The Self in the Cell

Narrating the Victorian Prisoner

Sean Grass

LITERARY CRITICISM AND CULTURAL THEORY

OUTSTANDING DISSERTATIONS

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Reader, I married her.

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List of Abbreviations

A	*Armadale,* Wilkie Collins
AN	*American Notes and Pictures from Italy,* Charles Dickens
AT	*The Autobiography of a Thief, and Other Stories,* Charles Reade
HNL	*His Natural Life,* Marcus Clarke
LD	*Little Dorrit,* Charles Dickens
Letters	*The Letters of Charles Dickens,* eds. Madeline House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson
Life	*The Life of Charlotte Brontë,* Elizabeth Gaskell
ED	*The Mystery of Edwin Drood,* Charles Dickens
NTL	*It Is Never Too Late to Mend,* Charles Reade
PP	*Pickwick Papers,* Charles Dickens
Times	The *Times* of London
Truth	*"Truth is Stranger Than Fiction": True Account of the Proceedings Leading to, and a Full and Authentic Report of, the Searching Inquiry, by Her Majesty's Commissioners, into the Horrible System of Discipline Practised at the Borough Gaol of Birmingham,* ed. Joseph Allday
TTC	*A Tale of Two Cities,* Charles Dickens
V	*Villette,* Charlotte Brontë

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The Self in the Cell

Introduction

Solitude, Surveillance, and the Art of the Novel

Side by side with the major technology of the telescope, the lens and the light beam . . . there were the minor techniques of multiple and intersecting observations, of eyes that must see without being seen; using techniques of subjection and methods of exploitation, an obscure art of light and the visible was secretly preparing a new knowledge of man.

—Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

Because the Panopticon was a vision of Big Brotherism, which mercifully came to nothing, Bentham is apt to be remembered as a sort of malevolent clown of penal history.

—Giles Playfair, *The Punitive Obsession*

IN LATE DECEMBER 1786, JEREMY BENTHAM AUTHORED A NOVEL PROPOSAL FOR the discipline, punishment, and reformation of England's growing number of criminal offenders: a surveillant penitentiary and workhouse, contrived ingeniously so that a single observer positioned at a central vantage could watch every inmate there confined. The plans called for an enormous, enclosed circular penitentiary with a guard tower at its center and individual cells arranged along the height and circumference of the interior wall. In each cell, a window through the outside wall would admit light, while the inner wall would be entirely "formed by an iron grating, so light as not to screen away any part of the cell."[1] The guard tower, on the other hand, would always remain dark so that, although the line of sight between guard and cells would be unimpeded, no individual prisoner could ever tell when he was being observed.

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Unable to place each prisoner under perfect surveillance, Bentham reasoned, "the next thing to be wished for is, that, at every instant, seeing reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, he should conceive himself to be so."[2] Bentham conducted experiments in acoustics and optics, and he designed productive labor for prisoners to perform so that they would learn trades, grow used to earning their bread, and make the prison self-sufficient, or perhaps profitable. He also planned to open his prison to the public, so that public scrutiny would prevent abuse. Ideologically and economically Bentham's prison was a fabulous innovation, "a simple idea of architecture" intended to produce model convicts and make them productive.[3] He called his simple idea "Panopticon."

In England the time seemed right for prison reform. A decade earlier, in 1776, England had suddenly lost her primary outlet for social malefactors when the upstart American colonials unexpectedly declared independence and halted the flow of convicts to the New World. Confident the rebellion would soon be put down, English authorities employed temporary stopgaps to cope with the growing convict population. Some were pressed into military service and sent to America as soldiers rather than transportees; others were thrust into old ships called "prison hulks" until space could be cleared in Newgate or transportation could resume. But the surprising result of the war eliminated this first expedient and, worse, cast hundreds of these same soldiers adrift in an English society already suffering economically from a failed war and diminished empire. Newgate was full, and the prison hulks and local jails quickly filled and overflowed. Saddled with a "Bloody Code" that designated some 200 crimes as capital offenses, the Crown began to rely more heavily upon the gallows. Executions from 1783 to 1787 were carried out at a rate 82 percent higher than in the previous five years, with 97 in 1785 alone.[4] This ferocious display of state power soon exhausted the public's tolerance for brutality, so much so that juries became loath to convict any but the most serious offenders and the public gallows at Tyburn had to be removed to the safer confines of Newgate. Government officials were growing convinced that England required new methods of dealing with criminals, of doing so at home, and of doing so in a way that would prepare convicts to return to the very society they had offended.

