Dis / Inquisition

by

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We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

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ABSTRACT

The relationships of readers, writers, narrative voice and locus, and the discursive practices governing these relationships locate themselves in the self-conscious subject. Prison writers, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have written the subject in ways demonstrating the progressive weakness of this entity in epistemological and ontological systems. From François Villon to Dostoevski to Breytenbach, prison writers have established, stabilized and disintegrated the self-conscious subject as the origin of textual authority. This subject disintegrates as the origin of textual authority for the thesis as well.

The subject, as authorial presence recedes in many texts, now occupies indeterminate literary space. Prison writers point to the decomposition of the subject and a conception of subjectivities beyond/aside from the self-conscious subject as constituted in the discursive practices issuing from the Enlightenment.

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PREFACE: AT THE GATE

The forms and *genres* of writing we know are often moribund. The novel, a form Burroughs designates as 'arbitrary,' has been around for several hundred years with almost no movement away from the notions of plot and character development. That's what a novel is. It is a dominant form of writing. In a novel an author spends inordinate amounts of energy and words in moving characters through time and space—usually in a very linear fashion. When something as mechanical as this is disturbed, audiences become restive. Something as straightforward as running time backwards as in Martin Amis' ***Time's Arrow*** we consider 'novel.' The point is, the novel has become a restrictive form of writing. When someone does do something different with it, readership is scant and the writing comes under the questionable heading of 'avant garde.' And as Susan Stewart points out 'avant garde' is not a terribly satisfying designation for an author who in all likelihood is chafing under the form, who wishes to commit a 'crime of writing,' yet also wishes to be understood.

I have attempted to do something a little different with the Thesis, something transgressive enough to ameliorate the chafing, but on the other hand, not a punishable violation: I wish to be understood but know.... Many times of course, I have wished I had no such impulse. It is not comfortable to depart from the structure and open questions of mimesis, the relationship of reader and writer, the coherence, and the question of a writer's relationship to a 'tradition' or 'canon.' If I am transgressive with the Thesis then I will not

write a great 'thesis' by some lights. How does one escape the prisons one seems to have chosen? Carefully and with some attention to the guns trained on one's back from the towers, I think.

As an individual I have throughout my life been indebted to books. They, along with my experience, have made me. They have enlarged the world I live in as much as travel when they did not constrain it. And, at least up until the last decade or so, they were cheaper and less tiring.

Some three years ago, when I realized people expected it, I began to struggle with a description of my 'thesis topic' that was succinct and explicatory. I knew the direction in which lay the territories I wished to travel in my writing, but I did not as yet have the place names. No map, no representation. "Prison writers," I used when I felt someone did not need to have a great knotty issue or question or problem solved. That certainly covered a lot of that territory where I was headed. When I felt someone needed some problem solved I used "how people write themselves back into —and out of—the discourses which have expelled them." These were very partially on the mark. Another run at the same track was "the reconstitution of subjectivity against institutional discourse." Those last two constructions aren't very succinct, and even that only got at part of the territory I was traversing, the latter being closer.

Just recently I have realized that a much more lucid description—at least for me—is prisoners and textuality, or more properly, prisons, prisoners and textuality.

However, as time and words have flowed I realize the meanings of prisons and prisoners have broadened. Textuality, a valorizing term once, has become tarnished somewhat. Writing and reading are powerful that way.

Early on it seemed to me prisons were a particularly vivid example of institutions and their actions on people. I wrote then that whereas schools had been Reason's hope, prisons were its despair. The promise of a rationalized societal approach to a 'pastoral' model of the care of young subjects was exemplified by the rise of public schooling and the attendant rhetoric of pedagogy. On the other hand, prisons testify to the failure of Reason to account for dimensions of human behaviour and to come to terms with its own falterings, deadends, and impossibility. Even though prisons attempt to mimic a rational institutional pastoral approach, their contradictions and inconsistencies are so apparent that currently an intellectual torpor has overtaken carceral discourse. Many expect prisons to fail and have begun to treat prison as the institution where a Narrative of Reason is simply irrelevant. Perhaps some folks are coming to a realization that the mere existence of prisons, certainly on the scale they exist, testifies to a certain failure of reason, and more importantly, imagination. They could be right.

Clearly my task is not to rescue Reason or its institutions. I do believe it is better to poeticize public life than to rationalize it, much as I believe poeticizing my own life is the greatest personal virtue. Those who have the blind and inspiring courage to attempt to poeticize their own lives and the world from the experience of prisons are particularly harmonious with my aesthetics.

I needed a position from which to write, didn't I? Well, I already had it, but had no appropriate language with which to express it. Ten or twelve years ago I read a book by Judith Shklar, ***Ordinary Vices***, which I thoroughly enjoyed as an exposition of liberal sensibilities. I had originally read her writing on Rousseau wherein she had named him the "Homer of the losers." I had liked her treatment of Rousseau so much that when the opportunity to read ***Ordinary Vices*** arrived, I jumped. However, the book did not seem compatible with my intellectual activities for a number of years after.

Then I came across a volume by another writer, Richard Rorty, that dealt with Shklar's text cogently inasmuch as he uses her definition of 'liberal' as central to his sketch of the 'liberal ironist.' He imagines the liberal ironist as the citizen of a poeticized public sphere, or a potentially poeticized public sphere. This book was ***Contingency, Irony and Solidarity***. I borrowed it from a friend two or three years ago. The titles of the first three chapters are emblematic: 'The Contingency of Language,' The Contingency of Selfhood,' and The Contingency of Community.' He starts with the impermanency of meaning, despite our resistances to such a notion. A year and a half ago I

read it carefully enough to realize it was relevant to me and the writing I was doing.

Shklar had put cruelty first among her ordinary vices for liberals. In fact Rorty used the definition of liberals as those who put cruelty first among vices. This served as Rorty's point of departure. He managed to deliver a private position for a literate individual in the late twentieth century as ironist. But, having established the contingencies of language and selfhood and become an ironist, this individual needed a public position, a way to approach a community of others. Hence the liberal ironist, an ironist who puts cruelty first among vices.

Well, I suppose I am an ironist privately. I struggled and continue to struggle with the label, 'liberal,' which Rorty suggests is the public position one may arrive at when putting cruelty first. And I do put it first. I see no particular vice or virtue in labelling myself liberal in the context of my community. Liberal has taken enough of a beating in the last decade or so, that it might almost be worth taking such a name. On the other hand, I don't like taking names and liberal will have to get a little scruffier yet to have real appeal.

Shklar's disquisition on cruelty is guided by Montaigne. Montaigne saw himself "hating cruelty cruelly." This is natural and dangerous. Hating cruelty cruelly justifies a great deal of punishment, the name we have for our treatment of those whose cruelty we hate so cruelly. And this creates what might be referred to as a 'carceral loop.' These loops can be—and Foucault

works this vein vigorously—moral, rational, or physical. Hating cruelty cruelly is a moral carceral loop when applying it to punishment. And one of the cruelties that loomed large for Montaigne was using cruelty to punish acts that involve no cruelty. The examples of these abound from history and the present.

I was tempted at one point to attempt to sidestep Foucault altogether and others who write without the context of having been imprisoned. I guess that changed as my notion of what constitutes prisons and prisoners changed. The first identification of a physical carceral loop and the one Foucault chooses as his moment of departure for examining carceral discourse in ***Discipline and Punish*** is Bentham's Panopticon. As a physical reality this idea is only partly realized in most of the places it has been applied. Strangely, and I think in part due to Foucault, prison architects employed the panoptic principle more literally in the avalanche of prison building in the US of the last decade than ever in previous eras. As a conceptual reality it may be much more prevalent than as an architectural reality. Certainly it is intricated in this writing, particularly in the sense of looking in many directions simultaneously.

As both physical and rational manifestations of carceral loops, I would like to point to an iterative nature of bodies realized under Reason's discursive practices. The institutions of Reason demonstrate a relationship to subjects which is interesting and, to me at least, frightening. The lessons of the school desk and the prison cell are the same: we are iterative bodies endlessly

occupying and abandoning and reoccupying the blank spaces of Reason's institutions and its Narrative.

Particularly important for those literate individuals living in the comfortable societies of the late twentieth century is Shklar's partitioning of physical cruelty from moral cruelty. Imprisonment has been and remains a system with a fundamental dimension of physical cruelty. Punishment, however, one may perceive, is moving from the realm of physical cruelty to moral cruelty. It has been for two or three hundred years in the West. The site of punishment is less and less the body and more and more the mind. That has its own set of dangers, pointed to by Nietzsche and Hawthorne, and one is certainly the expectation that we each become responsible for treating *ourselves* to cruelty from time to time. This kind of situation demands ironist sensibilities.

However, as an ironist, I am afraid of the trap putting cruelty first may set, at least according to Shklar: misanthropy. And of course, this may lead to cynicism. I think the term cynic has been too far degraded to try and rescue and what I mean in everyday speech by the term is a person who sees only the wicked possibilities in people and situations. I fight with it both publicly and privately. So far I seem to be managing by the application of a radical skepticism nourished by a strong diet of irony. I won't attempt to rescue misanthropy either, but as Shklar points out, even casual observation of human behaviour may evoke a fair dollop of it. I think struggling with cynicism and misanthropy demonstrate decent instincts, but it is a struggle for

me all the same. So, in Rorty's sense, I do not think I have quite got the liberal part right.

Rorty's conclusion, that we have in our present forms of democratic government and dialogue all the tools to continue improving (one presumes toward a democratic perfection) our civil life, seems dead wrong and wrongheaded to me. I think he may have missed the point about cruelty to some degree, one he might not have missed had he looked a little more closely at prisons. If one looks at the gap between the poeticized liberal society he imagines we ought to be aiming for (and I go along with him on that) and the existing societies we inhabit with their prisons and executions and all that leads to these, the good professor from Chapel Hill might think twice before imagining we have all the tools we need to democratically poeticize our societies. George Jackson, Carl Harp, and Leonard Peltier did or do not have access to the same tools Rorty does. And they at least have or had some tools. The vast majority of those in prisons have access to almost no tools for self-creation, let alone for social creations. I had to read Shklar and Rorty juxtaposed to understand my misgivings on Rorty's political positions.

Nonetheless, I feel I owe Rorty a good deal in giving me some ways to think of myself in relation to my writing about prisons and prison writers, and discourse in general. There are few prison writers who are not given to irony. Prisons and the claims that build prisons clamour for irony. Shklar we both owe a debt to in helping us order some priorities and put cruelty first.

Her writings have helped point to the cruel irony hating cruelty cruelly may lead to. She also demonstrates how widespread a distribution cruelty has.

Cruelty is an organizing principle of human societies and human interactions. In ***The Cultivation of Hatred***, Peter Gay deals extensively with the ordering of punishment, its rationale, and the identification of those 'torturable classes,' as William Burroughs calls them, who are punishment's usual objects. Certainly in dealing with the cultural histories of the West in the nineteenth century, Gay makes obvious the *necessity* of cruelty to our traditions. We know ourselves as civilized because of the the trace of the signature of cruelty in every quarter. I can think of no society where cruelty does not play an important role in defining who people are and how they interact with one another.

Cruelty may be no vice at all, or so one might believe in contemplating its intrication with our public and private lives. I think in part Nietzsche might have believed this, and there are certainly those who took him to mean this.

He believed hypocrisy concerning cruelty more malignant than cruelty itself, and moral cruelty to be most dangerous. And certainly the subtleties of moral cruelty are more elusive than physical cruelty, and hence, it is dangerous indeed. We struggle with those more and more frequently, while physical cruelty is more and more condemned on all sides.

If I still put cruelty first in light of its prevalence and use, that is, if I somehow avoid despair—a set of questions might occur. I might look at whether we somehow need cruelty to regulate human interaction. Or at least, I might begin to look at how societies have relied on cruelty to order their affairs, how it is incorporated into the metanarratives, how it forms the hooks public discourse hangs itself upon. Is it a necessary vice? This was the question I began to ask myself. And if it is, what effects does it have on the individual entangled in the nexus of cruel discursivities we call prison? And how may an individual respond to this, particularly an ironist who puts cruelty first among vices?

Most of these questions I cannot address here. That's not what I'm writing about. Besides, I am not much good at producing answers to questions concerning public discourse, societies and so on; I am not even certain of framing reasonable questions. So I am not much concerned with political discourse in this writing. However, inasmuch as prisons exists in a public sphere, there are political questions impinging on a prisoner. Those individual prisoners will answer. And almost every prison writer takes a swipe at these questions, if only in passing.

I am interested more in the effects of metanarratives on prisoners and how writers who write from prison respond to these metanarratives. At the core of many of the metanarratives we find an unavoidable dimension of cruelty because they partake of a rationalism driven by a universal subject. And the

universal subject must be obeyed everywhere, even though we can find this subject nowhere.

And there is a political metanarrative impinging on prisoners. Individual prisoners have taken this as the point to begin to respond and some have been fixated upon it. It is a discourse with powerful effects, and powerful motivations pull prisoners toward it.

However, that's not motivating me. In a sense, I am after what Susan Stewart calls in ***Crimes of Writing***, "...the impossibility...of a writing that could write itself writing—that appears at the limit of representation" (p. vii). This impossibility has been a central issue for me. This writing does not attempt to appear to be an artifact which has been washed up on the shores of cogency, composed of the transparent truths of discursive currents. It has been a process of creation with all that implies, and has been produced in a context—a number of contexts really—sometimes inimical to that process.

Stewart, in making her observations, has in mind the relationship of 'crimes of writing,' forgery, graffiti, pornography, and so on, to those transgressive writings which engage literary *genres*: the 'avant garde' novel, for example, the 'novel' novel, the writing branded 'unreadable,' as has Burroughs from time to time. In some sense, these works are intentionally transgressive: they beg to be punished. However, their impact is softened by writing which is 'literally' criminalized.

The other issue she points to that is central for me is "the relation of subjectivity to language—the surrendering of one's subjectivity to language, to an inheritance, in exchange for the articulation of self that inheritance can provide" (ibid. p. 7). An ironist, as Rorty points out, seldom accepts the language as it is given in articulating the self. Prison writers do not, if they are any good. The terms under which one does this surrendering and articulating is what is of prime importance, and Rorty and Shklar have both guided me in determining how I might look at these.

How I might look at these. Makes it sound as if there is a 'these' to look at and I should put effort into it. But I do not believe it. I am not aiming for statements of a final kind. At best, I aim for a provisional vocabulary, and that means I continue to create loose ends. It is not unexpected.

I have attempted a 'creation' with this writing. When I told my wife its aesthetic was more allusive than explicatory, she said, "That's OK if you want to write poetry...." Doesn't every writer? Whatever else goes on, I am writing. It is a poor poem, I know. Nonetheless, I am partial to it. But, a thought from Harold Bloom may be helpful here:

> The truth is that poems don't have presence, unity, form or meaning...What then does a poem possess or create? Alas, a poem has nothing, and creates nothing. Its presence is a promise, part of the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Its unity is in the good will of the reader....its meaning is just that there is, or rather was, another poem. (***Kabbalah and Criticism***, p. 122. In ***Contingency, Irony and Solidarity***, p. 41)

I pledge my good will, beloved reader. And you? Will you give me a sign of tolerance for my mentioning when you wish using? For my rainbow folly when you want gravity. Let us be united in this meaning: there will be another poem.

CROSSING BORDERS

Tule fog wisped across Highway 17's black dawn surface. End of the first week of December. The bus headed east towards Sacramento, its cargo of weary travellers bobbing their heads in and out of shadows as the bus creaked along the service roads for which neither California nor the municipalities would take full responsibility.

The bus station in the city's center was as tired as the travellers. The fluorescents overhead buzzed into road hum in the ears of the sojourners.

Last off the bus was a curly haired, dark-faced young man. His skin was dark enough, his clothing cheap and sturdy, but used enough to hint at points of origin south of San Diego. As he moved to the glass-panelled doors at the station's entrance, a man in a tan windbreaker moved to intercept him.

February 17, 1986: Sacramento County Jail

"OK, Tony, I've prepared a statement from the conversations we've had over the past few days. It explains how you had to leave El Salvador and the reasons you want refugee status. We've got to deal with the immigration application and the murder charge at the same time. Here, read this."

"I am reading this? Thank you."

Affidavit of Antonio Chavez

When I was 17 in 1979, I went to the Technical School in the capital of my country, El Salvador. There were many problems of a political nature in my country, and soon the police came to the school and some of the students disappeared. We never heard anything about them again.

The school was closed from time to time, from strikes by students and unions, and from the police. When the school closed I would return home to my family who are farm people in the countryside.

At the school I was learning welding and metal machining. When I qualified in these trades, I went to work. But the political situation got worse. There were more strikes and demonstrations, there were assassinations; they even killed the archbishop in the capital. As the political situation got worse, so did the economic situation.

In El Salvador there are two kinds of unions: one is organized by the owners of industry and the government, and these are legal. The second kind of union is organized by workers and they are not legal. I joined a workers' union, because the other unions seemed to make things harder and harder for workers. By 1982, I was unable to find work at all. Many others were out of work, as well.

In 1983 I was with a friend going to apply for work. There was a demonstration on the streets and we got caught up in it. The police shot us both. I ran away but the police caught my friend. Because I was able to run away I am alive today. I was afraid to go to the hospital because the police came and shot people there sometimes. I bled for three hours before I finally went to the hospital. The doctors operated on me and some of my internal organs were damaged. The International Red Cross was also there and they spoke to me. I was afraid and did not tell them very much about myself. I began talking more to the Red Cross after the police found

me in the hospital. Talking with them saved my life, I am sure.

People in El Salvador who are not rebels, not union members, not political, not criminal sometimes get shot. I was a union member and I was very afraid when the police came to the hospital.

My friend who was shot knew where my common-law wife lived and also where her mother lived. I learned later that he was found dead the next day. My wife and her mother disappeared. I believe he was tortured and told where he thought I might be found when he was dying.

The police came to the hospital and put me in a jail in the hospital. The jail had two sections: one for criminals, one for politicals. There the police tortured me psychologically and physically. They blindfolded and made me stand for hours, then would rush in shouting and push me down and kick me. They pushed against my stomach where the bullet wounds were and sometimes stitches came loose and I would bleed a great deal. They wanted me to confess to being a rebel, which I am not. When I was standing someone would clap his hands hard against my ears. For six days I was blindfolded, kept awake, and given very little to eat. Other people were screaming nearby who I believe were being tortured. When I would not confess, the police would say I would get the same as those whose screams I heard. I signed a confession saying I had shot my friend.

I was taken in front of a judge who sentenced me to life in prison beginning when I was released from the hospital.

I was in the hospital for thirty days or more. I was able to get out and escape to a friend's house. But the police and army were looking for me and I had to go to another friend's house. I lived like this for over a year. I was a danger to my friends but they helped anyway. I was weak from being shot and needed time to recover. I am not sure about dates. By

1983 I felt strong enough to leave El Salvador. I knew I had to do this before the police could find me and kill me.

I had no money and went through El Salvador by foot and bus; I went to Guatemala. I stayed there but eventually got to Mexico. In Mexico I stayed a year or more in Vera Cruz. I went on to the US by bus. Until recently I did not write to my family as I thought it would be unsafe.

In 1985 I came to San Diego and hope to make the United States my home. I know I would be killed if I return to El Salvador.

This statement is true and represents the facts as I know them.

Antonio Chavez

February 17, 1986

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"My guy is walking on this one and you know it Ernie. No prints on the knife, no witness, nothing. Cut Chavez loose, and I'll see if I can get Robertson to plead to Man One. Ernie, you don't even believe he did it and I know you want to get this Robertson beef settled."

"You're getting too predictable here, George. Show you a Central American who may be a victim of US policies and suddenly you don't want to look at his conduct in this country. Tell you the truth, I don't know what to believe. Chavez was in the hotel the night it happened and on that bus the next

morning. We hear he had some kind of grudge against the victim. He looks pretty good for it, if you ask me. I've got no other suspects."

Sacramento County Jail, March 2, 1986.

"You sign the paper agreeing to appear in two weeks at Immigration and we can have you out of here this afternoon. The murder charge is dropped. You stay at Ms. Collins' place until the immigration hearing. You can go down to San Franscisco next week to speak to her Sanctuary group at First United Church, they're all people you know down there. Only thing you can't do is any kind of work."

"Just sign this paper? I can be leaving here?"

"That's right, Tony. Then come back for the hearing on March twenty third."

"Thank you , Mr. Peterson. Thanks."

"I told you, call me George. And be back on March twenty third, 9 a.m., at Immigration."

March 24, 1986

"Ruth Collins, please. It's George Peterson calling." The line went quiet.

"George? George I don't know where he is. He didn't come back from the City with me. I just hoped he would show up at Immigration. He didn't, did he?"

"No he didn't, Ruth. Not a sign of him—too bad, too, because I think INS would have held off, maybe even accepted his application. It was looking good. They might still, but he hasn't helped himself any with this."

"Oh dear. Can we check with the Sanctuary group in the City. They may hear from him."

"Worth a try. If they do, tell him to call me collect and we'll go from there."

"I'm sorry, George. He was so worried it wouldn't work out."

"Not your fault, Ruth. Just call if you hear anything."

"Ok, George. Thanks."

"Sure thing, Ruth. Talk to you later."

"Goodbye, George. And thanks again."

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I heard Antonio's story from a man who visited me in my capacity as an employment counsellor five or six years ago. It was his story and he was soon to have his refugee status reviewed. I do not think it was renewed. His expressions, the fear and pain he showed when describing the bullet wounds and torture made me believe the story.

A woman who works for the government told me 'Tony' had been less than a model visitor while here. I am sure she had documentation from the police and I am sure her assessment was to some degree accurate.

It is not an accident I present his story in this way, although initially I merely thought it a 'literary' device. The fact is that this is the way we usually know people in exile, people in prison. Their stories come to us from official documents and files.

I do not know what has happened to this man. I want to acknowledge him and his story. I hope he has found a new country. He may however belong forever to the nation of prison and exile.

A MISERY OF IMAGES

(Breyten Breytenbach refers to his experience in prison as ``a misery of images which I shall never be able to express.'')

Since what follows is a conversation with writers—we are included, beloved reader—I would like to open with words about some of these. They write. They know prison. I have learned from them and continue to learn from them. I would like to remember them formally.

I came to this writing when I read a piece by Henry Louis Gates on the ***Education of Little Tree*** controversy which will be described below. He commented on slave narrative in this piece. First, the thought of slave narrative led immediately to a thought about prisoner narrative (almost). Last, the thought of human history is always a narrative of slavery and oppression. Slaves: Moses, Nat Turner, Laurence Frayne. Prisoners: Laurence Frayne, Nat Turner, Moses. The need for cruelty hides just behind the need to be right—Burroughs writes of the addiction to being right—they are mother and child. This led back to Judith Shklar, and I don't know she's ever been near a prison. But she knew more clearly than Sade the battle cruelty mounts for the right to take the signature of history. And Rorty knew the importance of cruelty, of Shklar, and the significance of cruelty to our beings. Cruelty, and the ordering of cruelty and its dispersion are organizing principles of all civilizations.

Bakhtin's obsessive passions spurred me on early. *His* mumbled, gray-shiny conversation with Dostoevski caught my ear and eye. Bakhtin stroked his chin and wrote until gamba violed and recorder sang, and the carnival began. And Fydor himself, beard sprinkled with gray, hair greasy, eyes fierce yet forgiving, looking and listening more than he ever talks, his works have always pulled me. He sees it as it is. Dostoevski visited Breytenbach in the latter's cell one night. Never said a word, listened intently inspecting his dirty fingernails from time to time. Breytenbach led me to grand claims. I shall indulge them.

Breytenbach's novels provide layers, a guide to the layers, doubts about the layers, and finally an attempt to come to terms with a self-doubting subject, an attempt not only to reconstitute his subjectivity but subjectivities generally. He announces his project any number of ways. From his portrayal of himself as well-intentioned fool in the political realm, to his doubts about writing itself and the nature of his own subjectivity guided by a post-structural sense of subject, Breytenbach, perhaps as effectively as any novelist can, pushes beyond the limits of subject-centred consciousness. The South Africa of the late 1970s and early 1980s is the right locale for his epiphanies, the South Africa of his youth the right locale to flee, and Azania the write South Africa for Breytenbach's future.

He fully recognizes the thicket of cruelty modernity has created in the name of humanism, the totalitarian tendencies of 'liberation' movements, the slave in the oppressor, the oppressor in the slave. Yet he resists the move to

dialectic by underscoring the personal again and again. The decomposition of the subject is almost complete and almost explicit in Breytenbach. He addresses his ***True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*** to Mr. 'Investigator' and Mr. 'Investerrogator' who is both a representative of a liberation organization and Breytenbach's wife. He warns Mr. Investigator of the dangers for the imprisoned in taking on the roles of guards. He is vigilant concerning his own role, yet conveys the impression that neither his vigilance nor rigorously observing the discursive logic of social justice can prevent the impulse to cruelty and for carceral machinery. Nelson Mandela is now a keeper of political prisoners.

Seth Morgan is dead too young and a writer who fumbles with the reconstitution of a subject. Perhaps because he knows what he is doing, Morgan handles it clumsily. Morgan is important—to me—because I knew him and because his one novel points to a reconstituted subject, to an unconscious reconstituted subject, to the commonplace folk who are, as a commonplace, in prison; folk who are as flat and forceful as a heroin rush. Unconscious from drug addiction prior to the decomposing event of imprisonment, the voice Morgan chooses is Joe Speaker, a barker in San Francisco's North Beach Gomorrha. Just an average junkie with an average mate. That he is her pimp seems not unexpected, normal. The purple tale Speaker stumbles through is predictable; likely it must be. The lies Morgan told me are not so important, but the lies he tells his readers are very important.

And Burroughs of course. ***Homeboy*** can only show up for a ***Naked Lunch.*** Burroughs has already been credited with influencing the cyberpunk *genre*. And did he not invent the Heavy Metal Kid in the early sixties? But his influence is far broader and I don't think ***Homeboy*** would have appeared as it did without him.

Villon I came to late. Inspiration for writers who speak in a hundred different tonalities: Genet, Breytenbach, Corso, Pound, and Charles Algernon Swinburne. Villon was there when the chaos of the late Middle Ages gave birth to a subject—*the* subject—when cruelty began to reveal its face as human. If we expel God, we must be prepared to assume his faces. And Villon knew this task. Villon's tale is a hard one for each who would defy what the age demands. Ignominy is the least such a one can expect; the gibbet will always be close by.

Carl Harp is dead in prison, George Jackson the same. And a million, a hundred million others. The calamity of civilizations is slavery and prisons.

Throats are cleared; chins are lowered and eyes levelled. (Somewhere—I can barely hear his voice—Breytenbach speaks: "the words about the neck....") *But what about the monsters*? I don't know. I don't have answers. Some people have to be stopped and if I were the one responsible for making them the way they are and it was my job, I would shove the shank up under their ribs myself if it made sense. But I'm not the one. We are. Or they are. (Somewhere Breytenbach speaks: "the words about the neck....")

Those words about the neck. May god have mercy on all our souls when we abandon ourselves to revenge. We are lost then, it is true.

I am sure in time I will be grateful to all, and grateful for all. But not yet, not now. For now I wish to write of the prison, the place of 'isolated visibility,'[1] the pit, a land of exile and slave ship in one. The prison of my dreams, the prison eternal, the place of a 'misery of images.'

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A question occurs before reading too far into the writing at hand. Two questions, really. Why is the writer here? And why does he take us here? In the first instance, I cannot help but be here: I've spent a lot of time in prisons, I write, and I read prison writers. Prisons, prison writers and my own writing is the ground of this Dis/Inquisition. In answer to the second question: it is only an invitation I offer in answer. But I see us as connected. You came down into the pit with me; I did not forget you, you were the light of my being while I was in the pit. I wished only to be with you again; to be again with you, but to never forget where it was I had been.

The 'us' and 'we' I invoke refer neither to a pre-existing we nor the legions of my selves. It refers to the community of writers and readers involved in the writing at hand.

Prison writing has yielded several connected themes for me. (Or, just as likely I have imposed several themes on this writing.) The first is the question of a person's relationship to self and how that relationship plays out in the world. I am interested in the history of that relationship and process. One might give a title to this relationship and process: The composition and decomposition of the subject (from the dawn of modernity to the present). For writers from the experience of prisons it might begin with Villon and seek a terminus (provisionally) with Breytenbach and Burroughs, at least for our present purposes. The second and closely related theme is the writing of the self in the previously referred to relationship and process, especially amongst those writing from prison, slavery, and exile. One might assign a shorthand title to this question: The uses of writing in constituting the self by prison writers and by a larger community of writers. Autobiography will be a prominent mode of such writing, of course. Auto/bio/graphy literally means the self writing its life or being. As a genre, it might be seen to mean much more.

A third and intimately connected theme is the role of writing generally in establishing identities, and therefore realities. On the third theme, I want to compose a particular leitmotif. The connected theme I will point toward is the role of institutional writing in constituting identities and appropriating subjectivity. And a motivating theme in all of this is the reclamation of subjectivity through writing, and against institutional writing: autobiography will quite naturally be a primary mode of writing against institutional writing. By subjectivity, I am referring to the very ordinary senses of self. I am also

pointing to a not so ordinary sense of self, a sense of self which has become extremely self-conscious yet has also lost the ordinary sense of self-consciousness to a great degree. It is the sense of self where the subject must first see itself as object to constitute a self.

In referring to writing which relates to subjectivity, I use the word Logos (writing/idea/word) because its meanings point to writing and thinking. A self-conscious being (thinking subject) writing itself has brought us to subjectivity. Logos/Word is my shorthand for the subject and its technologies of writing/thinking. William Burroughs uses Word, others use Logos but they substantially refer to the same phenomenon and historical-intellectual process.

This subjectivity becomes more transparent in the examination of narratives. Narratives using autobiographical modes—from the confession to autobiographical novels—have helped reveal the self and given us some of the tools and structures, the technologies with which we might construct the self.

When dealing with the rise and fall of the subject, we will recognize the heart of cruelty which beats in the breast of Logos. Cruelty is inescapable when the subject becomes universal and the source and foundation of knowledge. The subject who is the source of understanding is of course a non-existent subject, yet one all must obey. This subject eventually replaces understanding with a prison called method in its fury to appropriate both world and self. Writers using the autobiographical forms are often struggling

to move through the varieties of prisons and manacles to understandings and self-understandings free of prisons and manacles, to assert themselves against the imposed understandings of themselves of the past and future.

In modernity the subject is a curious entity with an illustrious but odd history. Only by having access to its object nature can its true subject fullness be realized. A loop that may be seen as leading out of and into madness—or prison—may appear. The notion of the subject has had excellent use value, but may have also given rise to a pervasive confusion. The subject has sometimes been a cruel, arrogant master and an incompetent, bumbling servant.

The subject has had a vast and worthy use value to us however.
While we may see the stumbling fall of the subject, we will not see the subject's disappearance. Just as the decline of a God-centred cosmology gave way to a subject-centred epistemology without the disappearance of God or God-centred ontologies, so the rise and fall of subject-centred reason has not seen, nor will it see anytime soon, the disappearance of the subject. God and Subject have been useful when they are not inflicting pain beyond endurance.

The examination of narrative often reveals the view the present has of itself. Writing from previous eras points the way, gestures to the posture of the present. I make the assumption that narrative points of view, narrative voice and other devices we sometimes refer to as 'literary' are not used casually.

Prison writers find themselves in a very 'literary' situation because they are written into prisons and sometimes write themselves out, and sometimes believe there is no in or out as such. But they know prison is intimately connected to literature and literature is intimately connected to our sense of ourselves.

I also make the assumption that writers and readers sometimes make more or less of 'literary' devices than I might. So a narrative voice may get in my way but do more or less what the author intends.

The expository nature of the modern prison, its panoptic structure reminiscent of the omniscient third person narrator, its concern with formation of identities and the development of character, and more, all point to a discursive impulse similar to that impelling the novel itself. So goes the argument put forward by Bender in ***Imagining the Penitentiary.*** Taking the nexus of discursive formations impinging on the novel into account, he imagines this nexus to have delivered the prison in its modern form, as well. And certainly writers like Defoe and Fielding, progenitors of the modern English novel in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, had intimate knowledge of the incarnation of prisons immediately predating those of modernity. Fielding, in his capacity as magistrate was an early prison reformer who endorsed much of what has constituted the modern prison. Defoe's ***Moll Flanders*** certainly caused some hesitations concerning the imprisonment of fallen women.

The premodern prison, according to Bender, operated under a sign of 'liminality.' This liminality he opposes to the isolation of modern prisons. Liminality has several dimensions in this construction. First, the prison is the threshold of some other displacing event such as death, transportation, corporal punishment, payment of debts, and release. Premodern prisons were not for serving a term of punishment, but rather holding facilities until guilt could be assigned or not. As such, they were 'domestically' arranged. Prisoners often lived with their families, and paid for such goods and services as they could afford. They were in this sense on the threshold of the larger community.

