette prison.

(1: 320)

Living in such complete harmony that they share the same feelings and thoughts, the two lovers spend their precious last days together in a symbiotic paradise, interrupted only by periodic unwelcome visits of the rejected mistress, Mathilde. After Julien’s execution, while Mathilde is occupied with the showy disposition of his mortal remains, Mme de Rénal continues her pattern of maternal devotion to her lover at the expense of her own children: in spite of her promise to live for the sake of Julien’s son, three days after his death, “elle mourut en embrassant ses enfants” (1: 321).

For both Julien and Fabrice, happiness comes only through the mediation of maternal passion that they discover in prison. Their return to the extralinguistic bonds of mother and child presupposes their self-discovery and provides the necessary security for their tranquil introspective quests. Brombert mentions Stendhal’s passion for mediated communication and its expression in the motif of the prison; secret codes, signals, and cryptic messages hidden in songs naturally abound in a world of obstacles and walls, distance and dangers. This communication plays a vital role in the protagonist’s poetic journey into himself. For Brombert, the internalized prison of the mind is “the metaphor of the textual space”; within this space occurs what he calls “the fecund struggle with the limits of language” (16). Such a struggle can only succeed in a space outside language, a space that Stendhal creates within the confines of the maternal prison.

Notes
1. Beginning with the experience of the author as exposed in La Vie de Henry Brulard, this essential time of mother/infant symbiosis remains a constant theme in his novels; only his female protagonist, Lamiel, escapes the influence of a strong maternal figure.

2. The essential difference between amour-passion and amour-vanité, as defined by Stendhal in his essay, De l’Amour, is spontaneity; whereas amour-vanité must be created by the interference of outside stimuli (envy, vanity, rivalry, etc.), amour-passion exists independently, free of artifice or mimesis. For a more detailed treatment on the importance of these conflicting concepts in Stendhal’s work, see René Girard’s Deceit, Desire, and the Novel.

3. Other Stendhalian critics, such as Jacques Laurent, have taken exception to such a literal Freudian interpretation. In his Stendhal comme Stendhal; ou, le mensonge ambigu, Laurent mocks the Marxist and Freudian readings of Stendhal found in Didier’s work, which he purports to disprove in his own critical work.

Works Cited


THE DOMESTIC PRISON

Leland Monk (essay date 1994)


[In the following essay, Monk argues that rather than its brief attention to the actual prison mentioned in its title, the novel’s more significant engagement with the theme of imprisonment is its mechanism for discipline. Drawing from the ideas of Michel Foucault, Monk argues that the novel itself acts as a disciplinary structure more effective than a physical prison by compelling the reader’s self-regulation.]

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Laura C. Berry (essay date 1996)


[In the following essay, Berry incorporates a study of the Infant Custody Bill of 1839 into her analysis of Charlotte
and Anne Brontë's novels. Berry argues that the Brontës depict the domestic realm as a place of confinement or imprisonment, and that the issue of child custody illuminates the relationship between individuals and the social and legal structures that contain them.]
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Lisa A. Long (essay date 1998)


[In the following essay, Long compares the discourse of American prison reform and the discourse of domestic culture in the 1860s, focusing on the work of progressive social critic Rebecca Harding Davis, whose novel Margret Howth connects the struggles of middle-class white women to those of marginalized groups in American culture, especially African Americans and supposed criminals.]

Midway through Rebecca Harding Davis' first novel, Margret Howth: A Story of To-day (1862), her social reformer, Dr. Knowles, exposes the seemingly uninhabitable dens of the homeless to the title character, demanding of her, "Home!... oh, Margret, what is home?" Knowles' deceptively simple question conjures up issues central to the text: the ravages of industrial capitalism, the dictates of domestic ideology, and the vulnerability and marginal status assigned to those unsuccessfully negotiating either one. Several critics have already noted that despite the fact that
mainstream culture reified the home as a secluded refuge, untainted by the public world of work, there was as Michael Grossberg identifies it, a mid-century anxiety about the home. Many nineteenth-century writers suspected that “public America seems almost to pour into the private sanctuary;” infecting the apparently insular sphere with anti-democratic ideals and capitalist notions. Indeed, one critic has noted that the crime stories and murder mysteries contemporaneous to Margret Howth repudiate the effectiveness of the home as safehouse.⁶

In Margret Howth Davis shows us that the domestic space is part of a criminal culture in which homes are prisons and prisons become homes. Especially striking is how the discourses of “home” and “criminality” animate each other; criminals are defined as homeless, while non-traditional homes and the people who inhabit them are considered criminal. Davis’ pairing is neither isolated nor incidental; prison reform was evolving in the 1860s as legal scholars were creating domestic law.⁷ The industrial “home” most clearly inscribes domesticity and penology within a strengthening U.S. capitalist economy, for that home is always inhabited by criminals: either the poverty-marked victims of a brutal economy who labor there, or the unscrupulous opportunists who exploit them. Prisons and homes come to infuse each other so thoroughly—in legal and reform documents, as well as in Davis’ novel—that the differences between them become practically negligible.

Davis’ acute interest in the socioeconomic dynamics of an emerging capitalist society, as well as her editorial work at the Wheeling Intelligencer, would have made her familiar with the evolution of domestic law and prison reform; most likely, she knew Enoch Wines, the leading proponent of penological reform during the 1860s.⁸ Wines and Theodore Dwight’s “epoch-making” Report on the Prisons and Reformatories of the United States and Canada (1867) posits that an inadequate homelife causes criminal behavior, while a home-like environment may stem that impulse.⁹ Legal maneuvering such as that exhibited by James Schouler in A Treatise on the Law Of Domestic Relations (1870), the leading casebook of its time, further weds the notions of homelessness and criminality.¹⁰ Thus the intensely sympathetic alliance white, middle-class, women writers like Davis forged with the enslaved, impoverished, incarcerated, and other marginalized groups, reflected not only their shared disenfranchisement, but also the social policies and legal foundations which were solidifying and amalgamating their common oppressions. While many critics contend that the family is a creation of nineteenth-century domestic law, Davis adds, I will argue, that the home is as much created by the dictates of mid-century criminal law and prison reform.¹¹

With the development of a criminalized domestic culture, Davis nuances her understanding of mid-nineteenth-century capitalism, articulated a year earlier in her highly-acclaimed Life in the Iron Mills.¹² However, scholars cite the novice author’s ongoing struggle with the powerful Atlantic Monthly editor, James T. Fields, as tempering the cultural analysis offered in her second effort, as well as vitiating its aesthetic power. Fields’ insistence that Davis change the “assembled gloom” of her manuscript into “sunlight” prompted Davis to destroy the original text and append the novel’s seemingly traditional ending (lovers are reunited, fortunes fortuitously attained) to its unrelentingly bleak beginning. Margret Howth is generally deemed a “failure in artistic terms” because of the unevenness of tone forced upon her.¹³ Jean Fagan Yellin, whose efforts recovered Margret Howth from obscurity, terms the resultant text as “feminized,” that is, the “dearness of the powerful editor . . . struck the young writer dumb.”¹⁴

Though the Atlantic editors were successful in ensuring the “ubiquity of the patriarchal True Woman,” as Yellin rightly argues, I believe that ideology is not triumphant. Admittedly, the novel ends in marriage; yet Davis did not abandon her life-time commitment to delineating the social and legal oppressions incorporated in that institution.¹⁵ In forcing herself to append the so-called “happy ending,” the whole novel is directed towards an oblique and complex interrogation of the assumptions and inevitabilities underpinning this commonplace cultural plot. Ultimately, Davis undermines the myth of continuity and goodness rooted in the matrimonial ideal and embodied in American homes. Specifically, the repeatedly invoked image of the glowing hearth both covers the characters’ hardships in an obfuscating, hypnotic glow, and literally becomes the means of capitalist success, rather than a beacon of domestic felicity. Thus the contrivance many readers find falsifies the second half of the book might just have been Davis’ intention, a sizable landmark left for her readers as she cagily wrote, in Susan Lancer’s terms, “over and under censorship.”¹⁶

Davis shows how the domestic ideology of the home conspires with that of the criminal to contain individual desire and maintain social stasis rather than enable social mobility. Characters may theoretically earn a “home” and all that this concept entails (material pleasure, heterosexual romance, etc.) through industrial labor, yet Davis shows how it is an ideal endlessly deferred. Incarceration in the home, criminal or not, is minimally significant as a physical restriction; the home and the state of criminality become waiting-places of the psyche, as well as the body—a “resting place for the misfit, malformed and despised,” according to Thomas L. Dumm—where one learns to control desire, nurture alienation, and become “deaf and dumb” (Davis’ original title for the novel) to the world around.¹⁷ Ultimately, working-class homes coerce self-surveillance and continued labor from their inhabitants; the explosion of criminal discourse in American culture, and the home’s place in it, are essential to the growth of capitalism. Though the myth of the self-made man insists that focused ambition cures criminality, Davis reinterprets capitalist success as criminal behavior; capitalism is both the cause of and the cure for criminality. At the same time, the home is both the prison and the signifier of freedom. Consequently, Davis’ characters have no place to go.
CRIMINAL CULTURE

Criminals and criminal behavior constantly inform Davis’ telling of the domestic woes of her characters; they emerge as the basic paradigms with which individuals conceive of social identity. In this essay I will trace variations of criminal status through a close examination of the four main characters: Margret Howth, an impoverished, unmarried mill worker; Stephen Holmes, an egotistical, ambitious young man; Joe Yare, a former slave and prison inmate, the only literal “criminal” in the novel; and Joe’s “mulatto” daughter, Lois, whose childhood spent in the mills has left her physically disfigured, yet spiritually enlightened.

Davis’ novel resonates with a range of fictions generating the criminal culture in which her characters participate. Her interest in psychological imprisonment, in the “tyranny” of domestic intimacy, and in the corruption of American capitalism, has important literary precursors and a significant legacy. For example, there are striking similarities between Davis’ ethnically diverse mill-town neighborhood and the American microcosm found on Herman Melville’s Pequod in Moby-Dick. Ahab’s monomaniacal ambition and Bartelby the Scrivener’s preference “not to” also implicitly interrogate the assumptions of capitalism. Both Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allen Poe deal consistently and explicitly with criminal psychology in their fictions; for example, Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter and Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” investigate the criminal nature in us all. Perhaps less obvious influences on Davis are Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, whose insistence upon the inescapable criminal status of African Americans prefigures Davis’ depiction of Joe and Lois Yare. Their slave narratives expose the psychological imprisonment of both enslaved and free African Americans that forms the racial base of criminal culture. Later Naturalists like Theodore Dreiser in An American Tragedy and The Financier, and Edith Wharton in The House of Mirth, amplify Davis’ astute observations on the decay at the heart of mature capitalism and the domestic apparatuses underpinning American culture.

Social policy from the 1860s confirms that mid-nineteenth-century America could well be termed a criminal culture. Contemporary reformers redefined “criminal” as synonymous with “marginal”; to be “criminal” was to live outside the norms of middle-class, white, heterosexual American culture, to live, as Davis puts it, on “the border of the battlefield,” dependent on others for material sustenance, unable to police the self (3). Dependence was soon translated as social deviance when applied to groups such as the indigent poor and the insane. Swiftly changing demographics emerging from mid-century population growth, industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and the specter of emancipation, all conspired to produce the impression that dependent and deviant persons were lurking everywhere. The definition of criminal behavior became quite fluid in the 1860s as it strained to encompass all perceived threats to social stability. Many practices which had previously been condemned but legal now became part of the criminal codes: vagrancy, drunkenness, prostitution, abortion. Sentencing policies and rehabilitative measures were also in flux; an 1869 proposal for the Elmira, New York penitentiary—which was shaped by Wines and Dwight’s report—audaciously suggested that “criminals should be sentenced not for a definite term of years . . . but until they are reformed, which may, of course, turn out to be for life.” In Davis’ industrialized modern world, then, “innocence” is a negative process, similar to the elusive Puritan grace; Davis’ characters—whose marginal characteristics range from being African American or physically handicapped, to the states of spinsterhood and moral degeneracy—are guilty until they have shown, through unspecified lengths of self-control, that they are not.

Domestic law, too, developed in response to a perceived social threat—here the ineffectiveness of the family to monitor criminal behavior. Mid-century family reformers testified to a growing anxiety about the family’s ability to control “what appeared to be an increasingly unsteady, secular and overly permissive social order.” The home was consequently criminally inscribed in contemporaneous legal discourse. James Schouler articulates the very basic way in which the home and law intersected: “to every one public law assigns a home or domicile; and this domicile determines . . . the status, capacities, and rights of the person” (9). Thus in the eyes of the law, one is somehow deprived of citizenship, of personhood, unless one has a domicile to define legal presence. And one who forfeits his/her legal standing by becoming “homeless” is, by this logic, criminal. Dumm reasons that the homeless might be particularly suspect, for if one’s adherence to democratic governance is traded for the protection of one’s property rights, and one does not own property—a home—the homeless might not feel bound to any law. Domestic law goes so far as naturalizing the home’s new legal status; everyone is from birth “in the system” (Schouler 9). The mid-century ascendancy of domestic law highlights the growing regulatory function of the home in American culture, which enforced the production of children, curbing of sexual passion, and protection of private accumulation.

At the same time the material trappings of American homes began to be read as signifying the family life transpiring within; Colleen McDannell argues that the “proper home”—increasingly occupying mid-century architecture “as a combination of family and house—encouraged all of the Victorian values,” among them morality, piety, patriotism, refinement, and discipline. Not surprisingly, criminality invaded the home to become a measure of domestic propriety; homes which did not conform to this middle-class ideal were well-nigh felonious. As the number of “dependent” citizens apparently rose, and the need to regulate them became more immediate, social reformers conjoined the home and the prison in an attempt to make reform and incarceration palatable. What could be more natural and benign, they contended, than the criminal home, whose “parents” would gently coerce the deviant
into acceptable behavior? According to Barbara Brenzel, parents who had hit hard economic times, or were worried about their children being corrupted on the streets, were often complicit in this redefinition of dependence and poverty as criminal; these concerned and/or unfit parents would label their children as "stubborn and disorderly" in order to gain them entrance to the reform schools where they would learn control and, consequently, might be safe. Thus biological guardians and behavioral guardians began to merge, as the rhetoric of the home and the prison were conflated.

Wines and Dwight embellished this concept of home-like incarceration in advocating the availability of libraries, religious instruction, and vocational education for the edification of the adult reformatory's inhabitants. They clearly believed that if adult criminals had been provided with these tools for survival as children, they may not have pursued their vicious ways. Wines and Dwight amplify environmental theories which argued that criminals suffered from a poor environment rather than irreversible and inherited viciousness; that is, non-traditional homes produced criminals. Reformation could be achieved by providing a "proper" home, one giving loving yet firm guidance for a moral, industrious life. Davis maintains this environmentalist discourse; her rhetoric exactly mirrors that of family reformers like Horace Bushnell, who wrote in an 1861 edition of Christian Nurture of the "spirit of the house as an atmosphere which passes into all and pervades all, as naturally as the air they breathe." It is the "breath" of Davis' mill/home, "the fires of the world's want and crime," that eventually dictate Margret Howth's plot (208). For example, Lois Yare's physical deformity is a result of inadequate living conditions and the absence of a loving parental influence. As Lois testifies, "It was th' mill, I kind o'grew into that place in them years: seemed to me like I was part o' th' engines, somehow" (68-69). Raised in the mill, Lois is of the mill.

Margaret Howth: The Deaf and the Dumb

Margret Howth enters the "slime of the gutter" of that same mill, sentenced to hard, isolated labor because she is guilty of being poor (12). She begins on her twentieth birthday, and as she enters adult womanhood, Margret has no husband and no protection; her beau, Stephen Holmes, has abandoned her, opting instead to advance his fortunes through an alliance with a local heiress, Miss Hernes. Margret's parents—an ailing mother and a blind father—are unable to take care of her, and so Margret renounces Holmes and resigns herself to spinsterhood and family duty. The mill office in which she works becomes her reformatory cell, her "waiting-place" where she will be safe and, through hard work, learn self-control. The "wire cage, hung on the wall, and in it a miserable pecking chicken," clearly evoke her state of incarceration (10). But more significantly, her window frames a dead brick wall, "while the columns of numbers" her pen traces are "lining out her life. narrow and black . . . [the] figures seemed to her types of the years coming" (9-10). Margret's work space, what she calls her new "home," is a prison-cell as described by Wines and Dwight, where "the convict detained in it cannot render himself guilty of offenses, which can be committed only in company . . . the general duty is to work diligently, obey all orders and preserve unbroken silence" (134).

Locked in her physical cell Margret does work diligently in unbroken silence, stoically obeying the orders of the mill owner, Dr. Knowles. But Knowles is more than Margret's supervisor; he is both her warden and her tempter. Just as Hawthorne's haughty Hollingsworth draws the pure Priscilla into his schemes to reform criminals in The Blithedale Romance, Knowles wishes to coerce Margret into helping him reform "gallows-birds"; he plans to take the proceeds from the sale of his mill and set up an Arcadian community for such unfortunates. Yet Knowles' monomaniacal desire to possess the "keys" to Margret's soul and to fulfill his reformist schemes mark him as criminally suspect. His passionate face reveals a man "who would give to his master (whether God or Satan) the last drop of his own blood, and exact the same of other men" (13). Margret valiantly resists Knowles, for to succumb to him and become an unmarried reformer would be to assume a permanently marginalized position in mainstream American society. Ironically, in resisting her supervisor's desire that she help reform criminals, Margret herself becomes the prisoner. She is constantly surveyed by Knowles, for she had been used to the keen scrutiny of his eyes since she was a baby," and as his employee Knowles' "keen deep eyes never left her unconscious face" (13).

While Knowles constantly surveys Margret, she withdraws, keeping her emotions and desires locked inside; she learns the discipline of the spectacle. Yellin, too, notes Davis' innovation, which is apparent in the initial, anti-romantic description of Margret: "She had not the usual fancy of her sex for dramatizing her soul in writing, her dress, her face,—kept it locked up instead, intact; that her words and looks, like her writing, were most simple, mere absorbents by which she drew what was needed of the outer world to her" (8). One might read this as a contemporaneous dramatization of Emily Dickinson's audacious "inviolate self," as withdrawal from the eroticization of her supervisor's gaze, or as Gillian Brown's "agoraphobic" resistance to the domesticity inscribed within marketplace consumerism. Yet in this passage Margret also becomes demanding, de-sexed, the perfect non-threatening capitalist worker. In his Foucauldian analysis of the American body politic, Dunn has ably articulated the connection between discipline and capitalism, contending that self-surveillance is at the core of democratic society; American prisons—and by extension, American psyches—are consumed with a "rehabilitation of being." As prison reformers revealed, this idea of self-imposed lock-up was basic to conquering the increasingly widespread social threat of criminality: Wines and Dwight exclaim, "Prison Discipline! What is it? What relation has it to the repression and prevention of crime?" (49). "Repression" is key; repression of individual
desire, of individuality, is the goal of criminal reformation. Brown adds that “individual integrity is identified with a double dissociation: the body's difference from its labor, and the self's difference from the laboring body.” I see that Davis argues for a triple dissociation in showing the self's renunciation of its affections, pleasures, and desires—those things that define the self in an increasingly consumerized culture—as a critical moment in overcoming a criminal, that is, a human nature.

Hard work complements the psychic self-containment absorbing Margret's energy. Not only is criminal labor a service to capitalist concerns, but it also leaves the worker no leisure time in which to nurture individual desire. In fact, Margret's labor further inscribes her criminal state; it is her own pen, her act of writing, that outlines the columns confining her life (10). Work becomes a means of reform, for it is so exhausting and so engrossing—both to mind and body—that it ultimately usurps all human desire and extinguishes aspirations beyond the narrow world that the work creates. The endless round of monotonous labor Margret performs leaves her little time to devise alternate plans for personal growth or to pursue self-gratification; each morning she stoically thinks, “she might as well get up and live the rest of her life out;—what else did she have to do?” (58). The institution of apathy in the criminal mind functions in society as a policy of containment through deferral. Margret faces each new day with “still, waiting eyes that told nothing” (12). Numbing labor supplants ambition; social stasis results, as the incarcerated criminal expends all her energy performing duties, dimly believing that her conformity will be repaid with “freedom,” or with some sort of social status.

The perceived mid-century explosion of marginalized citizens like Margret called for permanent solutions according to contemporaneous reformers, not quick fixes. The penitentiary arose precisely to funnel recalcitrant individuals through a disciplinary society; prison literalizes what is always already at work in the American population at large. Punitive physical punishment, it was argued in the 1860s, would only break the criminal's will and destroy the potential for self-government. This is not to say that nineteenth-century prisons fully assimilated this kinder, gentler reform. Davis is clearly on the side of those prison reformers who were anxious to abandon physical punishments. Joe Yare's brutal prison experience had proven ineffective; as he testifies, “I was goin' down, down, an' bringin' the others with me. What good'll it do you or the rest to hev me ther? To make me afraid? It's poor learnin' from fear” (165). Although tales of physical atrocities were common, reformers continued to insist that the goal of reform was not only to occupy the criminal's body with labor, but also to isolate and control his/her mind, to empty it of deviance and fill it with “Better thoughts” (Wines and Dwight 221). Bodily incarceration—isolating the criminals from the citizens in prison—was the first step towards achieving this goal. The “separate and silent” systems that ruled mid-nineteenth-century penitentiaries allowed inmates to perform both physical and mental labor; under the silent system, which was the most widely implemented in the mid-nineteenth century, convicts were kept in individual cells at night, but employed together during the day, provided they marched in lock-step, kept their eyes downcast, and never faced each other or talked. Wines and Dwight advocated a variation of the silent practice, seeing mental solitude as the only practical way of turning the convicts' reformatory efforts inward. In the criminal home, “the bodies of the prisoners are together, but their souls are apart; and while there is a material society, there is a mental solitude” (Wines and Dwight 57).