Bentham's Panopticon would have served these aims, which explains perhaps why Michel Foucault regards the proposal for the Panopticon as the first movement toward the modern penitentiary. Had Bentham struck while the iron was hot, England may well have built his prison and ushered in a new era in convict administration. But twenty-five years later England still had no Panopticon, and Bentham had been summarily dismissed from England's discussions about discipline and punish-

ment. Though his proposal for the Panopticon was ready in 1786, more than four years passed before he presented it to Sir William Pitt.[5] By that time, the Pitt cabinet had happily "rediscovered" Australia and concluded that convicts could be stored much less troublesomely at the antipodes than at home. During the next eighty years, England transported 160,000 convicts to Australia, continuing across the globe the very system of colonization and criminal punishment they had been obliged to abandon in America. Still, Bentham persisted, and in 1794 he finally won a contract to build his Panopticon. Parliament advanced him £2000 to conduct experiments in acoustics and optics and spent £12,000 more to purchase a marshy plot of land near Vauxhall Bridge.[6] But the experiments failed so miserably that they devoured not only the advance but much of Bentham's private fortune besides.[7] In 1800, citing the "number of years which [had] elapsed since the first steps were taken," the secretary of state called for the project to be abandoned.[8] When England did finally open its first reformative prison, Millbank Penitentiary, in 1816 on the site meant for the Panopticon, the new jail bore only passing architectural and disciplinary resemblances to its more famous precursor. Its six pentagonal buildings had hallways radiating outward from a central guard tower, like a wagon wheel, and inmates were locked in separate cells closed off from the tower's view.[9] Even two decades later, when Parliament created England's first national Prison Inspectorate, the inspectors endorsed a program of separate confinement rather than surveillance. The "Model Prison" at Pentonville, which opened in 1843 as England's first full-scale experiment in reformative imprisonment, used solitude to inspire prisoners to self-reflection, moral regeneration, and self-narration undertaken from the cell.

What ought to interest literature scholars in all this is the extent to which even this cursory account of English imprisonment places Bentham, Panopticism, and Foucault upon tenuous ground. Those who study the nineteenth-century novel, especially, have used Foucault's work to help explain the recurrence of policing, detection, public scrutiny, and even omniscient narration in the works of authors from Dickens to Henry James, since these themes indicate a particular Victorian anxiety about individual privacy and the invasive social pressures that shape—and misshape—private identity and secret desire. As D. A. Miller charged in *The Novel and the Police* (1988), "no openly fictional form has ever sought to 'make a difference' in the world more than the Victorian novel," and no author more than Dickens developed in the English novel such a "massive thematization of [the] social discipline" that the Panopticon implies.[10] This argument is persuasive because it is correct, at least in the sense that Victorian novels by Dickens and others bristle with social critiques that pit individual protagonists against social forces that

threaten to buffet them into physical and psychological submission. We need only look at Jane Eyre, or Pip, or Maggie Tulliver, or innumerable other Victorian characters besides to know it. He is also correct, along with critics like Mark Seltzer and Audrey Jaffe, when he suggests that the Victorian novel tried to "make a difference" mostly by embracing a realism so exhaustive that even omniscient narration occasionally buckles under its weight.[11] Omniscient narration in Victorian fiction is thus Foucaultian not only because it watches and sees, but also because it becomes a vehicle for including and even producing knowledge about those things most alien to respectable middle-class readers: poverty, madness, criminality, prostitution, and imprisonment. By serving this function, Foucaultian critics suggest, the novel replicates the Panopticon's determination to watch over, account for, and discipline social aberration.

