PRISON WRITING AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE META-NARRATIVES[1]

by **Ioan Davies**

"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 but which 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 contending 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 evangelicals 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 infinite 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 annihilation, 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 Nationalists, 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 spokespersons of the majority race, some of whose leaders speak on behalf of their people in the name 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 designing 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 *Shoah* 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 Ignatieff's *A Just 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 within and against the meta-narrative. His story is about the origin of Gospel music, work songs, jazz, the blues, Eldrige Cleaver, 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 twenties are either in prison or on probation, over 50 percent of the inmates of Manitoba prisons are native people – 'Indian' or Metis). And, as the film *Roger and Me* showed, as unemployment increases, the penitentiaries get bigger. But these are well-known facts, that could be recited by any undergraduate criminologist. (And criminology must be one of the fastest growing disciplines, an adjunct to the meta-narrative, a substitute 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 Attica prison 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-story as are religious ones).

> During the war [Genet] was in prison at the Sante and he had to be transferred to the Palais de Justice to be sentenced; 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 about to be handcuffed to another prisoner, the latter asked the guard, "Who is this guy you are handcuffing me to?" and the guard replied: "It's a thief." The other prisoner stiffened at that point and said, "I'm a communist, 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 contempt... (Foucault, 1974: 159)

The implication of this, if the politics of prison expression is not to be dismissed, 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 *Soledad Brother* he expressed 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 *fedayeen*. 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 sentry-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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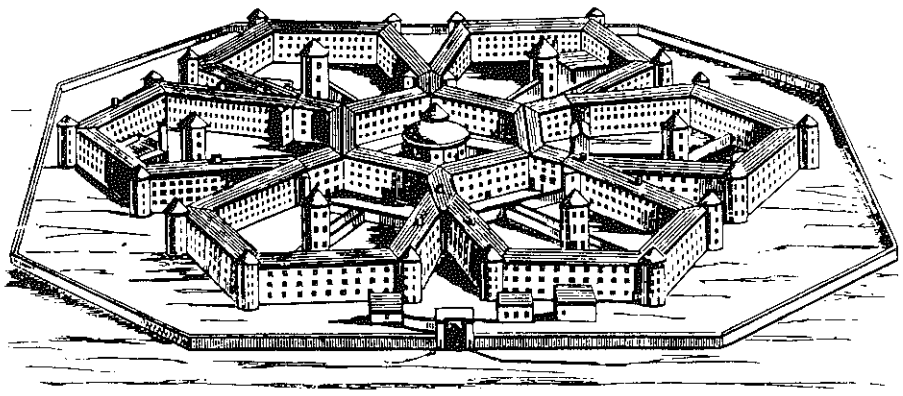

Bird's-eye view of Millbank Prison

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 politics. But is there no connection between the common experience of prisoners? This depends on how we ask the question. The commonsensical 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 circulating 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, or he may have been a South American.... Well now: no repetitions, let's have done with old stories. (Bienek, 1972: 59)

But many of these stories exist on the surface, as if the prisoner wanted to be the

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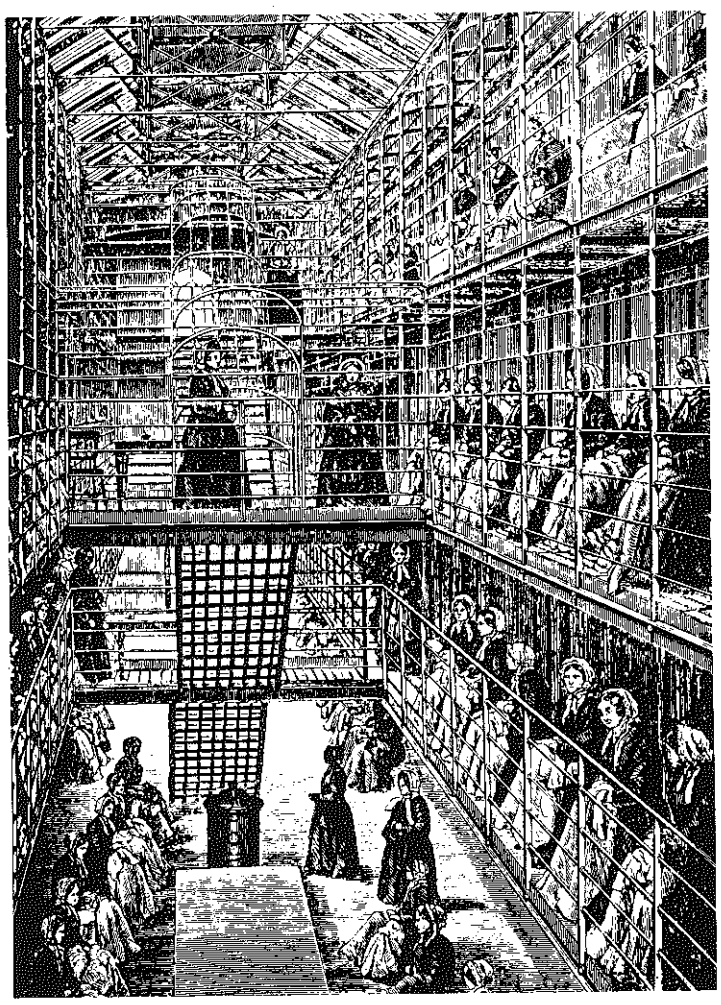

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Victorian-era women's prison

hero of an ur-epic of which he is only a minor player.