The institution of “separate and silent” systems in industrial settings, coupled with the growing belief that society might also be culpable for crimes, suggests that establishing a “criminal” mind-set was a way of controlling deviant citizens who were not literally imprisoned. Davis even intimates that isolation and self-surveillance are endemic to human existence; she conflates daily life and prison life resignedly stating, “your enemy, Self, goes with you from the cradle to the coffin; it is a hand-to-hand struggle all the sad, slow way, fought in solitude” (7). Ironically, the internalization of criminality is especially crucial in a liberal democracy where citizens rule themselves. Certainly, Davis demonstrates how the mental isolation of industrial labor and brutal, capitalistic endeavor can force criminalized characters into destructive yet sanctioned social positions. Both Margret and Holmes are tortured by the thought of living their lives in isolation. When Holmes deserts Margret she finds herself “going mad with being alone”; in a moment of weakness he pleads with Margret, “don't leave me with myself” (145, 144). Faced with soul-starving solitude, both are persuaded to break out of their apathy and resign themselves to entering “society's most vital institution,” marriage. Holmes' brush with death in the mill fire convinces him of the folly of an empty, loveless marriage with the wealthy Miss Hernes. And when oil is fortuitously discovered on the Howth property, Margret is no longer required to sacrifice herself to the labor force; all bars to their union are removed.

**Stephen Holmes: A Self-Made Man**

Before Stephen Holmes can be redeemed through his marriage to Margret, he engages in a project of relentless self-fashioning which exposes the dual nature of criminal culture. Davis' portrayal of Holmes probes the delicate balance of Christian clemency and dispassionate justice, of individual initiative and abeyance to community standards, which characterize American law and reform. While American social institutions were increasingly secular at mid-century, muscular Christianity continued to serve as the motivating force behind most reform movements, especially as reformers proclaimed the failure of secular institutions to transform a society they perceived as rapidly decaying. In particular, Protestant doctrine intersects—or rather serves as the model—for our democratic system of laws based on self-government, the possibility of rehabilitation, and the opportunity for self-advancement in a world of free will. Enlightenment logic and Christian redemption

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mingle in nineteenth-century penology, for prisons were to "teach rational men the folly of sinful acts." Enoch Wines was a minister before he began his penitentiary work and retained his religious ardor throughout his life; thus, it is no surprise that his reform strategy assumes that all human beings are criminal in the eyes of the Christian God. "We are a world of malefactors," Wines and Dwight preach, "the position we occupy is that of a criminal revolt against our rightful Lord" (146). Like Wines and Dwight, Davis reinforces the contemporary belief that self-surveillance should be a normalized state of existence, for "convicts who know that the keeper's eye is ever on them seldom expose themselves to punishment" (171). According to Schouler, this innate sense of moral obligation ensures the desire to "preserve the home." Thus contemporary lawmakers, even those like Schouler who aggressively pursued a rational logic in his case law, also infused democratic law with the apparent universality of religion. Schouler asserts, "positive law but enforces the mandates of the law of nature [God], and develops rather than creates a system" (5).

Yet Holmes' ambiguous relation to law demonstrates how those who are adjudicators in democratic capitalism are at once malefactors. Holmes is versed in "official" law, familiar with capitalist codes; he works as a supervisor at the mill, and his alliance with Miss Hermes ensures he will soon own the mill, for it is her dowry. Thus he has the authority to pass judgment on Joe Yare, who is trying to conceal a past crime of forgery, even though other characters try to persuade Holmes that "he's trying to do right. Yare is . . . sendin' him back [to prison]—yoh know how that'll end. Seems like as we'd his soul in our hands." Holmes fires back, "We didn't make the law he broke. Justice before mercy" (132). Davis tells us that even in his most kindly moments, Holmes' smiles, though "unspeakably sad and tender," are the same as those he would bestow upon a "criminal, condemning him to death" (109). Thus she underlines the just certainty of democratic law, showing how it has become dissociated from truly Christian justice. Holmes is "a man not bound by any ethical considerations, but only law."54 Like his mother before him who had considered herself "one o'the' elect," Holmes "somehow . . . had the law on [his] side in outward shown" (133). Yet Holmes' cousin bitterly remarks that he "hated religion, known" Holmes' mother, who had wielded her religious weight in a similarly inhuman manner (134).

Davis' Christian sense of criminal culture opposes Holmes' legalistic sense; hers is firmly based in justice through community. She begins her novel with an explicit statement of her anti-individualistic, anti-capitalistic stance:

There are less partial truths, higher hierarchies who serve the God-man, that do not speak to us in bayonets and victories.—Mercy and Love. . . . There is no need that we should feebly vaunt and madden ourselves over our self-seen rights, whatever they may be, forgetting what broken shadows they are of eternal truths.

(7, 4)
costs. Wines and Dwight suggest that a prison system of reform based on the myth of the self-made man is the best way to motivate prisoners. The Irish model in particular was attractive because "it placed the prisoner's fate, as far as possible in his own hands; by enabling him, through industry and good conduct, to raise himself, step by step, to a position of less restraint" (73). Prison policies in general reflected this trend; in the 1830s incentives were added which rewarded prisoners' "good behavior" with entertainment, cash bonuses, or commuted sentences. Ultimately, however, criminals were in prison to produce the appearance of more disciplined, better selves. Holmes' education process closely mirrors the rhetoric of the prison reformers: "He knew what this Self within him was; he knew how it had forced him to grope his way up, to give this hungry, insatiate soul air and freedom and knowledge, to lift this self up into a higher range of being" (121). The rhetoric of the self-made man contains the criminal in a capitalistic scheme of self-exploitation and justifies his abuse of others.

Consequently, Davis reinterprets Holmes' economic success as criminal behavior rather than as triumph over his offensive poverty. Prison reformers would celebrate Holmes as one who has conquered emotion and extraneous desire to become a successful capitalist. He very stringently polices himself, overcoming various enticements, working his way up the economic ladder. His self-imposed cell-like "home" is "whitewashed and barely furnished; it made one's bones ache to look at the iron bedstead and chairs. Holmes' natural taste was more glowing [but] . . . it needed correction, he knew; here was discipline" (100). Yet like Lois Yare, because his home is "in the mill," Holmes is "of the mill," spiritually scarred by its self-indulgent economics. Holmes illustrates self-reformation gone awry; money is not even the end for him, but simply a means to his total self-absorption: "his work in the world was only the development of himself" (120). His exclusive attention to self encourages him to revel in omnipotence at the expense of others instead of conforming to community standards of love and mercy. He feels the "freedom of the primitive man, the untamed animal man, the self-reliant and self-assertant having conquered Nature" (107). Holmes' efforts to improve himself unleash rather than contain the savage brute criminal culture desperately wished to control."

Davis further reveals Holmes' criminal nature as he ruthlessly pursues the material means needed for the realization of his unrestrained and promiscuous self. Holmes must market himself to a young heiress whom he does not love in order to obtain the mill. Not only is Holmes' capitalistic drive criminal, but in pursuing a loveless marriage Holmes also sullies the domestic law and companionate marriage which Schouler, among others, argued is the disciplinary base of a democratic society; his marriage would not enforce the affectionate bonds which were to encourage moral behavior. Dr. Knowles observes, "he's sold [brain and soul] at a high figure,—thr ew his heart in,—the purchaser being a lady," like a man who has "put [himself] up at auction" (80-81). Holmes, the successful man, and not Margret, the vulnerable woman, is figured as acting against "natural" tendencies in selling himself to the highest bidder. In Holmes, Davis wryly observes, there is "no fairer exponent" of the "great idea of American sociology" (121).

**Joe and Lois Yare: From the Plantation to the Penitentiary**

Davis' inclusion of key, African American characters in the main plot broadens and complicates her exploration of "American sociology." As H. Bruce Franklin observes in his work on prison literature in America, "America is itself a prison, and the main lines of American literature can be traced from the plantation to the penitentiary." If, as Franklin maintains, the descendants of enslaved Africans are "in many senses the truest Americans," then their experiences of enslavement and post-emancipation criminalization must be the most basic of American experiences. Margret Howe th only perfunctorily reveals the racist core of American criminal culture, for enslavement is often reduced to metaphor. Davis' allusion to Holmes as an "Orleans slave" allies him with the enslaved, and despite his intimacy with capitalistic law, he clearly identifies with the former slave and socially-defined "criminal," Joe Yare. Margret Hoth, too, is associated with slavery; "one might have fancied her a slave," as she enters the mill, Davis suggests, "putting on a mask, fearing to meet her master" (17). Yet Davis need not resort to indirection in conveying the Yares' subjugation; Joe's prison experience literalizes the criminal culture Davis subtly delineates, while Lois' injuries are a constant reminder of its cost. Yet Joe and Lois must remain as sub-plot, unsuccessfully mimicking the actions of the white protagonists.

Joe and Lois function as mirror images of Holmes and Margret, providing alternative versions of their doomed existences, stigmatized by race, as well as by poverty. Even as Holmes works in the mill, he has a "vague sensation of being followed. Some shadow lurked at times behind the engines, or stole after him in the dark entries. Were there ghosts, then, in the mills in broad daylight? None but the ghosts of Want and Hunger and Crime" personified in Joe Yare (116). Holmes and Joe are implicated in each other's fates, albeit in a traditionally racist way; Joe is the sulking shadow representing Holmes' spiritual struggle. As they wait together to visit the dying Lois, Holmes acknowledges, "how did this foul wretch know that they stood alone, apart from the world?" (206). Holmes knows Joe's crimes, his secrets, but Joe the criminal is able to recognize the criminal in Holmes. Lois similarly mirrors Margret, for they "claimed recognition by some subtle instinct" (64). Yet while Margret observes the "big blue-corded veins in her wrist, full of untainted blood," the "livid thickness" of Lois' skin sets her apart "from even the poorest of the poor" (64, 56). Lois' isolation, her unmarriageability, represented by her dark skin, throw Margret's Anglo-Saxon purity and desirability into relief.
Despite their doubleness, Davis rewards the two sets of characters with entirely disparate fates. Lois relinquishes herself to domestic values, and to Holmes, first risking her life to save him from the mill fire her father has set to keep Holmes from exposing his crimes, and then wasting her strength nursing him. Yet Lois is not rewarded with a home and marriage, as Margret is, but with death. Similarly, Holmes achieves a home and a wife—salvation—while Joe loses his daughter, Lois, and his only hope for a happy future. In burning down the mill Joe solidifies his criminal status; he may even be held partly responsible for his daughter’s death. And yet the Yares’ fates do not seem pre-determined at the beginning of the novel. For example, Davis’ initial depiction of Joe is pitying. He shows gentlemanly manners, opening the mill door for Margret, yet he is “jeered for his forwardness” (15). Like many criminals, Joe’s only “crime” may have been his ignorance of the propriety and/or legality of his actions. Davis vehemently defends this environmentalist position through the voice of Joe Yare: “Who taught me what was right? Who cried? No man cried fur my soul, till I thieved ‘n’ robbed; n’ then judge n’ jury n’ jailers was glad to pounce on me” (165). Though his gentle behavior demonstrates that Joe has decent instincts, he was not taught the criminal codes of white society. Significantly, his secret crime has been forgery when he doesn’t even know how to read or write.

Davis proceeds to obfuscate the source of Joe’s criminality; she suggests that he is deviant, not only because he is poor and uneducated, but because he is African American. Joe’s miserable status is pathologized, for he is a “short, sickly man” with a “crime-marked face,” “sullen, heavy lipped, the hair cut convict fashion, close up” (15). Society reinforces the separate and silent system, for “no one spoke to him” and “people looked away” (97). Most significantly, his behavior and ultimately Davis’ reference to his race suggest that imprisonment comes naturally to Joe, for he clings to enclosure, walking “close by the wall with his head down,” and “stopping in submissive Negro fashion” (97, 163). Though Lois is not stigmatized in the same fashion as Joe, her behavior also suggests that submission comes naturally to her; Lois is a happy slave to Christianity. Margret notes that the “owner of the mill was not a more real verity” to Lois than the heavenly “Master” of whom she glowingly speaks (67).

Davis could not have been unaware that the criminal class was synonymous with the slave class in the South, nor blind to the racial implications of such a tenet. Further, one cannot ignore the striking similarities between the way power was wielded to control slaves and to control convicts: the subordination of will, enforced routine, dependence for material sustenance, isolation, and coerced labor. Southern prisons during Reconstruction even re-created slavery, sending their inhabitants—the vast majority of whom were African American—to labor in the cotton fields. It is, then, no coincidence that the only “real” convict in the novel is African American. This novel, perhaps unconsciously, prefigures post-bellum efforts to shift African American identity from that of slave to that of criminal.

Davis leaves this issue murky, for she phrases her own musings on Joe in question form: “What if he were black? What if he were born a thief? What if all the sullen rage of his nature had made him an outcast from the poorest of the poor?” (167). While Davis’ contemporaries most certainly read his arson as a reprehensible act confirming his redeemable criminal nature, one might also consider Joe as exercising agency when he strikes back at the young, white “Mas’t’” who has law on his side; his actions are akin to Frederick Douglass’. After all, Holmes threatens to return Joe to prison, guaranteeing the old, feeble man’s death; Joe does not meekly submit, but retaliates by burning down Holmes’ home and future, the mill, and almost burning Holmes, himself. However, while Joe is allowed subjectivity early in the novel, by the last section Davis resorts to caricature. He is stripped of humanity, “something crouched underneath” Lois’ stairwell in the dark. “whether a man or a dog” Holmes cannot tell (206). In his last exchange with Holmes and Lois, Joe is portrayed utterly unsympathetically; his potential for reform is erased as his spiteful and selfish behavior answers cultural expectations. Our final image of Joe Yare is of a “vicious, cringing wretch, crouching to hide his black face” in the bedclothes of his dying child (212).

While prison reformers believed in the rehabilitation of white prisoners, the genetic inferiority of African Americans was often cited as a commonplace. The latter belief, which justified centuries of unbelievable acts of inhumanity, would not die with the eminent announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation. Obviously, Southern slaveowners were invested in maintaining racist ideology, but so were their neighbors to the North. Those who had looked the other way during slavery’s long reign were also complicit in its preservation. If they admitted that African Americans were not naturally thieves, not born criminals, one of their justifications for neutrality in the slavery debate would crumble. Margret’s response to Lois’ grief symbolizes Davis’ narrative disentanglement from this issue; as she watches Lois weep, Margret asks,

Was she her brother’s keeper? It was true, there was wrong; this woman’s soul lay shattered by it; it was the fault of her blood, of her birth, and Society had finished the work. Where was the help? She was free,—and liberty. Dr. Knowles said, was the cure for all the soul’s diseases.

(Davis 72)

As Civil War raged on, Northerners began to realize that emancipation was the likely result of Union victory; those sympathetic to abolitionist causes, like Davis, did not begrudge the former enslaved their liberty. Indeed, Davis worked actively to achieve such a goal as a member of the Underground Railroad in Wheeling, West Virginia. Yet many of her fictions and essays reveal that she was unable to extricate herself from prevalent racial stereotypes. Unfortunately, Margaret Hough suggests that freedom will only confirm African Americans’ incapacity for self-government and their criminal natures. At least in 1862, Joe Yare is still permanently stigmatized by his race.
THE MONITOR OF THE HEARTH

More ambiguous even than her stance on race, is Davis’ attitude towards the resolution of her domestic plot. In wrestling with James T. Fields over the direction of Margaret Howth, Davis wrote a rather cryptic response to Fields’ charges of the “assembled gloom” of the novel, cheerfully submitting that she will transform it into the light of a “perfect day in June.”24 Subsequent critics have read Davis’ conventional ending as faithfully answering Fields’ injunction. However, I believe that Davis duped Fields, adding rather than subtracting narrative complexity for what she clearly considered a discerning audience. Fields’ June day is embodied in the fleshy, entrapping luxuriance of Miss Hermes, and the “warm and healthy light” she promised him is transformed into the hypnotizing, noxious fires of the Howths’ hearth. Miss Hermes’ tableau vivant representing the month of June clearly perverts Fields’ intentions. “Some summer’s day might have dawned down into such a human form,” Davis seethes, “there was the full contour of the limbs hid under warm green folds, the white flesh that glowed when you touched it, the snarling eyes, the sleeping face, the amber hair uncoiled in a languid quiet” (125). Miss Hermes is the snake lying in wait to pollute the domestic paradise; her dangerous sexuality is opposed to Margret’s androgynous purity. June, the month of weddings, is instead a month of death and enslavement, associated in Davis’ vision with the consumption of yellow fever and the New Orleans’ slave trade (175). Miss Hermes’ scent further allies marriage and industry; she wallows in perfume, “the unclean sweetness of jasmine-flowers mixed with hot sunshine and the smells of the mill”; “the mill and his future wife came to [Holmes] together” (125-26). Davis is repulsed by the way capitalist greed and moral impurity, embodied in Miss Hermes, has thoroughly invaded the marital relationship.

Not only is the light of the summer day corrupted, so, too, is the beacon of domestic ideology, the glowing hearth. The hearth not only had important cultural significance at mid-century, but it had great importance in Davis’ personal symbology. In her late-life autobiography, Bits of Gossip, Davis recounts at length the special powers of the home fires which had “burned always in [her] memory”:

The black soot hung and swayed in the great chimneys like a mass of sable moses, and, beneath, yellow and red and purple flames leaped up from an inky base of coal to reach them, while on this base, black and shining as jet, was a gray lettering that incessantly formed itself into words and then crumbled away. You knew that the words, if you could read them, would tell you the secret of your life, and you would watch them late into the night, until you fell asleep and woke to watch again. But the words always crumbled away before you could read them.

(8-9)

While Davis was never able to decipher her own life in the ashes, the Howth fire is given voice and agency. It more than tells Margret’s future; it determines it. Although the Howths’ hearth simply fulfills its role in prodding Margret toward domesticity, Davis makes the home’s monitor complicit in the growing legal truism that “a reciprocal action and reaction, though almost invisibly, exist between government and our firesides.”25

Not surprisingly, descriptions of working-class homes, prisons, and industrial settings became increasingly difficult to distinguish at mid-century. For example, Wines and Dwight discuss reformatory dwellings that are “strictly of the family character . . . this home should be, though tidy and attractive, yet of the plainest character, partaking as nearly as may be of the nature of domestic departments of families in moderate circumstance” (64). Such a description of the plain, tidy home could be applied to the Howths’ working-class cottage as easily as to a house of detention.26 Davis similarly transposes the rhetoric of the home; Lois transforms her industrial abode, taming the mill’s hearth—the furnace—with her domestic rituals.

“Two or three doors of the wide brick ovens were open, and the fire threw a ruddy glow over the stone floor . . . very home-like . . . [Lois] had made a table of a store box, put a white cloth on it,” and cooked a meal in the “red coals” of the furnace (162). But this is a home where a criminal, Joe Yare, tends the hearth and unleashes those once glowing fires; they rage out of control, consuming the structure they had once warmed. The mill becomes “a live monster, now—in one swift instant, alive with fire,—quick, greedy fire, leaping like serpents’ tongues out of its hundred jaws, hungry sheets of flame maddening and whirling” (171). This fire expresses the anger and frustration seething in many home inhabitants, as well as the monstrous possessiveness motivating domestic ideology.

Even though Lois has demonstrated true womanhood, the homely hearth she has faithfully tended literally consumes her. African American men and women, readers must conclude, are incapable of creating and maintaining a proper home.

The more suppressed Howth hearth light throws a hopeful glow over the realities of a criminalized world; however the red glow is also deceiving—it mystifies.

The fire on the hearth burned low and clear; the old worn furniture stood out cheerfully in the red glow . . . but the glow was all that was cheerful. To-morrow, when the hard daylight should jeer away the screening shadows, it would unbar a desolate, shabby home.