Finally, they were on the threshold of some alien experience, be it prison or some other 'displacing event.' Something approaching the modern prison did exist in the early eighteenth century but its carceral use was quite restricted. By the end of the century a whole fleet of disused navy 'hulks' would be anchored near the coast of England. Eventually, this would be the staging areas for penal transportation, particularly to Australia.

It is difficult to imagine the world before what Foucault refers to as the 'isolated visibility' of the modern prison. Subjectivity for the prisoner must have shared some of the domesticity of the 'liminal' prison. We can imagine a less densely written prisoner three centuries ago, even a prisoner whose alterity was not so vivid as today. Thus, the mere fact of Defoe's several imprisonments did not disqualify him from the confidence of government officials.

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As mentioned above, I had read an article some years ago about the ***Education of Little Tree*** controversy. This book purports to be the story of a Native American boy adopted by a family in Tennessee, a white family. Little Tree grows into young adulthood and discovers his heritage. Apparently, the book expressed views with some currency for minority groups, and Native American Studies departments in some American universities incorporated it into their curricula. Then the serpent's tooth: while it had been assumed the writer of the book was a Native American, it turned out the author was a former speech writer for George Wallace writing under a pseudonym. Cries of outrage all around, and hence the article I read by Henry Louis Gates. Gates' conclusion was simple, perhaps too simple: that which is thought to be authentic is authentic. Little Tree was authentic as long as we thought he was and ceased to be so once we thought otherwise. Similarly with the subject: authentic as long as we believe, foundational as long as it appears to be embedded in those foundations, real as long as long as Reality stands against realities.

Little Tree and the part of the controversy I was aware of were amusing enough, perhaps even disturbing. But what really caught my eye was Gates' treatment of slave narrative. He mentioned specifically the outrage of some Afro-Americans with William Stryon's ***True Confessions of Nat Turner,*** a novel I had admired upon reading it in my early days in prison. The time of my reading, the mention of slave narrative, and the Little Tree controversy all

converged to turn my mind to prisoner narrative. Working with prisoners and in prisons as I was, I had watched a number of prisoners struggle in various ways with the Word. They struggled with uncommon energy against their institutional descriptions. I began to contemplate the relationship of prisoners with writing.

There is a vast Literature authored by prison writers and an even larger body of writing by writing prisoners. Who can be claimed by this Literature? Dante, Cervantes, Villon, Serge, Dostoevski, Gramsci, Burroughs, Levi, Bakhtin, Jackson, Harp, Morgan, and many more whose names we recognize; and so many unnamed and unknown. I found myself more drawn to the writing than the Literature. Early on, however, I realized prisoners are more written than they write, and often when they write they are aware of this fact. I began to think thesis. I mentioned this to a friend and he produced a book by Ioan Davies, ***Writers in Prison***. Davies' book proved invaluable as a map of (mis)reading prison writers. Through his book I discovered some writers who have stayed with me. Although his approach, dispersions and conclusion are different than mine—I can not reach a 'conclusion'—I owe a good deal to his insistence on taking prison writers seriously.

I wrote above that the Little Tree controversy was amusing. It was: not because people felt betrayed, but because a text had invented an author and when the author embodied was not the author invented by the text, an audience previously enchanted with text and author were disillusioned by both. The readers of the text had invented a betrayal along with an author.

The layered irony of this situation is in fact amusing to me. The feelings of betrayal are not.

EVASION

As I write this, which I know will become part of an Introduction, I am led to the betrayal I have not yet been sufficiently fortified to write about: the gulags, the lagers, the Holocaust. Each prison writer who has written from prison prior to these twentieth century terrors has prefigured them, and each writer since has written with them ever above his or her head. Dostoevski prefigured the gulags of Solzhenytzen, and Breytenbach could think of nothing but Bergen-Belsen when he returned to South Africa in the 1970s. Bakhtin wrote nothing but the gulags all the decades he was exiled or imprisoned and never mentions them. These catastrophes had him tongue-tied. So far they have done so with me.

The literate prisoner knows Reason fails at the prison gate. If prison is possible on the scale it is used in 'civilized' societies, then anything is possible in civilized societies. Anything.

I think ultimately I rejected Davies' thesis on account of the catastrophes. His position comes out to this: having rejected the universalizing texts of humanism because there was a holocaust—for other reasons as well—he then appears to adopt the Holocaust as universal text. I am uncertain whether he is justified on any kind of rational grounds; he may be. I do know I can not

accept his thesis for the obvious reason. I can not accept the meaning of the Word to be obliteration. Obliteration by the word is that from which I seek escape, and I will not write myself to that conclusion.

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I had at one point thought isogesis made the best sense for me as procedure. Only those writers who had actually made the trip to Stony Lonesome should make comment on the canon of prison writing. However, an exegetical movement soon became inexorable. A deliberately naive approach such as isogesis is too great a conceit. When Kafka may not make comment on writing and the prisoner we have become true provincials. Many writers and thinkers have recognized the pull of the prison, the mystery of the creature of reason which says so clearly reason is not what it claims. Since I seemed on some level committed to a map of misreading, then a negative hermeneutics seemed more exactly what I was after. Eventually, these distinctions became irrelevant.

But to return briefly to the above mentioned evasion and betrayal. In reading Primo Levi's ***The Periodic Table*** I felt an instant kinship as he described himself taking refuge in his studies from the horrors ahead as a young chemistry student, an Italian Jew in the 1930s. Had not my turn to criminality thirty years later been just such a seeking after refuge? And ironically, I had been a criminal who used chemistry as the signature of my crime. I made psychotropic substances, played the alchemist. The horrors, of course, had

not been evaded and perhaps we had each made them worse by not facing them with greater alacrity.

In a sense I know I can not attempt any comment on these issues without opening myself to an accusation of trivialization. I do not compare myself to Levi, nor do I compare the circumstances of each. I say only I felt a kinship and I believe as a writer Levi wished me to.

Ever since Abraham made himself hostage to Jehovah's tantrum and decided to sacrifice Isaac, we have been making prisons for ourselves and others. Now Reason/Logos has come to dictate the terms of incarceration. We have found we must construct our subjectivities within Rules.[2]

I have found myself in figurative and literal prisons throughout a lifetime. As Reason has emerged as the dominant text of humankind, a highly systematized and elaborate carceral discourse has emerged. This discourse aims clearly at appropriating subjectivity as its first move, and does so through both oral and written means. It displaces subjectivity and becomes subjectivity. We are usually aware of the spoken dimension of this discourse as it appears in the arrest, questioning, trial, and sentencing of prisoners. Yet we are not so aware that this is also a process of writing, idiosyncratic and with highly evolved rhetoric. In fact, the speaking without the writing would not work under the rule of Reason. The writing is where the power resides and it seems to hide behind the speech.

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Redescription is the first task of the prison writer, and so too the task of this writer writing about prison writers. The prison writer will describe much of what we take to be usual as unusual. And she may also take the unusual to be usual. This is partly because he is writing out of the " bitter cosmos of concrete, and echo-corridors and grills..."

We who live in the sweet world do not know that corridors and concrete are bitter. If we think of that bitter cosmos at all we think it ordinary, or different but necessary. Whereas we stand within the sweet world and look into this bitter cosmos and usually believe the existence of the bitter cosmos keeps the world sweet, whereas the prison writer finds this assumption troubling. Finally, she might say this bitter cosmos makes the world bitter. His text will always tell the menippean tale of the sweet world's description of itself imploding. The prison writer finds with Bakhtin the text undermining itself, bitterness where we find sweetness and sweetness where we find the bitter.

An aside here might help. I have experienced first hand the working of Logos in the carceral machines. I have seen the neat pretensions of Reason in these circumstances. What I can say about this discourse is simple: it cannot maintain consistency, its contradictions are rampant, and ultimately prisoners, guards and administrators know that the arbitrary is the constant of prison (and Reason?). The arbitrary is the constant of carceral discourse, and I suspect, of other discourses, as well.

Prison is not alone as an institution in writing individuals. The power to write individuals is a privilege which defines institutions. Prisons write them in a way perhaps more vivid than most institutions, a writing more of itself. It may nonetheless serve as model of the writing of individuals by institutions.

If we choose to imagine some good comes from this writing of individuals by institutions, we must allow of the evil which may be done. It accomplishes—and I find this a benign description—what has been referred to as "the colonization of the life-world".[3] If it contributes to the constitution of subjectivity, it also allows of appropriation of subjectivity and an obliteration. While not all institutions aim at this appropriation as uncomplicatedly as prison, there always exists this tendency.

What some prisoners discover is the writing road to reappropriation of subjectivity. Here I refer to the more every day kind of subjectivity. Writing is particularly effective, uniquely effective in accomplishing this. Writing is the lubricant without which modern carceral machinery does not function. If the gears of this subjectivity-consuming machinery are to be halted or reversed, prisoner writing might do it.

We construct our prisons too easily and repair and prop them up too thoughtlessly it seems to me. I do not wish to participate in this easy, thoughtless, prison building. So the writing that follows will attempt to avoid putting more bricks in the prison wall. I will try to identify the moves of the

prisoner in reappropriating subjectivity without reimprisonment of these writers, the reader—or myself. I will try to identify my own moves without falling in love with them. This writing is meant to not conform to the structures it wishes to enter: we are aiming at literary break and enter.

I also am aware *this* writing is about writing, and certain expectations might dwell in the situation I write into. I may only reach to satisfy these fitfully. My narrative is as fragmented and diverse as the Narrative of the subject. But at least part of my narrative points to the dilemma of wishing to evade a mode of writing which fixes and imprisons subjectivity in a situation that seems to demand this explicitly. Writing of Examination, Foucault gestures directly at the connection of carceral and pedagogic discursive forms in a section of ***Discipline and Punish*** entitled *Examination.*

I hope to escape—who doesn't? But I will be in the text here and now. I will not imagine there is something beyond the wall giving purpose to our imprisonment.

What I propose to do is hold a conversation with writers who share the experience of the prison. I will define this community as broadly as possible, and writing likewise. Much of this conversation will take the form of writing about reading, but much more of it is writing about writing. And writing is without purpose if it is not, on some level, about who we are. Certainly the writing which puts people in prisons is writing which seeks to say who they are and how we must be with and without them.

This conversation began long ago. So some of what I will be doing is eavesdropping, perhaps even 'intercepting communication.' I had imagined it a conversation of recent origin once. But it is ancient, as ancient as exile, as slavery, and it exists because we can imagine it; that is, for the same reason hell exists.

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1. This term is Michel Foucault's. It comes from Discipline and Punish, an influential text for myself and some of my sources. Foucault wrote extensively on prisons and the evolution of modern institutions. Many of his notions seem apt, although I find a certain paradox in his projects: he reinforced the powers he sought to destabilize.

2. Bender describes the 'liminal' nature of prisons prior to the rise of the modern prison in the Eighteenth century as being 'domestic' in its arrangements. Instead of the isolated prisons of today, the prisons of the premodern era were often run together with the communities surrounding them, and houses in the neighbourhood of the prison were appropriated for the use of prisoners who could afford them. These houses were called Rules; here one might find prisoners and their families living in a reasonable approximation of domesticity, or find gambling attended by prisoners, guards and people who lived in the area. The description of the Rules is taken for granted in ***Jonathan Wild*** by Henry Fielding where they are merely part of the scenery. The awful truth is I have just used a footnote to explain a joke. Only someone explaining Derrida could imagine this an effective mode of humour. I shall likely abandon this shabby obsession soon.

3. Habermas picks up this term from Weber in ***The Theory of Communicative Action***.

The regulations regarding the good order of the Institution
or
the impossibility of a writing that could write itself writing

Methods

&

Procedures

WRITTEN IN STONE

I ran into him in the Remand Unit when I was in there looking for another prisoner. I had not seen him for over a year. He had been waiting for a parole hearing in a Federal prison then; it was coming up in a couple of weeks. He didn't make that one but did the next, six months later.

Years in prison weight rooms left him well muscled. He had a pleasant, freckled face with a grin jiggling his mouth most of the time and stood about six feet tall. If I hadn't talked with him as much as I have this spring I might imagine he has no better idea about the gravity of his situation, the hole he is sliding deeper into, than he had five years ago when I first met him.

His crinkly hair is a red-brown and he usually has a mustache and goatee. His skin is pale and freckled with no sign of his mixed racial heritage. Still it's there if you know what you're looking at, but dark skin doesn't announce his patrimony as it does with his older brother whom I know also.

His name is Jack Pierre. He's thirty-five now: his hazel eyes are amused and accompany the jiggling grin comfortably. Today he told me he has had less than three years on the street since he was twelve years old, and was either on probation or parole during that time. He's been remanded on several bank robbery charges, officially armed robberies: he carried a starter's pistol. So—eight ARs, all while he was under the influence of heroin or wishing he was. He's also completing the Federal prison term, has three years left on that. Even if he's given concurrent time he'll finish off the three years he has

left. And it's unlikely any judge will give him just three years on the multiple armed robberies.

I remember when I first met him. "I just need a job," he'd said. That sounded fairly simple. He was not asking for his own office, a window overlooking the Harbour, hot and cold running secretaries. Sounded fairly simple until you asked what jobs he had done or what skills he had. He claimed he'd never drawn a wage and the only thing he knew how to do that might get him a job was tatooing. That was it.

Somehow he found his own job and just needed me for some paperwork for his boss. But his employer's boyfriend was his real boss, an ex-con doing construction contracting, who had a few scams going. He mismanaged the payroll and talked Jack into waiting for his paycheque. It never came and when he went to collect his unemployment insurance, well, it turned out his boss had forgotten to pay the premiums.

It was the first job he had as an adult and he was thirty years old. The job was driving a small bulldozer and a large truck and the day after he started working he pulled into the parking lot at my office looking like he'd won the lottery.

But it didn't last. At thirty-one, no education beyond primary school and having been so naive he hadn't known he should have been getting payroll stubs, Jack felt mighty lost and foolish. (Jack was wilfully ignorant here, I'm

sure.) He reverted easily to what he knew best: robbery, heroin, and prison. In or out, Jack remained addicted to his notion of himself as a loser, junkie, a convict.

His greatest skills were artistic. He'd begun tattooing when he was fourteen in a juvenile jail and had done it ever since. Tattooing is illegal in prison.

An impulse to write oneself resides in this most common of prison arts. The writing of prisoners is reserved to a committee expert at the activity. With zeal and jealously the committee husbands the right to write. Tattooing is banned on medical grounds, primarily. It is thought to spread diseases of the blood like hepatitis and HIV. Most tattooing in prison becomes a writing into the narrative another has told about oneself. Finding oneself written as prisoner, the tattoo becomes filigree upon the script.

A needle and charred matchsticks serve as the illegal prison artist's tools for tattooing. Once a young prisoner submits to these first scribblings he is marked beyond erasure, and with the crudest of markings. Often as a way of covering this original si(g)n—which after all announces the state has had you before childhood has ended—he may write himself with the more elaborate tattooing available in Federal prisons. There, prisoners have access to something approaching a real tattoo gun. They have enough time to acquire good tools and real ink.

Now doing longer sentences, the prisoners have more time to practice their art and more sophisticated teachers. Some of the tattooing is quite elaborate, even attractive if you care for that sort of thing. These days a lot of people do.

Jack was so good he could easily have competed on the market on the outside. As he came of age the market was limited. These days he might make a living at it. He also made interesting wood sculptures and could move easily and pleasingly from one graphic style to another. He has a talent. He showed me his latest work. He had learned a highly stylized approach to Northwest tribal drawings from a fellow who was Haida. He learned quickly. He was proud of this work, felt it left a trace of him in a world relentlessly pushing him towards its edge. Pushing back, pushing back, pushing himself back into the world.

Over the weeks I visited him I regained a sense of the person who was Jack. I liked him. Oh, wrong thing to write? Am I directing attention to myself. Well, I'm here, too.

Jack is likable. And unreliable and dangerously lacking in common sense. He had been thinking about how he got like that. As he put it, how he went from being an innocent little kid to... well, how he got to where he was.

He was sexually abused from about six or seven until he was in his early teens. It's the kind of thing prisoners don't talk about because admitting

vulnerability can be dangerous in prison. And allowing yourself to be vulnerable, as you inevitably must when recalling and recounting your victimization, well that can get you killed. Jack was going to be a witness against the man who had abused him all those years before, not an easy decision to come to ordinarily, wretchedly complicated in prison. In all those years in prison he had survived by learning one rule first—don't be a rat. This injunction against informing kept him alive. Fortunately 'sex offenders' are so despised, the injunction is weak. But it is not clear cut. Prisoners have difficulty making moral distinctions, like everyone, but the process is further muddied by a pack mentality layered over with delusional individualism, and the pressures of institutional life. Jack has vacillated on this and is uncertain he can close the book on his victimization without exposing himself to further victimization and maybe even his own murder. Informers are subject to death sentences. Not a comfortable place to make a decision.

The man who molested him is a relative under suspicion of murdering his wife. Her hand was found some time ago in a ditch—the husband found it. The flame of the inferno is eternal.

Jack caused me to think about victims. Some of his most recent ones received calls after his robberies telling them the gun wasn't real, he was sorry. Then his hatful of rain, the red balloon with the blue surprise and he found the oblivion he needed to not worry about his victims, not think back to innocence. Came the dawn, muscles creak, joints rub, intestines reach,

clenching into daylight's white scream. More—victims, dope. His days stretched out like thunderclouds over the plain.

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Another day another unit in the prison. The guard is bearded, broad-faced, tall, large through chest and stomach, jovial. As I lean on the desk he greets me and his joviality turns rueful as he recalls and comments on a young prisoner we both worked to get paroled a few months previously. The young man, eighteen now, will enter his twentieth year in prison. He's back on parole violation. We both shake our heads: this young felon has been incarcerated since he was thirteen and his twentieth year is not likely the last he will spend in prison. When I'd asked what he was doing back he could describe the acts which got him hauled back but he seemed confused as to his motivation.

But he's not the reason I'm here today in this unit. Over the past couple of months I've been visiting another, older prisoner. Under remand, he is charged with nearly a dozen armed robberies and has just recently resigned himself to the inevitable: he will plead guilty soon. At first he'd been reluctant to talk at all about the crimes, thinking he had a chance to 'beat' them. I knew he didn't, but he had a bad jones from coming off a sixteen month heroin run. We had known each other in another prison years before. It took a while to rediscover each other.

After a few visits, he began to talk. I listened and he talked. He talked a lot, more in a few short afternoons than I'd heard him talk in nearly a year of seeing him every day ten years ago. And when he couldn't talk, I sometimes smoked cigarettes with him.

This day he was setting his hopes on getting a light sentence by highlighting the circumstances under which he committed the crimes. He was addicted to heroin. That's the sum of the mitigating circumstances.

Because the judge who he hopes will take his plea and sentence him has dealt leniently with others who have committed similar crimes with similar mitigating circumstances, Rory hopes he will get a light sentence. I have my doubts. But this judge has taken some fairly enlightened positions with addict robbers with lengthy records like Rory's.

He is thirty-seven. His head has the appearance of a corn field after a dusting of snow in November. Another five years and his hair will be completely white. His eyes are sea green and somewhat dull from too much jail light. His frosted hair is short, his face broad featured, lips thick, mouth wide, nose long but not prominent. He has served two lengthy federal prison terms, and some lighter provincial sentences. In the decade I have known him he has less than two years on the street. He has used weapons in some of his robberies but considers himself to not be a violent offender. He's right: under normal circumstances I can't imagine him given to violence. What he's like

with a head full of dope I don't care to guess at. On the charges he's up on he used a starter's pistol and went from till to till in a grocery store, keeping over fifty customers at bay while he emptied cash from seven registers a couple of weeks before Christmas.

He tells me he isn't getting his hopes up, but the judge who he is counting on seems to feel locking up bandits who rob to feed their habits is a useless enterprise. He's probably right. However, the public and police seem to feel otherwise and judicial independence is increasingly a precious commodity. It may disappear completely with the high, thin whine of politicians solidifying their constituencies, police chiefs inflating their budgets by letting us know what a precarious world they defend our interests in.

So Rory is facing a third term for armed robbery. In most jurisdictions, given the dramatic nature of the robbery and this record, he would be facing a minimum of seven to nine years and probably more. But this judge has given an addict robber with a long record a suspended sentence and lengthy probation within the last year. He's given another 'two years less'. Two years less a day is a provincial sentence. Two years or more means a federal term. Both men had records worse than Rory's. He thinks he can pull short time. But he's not getting his hopes up. That's what he says out loud. Of course, he is.

He has been asked to supply a probation officer with some backrground material for a pre-sentence report. He tells me he doesn't want to write a tale

of mistreatment at the hands of his family or society. But he feels he has served time in unreasonable proportion to his crimes. I don't know. I think he started robbing banks with a sawed-off rifle under his arm. All for drugs he tells me. But I've seen addiction up close and not all addicts rob banks.

He writes his story and elaborates on parts of it. He hopes the probation officer doing the pre-sentence report will look favourably upon a light sentence even though he has refused to condemn the emotional habits of his parents which include drinking, withdrawal and rage, expressing itself in beatings. There is some integrity in his refusal. He wants me to talk to the probation officer, whom I know. "Maybe put in a good word," is the way he says it.

I know what the document she has says and I know what she wants to hear. I can't comment on the family background because I don't know it. I do say Rory is not likely given to violence—or crime at all—unless drugs are involved. I can't say I think his criminal behaviour is about to come to a halt. He still has not seemed to really wish to leave the drugs alone. Still, I think it's foolish to give him a further heavy sentence.

But today he's talking a little differently. Maybe it's because he has a date set and his day in court is no longer an abstraction. His future is beginning to take an ominous shape. Maybe it's just a bad day and he's got too many cartons of cigarettes bet on the Rangers going into the seventh game of the Stanley Cup. Whatever it is, he's bargaining with fate today. He's setting

limits on the highest sentence he will take without appeal, talking like he has some choice over what prison he's classified to.

Rory's had his stoic face in place these past few months, never whined to me, never tried to manipulate me. I respect him for that. When I first met him ten years ago, it had been under different circumstances. Rory, he's been straight up and down with me. For that reason I feel I need to risk the truth with him.

The truth is he can not walk into a court room and expect mercy. When the writing to end writing is done, when justice is done, he must be ready to write back. Although he says he is not getting his hopes up, I know he is: what other choice is there? And whatever his sentence, it will never be short enough. It's not going to make the difference. I try to nudge him toward imagining a future beyond prison walls, but taking this reality into account: doing time is painful, cruel, and it's meant to be. It is not an easy conversation. He has done all his sentences as doped up as possible, avoided education, 'programs,' rehabilitation in any form. Can't blame him for that: I never saw any remaking of prisoners in prisons that prisons could take any credit for.

All we can really do is keep the conversation open, try to include new figures in it, allow a place for imagination in it. All I can do is hear, read his text: speak, Rory, preach that gig and play it blank. And tell 'em you're gonna go on out and gas that dog.

He knows what he's up against with a prison sentence. He knows I can't do a minute of his time. He has to do every day of it himself. In prison, they talk of 'doing your own time' and not having 'your head on the street.' How do you prepare to live as a free person when the very idea of freedom is a threat? I don't know. It's like living without hope, but not hopelessly. I don't know the method. I don't know, and neither does Rory.

(PROVISIONAL) FINAL VOCABULARY

> *Jonathan Culler, per de Man, writes: "The best a reader can achieve is a strong misreading—a reading that will in turn produce other misreadings...strong readers struggle to master the text by misreading... Our dealings with prior readers reflect not the triumphant conclusions of most stories of reading but patterns of blindness and insight..."(**On Deconstruction**,* pp.79-80)

The prison writer is first a prisoner. He has thus been read and written already by universal nomenclators. He is next a (mis)reader. Nomenclators do not allow of misreadings, wish to avoid the strong misreading which in turn produces others. They prefer instead the weak reading allowing of no other. But for the prison writer to engage his situation, he will often begin with what he considers to be a (mis)reading of himself, the weak reading of the nomenclator. When he becomes aware of the misreadings and misnamings done by nomenclators, the literal level of punishment where each act is preceded and followed by writing which will eventually compose the file, the dossier, the case, he might begin to write against these misreadings, might begin his redescription—of himself, the bitter cosmos and the sweet world. He might find the nomenclators' readings too literal, prosaic, and certainly distorted. This literalism is offensive: the prisoner finds himself written in the unpoetic and tendentious style of file composers everywhere.

Am I misreading from the outset in imagining a sympathetic audience for any work concerning prisoners, writers or not? Also in imagining the possibility of a 'thesis' which might escape the prison of "The Thesis," am I misreading

academe? And imagining anything beyond the various empires of cruelty, I misread the illiberal world? But I share with private ironists—and prison writers are often ironists—the wish to engage the empires of cruelty, to overturn the weak misreadings and replace them with my own (mis)readings, to redescribe the sweet world, the bitter cosmos, to work towards a personal and provisional final vocabulary, as Rorty describes the aim of private ironists. For them nothing is better than to take the vocabularies they have inherited and been written with, and turn them into that personal (final) vocabulary. Only thus can the ironist escape the rule of the nomenclator.

Rorty in ***Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*** convincingly makes an argument that disciplines—he is particularly concerned with philosophy—seek final vocabularies. Culler, from whom Rorty takes a cue, similarly argues that philosophy seeks to put an end to writing. In other words, each vocabulary, each writer, seeks to describe the world in such a way as to assure subsequent writings or writers are superfluous. A description of world, a rendering, so complete as to stand for the thing itself unassailably. But vocabularies are contingent, and so are the subjectivities we create with them. On this view, Einstein's description of the actions of matter in the universe is not more true than Newton's, but simply uses a vocabulary more consonant with the epistemological and ontological needs of those who need the actions of matter described in these ways.

An ironist seeks to find a vocabulary that escapes those Final Words from philosophers, scientist, literary critics, and so on. An ironist does not want

the self or the world described in a final way and in someone else's words. Irony, Rorty finds, is a sensibility literate individuals of this epoch are given to. Certainly we find ironists among prison writers. They will wish to overturn genres, metaphor, thematics, all manner of literary and social conventions, perhaps even the notion of text itself. And above all they will seek their own vocabularies.

Thus a novel like Seth Morgan's ***Homeboy*** finds the junkie-thief-pimp-protagonist, Joe Speaker, romantically involved Harlequin novel style with the woman he pimps, and the couple sharing all the domestic aspirations of any contemporary couple. A passage such as the following allows us to see the bitter can be sweet, but bitter can be more bitter still:

> *Jailin'* was an art form and lifestyle both. The style was walkin' slow, drinkin' plenty of water, doin' your own time, the art was lightin' cigarets from wall sockets, playin' the dozens, and slowin' your metabolism to a crawl, sleepin' twenty-four hours a day. Forget the streets you won't see for years. Lettin' your heart beat the bricks with your body behind bars was hard time. Acceptin' the jailhouse was easy time. *Jailin'*. (***Homeboy***, text and dustjacket)

This is the advice all first timers—fish—get from the veteran convicts: forget the sweet world, it no longer exists; forget it, as it has forgotten you. But Morgan makes the distinction, well known in prison, of easy and hard time. Such a notion may seem risible in the sweet world but is indispensable in the prison. Thus, prison writers begin their redescription of the world, from the bitter cosmos, outside the text of the sweet world, from inside the prison. Yes, there is an "outside of the text" and it is another text. And sometimes,

as with prison writers, it is the text of the other. What is incomprehensible to us in the sweet world—easy time—is the commonplace to the prisoner.

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We must first describe the place where so much ground is lost and won but whose borders never change. We must understand that awful spectacle driving individuals in prison to drug, to kill, to rape and to write, know the history of the spectacle, its texture, its stony heart.

And I am quite glad to drag a reader there. The reader may wonder why it is I stand here. If readers wonder at this, they may not accept gladly my invitation to stand beside me.

EMPIRES OF CRUELTY

> The essence of any sadistic relationship between a bad prison boss and his prisoners is that the latter should be (in the word so often used of Australian convicts) "objects." The System's distinction between "objects" (prisoners) and "subjects" (the free) was no mere grammatical quirk: it implied the convict's expulsion from the domain of rights....The only refuge of their criminality was within their bodies, from whose inaccessible centers the meek silence craved by the system could be trumped by mute defiance. (***The Fatal Shore***, p.. 461)

Robert Hughes outlines in the above passage the first task of incarceration and the discourses which lead into it: the appropriation and redescription of subjectivity. Although all prison bosses may not be involved in sadistic relationships with their prisoners, they are involved in cruel ones—cruel because carceral discourse forms these relationships and is based on the notion of a universal subject whose mission is to expel elements of alterity from the discourse. Carceral discourse and practice are meant to appropriate

subjectivity and to give it a new description, a description that allows for the cruelty inherent in the discourse and practice, a universal subject whose subjectivity does not contaminate the discourse.

Penal institutions are not alone in their task of appropriating subjectivity; most institutions aim at the same to greater or lesser degrees. Thus, a child enters school and becomes a student; a sick person enters the hospital and becomes a patient. The former customer of the insurance company becomes a claimant when the product he has purchased has a more than theoretical use.

As with all modern institutions the ground of these redescriptions and appropriations is writing. What we normally view is the practice which is rationalized and normalized to the extent that it becomes unremarkable, and we hear the spoken lines accompanying the play. The practice for the convicts who were sent to Botany Bay is well known: apprehension, charge, trial, sentence, transportation, chains and the lash. These lines wrote the prisoner and are prominent in narrative. However, what is less prominent is the first ground of the written word accompanying all these practices. And there would be more writing: a record accompanying the body of the prisoner on the journey, bills of lading, receipts. There also would exist a second order of writing dealing with a mass rather than individuals: reports to the home office, annual statistics, and so on. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the texts of prisoners were coming to be quite densely written.

Usually the appropriation and redescription are met with only "mute defiance." However, sometimes the written word appropriating subjectivity is met by the writing prisoner, a person highly sensitized to the appropriation and often having definite strategies to counter it. In the chapter of his book ***The Fatal Shore***, in which the above passage appears, we meet just such a convict, Laurence Frayne, who left a record of his time at Norfolk Island, the end of the line for prisoners too incorrigible to be punished with mere transportation, hard labor, manacling and flogging.

Norfolk Island was the end of the line in the System (of transportation) in place from 1788 until half way through the nineteenth century. Britain dealt with its criminality, political unrest, economic fissures, and social disorder with transportation to New South Wales. And when a convict proved too unruly for New South Wales, he would be removed to colonies in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), or a dozen other outposts on the Australian mainland. These were bad enough, and the harsh and arbitrary regimes operating there were ruthless under even a benevolent warder. But Norfolk Island, a thousand miles east of Botany Bay and four hundred miles west and north of New Zealand, was referred to in dispatches between the governors of New South Wales and the Home Office as the *ne plus ultra*, Latin for the end of the line. An uncommonly large proportion of those who landed there were the Irish insurgents, marked by the curdling of Gaelic sentiments which have typified British-Irish relations for twelve centuries. Laurence Frayne was one such man.

Frayne demonstrates a shift in the figure of the subject among prisoners. An Irishman, a tribe the British supposed to be savages, Frayne's defiance is borne of the knowledge that essential justice is denied to those in his circumstances. He writes. He thinks. He writes he is a better man than his captors, and thinks so. He withstands the floggings commandant Morriset visits on him so sturdily as to have merely convinced his captors he was the insensate brute they thought him to be. But he asserts himself in a way that must have left a nagging doubt as to the true nature of the relationship in which he and his captors find themselves locked. Of course, the machinery to manacle doubts was as readily in place as the chains and manacles to subdue bodies.

Frayne's history on Norfolk Island captures the essence of a subject reaching for the appropriation of the discourse used to dominate him. He seems to have invited punishment upon punishment, lash upon lash with speech alone. On discovering two convict women, one from his hometown, on the Island, he did not hesitate to become sexually involved with them even knowing to a certainty he would be flogged; he was. For calling the Commandant of Norfolk Island "as great a tyrant as Nero" after receiving 100 lashes, he "was sentenced to an additional 100 & to be kept ironed down in a cell for Life and never to see daylight again." The record of brutality directed against Frayne is numbing and against this he offered not only something noisier than mute defiance on the spot, but more importantly, writing after his confinement. (He would have suffered even more punishment had he attempted to write during his internment.) He left the only first hand convict record of life under

Commandant Morriset, whose tyranny might have gone unremarked had not Frayne written himself back into his own subjectivity. Morriset, while as harsh as Norfolk Island demanded, seems not out of place amongst the commandants of the prison colonies of New South Wales.

Prison is supposed to be cruel, and if it weren't it would be something else. We sometimes pretend otherwise, but we can't have it both ways: even if prison meant nothing but limiting freedom, it would be cruel. And there is considerable cruelty beyond this, worked into the interstices of the prison wall. If God is in the details, then so is the devil.

