Romantic Outlaws, Beloved Prisons

Duncan, Martha Grace

Published by NYU Press

Duncan, Martha Grace.  
NYU Press, 1996.  
Project MUSE.  muse.jhu.edu/book/15819.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15819

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=495874
CHAPTER 4

*Flowers Are Flowers: Prison As a Place Like Any Other*

Lately, I've seen . . . [my prison] as an English garden because of the flowers that grow in abundance along the walks . . . .

Flowers are flowers. Walls and fences have no real power over them.

—Busby Crockett, "The Prison Trip"

You are still in jail, in the hole or out of the hole. You are in jail in the street or behind bars. It is the same thing.

—Claude Brown and Arthur Dunmeyer, "A Way of Life in the Ghetto"

While serving time on death row, Edgar Smith was often asked to explain why he read and made other efforts to improve himself. In his prison memoir, he answers this question as follows: "There is perhaps nothing more frightening to me than the prospect of finding myself stuck for the rest of my life in some dreary small town, working in some gas station or hardware store for sixty dollars a week. That would be going from one prison to another, from a cell to a cage, and I have had enough of prisons and cages." For nonprisoners, the defining characteristic of prison is the deprivation of liberty. But the protean character of the concept liberty permits Smith to equate being behind iron bars with being stuck in a small town, working at a gasoline station for sixty dollars a week. In equating the two situations, Smith may be drawing on either the positive or negative sense of liberty. On the one hand, he may be viewing his imagined life in a dreary small town as prisonlike because he believes that others have prevented him from obtaining the education and financial resources to leave. This reasoning would place his remark within the classical liberal
understanding of freedom, that is, negative liberty, or freedom from constraint. On the other hand, he may be drawing this equation because liberty to him means not merely the absence of coercion but also the capacity for self-realization. In the latter case, his observation would draw upon the concept of positive liberty best exemplified in the works of T. H. Green and Jean Jacques Rousseau.²

I began with an example of someone who imagines prison and the world outside (or some parts of it) to be equally bad, equally unfree. This same theme often appears in prisoners’ reflections on the similarity between their plight and that of the guards. Note, for instance, how former prisoner Thomas Flynn empathically describes the constrained life of a prison guard nicknamed “Absurdo”: “Absurdo hasn’t had much freedom, no time to explore, just school, the service, marriage, children, and the first government job that required nothing more than a high school diploma. Two weeks off a year, three after another five on the job, Absurdo knows about being institutionalized, he knows about time.”³

Albie Sachs, a prisoner in South Africa, also recognizes an important similarity between his situation and that of the guard who repeatedly seeks him out: “It occurs to me that the station commander may be almost as lonely for company as I am.”⁴ And Charles Colson, in Born Again, describes his fellow inmate’s “conclusion . . . that some of the guards seemed more imprisoned than the inmates themselves.”⁵ Finally, an anonymous prisoner states: “You have to realize that the guards are there doing time just like the inmates.” He elaborates with this vignette:

I remember asking a guard how long he had been in Sandstone. “Twelve years.” “Do you think that you will be doing all your TIME [sic] here?” “No, I’ll finish up in Leavenworth.” It blew my mind. He was talking about the next twelve years, which he has to serve in order to be eligible for retirement. I thought to myself—Wow, I am going home in a year, and this guy has twelve more years of this stuff.”⁶

In these examples it is unclear whether the guards perceive themselves as unfree. Colson’s observation, in particular, seems to
draw upon a concept of freedom as the absence of even *unperceived* restraints on behavior. This sense of the word *liberty* implies the possibility of false consciousness, of being unfree while thinking one is free. Another inmate, Julian Beck, makes his analogy between prison and the world outside clearly dependent on this sense of the word *freedom*: “I often think that if the people on the street would realize that the world we live in is a prison, they’d do more yelling and railing too. The sad, perhaps tragic, thing is that people do not realize they’re not free.”

This concept of false consciousness is also expressed in a passage by the nineteenth-century revolutionary Vera Figner. Soon after learning that she will be released in twenty months, Figner writes the following indictment of the characters in Chekhov’s play *The Three Sisters*:

> “The Three Sisters” aimlessly wander through life, expecting salvation from moving to Moscow. *But it is within himself that man bears corroding melancholy, or the buoyant spirit of creative life; and the “sisters” will wither as fruitlessly in Moscow, as they withered in the provinces. . . . If such was life, then what difference did it make whether one languished in prison or out of it? One would simply come out from behind the walls of the Fortress to find himself in a larger prison.*

To this ardent activist, a dull and languid life, which she fearfully anticipates finding outside prison, is not worth living. In comparing an apathetic life in freedom to a larger prison she, like Edgar Smith, draws upon a concept of positive liberty—not the absence of coercion, but the full realization of one’s potential.

If one way of perceiving prison as a place like any other is to emphasize the coercive forces in the outside world, another is to affirm the capacity to transcend one’s physical environment, to be free even in prison. The imperviousness of one’s essential self to incarceration comes through in the following passage from *War and Peace*. The scene occurs when the French are holding Pierre as a prisoner-of-war.

