AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE META-NARRATIVES

"There is no document of civilization," wrote Walter Benjamin, "which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."

In many respects the experiences of incarceration, slavery, deportation, war and physical annihilation are at the centre of that barbarism. Benjamin continued: "And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another." The most pertinent case study in this thesis is that of prison writing, which is written against the barbarism that is then appropriated by "civilization" for its own purposes.

There has been writing out of prison since at least the third millennium B.C., some of it (particularly that relating to ethnic deportations and slavery) entering into the ritual narratives of Western civilization, while in some societies (the Soviet Union, the United States, France, South Africa, Ireland and Palestine/Israel are particularly notable) the experience of incarceration has become the site of counter-narratives.

For example, the Old Testament, which contains a large amount of material relating to deportation, exile and imprisonment has not only become integral to both Jewish and Christian narratives but, by adaptation, to the narratives first of black slaves, then subsequently of black populations in the United States, Jamaica and Britain. In this sense the meta-narrative is turned back against itself, though ultimately it could be argued that it is rejuvenated (certainly the persecution of the Puritans in the 17th century and the Black evangelical in the 19th led to a reaffirmed Christianity rather than to its demise). What is clear is that Judeo-Christianity, because of its incarceratory origins, shows inherent capacity both to be extremely cruel and to give hope to those whom it locks up and damns: we should not forget the grisly spectacle of the Pilgrim Fathers sailing to freedom in the "Mayflower," and then the ship sailing on to deliver slaves to the West Indies.

The idea of prison is at the heart of Christianity, and Dante's Divine Comedy, with its stratified level of punishments and rewards, perhaps its most telling document. As George Steiner said of the Inferno:

The concentration and death camps of the twentieth century, wherever they exist, under whatever regime, are Hell made immanent. They are the transference of Hell from below the earth to its surface. They are the deliberate enactment of long, precise imagining. Because it imagined more fully than any other text, because it argued the centrality of 'Hell' in the Western order, the Commedia remains our literal guidebook — to the flames, to the ice-fields, to the meat-hooks. In the camps the millenary pornography of fear and vengeance cultivated in the Western mind by Christian doctrines of damnation, was realized (Steiner, 1971: 47-8)

Thus at the core of Christianity there is a lunatic logic which not only allows for annulling, imprisonment and banishment, but also for resurrection, self-affirmation and transcendence. The present situation in South Africa provides ample opportunity for meditating on such a paradox, where the Afrikaner Nationalist, themselves victims of large-scale incarceration (for them the British invented the concentration camps), have, ostensibly in the name of a white Calvinist sense of
predestined power, locked up the spokes-
persons of the majority race, some of
whose leaders speak on behalf of their
people out of a sense of Christianity. The
recently freed blacks will presumably
agree with their erstwhile captors on how
to create a truly Christian South Africa.

The situating of prisons within the
meta-narrative goes all the way from the
historical and literary correspondences
behind designating the penitentiaries (as
Michel Foucault argued in *Discipline and
Punish*), through the language and ritual
which gives meaning to the quotidian
reality of the jailers’ actions (see *Shook
and Robert Hughes’ The Fatal Shore* for some
accounts of these), to the series of quasi-
religious rationalizations which are used
to justify various forms of punishment
(Michael Ignatoff’s *A False Measure of
Pain*, Philip Priestley’s *Victorian Prison
Lives* and Hughes contain some of the best
English stories from the 19th century). In
*Prison Writing in America*, Bruce Franklin
traced the response by black prisoners in
the States (from slaves and convicts to
penitentiary inmates) which worked with-
in and against the meta-narrative. His
story is about the origin of Gospel music,
work songs, jazz, the blues, Eldridge Cleav-
er, Malcolm X, George Jackson, Chester
Himes. It is the story of creating culture
underneath another culture: it is the story
of the limits of the meta-narrative.