Prison always seeks to do more than limit freedom. At the very least, it also seeks to appropriate and redescribe subjectivity. In this it is typical of a range of institutions.

I DID NOT SURVIVE

Often the record left by writing prisoners, such as Frayne, seems to be aimed at making the important statement "I survived." Many of the autobiographical accounts of prisoners seem to share this motivation. Carl Harp's ***Love and Rage***, written while he is still in prison on life sentences, makes the statement " I am surviving." He is since dead—in prison—his suit against the prison authorities in Washington State for beating him and sodomizing him with a billyclub unheard by a court. Harp is one of the

obscure writing prisoners who writes specifically to survive. In the 'Introduction' to ***Love and Rage***, he writes of his prison diaries:

> Nothing in them is the last word. I am still growing, thinking, struggling, writing....it's those that need to know who should read them, dig it? *Wise people talking with each other do not educate the ignorant*....I don't claim to be anyone but what I am, and I'm not trying to impress anybody. Just trying to be myself, errors and all. (***Love and Rage***, p. 9)

Harp had an appeal of his sentences and a suit against the State of Washington before the courts at the time of his death. From the first sentence quoted above, the reader may infer Harp was very conscious of his 'writtenness,' and very active in his pursuit of the (provisional) last word. His writing aims at not ceding this 'last word' to institutional discourse.

His diary as printed under the ***Love and Rage*** title begins after he has been transferred to San Quentin in California from Walla Walla in Washington State. This transfer occurs precisely because he has been assaulted (both badly beaten and sodomized with a riot baton) and has filed a suit against the prison authorities. It is presumably to protect him in an unsafe situation. However, reading his entries from San Quentin it is clear he is at great risk there: almost every day prisoners are shot at San Quentin during his stay there. These shootings take place when prisoners fight or disobey commands or....It seems they might occur for almost any reason.

At the time of writing his diaries (1979-1980) which compose the book ***Love and Rage***, he was thirty years old and serving four consecutive life terms. Of his history he writes:

> I was born of March 8, 1949 in the city of Vancouver, Washington, but spent most of my life in the State of California where I saw my first prison and began my first diary at the age of fifteen. I was the son of poor, working class parents, and my family—minus my father who left shortly after my birth—lived on welfare more often than not to survive. To my knowledge I am the only member of my family with a high school education and a course (shoemaker)....At the age of 23 I was again on my way to prison only this time with four consecutive life terms for crimes the State knew I did not commit....(ibid, p. 9)

Harp does not become a 'lifer' in the sense that he does not defer life until some improbable release. He allows himself to become politicized and becomes an activist. This happens in a way he is not sure about: "I don't know exactly what happened but something snapped in me and in 1974 I publicly declared myself a political prisoner" (ibid, p.10). This accounting of oneself as political prisoner is a common move in writing against institutional discourse. The institutional writing of the prisoner is in some dimension 'political' but it is more of itself than it is a political discourse per se.

Yet these statements of the 'I survived' or 'I am surviving' variety seem to be demand statements. Breyten Breytenbach—in both his prison books, but especially and specifically in ***True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist***—tells us "I did not survive."

There are really only two tales the prisoner may tell within the tropes of the Narrative: one is the tale of how the prisoner, slave to his criminal nature cannot be saved; the other, the tale of how the Narrative saves the narrative of the prisoner. Once outside these tropes the prisoner may tell other tales. Breyten Breytenbach tells the tale of disintegration and dissolution. From his title, ***True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist,*** to his chapter titles, Breytenbach parodies prisoner narrative. It becomes clear his confession cannot be true, as he is uncertain as to what he ought to confess. In the end neither is he rescued, nor does his criminal nature ever emerge. He simply writes his annihilation under the auspices of the South African prison system.

Breytenbach gives his answer to the question often asked of prisoners expelled into the sweet world: "How does one survive? I did not survive. This is important to point out. True, there is a sum of attributes which can be called by name....One mustn't be like those who always simplify 'reality' by trying to understand it . One must live it...."(***True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist***, p.308). Reason always seeks the reduction of experience. In the case of understanding how one survives, the simplification is "he served his term of confinement; he was cured (cheers for carceral machinery) or was not (hisses of disgust for criminal nature)." But we know also that whoever went down into the pit shall not come up. We might ask what is added or subtracted and how? Prisoner narratives can give us words and silence, can give us a structure, one congruent with more familiar forms: amazing grace, once was lost but now am found.

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DIS/INQUISITION

He was prepared. He knew his place and part. Under his arm he carried his papers. For form and content no demand need be made: we all know the form and content of form and content. But artfulness, this was something new, an unexpected demand. Never mind, it seemed a pleasant diversion. "I must reconstitute, I must comprehend, I must prove. That is, I must allow it to reveal itself...my frame and my field and my discipline." (ibid., p56). Dis/inquisition: the Committee waits; the Board waits.

He walked across the quadrangle, destination Room 402. A lamb to the slaughter, a goat to the scape—he walked distractedly, attempting to push his body against the obduracy of his mood. His legs searched out such purchase as the flat concrete gave, his eyes searched for the familiarity which seemed to have fled the world. The Members might already be assembling, hardening themselves against his lacunae. They search who also sit and wait. He wished he had invited more friendly presence, those who might see value in him and his works. Who are they?

This would be a time of judging: his works, his character, his ability to defend his works and to allow amendment. Judgment seeks for final vocabulary, and seeks to direct that vocabulary.

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I did not survive. With Breytenbach I remember the walking and the walk, not the walker. The anonymity of the experience contributes to this: inside the prison great causes, lofty notions, great men, the memory of the self—these disappear. [Remember Genet's anecdote as recounted by Foucault: a communist prisoner refused to be manacled with Genet during the Second World War, not wanting to be tainted by a 'common' criminal such as Genet; since that time Genet commented he had no use for political causes. (His acitivities with the Black Panthers and Palestinian groups say otherwise.) The communist had not as yet proved himself worthy of the name prisoner.] Breytenbach knows his politics are irrelevant to Breytenbach the prisoner. Politics in prison begins and may end with resistance to the prison. It becomes a resistance to, as Breytenbach calls it, "a misery of images which I shall never be able to express" (ibid, p.216).

Among the misery of images he contends with is Breytenbach, the Afrikaner, coming of age in Apartheid. In that place at that time, the word locks meaning in ethnicity, in the skin, and in history. In his baroque confessional, he argues himself and his compadres into a thousand cells and out again. Exile has become his state, southern Africa his country, but prison is home—and always present. When he raises up from his Lazarus bed after seven years, South African prison seems another neighbourhood of Apartheid: place and mode of dwelling codified; social interactions strictly prescribed. In his

meditations, the prison and South Africa are the tale of the misery of images, and the mirror of the world.

Writing prison from a Narrative of Reason means I survived prison; writing a prison narrative means I did not survive. Omitting the annihilation means my narrative has become another line in someone else's narrative. Only counterfeit prison narrative leaves no trace of the annihilation. However, many paper it over.

(mis)READINGS: WORDS ABOUT THE NECK

The prisoner finds, as does any person enmeshed in institutional discourse, she is already read and written. The writing prisoner responds to this often with identifiable strategies, ones which seek to redress the violence of the appropriation and redescription of subjectivity inherent in the reading and writing of the individual in institutional discourse.

Breytenbach knows how integral writing is to the carceral process and writes of his own literary reception of his own imprisonment as a "misery of images...The expiation. The weighing, the sending off to the abattoir, the words about the neck, these must be refined to gestures of lifting an eyebrow, moving a pen...The means is the murderer. In this way does writing destroy reality, to replace it" (ibid, p. 216).

He writes back furiously against the nomenclators' readings—in this case, the reading of Breytenbach by Apartheid: terrorist, criminal. His confession is baroque and confused. But his phrase 'the words about the neck,' is especially arresting. Breytenbach imagines these words literally, as in 'you shall be hung by the neck until you are dead.' This is a standard formula when handing down a death sentence by hanging. But he also imagines the words throttling the individual. Choked by words. And even a third order of meaning might be ascribed to this phrase, the notion of any individual who is imprisoned or otherwise constrained by institutional discourse carrying Logos as a weight around the neck. And Breytenbach knows each sentence pronounced is a murder.

In this he has begun to see writing as William Burroughs sees it: the primary mode of oppression in literate societies. Where at the dawn of modernity, a Villon stumbles towards a vehicle for the expression of the self—Logos/writing—and drives drunkenly out of the late Middle Ages, Breytenbach and Burroughs have jumped out and will be delighted to see this old Logowagon crash.

And the gestures: lifting of the eyebrow, moving the pen. Breytenbach identifies these, but there is also The Sigh...the sigh, the sigh. After all, decent folk must have regrets about murder no matter how legal.

WARRANT/HABEAS CORPUS

I should point out some of the features of this writing in advance. Like Burroughs, like Dostoevski, I imagine Logos as a disease, or a virus. Dostoevski calls consciousness a disease, Burroughs imagines the Word as a virus. I see consciousness as improbably present to itself in an unmediated way. The Word is the primary mode of mediation. If it is present to itself in an unmediated way, then the experience likely will be so fleeting and solipsistic as to be irrelevant.

I also believe we generally use writing in a way completely at odds with our actual experiences. In the mediation of consciousness by writing we attempt to cast consciousnes as orderly, linear, intelligible and sensible, lawful, civilized and controllable. It is not, and neither might writing be. Our experience of a world ordered after such a model is bought at great cost. We are essentially slaves to Logos.

So this writing attempts to undo the slavery and ignores, in fact subverts, some of the ways of proceeding that lead into such slavery. It is a delicate undertaking, and especially in the context I am writing into. After all, this is the context which generates those ways of proceeding and sees its duty as the orderly, lawful, intelligible ordering of writing and hence, consciousness. It is generous in accepting such a task and ruthless in demanding we accept the gift.

The form is known for its purging of the personal. It demands 'objectivity,' imagining this quality is something separate from subjectivity. The form calls for the author to be disappeared, strangely: the thesis as always already postmodern. Yet *this* author is so persistently present when deceny demands his absence. But this absence is only prologue to the moment when the Committee issues its *habeas corpus*. And I do have a body, I am present. No point to pretending this is going anyplace else. I'll answer that writ.

But I am answering in a way very conscious of the battle for subjectivity, for a provisional final vocabulary that is mine and that I wage against institutional discourse. A battle I have already lost. Of course.

In the interests of continuing my resistance I must state I am neither philosopher nor literary critic. I have been exposed to these discourses and undoubtedly influenced by them. Or sickened by them, to get back to Burroughs and Dostoevski. But part of my resistance is to refuse identification with the procedures of philosophy and literary criticism. This is a resistance I put energy into as a reader and writer in conversation with other readers and writers constantly. Because this is the only road to a (provisional) final vocabulary of my own.

Every narrative has its counternarratives or could, theoretically, however garbled their articulation. And they will be garbled or at least illegible because what we generally find of the counternarrative is the trace that remains in the larger narratives. The narrative of modernity, the Narrative of

Reason has also its counternarratives, and a more fragmented and frightening story we cannot tell ourselves. The narrative of modernity is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves, the one that stitches up the ravelled ends of our collective and individual lives and tells us it all makes sense. It is a discourse of monologic, a Narrative of Reason and reasons.

The counternarrative is something else—perhaps this is the sum of what we can say about it. But allow me to attempt to say more. (I have been asked explicitly to make more of counternarrative, a term I believed I appropriated from Davies—I didn't. I am plainly uncertain as to what can be made of it.) These are the stories we cannot allow as true, the stories of the failure and contradictions of our values and institutions. (Although our interpretations of this story will usually recast the story as the valorization of these.) Can we allow that? Counternarrative is the story running between the lines of (meta)Narrative, the voice whispering, "It may not be so, it is not so, there is another story to be told, a story every bit as convincing as the conviction you have now."

Many have attempted systematically to write counternarrative, but it would not be counternarrative if this were possible. Genet attempted counternarrative, thought he could write it. Then along came Sartre with ***Saint Genet*** and poor Jean went into a depression for five years. Kafka stumbled into counternarrative and the Narrative has been trying to digest him ever since. Maybe the secret is to keep it secret: a critical mass of readership and counternarrative is the Narrative. No, that's too simple.

Right now I am experiencing a tempation to make my 'imaginative' writing prop up ideas. This could be pleasing but it seems too easy. I am writing from my experience as well, and forcing concepts on the experience would be a gift to bad conscience and would leave no space for counternarrative.

Part of the counternarrative are the stories of prisons and prisoners, the stories of exile, the stories of slavery, narratives of the obdurate imperfectability of humans and the folly of the human enterprise, told in certain fashions. I could go on and say in this instance there may even be a counter-counternarrative. Because so much of what we imagine as writing from prison comes from male authors, when a woman such as Albertine Sarrazin writes into this counternarrative 'canon,' she in effect sets up a counter-counternarrative. The counternarratives are fragmented, disjointed and adhere to an aesthetic of inconsistency and illegibility; they must. They have no authority, otherwise they become more chapters in the Narrative. They are illegible in the sense they exist side-by-side with the narrative we read, yet we do not see the print. They are the writing we read *into*. They are orphan narratives. To appeal to authority would miss the meaning that may be there.

A Dostoevski may retain the trace of counternarrative. Certainly much of Dostoevski's interrogation of human motivations and interactions leave a trace outside a larger Narrative. The uses of political discourse by Afro-American prison writers drawn into their narratives also draws these narratives towards a larger Narrative. Obviously, a counternarrative does not transmute with the introduction of elements of larger Narratives. These

counternarratives depend on readers for vitalization. Single readers are best. A counternarrative will never bring consensus at the book club.

However, counternarratives can make no guarantee of meaning. They remain unconvinced and unconvincing. They may do much ravelling and unravelling and find themselves powerless to resist the Narrative, unable to stand without the authority which corrupts them: we are chained to the world and we all got to pull. So counternarrative makes no guarantees.

I wrote of my feeling of affinity for Primo Levi, the young chemist trying to ignore the implications of fascist Italy. As someone who dabbled in chemistry at the same age he struggled to become academically qualified as a chemist, I look back and realize the irony chemists know about the world. Chemicals decompose, change their nature. They may do this slowly or quickly, but they do change by the mere fact of being of the world. Our world has a chemical compostition, all of it. It changes. Yet thinking is predicated on the notion we can fix the world, know it in its one true form. We want to know the one meaning the world has. This is a fool's errand.

CHARGE/TRIAL/COMMITTAL

I referred earlier to the Little Tree controversey. It is an instance of the text creating the author. But it is more, as well. When the created 'author' was not identical with the corporeal author and his history, a new 'author' was created, and a new text. This case demonstrates the difficulty in valorizing

the disappearance of the author, imagining it to be a straightforward unidirectional operation. Text and author are in play together forever, and have the ability to change one another as time and circumstances might permit. In his essay, *What is an Author*, Foucault endorses the notion that in 'fiction' particularly, a type of writing he distinguishes readily from other discursive modes—he refers in particular to what he designates as scientific discourse—the text creates the author, and perhaps should in order to recreate the 'author' function.

The Little Tree fiasco suggests this construction is far too simple. In the first instance, the text ***The Education of Little Tree*** did create an author, one to whom a certain 'authenticity' attached, one whose text might be taught in universities as representing the experience of Native Americans raised in a white milieu, one who understood the experience as it is. Then the former speechwriter for George Wallace, a politician who had advocated segregation of the races, was discovered. The author created by the text was now thought to be the author of a betrayal and a deception. The text of history had overtaken the text in print, and had recreated the author. No outside of the text? Perhaps, but the entirety of the events were outside of the discursive fields of the printed text. Certainly all the dynamics that could create such a situation were pointed to in the printed text. But the specific turns of chance and circumstance were not. I recall Burroughs' essay on coincidence and think this series of events is not coincidence, but magic. There is something to learn here, something more than Henry Louis Gates' conclusion: "Something is authentic as long as we believe it is." I think we may be

called upon to abandon categories of 'authentic' and 'inauthentic.' Perhaps it even makes sense to abandon categories of 'true' and 'false.'

Certainly the categories of 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' should be under question for the intellectual disposal squads. Foucault puts fictive discourse alongside 'scientific' discourse, traces their respective histories and seems to suggest they require different rules of constraint because of the 'dangerous' nature of our perceptions of authorship where fiction is concerned. However, the notion of seeking standards of incommensurable constraints for 'fictive' and 'scientific' discourse is difficult to sustain. Any understanding I can gain concerning, for instance, theoretical physics over the last hundred years suggests much of this discourse concerns imaginative projects which have many of the attributes of fiction. Told one way, theoretical physics may be a fiction; told another it may be a myth. And told yet again another way, with theories held to standards of falsifiability, it may in fact be what Foucault refers to as 'scientific' discourse.

According to the construal of Rorty, it is not intelligible to speak of an Einsteinian understanding of some aspects of the physicality of the universe as more 'true' than a Newtonian one. It simply is more compatible with the contingencies of a contemporary vocabulary than Newton's understanding. The history of quantum theory suggests we can no longer imagine the universe without using the kinds of faculties we use to understand fiction. The 'author' issue for scientific discourse is at least as mutable as for fictive discourse. A good theoretical physicist may need the qualities of a good

storyteller every bit as much as the qualities of a good scientist. In fact, it seems scientific discourse, at least where theoretical physics is concerned, has learned to use the modalities of fiction out of necessity.

We have arrived at a place where method must ask the question: to make or find the world? It seems we find we have made the world and make the finding of the world. Does method, or the disciplines which hobble into the light on that crutch find or make Truth/Reality? As long as I am unable to answer this question, I must leave aside method as such (and disciplines, because currently they cannot stand without their crutch, have in fact become the crutch). I seem to recall Rorty articulating this dilemma in ***Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature***. Method finds the reality that it makes. This is important and useful. It services some of our needs some of the time. But is irrelevant most of the time to most of us living in the world. How can we find the world when it is not lost?

If I wish to turn prisoner narrative and prisoners into ciphers in order to populate a universe of ciphers, I will have some questions and maybe some answers. But the proper questions must emerge, they must not be force-fed with ciphers. If I wish to use prisoners to propel polemic, there will be no room for ciphers or questions. Interpretation has the power to begin again, has always already begun. It has appeal but I am not committed. Interpretation, polemic, won't suffice any more than method; none of them can do the job alone. How do I proceed in this bramble? Cautiously, and avoid all the thorns? Swiftly, and tend to the wounds once I emerge?

The methods of dominant discursive modes in appropriating subjectivity command my attention first. In following this attention, I feel the degrees of surprise, shock, betrayal, and disgust of Carl Harp, George Jackson, Malcolm X, and Monster Kody Scott. Recapitulating Nietzsche, Foucault writes:

> Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination. (*Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*; in ***The Foucault Reader***; p.85)

While I agree with this point of view, I make no claim of truth for it. It is simply the view my contingency makes available to me. It has all the compelling features of good fiction, but I can not oppose it to a point of view which sees a human destiny in universal reciprocity and suggest one is less true than another. The method here is to know my own prejudices, know they are contingent, and know I shall not likely call all these prejudices mine throughout my life. I wish also to raise the possibity that the notion of 'fiction' put up by Foucault is far too slight for the actual prevalence of fiction. I believe elements of fiction exist in all writing, and see metaphoric language and rhetoric parading through the lands of discursivity as fact, truth and reality.

In considering method, a further thorn of irony looms. What I hope becomes evident in examining the writings of prisoners is that method employs itself as a means of forgetting and obscuring. We may believe this of all method: to

remember is also to forget. What we draw into the light helps us forget and ignore what remains in the darkness.

The courts, the law, and prisons must forget even as they remember, and sometimes they consciously do so. Judges, in passing sentence, often contend they must put aside some factors and consider others. Certain aspects of an accused person's conduct are held to be mere pretense; motives are ascribed. The apparently good works of an accused double back and are held to be signs of a more profound corruption: " While posing as a community pillar, you abused the trust of the community." Bankers, teachers, doctors have been subject to this kind of charge, seldom true. "First I win their trust, then I betray," ascribes a motivation few have the wicked will to accomplish. You would not realize this listening to judges. They deal in fiction, in opinion, and even convenient opinion. The memory of the criminal justice system wills itself selective or at least interpretative. It purports to give perspective in line with reality; it more likely gives reality in line with perspective.

Part of what we might see in looking into prisons and the narratives of prisoners is the rationalization of punishment obscuring the objects of punishment. As I universalize the criminal, find systems of appropriate study, regulate the activity of prisoners, their movements, I also lose some of my ability to read the text of any particular individual. This is no less true of any institution of modernity than it is of prisons.

I can do no more or less than interpret in the broadest sense. I have not tried to remain true to the texts I use, the voices I have heard. Silence is a commentary as well as an affectation. Such a claim—there is nothing to interpret—is pointless, if not disingenuous. There may be epiphanies of silence when commentary is surpassed, but they are rare. We interpret almost ceaselessly.

My intention is to raise some other possibilities in texts, attune my ear to other timbres in the voices, as the texts and voices can only be 'true' if considered along with the dissonances. And part of what happens here is the monologic of seeing the world in terms of text, author, reader, subject, object, individuals, prisoners, liberty, slavery, begins to decompose. That is my wish and my view.

Scholarship, if we follow naturally from the above, is also forgetting and obscuring. While it may illuminate the spot where it turns its white light of integrity, it throws the borders and beyond into shadow. While it may arrange so many 'facts' in a row (other configurations will do), bidding us to remember just so, it forgets how these facts came into being, how we found them to begin with, or whether we 'found' them at all.

I believe causality will always remain a leap of faith, *auto da fe*, although with time, and in particular instances, the distance we leap may seem to shrink. And Faith was one of the first pretenders Reason claimed to push

aside. Reason inevitably finds itself undermined when no matter how long its journey, its first gesture is genuflection, its first step Faith. It always must be.

But what will rescue me from polemic? Nothing ever does. Would I be well advised to make this a study of rhetorical forms? Perhaps, but I would find that boring and I would end by a tendentious and likely false argument. A certain reading of modernity says civilization is simply well organized and disguised rhetoric and I will live with it.

My infidelities are legion. I cannot remain any more faithful to a method than to texts and voices, and for the same reason. I love all methods, as Descartes loved The Method which kept him warm through the bitter and lonely winter of his twenty third year. I am even partial to monologic from time to time. How I love the old questions—and the old answers. And though I love them, I can not marry with one, for my expectations of them are too slight.

Every hair may be numbered but now I wish to dally with deconstruction, now frolic with phenomenology. Shall I numb you with negative dialectic or nag with negative hermeneutics? At several junctures over the last couple of years, I have looked longingly at most of these and thought, "This could be mine. I understand this. I could explain it and use it." I may or may not have learned something from each, but the rest is an empty dream. I am talking now, talking with readers and writers who have been important to me over the last several years.

I come again and again to these conclusions. All texts are commensurate. No texts are commensurate. We can choose either, both, or neither. Because I find the category of text itself dubious, I know what I am doing when I choose either. And to bring to life one set of circumstances as reality necessarily means losing a universe of possibilities. To have my conversations under the streetlamp with these writers means I lose something. Thankfully, at least tonight, I do not miss what I have lost.

SPEECH OUT OF THE SIDES OF OUR MOUTHS

(Any number of clichés attach themselves to prisoners. One is the prisoners on the yard talking out of the sides of their mouths to avoid being overheard. They direct their speech to an audience they want to hear them and away from one they do not want to be overheard by. I use this phrase below mostly for the fun of it, but also to indicate speakers inform those they wish to inform and audiences hear when they can hear. With writing the audience one gets is the audience who wants to understand. With this writing I wish to be understood—as a writer.)

In considering what may constitute conversation, speech and speech-acts, Bakhtin's notions of the text demonstrate a broad enough sense of text and speech to be helpful. He defines the 'book,' i.e., the text, as a "verbal performance in print, ...calculated for active perception, involving attentive reading and inner responsiveness, and for organized *printed reaction."* ***(Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,*** p. 95. As quoted in ***Jean Genet and the Semiotics of Performance***, p. 33).

I have provoked this talk, this writing. I must take liberties with the form. I already am. It is because I want this writing to be a work of imagination, not reportage, not analysis for its own sake, not the husk of writing. I want to write for all the reasons writers write.

So it is my relationship with writing that is under question here first. I am the subject who must realize my object nature to come into my subjectivity as I would write it. I am inserting myself in a situation which demands I look at this. I look to the others who have written themselves to give me some sense

of the tasks. (The how of the thing, they need to know about that.) A conversation with individuals who have lived and died by words is what seems right.

I am in conversation with writers. This is a strange form. I talk *with* writers and report *to* my reader. I want to avoid this, but I am already imprisoned by the form of the thing, the very *idea*. I wish to escape but know I can only carnivalize the writing: The Menippean Thesis. But maybe that's the way it has been all along. At the very least I intend to take the form itself and allow it to function as self-interrogating. And there is a dual meaning to this self-interrogation: I ask the form to interrogate itself while calling into question the notion of 'self' as found in subjectivity and subjectness. Let us begin by imagining, with Bakhtin, speech and writing to be somehow commensurate and we are conversing. All of us.

To get these writers to talk to me I have had to imitate their accents. Speak their lines, appropriate their idiosyncrasies. Flatter them, and they love to be imitated. Enjoy their perversities. For Bakhtin I used inserted forms. Verse for the poets. Realism for the realists. Theory for the theorists. Others left me speechless. Imitating Burroughs on any level is presumptuous. Writes like a major. They shout at me tonight, wheedle, can't stop, won't stop.

Part of what I wish to accomplish is a wresting away from my time and contemporaries the vocabulary used to describe me. According to Rorty in ***Contingency, Irony and Solidarity***, this is my mission as an ironist. As a

literate member of a literate society, I seek to own my vocabulary and to open those possibilities foreclosed by vocabularies already in place. And with this vocabulary I seek ultimately to establish a description of myself, a self-redescription. This seemingly simple two step method presents formidable obstacles, however.

The first obstacle is the vocabulary already in place in my time and employed by my contemporaries. No easy thing to escape and evade. For some years now I have tried with only limited success. I have sometimes tried consciously, sometimes not. As if it were an instinct, a response wired into my autonomic system, I have always tried to evade and escape. The nomenclators, armed with discourse, are intent on making me their prisoner.

I aim at self-redescription because what I feel most vividly and have since I began to enter into the world, is the appropriation of my subjectivity. As if to say I am already embedded in discursive strata, the nomenclators wink and nod: we know you, you belong to us.

Another barrier to vocabulary for the ironist is irony itself. Irony is the trope which speaks against itself. The ironist finds irony itself undermining the effort to establish a vocabulary for self-redescription. Established vocabularies have an iron hold when unopposed except by those voices which speak against themselves. They may ignore such voices or use them for self-incrimination. The best the ironist can hope for is a provisional vocabulary.

If I am seeking a vocabulary, it is necessary that I enter into conversations and learn and turn figures of speech. These conversations are held in a variety of venues, in this posture and that, and over a period of time: Inside or Outside; Reader or Writer; Then or Now; and so on. And yet, I also wish to avoid these oppositions. With Burroughs I see the whole of literate civilizations as prisons: no Inside/Outside; no binaries. Pushing literary theorists a little further, I see the Reader disappearing along with the Author, perhaps disappearing into the author. How about time? Well, it's impossible to get the Then out of Now or Now out of Then.

I wish first to have a vocabulary, and after so long am astonished to find I still do not possess this essential. How long will it take? I am coming to believe it is forever an unfinished task. The vocabulary I have today will find itself distorted and denatured soon enough.

But someone or something ought to be knowable, fixable or at least to be able to have knowing speech. I wish to say this is indisputably and (superfluously) irrefutably true. This also is denied, but I must dance the jig that signifies this is not so.

Right now I think the task is to enter a conversation with a community of readers who are writers as well. But it will seem odd, especially announcing it now after it has already begun. Many of these writers and I have been in conversation a long time. Others, like Villon, I have been talking with only over the last two years or so. And he brought so much to the conversation.

Others I had spoken with and who spoke to each other had neglected to mention him, or I had not noticed. So the conversations began again. This is a conversation which occurs over a long period of time and we have come to know each other intimately. From time to time and sometimes for a long time, other things have occupied my attention. So the conversation stops and starts fitfully.

The how of it is difficult as any honest conversation is, any conversation in which we must confront together unpleasant realities. We know now the Word Villon took for freedom itself is just another prison. It took Dostoevski a trip to the gallows and a decade in prison or Siberia to suspect. It was necessary for Sade to spend twenty seven years in prisons and madhouses, mumbling ceaselessly about the prisons of desire and reason and recording every syllable until the obscenity of his disordered desire and reason was surpassed by his prolixity. It took the shriek of Artaud, and finally the deadpan wiseguy utterings of Burroughs: RUB OUT THE WORD.[1]

Writing, by one reckoning, is an act of theft, of appropriation. So can reading be. We are savvy enough readers and writers to know this. Some writers might resent this theft, others know it to be unavoidable. So we forgive each other our transgressions, those who are sensitive to such things. Burroughs would promote the thefts on the basis of the transgressive dimension alone. It would put writing in its place. In fact, in his essay *Les Voleurs*, he does exactly that. Plagiarism is a silly shibboleth, he says. After all, he appropriated a number of writers when producing his cut-ups. And

appropriated his own writing again and again, resetting the same passages and characters in a variety of different textual environments.

These appropriations are at the very heart of writing and reading. If we understand art history's relevance to writing this is immediately apparent. Pictorial art has always appropriated what has gone before and we have come to understand many paintings in relation to the paintings they have stolen from. It is quite legitimate. In fact, we valorize many paintings on the basis of their appropriations. The same is done in writing but somehow the hunger for something called originality has a very strong hold. Burroughs calls originality a 'fake.'

Burroughs' approach to writing seemed most fitting to what I wish in this writing. I have certainly seen an aesthetic affiliation and have tried some of his techniques. Repetition of passages whole is the only line I have drawn.

Lydenberg in his Burroughs book, ***Word Cultures***, suggests:

> Burroughs translates the vertical hierarchy of right over wrong into a horizontal and biological confrontation between different life forms. Similarly, the hierarchical structure of interpretation, assuming ascension to a symbolic meaning or moral intention which 'justifies' a literary text, is undermined by Burroughs' insistent literalness....Burroughs offers experiments scientifically detached and uncommitted, a horizontal arrangement of shifting and random juxtapositions....Burroughs' lateralizing of discourse frustrates conventional critical analysis. (p. 10)

This lateralizing of discourse is to some degree the aesthetic moment of *this* writing. Narrative has traditionally and primarily taken a linear aesthetic as its form and motivation. Only fairly recently has this manacle of origins and ends been confronted. But as Burroughs and others point out, the linearity of discourse is not congruent with experience. Discursive conventions may be questioned for their lack of mimetic integrity in that case, and if the reader is so inclined.

My readings are lateral, as surely as those I am having my readerly/writerly conversation with, talk out of the sides of their mouths. This, Lydenberg calls "....a critical procedure which would consist primarily of citation and juxtaposition" (ibid, p. 11). Juxtaposition is the most prominent procedure of the writing at hand. Juxtaposition, at least for the time it takes us to learn a more lateral approach to discourse, may then produce exactly the kinds of responses to writing Burroughs aims at. I take a slightly more eccentric view of citation.

I do not care for citation as a 'procedure.' It is often either sycophancy or arrogance. When it is not, it may be simply a tired salute to the ghost of textual authority. I have misread some texts in a way that citation is as likely to reject my reading as to confirm it, which is expected. Citation when it is not used to buttress arguments, to shore up tendentious discourse, may have some value to vitalize reading and writing. But I do not feel the urge to narcissistically point to my own misreading of a kind. I have certainly imposed my intentions on certain texts. Others seem to impose theirs on me.

But citing rigorously for my point of view may undo the good magic of juxtaposition.

Let us take a closer look at juxtaposition. I am juxtaposing the texts and readings of other writers and readers with each other's and my own. I also am juxtaposing authorial signatures each with the other and with my own. I am writing in such a way as to juxtapose differing voice and narrative locus. The effects I desire of these juxtapositions are to open new or different textual space, interplays of texts and readings, to summon new voices and to find new narrative loci. Not to write or read into these spaces myself (although I have and will), but to invite a reader to do so. And readers seem to be doing this very well, surprising me in the process, jumping on this writer's preconceptions concerning what he has accomplished or failed to accomplish.

The writing here is far more allusive than explicatory for many of the same reasons. My (mis)readings are not intended to dominate the texts at hand, nor is the text under composition meant to dominate itself or readings of itself. I do not wish to participate in a recomposition of subjectivity. If anything along that line is worth doing it is confined to the personal, that is to my own subjectivity or a reader's.

My treatment of the writing of women prisoners is slight to non-existent. If I give reasons it will seem disingenously self-justificatory. However, men do outnumber women in prison ten to one. Many women who have written from

prison have written from a political position, having been imprisoned for their participation in the suffragist, liberation, or in peace movements. These women have a good deal to say worth hearing on political and other issues.