(38)

This night-time, fire-light vision is a fantasy—the incandescence also “warms [Margret’s] floating fancy . . . giving her every-day purpose the trait of heroism” (39). The heart of the home sheds a blinding light that obscures the mundane triviality of Margret’s life; the firelight lures her and other women into believing domestic pursuits are the “heights of self-renunciation or bold resolve” (40). Men are not exempt from the hypnotizing effects of the home fires. Davis’ working-men’s faces reflect that hearth-fire, showing “homeliest home-scenes, low climbing ambitions,
some delirium of pleasures to come” (16). “Delirium” is an especially apt word to use; the home becomes the tantalizer of the capitalistic containment policy, the “far uncertain hope at the end” which characters give to their “gnawing heart[s] to feed on” (44). The dream of a proper American home is the most noble attainment capitalism has to offer—a cultural mirage that is always just out of reach.51

Holmes, too, is eventually tamed by the ideology of home. As he lays near death “this word ‘home’ had taken possession of him”; his hours spent recuperating in solitary confinement, “waiting through the cold, slow hours, in his solitary room” convince him of the salvation to be found at home (243, 197). Again, Davis couches his desire for home in uncontrollable, passionate language: “he did not reason now,—abandoned himself . . . to this delirious hope of a home, and cheerful warmth, and this woman’s love fresh and eternal” (222). He tracks Margret as if she were prey, noting the “hot panting in his veins, and strange flash in his eye” as he hunts her down after his “release” from the hospital (219). The once “homeless, solitary” criminal’s capitulation to domestic ideology triumphs over rampant individualism, as Holmes assumes the normalized status of husband. On this point Davis again echoes domestic lawyers, whose efforts to regulate home life sprang from a belief in the breakdown of familial order to personal indulgence. Self-fulfillment spurred on by capitalistic ideology had failed and needed to be contained by the very institutions which protected one’s right to pursue that self-fulfillment.

Yet in introducing the feverish, possessive nature of domestic ideology and the blindly capacities of the hearth fire, Davis undermines her seemingly happy conclusion. It’s true she supplied the conventional ending her editors sought, freeing her marginal cast of criminals in a formulaic fashion David Papke describes, “includ[ing] the reclamation of pre-modern values and social arrangements. Suddenly blessed with large inheritances . . . . worthy criminals are free to lead lives untarnished by the corrupt ways of the modern city.”52 The oil ensures Margret and her ailing parents labor-free, material comfort; Holmes is persuaded by his brush with death to abandon his self-indulgent schemes and marry Margret. Both turn their backs on the industrial world, setting up housekeeping in the Howths’ country cottage. Yet the hearth imagery is a constant, disturbing undercurrent. As Holmes begins his assault upon Margret, insisting she give him a second chance and marry him, she initially “measures her words, her very eye-light is ruled by decorum; she is a machine, for work. She has swept her child’s heart clean” (226). Margret had valiantly remained self-possessed throughout the novel, refusing to respond to the gazes of either Knowles or Holmes; she had been “colorless, lustless,” with “no reflected lights” (22-23). But the “hot fire” begins to work on her, “wearing her eyes,” and “the vexing click of the clock” beats on her brain as the hearth and home hypnotize her. At Holmes’ prompting she admits that her crime has been to deny “the law of [her] nature” (232), just as Schouler’s domestic casebook insists. Upon her capitulation, “the red fire-light flashed into a glory of crimson through the room . . . . the old clock ticked away furiously, as if rejoicing” (239). The hearth, the home and its domestic ideology of containment have won.

Davis destabilizes the formerly stable and happy connotations of “hearth and home” in yet another way. Realistically, hearth fires were dirty and inefficient.53 As Karen Haltnunen and Colleen McDonnell have both noted, domestic ideology obscured the real labor required to run a home; the kitchen and the hard, filthy work which took place there became invisible to visitors, barred from prying eyes by the public rooms of the house. Davis’ more realistic depiction of the hearth fire where Joel, the Howth servant, enjoys “diabolical orgies” burning the Howths’ newly discovered oil, denies such domestic fictions. His fire is “a horrible cloud of burning grease, from a dirty pint-pot on the table, before which Joel was capering and snorting like some red-headed Hottentot before his fetich, occasionally sticking his fingers into the nauseous stuff, and snuffing it up as if it were roses” (253). The cheerful hearth is exposed as a dirty, grease fire in this final image, its purpose scientific rather than nurturing. More important, Joel’s heathenish dance signifies the capitalist gain and exploitation which the oil will expedite, superseding charitable Christian decency. Joel eagerly transmogrifies the oil into the material items the family will now be able to procure: “carpets, an’ bunnets, an’ slithers of railroad-stock, an’ some colour on Margot’s cheeks” (254). Like the warm breath of a blazing fire, money will bring a feverish brilliance to Margret’s life, animating her features from without, rather than from within.

Holmes/home (he eventually symbolizes the hegemonic ideology of the “home”) will now police Margret. Margret maintains an inviolate self throughout, inducing the apathetic waiting state, the “homely face and waiting figure . . . simple dark and pure,” her criminal status demands (22). And her reward for her self-control is marriage to a man who will subsume her. In entering marriage, Margret is entering yet another prison of domination and dependence trading Dr. Knowles, her boss/warden for Holmes, her husband/warden who now watches her “as a judge would a criminal” (231). Holmes has finally triumphed, gaining the “master-key to a nature so rare as this,” and the “kingly power in his hand to break its silence” (260). According to Schouler, domestic law reinforced Holmes’ position, allowing him to “lord it over his wife with a somewhat despotic sway” (10). Margret’s legal status may have become normalized, yet the reality of her situation is essentially maintained; though domestic codes were beginning to change, the law of coverture still reigned, where the “wife’s legal existence becomes suspended or extinguished during the marriage state; it sacrifices her property interests, and places her almost absolutely within her husband’s keeping” (Schouler 10). And though he no longer needs to procure a fortune, Holmes is still hungry to possess and subdue, and the law guarantees him the right to “tame” Margret’s spirit; “it was his” (225). The “homely
hope” does not quench Holmes’ ambition; rather, it “[fans] into life stagnant depths of desire and purpose, stirring his resolute ambition” (222). Holmes becomes enmeshed in the deferred promise of home through ownership of his wife, while Margret becomes dependent upon her husband as representative of the state; they simply trade in emotional rather than material capital now, as they settle the “secret account” that lay between them (143).

While some critics see Margret and Holmes’ marriage as “a celebration of a loving commitment” and “the antithesis of egoism,” I believe that Davis’ ending also denies this gentle, humanistic myth.44 Ironically, at the end of the novel Margret is no longer impoverished, but has become an heiress as wealthy as the discarded Miss Hermes. The hearth finally transforms the plain Margret into a princess; her hair becomes the crown symbolizing her new-found wealth, “shining in the red fire-light like a mist of tawny gold” (242). Davis leaves signposts for her reader, indicating the surreal, fairy-tale nature of her ending: Margret’s reference to herself as “Cinderella,” the “Aladdin’s lamp” of Joel’s fire (243, 255). At the beginning of the novel Davis bitterly acknowledges, “you want something in fact to lift you out of this crowded tobacco-stained commonplace, to kindle and chase and glow in you” (6). In one sense she fulfilled her readers’ expectations. Yet even though she was not able to “dig into this commonplace, this vulgar American life,” as she would have wished, she does expose the obfuscating glow, the perpetual criminality of domestic ideology and capitalism.

Finally, Davis insists that it is not the structure itself, but the ideology of home that is imprisoning. Home is not a place but a state of mind. Davis’ literary contemporaries also disseminate the popular refrain that a house does not make a home. Her infamous editor, Fields, recounts his 1861 tour of Europe during which the “household monitor” which measured out his days in the United States, “began audibly and regularly to mark the seconds” wherever he traveled.48 “No miles could measure the distance” between one’s house and any other place, Davis agrees, for it is a psychic state that will not be denied, but also cannot be invoked on demand (22). Lois Yare is initially a hopeful and attractive character because she carries “home spirit” around with her as she travels in her cart, internalizing the “sparkle of warmth” of worldly pleasure (92). Yet Lois is truly a “homely” character; she is homely in the sense that she is full of warmth and good cheer, knitting together the community in the same manner that she tastefully arranges her wares. Finally, though, she is physically “homely”—dismorphic, scarred, mentally impaired—embodying the ravages of domestic ideology, racism, poverty, and industrial capitalism, just as American homes did. The tragic fate of Joe and Lois Yare counteracts the “happy ending” of Margret and Holmes, upon which critics have traditionally focused their attention.

ON THE HOMEFRONT

Though it is well-documented that Fields insisted upon the happy ending in order to keep his readership satisfied and, assumedly, to reinscribe traditional gender proscriptions, the historical context also provides keys to a productive reading of the novel’s ironies. Margret Howth began its serialization in 1861, the year that the American Civil War began. Davis’ ending also served an important cultural function in this time of war. First, it reinforced the “American” values of family unification—a microcosm of the national family—which Northern soldiers were ostensibly fighting to protect. Lincoln’s famous metaphor of the “house divided” served as a constant war-time refrain, for the domestic conflict was persistently framed as a family drama. Kathleen Dillhey has masterfully outlined how “Old Homestead” and “Romance” narratives sought to restore and reconstruct America through the recuperating function of domestic ideology.49 One contemporary reviewer of Margret Howth praised the novel specifically for its American spirit, and for its particular success in depicting those elements even in our industrial life that “vibrate and struggle outward those aspirations, germs of culture and reforms” which in turn form the “inner-being” of our fellow-citizens.50 Davis preserves national sentiments through references to a shared cultural heritage and an ambitious, reforming impulse.

The happy ending is also directly reassuring to frightened countrymen and women struggling to make sense of the war. Towards the resolution of the novel, Davis turns outside of the narrative to remind her audience of their temporal position: “Do you remember how Christmas came that year? how there was a waiting pause, when the States stood still, and from the people came the first awful murmurs of the storm that was to shake the earth?” Rather than emphasizing the certain destruction of the coming war, Davis tells only of its cohesive power: “Because of the vague, grand dread without, it may be, they drew closer together round household fires, were kinder in the good old-fashioned way” (197-98). The containment of the home certainly seems preferable to the unknown chaos of modern warfare, especially as it was splintering families and the country in irreparable ways. Fields ensured that Davis’ novel would not disrupt the fragile sense of social stability bolstering Northern culture through the war. Under his tutelage Davis abandoned her original scheme to kill Dr. Knowles at the Battle of Manassas; though he continues to “grumble,” and though he does serve in the Union army, Knowles is reintegrated into the family circle in the last scenes of the novel.

Ultimately, Davis’ story reassuringly images a future that will incorporate the most familiar elements of ante bellum ideology. The rosy glow of the Howth hearth is finally given a prophetic voice, since it compellingly foretells national redemption and a stable future for the divided country. Davis’ narrator comfortably writes, “why the very low glow of the fire upon the hearth tells me something of recompense coming hereafter” (5). It justifies the suffering of today by “blotting out the hard, dusty path of the future, and shed[ding] warm and clear the success at the end . . . only the old home as it once was full of quiet laughter and content” (42). In a world filled with fear and hatred, Davis valiantly struggled to manufacture the “love
and mercy" which was in such short supply during peacetime, and which would certainly disappear with the coming of war.

Perhaps in ending her story in an unrealistically optimistic way she attempts, like Margret, to "stifle by a sense of duty her utterable feeling of loss," a loss that may also be attached to the specter of war (157). Her rhetorical insistence on "stifling," on "duty," on "bearing the pain in silence" suggests, finally, the self-discipline to be required of Americans at war; her story of "today" is the story of a cultural psyche that is suspended, waiting for the return of home feeling. Yet the novel cannot deny the reality of war; Davis, perhaps inadvertently, asks unsettling questions, exposing the "warning truths" which had precipitated the war and that would continue to preoccupy the country for the rest of the century: Will the primitive, overpowering brute who is briefly glimpsed in Holmes be unleashed during war? If murder is socially sanctioned, how will one tell the criminals from the citizens? If Joe Yare is, indeed, "naturally" criminal, what will become of a society in which millions of Joe Yares are emancipated? If domestic ideology is truly imprisoning, if homes are unsafe, where are women to go? And if the "experiment of self-government . . . was crumbling in ruin," what would take its place (185)? Every aspect of Davis' novel insists that the maintenance of the national "home" is only to be achieved through the resolution of the much larger specter of criminal behavior in every citizen.

Notes

1. Rebecca Harding Davis, Margret Howth: A Story of To-day (1862; reprint, New York: The Feminist Press, 1990). The novel was initially serialized in the Atlantic Monthly from October 1861-March 1862, and was published in book form by Ticknor in 1862. Subsequent references to the novel are in the text.

2. See Michael Grossberg, Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-Century America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); David Ray Papke, Framing the Criminal: Crime, Cultural Work, and the Loss of Critical Perspective, 1830-1900 (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1987), 104. Sharon Harris, too, has noted, "though Margret escapes to her country home each evening, the time is near when this region will no longer be a "House of Refuge" either; the Ashley clouds from the mill are drifting further into that Edenic territory." Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 68. Finally in Murder and Moral Decay in Victorian Popular Literature (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1983), Beth Kalikoff argues that stories in which crimes are committed against family members "emphasize[d] the impossibility of protecting oneself from a crime arising from domesticity and intimacy" (55).

3. The 1860s marked a resurgence of interest in penitentiary reform. The penitentiary was an American experiment begun in 1790 with the construction of the Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia, a partitioned prison designed by Benjamin Rush. By 1819 the overcrowded, polluted jails proved uninhabitable, and two schools of reformers responded to the psychological challenge. The "separate" system of imprisonment was best illustrated by the Cherry Hill Penitentiary in Philadelphia where prisoners were not allowed visitors or letters, and were confined alone in their cells at all times. Such intense isolation was thought to encourage internal examinations and reform. In the "silent" system practiced in Auburn, New York, prisoners worked together, but they were not allowed to communicate; the lash enforced this policy. The inmate's inner well-being was forfeited for the ease and economic efficiency the silent system allowed. By 1860 both of these systems were grossly overextended; it became clear that new methods of incarceration and reform should be developed. See Blake McKelvey, American Prisons: A Study in American Social History Prior to 1915 (Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1968); Paul W. Keve, Prisons and the American Conscience: A History of U.S. Federal Corrections (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991); Adam Jay Hirsh, The Rise of the Penitentiary: Prisons and Punishment in Early America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Alexander W. Pisciotta, Benevolent Repression: Social Control and the American Reformatory-Prison Movement (New York: New York University Press, 1994).

The 1860s also saw the rise of domestic case law. According to Michael Grossberg, "a specialized law of the family was one of the most significant products of the nineteenth-century legal order" (ix). During the National period marriages were no longer considered solely religious relationships, but "private compacts with public ramifications" (20). Families were conceived of as interdependent parts of a larger social fabric. As nineteenth-century rhetoric privatized family life, domestic relations were separated from the world of public affairs which had governed them. Lawmakers consciously developed a new legal lexicon to adjudicate relations among the independent individuals who now made up the family unit (4). Domestic law was spurred on by family reformers who felt that social intervention was necessary to fix the increasing number of homes that were no longer functioning as disciplinary agents.

4. Enoch Wines was a lecturer at Washington College in Pennsylvania. Rebecca Harding Davis was born in Washington and attended Washington Female Seminary from 1844-48. The intellectual community there was relatively small, and the lyceum and lecture scene was quite active; Davis could have encountered Wines. Additionally, her brother attended Washington College and shared much of his knowledge with her. Though it is not clear if Davis read Dr.
Wines’ work, it seems likely that she would have been familiar with his theories.

5. [noch] C[obb] Wines and Theodore W. Dwight, Report on the Prisons and Reformatories of the United States and Canada (Albany, NY: Van Benthuysen & Sons, 1867). Subsequent references to the Report are in the text. Charged by the newly rejuvenated New York Association with compiling information on the current state of penitentiaries, Wines and Dwight toured seventeen states and Canada during the last year of the Civil War in response to a “crisis in corrections” caused by prison overcrowding and the perceived threat of an increase in criminal activity. The result was the most influential work on penology of its time; the Report shaped prison construction and reform policies for many decades. McKelvey writes that Wines and Dwight heralded in a new era of discipline and reformation in the penitentiary world, emphasizing rehabilitation over punishment and advocating prison education which would enable convicts to stay out of jail.

Wines had served as a minister in Congregational and Presbyterian churches, as well as a university lecturer. Dwight was a member of the noted Dwightes of Yale and the first head of Columbia Law School.

According to McKelvey, Wines’ infectious zeal fueled the formation of the American Association for Promoting the Social Sciences, and influenced reports and reformatory plans in New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey (52). Wines subsequently organized the first meeting of the National Prison Association (American Correctional Association) which adopted his more optimistic approach to penitentiaries.

6. James Schouler, A Treatise on the Law of the Domestic Relations (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1870). Subsequent references to A Treatise are in the text. Schouler was the leading late nineteenth-century authority on spousal and parental relations. His Treatise was the first comprehensive treatise of the subject in the United States. Schouler was consciously invested in legal professionalism and aped scientific methods in his efforts to establish objective legal standards (Grossberg 28).


8. Davis’ critical currency rests upon her first published work of fiction, Life in the Iron Mills (1861). Arguably Davis’ most important work, Life illustrates what the white, middle-class Davis garnered from her contact with the underprivileged during her childhood in the industrial mill-town of Wheeling, Virginia; her emergent class consciousness is, perhaps, the most radical and consistent feature of her work. The Brahmin literary world responded enthusiastically to the vigorous, reformist sensibility Davis exhibited in Life. On an 1862 tour of New England Davis was feted by the Fields, Emerson, the Alcotts, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, among others. Both in 1861 and today, Life has been lavishly praised for its grimy realism, its social conscience, and its sensitivity to the consequences of industrial capitalism.


10. Jean Fagan Yellin, “The ‘Feminization’ of Rebecca Harding Davis,” American Literary History 2 (1990): 203-19. Critics have generally relied upon Davis’ own indictment of the novel to substantiate their denouncements. Davis wrote that she felt in making the required revisions, “it was so much like giving people broken bits of apple rind to chew.” Letter to Annie Fields, 9 August 1861, Richard Harding Davis Collection, #6109, Clifton Wailer Barrett Library, University of Virginia.

11. Yellin 203; Harris 153.


15. In her study of the development of reform policies in the U.S., Barbara Brenzel has persuasively shown that dependence is a deviant characteristic common to all marginalized groups; “the indigent poor, the insane, and the criminal were all treated similarly. In one form or another, all were culpable of social devi-

16. Karen Haltunen has explored a variation of this phenomenon in Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-70 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982). Her titular "archetypal hypocrites threatened ultimately, by undermining social confidence among men and women, to reduce the American republic to social chaos" (xv).

17. In McKelvey 64-68.

18. Michael Grossberg, "Guarding the Altar: Physiological Restrictions and the Rise of State Intervention in Matrimony," in Law, Society and Domestic Relations, ed. Kermit L. Hall (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 302. Grossberg describes how marriage, which was not fulfilling its social regulatory function, began to be regulated more stringently. Marriages which were interracial, between minors, between close kin, or which were compromised by a mental infirmity were increasingly outlawed. These categories suggest that African Americans and other minorities, American youth, and the insane were targeted as deviant elements in American society.

19. Dumm explains that the penitentiary became necessary to "recreat[e] the tension that informed the behavior of the 'great middle class'"—most of whom owned property—by "reinforcing the relationships that bound the citizenry and political authority together" (126).


22. Brenzel 7. Brenzel tells the story of one girl who was labeled as "leading a vagrant and vicious life," but who was really a poor girl doing "extremely well in school" until her family pulled her out and left her begging for food in the streets (126). Her true crime was homelessness.

23. In McDannell 50.

24. Many Davis critics speculate that this is precisely the fate she had intended for Margret in her first draft of "The Deaf and the Dumb." See for example Yellin 234. Davis diffuses the sexual overtones of Knowles and Margret's relationship by describing Knowles as "an old man, overgrown, looking like a huge misshapen mass of flesh" (12). Further, he is a member of "a despised race," a "half-breed," and an interracial relationship was, I believe, beyond the scope of Davis' sporadically liberal social vision.


28. Brown 65. As Dumm sees it, prison negates the conditions which allow one to define individuality. by "eliminating the conditions which allow one to behave oneself!" (73).


31. See Hirsch xi. The pillory, lash, gallows, exile, or indentured servitude had been used to punish criminals. In the small, agrarian communities of the colonial period citizens knew each other and criminals were easily identified. However, in the burgeoning, urban U.S. criminals needed to be set apart. Under the "separate" system convicts remained in solitary confinement at all times; however, it was difficult to coordinate and monitor their labor.

32. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Seabury Press, 1969). They concisely explain: "Absolute solitude, the violent turning inward on the self, whose whole being consists in the mastery of material and in the monotonous rhythm of work, is the specter which outlines the existence of man in the modern world. Radical isolation and radical reduction to the same hopeless nothingness are identical. Man in prison is the virtual image of the bourgeois type which he still has to become in reality" (226).

33. McKelvey 3. Perry Miller was the first to articulate the codeterminacy of church and state law, identifying the Puritan covenant as the model for our liberal democracy. Errand into the Wilderness (New York: Harper & Row, 1956). Dumm picks up the gauntlet, charting how Quaker theology affected discipline's evolution from "coercion" to "persuasion" in the American colonies. Education and religious instruction were cited by Wines and Dwight and others as reformatory agents.

34. Grossberg, Governing 17. One might also read Holmes' inflexibility towards Joe Yare as a belated comment on the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which required Northerners to re-enslave escaped African Americans and return them to captivity despite any moral objections they might have to the law.


36. Qtd. Harris 45. Also see Davis' late-life autobiography, Bits of Gossip (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.,
1904), for Davis’ own detailed explanation of the inadequacies of Transcendentalism. Subsequent references to the autobiography are in the text.