Franklin’s and Priestley’s books bring out
an obvious fact about incarceration:
most people who are locked up are from
the poorer classes of any society, illiterate,
belong to ethnic minorities, usually the
visibly ethnic minorities (today one in
four black American males in their twen-
ties are either in prison or on probation,
over 50 percent of the inmates in Manito-
ba prisons are native people—‘Indian’ or
Métis). And, as the film *Roger and Me*
showed, as unemployment increases, the
penitentiaries get bigger. But these are
well-known facts, that could be reckoned
by any undergraduate criminologist. (And
criminality must be one of the fastest
growing disciplines, an adjunct to the
meta-narrative, a substrate in North
America and Europe for a dwindling
priesthood.)

So where does this leave writing in
prison? On a very different plane from the
meta-narratives. Foucault, in an interview
after a visit to Alcatraz in 1972, told a
story about Genet, which emphasizes
the difference between the meta-narrative
and the experience of prisoners (and we
must not forget that political prisoners are
just as concerned with creating a meta-
narrative as are religious ones).

During the war [Genet] was in prison at
the Sasset and he had to be transfer-
ted to the Palais de Justice to be sent-
tenced; at that time the custom was to
handcuff the prisoners two by two to
lead them to the Palais de Justice; just
as Genet was shown to be handcuffed to
another prisoner, the latter asked the
guard, “Who is this guy you are hand-
cuffing me too?” and the guard replied:
“It’s a thief.” The other prisoner stiff-
ened at that point and said, “I’m a com-
unist, I won’t be handcuffed with a
thief.” And Genet said to me that from
that day on, with regard to all forms of
political movements and actions that
we have known in France, he has had
not merely a distrust but a certain con-
tempt... (Foucault, 1974: 159)

The implication of this, if the politics
of prison expression is not to be dis-
missed, is that there is a politics beyond
Politics. Genet recognized that prisoners
everywhere shared a common fate, whose
definition ultimately had to be conceived
of in political terms. In the introduction
to George Jackson’s *Solitary Broke* he ex-
pressed his solidarity with the American
Black Panthers, while in his last book,
The Prisoner of Love, he deals at length
with his love/hate relationship with the
various Palestinian activists. The farthest
that Genet dare go is to be a supplement
to their activities: “For five years I’d lived in
a sort of invisible scenery—box from which I
could see and speak to everyone while I
myself was a fragment broken off from the
rest of the world.” (Genet, 1989: 315)

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Bird's-eye view of Millbank Prison

This brings us closer to the nature of
prison experience and the politics that
may flow from it. There is no Politics out
there onto which the prisoner might latch,
though there is politics. Every prisoner
lives as a supplement to all the other pol-
tics. But is there no connection between
the common experience of prisoners?
This depends on how we ask the question.
The commonest answer is that as a
counter-narrative there is a commonality.
So many stories in so many countries at
so many different historical periods sound
as if they were penned by a collective
hand, so much so that when prisoners
(particularly male prisoners) write their
own autobiography they end up claiming
for themselves stories that have been circu-
lating for centuries.

At last I should call it a day, there are
only stories left, old stories, repetitions,
nothing else, if I am not repeating my
own story, I repeat those of others. I
remember a story by a Spanish author,
but he may have been a South Ameri-
can... Well now no repetitions, let’s
have done with old stories. (Bionek,
1972: 59)

But many of these stories exist on the
surface, as if the prisoner wanted to be the
The feminist case is based on building from the ground up, rather than establishing a grand narrative that will redefine not only prisoners' existence but that of all of us.

I am afraid not of what they will do to us, but what they can make us into. For people who are outlaws for a long time may feed on their own terrors and emotions which, in turn, strangle their reason and ability to see reality... I pray that we do not return like ghosts who hate the world, cannot understand it, and are unable to live in it. I pray that we do not change from prisoners into prison guards. (Michnik, 1985:99)

If this might seem (because of its source) yet another resignation to the dominant narrative (which it is), there are clearly some shifts. The sentiments expressed by Michnik (and Havel and Mandels and Breytenbach) are those of Ghirardi, and therefore a different (Third World, non-Christian) sensibility has entered into our discourse around the politics of prison. In the prison game nobody wins. The strategy to overcome the Prisoner's Dilemma, as the mathematical games theorists put it, is Tit-for-Tat, where I assume that my opponent is rational and that his strategy is not predicated on mutual self-destruction. It presupposes that his objective, like mine, is self-preservation. Thus I assume in any negotiation that he is honest. If he fails to keep his bargain, I will change the rules of the encounter, not by assuming that he will remain duplicitous, but by providing another clue towards regaining mutual trust. I force his hand by turning him back towards recognizing that his ego is at stake because he cannot win by duplicity. (See Hoffer, 1985: 715-734 for an account of the logic behind this.) Thus the Christian game in which all will be risked in one final zero-sum Armageddon is exposed as illogical.