This brings me back to themes. To use juxtaposition and citation in too conventional a fashion leads to the readerly/writerly dead end of dominating texts and readings. This I wish to avoid. To find themes among such disparate writers as those involved with the present conversation implies a misreading of a certain kind, one that confuses intentions of writer and reader. I can half believe any of the thematic intentions I impose on these texts are conjurings, literary juju. So I reiterate: 'themes' are imposed; they have not emerged from the texts.

We know better than to think Villon thought of himself as related to any notion of a autonomous subject or a version of Logos recapitulating a certain version of the history of thinking about and describing the world. Villon wanted to assert his being and did so through his meditations of that being in poetry. He spoke out of the side of his mouth and wrote on the side of himself: that gives him a stake in the particular notions of the subject and subjectivity I write of here. However, to imagine his themes are mine is to confound. It is also a natural act always found at the crossroads of reading and writing.

The community of prison writers carries on a conversation of readers who read each other closely. Pound read Villon avidly and composed an opera

with Villon as centre. Corso reads Villon as a colleague. Genet chooses Villon as his model for life and poetry at one point. Towards the end of his career Genet salutes Dostoevski as the author of ***The Brothers Karamazov*** because the text 'destroys' itself. Dostoevski visits Breytenbach in prison, silently questioning the South African and occasionally inspecting his own dirty finger nails. Why doesn't Fydor talk more? So many voices in his writing but he refuses to state his point of view. Good for you Fydor, but tonight I'm going to nail you down: all your beliefs must come into view with no alibis. No more confession out of the side of your mouth or with a sidelong glance, as Bakhtin puts it. We writers from prison know each other, know the familiar rants each brings to speech. We could compose a canon.

Some of these voices are louder. Like those above. The rest make silent space to hear these. They are revered ones. We also make space to hear the softer voices, the ones from outside our experience. These voices favour *genres*, or so a certain kind of reading imagines. Breytenbach, Dostoevski, Jackson and Serge are partial to autobiography. In this they are representative: autobiographical forms are favoured by prison writers. I think we find the honesty pointed to in 'I speak' one of the chief powers of prison writers.

Villon certainly wrote an autobiographical form of poetry, although some *Villonistas* will be at great pains to inform those slovenly lay readers he is merely assuming an authorial voice. Ignore the autobiographical traces and let the Art speak for itself. (I wink at my reader and mock-whisper

'rubbish.') Dostoevski and Serge employed first person narrators, and both wrote in the genre of the autobiographical novel.

It is not unreasonable to begin with Villon and his attempts to flee his manacles, to break the Chain, to establish a subjectivity, his own, until then unknown. This is a conversation which has carried over five hundred years and has many other speakers than Francois and me. Davies writes of a Hungarian gypsy prisoner, a contemporary, conversing with *le pendu,* appropriating him lovingly, line by line.

We can not easily impute causality between the idea of 'prison writer' and the tight focus on subjectivity inherent in the autobiographical forms. But autobiography is a sensibility to which the prison writer is given. His first gesture is forced in the confession. The prison writer knows the secret: the only ground worth fighting for is the ground where subjectivity is made and remade, where humans make and remake themselves and the world.

Feyerabend writes of the incommensurability of texts. He is right and wrong. It is an act of imagination that makes texts commensurable. And his imagination makes them incommensurable. I can go either way, and have. In the long run, I am more comfortable using my imagination to make certain texts commensurate, but only when I keep in mind it is by an imaginative act they are so. Although he qualifies his notion of incommensurability as relatively rare and imagines it most common between texts from different epochs, I think it possible in/commensurability may be a matter of will.

Back to the imaginative work. I use my own imaginative writings to bring closer the prison and its inhabitants, bring them into focus. But primarily it is a way to bring my experience into this discourse. This writing is the subject of the work at hand—the writing and the experiences it stands for. For a long time we have been trained to think we need to put it farther away if we wish to see it clearly. Put in place all the clanking machinery of subject observing object. I'm pretty sure that won't work. I'll try another way.

Bakhtin points to polyphony in Dostoevski as marking a new sensibility in writing. The multivocity of Dostoevski, created by dialogic interaction, breaks down the hold of ideology on literature. Bakhtin sees this as reaching its full realization in Karamazov. I would think the multivocity of the Underground Man would be a good starting point. The dialogic interaction is not the focus, but a polyphony issues from the one individual who carries so many voices. Ideology cannot stand here either. A voice as interested in interrogating itself as the world is one I will listen to.

On the yard

Results

CORPSES AND CARNIVALS

I wish to clarify the notions of subjects I will work with here. First is the subject of the *cogito*, the subject who wields subject-centred reason as a tool, but only at the price of becoming one of Reason's objects, its primary one. Second is the subject who constitutes selfhood and identity. Both these subjects are intimately connected, bound in the notion of subjectivity. It can not always be clear they are separate, nor should it be. If we wish to trace the rise and fall of the subject, perhaps an ideal place to begin is with the unravelling, where neither rise nor fall, composition nor decomposition is certain. Here we uncover a great unease, a dis-ease, and perhaps no author found himself drawn to this unease nor draws so well the unease than Dostoevski. After him, there is no literary prison space where he is absent. Breyten Breytenbach was visited by him in his South African prison cell, he comforted Serge, and Genet certainly spent nights in his cell endlessly questioning Dostoevski. I, too, conversed with him in my cell.

If we are to begin a conversation with Dostoevski let us also invite Bakhtin. He was Dostoevski's great literary friend and interlocutor who presents a (mis)reading of the author powerful enough to do justice. He is a kind of posthumous critical amanuensis. His Dostoevski project was complete even before he entered the gulag. Good evening, my friends, my fellows in joyful hysteria and suffering clarity.

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Bakhtin holds several interesting theses concerning Dostoevski. The ones most necessary here are the notions of the menippea and carnivalized literature and the polyphonization of literature, that is, the breaking of the hold of monologic on literature. In brief, Bakhtin suggests that a number of genres, including the confession, the Socratic dialogue and the menippea, belong to a carnivalized literature. With the term menippea, he indicates a kind of literature which undermines accepted truths. He means a great deal more by the term. We will return to these notions, but some further illumination of the terms will help. Carnivalized literature has yet more specific characteristics, and has developed from the medieval communal dramatic spectacle. The *danse macabre* such as Villon might have witnessed in Paris graveyards in 1450 would be such a spectacle. The spectacle of public executions shares much with these dramas.

A text Bakhtin treats only in passing is ***The House of the Dead***, Dostoevski's novel written from his own prison experience. This novel sets a very modern mark for verisimilitude, subjectivity and novelistic realism by use of a now familiar device. In the 'Introduction,' the narrative locus establishes itself through a first person voice giving access to a second voice, also first person, by way of the discovery of a cache of papers belonging to the convict-narrator. Thus, a distance and filter present themselves, yet through these we are meant to come closer to accepting the 'truth' of the text, a mimetic paradox, occasioned by notions of the subject and its relationship to reason.

We are meant to trust what follows, a trust Dostoevski divorces with the publication of ***Notes from the Underground***, his next novel and the inauguration of the large projects of his remaining writing life. In his prison novel, we find the author soon pointing to what will be one of the other 'great themes' of his ensuing novels, the illusion of the outward and the battle of the interior individual and his exterior. The convict-narrator comments early on the concern of the convicts with fitting in, with 'good form,' with appearances. (***The House of the Dead***, p. 33) This seems a strange preoccupation for those who have been judged to not fit in, and yet this is true in every prison as it is in every society. In some ways, the need to fit in the prison setting is a matter of life and death. Those who do not fit in a prison setting, the 'skinners' (rapists and molesters), informers, and the mad, will be driven out or killed. That is black letter law in prisons.

In his short story, ***Bobok***, the author imagines a narrator who enters the land of the dead and invites the corpses who inhabit it to make merry before moving on to a more terminal stage of death. Reminiscent of Villon's Hanged Men, this land of the dead is where Bakhtin sees a resounding example of 'carnivalized literature' and the 'inside-out' view it takes of the world. In some ways, we can construe this as a gesture towards the surreal, to dada, and against Reason. Certainly, Dostoevski's lack of faith in Reason, his perception of its frailty is widely evident. Since Reason is both the servant and the master of the subject, the subject's trustworthiness is questioned again and again in Dostoevski, as is the subject's relationship to the truth. He finds the methods of the subject unsound.

In ***Notes from the Underground***, Dostoevski makes clear the agenda which will guide his literary production for the next twenty years. He raises again the perverse concern with outward appearances and its hold on the behaviours in the realm of social interactions. Finally, the inner voice speaks and belies all appearance. What is underground is the seething perversity of the inner man. Narrative voice is not just in doubt, but invites the reader to distrust it completely. And the author, that tiresome malcontent, confuses and irritates us. One might even say Dostoevski invites the reader to distrust the entire enterprise of writing and by implication reading. Neither outward appearance nor the inner voice which quarrels with it is reliable. Dostoevski seems to say, we cannot trust even ourselves: we are capable of only delusion. In the following passage the Underground Man changes the narrative rules—and notions of the subject—in ways that continue to have effects on world literature:

> Now I am forty. I used to be in the government service but am no longer. I was a spiteful official. I was rude and took pleasure in being so. I did not take bribes, you see, so I was bound to find recompense in that, at least. (A poor jest, but I will not scratch it out. I wrote it thinking it would sound very witty, but now that I have seen myself that I only wanted to show off in a despicable way, I will not scratch it out on purpose.)
>
> When petitioners used to come for information to the table at which I sat, I used to grind my teeth at them, and felt intense enjoyment in making anybody unhappy. I almost always did succeed. For the most part they were timid people—of course, they were petitioners....
>
> But do you know gentlemen, what was the chief point about my spite? Why, the whole point, the real sting of it lay in the fact that continually, even in the moment of the acutest spleen, I was inwardly conscious with the shame that I was not only not a

> spiteful but not even an embittered man, that I was simply scaring sparrows at random and amusing myself by it. I might foam at the mouth, but bring me a doll to play with, give me a cup of tea with sugar in it, and maybe I should be appeased. I might even be genuinely touched, though probably I should grind my teeth at myself afterwards and lie awake at night with shame for months after. That was my way.
>
> I was lying when I said just now that I was a spiteful official. I was lying from spite. I was simply amusing with the petitioners and...Inever could become spiteful. I was conscious every moment in myself of many, very many elements absolutely opposite to that. I felt them swarming in me, those opposite elements. I know they had been swarming in me all my life and craving some outlet from me, but I would not let them, purposely would not let them out. They tormented me until I was ashamed: they drove me to convulsions and—sickened me, at last how they sickened me! Now, are you not fancying, gentlemen, that I am expressing remorse for something now, that I am asking your forgiveness for something? I am sure you are fancying that....However I assure you I do not care if you are....(pp. 25-27)

First the narrator pulls us close with his intimate confession, and his reference to his audience as 'gentlemen,' implying the audience is within speaking range. He finishes this passage by letting the audience know he is not interested in any other person's assessment of him, and pushes the audience away. Later he announces that even our notion of audience is false—he does not intend anyone to see his notes. His own assessments of his motives he undercuts again and again. In the third paragraph, he takes direct aim at the struggle between the exterior and interior of the subject.

"I was lying when I said just now that I was a spiteful official," says the Underground Man. His most unflattering assessment of himself is not to be trusted, but can we trust the person who has just confessed his lie? We are

not meant to, of course—he has lied about his spiteful nature out of spite—and with this line Dostoevski puts in doubt the notion of subject and the subject's relationship to a reliable version of reality. We are meant never again to trust the evidence as it is presented to us and we can not. The author withdraws his authority, the subject decomposes.

Dostoevski indicates the subject is unknowable to himself, and that among the conflicting impulses and motivations of humans, we can never reliably know one that is reliably what it appears to be. When altruism is the pretty story we tell ourselves, self-interest motivates us. When we act truly badly we may find we have a good motive.

"I was lying when I said just now...." I believe with this sentence he has set in motion the fall of the subject and a restless dissatisfaction with Logos, again never to be trusted. [2] After four centuries of struggling to establish itself, Reason and the subject who wields it are contemplating decline. Where Villon used poetry to bring his own subjectivity into believable view from the gallows in *Les Pendus*, Dostoevski gestures to the complete unreliability of the subject.

These are grand claims and the Underground Man and his creator would have been the first to dispute them. We would talk all day and all night and discover the disputatious motive to be no other than dispute itself. Nothing else is left when there is nothing to trust.

And certainly there is little to trust. Although the Underground Man relentlessly exposes his perversity, his nastiness, his pettiness, he is a liar. And someone who admits he enjoys his perversity. Written to conform to autobiographical forms, quite explicitly the untrustworthy narrator tells us autobiography is self-justifying, unreliable and tends to prevarication. But then, this comes from a liar.

What Dostoevski brought into focus we still struggle with. Many authors who are aware of the unreliability of the subject, who struggle with this situation, are nonetheless forced to work with the discredited tools and methods of Reason. Michel Foucault is one. He caught himself again and again imprisoned by Reason, by his subject-centred consciousness. Academic and academic renegade, desiring to undermine systems and ironically a generator of systems (or antisystems), Foucault's difficulty may be viewed vividly in his treatment of documents from the nineteenth century dealing with a case of parricide. One of his strongest gestures is against the unexamined entering into of discursive formations. Yet he may seem to reinforce the notion these formations have power in themselves so compelling we must enter into them. It is a paradoxical formulation: humans give discursive formations such power as to be forces of nature, but to examine them from this angle also cedes to them this power. Foucault may be seen as the Grand Inquisitor of discursive formations, and their unwitting champion. Logos is a trap, a prison.

The murderer at the 'centre' of Foucault's treatment is recognizable in the vocabulary of Dostoevski, an individual unmoved by Reason. The murderer's motives attempt to conform to Reason's movement, but ultimately are a mad assertion of his subjectivity. Or at least, the discursive formations we work within force us to see him this way.

The difference between the treatment Foucault allows a Pierre Rivière and Dostoevski allows the Underground Man may be accounted for in the difference between what we know under the signatures of academic and fictional modes of writing. They are in many ways the same narrators, or same kind of narrator. They are clearly beyond reason and on a mission many would judge mad. The real difference is who represents them, at least in my mind. Foucault thinks he may abandon the narrator to the nineteenth century accounts and simply produce the 'dossier'. Dostoevski believes he must represent his creation fully by allowing his creation multivocity and the muting of his writer's authority.

THE DOSSIER

I sat down and stared at the foot thick bundle of folders across the buffed gloss of the conference table. The man who had placed it there nodded as I commented on the individual whose files he had his hand on. Apparently the individual described in the files had been described in them in terms compatible with the comments I was now making. Occasional nods of the head from the man across from me told me so. (At moments like that I wonder how crazy I have become.) More lines in the files would ensue from my comments; additional comment from other individuals would join these; processes set in motion by these comments would necessitate more files. The individual I think I know will be written, perhaps in a way I recognize, perhaps not. But he will be written.

Institutions write individuals. The narratives created incorporate both written and oral elements. These disperse and re-coalesce, are interpreted, and re-interpreted, and come to life again; eventually, they reach a critical historical mass when the institution no longer troubles itself with the individual or death intervenes. The narrative is a completed dossier and committed to storage after a suitable period of inactivity. Often these narratives are decades in the composing. But finally the written individual arrives, and for most this is the identity which inhabits the future. As a general case of this institutional writing, the written prisoner is particularly vivid. We write prisoners in tendentious, intricately articulated though sometimes crude and moralistic discursive modes.

If we follow a certain line of reasoning, institutional prisoner narrative yields the author of the narrative, the prisoner. We then assign authorship to the narrative, author created from pure narrative. And to carry this further, the representational discourse written against—layered over—the individual and

his /her context, soon displaces the individual and context so we are finally able to only think the representation and have difficulty with recovering what or whom has been represented. Perhaps this labyrinth drives autobiographical writing, the writing where identity and being set their limits against the past and future. In the guts of a discursive practice where being is in doubt, the writing prisoner sets about displacing the representation which has displaced being and identity, creating a counter-representation in effect.

As an instance of writing the prisoner, ***I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, sister, and brother...A Case of Parricide in the 19th Century***, offers a troubling moment of departure. The text, edited by Michel Foucault, does more than it proposes. The morphology of the text seems to support Foucault's claim that Rivière is "at the very centre." A 'Preface' by the editor, contemporary documents, and commentaries precede the compelled narrative of the prisoner. The narrative is followed by analysis of context by Foucault and some colleagues. So this narrative of the prisoner finds itself swimming between the 'Preface' by Foucault where the claim of centrality is made, and the section entitled 'Notes,' a collection of commentary by Foucault and his colleagues. Eddying closer to the narrative of Rivière are court documents, newspaper accounts, expert medical opinion, and so on.

It is a curious instance of intellectuals taking up the gestures of bureaucracy, and exhuming the long dead murderer and his narrative only to (re)write him in such a fashion as to push him not to the 'centre,' but to the margins, to employ the terms of this genre of discourse. More properly, the weight of

literate attention brought to bear on Rivière and his narrative have him crushed and compressed: he has been reduced to near invisibility.

And, ironically, having vowed to avoid the 'trap' Rivière's text sets, Foucault and company avoid commentary on the narrative itself. Direct comment would invoke one of the "discourses (medical, legal, psychological, criminological) which we wished to use as our starting point in talking about it." We are pointed towards ignoring the text—and its subject—altogether. Thus, the text Foucault and his colleagues have created moves toward the erasure of the subject of the narrative.

Ironic because Foucault's reception in many quarters has been as on the side of prisoner, gays, the mad.[3] The explanation seems to again point to the curious bureaucratic gesture: "But the main point for us was to have the documents published" (p. xiv). This assemblage of documents and commentary produce a view of emergent discursive formations during epochal discursive shifts, that is the early nineteenth and late twentieth centuries. But Foucault's main point, "to have the documents published," undermines his promotion of questioning discursive formations to some degree. Foucault would likely not have taken exception to being perceived as on the side of documents.

Because the French state recruits intellectuals as functionaries with an avidity alien to North America, the gesture becomes understandable. And

emblematic of the teleology of carceral discourse. The discourse wishes to displace the individual.

And because the narrative exists and is consubstantial with the murder, according to Foucault, forming what Foucault refers to as the "narrative/murder," we may see a proto-writing of the prisoner writing. The narrative suggests writing was "to surround the murder...." Rivière intended to write his motivations and the crime they led him to prior to the act itself, or so his narrative suggests. As it happened, the written text only came about while he was in custody. However, we may certainly construe the narrative preceding the crime; or it might be suggested the murder intended to bring into being the narrative. Foucault brings into question the notion of a destabilized authorship in a partially clear way: in the twentieth century, ***I, Pierre Rivière...*** exists under the signature of Michel Foucault. And with more furious irony we notice how he orphans the text and its author. This author did not just disappear; a death squad of academic bureaucrats 'disappeared' him.

What we have is a narrative (P. Rivière)/murder/(P. Rivière), narrative (Foucault et al)/murder(of P. Rivière et al)....narrative(jw)/murder/(mf et al by jw)...and you?

Having disinterred the parricide and his narrative, Foucault and his colleagues had already begun to rewrite him, any delicacies concerning commentary on the narrative notwithstanding. Foucault, not known for his collaborations

generally, worked with a committee in dealing with the singularity of this murder/narrative, suggesting the bureaucratic move is appropriate for the "dossier".

Foucault's signature is worthy of invocation on a couple of counts. First, he wrote extensively concerning prisons, and the power inherent in discourses, and entertainingly of the history of discursive formations. Second, many sources I have absorbed in the development of my writing (Ioan Davies and John Bender to name two) have been influenced by Foucault. I have not been immune myself and likely have had my views shaped by this individual—finally causing me to look critically at the above cited text.

The point here is not the surpassing gesture, but the humble indication institutions write their subject/objects, and even the most alert individuals who constitute the institutions will write more and less than is intended. The nexus of discursive practices locating the individual who is written may be only partially accurate at best, intolerably tendentious at worst. In this situation the prisoner finds ready motivation to write, to engage both those representations preceding and following.

How the prisoner writes and the result are of interest in understanding the lacunae of the discursive practices at hand. No, that claim may be too grand; it may simply bring a different focus to practices.

CONFESSION/AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Confession is the purest autobiography. We peer directly into the soul of Pierre R. when we read his confession. Although he parodies the confessional, Breytenbach's ***True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*** are also purest autobiography. Despite his modesty at standing naked, he strips down to the bone. Since Augustine, confession is the gesture to the belief that the self needed revelation. This tradition says there is more to identity than the societal roles imposed upon the individual.

If writing is a technology of the self, autobiography is a very intimate form of this technology. But when the individual is written by institutions, writing may be a technology of obliteration, a technology to remove all traces. This technology of obliteration encounters the prisoner progressing through the criminal justice system. In this circumstance the autobiographical forms become an antidote against obliteration.

Perhaps the most prevalent form of prisoner writing is autobiographical in nature. Even those forms deviating from pure autobiography will often be received as autobiographical when they deal with the prison proper. Certainly the autobiographical covers a lot of ground in literature. Autobiography may be seen as a writing against those who write before and after. So call it a kind of alibi, complicating the notion of mimesis from which representational discourses emerge.

The autobiographical forms are so favoured by those writing from prison, a writer who does not use them surprises us. The epic reaches of Pound's ***Cantos***, as a whole, are shockingly incompatible with the autobiographical forms, although many of the poems are replete with autobiographical detail. Going back as far as Villon, autobiography has been a clear note of the prison writer. Since Dostoevski the voices of prisoners speak in the first person nearly exclusively. It has become a much more prominent form in general, but it has pride of place amongst prison writers.

Genet writes four of his five novels in the first person. Breytenbach wrote both of his prison novels as straight autobiography. Serge. The diaries of Gramsci, the journals of Carl Harp and George Jackson.

The devices used by Dostoevski to begin ***The House of the Dead*** reach rudely for mimetic authenticity. In the prologue of Dostoevski's novel, he uses the device of the first person narrator stumbling across the diary of a prisoner in Siberia. The remainder of the novel is the diaries verbatim. With this device, the author intends to bring us close enough to smell the beast. While not specifically a prison novel, the voice of the Underground Man in ***Notes from the Underground*** is a voice of deviancy, a man who has created his own prison, and who would have to be incarcerated by society had he not done so himself. In this short novel, Dostoevski not only outlines the themes which he will work out in his novels over the next twenty years, but also creates the antihero who will inhabit literature so vividly to this day, the man

whose inside is at war with the outside, whose exploration of his own and society's masks and falsities is bottomless. This is the individual struggling for identity and being, attempting a redescription which feels authentic. Its narrative voice is the tortured autobiographical I. What Pierre Rivière accomplishes in his naturalistic confession echoes again in Dostoevski to make a philosophic point, and in Genet the mad confession might be taken for an attempt at mental health or spiritual purity.

Genet, who wrote five novels (including ***Prisoner of Love***, often read too literally as memoir), wrote four of them in identifiably autobiographical modes. And his use of authorial voice in these books gives a short, but highly illuminating, lesson in the complexity of the autobiographical forms. Alternately claiming he created the characters of ***Our Lady of the Flowers*** as stimulants for his onanism, and that he had known these characters both as prisoners and free men, he points to a layered understanding of what the autobiographical novel might mean in relation to 'reality.' While we know some of the events of these novels parallel Genet's history, for much of his history and his fiction we have no authority other than Genet.

One of the themes struck consistently in the autobiographical forms is loss, more specifically loss of innocence. This is particularly so of the autobiographical forms employed by prisoners. A first note of this theme echoes from one of Villon's best known refrains posing the question: "But where are the snows of yesteryear?" "Mais, ou sont les neiges d'antan?" The poem, *The Ballad of Dead Ladies*, strikes a theme of loss and separation

reiterated in many of Villon's poems. He points again and again to the fragility and ephemerality of beauty, youth and innocence in lines like the one beginning: "Where is Echo, beheld of no man....?"

In the autobiography of Chester Himes, the Afro-American writer best known for his *policiers noirs* such as ***Cotton Comes to Harlem***, and in the prison letters of George Jackson, ***Soledad Brother***, the writers describe a moment in their childhood when they became aware of their status as blacks and read that as a life of woe. In both instances it is a moment when they commit some petty crime of adolescence, and learn from their elders that for a black child there is no petty crime—only ones which make invisible chains into chains of drop forged steel.

Genet's novels picture a constant assault on the innocence of young offenders. His quest for sainthood through the religion of ritual crime and betrayal, most fully articulated in ***The Thief's Journal***, may be seen as a gesture to recovering the innocence he felt stolen from himself and his fellows when he was first incarcerated at Mettray at the age of ten. Interestingly, Genet dates his writing career from 1940 when a volume of ***Remembrance of Things Past*** fell into his hands while he was imprisoned.

The adult pictured in Breytenbach's ***The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist***, although a sophisticated citizen of the world in one sense, nonetheless is an obvious innocent, incapable of making the compromises which are the mark of lost innocence. He cannot be like his brothers, one a

general in the South African counterterrorist forces fighting in Namibia, the other a highly placed political functionary. Both his brothers attend his trial and the feelings Breytenbach expresses are as brotherly as they can be for men who actively support a regime intending to imprison him for life at best and to kill him at worst. The entire narrative is written (spoken in a tape recorder) for and to his wife, who will transcribe it; it in many ways sounds and is meant to sound like the sobbing of a hurt child recounting her sorrows to a mother figure, whom Breytenbach ironically addresses as Mr. Investigator. Even innocents and innocence may employ irony.

Even the narrator of ***The House of the Dead*** speaks innocently, naively of his fellow prisoners of the proto-gulag. The Underground Man is a kind of innocent, that kind who finds himself too good for the world and thus must withdraw from the world, or destroy it or be destroyed by it. Innocence is assaulted again and again in Dostoevski: Raskolnikov seeing with Nietzschean blind eyes, imagining if he is only bold enough he may defy the laws of human society and the cosmos; Aloysha who clings to innocence and who is overpowered by the Grand Inquisitor, surely the most powerful voice in the ***The Brothers Karamazov***. And Pierre Rivière is certainly an innocent at some level, (mis)understanding only the dilemma of being driven to a justice achieved by unjust means.

Loss of innocence is a worn theme in any scan of writing. Writing it as "I did not survive," as Breytenbach says explicitly, is the adult's way of saying farewell to the child, the prisoner's way to say farewell to the prison—and the

world. Who inhabits the prisoner who does not survive? The person who can say aloud, "I did not survive"; perhaps the child whose innocent self will surely be replaced by another self whom the child can not survive. The child has innocence ripped from him as the prisoner has the world from her. The land where innocence and the world are obliterated and forgotten is called prison.

PRODUCING THE ALI(E)BI

The first move of the prisoner writing in an autobiographical register is to write back into a narrative that has written the prisoner out in the first instance. It is a knocking at the gate, a demand for release and entry. Writing the prisoner often excludes and erases. Foucault and his colleagues have done so with Rivière, even while at some pains to do otherwise.

The confession Pierre Rivière produced is autobiography of a most vivid and dramatic kind. It speaks as truthfully and falsely as any autobiography. Its antecedents in Augustine and Rousseau set the mark for autobiography. And what Foucault's committee of academics do with Pierre Rivière's confession speaks loudly for the necessity of autobiography.

If Foucault and his colleagues represent Pierre Rivière in the twentieth century, much as medical experts, judges, lawyers, and journalists had in the nineteenth despite the existence of the prisoner's own narrative, we may begin to see the difficulty engaging the prisoner in establishing a relationship

with his or her own being. We begin to focus on the struggle for self-representation for prisoners. The whole carceral process may be seen as a struggle for representation: the prisoner finds himself always already written and represented, an institutional representation of alterity; through writing the prisoner can make a claim to self—representation. There are at least two other modes of representation which come to bear on the prisoner.

The first is the juridical sense of representation: in a trial, a lawyer will represent a prisoner or the accused, and a case is presented. Note the case is not represented, although there may be no practical difference in the presenting and the representing of 'the facts.' What can not be represented may be thought to be not real at all.

So, jurisprudence is satisfied to have 'representation' for the accused, and to have arguments presented. In this context, representations, allowed or disallowed by the court on grounds casuistic at best, tell the tale. In reading the chapter entitled 'Who Were the Convicts' in ***The Fatal Shore***, we get some inkling of how inadequate this acontextual representation is to any notion of the facts, truth, or reality. Here we see the modern history of the convict as a multilayered tale of representations, a history of representation told with a carceral twist. Mayhew's careful taxonomy of the dangerous and criminal classes is present, with the deserving and undeserving poor featured prominently. Apprehended Jacobinism is perceived in much of criminality. Most vividly we see the convict represented and represented and represented:

made real through words, legal processes, moral debate, punishment and exile, and all this guided by representation.

Foucault wishes to not represent Rivière, but to publish documents and comment on context. But what of the murderer's narrative 'trap?' (M. Foucault, what did you expect from this mad and cunning criminal?) "I thought therefore I must not say I represented myself.....," Rivière wrote in his narrative. Having convinced himself, or been convinced by interrogators to display a degree of cunning he did not likely possess, he decided to claim he represented no less than God. As it turns out, he represented his father as he believed himsef mandated by God, but this is lost to Rivière. The point is how keenly aware he is of the play of representations in the crime, how all turns on this.

Foucault claims the murder and narrative 'consubstantial,' but they may also be seen as representations of one another. The murder represents the narrative as surely as the reverse. The 'author' may refer to either or both as what an author might represent. And the author is at various times Pierre Rivière, Michel Foucault et al, and the reader who may see this narrative/murder as either of the already mentioned authors, or in some way wholly different. If they are both representations and consubstantial, something requiring yet another discursive turn may arise.

But the move to write back into the narrative which has exiled the prisoner in the first place makes for some of the prisoner writing's least interesting

moments. Although often generated from sincerity, they make a tired turn, a predictable and unsatisfying one for the reader. "I may be judged guilty, but you will see why I was not really guilty when I have told my story." Or "I really am guilty, but how could I do otherwise in my circumstances—and besides I am not like that any more." These paths into narrative belong to a literature of rehabilitative and exculpatory motives. Like any narrative, they choose points of emphasis, elision, occlusion, and poetics. They aim at redemptive archetype, one of the only two stories there are, according to Borges: the story of an innocent taken to a hill and put on a tree to die, and the tale of the sailor lost a long time at war and on the return voyage to home.

But autobiographical forms can allow for writing on an entirely different order. Both Dostoevski's ***House of the Dead*** and ***Notes from the Underground*** open prison gates and evade the motivations referred to above. Breytenbach's ***True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*** at once parodies prisoner autobiography and puts autobiography in an unaccustomed place of pride amongst literary genres.

Autobiographical writing arcs from the modern to the postmodern with Dostoevski and Breytenbach. Dostoevski copyrights the modern autobiographical gesture of the self at war with the world, while Breytenbach points to the horizon of the postmodern, the self abandoning of the world to doubt. Dostoevski novelistically brings to fullness modernity's doubt of itself, while Breytenbach no longer doubts the doubt (and no longer fears it).

From the guilt assigned with certainty to Rivière to the guilt called into doubt by Dostoevski, the stage is set for Breytenbach. Discourse and reason seen as tools to overcome doubt have been hallmarks of modernity since Descartes, who claimed to prize his doubt and then set about subduing it with his Method—ah, how it kept him warm in that winter of his twenty-third year. Breytenbach sees doubt not only as a tool, but perhaps also as the most significant feature of context. Doubt supplants guilt itself—and innocence.

Innocence and guilt apply only to the innocent and guilty. The rest of us are human. We use these discursive figures more carefully when we are human.

NOTES

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1. This phrase he adopted from Brion Gysin, a worker in the plastic arts. With Gysin, Burroughs worked out many of his theoretical positions and collaborated on much of his cut-up work.

2. We find the distrust of systems of belief reaching a crescendo in 'The Grand Inquisitor' section of ***The Brothers Karamazov.***

3. Foucault's 'side' is of course the most maddening—to some—flourish of the Foucault signature. Is he partisan of the right or left politically? This indeterminacy amused Foucault as evidenced in interviews in ***Power/Knowledge*** and ***A Foucault Reader***, and elsewhere. But certainly it is not unreasonable to say he was on the side those oppressed by institutional discourse used heedlessly and hypocritically. This may be what Simon During alludes to in ***Foucault and Literature*** when he assesses him as an ally of marginal groups. Not without doubts, however (pp. 180-181).

ON THE YARD

SLAMMED

Late July at the prison gate. Federal prison, two years plus: five and a half for Jim this first time out—if his luck held, he didn't kill someone and get caught. Home. Regional Reception Centre. Induction: forty odd souls in 23 cells. And the guards in civvies, Living Unit officers, LUs. A vocabulary to learn. You get so much more out of travel if you learn the language.