This really is the crucial point, not only for Foucault but also for the critics who draw from him in assessing the Victorian novel. The Panopticon's inmate is watched, or believes that he is, and he adjusts his behavior as a result. The lesson, Foucault tells us, is that individuals are never more than the sum of the disciplinary forces brought to bear upon them—that they have no genuine selfhood or identity that is free from the power of society's many prisons. Miller suggests that Victorian novels offer this same lesson when omniscient narrators exert their surveillant powers upon individual fictional subjects, so that we are permitted to "enjoy our privacy in the act of watching privacy being violated."[12] These are persuasive arguments about Victorian society and fiction, especially since so many Victorian novelists seem, at least, to reach Foucault's pessimistic conclusions about the possibility of unfettered selfhood. Indeed, if we wished to extend this principle to its most general form, we might be hard-pressed to find a Victorian novel in which detection and social oppression exert no pressures upon the individual self. Because literature always emerges from within social contexts governed by these kinds of power relations, and because the author always exercises a certain discursive power over the materials he represents, it may really be true that the Foucaultian model is as universally applicable as it is apparently inescapable. As Seltzer wrote of Henry James, perhaps the most deliberately apolitical nineteenth-century novelist, "James's art of representation always also involves a politics of representation," at least insofar as his ideological stance always inheres in the form and content of his texts.[13] Every novel, in other words, is almost equally subject to suspicions that its ideological agenda parallels the Panopticon's.

But where in these discussions is the Victorian prison? No prisoner ever spent a day in the Panopticon, nor probably in a prison much like it. Instead, someone convicted of a crime in nineteenth-century England

could expect to be transported to Australia to work under nearly unendurable privations; held for weeks or months in an overcrowded and filthy local jail while awaiting quarterly assizes; committed for debt and thrust into the Marshalsea or the Fleet, where a greedy jailer demanded exorbitant fees for a squalid cell and cursory amenities; or driven, as happened all too often, utterly mad by solitary confinement, the very tool that Victorian authorities hoped would produce moral reform. Between 1750 and 1850, English authorities employed everything from hangings to hulks in order to deal with criminal offenders, acting more frequently according to expediency than ideology. Victorian novel after Victorian novel shows us these various prisoners, from Dickens's Fagin, Amy Dorrit, and Alexandre Manette to Charles Reade's Thomas Robinson, Marcus Clarke's Richard Devine, and Samuel Butler's Ernest Pontifex. Only rarely do Foucaultian critics turn to these representations of literal Victorian prisoners, likely because the prisons in which these prisoners are confined have, rather inconveniently, very little to do with Panopticism. Under the circumstances, it is worth wondering whether recent scholarship focused upon surveillance has forged provocative links between the novel and the prison or only between the novel and Foucault.

Certain critiques of literature and the prison have departed from this orthodoxy in useful ways. Jeremy Tambling, for instance, offers a largely Foucaultian reading in *Dickens, Violence and the Modern State* (1995), but he does include several novels, *Little Dorrit* (1857) and *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) among them, in which prisons play a large role.[14] Forty years ago, in *Dickens and Crime* (1962), Philip Collins pushed the historical mode near to its limits by contextualizing exhaustively Dickens's experiences of and writings about a variety of English prisons, from Newgate and Coldbath-fields to the Marshalsea. Indeed, Collins's work has been indispensable to my own, though he does not examine the narrative strategies implicit in Victorian punishment or analyze the relation between the prison and narrative production. John Bender provides a more current and intriguing analysis in *Imagining the Penitentiary* (1987) by arguing that the key to the emergence of the penitentiary during the eighteenth century was the "penitentiary idea" implicit in novels like *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722) and narrative sequences like *A Harlot's Progress* (1731-32) and *A Rake's Progress* (1734-35). Together, Bender argues, these texts "restructured the chaotic (though once culturally functional) experience inside the old prisons, [and] implied a new kind of confinement—the penitentiary—conceived narratively on the lines of the realistic, consciousness-centered novel."[15] This suggestion that the novel inspired the prison may appeal to the sentimentality of those of us who, like Auden, wish to resist the notion that "poetry makes

nothing happen."[16] But Bender either ignores or disregards the practical and ideological pressures that combined to produce the penitentiary early in the nineteenth century. The development of the reformative penitentiary depended much more heavily upon social dislocations, increasing poverty, and the work of early penologists like Cesare Beccaria and John Howard than upon the influence exerted by eighteenth-century narrative. By the Victorian period, the prison was much more a place for narrative construction than a place constructed through narrative.