38. See McKelvey 26, 42; Dumm 80; Keve 19.

39. Mark Seltzer explains this inconsistency as the dual requirement of “self-discipline in the mills and self-gratification in the market” in his analysis of Life in the Iron Mills. “The Still Life,” American Literary History 3 (1991): 455-86. Brown makes a similar connection between a “vigilant domesticity that absorbs exterior threats” that is also a “model of capitalist consumption” (182). Instead of Margret’s caged chicken, Holmes is symbolized by the “frantic ambition” of an aspiring rooster, determined to stand on a lichen-covered wall or perish in the attempt (176).

40. Davis is, perhaps, also commenting on the truly patriarchal nature of prostitution during a time when the woman’s body was thought to be the site of sexual deviance. See Barbara Meil Hobson, Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Much of Davis’ work exposes the economic basis of women’s social relations.


42. See Dumm 125. Joe Yare’s life illustrates the correlation between poverty and criminality in the United States. “The criminals had somehow avoided being ‘socialized’ into the money values of society. To be sure, few criminals lacked interest in money itself. The problem lay in their inability or unwillingness to strive for it in the manner prescribed by society.” In Joe Yare’s case, as well as the cases of other enslaved and/or free blacks, the “criminals” are certainly denied access to this knowledge.

43. See Hirsch 71; Keve 20; and Michael Hindus, “The Social Context of Crime in Massachusetts and South Carolina, 1760-1873,” The Newberry Papers in Family and Community History (Chicago: Newberry Library, 1976) for further discussion of the practices which characterized both institutions.

44. Franklin notes, “no longer were they just a sub-human race” after Emancipation; “now [African Americans] were to be thought of as a race of criminals” as American society scrambled to keep them in perpetual bondage (101).

45. For more detailed discussions of Davis’ abolitionist activities and racial portraiture see Harris 78-81 and Pfaelzer.


47. Grossberg, Governing 10. This quote taken from an 1837 legal commentator, David Hoffman.

48. Writers who were avowedly arguing for working-class housing reforms explicitly outline the capitalist purposes of the home and its disciplinary function. The unsafe state of working-class tenements is decried for “this needless sacrifice and shortening of life, this accumulating amount of ill health, causes an annual loss, in each of our great cities, of productive capacity to the value of millions of dollars.” “Model Lodging Houses,” Atlantic Monthly 5 (1860): 673-80.

49. Ann Rombines, who traces the development of the “home plot” in women’s novels, believes that home rituals celebrate “the continuity of a common culture and the triumph of human values” over external circumstances. The Home Plot: Women, Writing & Domestic Ritual (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 12.


51. Read within this context, Davis’ description of the people crowding the streets on Christmas day is monstrous: Holmes passes “crowds of thin-clad women looking in through open doors, with red cheeks and hungry eyes, at red-hot stoves within, and a placard, ‘Christmas dinners for the poor, gratis;’ out of every window on the streets came a ruddy light, and a spicy smell; the very sunset sky had caught the reflection of the countless Christmas fires, and gleamed up to the zenith, blood-red as cinnamon” (205).

52. Papke 112.

53. See the description in Elizabeth Donaghy Garrett, At Home: The American Family, 1750-1870 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990). The early American cook was subjected to the danger of the flames, “the deleterious vapours and pestilential exhalations of the charcoal,” “the glare of the scorching fire,” and “the smoke so baneful to the eyes and complexion” (99).

54. Rose 30.


AMERICA AS PRISON

Nicolaus C. Mills (essay date 1970)


In the following essay, Mills uses the works of Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain to discuss the theme of American society as a prison. Mills suggests that Puritan society, Wall Street, and the culture of slavery were all forms of imprisonment in the writings of nineteenth-century American authors.

I

"Don't be shocked when I say that I was in prison. You're still in prison. That's what America means—prison." These words of Malcolm X come as no surprise to anyone familiar with American writing in the 1960's. Equally harsh indictments of American society can be found in the novels of William Burroughs, Peter Matthiessen, and Norman Mailer. The idea of describing American society in terms of prison and imprisonment is not new, however, and if one is going to understand it in perspective, he must turn to nineteenth-century American fiction. In the work of Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain it is not merely the oppressive institutions but the very structure of American society that in one form or another is imprisoning.

How imprisoning may be judged by the fact that, unlike their European counterparts (Stendhal's Julien Sorel, Dickens' Magwitch, and Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov), the "criminals" of nineteenth-century American fiction are free from even the taint of violence or acquisitiveness. Natty Bumppo is jailed for hunting out of season, Hester Prynne for having a child out of wedlock, Bartleby for refusing to accept the walls around him, Jim for denying his slavehood. Their crimes do not go so far as to involve the conscious pursuit of martyrdom. Thoreau speaks of in Civil Disobedience when he declares, "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also prison." But they do show prison to be the natural consequence of a conflict between personal integrity and an overbearing society.

II

In Cooper's The Pioneers imprisonment is a logical extension of the restrictiveness (particularly in terms of space) of a society in which personal freedom is becoming increasingly subordinate to property values. At the start of the story Judge Temple is shown shooting at and missing a deer for which Natty has set a careful ambush, and at the end of the story Natty is shown going to jail for hunting a deer out of season. For the Judge, who presides over the court that sentences Natty, there is nothing incongruous about his involvement in either of these events. It is on his land that Natty hunts; so he feels no hesitation in shooting at a buck that comes his way. And at the trial of Natty it is the "sanctity of the laws" that he upholds; so he feels that there is nothing personal in his legal actions. From Natty's point of view, on the other hand, the Judge's role is dubious. Natty never admits that the Judge has the authority to say who shall or shall not hunt:

"There's them living who say, that Nathaniel Bumpo's right to shoot on these hills is of older date than Marmaduke Temple's right to forbid him," he said. "But if there's a law about it at all, though who ever heard of a law that a man shouldn't kill deer where he pleased! . . . it should be to keep people from the use of small bares."

Nor does Natty acknowledge the justness of the court. At his trial he tells Judge Temple:

"Have you forgot the time that you came on to the lakeshore, when there wasn't even a jail to lodge in: and didn't I give you . . . the fat of a noble buck to satisfy the cravings of your hunger? Yes, yes—you thought it no sin then to kill a deer! . . . And now you shut me up in your dungeons to pay me for my kindness."

What Natty does see is that "might often makes right here, as well as in the old country" and that society regards his sense of freedom as a threat to its order. The description of the combination prison and law court in which Natty is tried makes this distinction clear. There is nothing about the building that shows any flexibility or unity with the wilderness surrounding it:

The edifice was composed of a basement of squared logs, perforated here and there with small grated windows. . . . The dungeons were to be distinguished externally from the debtors' apartments by the size of the apertures, the thickness of the grates, and by the heads of the spikes that were driven into the logs as a protection against the illegal use of edge-tools. The upper story was of framework regularly covered with boards, and contained one room decently fitted up for the purposes of justice.

There is no way that such an institution, which occupies the center of society in The Pioneers, can accommodate Natty's world, and when he is brought to trial, everything he values is minimized. Time and again his explanations are dismissed by Judge Temple, and when he and Billy
Kirby (whose life Natty supposedly threatened) arrive at a warm understanding, the Judge warns, “This is an improper place for such dialogues.”

After Natty is found guilty, he is sentenced in a manner that literally and symbolically deprives him of the freedom most essential to his being. He is forced to endure the public punishment of having his legs placed in the stocks, and then he is put in a jail cell so confining that all he can do is pace its “narrow limits, in his mocassins, with quick impatient treads.” Under these circumstances Natty’s only recourse is escape. There is no other way for him to respond to a society in which prison is merely one manifestation of what Judge Temple calls “wholesome restraints.” As Natty tells Elizabeth Temple, “I love the woods, and ye relish the face of man; I eat when hungry and drink when a-dry; and ye keep stated hours and rules. . . .”

In The Scarlet Letter, as in The Pioneers, prison is a dark and rigid building:

the wooden jail was already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age, which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle browsed and gloomy front. The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its front door looked more antique than any thing else in the new world. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era.

In Hawthorne’s story it is not, however, the spatial limitations so much as the moral repressiveness of society that prison reflects. The Puritans are described in terms similar to their jail:

a community, which owed its origin and progress, and its present state of development, not to the impulses of youth, but to the stern and tempered energies of manhood, and the sombre sagacity of age; accomplishing so much, precisely because it imagined and hoped so little.

This identification is carried even further with Hawthorne’s use of colors and textures. There is nothing bright or natural about the prison or the Puritans. The Puritans wear “sad-colored garments,” and the prison has a “gloomy front.” The Puritans have a look of “grim rigidity” about them, and the door on the prison is “iron-clamped.” The Puritans have become “petrified” in their attitudes, and the prison is “more antique than anything else in the new world.” Hawthorne goes on to describe the Puritans as a people “amongst whom religion and law were almost identical” and then completes the identification of the Puritans and their prison with a description of “the grim and grisly presence of the town-beadle.” “This person prefigured and represented in his aspect the whole dismal severity of the Puritan code of law, which it was his business to administer in its final and closest application to the offender.”

As part of her imprisonment, Hester, like Natty, is put on display, and here, too, there are important parallels between The Scarlet Letter and The Pioneers. In both books such punishment is seen as archaic and vengeful. Cooper observes:

the whipping post, and its companion, the stocks, were not yet supplanted by the more merciful expedients of the public prison. . . . those relics of the elder times were situated, [in front of the jail] as a lesson of precautionary justice to the evildoers of the settlement.

Hawthorne ironically notes:

this scaffold constituted a portion of a penal machine, which now, for two or three generations past, has been merely historical and traditionary among us, but was held, in the old time, to be as effectual an agent in the promotion of good citizenship, as ever was the guillotine among the terrorists of France.

Even more central to both stories is the description of how such punishment violates the inner being of its victims. Natty is humiliated by his treatment and in rhetorical fashion asks, “Is it no harm ... to show off a man in his seventy-first year, like a tame bear, for the settlers to look on... where the boys can point to him and say, ‘I have known the time when he was a spectacle for the county!’”

Hawthorne comments, “The very ideal of ignominy was embodied and made manifest in this contrivance [the pillory] of wood and iron. There can be ... no outrage more flagrant than to forbid the culprit to hide his face for shame; as it was the essence of this punishment to do.”

The result is that Hester, like Natty, faces a situation in which some form of escape is necessary if she is to be free. As long as she remains in Boston, she must live in a societal prison in which she is “the general symbol at which the preacher and the moralist might point.”

In Melville’s Bartleby prison (ironically named the Tombs) is also a dark and unnecessarily quiet place. As the lawyer-narrator of Melville’s story observes, “The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom.” In terms of the human values they exclude and the routine they impose, prison and society are, nonetheless, virtually identical in Bartleby. The walls that Bartleby encounters in prison, where he is pictured “standing alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall,” are an extension of those he finds throughout society.

Melville’s story begins symbolically on Wall Street. There the deadness of a prison-like society is embodied in the law office in which Bartleby works. It is an office that is prosperous and respectable, and yet as Bartleby’s employer admits, it is an office “deficient in what landscape painters call ‘life.’” At one end it looks “upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious skylight shaft,” and at the other end it has “an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade.” This imprisoning effect is repeated in the office itself, where Bartleby is placed behind “ground-glass folding doors” as well as a “high green folding screen.” There is literally no direction in which Bartleby can turn and not face a wall of some sort. His “dead-wall reveries” are a reflection rather than an exaggeration of his condition.
Bartleby’s passive resistance and ultimate refusal to do the copy work his employer puts before him are a serious challenge to the system in which he finds himself, and for a brief period he has some effect. His employer admits, “For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. . . . A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam.” But Bartleby’s task is finally a hopeless one. His employer is not strong enough to escape the social prison in which he finds himself, and in the long run he bows to the criticism of his “professional friends” by abandoning Bartleby to an actual prison. Even before he takes this step, however, Bartleby’s employer reveals the ease with which the walls of prison may be substituted for the walls of Wall Street. At the same time he gives Bartleby a socially “reasonable” way out of his difficulties, he also makes it clear that, if the latter does not act, it means the Tombs. “Now one of two things must take place. Either you must do something, or something must be done to you. Now what sort of business would you like to engage in?” For the lawyer, who cannot recognize the similarity between the walls in his office and the walls in prison, the choice is as clear as it is genuine. For Bartleby, on the other hand, the end result is that it only makes sense not to act: to refuse to prefer one prison over another.

In contrast to the imprisoning of Bartleby, the imprisoning of Jim in Huckleberry Finn is comic. There are no massive walls or steel bars holding Jim. His confinement is, as Tom Sawyer says, “the stupidest arrangement I ever see.”

“And there’s Jim chained by one leg, with a ten-foot chain, to the end of the bed: why all you got to do is to lift up the bedstead and slip off the chain. . . . Jim could get out of that window hole before this, only there wouldn’t be no use trying to travel with a ten-foot chain on his leg.”

The inefficiency of Jim’s home-made prison does not, however, make it less cruel or the system it represents less inclusive. Throughout Huckleberry Finn slavery is seen imprisoning whites as well as blacks. As the last third of the novel reveals, just keeping a runaway like Jim under control is a difficult task. He must be watched and fed by another slave, and holding him for his owners must be made respectable and a matter of highest priority. Even the doctor who captures Jim is not immune from these pressures and finds that he must sacrifice the welfare of his patients in order to defend the slave system:

“It was a fix, I tell you. I had a couple of patients with the chills, and of course I’d of like to run up to town and see them, but I wasn’t because the nigger might get away, and then I’d be to blame. . . ."

Twain also makes it clear that in creating a slave system the white South not only controlled its slaves through fear but unavoidably itself. Tom Sawyer is correct when he observes (albeit for the purpose of making a game out of freeing Jim) that there is no reason for a captured slave to observe ethical restraints:

“. . . prisoners don’t care how they get a thing so they get it, and nobody don’t blame them for it either. Ain’t no crime in a prisoner to steal the things he needs to get away with. . . ."

On an adult level this same kind of thinking is reflected in the fear and brutality of the men who capture Jim:

The men was very huffy, and some of them wanted to hang Jim, for an example to all the other niggers around there, so they wouldn’t be trying to run away, like Jim done, and making such a raft of trouble, and keeping a whole family scared to death for days and nights.

This picture of a terrified South is similar to the one Kenneth Stampp draws in The Peculiar Institution: “The danger that other Nat Turners might emerge, that an even more serious insurrection might some day occur, became an enduring concern . . . the fear of rebellion, sometimes vague, sometimes acute, was with them always.” It is a picture that Twain does not develop in the detailed fashion of an historian, but his insights are as powerful as Stampp’s. Even when the men who capture Jim are told that he helped the wounded Tom Sawyer, they are too much the prisoners of tradition to look on him as a human being. It is vain for Huck to hope that they will relent in their severity:

I hoped they was going to say he could have one or two of the chains took off, because they was rotten heavy, or could have meat and greens with his bread and water, but they didn’t think of it.

III

Twain’s view of Southern society as a prison anticipates in so many ways the quotation from Malcolm X with which this analysis began that it is tempting to argue that here is another case in which Huckleberry Finn links nineteenth and twentieth-century American fiction. There is, however, nothing in Twain’s critique of society (save the immediacy of his concern with race) that makes it significantly different from Cooper’s or Hawthorne’s or Melville’s. Indeed, the modernity of all four writers’ description of society in terms of a prison stems from the fact that their views cannot be limited to a specific era. In Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain the imprisoning nature of society is seen as a perpetual historical concern. The important distinction in their fiction is not between European and American society or past and present traditions but between society and nature. Thus, in Cooper it is the contrast between the “wilderness” and the “settlements” that is most important for Natty. The defects of Judge Temple’s world are merely the most obvious indication of the limits of society as a whole. As Natty makes clear in The Prairie, even a prosperous life in society would not satisfy his needs. “I might have been a congress-man or perhaps a governor years agone. . . . But what are riches without content?” “If I live in a clearing, here, it is one of the Lord’s making. . . . never again shall I be seen running wilfully into the danger of immorality.” The same logic is reflected in the contrast between the river and the shore.
in *Huckleberry Finn*. It is not merely a society based on slavery but the constraints of being “sivilized” that Huck flees. As the slavery and imprisonment that Hank Morgan experiences in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* demonstrates, Twain saw exploitation characteristic of society as a whole, not merely the antebellum South.

The same kinds of distinctions also apply to *The Scarlet Letter*, in which the “wild rose-bush” that grows by the jail is contrasted with the “black flower of civilized society,” and to *Bartleby*, in which the “grass” that grows “by some strange magic” in the courtyard of the Tombs is different from everything around it. Hawthorne’s criticism of Puritan society is intense, but he never argues that Puritan society is uniquely imprisoning or represents a dead past. At the start of *The Scarlet Letter* he maintains that the founders of “a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness” have “invariably” found it necessary to build a prison. Similarly, in *The House of the Seven Gables* Hawthorne finds the Puritan tradition enduring enough to make a “dungeon” of the Pynchon house. Indeed, not even modern society is truly liberating in *The Seven Gables*, and when Hepzibah and Clifford take their first train ride, they are described as “strangely enfranchised prisoners.” In Melville a parallel historical perspective is maintained. The Tombs in which Bartleby is placed are pictured as having an “Egyptian character” and being of ancient tradition. Thus, they form a link not only with Wall Street but with all societies in which human welfare is subordinated to lesser concerns.

The result is that for Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain seeing society as analogous to a prison finally means regarding it as a continual danger and at the same time defining its limits in terms of an alternative realm (suggested by nature) in which, as Emerson noted in his essay *Circles*, “the heart refuses to be imprisoned” but “tends outward with vast force and to immense and innumerable expansions.” That the existence of such a realm still cannot save the fictional heroes of all four writers from pain or defeat is but one more sign of how deeply their social vision foreshadows the social vision of their twentieth-century counterparts.

**Robert Shulman (essay date 1984)**


*[In the following essay, Shulman explores the theme of society as a prison in American literature, with special focus on the repression of creativity and artists. Shulman argues that authors including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe expressed in their writings a sense that even outside of a physical prison, the artist was confined by a particularly American drive toward conformity and sameness.]*

Prisoners live in enclosed places. They want to get out but if they are in for a long time they work out ways of surviving. They also work out ways of defying the authorities and, if they cannot escape, they at least work out ways of communicating so as to escape detection. In these respects they share common ground with Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe. Each of these great mid-nineteenth-century American writers had special and also shared reasons for simultaneously communicating and concealing in the manner both of the symbolic artist and of the prisoner.

The symbolic mode, of course, was part of their artistic heritage. But a heritage is never simply passively absorbed. If it is to flourish it must satisfy the needs of a new generation. We must explain why Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe seized on the symbolic possibilities their culture made available to them. One explanation is that these writers were attracted to the possibilities of symbolism partly because of their experience as artists in a market society. America each of them came to see as a prison. Because of the frequent conflict between their deepest insights and the demands of the marketplace, as an integral part of their careers as professional writers Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe were motivated to exploit the mode of symbolic indirection that was theirs for the taking. In their version of the style of the inmate, the techniques of symbolic indirection and symbolic intensification allowed them to communicate and conceal, to satisfy the demands of their vision and commitments and also to disguise them from unsympathetic readers. These techniques allowed Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe to defy their audience and at the same time attempt to succeed in the marketplace. In ways that differ for each of them, moreover, each of these authors came to experience his society not only as a positive resource for material and themes, of language and values, and not only as an antagonistic force hostile to their deepest needs as writers and therefore both stimulating them to express their own vision and making that enterprise difficult, but also more particularly they each came to experience America as a prison.

Melville’s “Benito Cereno” is a preliminary example. Consider the dimension of “Benito Cereno” that is the symbolic allegory of a sensitive, Dimmesdale-like artist, Cereno, trying to communicate the truth of his situation to an audience. Delano, Delano is a close relative of those common-sense representatives of official society—Peter Hovenden in “The Artist of the Beautiful” or Baglioni in “Rappaccini’s Daughter”—characters who repeatedly in Hawthorne’s tragedies of the creator cause problems for his artist figures. The truth Cereno wants to convey through the indirect means forced on him by his situation is that he is a prisoner and that the surfaces of the ship are deadly and totally misleading. Delano, who is a prisoner without knowing it, is an insensitive and imperceptive audience, with nearly fatal results. For his part Cereno has been forced to do what inmates have always had to do: to find indirect ways of communicating in order to escape the detection of their keepers. Concentration camp inmates developed ways of conveying, and their friends on the out-
side of communicating, the truth about the camps. They did it through a code in obituary notices, an effective, macabre device all of our writers would have understood. Penitentiary inmates have their devices. As usual with Melville matters are complicated because Delano is in a sense one of the keepers and Babo is a rebellious slave and artist even more inventive than Cerenio, so that even on this limited theme meanings proliferate in ways guaranteed to baffle and antagonize the Delano’s of society.

Through both Cerenio and Babo Melville transforms his own experience as a writer. It is instructive that based on his experience as a writer in America, Melville should parallel the experience of the inmate, imagine situations of confinement—the San Dominick, Bartleby’s enclosed Wall Street office and prison—and develop the devices of symbolic indirectness. The confined setting is explicitly that of the American author in the autobiographical Pierre’s freezing, prison-like room where he writes his first book, after his introduction to the city in a surreal scene at a police station. Melville developed the techniques of the inmate in response to the conflicts between the demands of his vision and the demands of his public. In Moby-Dick he created an exuberant, expansive version of this style. After the brutally negative reception of Pierre, he went underground. The techniques of the inmate were not evident in his first novel, Typee, although it is the narrative of a prisoner’s term and escape from a valley now seen as Paradise, now as Hell. In Chapter 17 of Typee the indictment of the new penitentiaries is not a casual digression but a reflection of a major concern with the prison-house of the modern market society in conflict with what turns out to be the threatening freedom and confinement of the traditional world.