And the rituals. Dumped out of the sheriff's van shackled in his street clothes at A&D, Admissions and Discharge. Processed: strip searched; showered down with disinfectant; suited up in green coveralls, no underwear, socks, no shoes. A white-haired, hefty individual with bushy sideburns issued him two sheets, a blanket and two towels. Onto the range, or tier where the cells are. The routines all geared towards prevention of escape. At thirty five, Jim knew his running game was behind him. He tired of the routine quickly.

With new prisoners being processed, some of the residents of the induction unit had begun to hover by the bubble hoping to catch some scent of freedom which might linger on the new arrivals. The bubble was the cage at the mouth of the range, steel plate to hip-level, and Plexiglas above.

A young curl-headed prisoner asked Jim if his name was Gary. Jim said no, but he had known Gary at Remand.

"I'm Mike. Lorne said I should be on the lookout for Gary." Curl head looked hesitant. Then, suprisingly, he asked, "What's your beef?"

Jim looked at him knowing some etiquette was being overlooked. He wondered whether he should answer. He decided he would. "Drugs," he answered simply.

"You can bunk with me. Come on down to my house." Curl head had also made a decision. On what he based the decision Jim could only guess.

As they walked down the range, standing at a cell door about halfway down was a tall, middle-aged, bespectacled individual, red kerchief at his throat.

"I'll be bringing you your food. I'm Bambi," he said. Behind Bambi, lying on the lower bunk languorously was a youngster not yet out of his teens, mascaraed, looking wise and stupid simultaneously.

Mike escorted him about two thirds the way down the range to number 17 and invited Jim in. "I've got the bottom. Put your gear on the top bunk." Jim threw the blankets, sheets, towels, and toiletries on the top bunk. Number 17 had a metal desk and chair, bunks, toilet, and basin, as well as two metal lockers, six feet high and no doors. The lockers stood side by side against the wall of the cell beside the door. The placement of the lockers obscured a corner of the bunks from the window in the cell door, an interior design favoured by prisoners. The floor dimension of the cell was no more than 12

feet by 8. The walls and ceiling were cinderblock, painted cream white. A heavy steel door at the entrance travelled in a metal frame embedded in cinderblock, and industrial grade linoleum covered the floor. Home on the range.

"You bring any dope?" Mike asked.

Jim, surprised, asked, "How would I get any dope in here. I was stripsearched coming in."

Mike looked at him oddly. And then he stated: "This is your first time in the big house. If you want to bring in dope, you suitcase it. Works all the time."

Jim again felt embarrassed by not knowing the language of the land. "Suitcase it? What does that mean, suitcase it?"

Mike looked at him querulously, as if wondering how Jim was to survive in his new and exotic surroundings. Pausing, pondering the effort it would take to counter such ignorance, Mike looked at him, amused. "Shove the dope up your ass, that's suitcasing. Get money in that way, too."

Another pause while Jim pondered this new knowledge.

"Hey. Ballgame's on. I'm goin out on the range to watch TV. C'mon, I'll introduce you to some of the solid guys out there. The others, I don't

introduce you, stay away from them. We got all kinds of rats and skinners here in Induction." Jim knew about rats and skinners from his stay in the provincial jail. The first were informers, the latter sex offenders. Both were trouble—and in trouble.

His first night in the provincial jail, which had real tiers stacked one atop the other, he'd heard a voice from above growling as the lights went out: "Number five's a skinner." Then the muffled sounds of flesh and bone colliding with its kind, and groans accompanying the blows. He'd asked someone the next morning about skinners. And felt stupid when informed.

Mike strode out onto the range. Jim followed less certainly. The TV was against the back wall. Two card tables were pushed to the sides of the range. They accommodated several older prisoners playing bridge. Between the tables were several rows of chairs facing the TV. Jim looked up the range and saw all the inmates had congregated at the end of the range where he now stood. Up by the barrier gate, near the bubble, the range was clear.

Men smoked at the card tables and followed the card games listlessly. Fluorescent lights overhead added to the July heat. Tedium locked the air of the range into the summer's afternoon.

"One hearts," bid a graying, tall, rangy prisoner who then asked, "Hey Mike. You want to play the next rubber?"

"Sure, yeah George. Hey, this is Jim, come in this morning from Remand. He's a fish. And this is Doug, Skull, and Chris."

George peered over his reading glasses, looked Jim up and down. Briskly, glancing back at his hand and then at Jim again, he haled, "How you doin' Jim? Ya play bridge?" George, in his mid-fifties, seemed edgy but confidant in this environment.

"Yeah, I play some. Not much good though," he answered in what he hoped would pass for an ingratiating tone.

Doug now extended his hand. "Jim, welcome to the big house." He was in his mid-thirties, rumpled and weary-looking. His mustache lifted over his wry smile. Jim liked his look.

Skull and Chris, partners in the game, remained silent after looking him over briefly and suspiciously. Jim said, "How are you, gentlemen?" Neither spoke, but took his outreached hand when it came to him. Both had trimmed beards and Skull had a shaved head, his torso emblazoned with tattoos; Chris was in his early twenties, buzzcut hair, and no front upper teeth.

Mike and Jim watched the ballgame and showed signs of interest as bids were made and cards played.

"Count," boomed a voice form the head of the range.

"Cocksuckers," George muttered, his mouth twisting, a brief look of rage passing over his face. He looked at Mike and declared: "We'll have to leave the hand till after lockdown, Mike." Looking back at his hand and then at his opponents, he said authoritatively, "Let's hurry this one up." He slapped the cards down crisply, as did the others at the table. George had some of the quickest, most efficient glances Jim had ever seen. The card players were finished and George had set to scribbling and adding scores in ninety seconds. Around the tables and from the TV viewing chairs prisoners rose and moved slowly, resentfully to their cells.

Jim waited for Mike's cue and followed him. For one awful moment he did not remember which cell was his, but felt reassured trudging after Mike. He tried not to make eye contact with the prisoners moving down the range. Some doors banged as prisoners entered. Most just entered their cells and waited for the guards to come down the now empty range and let them bang the sliding steel doors shut.

"I'm not goin to lock myself in for them," Mike said to Jim as they waited for the guards to make their way down the range.

Mike and Jim took places in the cell. Mike laid down, Jim sat at the steel desk. " What kind of time you get? Ordinarily, I wouldn't ask, but since we're bunking together...." Mike's voice trailed off.

"Five and half years. Sixty six months. Conspiracy to traffic a controlled substance." Jim got his sentence and the charge on the record. Not a skin beef and doing enough time for the drug beef so no one would think he'd ratted. He began to think again how long sixty six months was. He would be well into his forties before it was over. He'd heard about sentences starting out one length and seeming to get longer as more of the sentence was served. No one could explain to him how this worked on the mechanical, legal level. However, only three weeks into his sentence, he had learned prison was a very arbitrary place.

"Controlled substance, huh. What, speed?" Mike asked this with some interest.

"LSD. Never messed with any other drugs for business. How about you, Mike?" Indirect as the question was, Jim knew enough to realize a delicate matter of protocol was involved. And Mike had lost some interest at the mention of LSD.

"I'm flattening out ten on armed robbery. Done nearly seven on this bit. I was out on parole a couple of years ago, but they pulled me back in on more ARs. We're pullin' em right out of the halfway house. Do a bank and lay up at the house. It had a great little alley into its garage. Gave me concurrent time on the new charges. I'll flatten out the ten." Mike told the story resignedly, the last seven years in twenty seconds. Just the way it was, no emotion and no resisting implacable fate.

"Christ, you look pretty young to be doing ten years, if you don't mind my saying so, Mike."

"I'm twenty eight. Started doin' federal time when I was sixteen in Dorchester, down east. Done enough time to be bitter," Mike stated, matter of fact.

"You from down east? I know some people from Halifax and Saint John. Newfies, too. You know Fat Peter?"

" Yeah, I know Fat Peter. That's where I'm from, Halifax. Done a lot of dope with Fat Peter. Where do you know him from?"

Jim was relieved to find they knew someone in common. He was new to Western Canada. "Oh, hell, I knew Peter fifteen years ago in Toronto when we were kids. He sent people out to see me in California. Made 'em some good money, I expect. Hey, Mike what's a fish?"

Mike smiled. A tidy chuckle escaped from his throat. He looked at Jim amusedly. Jim's question was also the answer. "You're a fish, Jim. First timer, new guy."

That night a toaster, two loaves of bread, and two paper bowls containing peanut butter and a Technicolor jelly (loaded with petrochemical byproducts)

appeared on the range. Intermittently, one of the prisoners would make a sandwich and slink off with it like a stray dog. In the summer heat flies buzzed about the sugary substances, never ceasing their patrols of the area. Flies filled the air on the range. Jim remembered he had heard somewhere legions of flies attended Satan and decided he was close. But until he shows his wicked hand we can eat peanut butter and jelly, he thought. Every hour a guard would stroll the range counting bodies.

At ten they did another formal count which required all to return to cells. At eleven they locked Induction down.

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He stared in disbelief, puzzled by the disquisition the rangy, mustached man with the blue baseball cap emblazoned 'US Marines' was giving to the seated group of convicts in the Chapel. Finally, Jim could keep silent no longer.

"So this is a class for us to learn to be prisoners?"

"Inmates. That's correct. You will learn the regulations governing your conduct in this institution," US Marines replied, not even noticing the sarcasm.

"And you say it could take up to three weeks?" Jim asked.

"That's correct," US Marines confirmed.

He couldn't resist: "If I'd realized it was going to be so difficult, I wouldn't have signed up."

US Marines didn't smile and neither did the other prisoners. "There's a lot to learn about getting along in this institution. Now let's talk about Direct Orders. When an Officer says he is giving a Direct Order, you must obey. If you don't you're liable for Disciplinary Action. This could include time in Administrative Segregation, or even transfer to another, higher security institution. "

"What's Administrative Segregation?" Jim asked, looking around at the other prisoners because he knew he might not get a cogent answer from US Marines.

"The Hole," said the prisoner sitting directly behind him, a red-headed, freckle-faced youngster.

"That's correct. The Hole," US Marines affirmed. "The point is, if you disobey a Direct Order there is a range of penalties you could face."

"Like getting shot," said the young prisoner behind him. Not a fish, thought Jim.

"That's correct. If the situation required, you might be shot for disobeying a Direct Order." Again, US Marines gave his disquisition in his matter-of-fact tone.

Something about the term Direct Order offended Jim. He hoped he would never be given one because he would be tempted to disobey. Just to see if they really would shoot, he thought, surprised at the level of his perversity and the darkness of his private joke.

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July turned to August. Two weeks into his sentence. Sixty five and a half months to go. Jim got to go to the library in the main part of the prison, beyond the storm fence. An 'inductees,' movement was restricted for those in the Induction Unit in the prison proper to times when the GP (general population) was locked down. Maybe old grudges would get someone killed, maybe illicit communication would precipitate a riot or escape, maybe dope would get circulated and some poor soul would forget temporarily the hell all around.

On the way to the library Jim spotted a woman in prison garb by the kitchen, the only area where GP seemed to be all day. Blonde, sassy, bottom lip stuck out, she seemed to keep a small group of guards and prisoners mesmerized. Her breasts were bare beneath a V neck T shirt.

Later he asked Mike where the women's unit was. "There's no women here but pigs. What are you talking about?" Mike seemed genuinely confused.

"The blond we saw on the way to the library. Yesterday. She was over by the kitchen."

"Ah, shit, that was Cindy. She's a tranny. She's on hormones. Had you goin' did she? Well, you're not the only one." Amusement showed full on Mike's face.

One morning Jim awoke and realized all at once that everyone in the Induction Unit was there for his own reasons and most were lying about the reason. Many were hiding from enemies, some waiting for transfer to the prison for sex offenders. A few were crazy or getting that way. Regardless, they didn't even seem to be doing time. Just waiting and watching. The tension in the unit was high, as was the insanity quotient. The place was worse than the remand centre in Vancouver where some folks had been awaiting trial over a year.

The kid he'd seen with Bambi his first day was gone one morning. "What happened to your kid, Bambi?" Mike had asked. Bambi shrugged his shoulders. The boy came back four days later, no makeup and bandages around his wrists. By the afternoon the kid had the mascara and makeup back on, heavier than ever. He now wore a scarf about his neck and bright red lipstick on his mouth.

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Corky was a huge, ugly monster of a biker. Six-five, close to three hundred pounds, long, shaggy hair and beard. A kind of woody smell attached to him. He claimed to have done nearly fifteen years in the east and complained frequently of the 'skinners,' casting his eyes at the strangers around him.

Ralph's long black hair was crowned with a red bandanna, He was a thin sad-faced Indian, intense and angry, life having long since lost its sweetness. He'd been in seventeen years, most of it in Maximum. Liked his brew, Mike said, and attacked guards when he had a head full. He'd done most of two years in the Hole at the BC Pen for shanking a guard.

The kid came in after Jim had been there two weeks. He was sixteen and looked fourteen. Within hours Mike was talking to him intently in the small exercise yard. At noon lock-up he told Jim: "The kid's wise, turned tricks on the street. I want to get some. Hope you don't mind, but I want him to bunk with me."

Jim felt sick. At the situation, at Mike's predatory instinct, at his own useless judgments, but said, "Sure, no problem, Mike. I don't know who's got an empty bunk in their house, but I'll check after lock-up."

He ended up bunking with Boudreau, a Quebecois cattle rustler. He explained his scam to Jim. The official charge was fraud. He'd buy cattle

with bad cheques in one town, take them down the highway a hundred miles and sell them at auction. Boudreau was quiet, angry and intelligent. He had done federal time before, on the Prairies. He obviously hated and feared everyone around him.

Jim noticed Ralph spending a lot of time with the new kid. The unit was small enough that even the most discreet arrangements became known quickly. Mike and Ralph weren't discreet: they were pimping the kid around to a few of the other prisoners on the unit. Ralph got drunk and nasty, and slapped one of the customers. The kid hardly talked and was hard to read.

A few days later, he noticed the kid was in Corky's cell at the four o'clock count. After the count, he came out of the cell in a hurry and headed for the yard. Jim didn't see him again. When he asked, he found out the kid had gone for the fence and was now in the Hole. Smart move: he'd got out of a bad situation with other prisoners and had not ratted. He'd 'attempted escape' and would have a 'solid' reputation.

Population can't be worse than this, Jim thought, and started thinking of his plan to get there. He immediately talked to US Marines and said he thought he knew how to be a prisoner, talked to the LU and said he wanted to get into GP and go over to the university program.

They'd all watched him closely enough to know he would not cause too much trouble in GP. They arranged for him to enter the main part of the prison. He

arrived at Unit 11, Two North on August 14. The cell was not a lot different than the one he vacated. A new home. He put his belongings in his new cell and got a pass to the Academic Centre from an old guard.

That evening he read for several hours, listening to the sounds of several hundred men who made the main unit home. He heard cheers for a baseball game on TV. Hushed conversations came from the cells nearby. When he ventured out onto the range, he did so with some nervousness. He knew no one here, although he had been given the name of someone who was housed on one of the other ranges. He had no desire to meet with this individual tonight. He felt the prison was at once very normal and very strange. It would likely be years before he was released and he tried not to think about that. The book he was reading could not keep his mind from the matter of surviving for those years.

DEAD TIME

Someone always has a reason for interrupting the routines of prison, however spurious. When they hadn't been released from their cells after the nine o'clock count, Jim knew something was up although he had only a matter of weeks served on his five and a half year sentence. It would be a long time until he was 'on the gate.' the state of mind a prisoner is in while awaiting a parole hearing or waiting for release after having a successful parole hearing. It is very different from dead time, the time a prisoner is awaiting trial in custody. Dead time can work for or against a prisoner. Sometimes judges take into account dead time when handing out a sentence.

The expression 'on the gate' referred to the distracted state of mind prisoners awaiting release operated with. The everyday of the prison became less concrete, less important to pay attention to in such circumstances. Being 'on the gate' could be dangerous, and it is always a difficult time for a prisoner. Dead time, on the other hand, is just time.

The prison's main unit was laid out as many prisons are. It had three stories, each one having four 'ranges' or cell blocks built to run out from the central part of the building. In this centre part there was the 'bubble,' an enclosure that was steel plate to waist height and Plexiglas from waist height to the ceiling. In it, the guards did their time: they could observe activities on each of the four ranges running off the central area. It was the same on all three floors.

Jim lived on Two North where there had been an empty cell when he moved into Population. Many prisoners housed themselves in social groupings, awaiting a cell emptied by parole or transfer on some prestigious range with friends or lovers. There were ways cells emptied aside from parole or transfer, of course. Jim never moved from Two North in the year he was in the prison.

It was the third week in September, his fifth week in the Main Unit that the first murder occurred. The victim was an Indian on Two South he had noticed as out of place on the second floor ranges. Natives had a range on One North where most housed themselves. Both native convicts and the others sometimes referred to One North as the 'Rez'. So Ben, the Indian on Two South was out of place when he was alive. And now he was out of breath and dead.

He had been stabbed to death. Jim heard later nineteen stab wounds decorated the lifeless Indian's corpse. He also heard the white walls of Ben's cell were covered with large blots and splatters of blood. Others had viewed the bloody crime scene avidly, but Jim had avoided this.

Jim had his own ideas about who had done it, but not a shred of proof. He was thankful for that: he had thought of the impact of having proof of a ghastly crime that he had to keep to himself. You don't hurt those you have

to live with if you want to survive in prison. He wanted to survive. At least, he did then.

So there was a murderer among their number. On the other hand, what did he expect in a maximum security prison with five hundred individuals locked in it?

The week before he'd seen the tall, thin, sandy-haired junkie he'd seen in the Induction Unit walking toward Two South. Jim knew he did not live on that range and he had been wearing a parka in the September heat. The parka had done an inadequate job of concealing the baseball bat under it, and Jim had been surprised the guards in the 'bubble' gave no sign of noticing either the parka or the bat. After all, the visitor to Two South had walked right by the bubble. He had to. Prisons are set up that way.

Jim had immediately sensed something was about to happen. The parka more than anything suggested something strange was about to happen. He would later understand it was not strange at all. A minute or two later there had been muffled shouts from Two South, then crashing sounds like a tall metal locker falling on linoleum. This was followed by thudding blows sounding like a large club colliding with flesh and bone. That's all Jim knew. He hadn't seen the visitor go into a particular cell on Two South and had not seen him emerge from the range. Count came soon and it looked suspicious—he thought—to loiter near the bubble. But then he had thought a parka in summer heat with a baseball bat underneath would be suspicious too.

The prisoners knew something was up when they weren't released after the count that night. They usually had two more hours on the range before lights out after the nine o'clock count. The barrier gate shut at nine, so visiting other ranges was out. But on their own ranges they could shower, visit others on the range, or use the TV room. Not that night. They were kept locked down and then within the half hour the guards did another patrol of the range, looking carefully through the small Plexiglas windows in each cell door. Some prisoners asked the guards " What's up, boss?" The guards gave no reply.

At eleven, the lights on the range remained on. Something serious was going on all right. It was very quiet on the range, and there was activity on one of the ranges on the second floor: every once in a while, when it was very still in the prison, voices could carry several hundred yards from one range to the next. It was almost never that quiet in the prison.

About fifteen minutes after the eleven o'clock count he heard the opening of the full three quarters of a ton barrier gate that blocked off Two North from the rest of the prison at night. It opened with a tremendous and unnerving crash. Voices issued from the mouth of the range. He went to his Plexiglas window and looked out. Two men in suit coats talked to three guards in uniform as the group of them strolled down the range. At each cell they would stop in front and then one of the uniforms would use his walkie-talkie and the cell door would snap open. Then some muffled talk and the sound of

furniture being moved. Occasionally, the sound of the search would become quite loud. They were taking their time getting down the range.

When they got to his cell, the group had some hushed words. The door snapped open. One of the individuals in civvies, identifying himself as Detective Martens of the Matsqui Police Force, asked if Jim knew Ben Joseph of Cell 23, Two South. Jim had never heard the name and said so. Meanwhile two of the uniforms moved items around in the cell, searching. He could feel his heart beating in his chest. The search of the cell seemed half-hearted and they were finished quickly.

Jim had seated himself on the thin mattress on his cot. His mouth was slightly open from fatigue. The guards climbed into his mouth and proceeded to his heart. There they conducted a much more thorough search in each chamber, diligently turning over the emotional furniture of a lifetime. His family were asked to step outside. His wife was handcuffed briefly. They left his heart a shambles and left the way they had come in. Fluorescents buzzed overhead and Jim closed his mouth after the guards had stepped out. The lock on the steel door snapped shut once more. The small group continued down the range. Jim sat still on the cot.

After the detectives and guards had cleared the range almost two hours later, talk began from cell to cell. "Some Indian's been shanked over on Two South," he heard Rick answer someone across the range. "I wonder if we'll

stay on lockdown tomorrow," another voice questioned. "Shit, I hope not," was the response.

It was well after two when Jim fell into a fitful sleep. Still, he awoke before seven and was dressed by the time his cell door snapped open for the day. Looks like there's not going to be a lockdown, he thought. Good. He had no desire to add lockdown to his prison inventory.

Out on the range prisoners made their way to the showers or the barrier gate. He joined the group at the barrier gate. Some leaned against the walls, some crouched, and others stood almost at attention. Somewhat more morose than usual but still talkative, they discussed the previous evening's events.

"Yeah, some chug over on Two South," Marvin, who was native himself, said. "Shanked. I know who the guy is. He was in here a year ago. Got transferred back about two months ago."

"So, is he dead?" Gary the armoured truck robber asked.

"Yeah. I think so."

"Must have been a skinner," Gary speculated. Not an unlikely possibility and after all, Gary won more than his share of cigarette cartons betting on football and hockey games. Gary's hunches were often good.

"I don't think so. Don't know for sure." Marvin was in the usual crouch he went into when waiting for the barrier gate to open. He had a wicked look about him, a jagged scar running from the corner of his left eye to the left corner of his mouth where it barely disappeared into his thin mustache. Here, sober on the range, he was a solid and reliable presence. But on the street, drunk...well, you probably didn't want to run into Marvin with a knife in his hand and a belly full of whiskey.

In the dining hall rumours swirled. They'd already nailed the guy who'd done it. The victim was both a sex offender and an informer. Another rumour had it that it was a bad debt which got Ben Joseph shanked. Any of the stories could have been true. One thing was certain: if the prisoners had only rumours, the police and prison administration were a long way from finding our who had killed Ben Joseph.

Although everyone had expected a lockdown, it never materialized. That was a relief to everyone. People get mighty touchy during a lockdown.

As he returned to his cell after breakfast to get his books, Jerry stopped him by the bubble. Jerry was in on a nine year bank robbery conviction. Blond, thin, a weasly looking fellow of twenty-three, Jerry was doing academic upgrading. Jim helped him with his homework occasionally. Guys who need help should get it, he thought to himself. He helped Jerry with the parts of speech, but realized he disliked him.

In front of the bubble Jerry asked Jim if he'd heard about the murder. When Jim answered he had, Jerry looked a little disappointed. "Hey, you want to go check out the guy's cell? I hear they left all the blood on the sheets and walls."

His stomach did a back flip, but Jim managed an answer: "Nah, Jerry. I'm in a hurry. Got to get to my work area."

He guessed later it wasn't that strange. Just the sort of thing people do: slow down to take in a crash on the highway. You never liked what you saw but you had to see it. Later that night as he passed the entrance to Two South, he looked down and noticed a cell about a third of the way down the range had yellow crime scene tape over the doorway. He turned away quickly and hastened his step.

He heard later Ben Joseph had been on the gate. Ready for release. He had owed someone money or drugs, Jim heard. That's where the story got muddy. Either he could not pay or would not do a favour or insulted the wrong person or.... Too many contradictory accounts surfaced for anyone to be sure of the whole story. Most could agree on one thing though: Ben Joseph was no longer behind fences or razor wire.

That night he tidied up and rearranged his heart. He made room for the bloody sheets and a piece of the blood-spattered wall of Cell 23, Two South. From the TV room he took a chair for Ben Joseph to sit on because he knew

Ben would be tired from losing so much blood. He made room for solicitous Detective Martens to visit from time to time and talk to Ben about who had murdered him. Ben, strictly following the convict code, told the detective nothing. Jim knew he would have to dispose of some old items to accommodate the new arrangement. He had to throw out some parts of speech.

After Christmas they arrested a fellow with sunken eyes and sallow complexion for the murder. He was an Indian, too. Jim had not even known he was in the prison at the time of the murder.

THE GATE OPENS AND CLOSES

Some years ago, my father was dying in a hospital. I was in prison thousands of miles away. My 'case manager,' a man I had dubbed Old Cobra Eyes, perhaps unfairly, told me I could attend his deathbed or his funeral but not both.

I was stunned enough that I felt little resentment at his offer. I had recently been given parole and had a date I was to be let out of prison. But that date had not as yet arrived. I had a decision to make and my father's guidance helped me. When I was quite young he had explained the beginning of a Thomas Hardy novel to me. In the opening scene some country folk remove the coins from the eyes of a corpse of one of their number saying something like 'He won't be needing these where he's going'. "Life is for the living," my father interpreted. He was dying and my two sisters and I would be left to bury him. I was to stand with them.

My father gave me other gifts, treasures really. I had been quite rebellious growing up and the more my parents suggested something the less likely I was to do it. I caused them pain that only an eldest child can cause. The possible catastrophes have no limit when a parent has no map to the land into which children disappear to become adults. When I was seventeen and it was clear to us both my path in life would have some unusual dangers and he had done what he could to prevent me from following this path, he did something unusual and generous. He looked at me one evening as we sat together and

said, " You may run into problems in life we can't know now. You may be far away from us, your family, say in South America. Don't forget we're your family and you can always call on us."

He was saying what his Faith demanded, I imagine, but also speaking from his heart. I think he may have had in mind the Prodigal Son. He had tried to rescue my faith when it began to falter. He gave me a fine volume of Bunyan's ***Pilgrim's Progress*** as a gift, along with several C. S. Lewis texts dealing with humanity's relationship to evil and faith. I was only vaguely aware of Bunyan's prison sojourn, but I was very taken with the allegorical nature of the book. I think as my father saw my view of the world darken in my early teens he was anxious I recognize the Slough of Despond before I fell in and drowned.

He was in some ways prophetic and his is a reminder all children need. If they haven't been told that a family may have that dimension they may not know when the need arises.

Of course, not all fathers feel that way. He did. I am proud of his memory for that and set it as a standard for myself. He has certainly helped me in my life in ways I'm sure I don't recognize.

I know Old Cobra Eyes is a father to a son. Although this was my name for him and was based more on his physical presence than any wrong he did me, I heard from several prisoners he was particularly duplicitous. He was

obnoxious with me and high-handed, but he was a prison official. I was told by other prisoners he would promise to support their applications for parole and then go along with the most negative assessments of them put forth by the Parole Board at their hearings. Prisoners felt it showed a lack of character. I was not there and I don't know. I do know if the man could not stay consistent from context to context when dealing with prisoners, he was bound to earn their enmity. And if he could not stay that consistent with his son, he could never say what my father said to me and live by it.

My father did. It has got me through a lot, has saved me from going from bad to worse. In the hot and humid days when I returned to Toronto for his funeral, I felt overwhelmed by the power imprisonment had exerted on me. I can't separate it fully from grief but the blind stupidity of state power sating itself reflexively in oppression maddened me. I was required to report to a parole officer thousands of miles from the prison I would return to the following day. "I'm only following the rules," is a phrase meant to soothe, I think. But to me there is scarcely a more self-condemnatory phrase a person can utter. I do detest those who only follow the rules. They have abdicated life.

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There is an expression prisoners have, "on the gate." A prisoner is on the gate when awaiting release or a parole hearing. It connotes a distracted state of mind when fate tempts a prisoner to let his feelings and thoughts be "on the street." A very dangerous frame of mind, one that allows maximum vulnerability in a place that never forgives vulnerability. An institutional

charge, new 'street' charges, a riot, a lockdown, all these commonplaces of prison can pull the prisoner right off the gate. A negative reaction in the press to the impending release of a prisoner, while not a commonplace, can pull a prisoner off that gate. Suddenly, he's doing prison time again. Sometimes the prisoner does not get near the gate again for a good long time.

Being on the gate can come for prisoners on much different timetables, depending on circumstances. A 'lifer' can be on the gate a year or two before a parole hearing. Ten years served and that chance at parole can loom very large very early. And, for the obvious reasons, the danger is very large for such an individual.

Prison can teach a great deal about lowering expectations. Being on the gate and yanked off should be enough to keep expectations at a minimum for a lifetime. But hope is a hard habit to kick.

I was on the gate when I got the call my father was dying. I was at the University 'social,' an awards ceremony and party for prisoners in the University program. I had been paroled—given a release date and a pass program—early in June. I won a number of books for academic awards. I had seen Orcas run on Quarantine Bay. All in a matter of weeks. That afternoon about five o'clock a young female prison official told me that I should call my sister in Toronto. Usually you had to book time at the phones at set hours. I knew my father's health was not good but I was shocked when my sister informed me he was expected to die within a few days.

I remember walking rather blindly around the prison grounds, tears in my eyes, but not enough emotional release to help. The sadness merely built and I locked the bigger piece of it away as I struggled with the decisions and mentally prepared myself for the days to come. When I was in the graveyard that held the quarantined for whom the station at Quarantine Bay had become an eternal home, a fellow prisoner, a friend, found me and offered his sympathies. That is my only outstanding debt today.

I had been on the gate. I had heard the expression over the previous two years without really understanding its more Byzantine turns. But I also had come to realize the gate swings both ways. I had seen prisoners awaiting Classification at the Remand Centre after sentencing who had looked forward to the return trip to prison. This is the truth Genet points to—for some prison is a paradise, or at least as close as they will get on this earth.

I took a trip on a hot July day in a Sheriff's van with such a prisoner. His name was Robert Beaudry, but everyone called him Bobby. In his late twenties, a strong-jawed and handsome man with an open and earnest, good humoured expression, Bobby's hair and mustache were nearly completely white. Until you looked closely you might have thought he was well into his forties. He actually looked very distinguished and it was easy to imagine him in a boardroom or a lawyer's office. But Bobby was a bankrobber.

I hadn't met him until we were in the transport vehicle together. There were nearly a dozen of us with sentences ranging from three years to twenty-two. The long sentence belonged to a 'terrorist,' a man who had been excoriated as a common criminal posing as political by the judge, who then proceeded to sentence him as he would no 'common' criminal.

Bobby had received nine years consecutive to the sentence he was on parole for. I didn't have to ask to know he'd got strung out on dope and took the banks to feed his habit. Bobby was tense as we loaded into the van. The Remand Centre had that effect on people. But an old colleague was loaded in too, one he had not seen in a long time. Bobby cussed out the cops, the prosecution, the judge, and especially the guards. In this he was joined by his friend and several others in the van. The friend was already ensconced in the Federal prison and had just been in the city to go to court for the day.

Pretty soon they were catching up on old acquaintances and old scenes from the Big House. Bobby relaxed visibly and the closer they got to the prison, the more he seemed at ease. So many old friends would be waiting for him. He would be welcomed. Soon he was laughing hard at the story of some old friend whose fate had been as dim as his own. By the time we arrived at the prison gate he couldn't get the smile off his face except to laugh.

Bobby wasn't stupid and he spent plenty of air bemoaning the length of his sentence and how little chance he had at early parole. But his smiles sent a clear message he was coming to a place where he would be accepted, where

he would know what to expect, where he could get along and have a place. He had been on the gate when he got into that van and it looked like he was going to make it through the gate without a catastrophe striking.

I saw Bobby in population. He usually looked at home—relaxed and confident. He did not have the haunted, uncertain look you saw on some prisoners. I didn't spend a lot of time with him, but would pass pleasantries with him if I ran into him. I was surprised in December to see him walking around after an absence of nearly a week. I thought he'd been transferred.

He had a big Band-Aid at the side of his throat. An outsized piece of gauze was under the Band-Aid. I said hello but did not ask about the Band-Aid. If someone had slashed his throat, it would have been embarrassing for him to have to explain.

Still, I was curious. So I asked someone I knew who was close to Bobby. "Bobby slashed his own throat. Did it with an X-acto knife. No one knows why. Including Bobby."

Bobby seemed to have such a sunny disposition that I was unnerved by this news. I kept wondering why he had done it. And then I remembered the trip in the van. Bobby must have realized what I had realized that day. He was happy to be going back to prison.

That gate swings both ways.

COME-ALONG

Some years ago Jacquie and I drove out to the Grand Tetons in Wyoming. Driving through those mountains in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming was as balming an experience as a person can have behind the wheel of a car. I was especially taken with the mountain ranges and river valleys of western Montana. The dry heat of the plains and the ranges rising out of the dusk one after another and the diamonds of sun-spattered rivers winding out of those mountains were inspiring.