Given this state of scholarly affairs, my purpose in this study is to show how the prison—by evolving during the nineteenth century as a private space explicitly designed to wield psychological and narrative power over those it confined—provided both the impetus and the model for increasingly interior fictions of the psychological self. In 1775, before England turned to reformative imprisonment as a penal option, criminal punishment was deliberately punitive and visible: executions, stocks, pillories, and even brandings served to identify and injure those who had broken the law, and to dissuade others from doing the same. Imprisonment, whether at Newgate or in local jails, likewise permitted and even encouraged commerce between inmates and the public. But by 1850, with the penitentiary firmly ensconced as England's primary sentencing option, punishment had become a much more private endeavor, expressly intended to remake convicts somewhere beyond the reach of the public stare. Most convicts endured some form of the national disciplinary program established by the Prison Inspectorate in 1835, which called for separate confinement intended to inspire self-reflection, moral regeneration, and (often) self-narratives that prison chaplains read, edited, and interpreted in order to ensure that they told the "truth" about the prisoner's guilt and the beneficent effects of the cell. This prescribed role for autobiography under separate confinement gives us a clue to the relation between narration and imprisonment, for it shows that narrative authority and subjectivity were both at stake for those confined in England's new penitentiaries. Much the same was true in Australia where convicts and free settlers mingled in the streets. In that vast carceral society, the power to give a proper account of one's self constituted a crucial part of the distinction between the guilty and innocent. Farther away than the American colonies had been, this new theater for convict transportation also made it far less likely that convicts or their self-accounts would ever return to England. As imprisonment became more private and psychological during the first half of the nineteenth century, it also raised increasingly complex questions about how to account, fully and honestly, for the Victorian prisoner.

These questions placed Victorian novelists, uncomfortably, at the intersection of opposing propositions. On the one hand, realist and

reformist authors like Dickens, Reade, and Clarke needed facts and physical details about the prison in order for their novels to "make a difference," since such objective materials would provide their accounts with social and cultural legitimacy in the eyes of Victorian readers. On the other, these same authors came to understand—precisely because of their careful scrutiny of the prison—that facts about confinement, now that it was stubbornly private, were hard to come by, and that in any case facts were no longer adequate to narrate a prison that operated upon the mind rather than the body of the confined. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, defenders of the prison offered "proofs" that prison discipline was having its desired psychological and reformative effects. At the same time, growing numbers of critics in the press and in literary circles argued that separate confinement, transportation, and even debtors' prisons were inflicting disastrous physical and psychological consequences. Both sides were in some measure correct. By mid-century the Victorian prison in each of its forms clearly demanded fictional treatment as a place of powerful psychological—rather than just physical—moment. Victorian novelists accordingly needed to justify their inclusion of psychological narration and invention within novels they hoped would be taken as objective, irrefutable portrayals of the self in the cell.

They found grounds for that justification in the prison. Treating prisoner bodies and self-accounts as texts to be read, interpreted, and narrated by agents of the prison, separate-confinement penitentiaries had already authorized and even institutionalized the practice of inventing—from an external perspective—the psychological "truth" about the imprisoned self, its motives, and its sufferings in the cell. Treating transportees as objects of discipline and suspicion, Australia authorities had already erected a vast carceral society in which prisoners were not to be believed, even in accounting for themselves, if a free settler could be found to tell their stories. Both major forms of imprisonment had therefore accomplished by mid-century what Victorian novelists required: the narrative subjugation of the Victorian prisoner. By embracing and even mimicking the explicit and implicit narrative aims of the prison, Victorian novelists recognized that they could engage in deliberate psychological invention without compromising the apparent legitimacy or integrity of their realist fictions. Reading and narrating prisoner bodies and texts, insisting thematically upon the prisoner's solitude, adopting the form of self-narration undertaken from the cell—these modes all became part of Victorian novelists' repertoires in accounting for the prison. Perhaps this explains why the figure of the self in the cell that endures in nineteenth-century figures like William Dorrit and Alexandre Manette is not that of the Panopticon's incessantly watched prisoner. It is, rather, that of the hopelessly isolated inmate, broken by confinement,

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