Before his mature development as an artist, Melville was already compelled by the prisoner’s situation. It posed for him the issues of dominance and rebellion, authority and freedom, issues he was to return to again and again in his career. In the course of his development Melville also found he needed to develop a style of symbolic indirectness and symbolic intensification. As his vision darkened and deepened, as his concerns became more profound and far-ranging, Melville needed to satisfy the imperatives of his own outlook. In the marketplace where “dollars damn me,” however, readers demanded official optimism and were suspicious of metaphysical probing. Melville first experimented with a symbolic style in Mardi, avoided it in Redburn and White-Jacket, returned to it deeply in Moby-Dick, and after the reception of Pierre he worked hard on an inversion of the expansive style of Moby-Dick. He developed an inward-turning, symbolic technique that created surfaces that would satisfy his magazine audience and depths that a few might understand. Especially in his short fiction of the 1850’s and The Confidence-Man he worked out the techniques of the inmate.

In Chapter 33 of The Confidence-Man Melville uses the figure of harlequin to express his commitment to this intense art of symbolic indirectness. In opposition to the literal realism and conventional morality called for to achieve success in the marketplace, Melville affirms a stylized but unrestrained imaginative release, a symbolic acting out of the usually concealed realities of characters and situations. Melville’s harlequin looks ahead to the suffering clowns of the twentieth-century artist. He also looks back to Poe’s “Hop-Frog” (1849), one of the most disturbing enactments of the American artist’s feelings of hatred against his imprisoned servitude to the public.

In this symbolic allegory Hop-Frog, jester to the King, is a captive entertainer at the court of a gross, imperceptive monarch. Hop-Frog’s situation is similar to Babo’s in “Benito Cereno.” Both are slaves, both feel abused and looked down on, both violently rebel, and both are inventive dramatists who stage performances that have terrifying consequences. It is sobering that Melville and Poe, both using the techniques of the inmate, should express such powerfully hostile feelings about the American artist and his public. Emerging from their experience as writers in America Melville and Poe focus on frustrated hatred, a sense of imprisonment, and a desire to murder and obliterate. Writing near the end of their careers as professional authors—and for Poe in the year of his death—in these stories Melville and Poe convey the intensity of their response to their situation as American authors.

In Hop-Frog’s case, his initial powerless subservience to his public is combined with thwarted creative power, represented partly by his powerful teeth, arms, and chest above his crippled legs. To compound his sense of the artist’s degradation and self-contempt, Poe presents Hop-Frog as a crippled dwarf. His employer constantly demands “invention,” “characters,” “something novel—out of the way.” The story is dominated by the symbols of Hop-Frog’s intense reaction against his caged imprisonment to this public and its demands. The image of the parrot’s beak grating against its cage, the harsh noise dominating the entire chamber, is one major symbol of the hatred, frustration, and threatening, aggressive contempt the caged artist turns against himself and even more against those who have degraded him into a parrot, no nightingale or raven. The cruel noise dominates the final scene of awful revenge and turns out to be the grating of Hop-Frog’s Fang-like teeth.

“Inspired” by the wine he is forced to drink, Hop-Frog stages a play. It resembles the one whose violent first acts Babo directs and whose final scenes and scenario Babo conceives and also directs, down to the costumes, props, and casting of roles. In his version Hop-Frog tricks his employers and with their own consent tars and feathers King and court, chains them, and dresses them as apes. In thus reversing the conventional power relations, he makes a captive monkey of his public as he feels they have made a caged parrot of him. The artist who has turned his contempt against himself in the image of the crippled dwarf and unwilling today—hop, frog—at the end turns his hatred even more forcefully outward against the public he feels has maimed, abused, and imprisoned him. In another
of Poe’s Gothically darkened, prison-like chambers of the mind, Hop-Frog, “with the rapidity of thought” (p. 226), then illuminates the mind’s destructive powers in his terrify- ing final action. His thwarted creative energies now express themselves in an act of horrible destruction. At the climax, the chamber’s one source of light, the lamp, tradi- tional symbol of imaginative creativity, becomes an imple- ment of vicious torture and the abused, caged victim has been goaded into inhuman, all-too-human victimizer and executioner. For those who cannot separate the story from their knowledge of Poe’s life and death, perhaps the most painful turn is the sense that, whatever the origins in Poe’s drinking, imaginative blocking, and difficulty in writing, whatever the actual tangle of rights and wrongs, one of our most gifted writers was impelled at the end of his life to image his career in just this way. He stresses imprisonment, primarily his own and in reaction that of the public he imagines in his control, chained and burned to death.

Both as an artist contemptuously at odds with a public he nonetheless depends on for support and as a man charged with powerful, unacceptable feelings, Poe was motivated to develop techniques of symbolic indirectness. In “Hop- Frog” and in his detective fiction, in his stories of revenge and his brilliant studies of the buried underside of the self, as Melville and Hawthorne do in their ways, Poe com- bines the techniques of the inmate with his own personally and socially revealing themes and imagery of imprison- ment and punishment.

Written at almost the same time as “Hop-Frog,” the first paragraph of The Scarlet Letter is dominated by the image of a nineteenth-century prison, not a seventeenth-century jail, which was like an ordinary house. Hawthorne’s prison resembles one of the new penal institutions Americans had pioneered along with everything else. Unlike the domestic architecture of the seventeenth-century jail, the prison in The Scarlet Letter has a massive oak door, iron spikes, and it is aligned with the “bearded men” who rule the soci- ety and who also appear in the first sentence of the novel. These iron-like, bearded men, their prison, and the scaffold define and unify the society of The Scarlet Letter. Characterized in this way the society tells us much more about Hawthorne’s sense of his nineteenth-century America than about the Seventeenth Century. Hawthorne needed the disguise of the past to free his imagination so that he could create what is basically a contemporary drama. It is not simply that he needed to escape the detec- tion of the keepers but also that the keepers were part of his own identity. In “Benito Cereno” and “Hop-Frog” Melville and Poe seem fully conscious. To release his en- ergy, however, Hawthorne had to disguise matters from a part of himself, as Poe does in stories like “Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Like Melville’s Babo and Poe’s Hop-Frog, Hawthorne creates a costume drama. In his version the protagonists wear seventeenth-century dress but the structures they live in and embody emerge from Hawthorne’s sense of the present.

As he shows in Chapter 21 of The Scarlet Letter Hawthorne knows that the first settlers were basically Elizabe-

than in their outlook, that they liked ornate clothing and the ceremonial pomp of traditional English society. But he chooses instead to emphasize a joyless, punitive society. As Winthrop tells us in his famous “A Modell of Christian Charity,” for him and his first generation contemporaries what holds society together is the loving brotherhood of believers under God. When love fails, as it did when Winthrop was rejected as governor, he invokes the power of God. Through the medium of the people, Winthrop argues in his “Speech to the General Court,” God chooses the rulers the people are bound to obey by virtue of custom and divine authority. Even under the changes of the New World, for the founding generation the unifying force was the traditional outlook of the Old World, an outlook based on ancient patterns of authority and deference sanctioned by a deep commitment to God.

For Hawthorne in The Scarlet Letter, however, what holds society together is not religious belief, shared traditions, and a common way of life but rather the prison and the scaffold. As ceremonial centers they answer to Haw- thorne’s sense of a society lacking the traditional unifying sentiments and forced to rely primarily on punishment and repressive power. He is not giving a historically accurate portrayal of the seventeenth century and he is not giving a literal description of his nineteenth-century America but rather an image that emerges from the depths of his con- temporary experience. Hawthorne’s resonant image or myth comments suggestively on the grim end results of social tendencies that had started in the seventeenth cen- tury. Americans who had inaugurated their society and their characters on the basis of the Protestant temperament and possessive individualism had ended with what are for Hawthorne the unifying realities of the prison and the scaffold.

The iron-like men who run the society and give it its tem- per are capable but insensitive, heartless. The prison and scaffold are wood but the society and its leaders are iron, a word that recurs again and again in Hawthorne’s descrip- tions of the “iron arm,” the “iron links,” and the “iron framework” of official beliefs, character, and society. The prevailing punitive rigidity and heartlessness define the dominant qualities of the official work ethic society and its representative men, the keepers in what Hawthorne repeatedly presents as the prison-house of orthodox society. His gallery of the representative men who dominate this soci- ety and give it identity began with the parti-colored man in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” and runs through such characters as Endicott in “The Maypole of Merrymount," Peter Hovenden in “The Artist of the Beautiful,” and Ba- gliori in “Rappaccini’s Daughter.” It includes the forefa- thers and all they come to stand for in “The Custom-House sketch.” Judge Pynchon of The House of the Seven Gables is cut from the same iron pattern. Throughout, the histori- cal and geographical settings are the occasion for what is primarily a contemporary American portrait. In “My Kins- man, Major Molineux” Hawthorne had explored the impact of a rapidly changing society whose stable institu- tions and authority figures were being undermined. In The
Scarlet Letter he shifts the focus away from social change and creates an image of the rigid, repressive power that for him continued to exist. From some points of view Jacksonian America was a society in flux; from other points of view official society continued to bear down on those who were at odds with the prevailing values.

In The Scarlet Letter Hester is the main alternative to the masculine-dominated official society. In contrast to the imagery and attitudes associated with society, Hester is characterized as rich and voluptuous; she has a passionate temperament which expresses itself in the oriental luxuriance of the letter and Pearl’s clothing. Before it is repressed, her dark hair flows. Fluidity and passion, a depth of creative, sexual energy characterizes Hester, especially when she is freed from the deadening effects of the letter, from the rigid official punishment it in part represents. In contrast to the drab rigidities of the prison world, Hester speculates freely and dangerously and expresses herself in color and in the sexuality which animates her art—her elaboration of the letter and her other creations—and which precipitates the crisis the novel turns on.

As a free, sexualized, independent woman, speculative intelligence, and artistic creator, Hester is an embodiment of a compelling individualism at odds with the socially conventional version and close to Hawthorne’s deepest feelings about his own creativity and identity. That he should treat Hester ambivalently reveals the most intimate strains which animate Hawthorne’s imagination. He does not make matters easy for himself: he does not soften his view of the dominant, orthodox society as a way of blurring the oppositions and making his reservations about Hester more palatable. The society’s accommodations to Hester do not alter the basic character of the society or Hawthorne’s generally critical view of it or his ambivalent treatment of Hester.

In view of his deep reservations about her, it is significant that Hawthorne allows Hester’s mystic, passionately charged scarlet letter to become an organizing center and communal point of reference, an alternative one to the official symbols of the scaffold and prison. The scarlet letter embodies both the rebellious energies of the artist and the official attitudes of the society the artist both accepts and subverts.

After her formal release from prison, as she becomes vulnerable to the standards of domesticity, common-sense, and the Protestant decorum, Hester’s nature is truncated. She cannot directly express her passionate energy in acts of love with Dimmesdale or in intellectual and imaginative creations growing out of personal fulfillment. Her creative passions are instead repressed and express themselves overtly only in the art of her needlework. The richly elaborated, mystic letter and Pearl’s dress are especially subservive of the official, common-sense, work ethic standards. Hester is like a prisoner forced to express herself in a symbolic code to escape the censorship of the authorities. She keeps the surface barely within tolerable limits and charges her message with implications she is partly aware of, partly unaware of. This combination also applies to Hawthorne, who has his own complex reasons for expressing himself indirectly through the techniques of the inmate.

In The Discovery of the Asylum David Rothman analyzes the total institutions the Jacksonian reformers created to discipline and reform deviants. Like the inmates in the new prisons, reform schools, and mental institutions, Hester is compelled to repress her sexuality even more fully than her creativity, which at least has the outlet of the subsistence and charity work she is allowed. After she dons the scarlet letter “the light and graceful foliage of her character had been withered up by this red-hot brand” and her form, “though still “majestic,” no longer inspires “Passion.” Explicitly, the missing quality is “tenderness” but the imagery of brands and fire suggests sexuality as well. In its official social dimension the scarlet letter represents the pressure of the society’s rigid hostility to the warm passion and defiant individualism Hester embodies. She is truncated by this hostility, is affected in the most intimate recesses of her being, but in a modified, indirect way she continues to express the defiant energy of what in “The Custom-House Sketch” Hawthorne calls “the inmost Me” (p. 4). The narrator reminds us that a “magic touch” may still revive the “woman” in Hester (p. 164). In the forest scene the novelist shows that Hester is still passionately alive and responsive. What revives her, however, is not a magic touch, since Dimmesdale is much too passive, but Hester’s ability to love and express her love, not in a safe but in a dangerous, vital way.

Under the influence of the official stigma of the letter and all it represents, Hester is changed and her relation to others and to society is changed. Under the influence of the letter Hester is isolated but also tied, related, to society. Hawthorne’s language is significant. “The chain that bound her,” he has his narrator say in Chapter 5, “was of iron links, and galling to her inmost soul, but never could be broken” (p. 80). The “chain” is reminiscent of “the instinct,” “not love,” that in “The Custom-House Sketch” Hawthorne says binds him to Salem (p. 11). It is also reminiscent of the “strong traits of their nature which,” Hawthorne also says in “The Custom-House Sketch” “have intertwined themselves with mine,” the traits of his iron-like forefathers (p. 10). When the letter in its official, punitive role is foremost, when Hawthorne is answering to the iron-like, orthodox demands intertwined in his nature, and especially when for Hester the possibility of genuine love has been blighted by the “iron arm” of the official code, Hawthorne characterizes Hester’s relations in the imagery of “iron links.”

In the forest scene, however, Hawthorne imagines an alternative to the “iron links” the scarlet letter and the “iron arm” of society have forged within and between Hester and others. He allows Hester’s passionate sexuality to show in the revived flow of her dark hair. Her smile has the requisite “tenderness” to modulate the full power of
her passion but the “gushing” and “glowing” and the re-
vival of “her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her
beauty” establish her uncensored depths and energy (p.
202). The instinct, love, establishes a vital relation that
brings Hester to life again, reinvigorates Dimmesdale, and
temporarily releases him from “the dungeon of his own
heart” (p. 201). This act of love and the relations it estab-
lishes cannot be characterized in the mechanical imagery
of a prisoner’s chain with iron links because it is alive,
passionate, and changing. For a magic instant Hawthorne
imagines a vital union animated from the depths and prom-
ising fulfilment on this earth. Given the society he knew,
this vital union is necessarily in opposition to it and per-
haps to some extent to all constituted societies. But it sug-
gests the living center social relations might flow from.
At the center of the forest scene Hester is, significantly,
not isolated and she is not selfish. She acts from her depths
for herself and for Dimmesdale. It is revealing that the only
alternative to her unifying, passionate love that Hawthorne
can imagine is the iron arm and the iron links of repress-
ion, punishment, and guilt, of the iron framework of soci-
ety as a supporting but isolating prison.

Even Hawthorne, the most skeptical of our great mid-
nineteenth-century American writers, has an intense intu-
tion of the individualistic sources from which a new kind
of social union might develop. The heart of the forest
scene is Hawthorne’s equivalent of the sexually vitalicized
“love is a kelson of the creation” of Section Five of “Song
of Myself.” It is his equivalent of the erotically charged
realization in “The Grand Armada” in Moby-Dick that
“deep down and deep inland, there I bathe me in eternal
mildness of joy.” But for Hawthorne as for Whitman, the
insight, for all its threat to the conventional social order, is
more alive than Melville’s to the possibility of a new kind
of society energized from the personal depths of love. It
thus seems especially American that, like his great con-
temporaries, Hawthorne is unable to imagine the living,
nonrepressive community this individualism might anim-
ate and develop in. In view of his fears about her ener-
gies, no wonder Hawthorne feels impelled to reincarcerate
Hester for her full term.

Except for the marvellous interlude in the forest and with
the exception of her troubled relation to Pearl, throughout
the novel Hester is accordingly isolated from her intimates
as well as from society. Because her passion is threaten-
ing, Hawthorne makes Hester pay for it but the isolation
itself is not so much a punishment Hawthorne imposes on
her as an acknowledgment of the isolated position in
American society of a person like Hester. Her isolation
from society is an intensified version of the isolation Haw-
thorne had experienced, in a modified form continued to
experience, and had repeatedly imagined as characteristic
of his fictional creators. But this isolation also has more
general sources and implications.

As the recipient of the punitive ostracism of her society,
Hester reveals that American tendency Tocqueville had re-
cently analyzed. Tocqueville saw the majority as so pow-
erful in America and the impulse toward equality, toward
uniformity, as so basic that views conflicting with the ma-
majority’s were, he believed, suppressed before they were
born and if not were punished through an informal but ef-
fective system of social ostracism.6 Granted that the sys-
tem was imperfect and that sects, splits, and fragmentation
were dominant characteristics of Hawthorne’s period. Still,
the tendency Tocqueville noted is also significant. It is
suggestive that Tocqueville began his American investiga-
tions as a student of the new penal institutions. For him as
for Hawthorne, America is in significant ways a prison, on
the one hand enforcing uniformity and punishing deviants,
on the other hand driving people into the solitary confine-
ment of their hearts.

In The Scarlet Letter Hester’s situation is also similar to
that of a prisoner in one of the institutions designed to re-
form the deviant through isolation. Once she is released
from prison Hester has the freedom of the grounds but
“she was banished, and as much alone as if she inhabited
another sphere.” While it punishes and seeks to reform her
by chronic public exhortation and social pressure, society
may also be seeking to protect itself from contagion. The
official hope, however, was not that of the seventeenth-
century Puritan but of his nineteenth-century successor,
the Jacksonian reformer. The official theory was that in
isolation, removed from the possibility of corrupting and
corruption, the prisoner would turn inward and the basic
good of human nature would manifest itself in a reformed
citizen. Hawthorne, however, realizes that the rich, dark
depths of Hester’s nature are more troublesome than the
formers assumed. His own view is di-
vided. He or his narrator repeatedly warn us against the
refractory energy in Hester that refuses to be repentant,
that continually belies her surface acquiescence and re-
peatedly makes a mockery of the moral-spiritual reform
Hawthorne simultaneously believes in and needs to deny.
Finally the threat of Hester’s defiant passion was too
strong. Hawthorne shows the effects on Hester of her im-
prisonment, shows the values that are blighted—her
beauty, her creative vitality, her sexuality—and returns her
to the prison of his society.

Based on his complex experience and finally on his expe-
ience as an artist in America, in The Scarlet Letter Haw-
thorne, too, came to see America as a prison. To allow
Hester that release he imagines would have left unsatisfied
Hawthorne’s need for a balance between forest freedom
and the iron framework of a supporting, imprisoning soci-
ety. It would also have falsified his basic experience as an
artist in America. In his own life Hawthorne’s first term of
incarceration was one he chose himself, that ten year pe-
riod of relatively solitary confinement in his mother’s
house in Salem. This experience colored his outlook there-
after and made him sensitive to a dimension of his society
Tocqueville, himself a student of penal institutions, also
found ways of characterizing. Hawthorne had special rea-
sons for simultaneously communicating and concealing
in the manner both of the symbolic artist and of the prisoner.
In dealing with the threatening sexual themes and the
moral and social doubts of his early stories, Hawthorne had discovered what was good for him at the very beginning of his career and after twenty years of experience in the marketplace and with his forefathers behind and within him and with his wife and his high-minded friends at the Old Manse, he had additional reasons for perfecting the skills of symbolic indirection.

In The Scarlet Letter he brought the themes and techniques of the inmate to fulfillment. But in chastening and reincarcerating Hester, Hawthorne also acknowledged his own fears of the rebellious creative powers she embodies. In the concluding processional he has Dimmesdale ignore Hester, side with the powerful keepers who rule society, and die. Prefigured in his treatment of Hester and Dimmesdale is Hawthorne’s diminished will to explore his deepest preoccupations. With declining energy he nonetheless continued to deal with the situation of the imprisoned artist, from Clifford in The House of the Seven Gables through the abortive, undeveloped figures in the confined rooms and dungeons of the late romances. He came to prefer the novels of Trollope to his own books, although he knew he himself was unable to write realistic fiction. The techniques of the inmate had allowed him to survive, to satisfy his contradictory impulses, and to conceal and reveal, subvert and accept simultaneously. At the end of his career, at a banquet of the Saturday Club, surrounded by the literary friends of a lifetime, Hawthorne, Henry James, Sr. observed, “had the look all the time . . . of a rogue in a company of detectives.” At the end, when the techniques of the inmate had become a liability, under the surveillance of his inner and outer detectives this rogue finally escaped into immortality.

Notes

2. David Rothman, The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), analyzes the changing architecture of American jails and prisons and establishes the pioneering role of the Jacksonian reformers in developing the new prisons, reform schools, and mental institutions.