Deer Lodge is the site of the first prison in Montana. The town is on a particularly unbroken piece of plain thirty or forty miles across and sixty north to south. The Montana Territorial prison dates back to the late 1860s. It had metamorphosed from a small facility holding a dozen or two men then to its final configuration in the first decades of this century when it held nearly fifteen hundred souls. Its tessellated walls, its stone and brick superstructure and its towers resembled nothing so much as a medieval castle. It had dominated the main street of Deer Lodge and the town itself for over a century. In 1979 the massive Victorian fortress closed for good, giving way to the modernist medical model of penology: prisoners were no longer wicked, or merely wicked, they were sick. I haven't seen the prison that replaced the old one, but I have seen its kind. They look like public housing facilities festooned with razor wired fences. This one was about twenty miles outside Deer Lodge, out on the plains.

In the early days of September of 1991 the prisoners of the new State prison on the lonesome prairie outside Deer Lodge rioted. In this 'smash-up,' one of the many names prisoners have for a riot, prisoners took control of the facility for a period of six short and terrible hours. During this time they hung four of their number suspected of being informers and set fires throughout the prison. I thought of them in early mornings of late September, many of them sleeping in tents on the yard. Others would have been transferred to other prisons in Montana. The hint of winter on the ground would make old joints ache.

I visited the site of the old Territorial prison a month before the riot in the new facility and had been impressed by the unsentimental view successive generations of Montana officials had taken of prisons and prisoners. Equally impressive was the practicality of the citizens of Montana, and especially Deer Lodge, in determining how to dispose of the now worthless hulk that had formerly been the town's chief asset. Old Stony Lonesome had become a museum.

Deer Lodge itself had the shabby air of a western town whose time had come and gone and now rides adrift on the prairie, compass lost. The pancake eateries along the main street have a forlorn, flyblown look. Motels in the town itself had not been upgraded in twenty years and, judging from the one we stayed in, were a testament to the meanness of life for the professional travellers of America's highways. In the restaurant where I ate a steak as tough as a Montana lawman, a large Charles M. Russell reproduction dominated the waiting area.

The state bureaucrats who used to spend generously were gone for good. Despite the bars featuring gambling on a scale unknown outside of Nevada and obviously designed to catch the overflow of tourists travelling the Interstate through Western Montana, the town remains shabby and underpopulated. The tourists haven't come: betting on a Territorial prison museum seemed the only choice the citizens had, but it was not enough to make the tourists driving between Missoula and Yellowstone Park pull off the Interstate.

I entered the prison museum early on a hot morning in the first week of August. I felt rather foolish, thinking I might be the only visitor the museum had all summer. I was wrong. A few others were there. A fair of some kind was operating on the edge of town and I think this might have accounted for the early morning interest in Montana penal history.

Penal artifacts of all description decorated the display area. Committal papers from the last century, nooses, manacles and irons of a certain vintage, old newspapers telling of this riot or that escape gave body to the life of a prison and a prison town. Old photos of hooded bodies dandled from a gallows beam stood opposite a display of sewing and other handicrafts performed by prisoners on long winter nights on the plains. These hinted subtly at the human side of the id-bound Other who lives behind prison walls, just as the hooded figures in the photos aggressively suggested a certain economy of carceral style. The history of the giants of Montana penology sung its

lonesome song. The prison had done most of its growing under the stewardship of one man, James Fitzsimmons, who had been warden for over thirty years, beginning shortly after the prison had opened. His was the durable philosophy of the plains displayed in the movie 'Field of Dreams'—he had access to a voice telling him "If you build it, they will fill it." They did and they have, so consistently the prison had to be replaced by a facility more compatible with changing penological fashion. That festooned display area, which I imagined had once served to 'process' prisoners from the small towns and cities of Montana and prisoners returned from neighbouring states, had the gloomy aspect of a failed state-subsidized commercial enterprise. The entire display was noncommittally descriptive.

I was particularly interested in the story of a lawman and his deputies who had operated as extortionists in the early 1880s. They had accepted payment from outlaws and honest citizens alike until they had been caught and taken up residence in the Territorial prison.

One item in particular, or more properly its absence, caught my attention. Called a 'come-along,' it is usually employed with stubborn livestock. However, it had been used in the prison on convicts being transported or working outside the prison walls. Attached to chain or rope close to flesh, it comprises several sharp points of steel and bites into the flesh when the rope or chain is pulled. Gets the attention of man or beast. In the place of the absent come-along was a semi-apologetic note explaining some damn thief had stolen the thing. The irritated tone of the handwritten sign indicated the

thief had better not be caught in the State of Montana or he would be calling the new prison home for some good long time.

But there was a critique of this note as well, a terse counternarrative. Someone had written 'Good' above the line explaining the theft, going on to suggest a certain infamy attached to the use of such machinery. I think I would be disappointed to find it was written by an animal rights activist whose great cause was the elimination of veal production, but I suppose almost any motive will support a counternarrative. Not that I favour veal production. I used to eat scaloppini but those days are gone. It's just that commentary on a prison museum ought to engage meatier, carceral issues.

I doubt the counternarrative remained in place long. I'm sure once one of the museum's staff noticed its placement it would be removed.

I was startled by the attention paid this nasty little lever of control. First, the irritated 'official' explanation. While it did not threaten directly to send vigilantes after the varmi(n)t who had stolen the fleshbiting mechanism, it did make it clear there was history and civic pride invested in its steel, all one and a half ounces of it. No doubt about it, this kind of outrage demanded jail time, not some sissy fine. Second, I thought of the courage—or citified stupidity—of the person who had written the protest. The prison museum at Deer Lodge, Montana would not likely take lightly to some *auslander* writing on its exhibits. Could be looking at some jail time for that, too.

A thousand miles from Montana I read in the newspaper about the riot. It sounded nasty. I felt a shiver of recognition: that unsentimental view and practicality had predictable enough consequences. A few short hours and due process and execution of sentence carried out on the four who the convict population had hanged. Fires set. I wondered about what the prison authorities and newspaper would never know or report.

How strange they had chosen hanging with which to dispatch the most odious of their number. Was this a convict move towards deconstruction? Perhaps they had meant to make a statement that they had observed the norms of justice and had gone where those norms led. I don't know. I do know it's an unusual method of execution by prisoners.

When I heard about the hangings and fires at the new State Prison I thought about the come-along. I thought those hundreds of souls still have not slipped the come-along and the chains it is attached to. It's not an ounce and a half of sharpened points of steel anymore. But it still has a bite. The flesh and souls of the prisoners at the State Prison in Deer Lodge, Montana, will be raw for sometime.

WRITING CARL HARP'S

DEATH SENTENCE

MEMORANDUM
TO: James C. Spalding
FROM: Ad Seg Committee
DATE: 1-4-80

"...This committee has heard some of the very deep seated feelings of Mr. Harp. We feel he is sincerely disturbed by some of the many what can be called injustices in the world....we are not sure he is being realistic about the solutions, nor does he have a better view of the problems than any of us. His concept that everyone should work together to make this a better world is a very idealistic approach; however we do not feel that the answer is this simple being that each person has a different idea of what is right and wrong. We believe he is very frustrated in that he has a rage building inside of him that cannot be directed at any one person or problem from the position he is in. *It is sincerely hoped that he does not let a somewhat imperfect system cause him to self-destruct.* (Emphasis Harp's). He admits that the American system is better than any other system, and is not in any way anti-American.

Mr. Harp has reached the point where he represents everything in perspective of WE and THEY.

Address to the Administrative Segregation Hearing

....Since May 9/79 you have buried me in segregation. I have had, without due process, all of my visits restricted to no-contact, with one exception. I have been maced in the face, brutally beaten and sodomized with a riot stick. And if convicted for my part in the hostage-taking incident I face ten years plus habitual-criminal charges which is a life sentence, all consecutive to four consecutive life terms I already have. Don't you think that this is revenge enough?

I have no intention of repeating May 9/79—it served its purpose and the situation has and is changed plus is changing....If you want a guarantee that I will not repeat May 9/79 in any fashion, obviously I can't give that just like you can't guarantee that you will not assault me again or even kill me. I have said I have no intention of repeating May 9/79, and all I can do is give you my honest intention. As for my working around and for Human Rights and Justice in prison, I have no intention of ceasing that work regardless of whatever you do to me, but as I have said, I advocate that such work be non-violent unless self-defense is necessary. Your *actions dictate*

We asked him if he believes there are good people throughout society at all levels, just as there are people who are not. All people have to be handled as individuals when and wherever possible. Sometimes this cannot be done and one of these times is in large institutions.

We believe Mr. Harp puts forth the impression that he is a living time bomb, looking for somewhere to go off. He is correct in some of his ideas; however the tools he uses to call attention to the things he does not believe are right are the wrong tools. The entire world is not hate and injustices. We ask that he look around and expand his reading and keep an open mind. At this time we feel Mr. Harp should remain in Ad Seg as he is a threat to the orderly operation and safe conditions of the institution."

(signed)
Capt. R. Moses
W. Stewart
S. Grabinski

my tactics, not mine.

Now unless you can come up with a legal and just reason for keeping me in Administrative Segregation, I request that I be released from segregation....

As to any transfer, there is no legal or just reason to do that either and I am in no physical danger that I know of in this institution. Again, a transfer is only a matter of revenge, a matter of politics on your part. I request to remain in this institution for personal and legal reasons,...I have a number of legal actions that require my presence here. Security and cost-wise it would be better to keep me here rather than go through the problems and costs of taking me back and forth.

Carl Harp

WHEN WRITING ENDS

Institutions exist both as pure Logos, and also as material sites in many instances. The prison is an idea, an idea of a place, and a physical place. It is the most violent space outside of a battlefield. Even a medium security prison in a relatively peaceable country such as Canada has a murder rate which might extrapolate to ten thousand murders a year in a city/prison of a million inhabitants. Suicide and assault rates are similarly very high. This is a place to start in describing a prison.

Questioning the violent nature of prison space seems pointless. It is meant to be a cruel place, and therefore a violent place. Anyone who has spent time in a prison knows the nature of this space as " the epitome of violence, coming close to the ultimate violence of total annihilation" (***Writers in Prison***, p.78). To question this violence is to engage total annihilation.

The effect on prisoners is similarly violent. Victor Serge, who witnessed war and revolution, wrote of his five year term in France under the "silent system"(1912-1917): "It burdened me with an experience so heavy, so intolerable, that long afterwards, when I resumed writing, my first book (***Men in Prison***) amounted to an effort to free myself from this inward nightmare, as well as the performance of a duty toward all who will never go free themselves." (***Birth of Our Power***, *Preface*) Serge knows the cruelty is so total, so violent that many who experience it are enslaved to it forever.

In this context the prisoner writer pushes against an iron fate. He confronts his situation, interprets fate, pushes it. How prisoners interpret the sneaky tug of fate varies and so will the direction in which it is pushed. But the push is inescapable, may be fated if he wishes to escape. Written violently, the prison writer turns the word back against itself, or may. Much of prison writing seems aimed at exorcism of the powerful violence and cruelty found at the heart of reason.

THE ANTEROOM

The customers of the remand facility in New York City long ago named it the Tombs. In some prisons there is a space where men and women live called Death Row. The costumes they wear bear the insignia "Death Row" stenciled on the back of orange (or white or...) jumpsuits. Prison is a place where death is near. We find it to be the anteroom of death.

In May, 1994 the State of Washington hanged Charles Campbell, a hulking pest who murdered a woman he had raped seven years prior and who testified against him, facilitating his seven year imprisonment. Outside the prison where the hanging occurred two crowds formed: one celebrated the execution; the other mourned it. One crowd prayed for Campbell's soul, the other bid it a speedy journey to hell. Both crowds talked sense; both talked nonsense. Campbell came to the end of his sentence at the end of a rope and was written out of the world: no more writing Charles Campbell, no rewriting necessary. Prison waits patiently for the end of writing.

CARNIVALIZED LITERATURE

Mikhail Bakhtin identified what he called carnivalized literature and menippean satire as a particular instance of this. Menippean satire is a gesture against the serious forms, identified as the lyric, the epic, tragedy and so on. Prison writing has more than its share of such gestures. More modern forms, particularly the novel, are inhabited with the carnivalized spirit.

The mennipea, as distinct from other carnivalized genres, emphasizes humour, freedom of plot and philosophic invention, internally motivated use of the fantastic and the use of extraordinary situations to test truth or philosophy. Additionally, we find the use of what Bakhtin describes as 'slum realism' combined with mystical elements, inserted genres (poems, letter, novellas), multivocity, oxymoronic combinations—the noble bandit, the virtuous hetaera. His treatment of these forms is exhaustive, and points us to the prison wall and the life leading to the prison gate.

A TRIP TO THE CARNIVAL

The primary carnivalistic act is the 'mock crowning and subsequent uncrowning of the carnival king.' (***Problems of Dostoevski's Poetics***, p.124) Thus Bakhtin describes a central gesture of the 'inside-out world of carnival.' Its significance is "....the inevitability and at the same time the creative

power of the shift and renewal....Carnival celebrates the shift itself, the very process of replaceability....It absolutizes nothing."

Dostoevski's communion of the dead in ***Bobok***, his underground characters calling our sense of the world into question, have precedents if we look hard enough. Certainly Villon's hanged men, criminals beseeching the good burghers of Paris to regard them with Christian charity, point forward to Dostoevski. And he has inheritors, too.

Homeboy is a strong example of what Bakhtin calls carnival literature. It's protagonist works the job of barker, and a pivotal part of the plot concerns him receiving a Brooklyn Dodgers baseball cap from Whisper Moran, his spiritual father. This hat both gives him power and draws him to danger, thus containing the dynamics of the ritual crowning and uncrowning characteristic of a carnivalized literature. And the main characters, the barker, Joe Speaker and his woman, work the flesh trade, setting a context for 'slum realism' and the use of a billingsgate argot, both features of carnivalized literature.

By one reading this novel is a stewed and skewed California *policier*.
The barker goes to prison in possession of a bad conscience—he betrayed his thieving brother—and the knowledge of the hiding place of a great treasure he has stolen. A malignant, bald and fat—what could be more evil in California—pornographer wishes to have back the treasure. Speaker (the barker—is he really Fido?) survives the California Adult Authority, finds his spiritual father, an old con who has founded the Aryan Brotherhood, his fleshly father, a broke-down con from Nawlins, and returns to Kitty Litter, the

woman he pimps, shoots heroin with, and loves. And recovers the treasure, and destroys the evil, fat pornographer. As this novel closes Speaker and Kitty are about to become parents. We must believe they are spared some of the difficulty involved with this responsibility by some good dope. (Even if they only take it on the weekend, the sanctimonious stance of junkies everywhere according to Burroughs.)

But this semi-pornographic novel invites us to think in carnivalizing terms from the outset. Working as a barker—a carnival trade—in the North Beach fleshpots of San Francisco, Speaker and his friends use the Billingsgate argot as *lingua franca*, another feature of carnivalized literature.

Whoring and pimping are second careers for many of the characters, and their addictions sharpen the 'slum realism' of the novel. Thus many of the elements of carnivalized literature and menippean satire are in place.

Speaker's name announces a more sophisticated understanding of narrative than we might expect in the *policier* canon. Ratcheting the irony up a notch, the novel is written in the third person, despite the protagonist's name. And his drugged muteness adds again to the irony.

His mother was a hooker who gives him no clues as to his patrimony. In prison he discovers the old con, Whisper Moran, is his spiritual father and discovers another old con, Earl Slick, is his fleshly father; Whisper gives him an old, talismanic Brooklyn Dodgers baseball cap which saves Speaker's life

in a prison riot. Thus we have another of the elements of carnivalized literature, what Bakhtin refers to as "ritual crowning and uncrowning." This ritual of crowning and uncrowning, with the promise of more to come, reminds us we have yet to arrive at the last tent in the sideshow.

Speaker carries the name of Whisper forward in another surpassing irony. While his fleshly father recognizes him, it is only later that Speaker recognizes the father during a prison riot in which the father dies. One reading, likely a weak one, suggests the Oedipal in this plot turn: only in violence can we recover our patrimony, and we can then only regret the recovery.

But this is Oedipus swimming in menippean waters. First, the father is more id than superego: Whisper Moran is a prison gang leader, warlord of the Aryan Brotherhood, Earl Slick is a broke-down old cracker from Nawlins. Moran outlines the history of prison gangs in California: prison officials inculcated gangs as means of controlling prison populations, a gesture to the tactics of divide and conquer. George Jackson in ***Soledad Brother*** elaborates this phenomenon from the perspective of the 1960s when first it took root.

Whisper Moran's recounting of the hostile racialism of California prisons is full of the pathos and loss of a dimly remembered—and likely false—order of harmonious reason supplanted by a more ancient order of blood. Accomplished by the agents of Reason, of course.

Moran's whispered speech is the residue of a throat-cutting episode in prison. His voice has been all but extinguished by prison. So his spiritual son, Speaker, must give voice to prisoners as the protagonist of this prison novel.

Earl Slick, his father of flesh, turns Oedipus on its head. He sacrifices his own life so Speaker will not get killed in a prison riot. Moran initiates Speaker into his inheritance as a white trash/junkie/con while crowning him with the Dodgers' cap.

Although Speaker is junkie/thief/pimp/betrayer, Morgan invites us to see him as a noble savage. We are to see his female counterpart, a whore/junkie, as a virtuous hetaera. ***Homeboy*** is menippean right into its heroin polluted corpuscles.

The characters populating this novel are underdeveloped, unreflective, morally puny beings. From the outset they function as cipher and symbol. Heroin motivates almost all the important actions taken by Speaker and Ms. Litter. They survive, they get stoned. Morgan clearly wishes them to be seen as innocents. And they are, despite some murder, mayhem and moral turpitude. We read them as uncomplicated, inarticulate—needing only a potent fix and each other to reach their ideal of fulfillment.

The inside-outness of this carnival world is so complete we find nothing particular to distinguish the ethos of villain from hero. We know the pornographer, Baby Jewels, must be villainous: snuff films. Fat and bald, we

have strong clues as to his villainy even without snuffs. When he is about to appear in court his lawyer advises him to wear a wig—he will then be "just another fat man." "All the world loves a fat man," the lawyer opines, apparently forgetting they are in California, fashion-slave state, and in the city which convicted Fatty Arbuckle. All the world loves a fat man as long as he is immobilized in his mass. Speaker is almost as degenerate as the pornographer, but is not bald and fat. He must be hero material.

Kitty Litter, the woman impregnated by Joe Speaker on his way to Stony Lonesome, is an earthmotherchicana from Texas, a shitfire exotic dancer and whore, and, in genuflection to deviantpsychocriminology has been sexually abused by her father. Marinated in menippea, she uses the adjective 'tragic' affixed to the trivial and the paratragic. "Funny thing about heroin withdrawal, you develop a tragic sweet tooth."

The drug-addicted ordinariness of this couple, oriented only by addiction, may seem puzzling for those unfamiliar with the desire against desire which is heroin addiction. To be intoxicated with heroin is to transcend all desire except the desire for heroin.

All surface like its characters, the novel slips through its apocalypses, murders, prison riots, and whitelight noddings off, leaving few cerebral ripples. Speaker rises sporadically to something resembling morally inspired action: but he does it robotically, almost speaking out loud an aside to the reader: " I, like you, have been conditioned to react in these seemingly ethical

ways. But I have no heart for them. Can you get me a fix, some good dope?" He resignedly accepts the texts imposed upon him, almost embracing them, rejecting new readings as too difficult, and pointless anyway. Ironically, the man named Speaker says very little and almost nothing worth noting. He is not a literary character at all; his discourse pedestrian, unable to subscribe to any aesthetic but the beauty of the red flower of blood in the neck of the syringe, he stumbles through his barker's patter extolling the human as less than the subtraction of its parts. While his narrative does not speak to the institutions of reason, is sublimely oblivious of them, they contain him and write him.

In many ways, and although it is unlikely to have been, this novel seems written on Bakhtin's template for carnivalized literature. The very unlikeliness of the author having read Bakhtin or been aware of him argues for the substance of Bakhtin's thesis. Maybe.

Not to say Morgan knows nothing about literature and literate culture. He does. And he has self-consciously written against Literature and for writing. Anyone who does time in a California prison, writes a first novel like ***Homeboy***, retires to New Orleans and dies in a motorcycle crash after writing his first review for the New York Times Review of Books has got to know a whole lot about literate culture in these times.

With a death sentence, the power of writing becomes ultimately clear for the condemned and for the spectators. Caryl Chessman, executed by the State of

California in 1960, was acutely aware of the power of writing. In the narrative of the events leading to execution, one sees a man self-consciously attempting to write himself out of his death sentence. He produced and published four books while on death row. Arguments for his reprieve included a sentiment that one who had mastered the word so well had been redeemed. Chessman made a similar argument, saying he was an author and insisting on that account that he ought not be exterminated like a stray dog. (The sentence of death in California is by cyanide gas.) California saw it differently and, after keeping him twelve years on Death Row, gassed this writing dog.

He writes his sentence as tragedy sometimes, but realizes the farce, the entertainment factor—educational factor—at work in carrying out the sentence. He writes of the condemned: "Death, seeking permission to foreclose the claim it has upon him, is simply too inexorable and elusive an opponent. So death becomes Death, no longer an act but an actor." (***Getting Busted,*** p. 337) So, too, prison is not just a site, but also a citation, large footnote in a larger narrative, a Narrative of Reason. Chessman sees the farce/entertainment/education element of the condemned and that part of the prison belonging to them and to Death: "And seeing and hearing all this, you begin to wonder if this parody called Death Row is really what society wants at all." But of course it does, and wants and needs the parody particularly.

Although he did not self-consciously write in menippean trope, Chessman saw his fate as a menippea. He wondered why the literary turn his fate had

taken could not rescue him from the final writing. But if the large and small ironies of his execution and particularly its literary prologue can be recognized, they can be recognized only with this final writing in place. We may have difficulty recognizing the absolute nature of the cruelty in a prison sentence, but not in death itself. And Chessman's menippea was at least partly self-conscious and spilled into his writing: the title of the novel he wrote on Death Row was ***The Kid was a Killer.***

In fact, if prison could not rise to the parodic it would find itself badly disabled. Consider the military patina borne by prison, the costumes of the guards announcing the war reason wages with itself. Consider the courtroom: a good courtroom attempts to incorporate many of the elements of theatre: stage lighting, the raised platform of the judge's bench, the costumes of judge, lawyers, attendants—significantly, the accused has no official costume—all display the artifice and theatricality of the court. Similarly, sentences are in some degree artifice: unless additional charges accrue or by exception, all prisoners serve only two thirds of the sentence pronounced.

THE DARK PLACES

Prisoners who write, as well as those who don't, will struggle for reprieve from the text of imprisonment. In some sense, accepting the texts of prisoner is the first ironic step out of the text of imprisonment. Carceral discursive

practice no longer allows reference to 'prisoners.' There is not a prison in the English speaking world housing prisoners: they have long since become 'inmates,' courtesy of the medical model of penology. For that matter, there are no longer any prisons: they became institutions for similar reasons. So, when a prisoner understands himself as a prisoner, he has apprehended something fundamental about his condition, something the nomenclators wish to hide and deny. Thus, a prisoner can move toward textuality, may even begin to expand it, and allow for the play of texts.

The pull of textual authority is overpowering when one finds the self inexorably written out of all texts and into the Text. Hence, many prisoners feel the pull of Scripture. Prison administrators and workers may consider many of these religious conversions as false and self-serving. But they likely overestimate the potential for false conversion. Most prisoners are well aware the dominant texts of penology come from disciplines with "ogy" suffixes. Scripture is only talismanic for penology. It is however, compatible with prison, particularly the Old Testament, a text of exile, enslavement, and imprisonment.

With the prospect of annihilation ahead and no way back, the prisoner has entered the Valley of the Shadow of Death and knows it. Robert Hughes describes the tribulations of the convict named Frayne whom we met previously, transported in the early decades of the nineteenth century: "Ironed down to the jail floor as the Pacific boomed without end on Kingston reef, each percussion causing a faint shudder of the flagstones...." And, finding

himself in this condition, he reached for the balm of the textual authority of the 88th Psalm, which he recited aloud, over and over:

> I am counted with them that go down into the pit:
> I am as a man that hath no help:
> Cast off among the dead,
> Like the slain that lie in the grave,
> Whom thou remembrest no more;
> And they are cut off from thy hand.
> Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit,
> In the dark places, in the deeps.

Frayne turned, unsurprisingly, to the Law itself, becoming a 'bush lawyer' to fellow convicts, "the leading man among my fellow prisoners particularly among the litigious and disaffected." Of the first category, as among any convict populations he likely found a good number; but amongst the 'disaffected' he could likely count each living soul transported to New South Wales.

AUTUMN LEAVES

(The prisoner awoke at dawn.) In November, his fifth month in the prison, he noticed soldiers in fatigues just beyond the third fence, the one prisoners trying to escape never got to. One soldier stood with a rifle held to the head of a second lying on the ground. A third stood a couple of yards from these first two, apparently instructing them. Joe notice the tableau repeated up and down the perimeter fence two dozen or more times.

At noon, during the count he observed other maneuvers along the perimeter. The scenes seemed to set up one group of soldiers taking another group prisoner. At lunch in the dining hall he asked several of his dinner companions if they had noticed the scene. Several had, but no one seemed to understand what the scenes signified. Some who had been at the prison longer claimed they had seen soldiers engaged in similar maneuvers along the fence the year before.

Joe saw some soldiers talking with the administrative staff of the prison in the breezeway in the afternoon. Still no one had any answers about the meaning of the soldiers' presence. He began to form his own interpretation: they were there to rehearse the suppression of a prison riot.

The next morning they were outside the fence again. Same moves: soldier on the ground, another standing over him; the prone soldier would try to roll away and the standing soldier would block him. He saw some would try to

crawl away, some got to a crouch and would begin to run. They would be blocked. Because Joe needed to get to his work station, he was unable to watch the entire scene play out. His curiosity chewed at him the whole morning.

Babbitt had been on the Inmate Committee, and was absent most of the morning. He had been in this prison close to two years; if anyone could provide an explanation he could.

Joe saw him about eleven in the morning entering his office in the academic centre where prisoners learned everything from basic literacy to university courses. Babbitt had tutored there for a while, although he had completed his undergraduate degree. Joe took some university courses and tutored. They had a mutual respect which looked like wary regard. Babbitt stood in front of his small desk in the long narrow room they shared as an office as Joe entered after him. A careless lock hung over his forehead, touching the rim of his state issue reading glasses. He had picked up a piece of paper and looked pleased with himself. He looked up and crackled, "Listen to this. 'Prison is the state's most concrete exercise in repression.' That's the opening line for 'Creating Political Man,' my essay for the 'Prison Journal. I like that." He leered expectantly at Jim, waiting for appreciation of his clever turn of phrase.

"Not bad, John," Joe allowed absently. "Not bad." He paused, his distracted expression confirming his consideration of more weighty matters than

Babbitt's latest *bon mot.* He began: "I don't want to be paranoid, but have you seen those soldiers on maneuvers out by the perimeter fence the last couple of days? What are they doing? Practicing for a riot?"

Babbitt quickly moved beyond his disappointment in the less than fulsome display of admiration for his literary talents into his role as prison prophet. His attention and mood moved fluidly to the questions posed. "Yeah, I saw them. They were out last year, too. They're rehearsing the Operation Autumn Leaves scenario." He looked at Joe briefly for recognition.

"Autumn Leaves? What's that? Sounds sinister." Joe did recognize something here: it was like a certain sequence in a ballet, a moment when a longer term prisoner got to initiate a 'fish,' or newcomer, into a rite or truth of prison.

Babbitt leaned back against the desk, exhaled, inhaled and began to speak. "Autumn Leaves is an operational blueprint for managing prison populations in the event of nuclear attack or other disaster scenario. When the big one hits, the army moves in and puts the prison under martial control. Prison staff leave or are removed. When all staff are gone, all prisoners accounted for, we're assembled in one area. Then the soldiers shoot every living one of us and dispose of the bodies. It's top secret. The prison staff think they're here to rehearse riot suppression. So do most of the soldiers. The scenarios would be very similar except for the final stages."

"You're shining me, Babbitt. Where'd you hear about it if it's so top secret?" Joe found himself simultaneously incredulous and fearful. Yet Babbitt had responded with such alacrity and the story was outrageous enough to be true. The naming of the operation, the chilly appropriateness of the name of the event preceding nuclear winter, the fact that suppressing riots was very similar to the prologue to mass executions, these did not add up to an impromptu lie. And Joe knew such a plan had to exist as a part of emergency preparedness, even if only as a contingency or option. Whether or not the information was completely accurate, Joe knew he had heard a prison truth.

"You remember those radical environmentalist folks who came in with all those presentations on uranium mining in northern Saskatchewan? Came in with the university student council rep. Well, one of them was also looking into this area and came across the stuff through American sources looking into American emergency planning."

Members of this group had come in for months, as had many other political activists, sometimes sponsored through the University, sometimes not. Joe had tired of their assumptions that they had a mission to politicize prisoners. Still, they had access to good information on a number of issues and when you're forced to live with the same five hundred people, day in and month out, many of whom had long since lobotomized themselves with drugs or despair, a new face took a while to get old.

Joe paused, smiling ironically to Babbitt: "So the government doesn't think we can be relied upon to help rebuild civilization as we know it? Well, they're probably on safe ground with that. So, they just come in and shoot us down like dogs. Maybe we should develop our own contingency plan to deal with Autumn Leaves." That was a hopeless thought for as undisciplined a bunch as inhabited the prison, a swagger statement to cover fear. An image came to him of a document stamped 'Top Secret' and titled 'Autumn Leaves' danced into his head. A hand reached for it, paused, and handed it back to where it had come from.

On the morning following his conversation with Babbitt he was awake very early. When he looked out men in red serge held Winchesters in their hands. They wore Stetson hats and some were mounted on horses. In the mist he saw Indians held captive on the ground at gunpoint. A mounted man rode up and down the line giving orders. There was talk back and forth for a while. Then the talk ceased. All involved in the tableau were silent for some time. Then in the morning fog a sharp order rang. And all down the line the men in red serge let go with shots from their Winchesters. Shouts and screams filled the dawn.

The next morning the soldiers had deserted the fences and the prison. In the days and weeks following he watched as the trees on the hills around the prison dropped their leaves and the leaves settled down the hillsides. The rich reds and yellows of the leaves began to turn the brown of the resting earth of the hills.

Another morning he awoke early. It was the end of October and he turned his eye east and watched the hills in the ghost light of dawn. He saw a file of Indians rising from near the fences and working their way slowly over the crest of the brown hill through the dead leaves under the trees. As the last redman filed over the hill the sun began to rise. The dead leaves on the ground began to shine whitely like crystals, some radiating rainbows into the October dawn. They began to rise to the branches of the trees and attach themselves there.

He had come to prison knowing he might have to find his way through the nightmare of a prison riot, live with murder inches from his skin, or burn to death in a locked cell. But rounded up and shot like a mad dog—he had not prepared himself for that psychically. Just more prison apocrypha he told himself for several days, but it began to become part of his prison reality. Then he began to plan his escape.

> *The world has no name, he said. The names of the cerros and the sierras and the deserts exist only on maps. We name them that we do not lose our way. Yet it was because the way was lost to us already that we have made those names. The world cannot be lost. We are the ones. And it is because these names and these coordinates are our own naming that they cannot save us. That they cannot find for us the way again.*
>
> (***The Crossing***, Cormac McCarthy, p.387)

Yet so many of us work so frantically to organize ourselves out of our lost state. We fool only ourselves. Few have the stomach to look perdition in the face and to move on.

My wife had read a draft of this writing and pointed out she had no idea who Franki V was. Villon had seemed so much part of my life by the time I began writing about him that I did not notice how idiosyncratic my relationship had become. I had begun to imagine him as a figure belonging as much with Johnny-Boy in Scorsese's ***Mean Streets*** as belonging in the late middle ages. In Little Italy in the 1950s and 60s he could not go around being Francois Villon. Franki V seemed natural, a guy who would grow into the mid-life denied him in his own time and go gambling in Atlantic City on the weekends. Villon the storyteller, the thief, the wanderer would fit well into the clubhouses of Little Italy, drinking expresso—which would at first be a shock to his system—and sipping Campari in the evenings. Instead of killing the priest, he would help Johnny-Boy take on the *capos* and rebel against that more contemporary culture and time. Franki V and Johnny-Boy would work well together.

Shift the eye to the horizon. Way back there. A man on a muddy road in early June, heading south. He is a thief and murderer. He is leaving his home behind. Away from the city where wolves come for the citizens in the night. A scribbler in an age when few can read; most of his associates can not. He will be thrown in a jail for months, an unheated, stone cavern where his condition is so deteriorated after release he will die within a handful of years, although he has not yet turned thirty. His contemporaries saw Jeanne of Orleans with their eyes. And yet he, a scribbling guttersnipe from Paris, feels his power enough to make a career of opposing and excoriating princelings in print. While most of the world is concerned with showing proper respect to the earthly and church princes, he will steal from them.