> “Ha-ha-ha!” laughed Pierre. And he said aloud to himself: “The soldier did not let me pass. They took me and shut me up. They hold me captive. What, me? Me? My immortal soul? Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! . . .” and he laughed till tears started to his eyes. . . .
Flowers Are Flowers

Pierre glanced up at the sky and the twinkling stars in its far-away depths. “And all that is me, all that is within me, and it is all I!” thought Pierre. “And they caught all that and put it in a shed boarded up with planks!” He smiled, and went and lay down to sleep beside his companions. 9

Pierre is a character in a work of fiction, but his reflections resemble those of Tamsin Fitzgerald, the young woman imprisoned for hijacking a plane. She writes that there are two kinds of freedom: the “outer” and the “inner.” Consequently, one can “be in prison and yet be free.” It is futile and absurd, she concludes, to imagine that one can take away a person’s freedom. 10

A similar observation occurs in Robert Bolt’s play, A Man for All Seasons. When Thomas More is imprisoned in the Tower and his family comes to visit him, the following dialogue ensues:

ROPER: This is an awful place!

MORE: Except it’s keeping me from you, my dears, it’s not so bad.

Then he adds, in a mild tone, one fancies, and with a twinkle in his eye:

Remarkably like any other place. 11

For More, who had wanted to be a monk, prison and life in freedom were essentially the same, because neither was the Kingdom of God. Besides, as a scholar, he probably believed it was the life of the mind, the inner life, that mattered.

One explanation for the image of prison as a place like any other place is that this perception constitutes a “sour grapes” reaction: the disparagement of what one cannot have. This theory could explain not only remarks made by prisoners while they are confined—as a means of easing the trauma of incarceration—but also observations made by ex-prisoners, after the fact—as a way of justifying the wasted years.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, the notion that the “grapes are sour anyway”—that civilians too are entrapped, or that one can be freer in prison because the real life is the life of the mind—represents the use of a primitive defense mechanism: denial. In denial, the ego avoids becoming aware of a painful
aspect of reality by creating a fantasy that obliterates the unpleasant fact.\textsuperscript{12} Thus, the reasoning would go, "I am not confined; I am free," or alternatively, "I may be confined, but nonprisoners are also incarcerated in a different way."

Doubtless there is some truth in this theory. As a complete explanation of this positive image, however, it is inadequate. The sour-grapes theory does not explain, for example, the numerous instances of ex-prisoners committing crimes in order to return to prison. Recidivism, of course, has many dimensions, but one explanation may be the positive images of prison I have identified.

Another approach to explaining the image of prison as a place like any other lies in recognizing that people care not only about negative liberty, or freedom from constraints, but also about positive liberty, or the capacity for self-mastery and self-realization. As Isaiah Berlin discusses in his classic essay, throughout history it has proved impossible to limit the concept \textit{liberty} to its Western sense of "an area within which the subject . . . is or should be left to do what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons."\textsuperscript{13} Rather, the positive, or idealist, notion of liberty has persisted—reflecting the idea that a person may be divided against himself, or may suffer from false consciousness. We have seen numerous instances of this perspective on liberty in the prisoners' writings.

Still another source of the idea that imprisonment represents a difference only in degree from normal life lies in the inevitable gap between man's efforts to conceptualize reality and the complex, differentiated nature of reality itself. Dostoevsky makes this point in his prison memoir, \textit{Notes from a Dead House}: "Reality is infinitely varied compared with even the subtletest workings of abstract thought and does not tolerate broad, clear-cut distinctions. Reality strives for infinite graduation. We too had a life of our own, poor though it may have been. By this I mean not the outward, but the inner life."\textsuperscript{14}

Erica Wallach provides another commentary on the same theme in her memoir of her five years in Soviet prisons and camps. She describes a dialogue with a friend in a camp in Vorkuta, at the
beginning of their working day. As they watch their black-clad fellow-prisoners march ahead of them through the snow, the two women remark on what a moving scene it would make in a film. Wallach and her friend agree that anyone watching the film would feel terribly sorry for them, whereas they, the prisoners, would be “laughing and joking or just thinking about taking the next step, protecting . . . [their] faces, keeping the circulation going.” Wallach goes on to tell her friend that when she read Dostoevsky’s description of the conditions he lived in as a prisoner, she had thought she could never stand it. Yet there she is, in conditions she deems much worse than those of Dostoevsky’s time, tolerating and even joking about them.

In the Introduction, I quoted another remarkable passage from this memoir—a passage showing the contrast between the stereotyped view of imprisonment and the prisoners’ joyous response to Siberia’s great beauty. Beauty, I suggested, is a positive aspect of life that is unaffected by penal confinement. And here I may expand the point to summarize one thesis of this book—that happiness itself bears no necessary correlation to either confinement or freedom.