PHYSICAL PRISONS AND PRISON AUTHORS

Elissa Deborah Gelfand (essay date 1980-81)


[In the following essay, Gelfand compares the writings of women prisoners to the work of canonized male writers such as Villon, Sade, and Wilde, suggesting that the themes and tone of their texts counter the "power-centered" male texts that generally constitute the genre of prison literature.]

The following quotes by some well-known students of prison literature will give an idea of the qualities long expected of and thought inherent to important prison texts:

(Albert Camus): Si l’âme est assez forte pour édifier, au coeur du bagne, une morale qui ne soit pas celle de la soumission, il s’agira, la plupart du temps, d’une morale de domination. Toute éthique de la solitude suppose la puissance.1

(Victor Brombert): (en prison, on fait un) rêve de liberté et de transcendance . . . les ‘ailes’ de l’esprit permettent l’envol au-delà des murs confinants.2

Domination, power, triumph over circumstance, transcendence—these are the topos critics have assumed to be not only the prime characteristics of great prison writing, but in fact the very wellsprings of the authors’ imaginative production in confinement.

Such appreciations are noble and stirring—and yet, by their biases for the heroic, adventurous and contestatory mold of response, they have a priori excluded consideration of virtually all texts by imprisoned women. Camus’ idea of a necessary physical and moral colonization of one’s surroundings applies well to the writers in Genet’s penal fraternity of “collective ignominy”3; Villon, Charles d’Orléans, Boudard, Papillon, Genet himself, and of course, Sade, just to name French writers. Brombert’s
classic conception of unfettered imaginative escape holds as well for the more nostalgic writers, such as Chénier, Verlaine or Wilde. But women have been excluded from the prison canon. There is little evidence in their texts of a will to dominate or possess and, likewise, until recently little exaltation of triumph over circumstance. I shall examine the writings of several; imprisoned French women for two general purposes: first, to offer reasons, which are evident in the works themselves, for the inapplicability to women’s texts of long-standing critical presuppositions about prison literature; and, second, at the same time, to suggest a female tradition of prison literature, a tradition of motivation and realization, strong and identifiable in its own right. A study of French women prison writers implies an examination of the interconnecting issues of criminological theory, penal history and literary convention. These areas can all be considered contexts for the actual texts French women produced in prison.

The writings of women imprisoned in France since the 18th century—a chronological demarcation argued by Michel Foucault in Survivre et punir* and one to which I subscribe—are marked by the concrete situation of their authors, that is, by their peculiar identity as female criminals. As lawbreakers, then as prisoners, and finally as writers, these women committed both literal and figurative crimes. Criminological and creative models of women’s normality and abnormality reinforced each other: the moral and social deviance which characterized the female criminal and prisoner was and is quite explicitly articulated in law, judicial processes, penal codes, and criminological treatises; the transgression of the woman writer, though less apparent for not being explicitly defined, was nonetheless the real “crime” of stealing education, culture and, ultimately, the written word itself. Even with the legitimation of the prison writer in modern times, beginning with last century’s cult of the heroic criminal, women authors have remained outcasts to the now-established male prison tradition. On a very basic level, then, the constructs which explained women’s deviant behavior in all spheres—constructs which were never of their own making—were homologous and importantly determinant. It is to these normative views of their behavior that women’s texts respond and at the same time from these views that the texts’ narrative, lexical and thematic elements arise.

All models of female deviance—whether physiological, psychological or sociological—have rested on unquestioned assumptions about female “nature.” Eighteenth-century medical treatises, such as Pierre Roussel’s Système physique et moral de la femme, propound that organic functions explain human thought and personality. The “normal” woman, who was of “sanguine” temperament, enjoyed unity and harmony of physical constitution with moral inclinations. Vulnerable to the tyranny of the senses and therefore unable to aspire to noble conceptions, both normal and deviant women were best confined and constrained. Prison’s structure of class privilege, imported from the world at large, reinforced bourgeois feminine preoccupations with family and routinization of activity (the few women’s texts in the Bastille archives series bear witness to these themes).9

Madame Roland’s Mémoires particuliers of 1793* were a response to the medical paradigm of normality and to the more general societal judgment that embraced that paradigm. A contemporary newspaper, le Moniteur universel, judged Roland as follows:

La femme Roland, bel esprit à grands projets, philosophe a petits billets... fut un monstre sous tous les rapports. Sa contenance dédaigneuse, et... l’opiniâtreté orgueilleuse de ses reponses, sa gaïte ironique... (prouvent) qu’aucun sujet douloureux ne l’occupait. Cependant elle était née mais elle avait sacrifié la nature... Le désir d’être savante la conduisait à l’oubli des vertus de son sexe et cet oubli, toujours dangereux, finit par la faire périr sur l’échafaud (their emphasis).9

It is understandable why, in her memoirs, Roland would insist her life has been faithful to the heart and senses. Her assertions of the primacy of feelings are a response to accusations that she was “denatured” and “defeminized” by her intellectual activities. Roland’s memoirs are more than mere echoes of Rousseau or precursors of Chateaubriand: they are a woman’s answer to specific sex-related stigmas.

Roland’s Mémoires particuliers reflect the more general preference of imprisoned women for confessional genres for, in a word, memoirs counter accusations of being “desensitized” by criminal activity by showing the woman was and is, over time, the same woman, unchanged. Roland’s true identity—and this presentation of self is the prime topos of women’s prison literature—lay not in contemporary judicial labels of her deviance but in the future righted appreciation of the whole woman and her whole life. Memoirs likewise allowed women to trace for their own lives the story of a moral “fall” that was long the prescribed substance of feminine narrative. Further, in response to memoirs, one could only criticize the woman herself, and not the woman as author. Lastly, memoirs allowed the imprisoned woman, in a severely limited way, to engage in the “imaginative” process that has been synonymous with “creativity” since the late 18th century—that is, to show her “imagination,” but in the weakest sense of arranging the images of her life.

Roland’s memoirs are an important representation of the imprisoned woman’s concerns with the questions, “Who am I?” “Who was I?” and “Who will I be?”—questions which are obviously far from the corrective and contestatory mode of Genet’s “penel fraternité.” Roland’s portrait of her true self is at once an angry rejection of her contemporaries’ view of her and a reaffirmation of the only lexicon her generation offered women: the virtues of “bonheur,” “sentiments,” “sensibilité,” “pudeur,” and Rousseausque “utilité.” The only answer to historical insensitivity towards her was insistence on her own perceptual superiority:

Peut-êtê un jour mes récits ingénus charmeront les instants de quelque infortunée captive, qui oublient son sort en s’attendrissant sur le mien; peut-êtê les philos-
ophes, qui veulent peindre le coeur humain dans la suite d’un roman ou l’action d’un drame, trouveront-ils à l’étudier dans mon histoire.

(Mémoires, p. 238)

Thus, women like Roland, far from adopting in their writing an authority toward their experience, instead had to expend energy in reaction, not action: Roland leaves it to the “philosophes” to find the general usefulness of her own story. Far from transcending their ignominy, Roland and other women, ironically, reinforced the same limiting definitions of female “normality” that had originally delimited their shame.

The 19th century coexistent currents of Romanticism and positivism were of great importance in the shaping of the only woman’s prison texts we have: the Mémoires and the Heures de prison of Marie Cappelle-Lafarge.8 Criminology came into its own with the period’s glorification of statistics, empiricism and typology. The century’s foremost criminologist, Cesare Lombroso—though long since discredited for the absurd extremes of his anthropological empiricism—enjoyed an hegemony that informed much social thought and penal policy for decades to come. Lombroso’s ideas, developed in la Femme criminelle et la prostituée, 9 boil down to a quintessence of his contemporaries’ contradictory views of women: “normal” women, who all resemble one another, are men who are arrested in their development. Women are less frequently criminal than men for biological reasons: reproduction makes them naturally more conservative. Further, their recurring endurance of the pain of childbirth implies women are less sensitive (and not, as Roussel explained, hypersensitive). The antagonism between “virile” intelligence and their reproductive function makes women too unintelligent to commit crimes. Thus, when they do commit crimes—and it is only the “born” female criminal, anatomically and intellectually a man, who does so—they are more cruel and sadistic than men. One has only to think of the 19th century female criminal’s fictional counterparts, the sadistic and “virile” heroines of Romantic literature, to glimpse the fears and fantasies prevalent in the society of the time. Only Christian morality offered deviant women hope of rehabilitation—and it was at this time that religious orders replaced men as prison personnel.

Lafarge’s prison texts respond to the dualities that constituted contemporary views of her: they provide detailed analysis of the crime’s events (the alleged poisoning of her husband)—an allegation which was “proven” through the detection of a small and probably harmless trace of arsenic by a 19th century scientist. The texts also bear the Romantic nostalgia for the past in their reconstruction of Lafarge’s virtuous and sensitive young persona. Lafarge embraces all the dichotomized judgments that saw her as either pure defeminized mind or as pure feminine body, unable to reconcile the two:

Quand j’étais forte, que j’avais du courage, et que j’osais lutter contre la calomnie, il disait, le monde, que j’étais une impudente, une hypocrite, une femme sans coeur. Aujourd’hui que mes souffrances creient, qu’il les entend et qu’il les voit saigner, il accuse ma faiblesses et raille mes pleurs

(Heures de prison, pp. 194-95).

All of Lafarge’s words and actions were turned against her as proof of her guilt: her suffering was recast as remorse, her strength as hardness, her courage as audacity, and her intelligence as perversity. And yet, like Roland, Lafarge has no other vocabulary to present herself by the polarizing one Romanticism and positivism made available: “passion/raison,” “coeur/esprit,” “torture morale,” “folie morale,” plus the well-delineated faculties of “le coeur,” “l’esprit,” “la mémoire,” “la volonté,” “l’imagination,” and “la folie” (this last term will soon reappear, with psychiatric baggage, as “l’hystérie,” “la suggestivité,” “le somnambulisme,” and “l’hallucination”). Like Roland, and for reasons of literary convention which still deemed memoirs the most suitable genre for women, Lafarge disavowed her rights to the intellect, since memoirs were to deal with sentiment, not reason. Like Roland, Lafarge sought to counter her criminal stigma by reconstructing the past favorably and her writer stigma by avoiding authorial power and knowledge. And with rising positivism, Lafarge could not help also subscribing to the woman writer’s estate: the inferiority implied by her choice of emotion over logic.

The modern era is too complex to embark upon here, given Freud’s influence on theories of normal and abnormal motivation as well as the growth of sociological biases in criminological literature. However, the two major trends of importance for women prison writers are a shift toward individual psychological pathology—and not group typology—as the source of criminality and the concomitant shift of emphasis in prison from Christian repentance to individual cure. One also sees a clear shift in criminological literature from Lombrosesque “zones” and “lesions” to “psychologisant” categories such as “hysterie” and “hypersuggestive.” In Surveiller et punir, Foucault gets at this issue of the change in emphasis from the physiological to the psychological from a different angle, but his conclusions are of immense significance for women. In Foucault’s Marxian analysis, with the change in punishment from pre-industrial physical torture to modern psychological modification, society has depersonalized the body into an object in a network of power and economic relationships. The mind has replaced the body as the site of punishment. This idea of corporal depersonalization is a re-statement of the feminist tenet that dispossession of the body is a fact all women have historically endured. Thus, Foucault’s thesis that the history of punishment belongs not to the history of law or ideas, but to the history of the control of the body, points up another homologous relationship that has made imprisoned women twice victim: if all women have been oppressed by being anatomically defined, imprisoned women have suffered double biological subjection.

Modern women prison writers, such as Albertine Sarrazin, continue to assert their affective and sexual identity in the face of societal judgment. Although Sarrazin departs from
her foreissters by adopting the novel form, and thereby estab-
lishing a distance from her criminal experience, she is
nonetheless preoccupied with the presentation of her lov-
ing and dependent self who, in other words, embodies ste-
reotypically "feminine" qualities. Sarrazin's 1965 fresco of
prison life, la Cavale, offers in dramatized form the very
findings demonstrated in case studies of women's pris-
ons. These studies, which are based on assumptions about
which personal losses imprisoned women suffer most and
try to compensate, are incarnated in Sarrazin's characters.
For example, in the face of the loss of affective ties with
the outside world. Sarrazin's co-prisoners form "family
groups"; in response to the loss of their heterosexual iden-
tity, they establish lesbian couples. One could certainly
argue with the assumptions behind these perceived losses
and compensations—for example, the assumption that for
all women, the loss of heterosexual relations is a depriva-
tion and not either irrelevant or, as is sometimes the case,
a relief from violence. But Sarrazin nonetheless subscribes
to the popular mythology. Thus, like Roland and Lafarge,
while rejecting society's misreading of her identity, Sar-
razin describes herself in terms reflecting the ongoing bi-
ases surrounding women: she is a female "made woman"
by a man and she is forced to cohabit in prison with the
collective embodiment of "l'Éternel féminin."

There is, however, a sub-text in la Cavale that works
against the apparent structure of traditional definitions of
the female criminal, a sub-text which signals an important
change in women's prison literature. The sub-story is Sar-
razin's struggle to be recognized as a writer and not as a
criminal. La Cavale is the account of the narrator's efforts
to whip her imagination out of its prison-induced para-
lysis. The book ends with Sarrazin's fictionalized self hav-
ing traded off physical escape from prison for partial
imaginative escape through writing. And she succeeds—
for the novel itself is the concrete realization of that imagi-
native escape. Thus, for Sarrazin, the motivation for and
realization of writing in prison are inextricable.

But Sarrazin's completion of her novel cannot be seen as
the unfettered flight of her imagination, in the way that
Doris Lessing's contemporary heroines, in The Golden
Notebook, cannot be seen as fully liberated women writ-
ers. Does Sarrazin reorganize her experience in the way
that male writers—from the earliest Bastille picarque narrat-
es to Genet's mythic prose and drama—have done? I
think not. She does not attempt to correct the world
through her fiction; at most, she inverts her sense of weak-
ness into ironical, borrowed, off-handed toughness. Does
she display consistent and directed judgment of the world?
Only in her deflected anger, which is not the unbridled and
subversive energy of a Boudard or a Papillon. Rather, Sar-
razin displays a private ambivalence and feelings of inade-
quacy, which she believes love and dependency can cor-
rect. Does she offer an alternative vision of society? No,
for she neither experiences nor expresses "transcendence"
in the same terms as men, as she must wrestle if not with
the social, certainly with the psychological barriers to her
own self-expression.

The negative answers above are the female prison tradi-
tion: a non-destructive and life-affirming one. Sarrazin,
like Roland and Lafarge, forces us to question not the
power of her vision, but rather the very literary tenets
which have guided judgments of that vision, tenets which
are incompatible with women's texts and which have re-
legated them to critical darkness. Women's prison texts
force us to put into question the monolithic, universalizing
and power-centered criteria that have long named and vali-
dated the so-called "literature of revolt."

Notes
1. Albert Camus, L'Homme révolté (Paris: Gallimard,
1951), p. 54.

2. Victor Brombert, La Prison romantique: essai sur

3. For Genet's idea of the "common ground of audac-
ity," see his introduction to George Jackson, Soledad
Brother (New York: Bantam, 1970), introd. written

4. Michel Foucault, Surveiller et punir (Paris: Galli-
mand, 1975).

5. See Claudine Herrmann, Les Voleuses de langue
(Paris: des femmes, 1976). Herrmann demonstrates
how, historically, women had to hide the fact that
they were educated and how, if they wished to pub-
lish, they had to disguise themselves further.

6. Pierre Roussel, Système physique et moral de la
1775).

7. For information on the Bastille Archives, see F.
Ravaison, Archives de la Bastille (Paris, 1870) and F.
Funck-Brentano, Légendes et archives de la Bastille
(Paris, 1902).

8. Madame Roland, "Mémoires particuliers," in Mémoi-
res de Madame Roland (Paris: Mercure de France,

9. Cited in Benoîte Groult, Ainsi soit-elle (Paris: Gras-

10. Marie Cappelle (veuve Lafarge), Mémoires écrits par
elle-même (3ème éd., Bruxelles: Hauman et Cie,
1842-43) and Madame Lafarge, Heures de prison

11. C. Lombroso and G. Ferrero, La Femme criminelle
et la prostituée, trad. de l'italien par L. Meille (Paris:
Félix Alcan, 1896).

12. Albertine Sarrazin, La Cavale (Paris: J-J Pauvert,
1965).

13. For case studies of women's prisons, see Rose Gial-
lombardo, Society of Women: A Study of a Women's
Prison (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1966) and
Esther Hefferman, Making It in Prison: The Square,
the Cool, and the Life (New York: John Wiley &

Jeremy Tambling (essay date 1986)


[In the following essay, republished several times after its first appearance in 1986, Tambling applies French philosopher Michel Foucault’s analysis of the Panopticon to Dickens’s Great Expectations.]
stage after an absence of nine years. That night, one of the most memorable disturbances in the nineteenth-century theatre occurred when the drama critics in attendance, led by Frederick Guest Tomlins of the Morning Advertiser, demanded that the play be halted because of its offensive subject matter and one particularly shocking scene. The dispute became a cause célébre among critics, dramatists, and the general public and was recalled (with varying degrees of accuracy) years later by its participants, witnesses, and other interested parties.

Today the incident raises several questions. Why did Reade decide to return to stage writing after his self-imposed hiatus, since he had long criticized the inability of playwrights to receive proper compensation for their work and to protect it through inadequate copyright laws? Why was Reade’s dramatization of his novel so much more provocative than the novel itself, published in 1856, and how did it gain a licence from the Examiner of Plays? What actually happened on opening night, since the fracas was remembered so differently by many people, most of whom had strong motives for their recollections? What effect did the uproar have on the play itself and its reception, both during the first run and in revivals? Reade’s drama deserves at least a footnote in history, for it establishes a point in the nineteenth century when an angry audience could no longer condemn a controversial play to extinction, but could be defied by a manager and playwright who defended their production and eventually made it a success. The play also informs us about penal practices in Victorian England, an unpleasant subject to middle-class playgoers but one that Reade either courageously thrust before their eyes or exploited for his own profit, depending on one’s interpretation of the events.

It Is Never Too Late to Mend had already accumulated a contentious and litigious history before it ever appeared on stage, beginning on 10 January 1853 when Reade’s drama, Gold,1 was first performed at Drury Lane. Wishing to depict the recent discovery of gold in Australia through a stage realization, Reade composed a ‘Surrey piece’ in which three Englishmen, drawn by their misfortunes to the gold fields, eventually find wealth and vindication. Although better written than most dramas of this genre, Gold won acclaim for its pictorial rather than its literary merits:

The scene of the ‘diggings’ in Australia, with all the mechanisms of ‘cradles’, the chemistry of testing, and instances of the rude administration of justice in a lawless state of society, furnishes a living picture of a region which now engrosses the attention of every class of the community, and those who care little for the piece may go to see this particular scene, as they would go to one of the numerous dioramas of the day.2

Because one of the characters, Tom Robinson, is a thief, Reade made it his business to educate himself in the ways of convicts and prisons. He recorded in his diary, ‘I have the entrée of Durham Gaol, and I am studying thieves.’3 Reade did not display all the fruits of his research in Gold, but his enquiries later contributed to the prison scene in It

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1. Gold
2. Gold
3. Gold
Is Never Too Late to Mend, both the novel and play. During a respectable run of six weeks at Drury Lane, Gold 'crowded the theatre, and saved the manager [E. T. Smith]', at least by Reade's reckoning, with Reade earning £20 a week.4 The play also served Reade well as both a rough draft for the plot of It Is Never Too Late to Mend and as an unlikely repository of his performance rights, as determined by a notable court case in 1862.

By that year, Reade had made his reputation as one of London's leading dramatists and author of two perennial favorites, The Ladies' Battle (1851) and Masks and Faces (1852), the latter written with Tom Taylor. He was also a famous and wealthy novelist, thanks in large part to the publication of It Is Never Too Late to Mend in 1856. But the novel's gain had been the drama's loss, for Reade had abandoned stage writing after his final collaboration with Taylor, The First Printer, produced by Charles Kean in 1856. In later years, Reade complained that he had been 'driven off the stage against my will, and compelled to go into a sister art, for which I think I have not the same ability'. When asked to elaborate, he launched into a well-rehearsed polemic:

It was in consequence of the extreme narrowness of the market, and above all, the competition in those days of the stolen goods from the French, under circumstances particularly unfavourable to dramatic inventors... The case was this: the playwrights, who steal pieces from the French, are journalists, most of them (at least at that time they were so), and that gave them the power to shut the manager's doors to the inventor; it operated like this: the inventor asked the manager to read a piece, and at the same time a man who had taken a French piece without paying for it, and could get it praised in the newspapers by his colleagues, brought those two temptations to the manager, and he could undersell me, because you cannot invent a piece as cheaply as you can steal one.4

Although these are legitimate complaints, Reade is being wilfully deceitful. For one thing, he had profited from the same practice he criticizes: at least five of his performed plays had been adapted from the French. More important, he never mentions his primary motive for embracing novel-writing: money. He had earned far more from It Is Never Too Late to Mend than from all his previous stage writing, especially in America, where literary copyright was protected while performance right was legally ignored.