Francois Villon wished to make an impression beyond his time. Frankie V knew he was lost. So did I. Nothing nihilistic in that—just the way it is. So are we all, or so the indio gypsy tells Billy Parham in the passage from ***The Crossing*** quoted above. Whether we act to inoculate ourselves from perdition, with our clever structures, taxonomies and organizations, or accept it full, we are lost. The *Ballade des Pendus* might more universally be *Ballade des Perdus*.

Villon, with a cosmos, an episteme, crashing around him and no clear way ahead, took to the broad highway, to gambling, to thieving, to 'coining,' to the whole litany of late medieval crimes. With the wars grinding out a stabilization of temporal authority, clerical authority under assault, death by the rope, smallpox, wolves, starvation, with all these imminent, Frankie V

knew perdition to be the human estate. So let us commence to lose ourselves. Let us cross over. Let us once and forever pierce the veil: let us be for ourselves, let us fear first the monsters we summon, and only then the monsters gnashing at us from perdition.

We tired of princes and popes
spinning the ether, slaving us.
It was an age like any other
full of terror and horror.
The difference: we had found words
horrible and terrible enough to say it.

And you my children have not lost the words.
But princes and popes in new robes
have smudged the air: they despise slavery
while you shock yourselves awake
with the clank of chains.
The clank clank of chains.

Tell how Cayeux and I took off
those pious crows of Navarre.
How Montigny swung out over the crowd
heels aflail, his neck stretched
by the leaden horror
the world had put into his ass.

The gibbet groaned too
for Colin de Cayeux
Remember my legacy is not despair
but defiance. For it was I
who found the basis for being human:
I appropriate, therefore I am.

So steal, my reader: I did.
So appropriate: I did.
This is writing: this is theft.
And reading also: Take
What you need from us
And let us walk in your air.

CREDENTIALS

"This is a little awkward. Please don't be insulted, I have to ask you this." She looked at him, troubled and earnest. "Have you got any enemies amongst the inmates?"

"Nope. I don't mind you asking. My sins are a matter of public record. I may not win all the popularity contests, but I don't expect to get shanked tonight."

She coloured more deeply. "This is so embarrassing. Have you ever informed on anyone? Have you ever been convicted of any sex crimes?" She got the worst out quick.

Even a prisoner teaching a non-credit university preparation course must meet some moral standards; he understood that. The vacancy he was filling was previously inhabited by a double murderer. They don't come much more highly recommended than that. He had a mark to reach. Pancho had received word of his parole the week before.

"Informing or oppressing people sexually hasn't been that attractive to me. Never done either. Don't think I will." He knew his response was flip. He had made up his mind when he began his sentence, no matter what circumstances arose, he would never inform. Prison was home and you don't

make those under your roof want to kill you. And sex crimes were for people who didn't appreciate other human beings. He did.

He understood that the reputation of the prison university programs rested as much on how 'solid' the enrolled prisoners were as it did on academic standards. That went double for inmate-instructors. So the questions were just business.

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Pancho had originally come from Puerto Rico. That evening as I talked with him in his office with its tall bookshelves crammed with books I was anxious to read, he told me of his escape to Ireland in the wake of the murders that had landed him in prison. It had happened up-Island. He'd been on the run from a stint in the US Army chemical warfare unit, and had landed in Duncan, running a Pizza joint. A man and a woman had robbed him of money meant to buy drugs. In an urban ambush he had murdered them. He had lain in wait, shotgun in hand. After he'd shot them, he took their bodies to a garbage dump and left them. Then he'd escaped to Ireland. I knew little more of the crime than this, and had no desire to. Even this I had heard second hand. But one day, when new prisoners to whom he had to be civil in a mutual project had, he felt, not shown him proper respect, he said to me, "Don't they know who I am? I shot two people and put their bodies on a garbage pile." He had said this as a form of humour. We both knew this would not be grounds for

humour anywhere outside a prison. But it was grounds for bestowal of laurel in prison.

Pancho was feeling expansive: after the riots at the BC Pen, the riots at Matsqui, after watching young prisoners kill for a bad look or carton of cigarettes, old prisoners dying of despair, after twelve years the parole board had heard the right things. Mostly they'd heard 'American citizen.' He could be deported and he'd already cost the taxpayers close to a million dollars.

It was another somnolent evening in prison, the routine as predictable as rain in November, and Pancho had begun to allude to his crime in describing his encounter with the parole board. I didn't want to hear about it—I would still have to live with the man for a few weeks—but even listening lazily to Pancho's story I knew his crime was ghastly. But a prisoner gets attached to his crime and makes no apology to his fellows. I was happy for him, felt the danger and the justice of his release.

I wasn't anxious to know about the chemical warfare unit, or the crime that had sent him to prison. Since I didn't ask, he didn't say a lot. I did want to know about teaching the course he'd taught for five years. How had he done it, where were the manuals?

He had completed a history degree from the prison university program and a computer science degree by correspondence: lots of time to study in prison, and not much else.

He was a congenial host, bright and garrulous with the prospect of freedom looming. It seemed there was a full yard and a half between his right and left shoulders, all muscle. The muted light in the office glinted off his balding forehead and he would chew on his black mustache from time to time as he warmed to a new subject. He talked animatedly and looked dangerous. Hell, he was dangerous. The parole board was only cutting him loose because the Canadian government was tired of paying to keep him inside when they could send him back to the US, but Pancho talked like he had charmed them into letting him go. I liked the man, but I've been known to be reckless and foolish in my enthusiasms.

To my pedagogic questions Pancho said: "Tell them stories. Let them tell stories. Thrill them with perversity. Don't assume anything. And always let them know the animals are on the other side of the bars in this zoo." With that he closed the topic and went on to tell me about a play he'd seen while he'd been out on a pass; about the champagne he'd drunk and the cocaine he'd snorted; and most of all, about the beautiful woman who had shared his brief ersatz freedom.

We left for Puerto Rico immediately. Pancho had arranged for first-class tickets through Miami. Of course, we stayed in the most luxurious hotel in old San Juan.

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He'd noticed the new guy: noisy, muscular, 6'2", dark hair and mustache, the face blunt and features small for a man of his size. The new guy let every stranger know in every room he was in he had come from maximum security. Although the name of the prison had remained the same, it operated under a new regimen: part of the prison had become Protective Custody, housing informers and sex offenders and these days the name didn't mean what it once had. He didn't mention any of that.

The new guy had taken a joint job as a painter. It paid well, close to $6.00 a day, and was simple enough work. Mike was his name and he was painting the academic centre this morning.

"Oh, sweet Jesus. I'm going to have this guy right outside the door to the classroom while I'm doing Kierkegaard," he had thought. "He won't be able to keep his mouth shut. My guys are having enough trouble taking this seriously."

Time is plastic in prison. He usually rounded up the guys from their card game, dope-smoking, or meditations in silent corners of the library when it was time for class. That's what he did this morning. Still, they were two minutes late arriving at the door. He escorted the last two in just ahead of himself.

The painter was regaling a couple of loitering prisoners with tales of maximum security. Mike, dropping his vaudeville, looked suspiciously if stupidly, at the small party entering the classroom and questioned loudly, "Hey, you gotta wonder who some of these so-called cons are working for."

Let it pass? Pretend he didn't hear? No, guys like this think that's the signal to keep pushing. These were things he didn't want to know but had to.

"Mike, I work for myself. Because I like it. Who're you working for?"

Mike looked confused. How had his name become known? (He didn't realize how people had to listen to him because he was so loud, how people watched him because his judgment was imperfect.) Who was he painting the prison for? He seemed lost.

"We can talk about it later, if you want, Mike. I'm on B tier, glad to talk to you this evening. But not now. I got a class to teach."

Two days later Mike wasn't around the prison anymore. He had not appeared on 'B' tier. It seemed he had rubbed a lot of people the wrong way. The rumour was he was on his way back to max. Or maybe Bermuda. Some go to Bermuda.

SPARTACUS

I do not know if the stories I heard in prison are true. Some were and some weren't, I'm sure. Part of prison narratives is an oral dimension where facts are less important than the promotion of certain attitudes and feelings. Often we can say the same of a written dimension. I know some prisoners had trouble with words, especially some of the prisoners who understood words. Some prisoners begin to understand words chain as firmly as steel.

Take Joe Albright. Police in California and Canada had already taken him, so I guess you could too. He was serving a ten year term for attempted murder. He was a strong writer and by the time I met him, straining under nearly five years behind walls.

He liked his own writing so much he would gleefully quote from it and expect to be applauded. As much delight as he took in his own turn of phrase, he despaired at the turn of phrase used to describe him in a prison file: 'psychopath.' Not a flattering term anyway, but in prison it means you're not getting out anytime soon. He shed a tear or two at that. I was with him and somewhat embarrassed at this strong emotion from a man who, like many men in prison, seldom or never showed his feelings. I wondered how the pathology accompanying psychopathy with its concomitant 'lack of genuine emotion' could muster such despair, frustration, anger, and hopeless desolation. And yet this psychopath did muster these, and in generous portion. Now, Joe may have been a psychopath as I understand the term: but

my understanding is not the variety used by prison psychologists to warrant persecution beyond the usual range.

Probably the closest thing I saw in him to the usual definition was his inability to understand how his conviction and imprisonment had been rationalized. Just flat out felt he wasn't there, not at the scene of the crime as it was described in the reports and documents. He had escaped from San Quentin, no small trick in itself, and come north to Canada. He and his partner had come to a small BC Interior town, a ski resort, in the dead of winter, car trunk full of guns and summer clothes. A mountie had attempted to talk to Joe and he had tried to walk away. The cop had grabbed him from behind and put him in a chokehold. Joe had called for his partner to get a gun. The mountie shot the partner dead and took a bullet in the leg. Joe was released from the stranglehold but taken into custody.

Albright found it unreasonable the cop had shot his partner dead, and that he, unarmed as he was, had been charged with attempted murder. On a certain level it could seem to defy logic but it sounded like how the law worked to me. The way the law works got Joe a ten year sentence. The way it looked four years into his 'bit' he would be finishing the whole sentence behind bars. 'Doing it to the door,' as I have heard prisoners describe it.

Joe was six foot three, athletic, and disciplined. He was muscular and nothing about his features spoke of his outlaw past nor even his convict present. He appeared to have no bad habits except banditry. He scorned the

drug-addicted prisoners and exercised regularly and vigorously. He read a good deal, was very bright, thoughtful, and appeared to be very self-controlled. He had completed an undergraduate degree in prison, and had begun to make arrangements to take a graduate degree, although the logistics of this were difficult. He would be a fairly frightening figure as described in a police file: very bright, comfortable with firearms, and not given to conventional social constraints.

His mother was a biologist at Columbia University and his father worked with the UN. He told me once of an incident that probably set the tone for much of his development. Driving with his mother as a boy, he'd been angry when the police had pulled her over; he smoldered at the insolent authority, the careless, silent demand of obedience the uniform spoke. He explained it had nothing to do with feeling protective toward his mother, he just hated someone assuming the right to be obeyed. I certainly understood that.

We had other things in common. We'd traversed some of the same geography, had patronized the same optometrist on Union Street in San Francisco and had both lived in the Bay Area for lengthy periods. He'd lived on the Polk Street side of Russian Hill when I lived on the downtown side. A camaraderie developed between us, there was a mutual respect. But as for trust—well where the likes of Joe were concerned, if we'd been on the street my one eye would be on the pistol, the other on the door.

It was New Year's Eve, the wounding season in Matsqui Regional Reception Centre. It was 1984, a good year to go to prison. After supper a couple of the younger, more tiresome individuals who lived on my range, Two North, went up to the range early. I had caught some of their anticipatory excitement as they passed me in the eating area. One of them was a short, thirty-year-old with long dark hair who had come into the prison on transfer from another, lower security prison a couple of months previously. He'd made trouble there and they had moved him out. Now, playing his ghetto blaster full volume during the noon count, he was headed for trouble at this prison. He'd spent the last twelve years in prison with two short and crazed months on the street one year, and four months another with nothing approaching common sense to protect him or those who came in contact with him. With not much chance of growing up in prison, he was well into a life sentence on the installment plan.

The other, Jack, was doing short time—two years. He was twenty-three, stupid, loud, and easily insulted. He'd wanted to fight with me when I discovered two of these attributes and commented on them, whereupon I discovered the third. We worked it out without hurting each other. That's important in prison.

They rushed out of the dining hall as if they had somewhere to go, always a sign a prisoner isn't thinking. Joe Albright and I had arranged to meet on my range and play a board game re-enacting famous battles of the second World War. Tonight it was the siege of Stalingrad. Joe was a military historian but

the game was little more than a time-killer for me. In the week between Christmas and New Year's I had read enough I did not want to spend the evening alone in my cell with my books. First we had a visit from Polanyka, the Polish-Russian refugee who'd murdered his boss, and Steve, our pet terrorist. Some hashish was passed around and Joe smoked along with the rest of us, a bit unusual for him. Polanyka read us his story wherein he democratically skewered himself and the rest of us in the writing seminar. It was whimsical and true enough to be appreciated. They left.

We had smelled something vile, rotting, and vegetative on the range. It could only be a 'brew,' a quickly fermented prison beverage that has led to more than one riot and plenty of mayhem. Soon we heard Jack and his friend, their lazy laughter rolling down the tier. Their voices rose and the bellows of laughter became more frequent, we could tell they were progressing quickly to sloppy inebriation. We were fighting street-to-street near and in the Dherzinski Tractor Works. Joe's avidity trounced my listless attention to the game. It was getting close to seven o'clock and the guards would soon be walking the range to count how many of us had decided to stay the evening.

Outside halide lights glanced the razor wire. A truck with a spotlight rolled slowly on its perimeter patrol. Lassitude and oblivion cocooned us in the prison. Tonight we tried to forget ourselves as the world had forgotten us.

Footfalls, crepe on lino, measured, neither brisk nor slow, announced the approach of the guards. They passed my cell barely turning their heads. A

muffled commentary seemed to take place just outside my cell. Then, a few cells further down we heard one of the guards raise his voice:

"What have you got in there? Step out onto the range." It was a direct order.

"Fuck you, ya pig. Come on in here." The response was indignant as only a drunk's can be. A moment later we heard the muffled sounds of a scuffle. The range had gone silent except for the insurgent, small sounds of an undecided struggle at close quarters. Then a louder thwacking sound and crepe shoe soles slapping linoleum. The guards passed my cell in a retreating blur, and the two drunken prisoners followed swinging mop handles, occasionally connecting with the upraised arms the guards held around their heads. They chased them to the threshold of the range where the great sliding barrier gate was. Joe and I stepped onto the range from my cell to witness the now dramatic closing minutes of the year. The two prisoners walked back cursing and swinging the mop handle in the air. They looked pleased, as people do when they feel they have done something unpleasant but good. They also looked as if they knew they had provoked the gods and must wait for what that will bring.

The whole prison, five hundred souls on three floors had gone quiet, men on the floors above and below sensing what they could not see or hear hundreds of yards away. The monstrous iron of the barrier gate had slammed shut almost when the guards had cleared it. A few more tight seconds of silence

followed and then a voice of the PA announced, "You have twenty seconds to return to your cells. Then lock yourselves in. "

Those standing on the range scuttled into cells except the two drunken combatants, who cursed again. Their eyes searched the narrow corridor of the cell block wildly for those who might make a stand with them. The search was futile. No one would.

Joe Albright was fully alert, Stalingrad slumbering in the snows of 1943 and forgotten. His four years in prison allowed him to sense just how bad things might get much more quickly than I could. We had moved swiftly into my cell.

"Oh Christ," he pronounced. "They're going to gas us." We stood silently straining to hear the sounds of the next move. We both jumped when the cell doors snapped their locks automatically. "Yeah, no doubt about it, there's gas coming. Get your towels." I looked at him, not comprehending and swung to my locker, pulling out my five towels. Regulations allowed only two. If they search my cell tonight, I thought, I probably would be put on notice for a three towel violation.

I knew from rumour the procedure was to gas the unit then go cell-to-cell, searching the prisoners' effects and often beating the prisoners. A serious enough instance of contraband almost guaranteed a beating. Three towels was not serious, but it was a pretext.

Joe stood where he was, bent from the waist and crammed the towels into the crack between the bottom of the door and the floor. There was still plenty of space under the door. I threw him my parka, He removed the towels and stuffed the parka where they had been and then placed the towels separately and carefully where there remained space between floor and door.

Two hundred feet down the range, past the barrier gate by the bubble, the all seeing Plexiglas and steel control centre where the guards did their time, a rhythmic beat began. I moved over to the cell door and looked out sideways, my cheek pressed flat against the small window in the steel door. The beat became louder, and I could see man-sized insects, black helmets with smoked Plexiglas masks atop breastplated torsos, beating batons against Plexiglas shields and running in place. Their black paratrooper boots smacked the lino in unison. This ritual seemed totally alien to me but I realized I was a participant in it and its magic would have a very personal consequence.

Joe took my place at the door, and muttered, "Get your T-shirts. That's the riot squad," he whispered. "The gas will be coming pretty quick. Give me a T-shirt." I handed him one of the T-shirts and he tied it around his face. His eyes gestured and instructed me, and I did the same.

"They keep that up long enough to get your knees shaking. Then they pop a couple of gas canisters onto the range, slip on the masks, and charge. They'll take down anyone on the range and come in the cells one by one and thrash

us with the batons. They'll move the ones they want to put in the hole onto the range and take them away. Then they'll pop another couple of canisters to make sure we don't forget and take away their prisoners."

He looked over his shoulder at the outside window. I had been surprised when I'd come into the prison at the large windows with sliding Plexiglas. Of course, the massive concrete bars behind the glass put an end to the illusion of access to the free air. The window had a large sill and lip. The bars, six of them, were the back of a fair sized recess.

He stepped onto the bed, opened the inside Plexiglas wide and moved onto the sill and stood slightly hunched. He motioned me to come out. I did. We stood pressed together and hunched. He slid the inside Plexiglas closed. He looked grim and did not say anything but I knew we had protected ourselves from tear gas attack as best we could. I was frightened, excited and weak.

Outside on the range we could still hear the riot squad running in place and beating the batons against the shields. The prison normally felt immovable as it hummed with boredom and oblivion. At that moment it felt as if it could crumble on the spot. Some shouting went back and forth between the rebel forces and the waiting army. Suddenly the barrier door crashed open and we saw the two sorrowful malefactors moving toward it.

"Wait a minute. We're coming out. We give up," they called toward the barrier gate as they moved forward. That's all it took. With a great crash the three quarter ton barrier gate opened. A moment later it clanged shut.

The entire prison was tensely silent for another five minutes. Albright had already gone to the door when it slid open.

Voices began a mumbling roar and then subsided again. Then the voices seemed to build again and settled down to a din of the usual proportions. Prisoners gathered in clumps on the range, expressed their relief and told themselves it was that close. The clumps dispersed. In fifteen minutes the tension of the tier dissolved into the usual tedium.

"Looks like the slaves' rebellion ended peacefully enough. Ah, well. I'm not really sorry to see those guys out of here, anyway. They both were noisy punks," I said to Joe.

"Yeah, Spartacus was about to take us all down with him," Joe answered. "Come on. Let's see you get out of the tractor works."

It was New Year's Eve in prison. The ranges would be open until one a.m., the only night of the year it would happen. Everybody would have a good time tonight: drugs would be taken, trysts would be consummated. Temporarily at least we would anticipate the good things the new year would bring. We would not think about tomorrow.

Joe and I resumed our game. His attention soon fixed on that bitter winter of 1943. Mine didn't. I never did get out of the tractor works.

EXCURSUS: REFUGEE/EXILE

Waiting for life to begin

The exile and refugee are special cases of prisoners. I have been trying the last couple of days, like some taxonomist from another epoch, to define them in a way such as to make clear the distinction, but so far see them as too similar to do so. Exiles in the West are almost exclusively thought to be Westerners; although we have European refugees, they are mostly not of European extraction. Exiles almost exclusively are.

Still, we recognize a difference. Just as we recognize they are not usually prisoners in the common sense. But they may become prisoners and share much with prisoners. As one Vietnamese refugee in the Philippine detention centre at Palawan where he has resided five years, where his status as refugees has been denied by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees has it, all these—prisoner, exile, refugee—wait to become human, to come to life: " It's good to talk...(I)t's good to remember who I am—my life. I am waiting for life to begin, and I forget sometimes that this is my life." He has been recollecting his life before the refugee camp, but I think he gestures not only to the ever receding past, but to a present receding also, waiting impotently to be swallowed by the unknowable future.

They wish to remember who they are and begin the work of becoming who they will be, memory and the future resisting in an oppressive now. Still they

make the attempt. Still the past becomes harder to remember and the future harder to imagine, as the present becomes more unendurable.

Another difference that often holds is the matter of relationships to collectivity. Exiles tend to forego their relationships to collectivities, whereas we often imagine refugees in relationship to the collectivities they leave behind and the ones they move towards.

Refugees tend to be catalogued more than exiles. Thus, the UN High Commission of Refugees can tell us there are approximately twenty three million refugees in the world. These will remain nameless folk unless they happen to move in next door.

Exiles are another matter. Socrates had the option of becoming an exile. Alcebaides did. Dante was an exile. And Victor Serge. Lot, on the other hand, was a refugee. With the exception of Lot, refugees tend to be much less noticed as individuals than exiles, but more noticed as groups. Jehovah found the cities of the plain had not enough just men; if He were to spare the cities, He demanded a hundred just men. Lot bargained Him down to ten: if ten just men lived in Sodom and Gomorra, then Jehovah was to spare them. Apparently He did not, and Lot and his family became refugees. We must ask, if there were nine, what was the fate of the other eight? Did they become, like the majority of refugees, nameless as well as homeless? Perhaps, exiles tend to be exercising more will in their fate, but I think it does not necessarily appear this way to them. We think of Dostoevski exiled to

Siberia, but how much choice did he have? Lenin had it that refugees voted with their feet. Was he imputing a degree of choice to refugees concerning their status, or simply imputing a lack of true will to voting?

But we do not always recognize refugees. I believe the UNHCR's estimate of twenty three million is much too low. They count only those remaining in camps. But refugees are everywhere and everywhere they are silent in their suffering. Like prisoners, refugees grow a special bone: prisoner bones, refugee bones remain in them. And there are refugees we just don't recognize because they never end up in camps. But they are refugees from the nightmares of the world, shadow in bright daylight.

Refugees tend to be those who can't go back. We think exiles can. It's not always that simple.

TWO DEAD ENDS AND YOU STILL GOT TO CHOOSE.

Her ambulatory style is a frightened scuttle, crablike, a nervous step attempting to track both what is behind and ahead. Her posture speaks decades of unrecognized toil; the bloated, slack facial skin tells of distressed spirit. She weeps, curses the feebleness of her resolve not to weep. In a choked voice she squeaks out her shame and guilt. Jane has embezzled. Jane is a criminal under sentence. Confusion and stasis wash over us both as she tells her story.

In her childhood adults controlled her pain and theirs, ministering to that pain with blows and the withholding of blows. They achieved similar ends with rape. Abandoned early to foster homes and the Catholic church, she learned her worth could be measured in the works she performed, in the ability of her flesh to endure pain and humiliation. When she was eleven she put in sixteen hour days: going to school and then working until 11 p.m. in a Catholic nursing home; then she would rise hourly throughout the nights to check on the residents. Apparently, the Church had not bought into the notion of the magical child, not this castoff child. As I listen my prejudices arouse themselves. The whole story assaults my putative professionalism; I don't subscribe to that set of fictions wholeheartedly anyway. What is unusual is the suffused anger I feel: anger that anyone treats a child this way, and anger that she plays the victim so well.

She became a nurse and worked hard, couldn't sleep properly, the old demons ripping the night. She began to take off-the-shelf medicines to ease herself to something resembling repose, because she couldn't bear to discuss the assassins of sleep with her doctor. Endless days and years of toil, sleeplessness, torment: she shoplifts, steals from the clinic where she works. The good doctors find out. Here you go, Jane, some more shame and humiliation. Your plate did not look full. Yes, these are yours. Don't forget them on your way out the door. But never will she allow that she carries also anger and resentment on her back, a huge and malignant sack of discontent. Good people don't get angry, especially good women.

At my prompting she recounts this history in an attempt to explain her crime and punishment to us both. And recriminates herself: I'm rationalizing, she says. Where did we learn this silly self-condemning use of the word rationalize? Yes, it is completely accurate as Reason can sometimes be. But the intention is absent. We use reason against ourselves faithfully. We give reasons for what happens; we attempt, however clumsily, to impose a narrative of cause and effect on the uncontrolled, random aspects of our lives. And if it seems to explain without condemning, like good dancing bears we berate ourselves. Not accepting responsibility for our shocked discovery at how we are manacled to the world, oh good Lord, we are rationalizing. In the face of our naked shivering vulnerability in the void, in our weakness, let us not forget to take responsibility. And when we do that and are destroyed anyway, well then, let that be God's will. To discover our predicament is the sickness and suffering unto death. For this woman to discover the lies she has lied for others and herself is not something I envy, and yet, I think she knows already and that is where the trouble is coming from. What a curse it is to have slept the sleep of the just—but only metaphorically in her case—then to awaken.

Yes, of course she rationalizes; and tells the crystalline truth. We also bear this responsibility: to produce the correct and comforting lies on demand, the misreading desiring no more readings. We must let this world dream its dream of human dignity, of possibility. And believe it ourselves or be damned.

Jane is a refugee, surely. Manacled to the world, fixed by the past to the present, we move ineluctably to the future, no matter what its holds. We wait hopefully for life to begin.

DON'T YOU RISE UP 'TIL THE JUDGMENT DAY'S FOR SURE

I found out it was Easter Monday when the provincial employees at the jail wouldn't allow me in the front door and insisted instead I enter through A&D, Admissions and Discharge. I haven't seen a prison anywhere that doesn't have an A&D.

It's a holiday, I learn and I'm not supposed to be here working. But I come every Monday and I have told prisoners I will be here. I'm supposed to assist Larry Johnny with his letter for sentencing.

As it turns out, Larry isn't in the PC (protective custody) units where I find him most Mondays. He's got Yard time and he's smart to catch some air on a day like this. The PC units are on the third floor of this maximum security prison and purposely isolated from the rest of the prison. PC customers are targets for the GP (general population) prisoners. They earn their tickets to PC for being sex offenders, informers, or having otherwise violated the prisoner code. The PC units house 45 to 60 people all the time, winter and summer. There's little to do except watch TV, play cards or retire to cells and read. No air, no movement, not much choice in reading material and all meals are eaten in cells. Half the men here appear to be psychologically unbalanced and I have never been able to decide if it's cause or effect.

The atmosphere is poisonous here, much worse than in the GP units and it's none too healthy there. Here are the losers who keep on losing when other

losers hit the end of the line. Although it's usually the nature of the offense (sex crimes) or the nature of the offender (informers) that earns admission to PC, sometimes it's a dispute with another prisoner, a bad debt, a bad look, or just plain craziness that gets you here. Madness is as unbearable for prisoners as it is for the good citizens, but prisoners have no ability to consign the mad to 'mental hospitals,' just the prison time-honoured tradition of having the mad 'check in' to PC.

I see a few of my regulars and a couple who aren't so regular. One young fellow expects to get out on Electronic Monitoring, a truly Orwellian advance in penology. Six months of house arrest, a bracelet with a transmitter lodged in it wrapped around his ankle, this is the conditional freedom he's bought into. Sure would tempt me, though, to get out of this inferno in a hurry. I doubt that he'll get into the 'program,' but he seems to feel some hope of this has been held out to him. It's amazing how readily even these prisoners who are beyond hope will leap for the most ragged shred of a promise to lift them beyond this dreary hell. It's also unconscionable how these ghostly crumbs of hope are used to manipulate the prisoners. And it's crazy I feel I should be here. I long ago paid the debts owed, but I just can't get the fiddler out on the road. On the other hand, where would I be? My wife is meeting with her Garden Club, and it's Easter after all.

Crazy Thomas wants to see me. He's been in my classes. Other prisoners put up with him, but they'd rather not. I know I have to see him, but I'd rather not. He's crazy and dangerous and I've been trying for three months to

get him to tell the truth for more than 30 seconds consecutively. So much easier to get a handle on what he might be able to do when he gets out, but so far it looks like it may be impossible. He may not know the truth for longer than that.

Poorly educated, abused relentlessly by the adults in his life when he was a child, not overly bright, a congenital liar, this snaggle-toothed 21 year old Indian worries me. He doesn't seem to realize where his best interests lie. The psychologist has trotted out the old DSM III garbage can diagnosis: anti-social personality disorder. Prison psychologists are so disingenuous—and lazy: just give me my 90 thousand a year and I'll be in that prison just about whenever you call and I'll guarantee 80% of the people I see are psychopaths, antisocial personalities, whatever we call them this year. Yes they will be remorseless, unreachable, egocentric, and only capable of false emotions.

On the other hand, I haven't done very well with Thomas myself. He *is* remorseless: doesn't admit guilt for any of the half dozen times, man and boy, he's been charged and convicted. He garbles the stories of his life so assiduously I can never tell when he is victim or victimizer. Was he talking about his aunt stabbing him or was he stabbing a woman who was a stranger? I get him to clarify and then he mixes another story in. Still, I don't think he's clinically mentally ill. I do think he may have a traumatic brain injury and there is no doubt he has been traumatized. Again and again.

And he never stops with the tall tales of how tough he is, how many fights he's been in, and how many folks he's hurt. He is so thin and psychically wounded it's hard imaging him as dangerous. Then I think of all the rage behind the lies and imagine him with a head full of glue or whiskey. I shiver when I think of that.

Occasionally, he does tell about how one or another of his stepfathers or uncles beat him and his siblings. When he mentions this it's so ghastly and he talks so casually about it, I am temporarily speechless. Thomas has made it to 21 but not without cost. Odds are he has some permanent damage to his melon, inflicted in the name of fatherly love. I listen to him for fifteen minutes and it's obvious this won't be the day he talks straight. I give him another fifteen minutes to see if he can make himself sick and confused with his nonsense talk. No such luck. As long as he's got an audience he seems to be able to articulate indefinitely the mechanics of how he has taken or would like to take revenge on the world. I'm relieved he won't be coming to my classes anymore since he's got the cleaning job down in A&D. Failure smacks my ass like some football player telling me 'Good try' as I leave the PC units and the prison. I sometimes feel OK about working with these folks, but a guy like Thomas can take the fun out of the day. I have to remember somebody took the fun out of all his days before he could spell fun.

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As I leave the prison on this warm April afternoon my overcoat of doom seems sadly misworn. Not what I should wear on Easter Monday, a day for

collective joy, I'm told. If I could, I would shake it down today and let all its hell spill into the neighbourhood where I live. Perhaps the greatest impediment to something like this happening, an event where I would with my eye shake this monstrosity of iron, cement, and electronic gadgetry to the earth is not natural laws, not physics, not common sense. No, the real impediment is the guard's union. We can't have the boys—they are mostly men—unemployed.

Oh, but seriously. This prison defeats me and I am tired of it. But I know I have to finish my sentence. No parole this year.

****

Seventeen years ago in Toronto. It was August. My first wife, Ruth, drank a glass of brandy and had an attack of pancretitis. Of course, you have to go to the hospital to find these things out. And we did.

It was Mt. Sinai, a 'Jewish' hospital, built by the Jews when they realized the response of the gentiles to the destruction of the Chosen People was mainly indifference and turned heads. History is so very ugly.

I've been in hospitals enough to know what to expect: both the routines of the hospital and my own routines are familiar. Unless blood flows freely, an emergency room is a place for naps and the wait is long. I will fret at the delay until finally, after the doctors have whisked the patient off for

examination, after all my worry has turned to nothing but the distress of the surrender of a loved one to strangers, I will sit listlessly and stupidly alone.

I know as the night wears on in the emergency room fatigue will overtake me, my muscles will get hot and ache and my eyes become irritated and heavy. It happened this night. But I am a cosmos away from sleep, no Nepenthe here in this blindingly white sanitized corner of hell that seems to wink The End to the denizens of the waiting room. Better to die alone in a tent on a windy plain, or almost anywhere.

An elderly couple enter: he's agitated and she's stoic. They are speaking some middle European language I can't identify. Polish? Hungarian? Slovak? I don't know. He stands; she sits, head leaned back against the wall. Which one has the medical complaint? Maybe neither. He wanders away and she continues to sit. We're alone together in the waiting room. We seem to reach a silent consensus to retreat separately into our private psychic corners, paradise or hell, not moving much. I certainly move more than she.

Two young women and a young man come in and talk quite loudly about very little. The young man uses the pay phone and seems to want us all to hear his part of the conversation. I think unkind thoughts. They leave.

After fifteen minutes or so, her head comes away from the wall. She rests her forearms lightly on her withered thighs and stares at the opposite wall. And stares.