Such metanarratives are confirmed in many ways by women's writing out of prison, where the real politics is not based on existing a totalizing alternative, but in producing accounts of where the realities of being locked up are explored against the very everyday experiences of a fractured society. Most of women's writing out of prison (See Gelland, 1983 and Scheffler, 1986) is about resisting the meta-narratives, but doing so by patiently exploring the grounds of being incarcerated, in order to point a violent outgrowth of the social system, but in order to establish the very mundane reasons for being where they are. Judith Scheffler quotes from an American prisoner, Patricia McConnel, who writes fiction:

An extremely important element in my motivation to write these stories is to give the reader some sense of the reality of this form of social madness—that these are real human beings being destroyed by a machine designed and run by madmen, for the most part. In spite of this dark theme, most of the stories are life-affirming in some way. I am impressed, all these years afterwards, at the resiliency of the spirits of the women I knew.
enforced idleness, coupled with programs designed to destroy our bodies, minds, and spirits — designed to render us incapable of any future assistance to our people — have the historical duty . . . to change the relationship of forces between the prison administration and us by gaining effective control of as many areas of prison life as possible. (Carcio, 1980:69)

This story is surely ultimately more significant than embellishing the old one, because it stems from the belly of hell itself. As with women's writing, it is de-centred and specific, but unlike theirs, it is highly politically charged. It also suggests that the collapse of the meta-narratives will occur only when the Damned finally take over, and prisons, all forms of deportation and extermination are abolished. Then Heaven and Hell, in William Blake's sense, will be merged. But that day will not come until the voices of our prisoners reach a crescendo so loud as to cause the walls to crumble. This will be done, of course, country-by-country, maybe even prison-by-prison. Meanwhile, more and more people are incarcerated, and our technology assures that the jails are more and more electronically secured. Meanwhile, the meta-narrative censors the accounts of those inside. Meanwhile, everything we write is supplementary.

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WORKS CITED


NOTES

1. Meta-narrative is used here much in the sense that Hayden White does, or in the gener- section that Levi-Strauss used to find the Central Myth — that is as a story that binds togeth- er all the other ones. A somewhat different version of this is Gramsci's use of hegemony, which gives a particular political function to an interconnecting set of beliefs and symbols on which we draw to legitimize struggles for power. Meta-narrative is the literary version, nary the anthropological, and hegemony the political.

2. Havel's transition from prison to presidential palace has become one of the most dramatic cases of the last year. However, it is a transition that has some unique features of its own. Havel did not become president reluctantly. His career shows that he systematically built himself up as a political figure, even using prison, drama, and Charter 77 to achieve this end. As Ivan Klina notes in a recent interview with Philip Roth, "Right from the beginning, when I got to know him, Havel was for me, in the first place a politician, in the second place an essayist of genius, and only lastly a dramatist...

Havel was for a long time the only active representative of the line of thoroughly democratic Czech politics represented by Tomas Masaryk." (New York Review of Books, April 12, 1990:71) The genius of Havel was knowing that Time, and the West, was on his side. The problem is that, apart from his grasp of prior Czech experiences and philosophies, as well as his inversion of George Orwell's 1984 as a metaphor, does he have a political philosophy? He certainly has no philosophy of prison which is not linked to his personal desire for power. All of his essays and plays are anecdotes on some to gaming control. Surely the straggle of political thought should be to recog- nize that as the central starting-point, rather than being mesmerized by his metoric rise.

The most that any political
prisoner can do is to chip away
at the walls of the concept
of imprisonment

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