However much Reade exaggerates his grievances, he is most sincere when he regrets his isolation from the theatre. 'During my period of enforced exile from the stage I suffered intellectual hell', he wrote. 'I used to go to the theatres and see that one piece of unnatural trash after another could get a hearing, yet the market was hermetically sealed to me.'4 With the popular reception of It Is Never Too Late to Mend, Reade set about writing a stage adaptation, one that incorporated scenes from Gold as well as the novel, but to no avail: managers uniformly rejected the play. Meanwhile he witnessed the indignity of seeing his novel adapted by others 'with a success unparalleled in those days... Managers made at least seventy thousand pounds out of my brains, stolen."

Finally he struck back. When Thomas Hailes Lacy published an adaptation of It Is Never Too Late to Mend by Colin Hazlwood, Reade sued Lacy in 1861 for infringement of copyright—not of the novel, but of its dramatic precursor, Gold. Lacy knew he could adapt any novel he chose without recompense to the author. But he had not anticipated Reade's argument that since the novel included scenes from the play, and the play had been published, Lacy had violated Reade's copyright once removed. Lacy pleaded that he knew nothing of Gold (conveniently forgetting he had published the play himself), but the court was not persuaded, concluding, '[Reade] did not, by transferring these passages into his novel, lose any part of the copyright which he had in his drama; nor can ignorance of the existence of the drama on the part of the Defendant be urged as a valid defence.4

Thus an unauthorized adaptation could not be published; but could it be performed? During 1861 Reade brought two lawsuits against Benjamin Conquest, manager of the Grecian Theatre, where an adaptation of It Is Never Too Late to Mend written by Conquest's brother, George, had been presented for eighty nights. To the extent that the adaptation was taken from the novel, Conquest could safely produce the play without obligation to Reade.4 But by proving that the adaptation was partially (and unintentionally) derived from Gold, Reade was protected and won his case, receiving damages of £160.18 In other words, in 1861 an author could protect his novel from being freely adapted only by first writing a play on the same subject and having it published.

These successes did little to mitigate Reade's frustration at seeing his own adaptation lie unperformed for seven years. Then early in 1865, John Coleman, manager of the Theatres Royal in Leeds, York, Lincoln, and Cambridge, applied personally to Reade for permission to stage an adaptation of It Is Never Too Late to Mend. Coleman later recalled his first encounter with Reade:

When I said that I wanted to dramatize his book, he told me he had dramatized it already; that he had sent printed copies to every manager in London, and they had not had the decency even to acknowledge his letters on the subject. He had lost all hope and heart about it, he said, but if I liked I might take the play and read it, and form my own opinion as to its chances of success. I read it that night, and breakfasted with him the next morning, when we arranged to produce it forthwith at my theatre in Leeds.18

Although advised by Dion Boucicault to sell the play for no less than one-sixth of the box-office receipts, Reade was so favorably impressed by Coleman's initiative and personality that, as he later admitted, 'I made great concessions. I agreed to let him work it in certain first-class theatres, not his own, for 1/10 the nightly receipts, and I
actually let him play it at his own four theatres for 1 gu[ine]a per representation, which was a mere peppercorn rent.’ For his part, Coleman received performance rights for one year, with the stipulations that ‘the said drama to be thoroughly well rehearsed, and the words perfect before performance. Three new scenes at least to be painted[,] First, a . . . Farmhouse scene[,] a prison scene, built, and with real gas-light[,] and an Australian scene with gold-digging business.’ Believing that ‘A play of mine loses so enormously when not rehearsed by me[,]’ Reade came down to Leeds to attend rehearsals and make life miserable for at least one member of the company before opening night of 28 February 1865. In most respects, Reade’s adaptation of It Is Never Too Late to Mend is a conventional melodrama. George Fielding, an ‘upright, downright honest man’, is so poor to marry his fiancée of three years, Susan Merton, and decides to leave his Berkshire farm and seek his fortune in Australia. His departure is hastened by a villainous moneylender, John Meadows, who secretly wishes to marry Susan and has entrapped Fielding and his brother, William, in debt. (The first act ends with Fielding’s tearful departure from family and friends, whereupon Meadows immediately advances toward Susan, saying, ‘Mine! mine!’) Meanwhile Tom Robinson, an acquaintance of Fielding’s, is accused of larceny and sent to prison, accompanied by a boy, Josephs, who has been caught stealing potatoes. There they suffer the brutalities inflicted by the fiendish governor of the prison, Hawes, with Josephs dying from mistreatment and Robinson escaping only by being transported. Eventually Fielding and Robinson are reunited in Australia, where Robinson persuades Fielding to give up sheepfarming and take up prospecting. The results are predictable: with the help of Fielding’s aborigine companion, Jacky, the two friends find a huge gold nugget and return to England £7,000 richer. They arrive just in time to prevent the marriage of Meadows and Susan, who has been deceived into thinking that Fielding had taken a wife in Australia. All ends happily as Fielding and Susan are to be married, Meadows meets the fate of most melodramatic villains by being dispatched to jail, and Robinson offers himself as living proof of the moralistic title of the play.

Reade and Coleman agreed that the prison scene would be ‘the act of the play’, as it had been the scene of the novel. In fact, Reade had written the novel primarily to publicize the abuses of the ‘silent system’ as practised at Birmingham Borough Gaol in 1851. In the most sensational of the many cases reported by the Times, a 15-year-old boy, Edward Andrews, had hanged himself in his cell as a final refuge from the tortures meted out by the governor of the prison, Lieutenant Austin. A government inquiry into these abuses led to the publication in 1854 of a ‘Blue Book’ on the subject, the name given to official government reports (usually bound in blue covers) on a variety of social problems. In his thorough way of exhaustively researching a subject before writing about it, Reade studied this Blue Book carefully and invented Josephs and Hawes as counterparts to Andrews and Austin. His outrage at the barbarous treatment of those prisoners never abated, and years later he still fumed that Austin should have been drawn and quartered rather than simply dismissed from his position.

For the opening production at Leeds, Reade wished to present as grimly realistic a prison scene as possible, complete with a treadmill on which prisoners could be seen labouring. Here Coleman balked, repulsed by ‘the revolting realism of the incident’, and since the treadmill was not written into the contract, he prevailed over Reade. Coleman’s discretion helped to ensure a triumphant first night, the reviewer from the Era commenting that ‘a success more brilliant and complete has seldom been achieved anywhere’. The play was performed twelve nights at Leeds, but despite enthusiastic audiences, Coleman recalled that ‘it was never played a single week to its current expenses’. He then arranged a provincial tour of the production, beginning in Lincoln on 17 April 1865, and although Coleman wrote that ‘from that moment the success of the piece was assured, and wherever we went the theatre was crowded nightly’, a transcript of his box-office ledger tells a different tale. It Is Never Too Late to Mend lost £56.11.6 at Lincoln in the first six of nine performances; Coleman noted, ‘Never Too Late ought to have been withdrawn after the first night.’ The play then averaged receipts of £8.5.2 for eight nights at York, and after a promising first two nights at Cambridge (receipts of £40.3.6, which Coleman nevertheless called ‘The worst opening I ever had here’), lost £27.17.9 over the next six nights. In the midst of this dismal tour, George Vining of the Princess’s Theatre in London, having read the script, came down to York on 7 June to see a performance. Despite low attendance that night, Vining saw potential in the play and arranged for a London production, with Reade earning one-quarter of the profits through a sharing agreement.

Reade thereupon submitted a printed copy of the play to the Lord Chamberlain’s office for licencing. The soon-to-be-controversial prison scenes aroused no suspicions in William Bodham Donne, the Examiner of Plays, and the licence was duly issued on 24 July. Reade, an experienced dramatist, had anticipated Donne’s blue pencil, and although there are many excised passages in the licence copy, all the deletions were made by Reade himself, sometimes with the initials ‘C.R.’ appearing in the margin next to a certain cut. For example, in a monologue at the start of Act Two, scene three, Robinson, sitting alone in his cell, says, ‘And when they let us run in the yard for a mouthful of air, do we get it? Not we! A great filthy cap is put on our faces, to keep the light from our eyes, and health from our lungs. Sometimes the last victim that wore that cap was diseased; then you catch his disease, that is all. It is only a prisoner settled: ‘isn’t as if it was a dog.’ Reade correctly surmised that these lines would be disgusting to audiences and to their official protector, Donne. Later in the same speech, referring to the prison officers, Robinson adds, ‘and, but for good Mr Eden, I should hate him who made them the heartless miscreants I find them
here'. Again Reade cut the line, aware of Donne's distaste for all references to the Almighty.

Through these and similar alterations, Reade gave the appearance of improving the play for public consumption but left its provocative substance intact. Perhaps his self-censorship lulled Donne into a false sense of security. In his study of Victorian stage censorship, John Russell Stephens writes that Donne was 'perfectly content' with *It Is Never Too Late to Mend' 'mainly because [Reade's] social points were generally obscured in the dramatist's love of sensational effect'. Actually, many of the play's powerful effects were concealed in the cursory descriptions of stage settings, properties, and acting in the script. Even so perceptive a reader as Donne could not anticipate how graphically the prison scenes would come to life on the Princess's stage.

In 1865, the Princess's was the home of sensation drama in the West End, largely because of its talented scene designer, Frederick Lloyds, a holdover from the Princess's glory days during Charles Kean's tenure in the 1850s. Since May 1862, when Vining began his management, the Princess's had recorded two triumphs by the master of sensation drama, Dion Boucicault: *The Streets of London* (1864), which ran 209 nights, followed by *Arrah-na-Pogue* (1865) and another long run of 164 performances. Both plays featured a thrilling sensation scene—a burning tene ment and horse-drawn fire engine coming to the rescue in *The Streets of London*, and the famous escape by Shaunthe-Post up the walls of the prison tower in *Arrah-na-Pogue*—scenes wondrous to behold as well as technical masterpieces of the stage designer's art. As *Arrah-na-pogue* reached the end of its run and preparations began for *It Is Never Too Late to Mend*, Vining and Lloyds were determined to fulfi Reade's intentions and meet or exceed the standards they had set.

When the curtain rose on opening night of 4 October, spectators immediately broke into applause as they feasted their eyes on Lloyds's rendering of the Grove Farm. The reviewer for the *Era* admired its rustic realism: 'The farm labourers are employed thrashing the wheat, real horses are brought on and taken into real stables, piles of hay and straw are scattered about the barn in most natural disorder, pigeons are resting on the dove-cote above, and real water is drawn from the pump below, whilst moving figures animate the background, and windmills are seen breezily and busily at work.'

The cheery, wholesome atmosphere set the tone for Act One, which was well received by the audience, but made the transition to the shadowy, forbidding scenes which followed in Act Two all the more abrupt and disturbing. Reade's stage directions specify only, 'A corridor in the bourough gaol, a line of cell doors represented on flats or on a drop scene'. What confronted spectators was nothing less than a modern prison yard, rendered with a fidelity never before achieved on a London stage. To my knowledge, no artist's drawing of the scene survives. However, an illustration from Henry Mayhew and John Biny's *The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison Life* contains some of the elements of Lloyds's prison and provides at least an approximation of the set. To realize the full impact of this scene, we need first to understand its different components—a virtual catalogue of nineteenthcentury prison practices.

1. **The treadmill.** Although the treadmill is not mentioned in the script, it was by far the most scandalous of Lloyds's creations and dominated people's impressions of Act Two. Seen in the upper background of our illustration, the treadmill (or treadwheel) must have figured more prominently on the Princess's stage; the playbook description of this scene says simply 'TREADMILL'. The treadmill was basically a long paddle wheel sixteen feet in circumference on which a dozen prisoners at a time would slowly step for fifteen minutes, rest for the same amount of time, work again for fifteen minutes, and so on for as many as fifteen periods in a day. As Mayhew and Binny explain, the prisoners would support themselves by leaning on a handrail, and they move their legs as if they were mounting a flight of stairs; but with this difference, that instead of their ascending, the steps pass from under them, and, as one of the officers remarked, it is this peculiarity which causes the labour to be so tiresome, owing to the want of a firm tread. The sight of the prisoners on the wheel suggested to us the idea of a number of squirrels working outside rather than inside the barrels of their cages.'

The labour was so exhausting that prisoners would take desperate measures, such as self-inflicted indigestion or wounds, to avoid the hated 'shin-scrapers'. Not only could it reduce grown men to tears, but sometimes a prisoner would slip on the treadmill and be crushed under its tremendous weight. Nor did it serve any purpose besides supplying a form of hard labour. Although originally conceived in 1818 as a means of grinding corn or pumping water, most treadmills were designed only to 'grind the air—an unintentional lesson to the prisoners on the futility of hard work. One justice described the treadmill approvingly as 'the most tiresome, distressing, exemplary punishment that has ever been contrived by human ingenuity'.

2. **The crank.** The critic for the *Sunday Times* noticed a crank in the prison yard, a bit of artistic licence on Lloyds's part since the crank was always relegated to a 'crank cell' where a prisoner toiled alone, usually as a punishment. Next to the treadmill, the crank was the most dreaded form of hard labour. With the machine placed next to the cell wall and a long handle protruding to the side, a prisoner would use his entire weight to turn the handle in a circular motion, the resistance being imperfectly adjusted according to the age and size of the prisoner. (During Act Two, young Josephs responds to Hawes's charge that he refused to turn the crank by crying, 'You know I never said I wouldn't; I said I couldn't; that crank is a man's crank; it is too heavy for a lad like me'.) The crank had figured prominently in the 1854 Blue Book, and the commissioners found that 'although in
pressing the handle downwards the prisoner has only the five pounds [for a juvenile] or the ten pounds [for an adult] to bear down, yet in lifting it up, when nearest his body, he has to exert a force equal to at least three times those weights respectively.22 Prisoners were forced to spend hours at this debilitating, monotonous labour. At one point Hawes says to Tom Robinson, ‘So, No. 12, you have been REFRACTORY at the crank again: only done 3.350 revolutions out of your 3,500.’ Reade actually understates the punishment: the standard task was 10,000 revolutions which, at a rate of 20 per minute, required over eight hours.23 At the Birmingham Gaol (and in Reade’s play), prisoners were punished for not completing the required number of revolutions, at times being put on a diet of bread and water which sapped their strength and made them even less able to finish their quota. Needless to say, the crank served no more utilitarian purpose than the treadmill. Both existed only to punish, to humiliate, and to intimidate.

3. Picking oakum. Although now forgotten, picking oakum was as closely associated in the public mind with convicts as breaking rocks—reason enough for Lloyds to include some oakum pickers in his prison yard. Oakum picking consisted of shredding thickly tarred rope obtained from ships until the strands were reduced to the texture of floss, later to be used for caulking. This mind-numbing task was not as simple as it seems: many prisoners could not pick their required amount of oakum even over a 14-hour period, and the effort left their hands bleeding, blistered, and covered with tar. The work had little to recommend it as either a punishment or a worthwhile enterprise, since the financial return on a prisoner’s three-pound ball of oakum amounted to about three pence a day. Yet oakum picking continued for years, according to Philip Priestley, ‘because of its simplicity and its tediousness and because no one could think of any better way of keeping so many unskilled hands from idleness’.24

During this bleak parade of Victorian prison customs, a few protests from the audience were heard, but they were only the prelude to the storm. For in the next scene, Lloyds introduced the even more appalling spectacle of a prison interior, apparently based on the model prison at Pentonville. Near the centre of the stage were the cells of Josephs and Tom Robinson, separated by a corridor and with the fourth wall removed in each so the audience could view what was happening both inside and outside the cells. From this central point, gas-lit corridors radiated in a multi-tiered maze of cells disappearing into the gloomy depths, with the galleries connected by circular iron staircases. Only the critics paused at marvel at Lloyds’s artistry and wonder how he had arranged such an intricate set during the relatively short interval. The rest of the audience felt a premonition of horror at this moment, especially when Josephs was revealed strapped to the corridor wall with a ‘punishment jacket’. Another of Reade’s borrowings from the Blue Book, the punishment jacket was simply a straitjacket with a leather collar strapped around the prisoner’s neck. With their arms pinned to the wall by straps, prisoners were forced to stand for hours in excruciating pain, often unable to breathe freely because of the collar. Josephs does not exaggerate the torture of the punishment as applied at Birmingham Gaol when he pleads to Hawes,

> Oh no! no no! anything but that; it chokes me, it cuts me, it robs my breath, it crushes my heart, it makes me faint away, it kills me by inches: I cannot go on like this—first the jacket, till I faint away; then buckets of water thrown over me, and to lie all night in my wet clothes; then starved, and then the jacket again, because you have starved me down too weak to work. Oh, pray, pray have mercy on me and hang me! You mean to kill me; why not have a little, little pity, and kill me quicker?

Although Hawes and his minions do not grant Josephs’s wish, the boy soon decides his own fate. Deprived of both bed and gaslight in his cell, Josephs (played in heart-rending fashion by Louisa Moore) hurriedly ties a handkerchief around one of the iron staircases and, in full view of the audience, prepares to hang himself.

At this point the playhouse erupted into shouts of ‘Revolting!’ ‘Shame!’ and ‘Stop the piece!’ and indeed the play did stop. A confrontation ensued between Vining, who approached the front of the stage dressed as the convict Robinson, and the drama critics represented by their unofficial spokesman. Tomlins. Vining then made a short speech which the Era recorded:

> Ladies and Gentlemen.—With all due submission to public opinion, permit me to call your attention to one fact, which appears to have been overlooked. It has been acknowledged that the work from which this piece is taken has done a great deal of good. We are not here representing a system as it is, but the abuses of a system, and I may refer to the Blue Book—here a voice from the pit shouted out ‘We want no Blue Books on the stage’—for the truthfulness of these things. This
question can be discussed elsewhere, and I believe that
I am not wrong in supposing that most of the dissen-
tient persons had not[sic]—Here the Manager paused
significantly—Come in Free.38

This last reference to the ‘dissentient persons’ of the press,
whom Vining and Reade loathed in equal measure, touched
off immediate shouts of ‘Apologize!’39 Instead, Vining
asked the audience for permission to continue the perform-
ance and, remarkably, they agreed. The sombre mood of
the play was quickly dissipated by Lloyds’s dioramic re-
creation in Act Three of a ravine in Australia, seen first by
moonlight, then by the light of dawn, and described as
‘one of the most magnificent sets ever witnessed’.40 By the
time the play ended at midnight, the audience applauded
so enthusiastically that they called for Reade (who made
his bows from a private box) as Vining reappeared on
stage to assure the press that he had been honored by their
presence and had intended no slight to them.

The critics wasted no time in responding to the perfor-
man ce, and their comments fall into three categories. First,
they complained that the mistreatment of criminals and the
depiction of prison life were totally unsuitable subjects for
the theatre. In his column the next morning, Tomlins justi-
ﬁed his protest the night before:

If the theatre is to be made a one-sided and exagger-
ated advocate for every political opinion, it certainly
will be avoided by all persons who frequent it in hopes
of ﬁnding relaxation and amusement. There are ample
opportunities for persons riding their particular hob-
bies, without making the stage a polemical and politi-
cal arena. If Mr. Vining were judicious he would cut
out the second act, which would have the double ad-
vantage of shortening the piece (now ﬁve hours long),
and also of getting rid of the most painful and disgust-
ing scenes we ever witnessed in a theatre.41

Reade’s novel had successfully exposed prison abuses and
helped to curtail them, but what could be described in a
book could not necessarily be brought to life in a theatre.
‘The exigencies of dramatic presentation forbid argument,
qualiﬁcation, moderation’, wrote the Pall Mall Gazette.
‘No time is left for reﬂection; everything must carry con-
viction as it appears.’ Besides, what purpose could Reade
and Vining have intended? ‘Is it to call attention to that
question which increasingly presses itself on the notice of
all of us—the existence of a criminal population and the
best methods by which the evil may be mitigated? A more
judicious effort of benevolence than that of enlightening
public opinion through a sensation drama was never sug-
gested by a philanthropist.’42

While questioning the theatre’s role as a forum for ideas
rather than a place for diversion, reviewers also criticized
the sensations themselves. T. W. Robertson, who would
inaugurate a very different type of realistic comedy at the
Prince of Wales’s Theatre with Society the following
month, reﬂected the majority opinion when he wrote

if any person should dare to place upon the stage, for
the mere greed of gain, a ‘sensation’ scene in the like-
ness of the ward of a hospital, and simulate the opera-
tion of amputating the leg of the hero, or the arm of the
heroin[e] with real bandages, real tourniquets, real un-
guents, real saws, real needles, real arteries, and real
blood, and the rest of the sickening apparatus, then the
newspaper critic would be dans son droit to rise and
his loudly, and it is to be hoped that he would be
aided by audiences whose length of suffering is as ex-
traordinary as is their patience.43

If the proper role of art was to inspire, enlighten, and en-
tertain, then such scenes had no place in the theatre. Over
thirty years later, Clement Scott recalled being at the Prin-
cess’s on opening night, and the experience reinforced his
dramatic credo: ‘all that happened on the stage was doubt-
less true; the author had authority for everything he wrote
in his play; but the stage insists that realism shall have a
stopping point. Art does not countenance such horror as
this.’44

The most serious accusation, however, was that Reade and
Vining were portraying horrors that were no longer pos-
sible, given the reforms arising from the 1854 Blue Book
and, indirectly, Reade’s novel. The Era pointed out, ‘The
atrocities perpetrated in the Birmingham Borough Gaol . . .
. . have long since ceased to exist, and it seemed there-
fore felt by the audience . . . that an unnecessary shock
was given to their feelings by forcing upon their notice the
sight of brutalities which made the heart sicken and the
mind shudder to contemplate.’ One could only conjecture
whether ‘these thrilling examples of bygone cruelty were
simply brought forward to no more profitable purpose than
that of creating a “stage sensation”’.45 Reade had not
brought his prison scenes up to date in the nine years
since the novel’s publication, and a monster like Hawes or
an instrument of torture like the punishment jacket would
not be found in a modern prison.46 The melodramatic ex-
cesses of the characters seemed even more unreal when
placed against the lifelike appearance of Lloyds’s set. In
his defence, Reade might have argued (though he chose
not to) that the treatment of criminals was as inhumane
and ineffective as ever, however much conditions had
changed since 1856. The practises of the British penal sys-
tem were still based on punishment rather than reform, a
condition that would continue until the 1898 Prison Act fi-
nally banned such measures as the treadmill and crank.