Another five minutes. She hunches forward, rests her arms on her knees, and stares at the floor. It is an oddly masculine posture. The sleeves of her jacket move up her arms and now I am staring.

Staring at the numbers stencilled on her forearm. And trying hard not to stare. I am not staring. I am not. I feel slightly dizzy, my head is muzzy. I try to focus my thoughts. Hopelessly, I try to let my attachments drift. I do not need to be here, have these worries, these perceptions, feel the rigid plastic of the chair pressing my spine. I feel simultaneously complete human affinity and moral responsibility and the lack of these. I don't want these thoughts and feelings. The world presses into this waiting room.

I find this a very vivid memory. When I wrote of this originally I went on at length with some piffle I am not inclined to transcribe. I am silent in the face of this memory. I wonder if I should be.

The one thought I take away from that memory is, it is very hard to condemn the evil acts of individuals. Crazy Thomas is capable of some nasty stuff, I know that. But it is not until we band together, put on our vestments of authority, unfurl our magisterial methods, begin to act in the name of the common good, not until then can we truly abominate.

The alternatives we know are not very trustworthy either. I spent some time in those jungles and I know there's a lot to look out for. Trouble was, when I came back to civilization all, I found was more jungle.

CONFESSION

I got the rest of the story today. No wonder it was easier to talk about the theft, the trips to court, the sentencing hearing next week. No wonder she just handed me the sheets of paper with her story on them.

She is a pale-complected, brown-haired, large-boned, tall woman, twenty nine years old. She has a son who would be thirteen, maybe fourteen. I'll call her Kate. She lost her job at the credit union when her thefts were discovered, the ones that she unwittingly had donated to her sister's drug habit. Find that hard to believe? Well, maybe she's gulled me. I don't think so.

Kate has an airy manner, dealing with the catastrophes in her life as if they were somehow a dream. Someone else's dream at that. She herself was deaf until she was eight. She has an open, wide face, is polite and diffident, and has a sad aspect that is only fully realized when she speaks in her vague manner about the ruptured tissue of personal history with which she has constructed a life. And that story I read, the one her lawyer wants her to supply for the judge: no wonder she's sad and no wonder she can't say it out loud.

The second sister of four, two of whom were raped by the second in their string of stepfathers, and at least one of whom has a bad drug habit, Kate seems so very normal. But the violence and alcoholism in her family seems a

bottomless pit. The family fractured again and again, sisters living in Texas, living in Ontario, in tiny communities in the North. Never whole, and between the lines I read her strong need, her driving passion to have that family constellation firmly in orbit. She's wanted that since the first fracture when she was four, a violent incident between adults with three children and nothing to protect the children from their own childish appetites. And when the chance came to assist her younger sisters who had been so many thousands of miles away for most of her childhood, to give them money when they couldn't pay the rent, to give them money when they got mugged, to be the mother whose absence and neglect Kate felt so sharply, she was there. Didn't dare to doubt, to imagine the sins of the mother had passed to the children. She is that guileless, at least she could be around this family need.

We can spend our lives running after the train that left the station too long ago. And she might. But she's not stupid, and she knows she's learning even as she bleeds onto the naked page. I sat at the computer next to her as she wrote and heard her almost silent gasps as she wrote. I'm glad she's having the opportunity to write it, to make the beginnings of that story about ourselves we all need to be able to tell ourselves to be able to be ourselves, to say why it is the way it is and to give us some hints about where to go from here. I'm glad she's gasping. That story never comes easily, is never handed to us. It is always an act of auto-creation, and usually pushes hard against the Narrative already written. It is not a story about how we are doing well, the world moving in its orbit at God's sweet pace. It is the only story that matters, and it never makes us feel fine, always we know the pools of pain in

the story. But it is the story that makes the pain manageable, and prepares us for the additional measure.

When we finally talked she said little, but gasped again, again almost inaudibly. I told her about the story we need and she seemed to understand. She's 'getting help,' too. From someone I know won't act too stupidly with her.

And then there is the judge. I don't think she knows a lot about judges. If she's lucky, this one will pause and adjourn until he or she can read Kate's story.

But careful, Kate, there's a world out there that needs very badly to be right, and judges are among its first citizens. No 'reversible' error. Judges stand on precedents and fear a reversible error where they do not fear an irreversible error. Now, isn't that a strange world, Kate?

Burroughs knows what he's talking about when he says it's an addiction—the need to be right. I know the experts who will look you in the eye, behind them the pavement littered with bleeding bodies sprawled awkwardly, bleeding themselves, and tell how it really was not a car wreck: it was a controlled exercise in demonstrating the effects of driving through a busy intersection against a red light. Don't you see, it worked perfectly. I hope to have less of it in my life.

Strange that I haven't worked the inside of a prison for almost two years and yet it still comes to me. I hope it doesn't come to Kate.

No matter. Kate will graduate from our program, and I will see less of her. I hope she will come back from time to time. I hope her story will become more manageable with telling. I hope her sense of herself will become stronger. I think she heard me pass along my homily the other day: the hottest fire makes the strongest steel. I believe that, but I am not certain she is much interested in hot fires or strong steel. I hope her courage, which she has in inordinate measure now, will grow. And I hope she has the sense to know her errors and to fear only those which are not reversible.

THE PRISONERS (obviously)

Charles was a working class Brit, and an intellectual to boot: a sociologist no less, practitioner in a discipline which gives a sign of value in its marginalization. He was suspicious of me until the day I recounted my brief career as a milkman when I was eighteen, a profession I rejected finally when the shop steward took me out and tried to sell me on the virtues of the teamsters union. I guess he recognized a certain heedlessness about my class origins and an impulse for downward mobility Despite my prisoner's clothes, Charles seemed to assume any North American not hopelessly lost to lumpen status must belong to the despised privileged classes. In my case he was right: That's where I came from but it didn't take.

Charles was short and fineboned, curly hair frosted with the bitterness of British classism and personal heartbreak. I heard later from his office mate how his wife had left him when he went back to redbrick U in Britain to meet with his doctoral supervisor. I don't know how given to drink he was before but he certainly had a tongue for it when I met him.

And I became fond of him: his brilliant little lectures at 8:15 am: Weber, Marx, Durkheim, Giddens, Parsons, and so on; more sociology in one term than seemed possible. It may have been the only sociology I took, but it gave me a taste I pursued on my own. He would sometimes arrive still drunk in class, and would frankly confess he had been drinking until three that morning; then the hour and half drive to the prison in the Fraser Valley

archipelago. I had even heard rumours he had a run with some hashish smugglers in his time. Drunk or sober he gave lectures with more bite and torque than the sedate lecturers I would hear on campus.

Charles spent a good part of the semester reading a book on the history of clocks; a sociology of timepieces, it kept him amused or at least helped him pass the time. He'd come in evenings to supervise visitors form the community—usually from some radical environmental or feminist group invited by our resident terrorist.

As the year inched to its close Charles's hangovers seemed more brutal, his behaviour more overtly responsible. One night he came in staggering, muttering he'd been frisked and sermonized by 'Correctional Officer for Christ.' Outraged, he tumbled towards the coordinator's office. Red-faced, dudgeon rising, he seemed to totter under a weight of inequities beyond articulation. Entering the office, he fell flat on his side and rose sputtering and even further outraged, unbalanced, and humiliated. He was a decent sort though, and didn't seem to hold me or any other prisoners to account for his lack of balance. Corrections and its unholy mix with Christianity, however, he did hold at least partially accountable for his humiliation.

"Take it easy, Charlie," I said and helped to steady him. He muttered incoherently, sat down and took out the clock book.

"Perfect book for prison, Charlie," I tried again, I wanted to lift the poor guy's spirits. I knew what sessionals earned and I didn't think the University

was renewing him. Charlie was better than that: he knew it and I knew it, Hell, this was another week of him doing double duty. He reacted slowly to my remark. Halide reflected on the iced December windows and glinted off the razor wire of the closest of the three fences strung around the acres of prison.

He turned the book's cover with the picture of the baroque timepiece on it to his nearsighted, bespectacled eyes. His eyes were enreveried, hazel and unfocused behind his glasses.

"Yes, it is, isn't it," he replied in his Midlands accent, his voice throatier than usual. He appreciated the irony with me in silence.

I stayed with Charles for a while that evening. We didn't talk a lot and when we did we didn't attempt anything weighty. We read for stretches of over half an hour in complete silence. There were two weeks until the end of the semester. I did tell Charles at one point he was a hell of a lecturer and could be as interesting half cut as many were stone cold sober.

"Lots of practice," he allowed.

I saw Charles one more time. It was Christmas week and there had been the usual prison Yule cheer: stabbings, fights, and a suicide. Again, I was in the Academic Centre. One of my visitors had smuggled me in 'The Messiah' and I was listening to it on a tapedeck. The only light in the library where I sat

came from the outside, the halides and further off some floodlights. It was almost peaceful. I saw a small figure of a man, made larger by the murky indistinction of his outline, moving past the shelves. He was calling my name exuberantly. It was Charles.

"Over here, Charlie," I called back. Seconds later he loomed over me, smiling, shadows from the bars on the windows cutting across his face so part of his forehead, one eye, and his chin faded to ink.

"Want to smoke," he said jovially and pointed a joint in my direction.

I hadn't smoked marijuana in the six months I had been in. Not that it wasn't there. It was just that I might have had to make uncomfortable compromises or alliances to get it and thought the better of it.

"Charlie, I didn't know you had it in you," I said. And I was amazed: it was a foolhardy, but kind thing he did. With his reputation, they would have pressed the charge if they had ever searched him and found it. Charles and I savoured the joint together and spent a pleasant evening listening to Handel.

Yes, no doubt about it, it was a foolish thing Charles suggested to me in that prison library, and I thanked him for it.

CONCLUSIONS

the road is full
of ghosts tonight
the flash flash
flash flash flash flash
of each cars headlights
puts another ghost in the seat
beside me
tonight

neal came first and stayed too long
you cant get him out once he starts
to rap rap rap
rap rap rap rap rap
told me hed been in the joint
a year and a half
before he got to vote
had to just about push him out
but flash flash flash
and there was bill

nawlins, tex-mex, americas, tangier
I been exile round the world
but man I hated driving with those guys
wouldnt stop talking long enough
to find some drugs
just rap rap rap rap rap

I wanted them both gone
when they visited me in Mexico
worst pests in the west
wanted them
gone gone gone

theres ghosts in the world tonight
tonite franki v could have been
on the road
neal could have dug him
and bill too

RELEASE/ON THE ROAD

1944/45: NYC

Late autumn 1944 NYC snow in the air
mixed with the last brown leaves on black limbs
Near the Columbia University campus
in several apartments
three individuals
became acquainted with each other:
Al, Bill, and Jack.
black and white photos
they look young so young so young
kids alive burning at midnight
Not now—its different
old men now
old or dead

Allen Ginsberg, a Jewish teenager from Patterson New Jersey, undergraduate at Columbia, and dreaming of a career as a labour lawyer to carry out the wishes of his mother, a Trotskyite, to save the workers of America from the evils of capitalism;

William Burroughs, bourgeois cracker from St.Louis, Missouri, thirty years old, a decade from his Harvard graduation;

Jack Kerouac, in his early twenties, merchant seaman, recent refugee from a football scholarship at Columbia, from Lowell, Massachusetts, and of Quebecois origins.

All three would make reputations as writers and throughout their lives maintain a loyalty to each other and an interest in many of the ideas they brought from that time and place.

Five years later, in New York City, with Burroughs in Mexico City, Kerouac on Long Island with his mother with whom he would remain in some suburb or other for most of the years until his death in 1969, Ginsberg met a twenty year old ex-convict fresh from a three year prison sentence, Gregory Corso.

A black and white photo from 1959 in Tangier shows Burroughs, Kerouac, Corso, Paul Bowles, and others smiling to the camera. Burroughs as always is the gray eminence, the invisible man. He is shy, withdrawn and probably has the ongoing editing of Naked Lunch on his mind. This is a man who visits the beaches of North Africa in a suit and tie. Corso is the one at the far right in the photo, somewhat younger than the rest, huge grin, tousled dark hair and dark glasses. He looks like a beatnik should.

This photo points to Burroughs' literary associates. He has claimed he shares little stylistically with the Beats, and few of their literary objectives. While he had the adulation of Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso and even some more mainstream writers, Burroughs stood apart. This is best exemplified in his twenty years of exile, at first, running from possible prison sentences, later, almost out of habit. Gay and drug-addicted much of his life, Burroughs rejected most aspects of his native culture. Reading Corso and Burroughs

side by side a reader would have difficulty placing them in the same literary universe.

Corso had been in foster care since his mother had deserted the family six months after his birth, and returned to Italy. When Gregory was ten his father lhad remarried and Gregory came to live with him. Corso became a delinquent, spent his teen years in juvenile facilities until at seventeen he pulled a robbery serious enough to get him prison time. His formal education did not extend beyond primary school, but in prison he discovered Literature. When he met Ginsberg, he had already begun to define himself as a poet, and had found ways to dodge between the lines with which prison had written him. Ginsberg, the great encourager, was taken by this young savage litterateur.

Ginsberg himself had recently been released from the Bellevue hospital where he had been under psychiatric observation for eight months. He had been associating with a petty criminal named Herbert Huncke (Huncke was the original hipster, a Times Square hustler-junkie from whom the baby beats learned some chops) and been charged with possession of stolen property after a Keystone Kops episode attempting to evade police in a car. His professors at Columbia had suggested the psychiatric exam as a legal ploy. While in Bellevue he met Carl Solomon, whom he invoked in his breakthrough poem ***Howl***. Solomon, through family connection, was also responsible for getting Burroughs first novel published. Additionally he gave the Beats a direct link to Dadaism and Surrealism: after jumping ship in the

merchant marines three years previously, Solomon had become acquainted with Antonin Artaud in Paris.

Long before the Beats, prisoner writers had put their stamp on absurdist and dada themes or those themes had put their stamp on prisoner writers. With Villon's *Ballade des Pendus* we see a proto-dadaist literature, as well as a proto-autobiographical form. A kind of dadaist heart beats at the centre of the carnivalized literature of Bakhtin, and Les Pendus are creatures with this cardiology. They are the dead speaking to the living, virtuous knaves instructing the wicked innocents, and beseeching the innocents to virtue. Throughout Villon's writings, insurgent thoughts and turns of phrase threaten the established language. Finally, he arrives at the Coquillard poems, written in a billingsgate argot whose meaning may be lost to the nation of surviving languages. This dialect has been imprisoned in its contingency: it is an island of meaning exiled from the river of tongues flowing free to the present.

The absurd and surreal pervades Villon and other prison writers. This sensibility has been carried forward with Cervantes (think of his commentary on the 'other' Quixotes until he finally must wonder if his own Quixote is simply another counterfeit.) Dostoevski, of course, laid a foundation for the inside-out quality of carnival literature and a modern surrealist sensibility. Breytenbach is a dadaist writer, enslaved by writing, doubting the virtues of writing, yet still writing. Corso and Burroughs particularly might be considered post-dadaist, inasmuch as the surreal has become the commonplace for them. Dada, surrealism can be looked at as mock-carnival,

as carnival burlesquing itself. ***Homeboy*** is certainly a novel emblematic of such sensibility.

Why all the details about lives when good litterateurs know there is no 'outside the text?' I see it differently and the Beats and my relationship to the details of their lives and the texts shows this. Biography became autobiography for me. Burroughs, Corso, and the rest had a profound influence in my life. The Beats were early, powerful voices speaking in barely muffled autobiographical tones. It was speech: much of the writing was an invitation to and a holding of a conversation of some intimacy and luminous intensity. At fifteen ***Howl*** inspired me to write and elated me even more than the teenage girls with whom I explored the human cleavage of sexuality. After a while I could recite by heart the lines of the first part, as much memorization as I've ever done. A year or two before, ***On The Road*** had an effect on me distinctly different from other readers I have talked to: these guys seemed to be looking for something they couldn't define, and therefore wouldn't know if they stumbled across it. In some way it seemed stalled on the road. In short, I wasn't much inspired by the book. Somehow, I had to read ***Howl*** to understand ***On The Road***.

I don't think I wanted to duplicate the experiences described in Beat literature (although I did) so much as I wanted to break free in my own direction. Growing up then seemed to me to have a stale inheritance. It was probably a trite teenage perception, but what I saw of society was not something I felt drawn to, as in "I can't wait to be an adult member of this society and do all

the things I see adults doing." What the Beats suggested seemed more meaningful to me. And I sensed that if they could pull it off, so could I. Nearly did, too.

But ***Naked Lunch*** was different. Published in the early 1960s in North America, I read it when I was seventeen; I immediately saw this was not literature to understand as such, but to experience. Reading the novel in a conventional way is simply frustrating and that became apparent almost immediately when trying to grasp the significance of the title. "The title means exactly what the words say: NAKED Lunch—a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork," quoth Burroughs in his 'Introduction,' and what is on the fork was just coming clear to me. Burroughs indicates nothing at all if he does not indicate that to be born into a literate civilization is to be born a prisoner.

Burroughs considers much of his writing to be 'routines,' set pieces used again and again in the variety of contexts appearing in his novels and other writing. A piece he developed in 1938 with another individual shows up in his cut-up novel, ***Nova Express,*** in 1962, and again in a book of essays in the late 1980s. Many of Burroughs' characters appear again and again in his novels in changed circumstances. The author reaches for an absurdist humour that some of these characters are intimately connected with. His wit is dry, yet grotesque.

William Burroughs and Gregory Corso: two Beat writers, two writers who have spent time in prison, collaborators on a work called ***Minutes to Go*** (1959), a cut-up work, a technique Burroughs worked assiduously throughout the 1960s. While Burroughs spent only a few weeks in prison for crimes ranging from uxoricide to fraud to drug trafficking, Corso spent three years in prison, as well as most of his teenage years suckled at the bosom of the New York State juvenile system. The respective reactions of the two writers to the experience with the cut-up, or the fold-in as Burroughs later referred to it, is illuminating. The reactions follow a logic of writing from prison. Burroughs, despite a life designed in some ways to take him directly to prison, felt he was not of "the torturable classes," and therefore seems never to have feared prison. Corso found his way out of those torturable classes with poetry, yet never found the courage Burroughs had in surfeit when it came to the cut-up and writing generally. On the other hand, it is difficult to name too many writers more persistent at writing, more tenacious at exploring ideas, or more courageous at both or either, than Burroughs.

Another collaborator on the project, Brion Gysin, introduced Burroughs to the technique. Gysin had rescued the technique from the Surrealist movement of the twenties and thirties. Gysin had paintings due to be shown at the Surrealist exhibition of 1937, but they had been removed by Breton at the last minute.

Burroughs and Gysin collaborated on a theoretical text dealing with cut-ups, a how-to book entitled ***The Third Mind***. In this text Burroughs demonstrates a

number of methods to produce cut-ups. For instance, he makes the claim that by, cutting up Rimbaud's poems and reassembling them we produce new Rimbaud texts.

Burroughs wished, as Gysin put it, to RUB OUT THE WORD. Although he was addicted to the word, and took Beckett's response when asked about him, "Well, he's a writer" as the highest praise, he also hated the power of the word to control. In some ways much of his life and writing career are struggles with that control. His first two books were titled ***Junkie*** and ***Queer***, two powerful words controlling much of the activity in Burroughs' life. Burroughs writes in ***The Job***, "As soon as we say something is true, real, then immediately things are not permitted" (p.97). He points to the dangers inherent in accepting any reality, any truth, any method as *sine qua non*. His concerns are the exclusions necessary in establishing any system as The System. Feyerabend's arguments against method are similar, and are prefigured by J. Robert Oppenheimer, the ruminative, and ultimately rebellious midwife of the Bomb, in an essay entitled 'On Science and Culture' published in *Encounter*, October 1962:

> In the sciences, total statements like those that involve the word 'all,' with no qualifications, are hardly ever likely to occur. In every extension of knowledge, we are involved in an action, in every action we are involved in a choice; and in every choice we are involved in a loss, the loss of what we did not do.

Burroughs' concern, and my own is to hunt down our epistemological and ontological losses, to bring them along-side of the choices made, and to resist,

if only for a moment the weight and power of those choices. For Burroughs this often takes the form of resistance to the word itself. In as much as I am interested in writers, some of whom have been omitted from a canon, others of whom have had their prisoner's garb forgotten the better to have them included in a canon, I offer a resistance to a way of reading, a different angle from which to accept light upon the page. Burroughs offers a writing against writing, a writing to make resistance more natural.

Although it is not my intention to claim special status for writing from those who have been imprisoned, it is my intention to examine some of these, keeping imprisonment in mind. In some cases these writers keep in their own minds the fact of imprisonment, in some cases they do not.
His time in prison was quite brief, but Burroughs' mindfulness of imprisonment was large: he saw its effects as more generalized than affecting only those who have spent time behind bars. He saw literate civilizations creating a prison of the Word.

Burroughs took up the cut-up enthusiastically because he wished to resist the word, RUB OUT THE WORD, break the spell of the word. In this he prefigured Foucault and much of poststructuralism. Burroughs begins an undermining of dualities repeated over the next forty years to the present. His attention turns first to the biological dualities: male/female; heter/homosexual; awake/asleep; sober/intoxicated; dead/alive. He believes a turn to duality issues necessarily from the fundamental male/female duality. His misogyny is no more florid than his misanthropy. However, he playfully professes to

believe in the separation of women from men and speculated elaborately on how procreation and childrearing might be accomplished without the mixing of genders.

Burroughs' early project in ***Naked Lunch***, and the 'cut-up' trilogy which follows, ***Nova Express***, ***The Ticket That Exploded***, and ***The Soft Machine***, is to systematically break down the traditional narrative expectations, and to underline the inherent expectation—response axis embedded in language itself. Although many readers do not include ***Naked Lunch*** with the other three, it certainly has many of the features of cut-up without systematically having used the technique itself. Descriptions of the editing of ***Naked Lunch*** suggest it may have been a cut-up *de facto*: Ginsberg, Orlovsky, and Ansen seem to have commandeered Burroughs' papers, organized them, and, with that typewriter whiz Kerouac typing, produced a manuscript, while Burroughs remained in and out of an opiate stupour. Much of the book had been written while he was in a state of opiate withdrawal or intoxication, or while intoxicated with hashish. Parts of the book were nearly a decade old by the time this communal editing took place.

Burroughs went on to do audio cut-ups, as well as photographic and visual image cut-ups, and his iconography came to include ambient sounds as well as the sounds of the human body, including the sounds of stomachs engaged in digestion. In these efforts he followed examples set in the visual arts with collage, and with musicians such as John Cage.

One technique of the 'cut-up' or 'fold-in' is simply taking disparate texts, literally cutting them up into a jumble of phrases and words, and reassembling them. Another technique would take a page of text, fold it in four and reassemble the quarters in a different configuration. Yet another involves halving two pages of disparate text and patching them together so one half lines up with the half from the other text. Newspapers, Literature, writing of almost any sort or sot will do. ***Minutes To Go*** demonstrates how four different practitioners are able to take this idea and emerge with what amounts to four different styles in using the cut-up. Gysin, who had observed that literature lagged behind the visual arts introduced Burroughs to the technique. What seemed to capture Burroughs' imagination initially was the ability to manipulate the medium in such a tactile way..

Reactions to the cut-up have been varied, even among practitioners. Corso seems to have come along unwillingly at Burroughs' requests. Sidney Beiles contributed and was not pleased to be part of the project. Burroughs reflects in ***The Third Mind*** that Corso and Beiles were not pleased with the experience of ***Minutes To Go*** because of the iron hold of 'subjectivism' on authors.

Corso's reactions are illustrative. His poems were already cut-ups, he claimed. To the extent it is possible without employing the techniques, he produced a kind of cut-up, as the following lines from *Marriage* suggest:

> But I should get married I should be good
> How nice it'd be to come home to her
> and sit by the fireplace and she in the kitchen
> aproned young and lovely wanting my baby

> and so happy about me she burns the roast beef
> and comes crying to me and I get up from my big papa chair
> saying Christmas teeth! Radiant brains! Apple Deaf!
> God what a husband I'd make! Yes, I should get married! (***The Beat Reader***, p.180)

Here Corso spoofs patriarchal wisdom by introducing 'nonsense' associations of words. But it does not exactly get at the same things Burroughs is getting at with cut-ups. In part, Burroughs seems to urge authors to no longer imagine themselves as in charge of their texts.

Over one poem in ***Minutes to Go***, Corso identified its origins as 'Mine own words' and a 'Speech by Eisenhower.' He believed he owned the words, whereas Burroughs beliefs suggested the words owned Corso and the purpose of the cut-up was to assault that ownership. Corso is a case of the individual faced with his enmeshment in institutional discursive formations who chooses to find his 'own' vocabulary and resdescribe himself. In light of his attachment to his own redescriptions and their use in forming his identity, it makes sense he found little delight in cutting-up his poems. Poetry saved Gregory Corso from his role as another hoodlum from Little Italy. His. relationship with the Word is complicated by this and has some almost mystical freight for him. He takes his oracular poetic role very seriously, even returning to his prophesies twenty years later to check his powers. Largely, his immense respect for Burroughs drives his participation in the cut-up project.

Corso's own poetic tradition projects a Shelley-like image of the poet, having a special esthetic relationship with the world, and a claim to access to special

knowledge. His affinity with the Romantic project is overt. One critic generalized a connection between the late Romantic literature and the poetry of the Beats generally. Corso believes in a Blakeian poetic oracular tradition, replete with a special ownership of the Word, and a concern with the depredation of the natural world; Burroughs has come to share this last concern, but believes prophesy is a species of magic many writers are estranged from and that ownership of the Word runs in the opposite direction writers imagine. Latterly, Corso's poems have taken up a pursuit of rhyme and meter not entirely contemporary. In many ways, Corso is more dissimilar than not to Burroughs in his literary and esthetic concerns.

His poetry in the period 1974-81 suggests more heroin than poetry flowed from the point of his pen for some years. His humour is immense, as is his grandiloquence. In one poem he evaluates his oracular powers: in the late 1950s he had written of impending death and doom from the Bomb. The future is slightly different than the Apocalypse he had predicted. Death has occurred from testing not from bellicose explosion and burn, but taking its victims by cancers. He acknowledges his error concerning apocalypse, but points to the slower apocalypse engulfing us. He compares himself to Villon in another poem, both orphaned and imprisoned, both poets. He gives thanks his circumstances never included homicide, as did Villon's.

But I must talk again my confused, angry, bemused, impatient, wheedling, flattering talk with these writers. We tussle the text around, we stand on the streetlit pavement, Franki V and Dostoevski remaking the Underground Man

with Corso shouting at them 'the inside is outside', Ol' Ez and Uncle Bill yammering at one another, reason undone and done again, George Jackson reunited with Genet and pointing at his bleeding wounds, Levi searching the night sky for the god who has deserted us all, Breytenbach and Bakhtin standing some way off by themselves just observing the scene. My what a noise we make. I need a rest.

WORDS SUPPLIED BY CORSO/BURROUGHS/ACADEMIC COMMENTARY ON BURROUGHS/wilcox

head bowed against a quiet window and the past be
clearer days
I am incapable of love
Characters walk in and out of the screen
Of course I tried to tell him
but he cranked his head
not twig smear nor Roman coins
soup-
O what would that be like!
Ingrid Bergman was always impossible
'What's the use.'
O but what about love. I forge
finding myself in the most common
I told him
and we lived high up
of situations a trembling man without an excuse
prison dream——

OLD POETS THE MOST

straight hommage

The poor, impatient poets:
Burroughs is 82 years old, Corso 66.
Tangier all that time ago—forgotten

Paris, Beat Hotel—forgotten
Where are the snows of yesteryear?
Where are the Villonauds?

Gregorio, heroin robbed you of poems
A father then maybe a grandfather now
Still got your sense of humour though
Joined the graybeards, yes you were
An oracle

maybe you still are.

And Bill Lee. You are no one's
Granddad. Still an old man.
Shooting your canvasses
Shotgun art **Shotgun shack**
Too old to shoot the heroin anymore
Too old too old
He's too old
To shoot the heroin anymore.

All the good world
Can't understand

All those good poems
You beats **you poets**
So different, barely human
Bill—childless lonely old grubber
Gregorio only a shadow of laughter
No supermarket in California
Al won't let visitors come by no more
We get so we cant even keep **company.**

Corso and Burroughs differ in their perceptions of how subjectivity might be constituted. Corso has been referred to—along with the Beats generally—as self-invented. He has written in a Prologue to a poem presented at Columbia in 1975: "....we... are the Daddies of the Age/16 years ago, born of ourselves...." On this occasion he commemorates a reading he and his peers had given in 1959 at which Ginsberg's old Columbia professor, Lionel Trilling, did not attend. Trilling's wife, Diana, had attended in 1959. In 1975, the Beat influence upon culture evident and vivid, both Trillings

attended; Corso could not resist reminding the audience and the Trillings of the occasion sixteen years previous:

> What a 16 years it's been
> Since last sat I here
> with the Trillings again seated
> he older...sweetly sadder;
> she broader...unmotherly still. (***The Beat Reader***, p. 524)

This is a poet who takes his place as poet seriously. *He* may slight this position or mock it. However, his memory is long for others who do so. In a sense, Corso is Corso because of his identity as poet.

Burroughs could never imagine himself as self-invented. He knows he was invented by discourse and is as disturbed at that knowledge as Corso is elated by his self-invention.

Strangely, Burroughs might not have written much at all had it not been for the urgings of Ginsberg and Kerouac in the period in the mid-forties. Ginsberg and Kerouac saw 'writers' in almost anyone who could set pen to paper, including some individuals who might have been better off not to have such a notion. But the notion took with Burroughs and writing became perhaps the most powerful addiction he acquired. He wrote in almost complete isolation for a five or six year period in Tangier. Finally, Kerouac and Ginsberg visited him and editing of ***Naked Lunch*** got underway.

Burroughs' writing against writing does not wish to foreclose on writing. He does not wish to have the Final Word. He wishes only to point out that final

writing is fatal writing. He is explicit in his denial of absolutist truth, his doubts about thinking, and his fears of the Word.

In an essay entitled *On Coincidence*, Burroughs puts some notions of Truth in great doubt, particularly religious and scientific truth. He states his belief in something he calls 'Magical Truth,' and it is clear his view of what constitutes thinking, truth, and the use value of truth and thinking is a radical departure from most notions concerning these. On thinking, Burroughs writes of some explanations of the inexplicable:

> I do not understand why this assertion of randomness produces such an potent sedative effect. It seems to convey a comforting conviction that there is no God in any heaven and what is happening here is no one's plan, intention or responsibility. It *just happened*. Ask why it happened, and why just at this particular time, and once again the magic word is invoked:
>
> "It was coincidence."
>
> The universe is random, Godless, meaningless. Any belief in creators or purpose is wishful thinking. And when you point out that perhaps all thinking is wishful, reactions of intense irritation give evidence that we are dealing not with logic but with faith. (*On Coincidence* in ***The Adding Machine***, p. 99)

It is not the assertion of randomness in itself that has the potent sedative effect, in all likelihood. Rather, it is the notion that while the matter at hand may be random, may be coincidence, this is an exceptional circumstance. Most circumstances are of an order where cause and effect are in play, where thinking is generally not wishful. We do not live in a universe where

randomicity is a primary principle. These beliefs give dusk comfort to our days.

Burroughs' own belief systems are an encyclopedia of eccentric mid-century systems, including the use of Reichian orgone boxes, Scientology, and space travel. He works out a plausible belief in magic, which he defines in such a way as to indicate it is commensurate with creativity or imagination. To indicate his disenchantment with Logos, writing, thinking and rationalist systems, he poses the following construction:

> In the beginning was the word and word *was* God. And what does that make us? Ventriloquist's dummies. Time to leave the Word-God behind. (*On Coincidence* in ***The Adding Machine,*** p. 105)

His association of God with Logos is explicit. We are to understand our superstitions concerning Logos as equivalent to religious superstition. His own superstitions—orgone energy, E-meters, and magic—are no more errant than these.

Burroughs systems of belief are both naive and complicated. As with most who point to the frailty of reason, he invokes Reason's figures to buttress his own arguments. He invokes scientific discursive turns to vitalize a world-view that is anti-scientific, or has at least had great doubts about the claims of rationalism. He demonstrates the difficulty of trying to build one's own (provisional) final vocabulary. These difficulties are similar to the difficulties anyone has with the construction of any vocabulary with an awareness of

what inheres in a vocabulary and what may be done with it. Contradiction will always lie at the heart of a writing against writing.

Both these men are in some sense what some poets have to be: cranks, eccentrics, madmen. Their beings are different. They are individuals who say what does not fit into the Narrative. It is hard to justify many aspects of what passes for civilization by appealing to their writings or thought.

Burroughs in particular points to the decomposition of the subject's hold on reality. He sees the mask of reason gesticulating towards itself while it enslaves the body and consciousness. Discourse is the chains and the prison.

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