> But it is important to know that you are nothing. And to search without stopping, be you awake or withdrawn into the wakefulness of sleep, for the hairline cracks, for the gaps and the unexpected moments of deep breathing, for the space which is created by alleys and by walls … prepare yourself for the interstices of freedom. (Breytenbach, 1984: 309)

The surface stories and the deep, personal experience do suggest a commonality:

> When you are interested in prison accounts as a genre you will soon see that prisons are much the same the world over…. The least all of us can do – the marginal ones, the outcasts, the displaced persons, the immigrant workers, citizens of our various countries – is unite to expose all the intelligence services and the spy organs and the security or political police and the secret societies of the world. Pipe dream! So much for universality. (Breytenbach, 1984: 339)

This means that even the politics that is against Politics is an illusion. What does that do to the "political prisoner" or the "prisoner of conscience?"

Ultimately it means that he or she is a prisoner like everyone else, that any attempt to use prison to create a grand narrative is a distortion of the fragmentary nature of prison life. The most that any political prisoner can do is to chip away at the walls of the concept of imprisonment, not to use the prison system as an excuse to create even bigger prisons when the prisoner becomes the supreme agent of Politics.

> 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 traumas 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 Mandela and Breytenbach) are those of Ghandi, 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 Prisoners' 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 Hofstadter, 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 metamagical theorems are confirmed in many ways by women's writing out of prison, where the real politics is not based on creating a totalizing alternative, but in producing accounts 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 Gelfland, 1983 and Scheffler, 1986) is about resisting the meta-narratives, but doing so by patiently exploring the grounds of being incarcerated, not in order to posit a violent overthrow 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.

> My stories are about women struggling to preserve their wills, their self-respect, in a system intent on destroying them. (Scheffler,1986: 261)

The feminist case is therefore 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. And yet this case is compounded with the problems of doing anything either about prisons or the conditions that put them in place.

The truly problematic feature about prisons is their universality, the fact that, in any society, the feckless, the indigent, the racial minorities will be discriminated against by a judicial system that is only concerned with replicating a form of social order which comforts the dominant elements of society.

Thus prison is not about *preventing* crime, but ensuring that the middle classes feel safe. Equally, in societies where the free-flow of ideas is perceived to be a threat, intellectuals and others who contest the status-quo will be incarcerated or executed in order to maintain the social order. And yet when intellectuals are freed, much of the philosophical underpinnings of prison remain untouched. When Vaclav Havel became president of Czechoslovakia he freed all political prisoners but none of the regular ones, thus ushering in a new political order, but not a new order of criminal justice.[2]

Havel (and perhaps Mandela) can therefore begin to alter aspects of the meta-narrative without the penal system changing one jot. The tension that Foucault noted in Genet's attitude to political prisoners is thus at the core of understanding what prison is all about. Censorship may be (more-or-less) abolished in civil society, but it is ever-present in prison: indeed the existence of prison is predicated on censorship (an excellent recent issue of Simon Fraser's *Prison Journal* is devoted exclusively to censorship within Canadian prisons, both by the administration against prisoners and prisoners against themselves).

The fact of regular prison writing (as opposed to that by prisoners of conscience or political prisoners) is that most of it does not deal with the grand scheme of things, but with the everyday living struggles of minorities to survive in a predatorial world. In that sense a far stronger narrative has to be written. As a black prisoner from Attica wrote in 1988:

> That the criminal justice system of the United States is a facade for gross and shocking violations of the legal and human rights of Third World people and poor citizens can be confirmed by an examination of the prisons of the society. The prisons and jails in the United States have become bulging warehouses for Third World people, the uneducated, and the unemployed. They provide a legally sanctioned instrument for social, political and economic control.... We who have nothing to look forward to but long years of 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. (Curcio, 1989: 69)

This story is surely ultimately more significant than embellishing the old one, because it starts out of the belly of hell itself. As with women's writing, it is decentred 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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NOTES

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

2. Havel's transition from prison to presidential palace has become one of the most strategic cases of the last year. However, it is a transition that has some unique features to it. 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 Klima 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: 21) 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 ingestion 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 en route to gaining control. Surely the strategy of critical thought should be to recognize that as the central starting-point, rather than being mesmerized by his meteoric 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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