Reade responded to the clamour in typical fashion: having
cultivated his own animosity toward critics for years, he
attributed their complaints to the same motive. On 24 No-
ember he wrote to his American publisher, ‘I have just
achieved [sic] a great dramatic success. The whole Lon-
don Press caballed to crush it; and the public put its foot
on them with a decision they will not forget in a hurry.
d—a them.’47 He later embellished this interpretation in
his bitter memoir, ‘Reade’s Luck’, in which he charged
that Tomlins was drunk during the performance and was
incited by his fellow critics to make his protest, only to be
put down by galleryites who shouted, ‘Turn the black-
guards out.’48 Vining was equally unrepentant—and deﬁ-
cient in memory. After his ﬁrst-night challenge to the cri-
tics, he taunted them in newspaper advertisements that
trumped the success of the production. Ten years later, he attributed the entire controversy to Louisa Moore’s being accidentally thrown to the stage too roughly, with ‘a smack similar to a cod’s tail slapped on the marble slab of a fishmonger’s shop—the effect was horrible’. Despite the bravado shown by Reade and Vining, the audience response had an immediate effect on the production. By the second night, both the treadmill and Josephs’s attempted suicide were gone. The Era reported only ‘a slight outbreak of sibilation’ at the diminished prison horrors, and no protests since then. Bouicault later testified that the crank had gone the way of the treadmill ‘after two or three nights’. Beyond these concessions to decorum, Vining and Reade apparently made no other alterations—nor did they need to. The production amply fulfilled one reviewer’s prediction that ‘in the [public’s] anxiety to learn what has created such a sensation, the Manager will doubtless find a remunerative source of profit’. Besides the attraction of Lloyd’s splendid scenery, the production featured fine performances by Vining and Dominick Murray (as Peter Crawley, a grovelling agent of Meadows’s) and an astonishing piece of character acting by Stanislaus Calhaem, who portrayed Jacky with supposed fidelity to the customs and temperament of the Australian aborigine. The initial run of 140 performances gratified both Reade’s ego and his bank account, earning him £2,000 from total profits of £8,000.

It Is Never Too Late to Mend went on to become a repertoire staple, particularly in the provinces, where it proved a durable source of income for Reade. The play was also revived in London, first at Astley’s in 1874 (with Reade directing the production and Ellen Terry starring as Susan), later at the Adelphi in 1881. But as the memories of its sensational première faded, the play stood revealed as only the ‘commonplace transpontine drama’ that survives on the page today. In a whimsical passage from his English Dramatists of To-Day, William Archer dismissed Reade as a ‘dramatist of yesterday’ as he recalled the recent Adelphi production. The play had always seemed too long to Archer—he thought the title should be changed to It’s Never Too Late to End—and despite his determination to see a performance through, he finally succumbed in Act Three: ‘When the irrepressible Jacky took the centre of the stage and set himself to solve the mysteries of a cotton umbrella, I reflected that art is long and life is fleeting, and went.’ As for the notorious second act, Archer admits he did not see the original staging, but ‘If the scene was more horrible and more absurd than it is at present, it must have been a wonderful production’.

In retrospect, the play that Reade always considered his masterpiece served two important functions. First, the original production signalled the end of democracy in the Victorian theatre, a time when a first-night audience could force the removal of a play with the manager powerless to resist. The playwright Shirley Brooks, testifying before the 1866 Parliamentary committee, recognized the end of an era when he said of the outbreak on opening night, ‘I suppose that in other days that would have been accepted as what is called damnation; but the manager did not recognize the right of the audience to pronounce any such opinion; he pushed the piece on, and gradually the public came, and at last you could not get into the theatre at all.’ The age of the autocratic actor-manager had begun.

Second, Reade’s success in introducing a controversial subject like prison conditions into his play opened new possibilities for the theatre as an intellectual medium suitable for the portrayal and discussion of serious social issues. One can certainly fault Reade for not adhering strictly to the facts in his rendering of prison life. But in both his play and novel, he wanted to shock his audience, to force them to confront the harsh realities of a well-hidden penal system. When he received a letter in 1857 objecting to the details of It Is Never Too Late to Mend, he defended the novel with gusto:

These black facts have been before the public, before ever I handled them; they have been told, and tolerably well told, by many chroniclers. But it is my business, and my art, and my duty, to make you Ladies and Gentlemen realize things, which the chronicler presents to you in his dim, and cold, and shadowy way; and so they pass over your mind like idle wind.

This you sometimes call ‘being harrowed’, but ask yourselves two questions:

(1) Do you think you are harrowed one tenth part as much as I have been; as I could harrow you?

(2) I, one tenth part as much as Josephs, who died under the harrow?

By persevering in bringing his play to the stage, Reade ‘realized’ his vision once more, to the benefit of both the theatre and the social principles he supported.

Notes
5. Report from the Select Committee on Theatrego Li-
7. Ibid., II, 164-65.


12. ALS, Reade to Laurie and Keen (his solicitors), 2 February 1867, Parrish Collection, Princeton University Library. All quotations from the Parrish Collection are printed with the permission of the Princeton University Library.

13. Contract between Coleman and Reade, 7 February 1865, Parrish Collection, Princeton University Library.


16. All references to *It Is Never Too Late to Mend* are from the printed licence copy, British Library Add. MS. 53044 D. This copy is the privately printed edition that Reade showed to Coleman, with some additions, excisions, and transpositions made by Reade. The text is similar to that in the most recent edition of the play, *Plays by Charles Reade*, ed. Michael Hammet (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986). Hammet, who does not disclose his copy-text or editorial principles, includes one scene (Act Four, scene two) that Reade himself cut, and excludes short scenes at the start of Acts Three and Four which, Reade specified, were intended to be read but not performed. I have also consulted Reade’s manuscript of *It Is Never Too Late to Mend*, contained in three notebooks and preserved in the Parrish Collection, Princeton University Library.


21. Ibid., p. 171.

22. Ibid., p. 176.


24. Ibid., II, 32.

25. ALS, M. H. Davies (Coleman’s treasurer) to Charles Reade, 19 December 1866, Parrish Collection, Princeton University Library. Davies prepared a transcript of the ledger because Reade questioned the payments he had received from Coleman. Other documents in the Parrish Collection show that Reade and Coleman continued to wrangle over Coleman’s managerial practices and accounts. In particular, Reade objected to Coleman’s unauthorized leasing of the play to J. P. Weston of the Theatre Royal Bolton for 20% of the receipts while paying Reade 10%, with Coleman reserving the balance ‘for my humble expense in providing prompt book, music, sketches[,] models of scenery[,] posters, wood cuts, & c.’ Reade also believed he was owed forty guineas for performances in Cambridge and York. On the whole, however, Reade thought that ‘Coleman and I have done business together very fairly and agreeably’. Not only did he like Coleman, but as he confided to his solicitors, ‘[Coleman] may be useful to me by starting another play and so forcing it on those idiots the London managers.’


33. Ibid., vii; Mayhew and Binny, p. 308.


35. Ibid., p. 197.

36. Mayhew and Binny, p. 311.


38. *Era*, 8 October 1865, p. 11. Given the ensuing outcry, Vining must indeed have said, ‘... that most of the dissentient persons have Come in Free’, although the article in the *Era* reads ‘... the dissentient persons have not...’


43. *Fun*, 21 October 1865, p. 53. Robertson’s unsigned contribution is identified through the Proprietor’s Copy of *Fun* at the Huntington Library.
44. Scott, II, 274.
45. Era. 8 October 1865, p. 11.
47. Burns, p. 236.
49. See Fun, 25 November 1865, p. 103.
51. Era, 15 October 1865, p. 11. The Era (8 October 1865, p. 11) noted that the suicide attempt and other "more prominent causes of disapprobation" had been removed by the second night. According to Coleman, Reade himself decided that the treadmill must be banished before the second performance (Coleman, Charles Reade, p. 210). I have not found any mention of the treadmill being used after the première.
52. Report from the Select Committee, p. 143, question 4064.
53. Era, 8 October 1865, p. 11.
59. Research for this article was supported by a Travel to Collections grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Robert L. Jackson (essay date 1995)


[In the following essay, Jackson examines Dostoevsky's Notes From a Dead House, his account of imprisonment in Siberia, suggesting that although the novel ostensibly addresses the inhumanity of a physical prison, it also imagines Russia itself as a prison.]
Text Not Viewable Online
Tim Youngs (essay date 1999)


[In the following essay, Youngs analyzes Wilde’s poignant poem about a prison execution to highlight the ways in which prison changed the poet and his writings, concluding that the sordid, bestial conditions of prison compelled Wilde to confront realism.]

One remarkable career may have been launched at an institution in Reading (John Lucas’s, which this volume honours, at the University), but another reached an inglorious
end at a different institution there: Oscar Wilde's in Reading Gaol. Perhaps the arrival of John, a lover of the national sport, is anticipated in Wilde's line: 'A cricket cap was on his head', but there the similarity probably ends. Wilde is reported to have declared: 'I died in prison'. In a way this might be true. After a fall, he suffered from pains in his ear, which was later operated on in France. His death, on 30 November 1900, may have been caused, it is thought, or at least hastened, by complications arising from the operation. Additionally, and crucially, he feared greatly for his sanity while in jail. Writing to Ross on 1 April 1897, Wilde referred to 'my mental development in prison, and the inevitable evolution of character and intellectual attitude towards life that has taken place'. (Letters, 240) In De Profundis, he announces 'Sorrow... and all that it teaches one, is my new world', and reminds us that 'I used to live entirely for pleasure'. Since he believed 'My life is like a work of art', it is sensible to assume that his art must have been affected as his situation changed so profoundly. It was.

De Profundis, Wilde's extraordinary autobiographical letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, his lover, was written in his last year in jail between January and March 1897. It is a critical document in his life and thought. In it he advises Douglas to 'let the reading of this terrible letter... prove to you as important a crisis and turning-point of your life as the writing of it is to me'. Apart from De Profundis and the 'Ballad', and excepting his private correspondence, his letters to The Daily Chronicle in May 1897 and March 1898 are his only significant post-prison works. All are characterised by an explicit concern with the experience and effects of prison life. The frivolous side of his wit had been killed off.

Although Gagnier seems to find Wilde's prison experience a less decisive turning-point than he himself did, she does offer an important corrective to many commentators on 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' when she writes that it 'is about physical love'. Yet she does not offer any signs of that (male) bodily love. These, whether they are erected consciously or not, are present in the poem and inform the narrator's sympathetic identification with the condemned man. When the poem was published, its first and early editions carried not Wilde's name but his cell number, 'C. 3. 3.', a tag that would strengthen the connection between both prisoners as well as creating the expectation of an autobiographical voice. And in a letter to Frank Harris, he wrote: 'I... feel that the poem is too autobiographical' (Letters, p.328).

The link between the narrator and the doomed trooper is established early in the poem. The first four stanzas move from observation of the man to an implicit comparison with him. The first stanza begins: 'He did not wear'; the second: 'He walked'; the third: 'I never saw a man who looked / With such a wistful eye'; and the fourth: 'I walked, with other souls in pain'. We have quickly gone from the narrator's looking at another to reflecting on his own parallel action ('He walked'; 'I walked'). In fact, the psychological identification is far closer even at this point than the poem openly discloses. In the fourth stanza the narrator wonders what crime the man has committed and learns from a whisper: 'That fellow's got to swing.' (1.24).
A few months before he wrote the poem, Wilde had complained in a letter that 'The gibbet on which I swing in history now is high enough' (Letters, p.148). Wilde's envisaging himself as hanging in a figurative way that corresponds to Wooldridge's actual hanging should make us alert to the ways in which symbolism and actual description rub against each other in the poem. The narrator's identification with the murderer is made strongly in stanzas five and six, which bring the first section to a close. His soul is in pain. He knows what 'hunted thought' (l.31) oppresses the trooper: 'The man had killed the thing he loved; / And so he had to die' (ll.35-6). We infer from the shared knowledge a shared crime or sin.

In the third stanza of the second section of the poem it is difficult not to see an encoded expression of male love, together with its contemporary scandals of male prostitution:

Some love too little, some too long,
Some sell, and others buy;
Some do the deed with many tears,
And some without a sigh . . .

(ll. 49-52)

These references to love bought and sold and to remorse and untroubled acceptance relate directly to Wilde's homosexual experiences. Throughout De Profundis, Wilde charged Douglas with having brought him to bankruptcy: 'between the autumn of 1892 and the date of my imprisonment I spent with you and on you more than £5000 in actual money, irrespective of the bills I incurred' (De Profundis, p.43). For Wilde, in jail, this is love bought at a terrible price. His prison and post-prison letters veer wildly between recrimination over this and a desire for reconciliation. The love he had bought from other, particularly younger, working-class men, was purchased at the cost (when revealed in court) of humiliation. The sentiments expressed in the stanza, therefore, help set up the corresponding 'death of shame' (l.55) that both 'C.T.W.' and the narrator experience. Shame is the 'love that dare not speak its name' in Douglas's poem, 'Two Loves', about which Wilde was cross-examined in court; and is the loveliest 'Of all sweet passions' in Douglas's poem 'In Praise of Shame'. The 'wretched man' who lies in 'a pit of shame' (ll.38-9) may ostensibly be Wooldridge; symbolically it is Wilde.

Probably less meant symbols of male love, but arguably symbols of it nonetheless, are found at various places in the 'Ballad'. When the speaker of the poem tells us that the other prisoners wonder if they 'Would end the selfsame way' (l.154), he concludes 'For none can tell to what red Hell / His sightless soul may stray' (ll.155-6). Later on he pronounces: 'We were as men who through a fen / Of filthy darkness grope' (ll.355-6). Whether intended as such or not, these images lend themselves to sexual interpretation.

Through the use of such symbols and images the poem quickly begins to work on a metaphorical level: it is not just about society's punishment of murder but about the ostracism of those who break social laws (and religious ordinance). In this respect a crucial stanza is that which ends Section II:

A prison wall was round us both,
Two outcast men we were:
The world had thrust us from its heart,
And God from out His care:
And the iron gin that waits for Sin
Had caught us in its snare.

(ll. 169-74)

The lines might apply equally to Wilde and Douglas, or to any gay men, as much as to the two prisoners. Pulling or widening the reference of the subject like this, as Wilde does, allows the poem to be read on a couple of levels throughout: there is the trooper's murderous crime and there is Wilde's.

On the eve of the execution the other prisoners cannot rest for crying: 'there is no sleep when men must weep / Who never yet have wept' (ll. 259-60). Imaginative sympathy is felt for the man whose life is about to end. An empathy that is quite out of keeping with Wilde's earlier, highly individualistic work, with its air of detached amusement, is built up. Self-pity is stirred and displaced by cognizance of another's doom. We have other evidence, outside the poem, of Wilde's new capacity for identification. In a letter to the governor of Reading Gaol, Major Nelson, Wilde wrote: 'Of course I side with the prisoners: I was one, and I belong to their class now' (Letters, p.282). One may take also his admission to Leonard Smithers that 'I was not present at the Reading execution, nor do I know anything about it. I am describing a general scene with general types' (Letters, p.315) as a further indication of a broader vision beyond the individual. Part of the difficulty in reading the poem is caused by a tension between the specific and the type; the self and the group. This should be no surprise since Wilde cannot but have felt his crafted individuality threatened by his prison uniform; that is, by his forced identity of 'C. 3. 3.', a prisoner and a homosexual.

Critics have on the whole been slow to recognise within the 'Ballad' allusions to physical male love. If for Douglas and Wilde it had been the love that dare not speak its name, many dare not hear it. At the moment of Wooldridge's hanging, there fall these lines:

And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweets,
None knew so well as I:
For he who lives more lives than one
More deaths than one must die.

(ll. 391-6)

Regrets and sweets, the plural lives and deaths all connote Wilde's sexuality and its consequences. Ellmann writes, partly, though not only, of Wilde's homosexuality, that 'Wilde prided himself on living a life not double but multiple'. At the very instant of the execution Wilde moves the focus away from Wooldridge towards himself. The poet takes the condemned man's life—and death. But
this is not a selfish appropriation. It may be another instance of that strategy by which Wilde represents himself as a figure so tragic he is Christlike, but it seeks to attain self-understanding through the other’s fate. (In De Profundis he had asserted: ‘Christ realised in the entire sphere of human relations that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of Art is the sole secret of creation’.) Admittedly, Wilde does run the considerable risk of equating his crime with the trooper’s, a comparison which may appear to make murder a less terrible thing than it is, as John Stokes, for one, has suggested: ‘Wilde suppresses the knowledge that the man’s crime—murder—is of a radically different kind from his own alleged offences’. Stokes seems to take this as confirmation of what many critics have felt: ‘It is as if Wilde had lost his usually deft control over the transactions between actor and spectator and the multiple personality had become all but unmanageable’.

Yet this is what makes the poem so engaging. Wilde thought so, too:

The poem suffers under the difficulty of a divided aim in style. Some is realistic, some is romantic: some poetry, some propaganda. I feel it keenly, but as a whole I think the production interesting: that it is interesting from more points of view than one is artistically to be regretted.

(Letters, p.311)

Wilde is trying to forge new relationships and arrive at a new understanding. In the wonderfully powerful fifth canto he steps from a contemplation of his own condition to a criticism of what we might suppose to be our moral and social imprisonment of one another:

This too I know—and wise it were
If each could know the same—
That every prison that men build
Is built with bricks of shame,
And bound with bars lest Christ should see
How men their brothers maim.

(ll. 547-52)

True, this doesn’t match Blake’s attack on the ‘mind-forg’d manacles’ in his magnificent poem ‘London’ but it does lead to a direct assault on the prison system: ‘It is only what is good in Man / That wastes and withers there’ (ll. 561-2); and the opening lines of the following stanza do sound more like Blake (or a more prosaic version of him): ‘For they starve the little frightened child / Till it weeps both night and day’ (ll. 565-6). (This referred to an actual incident in which a crying child was given a biscuit by a warder who was then sacked for the act. Wilde offered to pay the fine of this child and of two others, and secured their freedom. He protested against the warder’s sacking in his letter to the Daily Chronicle of 27 May 1897.)

Notes


3. Ibid., 231.


7. Ibid., 462.
8. Wilde, De Profundis, in The Soul of Man and Prison Writings, 104.
10. See for example Isobel Murray’s note in Oscar Wilde, The Soul of Man and Prison Writings, 220.
11. Both poems date from 1894 and are reproduced in Chris White, ed, Nineteenth-Century Writings on Homosexuality (London: Routledge, 1999), 54-6.
18. ‘Skilly was a kind of thin gruel given to prisoners.’ Editor’s note, Letters, 328, n.1.

FURTHER READING

Criticism

Evaluates Wilde’s poem as it relates to the rest of his work; suggesting that Wilde underestimates the brutality of the murder he describes as he shifts between symbolism and realism.

Discusses how the novel’s introduction mediates between fiction and experience and traces its themes of grace and redemption.


Suggests that concepts of the individual and authority used by authors in depicting the modern prison were first developed in eighteenth-century literature.

Interprets Melville’s prison stories as models for the operation of power in America and argues that Melville also finds prisons in the home and school.

Applies the insights of Foucault on Bentham’s Panopticon to Hawthorne’s American novels.

Proposes that Dickens’s depiction of life as a prison with imagination and immortality as the means for escape is drawn from Romantic influences, particularly Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode.

Compares Dickens’s notes from his tour of American prisons to sections of A Tale of Two Cities, particularly the descriptions of prisoners sentenced to solitary confinement.

Theorizes that the development of modern prisons and theories of punishment are part of the broader figuration of power in Western society, placing special emphasis on Bentham’s proposed prison called the Panopticon.

Analyzes the theme of play in one of Dickens’s prison novels and how it connects with the author’s narrative strategy.

Examines the contradictions and variances in Romantic attitudes toward solitude and self-imprisonment.

Compiles several prison memoirs and biographies to give an account of life in a Victorian prison, from the physical surroundings to corporal punishment to life upon release.

Examines the fictional characters of Isabel Archer, Emma Woodhouse, Emma Bovary, and Dorothea Brooke to demonstrate the constrictions confronting strong, creative women in nineteenth-century society.


Explores the theme of domestic “incarceration” in Charlotte Brontë’s novel.


Discusses the effects of the French Revolution on the poetry of English Romantic authors, with special attention given to the imagery of the besieged fortress and liberated prisoners.